

Memory, Identity, and Extremism in the Ayodhya Dispute

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MARYYUM MEHMOOD, APR 25 2013

Discuss the Importance of Collective Memory in Shaping Extremist Narratives of Identity to Explain the Ayodhya Dispute.

Introduction

On December 6th 2012, India commemorated the 20th anniversary of the Babri Masjid desecration in Ayodhya, Northern India. Built by its namesake, the 16th century Mughal Emperor Babur, this relic eventually became a grave bone of contention between India's Muslim minority and Hindu nationalists, who claimed that the mosque stood at the birthplace of Hindu deity, Ram.[1] During the 1984 election campaign, right-wing Hindu political parties made it their mantra to have the mosque demolished. In 1992, the secular government bowed to the pressure of fervent Hindu extremists and gave way for the mosque's demolition, triggering India's worst episode of ethnic violence since the Partition. In many ways, the enduring communal tensions between Indian Hindus and Muslims are exemplified through the Ayodhya dispute.

Unfortunately, most mainstream academic research has typified the conflict using the primordialist concept of 'ancient hatreds' to suggest that disputes between Hindus and Muslims are inevitable, and that the two groups cannot co-exist harmoniously due to an intrinsic detestation for one another.[2] Undoubtedly, this analysis is highly reductionist, as it assumes both religious groups to be homogenous entities, bound in an eternal state of conflict. It sidesteps important questions which address from where these mutual feelings of animosity originate, and why they are heightened at particular moments in time. For instance, why was the Babri Masjid issue only propelled to national prominence in the 1980s, and why was it not an issue of importance for Hindu supremacists during the Freedom movement in the 1930s?

In this essay, I suggest that investigating the dispute through an identity lens allows us to evaluate why the hatred exists and who dictates these narratives. I couch my analysis of identity within the context of collective memory to illustrate the manner in which various myths are recollected, so as to remould history surrounding a particular event. This allows us to examine how and why collectives deliberately invoke memories of a specific traumatic event at particular times throughout history.

I will conclude this essay by signifying the importance of identity in deconstructing the overall enduring communalistic rivalry between Hindus and Muslims apparent in the Ayodhya dispute. Through the process of 'negative Othering', each group attempts to bolster its own collective identity. Collective memories specific to this dispute show how Hindus vocalise their 'Chosen Trauma' differently from Muslims, and that too at a distinct time in history.[3] Hindu extremists shape memories of the Babri Masjid prior to its demolition in 1992 to demonise Muslims, while Islamists frame the history of the 1992 storming of the mosque to rationalise vengeful acts of terror against Hindus. Both groups use collective memory in order to frame, justify and bring a sense of stability to their respective collective identities. Their contrasting ways of shaping history allow for the interest of group elites to be furthered by mobilising and coordinating mass support through propagating feelings of 'groupness' that their narratives of collective memory instil.[4]

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Historical Background

Ayodhya, a spiritual town in the Northern Province of Uttar Pradesh, India, was host to the Babri Masjid until 1992. In the middle of the 20th century, Hindu nationalists began claiming that the site of the mosque happened to be 'Ramjanambhoomi,' (the birthplace of Hindu god, Ram).[5] While the Ramayana (Hindu religious Scriptures) refer to Ayodhya as 'Ram's Kingdom', there is no mention of the exact place of Ram's birth.[6] The Mughal Emperor, Babur, built the mosque in 1528 and for over 300 years there were no qualms.[7] In fact, no outcry was recorded during, or immediately following, Babur's reign.[8] Considering that Babur was proud of his victorious captures of Hindu landmarks, surely there would have been documented evidence regarding this in his diaries, the Tazk-i-Babri.[9] This leads us to decipher that the concept of Ramjanambhoomi played no part in Hindu remembrance of the site at the time the mosque was being built. Most likely, it was a myth that had been generated by Hindu extremists to gather political support, as I shall later explain.

The first recorded incident surrounding the mosque was in 1949, when vandals broke into the mosque, placing an idol of Ram inside the main courtyard.[10] Many devout Hindus claimed this to be a 'miracle'. Prime Minister Nehru ordered to have the mosque's gates sealed in 1950, so as to prevent the issue from being hijacked by extremists.[11] The issue conveniently resurfaced in the run up to the 1984 elections. The Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), with the backing of right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), re-instigated the myth. BJP leader, L.K. Advani, even arrived at scenes of processions in Ayodhya in order to mobilise mass voter support.[12] Prior to the demolition of the mosque, the majority of Indian Muslims did not associate greatly with the mosque. However, the ultimate desecration of the mosque struck a chord with Muslims, particularly those more practising. As such, we currently find Islamist groups within India invoking memories of the incident as their rallying call.[13]

Ancient Hatreds

Primordialist understanding of identity is grounded in 'a belief in a common descent...and centres around (territorial) attachments...that are of deep emotive significance.'[14] Groups are strongly opposed to one another for seemingly superficial reasons, which are rigidly fixed throughout space and time. According to primordialist accounts, Hindu-Muslim communal animosity in the Subcontinent can be traced back to the time of the Mughal Empire, which consisted of Muslim minority rule over a Hindu majority. For Hindu extremists, Muslims are a malevolent 'foreign' element, set out to destroy the Hindu way of life. Anything related to Muslims is seen as threatening. Comparatively, for Muslim extremists, Hindus are seen as 'paleet' (uncivilized) and 'kufaar' (derogatory term for non-Muslims) out to violate Islam.[15] Hindu attempts to demolish one of the few remaining epitaphs of Muslim civilisation in the Subcontinent were seen by Muslim extremists to confirm the assumptions underpinning their narrative.

According to the primordialist discourse, Hindu-Muslim disputes are inevitable, as both groups are intrinsically disposed to harbouring feelings of mutual hatred for one another. This incredibly reductionist argument does not allow us to understand the factors that shape ancient hatreds. As such, it becomes necessary to introduce the concept of identity to the framework of analysis. Furthermore, it assumes that hatred is at a constant level across time. This is certainly not the case; communal violence between Indian Muslims and Hindus is occasionally heightened, but more often is the case that it remains latent. I will employ the concept of collective memory to investigate why Hindu nationalists and Muslims extremists conflict over a particular event, remembering it differently, and at distinct times across history. Thus, I shall illustrate in whom and by whom collective memories are instilled, and how different narratives of the Ayodhya dispute are maintained with the passing of time.[16]

Collective Identity

Identity is 'a relational construct that emerges out of... discourses and interactions.'[17] Individual identity is important in and of itself, but for the sake of this essay, focussing on communal relations, I shall restrict my analysis to collective notions of identity. It must be added here that individual identities are a process of socialisation of selves with other beings. Furthermore, according to Halbwachs, memories of an event are formed within the context of collective interactions.[18]

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Collective identity shapes feelings of 'we-ness' and is a 'robust declarative statement that a group makes, under the pressure of collective memory...to itself and to others, about its normative constitution...'[19] While I acknowledge the presence of moderate narratives of collective identity, for the sake of brevity, I shall develop my argument by focusing on the more sensationalist, extremist forms.

Why two groups bear an enduring grudge against each other can be understood using the framework of identity. The notion of identity is intersubjective, meaning that it involves the interaction between 'Self' and 'Other'. The concept of the Self can be threatened by the Other's interpretation.[20] As such, it is vital to distinguish a collective's Self-identity from the identity of the Other (opposing collective). This involves casting the Other in negative light, by portraying the Other as 'evil' or a 'public enemy.'[21] This allows for the inconsistencies in the conception of the Self to remain hidden. An effective means of achieving this is through in-group and out-group differentiation mechanism, which entails associating all positivity with one's 'in-group' (the collective to which they belong), and all negative feelings toward the 'out-group' (the Other collective).[22] This acts as an anxiety controlling mechanism, giving the collective Self a stable identity, by reinforcing a sense of trust, reliability and control to counter change.[23] This strengthens the identity of the collective Self by instilling a 'we-feeling' of 'groupness' amongst its members.

Differentiating between Self and Other is an essential part of the communal disputes between Indian Hindus and Muslims. As Hindus have much in common in terms of shared history with Muslims, they must reassert their collective Hindu-Self through distinguishing it from the Muslim Other, and vice versa. By negatively Othering Muslims, Hindu nationalists can instil a sense of superiority within their own group. For this reason, the Hindu nationalist discourse is geared towards 'discredit(ing) the history of the Muslims while elevating the history of the Hindus.'[24] The revival of Hindu nationalist rhetoric (circa 1984 in opposition to the Babri Masjid) has involved an overtly forceful drive toward demonizing Muslim traditions, whilst propagating conservative Hindu values in order to strengthen their own collective identity.[25] Hindu nationalist discourse 'identifies aggressiveness as an evil intrinsic to other religions' while it sees 'patience and tolerance as innate virtues of Hindus.'[26] Ironically, conservative Hindu rhetoric is heavily critical of religions, such as Islam, for their alleged 'politics of religious repression and (past) temple destruction', yet, at the same time, extremist Hindu narratives are themselves formulated around calls for mosque demolition.[27] Muslim extremists also employ similar techniques of negative 'Othering' toward Hindus. By their understanding, Muslims living in a secular Indian state must separate mainstream (Hindu) culture from Islamic traditions. Their narrative attributes superiority to Islam and, as such, Islamists must prevent the merging of religion and Hindustani culture in order to ensure Islamic values are kept 'pure'.[28]

From this analysis it is apparent that Muslims and Hindus have a shared history, however, their respective identity narratives are very much influenced by vastly differing interpretations of history. It can thus be said that both groups are deeply divided regarding their respective collective memory of the same historical events. Over time, extremists, to fit their changing philosophy, can alter these narratives. Furthermore, certain collective identities are reinforced at specific points in time. For example, negative Othering on the basis of religion was quite uncommon amongst Hindus and Muslims at the time of Quit India movement, when both groups were fighting side-by-side for freedom from British rule. However, religious Othering is central in case of the Ayodhya dispute. To answer the question as to why collective identity narratives are temporally fluctuating, we must situate the analysis of collective identity within the context of collective memory.

Collective Memory

A shared representation of the past can be employed in 'reproducing and rearticulating a historical representation (of a past event), as a means to constitute present collective identity.'[29] According to Bell, collective memory is a 'process or faculty whereby events or impressions from the past are recollected and preserved.'[30] Collective memory confers commonly held views of the past. It 'shapes the story that groups of people tell about themselves, linking past, present and future in a simplified narrative.'[31] Accounts of memory are neither completely honest nor are they accurate. However, the ways in which historical events are remembered differently is vital to understanding the construction and reconstruction of, and constant conflict surrounding, identity.

Myths and History

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Collective memories reach the masses using myths to supplant their theories 'elevat(ing) memory to the status of a historical agent.'[32] A myth is a term denoting a 'dramatised story that has evolved in our society to contain the meanings of key events.'[33] 'Myths are simplified, highly selective and widely shared narrations of an imagined past... the stories that people and groups tell about their location (and meaning) in time...[while] history is the infinitely complex past out of which these mythological narratives are hewn.'[34] Through the generation of myths, memory now serves as a 'therapeutic alternative to historical discourse.'[35] How these stories and narratives actually influence or become part of history is through being deliberately constructed and remoulded.[36]

There is no all-embracing, over-arching collective memory. Numerous competing narratives of collective memory exist. This is most apparent in the fact that different groups understand or narrate the same event in contrasting ways. Conflicts regarding competing conceptions of the past arise when political agents try to create rhetorical frames to aid them in organising their actions and managing the site at which their narratives play out.

Throughout time, 'history is constantly reaffirmed and reproduced through resonant rituals and symbols... [it] demarcates the boundary between Them and Us, delineating the Self from the alien Other... [such memories] can be invented... becoming embedded in the very fabric, material and psychological' of the collective.[37] In the case of the Ayodhya dispute, extremist interpretations of religion are a powerful source to draw upon, as they grant numerous 'abstract symbols that can be turned into physical objects or tangible events.'[38] As is visible from the narratives at work in the Ayodhya dispute, an assortment of right-wing Hindu nationalist political parties, consisting of the VHP, the BJP and the RSS, have all promoted the myth of Hindutva (Hindu religion and nation as one) and promoted the 'true' definition of a 'Hindu' as someone who is willing and prepared to fight against Muslims. According to this myth, Muslims are culturally alien, militant invaders out to destroy the nation of India. As such, a Hindu is also someone who 'equates the immemorial nation of India with Hindu culture and religion.'[39] Similarly, Muslim extremist narratives are propped on a myth of re-conquering the Indian Subcontinent.[40] They also equate Indian nationalism with Hindu culture and religion, but for different reasons; Muslim extremists detest the concept of 'nationalism' as it would mean swearing allegiance to a single nation, which would run contrary to their belief in the 'Ummah', a transnational alliance of Muslim brotherhood.

According to Fogu and Kansteiner, myths thrive on trauma.[41] For these myths to successfully become part of the collective identity narrative, they should be remembered effectively. They must find meaning within a specific traumatic event. The event of a 'Chosen Trauma', as I shall demonstrate, serves to cement the myths within collective memory, and hence support extremist notions of collective identity.[42]

Chosen Traumas

In order to rise to the top, competing narratives must reinforce their discourses so as to manipulate the masses. Linking myths and memories to traumatic events can make the narrative more emotionally poignant, and hence more memorable and impactful to the masses. Traumas embed the myths and allow political actors to take greater control of reshaping history. Traumatic feelings surface when 'the (larger) community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us... it is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger.'[43] Chosen traumas are remembered at certain times and are invoked by certain political actors for particular reasons.

Traumas occur when, as Murer has argued, there is a 'chronic fear of the Other returning to regain its previous place within the Self.'[44] This fear is based on this notion that the repressed Other would return to 'destroy the new subjective sense of Self and, at a group level, would undermine the re-established collective identity.'[45] Memories surrounding a past trauma may lie dormant for several decades, even generations, only to be rediscovered, reinterpreted and reused by elites in attempts to bolster a collective experience.[46] To retain their sense of collective identity, different extremists interpret history through their own constructed myths based on their particular collective memory narratives.

Application to Ayodhya

Political actors could reignite latent collective memories by reactivating the injuries inflicted by a Chosen Trauma

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through proclaiming new traumatic experience.[47] In this case, the Chosen Trauma of Ayodhyan Hindus was Muslim repression of Hindus in the time of the Mughal Empire; however, it was remembered using mythical claims, which alleged that Ram's birthplace sits at the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The myth was given the status of a 'new trauma' when Hindu nationalists invoked memories of the Chosen Trauma of Muslim Mughal emperor, Babur, 'slaying' Hindus in the 16th century. This tactic allowed extremists to sensationalise the issue, making it more emotionally charged, enabling their narrative to be more impactful amongst the masses. The unfolding of events in Ayodhya showed how a myth was being transformed through the introduction of new values and reinterpretations of the original trauma narrative. The traumatic event can thus be seen as a trigger for the myth. The myth surrounding the battle for Ramjanmabhoomi (the birthplace of Rama) thus became part of a wider struggle for 'Hindu' identity and 'Hindu' consciousness, and as a 'means to construct a unified Hindu tradition that can establish Hindu power over all communities in India.'[48]

The Chosen Trauma was picked up around the time of the election campaigns of RSS and BJP extremist political parties in 1984. Collective memories, in the form of both old and new traumas, reinvigorated feelings of hate for the Muslim 'Other'. The Babri Masjid and similar sacred places are seen as symbols of Hindu subjugation, which makes their destruction a necessary part of the liberation movement of the Hindus.[49] The strategy is thus to 'deny creativity to the Muslims' by repressing their interpretations of the same historical incidents.[50] This would enable the production of a single (Hindu) historical narrative, which has been crucial for the assignation of meaning to Ayodhya as a sacred Hindu site.[51] Through remembrance of traumas (old and new), extremist Hindu elites have been able to form a connection between the Hindutva version of Hinduism to Indian cultural and national identity. This reinterpretation of history through the inclusion of new traumas has bolstered the original Chosen Trauma, further embedding it within Hindutva narrative. This reinvigoration of the traumatic experience has served to heighten feelings of Hindu collective identity.

Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of Indian Muslims did not feel any strong attachment with the Babri Masjid before its desecration in 1992.[52] Immediately following the event, many Muslims felt too frightened to reveal their religious identity, fearing that it may lead to attacks being carried out against them.[53] In the aftermath of the mosque's desecration, the issue was picked up by Islamist groups and propelled as a 'new trauma' reinforcing the original 'Chosen Trauma' of the downfall of the Muslim Mughal Empire. Both traumatic events serve to emphasise a myth that aims to unmask the alleged Hindu attempts to end the Muslim presence within India. The desecration of the mosque was seen as politically motivated scapegoat-ing of Muslims by labelling them as less patriotic, and a 'public enemy,' while also demolishing India's last remnants of Muslim heritage and glory. This remembrance of traumatic events has given Muslim extremists a sense of superiority, and mobilisation and coordination power against 'Hindu India' by reinforcing a strong sense of Ummah (transnational Islamic brotherhood). Collective remembrance has allowed for the revitalisation of these myths through the manifestation of select past traumas, enabling Islamists to strengthen feelings of pan-Islamic collective identity amongst Indian Muslims.

Elites' Interests and Identity

Engaging in the above analysis points to the immense agency possessed by extremist elites. These groups are essentially in search of self-validation for their actions, which leads them to make every attempt to 'rewrite their personal histories...to make themselves more important actors (or) to justify their political and personal choices.'[54] The act of recalling a specific collective memory can be seen as a deliberate attempt to justify the present.[55] By reinforcing a particular form of collective identity, myths and traumas propagate a 'self-serving interpretation of the past.'[56] While mythical narratives of collective identity allow elites to mobilise masses, Chosen Traumas can be used to coordinate group members over a past event by recollecting it in a particular way, and at a certain point in time. As visible from the Ayodhya dispute, collective memory surrounding an issue can remain latent for several years, but can be rekindled to gather support towards an elite's cause and interests, e.g. electoral support.

Inevitably, in this recollection of events, in order to verify the narratives of a certain collective's identity, a conflicting collective identity is undermined. Collective identity is reinforced by means of associating current 'existential danger' with the past, so as to trigger fear.[57] In order to give one's own collective a sense of ontological security, the existential danger from an opposing collective must be vilified and their interpretations of the past must be repressed.

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As such, the mythical trauma propelled by right-wing Hindu nationalists surrounding the Babri Masjid can be seen as a means to 'masking brutal practices of repression' against Muslims, who would offer a different interpretation of the past, which would threaten the extremist Hindu narrative.[58] We see that 'memory privileges certain interests', while 'political interests and opportunism' influence the meaning of the past.[59]

Furthermore, in light of the collective memory analysis, we find interests and identity to be intertwined. As such they are a result of intersubjectivity; they are learnt and strengthened by the actor's interaction with other beings. According to Wendt, 'interests presuppose identities because an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is.'[60] Elite's interests might influence collective identity formation. However, over time interests might be altered in relation to the identity; they are shaped in accordance with each other. Through engaging with significant Others, the actors' Selves become socialised, and their identities and interests enter a process of constant redefinition and re-evaluation.

Conclusion

In this essay I have discussed the importance of collective memory in shaping extremist narratives of identity to explain the Ayodhya dispute. I began with a critique of primordialist accounts, which suggested that the conflict between Muslims and Hindus is inevitable, as they harbour innate feelings of loathing for one another. The theory of ancient hatred sees identity as temporally fixed. Such explanations, as I have shown, fail to evaluate how collective identities come about and why they are propagated at certain points throughout history.

How collective identities emerge was explained through analysing the mechanism of negative Othering. As Indian Hindus and Muslims share similar histories, they must distinguish their collective Self from the collective Other through the mechanism of in-group/out-group differentiation. By couching my explanation of identity in the framework of collective memory, I have shown how identity narratives can remain dormant for several years, only to be regenerated through the act of remembrance of collective myths surrounding a chosen trauma in order to 'redefine the past to fit the present.'[61] Shared history of both groups was divided by differing collective memories. Both Hindu and Muslim extremists vested different myths in traumatic events to control a particular collective identity, which was used to mobilise and coordinate the masses in order to encourage a collective behavioural response (tailored to their own interests).[62] In the case of Hindus, this was electoral victory and for Muslims, it was the strengthening of pan-Islamism.

This mechanism can be seen to validate and to justify their lives.[63] Extremist elite interests are furthered through instigating favourable collective identities. This discussion led to the evaluation of the relationship between interests and identities, and how it factors into this discourse of shaping narratives. Interests and identities are intertwined; they are constructed by way of each other. 'Identity is redefined through revitalisation of interests.'[64] We find that, originally, interests are shaped by identity, but over time, identities change and are rewritten in accordance with interests, which in themselves change. As such, narratives emerge and evolve through history. Extremists thus aim to gain control over the shaping of history.

In conclusion, with the addition of collective identity and collective memory analysis, a far more insightful explanation of the Ayodhya dispute has been presented. Collective Hindu identity feels threatened by the Muslim Other. Similarly, collective Muslim identity fears the Hindu Other. Both groups are bound by a shared history and thus make every attempt to distinguish their respective Self-identity from that of the Other. A means of achieving this involves differentiating their collective memories. As such, remembrance of specific myths, and particularly traumatic events surrounding the Babri Masjid, must be in opposition to their respective Other. In this essay I have shown how extremist elites from amongst both Indian Hindus and Muslims have been effective in mobilising and coordinating ordinary masses, aligning them to their (extremists') interests. They have successfully harnessed narratives of collective identities by controlling not only what is being recollected by their collective, but also, crucially, when and how it is remembered.

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[1] Puninyani (2003), p.125

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[2] Brass (1991), p.82

[3] Bell (2010), p.24

[4] Laitin (2007), pp.41-45

[5] Kinnvall (2006), p.94

[6] Jaffrelot (2007), p.279

[7] See testimonies of Jesuit missionaries in 1786: found in Deleury (1991), p.737

[8] Puninyani (2003), p.126

[9] Ibid., p.127

[10] Jaffrelot (2007), p.280

[11] Ibid., p.280

[12] Ibid., p.281

[13] 'Babri Masjid demolition: Has India changed since 6 Dec, 1992?', <http://www.firstpost.com/politics/babri-masjid-demolition-has-india-changed-since-6-dec-1992-547150.html>, 6 December 2012

[14] Brass (1991), p.70

[15] Sood & Kurginyan (2011), p.101

[16] Pennebaker & Banasik (1997), p.4

[17] Barnett (1996), p.3

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