Barbarous Brute: The Representation of Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur in Hindu Nationalist Historiography (1990-1999)

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"*Wise men have called an illustrious name a second life.*"[1]

Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur's life (1483-1530) hugged the turn of the sixteenth century yet, recently, his name has been voiced with unprecedented resonance. It is as if Babur, having lain dormant for centuries, has awoken from his slumber to the toils of the new states of Central and South Asia; to a second life. Emerging from the ruins of empire, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India each link Babur to their modern national and cultural identity. In so doing they emphasize different aspects of the Emperor and attest to his variegated appeal.

I am fascinated by Babur's second lives. No longer merely a historical individual, Babur has become the embodiment of an ideology, a past and a future. In this paper, I will analyze the representation of Babur in Hindu nationalist historiography in the run-up to and following the destruction of the *Babri Masjid* (1990-1999), Babur's mosque, in the north Indian town of Ayodhya.

Following a brief theoretical discussion of historical representation, I will describe Babur's representation in the texts, and contextualize it within a socio-political framework so as to make explicit both the ideological narratives that inform the representation and the power structures it supports.

I will argue that Babur's representation in Hindu nationalist historiography is best seen within the context of the articulation of national identity in India, the aggressive assertion and delineation of a majoritarian Hindu body politic, and its hegemonic aspirations. Within this context, Babur's representation substitutes not only the historical man but becomes a symbol for India's Muslims and through its exemplification of negative traits transfigures them into the Hindu nation's threatening Other.

Representation: Substitution and Exemplification

Historiography is a form of representation, argues Frank Ankersmit (Ankersmit 2001). A historical text about Babur (or more specifically, its narrative substance: the collective of

statements that makes up the representation), discursively construes a dummy to which relevant predicates can be affixed and which stands in for and takes the place of the absent Babur (Ankersmit 2001, 80-81). Rather than refer to a reality beyond itself, this dummy absorbs reality into itself: the representation is both ontologically and semantically autonomous, its meaning "not found, but made in and by the text." (Ankersmit 2001, 57-58; 281). My analysis of Babur's representation, accordingly, does not evaluate the extent to which it accurately reflects the historical person but rather, delves into the representation's discursive construction and its role in the production of meaning.

Chiel van den Akker, drawing upon Arthur Danto, argues that the representation not only substitutes the absent Babur but transfigures him into an example of that which his representation expresses (van den Akker 2011, 356). Thus, a portrait of Babur might express strength and leadership, and thereby transfigure Babur into an example of a strong leader. Significantly, according to Danto, what a representation expresses might be different from what it denotes, and invariably includes the artist's (here: authors') attitudes towards the represented (Danto 1981, 194).

Babur's Mosque and Hindu Nationalist Historiography

The *Babri Masjid* was purportedly built in 1527 on the orders of Babur as he marched into Hindustan. Hindu nationalists have asserted that the mosque's construction entailed the demolition of a temple marking the birth place, or *janmabhoomi*, of Ram, the seventh avatar of Vishnu and hero of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, and have called for its restoration. Hindu nationalist historians have sought to procure historical evidence to back this assertion. In December 1992, the so-called *Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi* controversy culminated in over one hundred thousand Hindu nationalist sympathisers or *karsevaks*, in violation of central government orders, descending upon Ayodhya and, incited by speeches of key Hindu nationalist leaders, demolishing the mosque.

I examine Babur's representation in the writings of three Hindu nationalist historians, Sita Ram Goel, Kishori Saran Lal and Koenraad Elst, in the years directly preceding and following the mosque's destruction (1990-1999). These authors are part of a collective that is commonly referred to as the 'pro-temple scholars' and are connected to the publishing house Voice of India. Their books, written in English, are sold at subsidised rates and enjoy a largely urban middle-class audience (Bergunder 2004, 59). The texts are also published online where they can be accessed freely.[2] The domain, *voiceofdharma.org*, is owned by the *Virat Hindu Sabha* (Greater Hindu Assembly), an Illinois registered not-for-profit organization whose "main objective is to create a vigilant Hindu society" and to "renew the collective memory of Hindus with the glorious history of the past… in the context of increasing threats to Hindu

civilization."[3]

Four questions guide my description of Babur's representation. Firstly, what key themes shape Babur's characterization in the texts? Secondly, what sections from Babur's memoirs, the *Baburnama,* are most frequently cited and to what purpose? Thirdly, is the perspective of the representation specific to Babur or extended to others? Finally, to whom is attributed agency and what motivations are accorded Babur?

In the works of Goel, Lal and Elst, four themes capture Babur's characterization. First is Babur's foreign status in India: Babur was an "invader who did not belong to India. He was forced by circumstances to march into Hindustan… and clamoured to return home to Afghanistan," writes Lal in *The Legacy of Muslim Rule in India* (Lal 1992, 39). Second is Babur's proclivity for brutality: Babur was "an indefatigable warrior and does not hide the cruelties he committed on the defeated people" (Goel 1991, 110). Third is Babur's "glorification of temple destruction." Elst surmises that as "Babur and his officers broke Hindu temples in many parts of the country" and considered doing so their "sacred duty" it is within the line of expectations that they did so too in Ayodhya (Elst 1992, 71). Babur's iconoclastic zeal is linked to the final theme: his religious fanaticism and commitment to *jihad*. Lal testifies that the *Baburnama* is "laced with the idiom of religious fanaticism which betrays the psychology developed by the ideology of Jihad contained in Islamic scriptures" (Lal 1991, 12).

Citations from the *Baburnama* serve to underline the factuality of this characterization. Three episodes are quoted particularly often. The first, detailing Babur's description of the eve of the battle against the Rajput confederacy at Khanwa in 1527, is presented as evidence of Babur's iconoclastic fervour: Babur resolves to abstain from wine and states that his "servants… dashed upon the earth, the flagons and cups… They dashed them in pieces as, God willing, soon will be dashed the gods of the idolaters" (Lal 1999, 56).[4] A second episode wherein Babur describes that "an order was given to set up a pillar of pagan heads" (Lal 1999, 57) affirms Babur's cruelty towards his enemies.[5] The third citation concerns a quatrain composed by Babur following his victory at Khanwa, and evidences the Emperor's "mental attitude towards the unbelievers" (Elst 1990: 49).

" For Islam's sake, I wandered in the wilds
Prepared for war with pagans and Hindus
Resolved to meet the martyr's death.
Thanks be to Allah! A Ghazi I became."[6]

Crucially, the featured themes characterize not only Babur but the entire Mughal dynasty, and at times all Muslims. Thus, "the Moghuls ruled North India as foreign occupiers" and Babur's cruelty is deemed a trait common to all "Muslim holy warriors, who easily killed more Hindus

than the 6 million of the Holocaust" (Elst 1992, 34). In regard to Babur's motivations and the attribution of agency, Elst writes: "Babar himself may never have been in Ayodhya… and can safely be absolved from the charge of being fanatical [but] absolving Babar is a different matter from absolving Islam. No matter what Babar's innermost motivations were… Islam as an ideology played a crucial role in bringing about… the destruction of places of worship, including a Ram temple at Ayodhya" (Elst 1990, 45). Stating that it was Babur's allegiance to Islam that informed his actions, Elst, thus, shifts the onus of responsibility away from the individual towards the meta-structure of religion, here equated with ideology.

The Hindu Nation and Babur's Offspring

Babur's representation in Hindu nationalist historiography is embedded within a distinctive narrative of national identity. Contemporaneous statements made by key Hindu nationalist ideologues are revealing in this respect: Lal Krishna Advani, president of the Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) in 1987 asked: "it [the temple-mosque issue] is not just a legal issue, nor is it merely a question of history. It is essentially a question of a nation's identity. Whom must this nation identify with, Ram or Babur?" (cited in Wariavwalla 2000, 594). Bal Thackeray, founder of the militant *Shiv Shena*, reminded his followers on the eve of the *Babri Masjid's* demolition that "the time has come to decide if this country should be identified with Ram or intruder-aggressor Babar" (cited in Banerjee 1992, 103).

In the words of Advani and Thackeray, Babur and Ram, mosque and temple, have become powerful symbols within a binary framework of national identity. The ensuing juxtaposition posits Ram as the soul of the nation and the invader Babur as its enemy: Babur, a traitor to Ram, is a traitor to the nation (*Ram drohi, desh drohi*) (Wariavwalla 2000, 594).

The juxtaposition, crucially, coalesces with a consolidated vision of the Hindu Self that had been elaborated in opposition to the Muslim Other (Thapar 1989; van der Veer 1994). From the conflation of these two dualisms, it follows that Ram and Babur's representations substitute not only the divine hero and medieval emperor but come to stand in for the Indian Hindu and Muslim communities respectively. If *x* is true of Babur, *x* is true of Indian Muslims: like Babur, the foreign invader, Muslims do not belong in India and are admonished to go to Pakistan or the graveyard (*jao Pakistan ya kabristan*), their allegiance to *jihad* and the *ummah* precluding national belonging (Engineer 1995, 90-91; Ludden 1996, 5; Mishra 2011, 193; Pandey 2006, 36).

This substitution is reinforced by means of the pro-temple scholars' perceived continuity between past and present whereby the past fills the present in such a way that every Hindu and Muslim is conceived of as a "sentient vehicle" of the historical experience, and as a consequence of which Indian Muslims can collectively, and pejoratively, be referred to as *Babur ki santan*, Babur's offspring (Ludden 1996, 12). This continuity reveals the eternal

quality with which Hindu nationalist discourse imbues and legitimises its construction of Self and Other, and which is paradigmatic for a historical exegesis that fuses myth and history; an 'invention of tradition' that seeks to create a new consciousness and deliberately blurs the line between fact and fiction (Datta 2006, 196; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Past and present, legend and politics, are bridged in a historical narrative of eternally recurrent struggle which emphasizes the defeat and humiliation of Hindus at the hands of Muslims and seeks to transform not only the memory of the past but to bring about its reversal in the present (Thapar 1989; Flaten 2012, 625-627).

The Politics of Representation

The dynamics of separation that underlie the representational dualism of Ram and Babur, Hindu and Muslim, symbolically divides India into two opposed imagined communities, and collapses all difference along the axis of 'good' and 'bad'. This qualitative division expresses a normative ordering of society and has been effective. Under the presidency of Advani, the BJP pushed the *Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi* issue to the forefront of its political campaigns, and steadily gained prominence throughout the 1990s. In 1998, as the single largest party of the *Lok Sahba*, the BJP headed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, in power until 2004 (Ludden 1996, 18; Lorenzen 1995, 9).

During the NDA's tenure, Minister for Human Resources and Development, Murli Manohar Joshi, appointed the aforementioned historian Kishori Saran Lal as chairman of the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR), and placed him on the committee of the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), charged to draft a new model school syllabus on Indian history. The placement of Hindu nationalist scholars such as Lal at the helm of India's major educational and funding bodies ensured the repeated articulation of Babur's representation through authoritative devices, thus furthering the representation's naturalization and restricting ways of thinking about those it substituted (Zavos 2005, 53; Thakurt and Raghuraman 2007, 161-168).

Conclusion

The representation of Babur in the writings of Lal, Goel and Elst not so much substitutes the historical Babur but his entire "progeny" which, on account of a genealogy facilitated by the historians' perceived continuity between past and present includes not only the Mughal dynasty but all Indian Muslims. He is a cardboard cut-out or logical dummy to which the predicates deemed relevant by the historians can be affixed so that if *x* is true of Babur, then *x* is true of all Muslims. In this way, Babur becomes an example of that which his representation expresses, the inherent intolerance and aggression of Islam, and as a symbol for the present-day Indian Muslim community concomitantly transfigures them into the Hindu's threatening Other.

Within an ideology whose vision of the good society entails the Hindu nation, the dynamics of separation that underlie such representational dualism express a normative order of society. Babur, as a symbol for Muslims, is made the cultural carrier of a set of inimical qualities that enforces the normativity of the Ram, the Hindu majority. The ensuing system of representation served to ingrain the Hindu nationalist rhetoric, and helped to rationalize, achieve and perpetuate a hegemonic structure wherein the 'good Hindu Self' is regarded as rightfully lording over the 'bad Muslim Other, thus facilitating Hindu nationalism's political ambition: state power.

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Notes

1 Hiro 2006, 164

2 Voice of Dharma. 2014. "www.voiceofdharma.com/books.html." Accessed June 2014.

3 Virat Hindu Sabha 2014. "www.facebook.com/viraathindusabha2/info." Accessed June 2014.

4 Lal quotes Beveridge, A. S. 1975. *Babur-Nama.* Lahore: Sange-Meel Publications, 554-555

5 Lal quotes Beveridge, A. S. 1975. *Babur-Nama.* Lahore: Sange-Meel Publications, 483-484

6 Elst quotes Beveridge, A. S. 1975. *Babur-Nama.* Lahore: Sange-Meel Publications, 370-371