CULTURAL AND POLITICAL IDENTITIES IN INDIA

Essays by
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INTRODUCTION

This booklet contains three studies on the evolution of cultural identities and policies at different periods, with particular reference to the present state of Uttar Pradesh.

Simone Casali’s essay explains social integration through architecture in the city of Lucknow — political centre of Awadh during the Nawab governments — where it is considered as a projection of the rulers’ cultural message. The author emphasises how the inclusion of different codes in town planning and the design of monumental architecture contributes to creating a blurring and fluidity of identity, favouring interaction between different social groups.

Marzia Cusolarti’s essay considers the crystallisation of community identities by studying the role played by Benares in the formation of Hindu ideology. Focussing on Benares, the author draws a parallel between the manipulation of the Hindu tradition, the aggressive cultural policy of Hindu nationalists in the colonial period and the present communal strategy of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Sangh Parivar.

Simona Vittorini’s essay analyses the 1999 election campaign, which saw a confrontation between the right-wing Hindu BJP and the Congress Party (I), led by the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi. The author explains how the election battle was characterised by discourse on nationalism and how, in order to give a symbol of legitimacy to her own “claim to Indianess”, Sonia Gandhi decided to stand for the Amethi constituency, thus maintaining the traditional link between the Nehru-Gandhi family and Uttar Pradesh.

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LUCKNOW REVISITED

by SIMONETTA CASCI (*)

Mind takes form in the city, and in turn, urban forms condition mind. For space no less than time, is artfully reorganised in cities, in boundary lines and silhouettes, in fixing of horizontal planes and vertical peaks, in utilising or denying the natural site. The city is both a physical utility for collective purposes and unities which arise under such favouring circumstances. With language itself it remains man's greatest work.

Lewis Mumford (1)

During these walks I became firmly convinced that the fish was the simga of my city. It felt as if I had solved an obscure puzzle. At the same time, I sensed that the solution was more obscure than the puzzle.

Nayer Masud (2)

Lucknow emerged as the political centre of Awadh during a period when the decline of the Mughal Empire coincided with the development of regional powers. As the Mughal Court became more distant, and with the East India Company already playing an important role in the Indian subcontinent, in Lucknow the Nawabs, the new rulers of Awadh, tried to create a distinctive culture.

Though Awadh was still a subah of the Mughal empire, the Nawabs, Shi'ite of Persian origin, carved out a semi-independent re-

(*) I must record my thanks to Professors Muzaffar Alam, Simon Digby, Sudipta Kaviraj and Sumit Sarkar for their criticism and helpful comments. I am indebted to H. E. Akbar Khadre, the former Ambassador to Italy, and to his wife Falz, to Mr. Sayed Kasim Ziai, Mr. Nasir Abid, Mr. Anwer Abbas and Mr. John Hewitt for their generous encouragement and assistance.

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gional state. In a context where the logic of numbers and the concepts of majority and minority were still irrelevant, the Shi’ite Nawabs regarded themselves as rulers, even though in local society the majority was formed by Hindu social groups and the Muslim minority was overwhelmingly Sunni. They asserted their authority according to the Mughal paradigm and therefore based their rule on dynastic loyalty, at the same time accepting the local layered distribution of power. Following the example of the Mughals, Awadh gave prominence to the ritual authority of its centre, in accordance with Indian tradition in which the state assumes a marginal role (3). In this context Lucknow was transformed into a hub of integrated relational networks, through which the Nawabs projected themselves as the representatives of a unified value system.

This study analyses how the town and its architecture reflected this complex evolution, in which different processes were interwoven. The first of these processes regards the elaboration of a political and religious identity, which was speeded up by the Nawabs’ encounter with the East India Company but also largely determined by the confrontation with the Mughals. The second process consists in the emergence of Lucknow’s individual character, which will determine the gradual development of the inhabitants’ sense of belonging to the city, as a prelude to the formation of a civic identity.

The first chapter in this study describes the urban development of Lucknow, emphasizing its relative isolation in the Awadh region. The second chapter focuses on the definition of a political and religious identity through the city’s architecture, with the town-planning and the monumental buildings seen as a form of cultural communication. The third chapter examines the interaction between architecture and ritual events and its role in building a sense of belonging to the city by its inhabitants. The conclusion discusses the redrawing of the map of Lucknow during the Mutiny (4).

1. Urban Development

Awadh, situated on the upper Gangetic Plain and crossed by the Ganges, Gumti and Ghagra rivers, was one of the Mughal empire’s richest provinces. In the western part of the region wheat and millet were harvested, whilst in the east rice was grown. Cotton, sugar cane and indigo were also rich crops. The region was so fertile that two harvests were often possible in the same year, the first and most important in September or October and the second in the months of April and May.

The province’s riches led Saadat Khan Burhan al-Mulk, an adventurer from Safavid Iran who had been appointed governor of Awadh, to maintain his control over it. With the passage of time as Court intrigues weakened the power of Delhi, he focussed his attention on Awadh where he created an independent base of power, defeating the Shaikhzadas of Lucknow and subduing the turbulent local landholding potentates (5).

In a period characterised by extreme unrest throughout the subcontinent, the Nawabs managed, albeit in alternate phases, to consolidate their power in Awadh and within the empire, to the extent that Shuja-ud-Daula confirmed his authority inside the Mughal Court by guiding the military forces of the empire and of Awadh against the East India Company. Defeated by the British at Buxar in 1764, Shuja-ud-Daula was obliged to accept a subordinate alliance with the East India Company, even though Awadh continued to be part of the Mughal empire.

Within the province itself, Shuja -ud-Daula continued to represent the empire and his authority to collect taxes was recognised by the rural magnates or taluqdar. However, the Nawabs remained outsiders. The landholders, mostly Brahmans, Rajputs, Saliys, Shaitiks and Afghans, did not share entirely the cultural tradition of the Shi’ite Nawabs, maintaining that their estates had been established before the arrival of Saadat Khan, and were a constant threat to the stability of the region, so that Shuja-ud-Daula was repeatedly obliged to organise military expeditions against them.

Despite these troubles, the region rapidly grew richer, transforming Faizabad, the political power centre of Awadh, founded by Saadat Khan, into a prosperous urban centre for trade. During Shuja-ud-Daula’s reign the old fortifications of the town were strengthened and

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were built to its south (8). At the end of the 17th century, a family of learned Sunni Ulama settled close to the Chauk in the Firangi Mahal house, granted as a malad-i-maash (revenue free grant) by the Emperor Aurangzeb. The Firangi Mahal semi-landscaped and transformed Lucknow into one of the most renowned cultural and religious centres of the Indian subcontinent.

The decision of Asaf-ud-Daula to shift the seat of government from Faizabad to Lucknow and to settle in the Machhi Bhawan (Fish Fort) confirmed the continuity between the original site of the town, the Mughal legacy and the Nawabi rule. The Machhi Bhawan, a vast complex of buildings, derived its name from one building, supposedly engraved with 52 fishes. The fish had the symbolic significance of sovereignty, since it was through the Mahi Maratib ( Honour of the Fish) that the emperor Akbar had legitimised the Fort founder's power. The Nawabi's decision to adopt the fish as their emblem asserted their authority within the empire, while, at the same time, recalling the beneficial significance of the fish in Hindu tradition (9).

The Machhi Bhawan was extended and embellished by Asaf-ud-Daula. A fortified citadel with imposing gateways of massive stones (10), the Machhi Bhawan included several main courtyards or quadrangles. The Machhi Bhawan was a vast complex, which employed more than a thousand of common labourers and a large number of servants, gardeners, elephant handlers, grooms, pigeon-house attendants, craftsmen and entertainers (11). The use of bricks instead of stone was finally introduced as a regular feature and adjacent to his residence the Nawab constructed a mosque, a baoli or stepwell and an imambara, a religious building for the Shia's commemoration of the tragedy of Karbala during the month of Muharram. In other courtyards were the private apartments and the zenana quarters, alternating with gardens, pavilions, water basins and fountains.

The Nawab's Court attracted foreigners from different countries and with a wide range of interests. The arrival of Claude Martin, a French adventurer, who settled in the town and soon made a fortune at the service of Asaf-ud-Daula, proved to be a turning point in the history of Lucknow. Claude Martin, who bought extensive properties

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(8) Ibidem, p. 143.
(9) The Mahi Maratib is a a standard bestowed by the Mughuls to great lords. According to legend when Safdar Khan Buri Khan was crossing the Gomti river to enter Lucknow to deal with its refractory shahshahs a fish jumped into his lap - Later as the NaLucknow to deal with its refractory shahshahs a fish jumped into his lap. Later as the Nawab of Lucknow to deal with its refractory shahshahs a fish jumped into his lap, the Nawab of Lucknow to deal with its refractory shahshahs a fish jumped into his lap. Later as the Nawab of Lucknow to deal with its refractory shahshahs a fish jumped into his lap.
(10) Twenty-four Landscapes Views in Hindostan; Drawn and Engraved by Thomas and William Daniell, London, May 1807, (L.L.
(11) R. Llewellyn-Jones, A Fatal..., op. cit., pp. 170-175.
in the town (12) and at the end of his life owned 13 houses, built his new palace Farhat Baksh (13) in 1781 but his final choice of residence was Constantia, later known as La Martinière (14), which brought a sumptuous French style to Lucknow.

On one side Farhat Baksh opened onto the river Gomti, while the other three sides were surrounded by a moat. The basement had an octagonal-shaped hall, with small chambers arranged all around it, cooled by fountains of running water. In the upper storeys the apartments opened onto terraces adorned with turrets, while on the top floor there was an observatory. Martin had also built two basement floors sunk into the river, where he would spend most of his time during the hottest months, then having to move to the higher floors when the river rose during the monsoon.

Claude Martin’s most spectacular building was Constantia, his last residence and later his mausoleum, built in the 1790s. The central, five-storey castle-structure consisted of four circular piers, which were sunk several feet below the water level and continued to the top of the building in the form of octagonal towers containing rooms and a spiral staircase (15). Below ground level there were underground apartments. Two semi-circular wings were added to the sides of the central block after Martin’s death, according to his instructions. Characterised by a sumptuous decor, Constantia puzzled western visitors but excited the curiosity of the Nawabs about western architecture.

Meanwhile Awadh had become more dependent on the East India Company, which had forced Asaf ud-Daula to accept a new agreement. In 1775 he had been obliged to cede the Benares region, to increase his contributions towards maintaining the East India Company troops stationed in Awadh. Thus the British presence in Lucknow increased and in 1775 the core of the Residency complex was founded. Built on one of the town’s high pieces of ground, it covered an area of approximately 36 acres and was owned partly by the Nawabs and partly by Claude Martin. It was an extra-territorial enclave, where the Resident, as agent of the East India Company, resided together with the members of his staff. Though the Nawab constructed most of the buildings assigned to the Company members and paid for their renovation, the Residency became a British stronghold and soon began to act as a second Court, from which the Resident could successfully challenge the authority of the Nawab.

At first consisting of a group of low buildings in the shade of some trees, the Residency was further developed along the lines of classic English architecture. Reached by a gateway, later known as Baillie Guard gateway, and through a park, the Residency consisted of the main Residency building, the Banqueting Hall with neighbouring houses, the Yellow House, the Treasury and Guard Rooms, the school, the church and other large private houses, often provided with underground rooms as a retreat during the hot season (16).

In 1797, a short time after the death of Asaf ud-Daula, the British appointed Saadat Ali Khan the new ruler of Awadh. Saadat Ali Khan, who had spent his youth in Calcutta, where he had come into contact with western culture, tried to oppose the aggressive policy of the Company but in 1801 was forced to sign a new treaty. By the terms of this treaty, further territories were ceded to pay for the upkeep of the Company’s troops and the army was drastically downsized, so that the Nawab was forced to depend on the Company’s troops to fight the landholders when they refused to pay taxes. In order to reinforce the authority of his Court, he further concentrated his focus on Lucknow by centralising administrative power and by reducing the jagirs or land-revenues, which had been assigned by his predecessor to nobles and officers, now often dependent on a cash payment from the Court (17).

As his new residence, Saadat Ali Khan chose Farhat Baksh, once the home of Claude Martin. Although the palace was somewhat defended by its position, unlike the Machhi Bhawan it was not a fortified citadel. It was, instead, a complex of opulent palaces; to the original European structure Saadat Ali Khan added a labyrinth of courtyards, gardens and pleasure pavilions, described by European travellers as typically oriental. To his residential complex Saadat Ali Khan also added a new durbar hall, the Lal Baradari, a low, free-standing, one-storey pavilion with 12 doors.

During the reign of Ghazi-ud-din Haydar (1814-27) the decline of Awadh continued, yet Lucknow’s splendour remained unblemished. The Nawab, who continued to reside in the Farhat Baksh complex, further extended the royal enclosure, beginning the construction of the Bara Chattar Manzil and the Chota Chattar Manzil (18), two buildings, whose domes had the form of a chhatri, the royal parasol, an


(13) Farhad Bux, Photo 10077/13 (2710), copy of an old photo by Felice Beato, Lucknow, 1858. (B.L.).

(14) La Martinière, Photo 27 (3) by Felice Beato, Lucknow, 1858, (B.L.), see ph. 7.

(15) R. LLEWELLYN JONES, A Fatal... op. cit., pp. 140-144; B. TAMDOR, op. cit., pp. 103-105.

(16) R. LLEWELLYN JONES, A Fatal... op. cit., pp. 88-114.


(18) Chhater Munnal, Photo 147/1 (40), Backfront of the Chhater Munnal by unknown, Lucknow, mid 1890s, (B.L.), Photo 147/1 (50) View of the Chhater Munnal (one of the
emblem of sovereignty according to Hindu tradition. The greater Chattr Manzil had two storeys below ground level and five storeys above ground level, while the lesser Chattr Manzil was a two-storey building. The Lal Baradari was renovated and beautified and was transformed from a durbar hall into a coronation hall.

The tension between the Court of the Nawab and the Court of the Resident was reflected by the confrontation between the Chattr Manzil and the Residency areas, which were now separated only by a bazaar. With British encouragement, Ghazi-ud-din Haydar assumed the title of Padshah in a coronation ceremony which severed his ties with the Mughal empire but which, instead of proclaiming the sovereignty of the Nawab, made him totally dependent on the Company. Not even the elaborate rituals introduced at Court to demonstrate his authority were able to hide the increasing frailty of the Nawab. He had abandoned the central administrative system introduced by his predecessor, handed over administrative control to his prime minister and, lastly, lent a huge sum of money to the Company, introducing a system whereby the interest on these loans was to be permanently payable to the Nawab's nominees, who had begun to gather around the Resident.

Despite all this, the opulence of the Court did not diminish and whilst Nasir-ud-din Haydar (1827-37), Muhammad Ali Shah (1837-42) and Amjad Ali Shah (1842-47) continued to live in the Chattr Manzil residence, in 1850 Wajid Ali Shah (1847-56) shifted the new royal residence to Kaiserbagh. Kaiserbagh, on which Wajid Ali Shah was rumoured to have spent more than 80 lakhs, surpassed the other royal complexes in grandeur and magnificence. Following the pattern of the Chattr Manzil, it consisted of countless palaces and gardens. Entered through a triumphal gateway, it also comprised a series of further gates, where a decorative motif of sensual mermaids was added to the traditional emblem of the fish.

Over the years the glorification of Lucknow as a symbol of the Nawabs' prestige induced Ghazi-ud-din Haydar, Nasir-ud-din Haydar, Muhammad Ali Shah, Ajmad Ali Shah and Wajid Ali Shah to build a plethora of religious and secular buildings together with trading facilities. Amongst others Ghazi-ud-din Haydar built the Shah Najaf Imambara, while Muhammad Ali Shah erected the Husainabad Imambara as his tomb and began the construction of the Jama Masjid.

Finally various other edifices were scattered throughout Lucknow, which conformed to the Islamic tradition or to the Islamic con-

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King Palaces on the bank of the Gomti, as it appeared after the final capture of Lucknow by Felice Beato, Lucknow, 1858; (R.L.).

cept of religious architecture, but were erected by the Nawabs in response to the persuasion of the Company's servants and their native collaborators (19). The Observatory, built in 1851, during the reign of Nasir-ud-din Haydar and closed by the last Nawab, was linked to the Islamic interest in astronomy. Following the traditional custom, the Nawabs associated the study of astronomy with symbolic cosmology or astrology, as transpired from the Lucknow Almanack, published by the Observatory, in which the articles mixed the ascending and descending phases of the sun and the planets with the horoscope of the Resident (20). The construction of the Hospital, which included a Unani section, and of the Poor House, together with the project for an iron bridge to allow the passage of pilgrims, honoured the Islamic precept which asks the pious to devote a portion of their income to charitable work.

In spite of this apparent splendour, Awadh was condemned to irreversible and humiliating subordination to the Company. The concession of massive loans at low rates to the Company had induced the British authorities, whose financial profit in Awadh was boundless, to keep the native state under indirect rule, even though the Company had already planned for direct administration in case of necessity. In Awadh the position of the British authorities was strengthened by the support of the tahqadar, who challenged the Nawab's authority by refusing to pay regular taxes and by accepting the protection of the Company, whilst in Lucknow the Resident enjoyed some support from pensioners benefiting from the payment of interest on loans.

The position of the Nawabs became weaker, as the subjects were separated from their sovereigns. However, in 1835, according to Mr. Shore, author of Present State and Prospects of Oudh, the peoples of Awadh and Lucknow were still at least as well off, and far more contented, than was the case in the British territories.

The deterioration of the political situation did not affect Lucknow, whose urban growth was the consequence both of the munificent patronage of the Court and of the investment of wealth by courtiers and officials. As Fisher points out, the latter were either related to the Nawabs' family or came from the Mughal service élite and therefore recognized the Mughal value system or shared the Indo-Persian culture of the rulers. Like the Nawabs, they too had a strained relationship with the rural magnates, who represented local culture and formed semi-independent centres of power strengthened by the support of clan and jati ties. As no native gentleman from Lucknow could

(20) Ibidem, p. 72.
reside safely in the country unless he held office in a district and was surrounded by troops, there was no other option for the aristocracy but urban investment (21). For this reason courtiers and officials created their own townships in Lucknow, building servants' quarters, with bazaars and ganjies catering for their needs around their palatial residences and religious edifices.

From a distance the view offered by the city was a myriad of minarets, cupolas, pinnacles, towers and turrets. The royal citadels with the most important monuments formed a line running along the right bank of the Gomti. The Chattar Manzil complex, situated nearer the river, and the Kaiserbagh complex, situated further away from it, were dominated by the Machhi Bhanw and the Residency, situated to the north. Close to the royal enclosures were the houses of the aristocracy and the officials, while, to the south east of the town were Dilkusha, a country house belonging to the Nawabs, and Constantia, Martin's house. To the south west the city itself developed with more ganjies and bazaars constructed by the Nawabs and the nobles. In the middle of the 19th century Lucknow's population grew to nearly 300,000 inhabitants (22) as the Court attracted scholars, poets, painters, musicians, dancers and courtesans, whilst the numbers of tradesmen and craftsmen continued to increase. The large military population, which contributed to its economic development, made Lucknow even more crowded.

Like other north Indian cities, Lucknow was divided into tolas or mahallas. The chief officials were the kotwals, city administrator or chief executive and police officer, and the kazi, the chief registrar. The kotwal, who also imposed the daily prices established by the ruler for commodities, had the assistance of the mubhars, who controlled the market and the morals of the market-place and consulted the mubhals or representatives and controllers of mahallas, and whose methods alternated between control and conciliation (23). Mahallas were often named after the most important guild or caste inhabiting them and were close to quarters predominantly inhabited by different castes and communities. For instance the Vajpayee tola, where Vajpayee Brahmins would perform rituals along the nearby riverside, was located near two important Muslim burial places such as Kazmain and the Dayanatuddaulah Karbalas. The Rastogi mubhalla, probably built by courtiers during the rule of Saadat Ali Khan, was in

habited mainly by the Rastogi Banya moneylenders and jewellers and was in the Chawk. The Kashmiri mubhalla was originally inhabited by Kashmiri pandits who had left Srinagar, migrated to Lahore and Delhi and finally settled in Lucknow, where Pandit Laxminarain Kaul became the Mir Munshi at the Court of Shuja-ud-Daula (24). Once they had become richer, they built rich havelis consisting of a sequence of numerous inner courtyards, where purdah was observed. As time passed Muslim families, too, settled in the Kashmiri mubhalla.

In addition to the Brahmans, who were more numerous than any other Hindu social group, or the Rajputs and Khattris, who were absorbed into the ruling classes, a large proportion of the population consisted of bankers, moneylenders and merchants. Business was flourishing for the bankers and hundis were issued by them to their correspondents in other cities and cashed in return. Banyas, with Agarwals and Rastogi subcastes controlled the trade corporations based on cross-caste networks and coordinating Hindu and Muslim craftsmen. The economic influence of these social groups increased, yet they remained under the supervision of urban Islamic institutions, kept the same social position and avoided an ostentatious way of life. Govind Lal, for instance, who was reputed to be one of the richest merchants in the town, owned a country house adorned with painted ceilings and pillars, furnished with fine mirrors and chandeliers, but had his main residence in a dilapidated house, situated in a narrow gull of Lucknow (25).

The importance of the bankers and merchants could be seen in the ganjies, bazaars and caravanserais, which sprang up all over the city.

Ganjies, the urban equivalent to the caravanserais, were mainly grain markets. Enclosures built at crossroads and accessed by gates, they were leased to a chaudhuri who let the shops situated at the front of the enclosure to grain brokers or shopkeepers. These people were sometimes allowed to build their own houses at the rear of the shops. Occasionally the lease was given to the grain brokers, who acted as a coparcenary body and divided the profits amongst themselves (26).

Ganjies flourished rapidly, as the production of grain and other agricultural products yielded good profits. In the Nawabi period thirty-four ganjies were commissioned, out of which nineteen were owned

(22) V. Oldenburg Talwar, op. cit., p. 67.
(24) Today his descendant still receives a monthly wazia from the royal Husainabad Trust, see "Hindustan Times-Lucknow", November 7, 1999.
(26) C.A. Bayley, op. cit., see pp. 96-106 on traders, gentry and ganjies.
by the Nawabs and their families (27). Twenty ganjes were commissioned during the rule of Asaf-ud-Daula in the area south west of the Chauk, while during the rule of Saadat Ali Khan eight ganjes were established and others were set up by successive rulers. Most of the ganjes were owned by officials and courtiers, both Muslims and Hindus. Suratganj Singh enclosure was built by Raja Surat Singh, a Khatri, whose family controlled the diwan office for nearly sixty years; the Shi'ite Prime Minister Riza Khan, who remained in office for 20 years, established Hasanganj on the other side of the river; Tikaitganj was built by the Diwan Maharaja Tikait Ray, a Srivastava Kayastha; Wazirganj was founded by Maharaja Jhualal, a Saksena Kayastha and a powerful official in the financial department. During the rule of Saadat Ali Khan Rakabganj, Jamghganj, Maqbalganj and Maulviganj also flourished (28).

In addition to the Chauk, built before the rule of the Nawabs, six new bazaars were founded where goods of all kinds were sold. Some of them, such as the Khas Bazaar and the Captain's Bazaar, located close to Farhat Baksh had one-storey brick buildings, while in minor bazaars the buildings were made of different and cheaper materials.

Finally, in the proximity of Lucknow, there were four caravanserais, which provided shelter and basic facilities for merchants, pilgrims and other travellers. They were accessed by gates and had rooms all around the quadrangular inner courtyard, in the middle of which animals or luggage were placed (29).

The commercial urban areas were inhabited by the lower classes, both Hindus and Muslims, who often earned their living as skilled craftsmen in the production of luxury goods (see following pages). Whilst some were involved in the creation of different ornamental goods, the majority of the lower classes worked in the textile sector. The most numerous amongst them were the specialist weavers or juglaus, who formed 20% or 30% of the artisan population in the towns and villages, reaching a total population of 250,000 in Awadh (30). Famous for the production of delicate muslin, in Lucknow they produced high-quality articles for the Court and its aristocracy and for the East India Company, together with a medium-quality product range for the army and the gentry.

There were numerous other occupational castes. The manufacture of brass and in particular of copper vessels employed a great number of moulders, casters, turners, coppersmiths, and polishers (31). Given the extension of Lucknow, there were many poriers, bearers, carriers and carters, who sometimes congregated around a stand owned by an oddar and were ready to transport customers in their dolis. During the day they were called for short distances within the commercial quarters and at night they were mainly required by courtiers (32). Others hired out furniture, clothing and decorations for weddings and other celebrations.

Finally a good percentage of the population consisted of mendicants, who were often ascetics or had renounced worldly goods and, as such, enjoyed a degree of respect. European visitors simply described them as beggars, adding that they were so poor that they did not even hesitate to throw themselves under the elephants to catch the coins distributed by the Nawab and the nobles during their processions. However, travellers preferred to describe the opulence of the Court, so that the many references to beggars remained somewhat vague. As Knighton states, so much had been written about Lucknow's beggars that it was not necessary to describe at length a matter to which visitors to Italian towns were already accustomed.

2. Architecture as a Communicative Process

In the attempt to create a unified value system which would establish the Nawabs as a counterpart to the Mughals and the British, an essential role was played by architecture, always a vehicle for the transmission of culture in the Muslim world, which traditionally discouraged figurative art. It was through architecture, namely town planning and the buildings delimiting inside and outside space, that the Nawabs communicated new values, adding new codes to familiar and intelligible systems of conventions.

The construction of new royal citadels, the creation of many gardens and the development of the city's commercial neighbourhoods were a feature of the urban morphology and not only revealed the interrelation between political power and architecture, but also the influence of this inter-relationship in reconsidering the local Muslim identity. In a similar way, the innumerable monumental edifices, built throughout the city, pointed to a search for religious legitimation and thus emphasised the Shi'ite identity, which was in turn communicated through a variety of codes aiming to create a synthesis of Muslim and Hindu architecture.

(27) R. Tandon, op. cit., p. 156.
(28) H.R. Neville, op. cit., pp. 149-151.
(29) R. Tandon, op. cit., p. 163.
(30) C.A. Bandyopadhyay, op. cit.
(31) W. Hoey, A Monograph on Trade and Manufacturers in Northern India, Lucknow, 1880, p. 198.
(32) W. Hoey, op. cit., pp. 51-52.
Town plan and monumental buildings are here explained according to Umberto Eco's paradigm on architectural semiotics. Eco maintains that architecture expresses functions through architectural codes, which are often already familiar and are communicated with the help of rhetorical formulas even when architecture aims at innovation. To the primary function which denotes *utilitas* it adds a complex of secondary functions which may connotate ideology through aesthetic articulations. In this process the message may be conveyed also by codes external to architecture, mainly based on anthropological criteria.

a) **The Town Plan**

The urban fabric, that is the arrangement of the royal citadels, the interplay between these and the dense town and the plan of the dense town, encoded external codes.

These conventions reflected the political evolution of Lucknow. The relationship between the royal citadels and the city itself and the structural pattern within the single royal enclosures primarily reflected the absolute nature of the political regime under the Nawabs. They also expressed a reconsideration of the physical environment by traditional culture as a result of the impact with the west, and had an effect on the wider-ranging reflections about Muslim identity.

The royal citadels bore witness to a gradual shift from the model adopted by the Mughals for instance at Shahjahanabad, in favour of a model which echoed the scenic design typical of certain eighteenth-century western Courts.

The interaction between the royal citadels and the city proper was accentuated by the absence of fortifications around the residences of the Nawabs. Shahjahanabad was dominated by a palace-fortress, situated on a bluff above the Yamuna, with walls measuring 75 feet at their highest, 45-foot wide at the base and 30-foot wide at the top (34). Machhi Bhawan, too, was a palace fortress and was isolated from the rest of the city by massive, soaring battlements. It was situated on a small hill, commanded control of essential communications routes and overlooked the river Gomti. Unlike the Machhi Bhawan, the Daulatkhana, the new private residence of Asaf-ud-Daula, and the subsequent royal citadels were not isolated from the rest of the city by massive walls. The interrelation between political power and town plan was emphasised by the horizontal range of the palace and resi-

dential buildings, now sprawling over a large flat area, and by their interaction with the market areas, which were clustered around it, transforming merchants, craftsmen and shopkeepers into spectators of the royal processions.

Together with the absence of fortifications, the arrangement of the palaces within the new royal residences reflected similar town-planning principles to those of late Baroque cities. Though it is impossible to reconstruct the plan of the Machhi Bhawan, blown up by the British during the Mutiny, like other military citadels built by Muslim feudal lords, it kept private and public areas separate but probably lacked a clear pattern to its design.

A more precise pattern of design was introduced by organising the space on two floors, adopting the principles of perspective stated by Tuscan painters and architects such as Piero della Francesca, Luca Pacioli, Alberti and Brunelleschi which were later introduced into the Baroque cities of the west (35). The use of space and the importance of the movement through different planes transformed architecture into the design of a stage set on which the powerful could appear.

When Saadat Ali Khan left Machhi Bhawan and Daulatkhana and settled in Farhat Baksh, he realised that processions required a new spatial perspective, based on straighter lines. The grandiosity of Saadat Ali Khan's residence was emphasised by a wide road, almost two miles long, which started from Farhat Baksh, connecting it with the hunting lodge of Dilkusha and its stables. This main road, along which were located the buildings of the Nawab's grand Chaupar stables and some palaces with European facades, formed a more or less unbroken line, lengthened the distance and acted as a backdrop for the parades of Saadat Ali Khan's centralised administration. A similar scenic perspective was also adopted by Wajid Ali Shah in Kaiserbagh. In his royal complex, often described as a city within a city because of its vast dimensions, the effect was obtained by a sequence of gateways, a typical architectural device for the celebration of power.

These perspectives were familiar to European visitors. According to Reverend Heber, on leaving the bazaar area, the town began to improve when entering a very handsome street wider then the high-street at Oxford but having some distant resemblance to it. Furthermore, from the Residency all the way down the main street and through the park of Dilkusha, Lucknow bore more resemblance to some smaller European capitals (Dresden for instance) than any other town he had
seen in India (36). This impression was confirmed by Emma Roberts who noticed that in the Chatter Manzil area, as well as an exceedingly handsome street above a mile long, there was also a more spacious Chawk with several well-appointed bazaars (37).

Greater linearity also helped to give a more precise definition to the space inside Chatter Manzil and Kaiserbagh. Yet in spite of the harmony perceived by European travellers, the organisation of space in Chatter Manzil and Kaiserbagh was complex. Whilst the public palaces were situated in a perspective influenced by western Baroque, private buildings reflected a traditional setting. This difficult organisation of space, deriving from the use of different conventions, was resolved in the skilful arrangement of gardens, which favoured the harmonious juxtaposition of public and private buildings in natural surroundings.

When Saadat Ali Khan moved to Farhat Baksh the official buildings were separated from the zenana or female quarters by a water basin with fountains, which ran the whole length of the garden. After its extension the Chatter Manzil complex appeared as a group of palaces and contained six principal inner courts with a variety of gardens. Towards the river was Farhat Baksh, the original nucleus built by Claude Martin, which consisted of many apartments accessed through open arcades, while towards the east more apartments were interspersed with flowerbeds, fountains and shady avenues leading to the zenana. The buildings in this area were irregular in form, without windows on the outside and separated from each other by other small gardens.

In Kaiserbagh, too, the landscaping created a harmonious scenario, and gradually revealed the overriding influence of geometrically-conceived space typical of western Baroque, as developed in France and particularly at the Tuilleries. In the public area the simplicity of the gardens, based on symmetry, enhanced the buildings themselves while, in the residential area, the gardens were more intricate, being adorned by gateways, passages, verandas and baradaris or pavilions leading to the private quarters (38).

As in eighteenth-century western Courts, the female element be-

(38) Bird’s view of Kaiserbagh, Photo 254/a (70) by unknown, Lucknow, late 1850s, (B.L.), see photo 2; Kaiserbagh-Kaisar Passana, Photo 269/a (16), Lucknow, 1856-57 in A.A. Khan, The Lucknow Album, 2 vols., Lucknow, 1856-57, Vol. I, (B.L.); View in Kaiserbagh, Photo 403 (65) by Samuel Bourne, Lucknow, 1860s, (B.L.); Kaiserbagh-The Choudhudi, Photo 460 (28) by Shepherd and Robertson, Lucknow, 1860s, (B.L.).

came significant in the royal citadels of Lucknow, although in a different manner. Farhat Baksh was enlarged with the construction of Chhat Manzil in order to provide more comfortable accommodation for the Nawab’s harem and at the same time Wajid Ali built several palaces for his countless favourite concubines within Kaiserbagh. In both citadels female quarters were built in a traditional style in accordance with the strict rules for the seclusion of women. Given the presence of an extended royal family, consisting of several wives and a large number of concubines, the female quarters spread to such an extent that they determined a partial transformation of the citadel’s structure, adding a feminine tinge which contrasted with the masculine character of the palace-fortress. This did not mean that there was any reconsideration of women from a social point of view but that the female element influenced the male identity of the Nawabs, now a far cry from the ideal of the male warrior of the Mughal period.

The subordination of women remained unaltered in the fiercely patriarchal system as can be seen also in the difficult interior arrangement of the western-style houses built by the Nawabs. The guiding principle behind these residences was that of privacy, which was a characteristic feature of private homes in the west and reflected a new concept of family based on the inner life of the emotions and thus on a degree of individualism. For this reason it was difficult to introduce a western-style interior arrangement, based on different and unknown conventions, which ignored the separation of men and women required by the traditional organization of space within Indian private houses. As Fanny Parks perceptively noted, it was a curious circumstance that many of the façades were imitations of the palaces of Naples and Rome, while the real native palace was beyond in an enclosed space (39).

This difficulty of adaptation is evident in Dilkusha (40), the hunting lodge built for Saadat Ali Khan by Gore Ouseley on the model of Seaton Delaval, a country house in Northumberland, England. Ouseley abolished the inner courtyards, around which Indian domestic life unfolded, and constructed a centrally organised structure with a symmetrical plan. The rooms were distributed according to their functions and created private and separate zones, unusual in a traditional layout. As a result, when the Nawab moved to Dilkusha with his zenana, the arrangements within the palace were not easy. As Neeta Das describes, the audience chamber, the dining hall, the billiard room and the guests’ rooms were probably situated on the ground floor, while

(40) Dilkusha, Photo 27 (7) by Felice Beato, Lucknow, 1858, (B.L.) see ph. 8.
the sleeping apartments of the Nawab and begums were on the first floor and the top floor was reserved for the hammans and terraces, where the ladies could retire and be concealed from the men's sight (41).

A further characteristic of Lucknow's urban morphology were the countless gardens. These, too, revealed the inter-relationship between space and politics and at the same time pointed to the evolution of traditional patterns and to the adoption of western principles. Gardens as an abstract vision of paradise had always been a constant feature of Islamic towns, providing a shady oasis, sheltered from heat and dust. Over the centuries they had beautified mosques and shrines and as pleasure gardens they had embellished royal dwellings. Contrary to the western tradition, which saw the garden as an element of external decor, in the Islamic context the idea of a garden was based on the concept of privacy and of contemplation as it was intended to represent paradise. In accordance with Mughal taste, the Nawabs adopted the charbagh model, as is depicted in an idealised Faizabad miniature from the mid-18th century representing the visible world as a stylised cruciform garden, divided by four water channels (42). Gradually the traditional model was rendered more elaborate by the introduction of countless pools and fountains and by the construction of baradars, open, one-storey pavilions or pleasure houses with arcades, a characteristic of the local gardens, often erected within the octagonal pool formed at the intersection of the four channels. The intricacy of the pleasure gardens subdued the dominant char-bagh theme, while at the same time the Court's palace gardens mirrored the Baroque visual scheme.

The best examples of nineteenth-century Nawabi formal gardens were those at Kaiserbagh. These had a lay-out which blended the char bagh motive with European ones. It was divided by four major channels with subdivisions, bridges and kiosks. The notion of dominating nature, which informed the gardens of Versailles and Les Tuileries with their geometric alleys and clipped hedges, was reflected in an equally grandiose scale in Kaiserbagh. Moreover, the similarity with formal French gardens was made more emphatic by the many hundreds of statues adorning the park and openly defying the early Islamic precept which considered the depiction or representation of the human image idolatrous. A few marble statues, for example an Apollo, a

Venus with dove and a nymph with hounds, were added to countless plaster statues representing figures from Hindu mythology (43).

Please gardens were scattered throughout the private areas of royal enclosures, the Nawabs' country houses, the palatial mansions of the courtiers and the smaller, courtyard houses. Please gardens such as the Wilaiyat Ali Bagh, the Badshah Bagh and the Sikandar Bagh were built as independent gardens respectively by Ghazi-ud-din Haydar, Nasir-ud-din Haydar and Wajid Ali Shah.

The most famous pleasure garden was Badshah Bagh. The Badshah Bagh was not modelled on the Persian char-bagh. It was a rectangular, enclosed garden with three long water channels originating in the southern half and converging into a baradari (44). If the Mughal gardens had an affinity with those of Renaissance Italy, Badshah Bagh was similar to the French pleasure gardens, with kiosks, small temples and labyrinths protected lovers from prying eyes. Here there was already evidence of a more worldly significance, closely linked to the growing importance of personal pleasure in daily life. A search for pleasure which, as Emma Roberts sternly commented, induced the ruling authorities to squander Lucknow's wealth in vain and frivolous amusements, in the pursuits of a weak mind, a taste for vice and the indulgence of depraved habits (45). Certainly Badshah Bagh was not conducive to contemplation, rather it encouraged vivacious and playful sensuality. But, though pervasive, pleasure still conformed to orthodox Islamic morality and was subordinate to faith. The observance of purdah remained strict, yet once again wives, concubines and courtesans had a gentling, female influence on male identity.

Adorned by a forest of orange trees, symbolizing life and fertility like all fruit trees, and by carpets of flowers, the Badshah Bagh was protected by a high wall and contained dark retreats and small summer palaces. The main palace had arabesque ceilings, marble floors and fountains and was fitted with velvet embroidered with gold. Its vast hamam was built of white marble, inlaid with cornelian and bloodstone, with intersecting arches in all directions (46). Of the remaining palaces one was used by the royal harem.

The city proper unfolded alongside the royal citadels and its spontaneous and holistic growth indicated that the lay-out of the streets was not casual but the result of considerable integration, despite the strong and enduring community and caste identities.

(44) B. Tandon, op. cit., pp. 120-121.
In the commercial town the pattern of the streets encoded the traditional spatial plan. This configuration of space, so different from that used in northern-European towns, was perceived and experienced, albeit unconsciously, by western visitors in the crowded town. Astonished by the contrast existing between royal opulence and the abject conditions of other areas, they sometimes noticed a similarity between Lucknow and Italian towns but were more often disoriented by the bustle of the bazara, considered a dangerous labyrinth. In the Chauk both sides of the road were crowded with booths for the entire length of the bazaar. Built in tuzza bricks, the shops were situated downstairs, while the upper storeys were occupied by merchants or sometimes by large courtesans' establishments. More houses bordered the narrow side-streets, which again had narrower lanes or gulls leading off them and ending in cul-de-sacs. These small urban spaces provided a safe shelter and formed a small collective area for the inhabitants of the surrounding houses. It was here that, following the popular tradition, open kitchens providing fresh food were established for the celebration of weddings or religious festivities and for the distribution of food to the poor. According to Hoey, *degwallas*, Muslim traders renting cooking utensils did such thriving trade that their vessels were out three days out of every five, all year long (47).

The houses, built according to a courtyard pattern, formed a dense mass as they were aligned along the narrow side street or the even narrower lanes, creating a continuous wall on both sides of the streets. Built more or less to the same height of two or three storeys, they shared the sidewalls with the neighbouring houses and had connecting flat roof terraces, used in the morning and in the evening for popular entertainment, such as flying pigeons and kites. Fitted only with small windows on the outside walls, the houses extended inwards through a sequence of enclosed courtyards, which could be added to as the extended family grew. The doorway, often accessed by a flight of steps, led inside the house, where the male reception area was separated from the secluded female area. Here the oblong courtyard was surrounded by spacious halls opening onto verandas. As there were no doors, these halls were divided into rooms by rows of columns from which heavy curtains were hung. If the house had two storeys, more apartments were situated in the gallery which ran around the courtyard.

*In Unnaro Jan Ada*, a novel, which narrated the life of a courte-


san, the author, Mirza Ruswa, recalled that the trading area was always crowded with merchants, artisans and with gentlemen making their way to the courtesans' houses. On Fridays, when the crowds were hurrying on to the fair of Aish Bagh, the ground was so packed that if one hurled a plate above people's heads it would not fall (48). Large emporiums of gold and silverware, shops selling silk and fine muslin or sweets and toys, perfume - sellers, kites, dried fruits and hookah bearers overwhelmed the helpless European visitor. Trade and commerce appeared to be chaotic, with merchants, shopkeepers and artisans concluding fast business deals, seated on a platform situated inside their small shops. All this gave visitors a claustrophobic feeling, so much so that they often grossly overestimated the town's population. According to Sleeman, appointed in 1849 as Resident in Lucknow, the population came to one million, an estimate confirmed by Dodgson a few years later (49).

Space has its own language and the significance of distance varies from culture to culture (50). The crowded town and its bazara reflected a concept of space and boundaries typical of polychronic societies, as explained in proxemics or the study of spatial distances. Monochronic time is characteristic of peoples who separate and divide it up and become disoriented if they have to deal with too many things at once, whilst peoples used to polychronic time tend to keep several operations going at the same time, like jugglers (51). In Lucknow, the bazaar reduced the segregated spatial pattern connected to the caste system and facilitated polychronic interaction, which is also typical of Arab public spaces and Italian piazzas. The involvement of individuals with each other was not only expressed by the milling of the crowd, but was accentuated most of all in the intermingling of trade, which blurred social barriers and created a degree of fluidity, despite the existence of strong identities based on caste and community.

Social interaction was accelerated by the production of luxury goods, increased as a consequence of the opulence of the Court. During his elaborate Court audiences and during the rituals required for political legitimisation, the king gave as presents jewels, dress, Kashi shawls, embroidered palanquins, swords, daggers and other richly-adorned objects. At the same time the performance of religious ceremonies, essential for the ruler to assert himself over his Hindu and

(49) D.S. Dodgson, *General Views and Special Points of Interest in the City of Lucknow*, London, 1860.
Muslim subjects, required the constant use of highly sophisticated ritual objects. Yet apart from this specific aspect, connected to political and religious symbolism, the production of luxury goods was more generally encouraged by the adoption of a lavish life style by the Lucknow elite. Nawabs and aristocrats displayed their power through their extravagance and lavishness, indulged in sensuality and created a refined world, where often pleasure prevailed.

The production of luxury goods required the collaboration of different craftsmen who were famed for their skill.

A large number of them were employed in the manufacture of gold and silver lace, which had a complicated process of manufacture. The dealer in gold and silver (gotawala) called a kandilakash to prepare a bar of gold and silver. The kandilakash bought from a snuff the silver and gold, which were then used to prepare a bar at the kandilakash, an institution maintained by a guild of gotawalas in the Chauk. The kandilakash then took the bar to his shop to make the gold and silver wire. Once the wire was delivered to the dealer, the latter sent it to the tarkash, a workman who worked the wire to a thread. The next artisan flattened the thread. When the gotawala received it back, he sent it for weaving to the gotaof, who often employed a group of artisans (52).

Zardoz, or gold embroidery from Lucknow, second only to that produced in Delhi, was in demand for articles of clothing, household articles (curtains, bedclothes, pillows), saddle cloths, elephant trappings and patkas to carry on Muhraram processions. The manufacturing process required a frame with a base of low-quality cloth. The velvet, crêpe or silk was stitched onto the base and then embroidered in gold thread. The zardoz was done with salma wire (gold or silver wires made to curl into spirals) and sitara wire, an extremely fine wire. Salma was done mainly by Muslim women living in purdah, while sitara embroidery was done in factories by small groups of artisans (53). Kamdani embroidery was done by the kamdaniwalas who were delivered by the employer a piece of cloth, usually tanzeeb, mal mal, jamdani, jali together with gold and silver thread. Contrary to zardoz, which was done with salma and sitara, kamdani was worked with tar or flattened thread (54).

When the zardosi or kamdani embroidery was used to adorn courtesans' clothes, the embroidered material was sent to the darzi, tailor or master tailor, and to his assistants, who were mainly Muslims and prepared elaborate outfits (55).

Chikan was not as thriving a business as zardosi and kamdani embroidery. It consisted of white embroidery with patterns of flowers and petals stitched onto transparent white cotton, fine cotton net or silk, which was mainly yellow. Chikan designs were transferred to fabrics by using wood blocks made of salwood, reproducing Mughal patterns of flowers and petals, and thus required the work of skilled block carvers, or thappagars, and cheppi printers able to produce the dye, as the wooden blocks were first pressed into the dye tray and then onto the fabric. Different embroiderers or sozankaar, mainly men but also women and children, would then come together to create a chikan embroidery by using a variety of traditional stitches according to their ability. Finally a launderer, or dhobi, would clean the embroidery, strictly separated into different colours, and pass the work to the shopkeeper or dukandar, generally a Hindu retailer, who had received the commission from the Court (56).

The juhari or goldsmith purchased and sold nine precious stones (diamond, emerald, ruby, sapphire, topaz, gomedak, cat's eye, coral and pearl) in addition to two other stones: the laliri or inferior ruby and the turquoise. Each of these precious stones was cut into different and varying forms by the almas tarash, a term used indifferently to describe distinct operations done by separate traders. The almas tarash or hakkak cut the diamonds, while the begri cut the other stones. The bidya perforated precious stones such as pearls and corals; the katiya cut large masses of crystal into smaller pieces; the nagina soz cut the coloured glass. The kallankhan was the manufacturer of glass droplets, an imitation of precious stones. Like the nagina soz, he cut the pieces of coloured glasses, but at the same time he also infused the stones with colour (57).

There was a considerable demand for perfumes, widely used by both men and women, as well as for rose water, which was sprinkled from the galabpash, a long necked bottle, during religious processions and at home. One of the more successful perfume laboratories was established by Asghar Ali, belonging to a Sunni family from Kanauj, who had been invited by the Court to present a selection of fragrances to the Nawab. Asghar Ali set up his laboratory around the year 1830 in the Chauk, at the Akbari Gate, and then built his own haveli. Like other perfumers he produced itr, or highly concentrated oil-based per-

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(52) W. Horx, op. cit., pp. 110-112.
(54) Ibidem, pp. 129-130.
(55) Ibidem, p. 100.
(56) S. Paine, Chikan Embroidery-The Floral Whitework in India, Aylesbury, 1989
see also W. Horx, op. cit., pp. 88-89.
(57) W. Horx, op. cit., pp. 119-122 and pp. 54-55.
fumes, from a variety of spices and flowers such as gulab (rose), chambell (jasmine), motiya, orange, amber, musk, koz or keori. Gardeners (maul) cultivated fields of different flowers, while khar grass, used as a fresh summer fragrance, was collected along river banks and keora grass was grown along the coast of Orissa.

The crops were then bought by the gufarsh, who sold them to the perfume manufacturer or irfarosh. In the laboratory the aroqkash distilled the essence from the flowers. Asghar Ali’s sophisticated range included a variety of shammas and hina, blends of different spices and flower fragrances, such as hina amber, a warm perfume suitable for the winter time. He also produced floral essences for flavouring food, missy or toothpowder and essences used to add aroma to chewing and niasa tobaccos. Most of the distribution was controlled by tobacco merchants, whose retail business was in the hands of Hindus (56).

b) The Monumental Architecture

If we consider architecture as a form of communication, the most remarkable aspect of Lucknow is the individuality of certain buildings which not only expressed the royal cultural identity but had a catalytic effect on urban process, revealing the essence of the city through the interplay between functional denotations and aesthetic connotations (59).

The buildings showed how the Nawabs tried to secure the legitimacy of their political authority through architecture, and religious architecture in particular. Their original architectural style emphasised Shi‘ite essence by means of functional aims, departing from the Mughal model and constructing artefacts that were of decisive importance in developing a shared civic area. In the same way, the architectural aesthetics helped to transform monumental buildings into theatres for the collective civic performances through a blend of different cultural codes.

Architecture and its Functions

Lucknow’s religious architecture is evidence of a complex and sophisticated cultural operation. Mosques, imambaras, karbalas and dargahs were to be found throughout the city. The skyline of the town was dominated by the mosque erected by Aurangzeb on the Lakhman hill, by the four minarets of the mosque built by Asaf-ud-Daula within the Macchi Bhawan complex, and by the Jama Masjid, built by Muhammad Ali Shah. Although from a distance these three mosques stood for the predominance of Islam, Lucknow’s religious architecture was characterised by the countless imambaras, which by far outnumbered the mosques, and by the karbalas, whose minarets commanded the skyline of the tightly packed town.

The mosque is the clearest symbol of Islam. As well as the external semiotics, expressed in the cupola and in the minarets, the quality of the internal space, mirroring function, determines the experience of the visitor and communicates a sense of identity, as well as defining and separating the Muslim community from other religious groups. All mosques are built on the same invisible axis and, even if there is no prevailing visual direction in the buildings, mosques do have a liturgical direction. In the interior this is indicated by the focal point, the mihrab, a concave niche in the qibla, the wall indicating Mecca. The subordination of the local Muslims to Mecca is reinforced in the Jama Masjid or congregational mosque, where the community gathers for Friday prayer, during which the kutba or sermon is read in the name of the local ruler, ensuring clear religious legitimisation.

Even in the rapport between the mosque and the imambara inside the Bara Imambara complex is expressed the cultural relationship between the Court of Delhi and the Court of Lucknow. Although the mosque is built on a raised platform accessed by a flight of steps, it is still in a significantly subordinate position to the imambara. Emphasising Shi‘ite predominance the imambara is deliberately placed in line with a series of imposing gateways, whilst the mosque is at an angle to the main axis.

Only the Jama Masjid, where the kutba will later be read in the name of the Nawabs, is characterised by a majestic staircase and a dominant position similar to that of imambara. In Jami Masjid, which was begun during the reign of Muhammad Ali Shah, the minarets are 50 feet high, whilst the entrance is separated from the beginning of the mihrab by a distance of 100 feet. The north-south axis also measures 100 feet (60).

Imambaras and karbalas are an expression of the political distance between Lucknow and the Mughal Court and, at the same time, define the relationship between the Nawabs, the Muslim or Hindu elite and the city’s population, through the creation of a Shi‘ite religious identity.

Compared with mosques, even today imambaras offer visitors a different experience, as they are not necessarily directed towards Mecca and thus communal boundaries tend to be blurred. Imambaras are associated with the celebration of Muharram, which commemorates

(58) W. Hovv, op. cit., pp. 107-108 and oral communication by the descendants of Isfah Khan, 1997 (who received as part of the dowry of his wife a quota in the perfume business by Asghar and Mohammad Ali).


the slaughter of Husain, grandson of the Prophet and son of the Imam Ali, by the Sunni Caliph Yazid in Karbala in 680. During the celebration of Muharram, which takes place during the first month of the Islamic calendar and culminates on Ashura, the tenth day, mourners congregate each day in the imambars. During the year this is where the taziyas — portable miniature models of Husain’s tomb — are kept, together with other ceremonial objects. On the day of Ashura, the taziyas leave the imambars and are interred in the karbalas (see following chapter). In Lucknow were not only several monumental imambars but also countless smaller imambars built inside palaces and houses.

Associated with the martyrdom of religious heroes fighting to the death against a stronger enemy, the imambars served to celebrate the warrior identity. They were thus conducive to an emotional experience shared not only by Muslims but also by the Rajputs, whose warrior ethos were supposed to be expressed first and foremost in their deep loyalty to the Nawabs. For this reason the imambars — literally the house of the Imam — had to combine codes familiar to Muslims with codes intelligible to the Hindu population.

Neeta Das notices a similarity between the structure of the imambara and that of the baradari, the single-storey pavilion erected by the Nawabs in gardens (61). The Lucknow baradaris were rectangular structures with pillars forming three arched gates on each of the four sides and therefore had twelve gates or doorways, as the word baradari implied (‘barah’ means ‘twelve’ in Hindi and ‘dar’ is ‘door’ in Persian). Baradaris were already a familiar sight in the Indian subcontinent before the Nawabi period. During the Mughal time, as it evolved from the three-storey pavilion of Fatehpur Sikri to the baradari of Shah Jahan in his Ajmer palace, the baradari took on features similar to those used in later Lucknow baradaris (62). In Rajput architecture, too, such buildings were familiar, as it is demonstrated, for instance, by the baradari erected in the palace of Raja Man Singh, a renowned mansabdar of the Mughal empire.

In Lucknow the twelve-door pavilion appealed both to Shiites and to Hindus. For the Shi’ite faith twelve refers to the twelve Imams and, according toAnnemarie Schimmel, mysterious relationships were established between the twelve Imams and the twelve signs of the zodiac (63). Moreover, the Hindus maintained that in ancient times Awadh was ruled by a dynasty which recognized the sun as a family god. Thus the number twelve was sacred as it referred to the passage of the sun through the twelve signs of the zodiac (64).

Like the baradari, the imambara was a rectangular pavilion divided into chambers, as in the cases of the Bara Imambara and of the Husainabad Imambara. Often multi-purpose spaces were used as imambars and according to Mrs. All those who could not afford the real splendour of an imambara were satisfied with an imitative one in the best hall of their house (65).

The Asafi Imambara complex, where the most important imambara of the Indian subcontinent is located, was built in 1775-97 during the rule of Asaf-ud-Daula and designed by Kifaitullah, an architect of Iranian origin. The imambara, situated on a raised platform, is approached by three forecourts and majestic gateways. Its ground floor consists of three galleries, while the first floor is formed by intricate vaulted passages and the second and third floors are also in the form of small corridors with low ceilings; the top floor is a roof terrace (66).

The ground-floor structure of the Bara Imambara is very simple. It consists of nine chambers, the largest forming a central hall 163 feet long, 53 feet wide and 49.5 feet high (65). Thus the ground floor consists of three parallel galleries, which are each formed by three chambers and are of the same length. The imambara is accessed by the northern gallery, which is half the width of the central gallery. The central gallery opens onto the southern gallery which is raised above the floor so as to allow for the safekeeping of the taziyas (67).

The conceptual space could easily be grasped and the non-directional space suggested the religious experience mainly through the effect of lights. As a result of the long barrel vault of the central hall, darkness separated the inside from the outside space, cloaking the surroundings in mystery. The many precious chandeliers made of coloured crystal directed the eye towards the taziyas and later also towards the tomb of Asaf-ud-Daula. Thanks to the good acoustics, a large religious congregation could assemble in the main hall and listen to the preacher.

From the frequent references to the citizens’ participation in the
building of the Bara Imambara, considered almost a tactical move by the Nawab for offering relief work to rich and poor alike during a terrible famine (68), it can be deduced that the Imambara rapidly became a symbol of the city of Lucknow. Moreover, the Imambara probably already was perceived as a building so impenetrable as to metaphorically defend the city from enemy attack. This is the interpretation of the intriguing belief that the first floor contains a labyrinth or bhulbhulaiyan, which could protect from enemies. In fact, the size of the central hall and the fact that it was not supported by pillars, made the construction of the barrel vault above it a difficult task. It was necessary to reduce the mass of the first floor by scooping out excess material, which resulted in the formation of a maze-type structure (69), popularly referred to as a labyrinth (70).

In the case of the Husainabad Imambara, the architectural influence of the Dargah Hazrat Abbas codified the influence of devotional practices on Court culture (71).

The Dargah Hazrat Abbas (the dargah is a term used to refer to a Muslim sanctuary or tomb of a saint traditionally visited by Hindus as well as Muslims), was originally a small building which housed the standard of Husain. During the battle of Karbala the standard had been entrusted to Husain’s half-brother Abbas, who died heroically attempting to save him. The legend ran that Abbas appeared in a dream to an Indian hajji who had stopped at Karbala on his way back to Lucknow revealing the hiding place of the relic and bidding him to take it to the capital of Awadh. The standard was last given to Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula by the hajji and placed in the dargah. The shrine became very popular and was visited to obtain individual grace, or else to celebrate religious rituals and in particular circumcisions, when generous alms were given to the poor. Women were also frequent visitors, especially after giving birth to a longed-for son and heir. Already in the time of Asaf-ud-Daula the Dargah Hazrat Abbas had become an important site for the celebration of Muharram. On the fifth day of the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husain all the standards were carried in a procession to the shrine, to be consacrated before being returned to the Imambara. The influence of the devotional cult on Court ideology and on the definition of Shi’ite religious identity was visible in the expansion of the structure of the dargah. During the reign of Saadat Ali Khan, who is chronicled as having received a grace from the martyr, the original building was embellished by a disproportionately majestic gateway which led into a rectangular central courtyard. Lastly the dargah, which has “chambers to its north and south walls and shrine chambers to its west walls,” was adorned with a “fluted dome, covered with copper-sheeting” (72). The same dome and gateway were copied at the Husainabad Imambara, one of the greatest Imambaras to be built during the reign of the Nawab Muhammad Ali Shah. The Muslim and Rajput warrior ethics were thus tempered together in one identity, associated with the devotional cult practised by the male and female population of Lucknow.

Unlike the Imambaras, the karbalas were not directly descended from other Hindu or Muslim architectural models in the subcontinent. They expressed the Court’s patronage of orthodox Shi’ism through specific references to the religious architecture of Iraq and Persia, places of pilgrimage for the Shi’ite scholars who challenged Sunni authority of Mughal India. Despite the vague echoes of karbalas built in neighbouring districts, it is no coincidence that the buildings, which still exist today, were all sited in the commercial quarter and thus clustered a short distance from the royal Court.

Notwithstanding these indications, the karbalas made no clear-cut distinction between Hindus and Muslims; they suggested a stricter religious identity than the Imambara, but one still vague in its outlines. Referring back to the mosque built at Karbala in honour of the martyrs by Shah Abbas the Great, their practical function was similar to that of saintly tombs, which - as has been pointed out - were popular places of worship for both Hindus and Muslims.

The architecture of the karbalas was inspired by the rauzas, or Persian sepulchres, which had been destroyed in the Sunni period, but had then been built in numbers during the Safavid dynasty (73). Obviously named after the Iraqi city where Husain was killed, they represent the battlefield of Karbala and the burial place of Hasan and Husain in Iraq. They are formed by an enclosed ground which includes the karbal building proper and a field, planted with palm trees reminiscent of Arabia, where tasias are interred and Muslims are buried. Often the karbala compound includes a mosque, an Imambara and a qalgha or area representing the spot of the martyr’s assassination. The karbala itself dominates the enclosure. It is a rectangular building.

(68) H.R. Neville, op. cit., p. 30.
(69) N. Das, op. cit., p. 68.
(70) E.H. Heron, The Tourist’s Guide to Lucknow, Lucknow, 1894, p. 132.
(72) Dargah Hazrat Abbas, Photo 988/(48) in D.A. Axt, Lucknow Album..., op. cit. (B.L.), see ph. 5; Husainabad, Photo 717/48 by unknown, Lucknow, 1860s (B.L.). For the description of the dargah see S. Tandon, op. cit., pp. 177-178.
(73) Voyage de Mr. le Chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l’Orient, vols. 10, Amsterdam, 1740, vol. VII, p. 93.
and like a rauza sepulchre is formed by nine segments, the tomb being in the central chamber, surrounded by small corridors used for walking around it. The rauza has one or two domes over the shrine-chambers and is flanked by two minars.

A number of the architectural features adopted for karbalas, such as the stark and plain facades and the minarets with balconies, based on Iraqi and Iranian prototypes, stress their orthodox essence. Nevertheless the sancta sanctorum or burial place of the founder emphasises the path of meditation and the way towards solitude: it is surrounded by vestibules and screens, while the domed vault of the central shrine chamber is decorated with stars to symbolise the heavens as a cosmic canopy, and the dim lightning creates an intensively evocative atmosphere.

Situated in the tightly-packed city, the Talkotara Karbala, the Dayamuddaullah Karbala and the Kazmain Karbala, the three major karbalas of Lucknow, are built according to the traditional karbala pattern (74). Talkotara, built between 1798 and 1814 in the southwest area of the city, is placed centrally within a vast enclosure. It has two chambers and two domes, the main gilded dome with a large neck ending in a cone. The rauza is flanked by two minarets, while the chambers are decorated with calligraphy, geometric patterns and floral motifs (75). Dayamuddaullah, located in Saadatganj, was built in a later period: compared to Talkotara, the enclosure is smaller. The rauza, which is centrally placed, has two shrine chambers, decorated with floral and geometric patterns and with calligraphy, surrounded by galleries. It has two domes with drums and is flanked by two minarets (76). Kazmain is also located in Saadatganj. It is supposed to represent the original burial place of two famous Imams buried in Kazmain, a town near Baghdad. The Kazmain compound is formed by several enclosures adorned with palm trees and containing the karbala building, a mosque and other edifices. Kazmain, built early in the 19th century, has one central shrine chamber, but two cylindrical domes. The shrine chamber is painted with floral motifs (77).

The function performed by the religious buildings during Muharram (see following pages) was not the only factor involved in defining the rapport between the urban centre and its population. The part played by the darwazas or gateways was also of decisive significance. Gateways marked out the territory and were an important feature.

(74) Karbala. Talkotara. Photo 988(50) and Karbala Kazmain. Photo 988(49) in D.A. ASI, Lucknow Album..., op. cit., (B.L.), see photo 6.
(75) B. Tonkon, op. cit., pp. 46-47.
(76) Ibidem, pp. 50-51.
(77) Ibidem, pp. 51-52.
of the city. They were built as self-subsisting edifices or entrances to forts, secular and religious buildings, gardens, ganiyas and bazaars. Thus, during the religious processions which took the pious from one corner to the other of the town, gateways marked the routes, as well as the pauses during which episodes from the tragedy of Karbala were commemorated, exalting the perception of shared experiences as symbols of inclusion or exclusion.

According to Tandon, during the Nawab period there were fifty-two gateways that he considers worth examining, which leads us to assume that there were others. Twenty-five of the gateways he mentions were built in the 18th century, while the remaining ones were built in the following century by Nawabs, officials and courtiers (78).

The series of imposing gateways leading to the Bara Imambara and the Husainabad Imambara includes the Rumi Darwaza, which like the Bara Imambara was built by Asaf-ud-Daula to provide relief work for the famine-stricken population (79). The Rumi Darwaza was supposed to be a replica of a Constantinople gateway and though this resemblance is dubious, it helped to form an association between the Nawab and the Caliph in the minds of the population. With its cusp arch on the western façade and three large openings formed by pointed arches, surmounted by thirteen small arches and flanked by two arced wings on the eastern façade the Rumi Darwaza had an overpowering effect. Its redundant effect was achieved by the profusion of openings which dramatised the aesthetic code, revealing a deeper significance.

Aesthetics of Architecture

The relationship between architecture and aesthetics, between form and function on the one hand and use and decorum on the other, confirms the search for a blend of different cultures and allows a glimpse of the creation of different identities.

The shift away from the classical architecture of the Mughal empire could be seen in the revision of the Indo-Islamic style. This was principally used for religious buildings and represented an important stage in the aesthetic development of the Nawabs, increasing their receptiveness to other architectural approaches. The reworking of Mughal classicism was contemporaneous with the interest in Western architecture which found practical expression in the adoption of an In-

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(78) Gate to Great Imambara, Photo 988/379 in D.A. Ali, Lucknow Album... op. cit. (B.L.), see photo 3: Mermaid Gate, Photo 403 (65) by Samuel Bourne, Lucknow, 1860s (B.L.).

(79) Tandon suggests that the Rumi Darwaza may have been built in two stages, that is partly by Shuja-ud-Daula and partly by Asaf-ud-Daula or in two different phases by Asaf-ud-Daula.
do-Western style, used mainly for royal residences. Dismissed by late
nineteenth century historians as a decadent, debased and vulgar
style (for instance by James Fergusson), in reality Indo-Western eclecti-
cism bore witness to a search for originality and posed - perhaps un-
consciously - the fundamental question of taste as a subjective method
of recognizing beauty.

The reworking of the Indo-Islamic style was no mere variation on
the imperial style. It suggested different aesthetic preferences linked to
new identities, inasmuch as it attested to the gradual transition from
an imperial to a regional dimension. This process of change required
the Nawabs to impose their authority by the creation of a regional ar-
chitecture which still maintained its descent from Mughal classicism.
During the period which saw the rise of the East India Company, how-
ever, this process went hand in hand with a climate of tension in
which political and cultural perceptions were increasingly uncertain.
Although such parallels are inevitably highly generalised, we may legiti-
manely compare this aesthetic phenomenon to the close of the Renais-
sance in Europe, when the certainties of classicism gave way to the
Baroque. As has been observed by Mastoro, in the West the definite
move away from the ancient world presaged the birth of a modern
identity; the vertiginous confusion which resulted was masked by the
apparent superficiality of the Baroque (80). Nawab architecture, albeit
lacking the drama of Baroque, entrusted itself in similar fashion to a
persuasive message obtained by the creation of a style that was florid
almost to excess precisely in order to mask a profound crisis.

A comparison of Nawabi and Mughal architecture throws into re-
lief how the persuasive message of the Mughal style was marked by
imperial grandeur and a capacity to fuse different native traditions,
while remaining deeply Islamic in essence. The self-assertion of
Mughal architecture and its search for perfection through severity and
magnitude were expressed in limpid classical proportions, symme-
try and the use of materials such as marble and sandstone. Nawab ar-
chitecture, too, was aware of the need to fuse native aesthetic lan-
guages, both Hindu and Muslim, but the reduced scale of its mono-
mental buildings caused its message of persuasion to be entrusted
chiefly to an abundance of decoration. Using almost exclusively bricks,
mortar and stucco, it was designed to astonish by interrupted lines, ac-
centuated curves, exaggerated ornament.

In Lucknow, the characteristic wealth of decoration, which be-
came dominant, in façade design in particular, as early as the period of

Asaf-ud-Daula, was accentuated by the repetitiveness of compositional
elements. An architectural device which tended to produce a hyp-
notic effect, repetition was intended to dazzle. A typical instance is the
wealth of decoration on the façade of the Bara Imambara, which at
ground level has foliated arched openings interrupted by two octago-
nal bays and surmounted by a series of small kiosks on the first storey,
while the parapet of the roofline is adorned by a row of chattiris, again
broken by two octagonal bays, each topped by a dome (81). The fa-
cade of the Husainabad Imambara is equally sumptuous, with a se-
cquence of cupped arches and the roofline embellished by repeated
perforated arches, the dome rising behind (82). The Islamic tradition
continued to dominate, expressed by various references. In particular,
repetition was joined with the typical play of advance and recess at
both the imambaras, while traditional geometric motifs were used for
the façade of the Husainabad Imambara. References to Hindu archi-
ecture were also included, for instance in the repetition of the chattirs.

Given that the opulent façades of the imambaras contrasted with the
simplicity of their interiors, already at the Bara Imambara the archi-
etect adopted a stratagem which allowed him to create an illusion
inside the building. The placing of the taziyas in the third gallery,
which was lit by chandeliers and appeared like a platform raised above
the level of the central gallery (see previous pages), created a holy
space, where the tragedy of Karbala unfolded in an equally holy time.
This architectural stratagem, which was ecstatic in character, created
both identification and empathy with the martyrs. It was used with
great skill also in Baroque churches, as Portoghesi observes in describ-
ing the ecstasy of Saint Theresa by Bernini in the Corno chapel in
Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome (83).

Persuasion was intimately linked to unmistakable sensuality. The
exaggerated tone of that sensuality created an ecstatic response, blurr-
ing the confines between the communities, and at the same time re-
ferred to the more mundane conception of pleasure. This is particular-
ly evident in the florid decoration of the gateways. Describing their
opulence, Todd notes for example how already in the period of
Asaf-ud-Daula « the foliations of the arches became exaggerated and
their border and spandrel more florid » and how in the early 19th cen-
tury the « type of cupped arch had acquired a pointed or ogee out-
line, and could sometimes be endowed with yet another intervening

(80) See the excellent work of R. Masiarito, Estetica dell'Architettura, Bologna, 1999,
pp. 97-125.
(81) B. Tandon, op. cit., pp. 51-35.
(82) Ibidem, p. 40.
(83) P. Portoghesi, Estetica: Dematerialism and Movement in C. Jones (ed.), Ec-
arch, also with foliations » (84). Such abundance of decoration held implied erotic symbolism, made explicit at the Mermaid Gate, a gate-
way tending toward the Indo-Western style, where Wajid Ali Shah al-
most playfully substituted the traditional Nawab emblem, a pair of
fish, with mermaids.

The shift from Mughal classicism and the introduction of an ex-
cessive style denoted how the aesthetic experimentation of the Nawabs
did not stick to rigid traditional schemas when faced with the crisis of
their own culture and the clash with other cultures. Thus at the outset
of the 19th century, in an attempt to reaffirm his own legitimacy de-
spite the penetration of the new Western rulers, Saadat Ali Khan in-
troduced the Indo-Western style, which became permanently estab-
lished during the reign of Wajid Ali Shah. The Company’s buildings
were not, however, the only influence on the Nawabs, or on Saadat Ali
Khan in particular, who had spent a great deal of time in Calcutta.
The buildings of Claude Martin in Lucknow were also a source of in-
spiration for the new architectural style.

The primary objective of Martin’s extravagant designs, monu-
ments to his wealth and success, was to amaze the beholder. Once the
astonishment subsided, however, an aesthetic concept influenced by
that of the West in the 18th century could be perceived in Martin’s ar-
chitecture.

In France the debate between the Ancients and Moderns, like the
contrast between the search for a national architectural order and ad-
herence to a more universalistic concept, gradually acquired an aes-
thetic relativism. It was no coincidence that Claude Perrault, de-
signer of the Louvre, held that proportions were beautiful or ugly ac-
cording to custom and convention, though he did not dispute the rela-
tion between beauty and utility. Later, in Britain, Burke’s aesthetic of
the sublime overturned the correlation between art and nature. Natu-
ral ugliness and formlessness were to be allowed as an expression of
tremendous and excessive nature. Thus began the transition from ob-
jectivism to subjectivism, linked to the subjectivity of taste (85).

Martin’s domestic architecture conforms to the late 18th century
French adagio, according to which architecture in good taste must be
pleasing, but pleasing architecture is not always in good taste. Furthe-
more, Martin’s buildings remind one that the debate surrounding ori-
inality had gained momentum in the mid 18th century in England. In
Twickenham Horace Walpole’s villa, an old building restored in « Ro-

(84) B. TANGOS, op. cit., p. 197.
(85) The debate in France and Britain is summarized from R. MARSH, op. cit., p. 105.
a) Court Rituals

Court rituals indicate the concept of sovereignty and its transformation. At the Nawabs Court they also indicated the Nawabs' detachment from the Mughal empire and the influence exerted on them by the East India Company (88).

The rituals adopted by the Lucknow Court were inspired by those of the Mughals, to whom the Nawabs were subordinate. Mughal Court ritual denoted an authority linked to the sacrality of the emperor, derived from a highly complex dynastic genealogy and inspired by the doctrine of the divine light of Subhawardi as reworked by Abul Fa'zal (89).

Initially the Nawabs derived their legitimacy from the investiture obtained from Delhi. Ceremonies were performed in the Lal Baradari at which the nobles and courtiers displayed their loyalty, initially based on a warrior ethic. Ceremonial and etiquette were both intended to foster a competitive spirit among those in attendance, while at the same time promoting cohesion. In the audience room, the effulgent Nawab received dignitaries seated on embroidered couches laid upon a raised golden platform encrusted with precious stones. At the corners of the platform were four pillars supporting a canopy of crimson velvet, fringed with pearls. To one side was the parasol or chattri, a royal emblem, also in pearl-fringed velvet. Before the Nawab, splendidly adorned with diamonds, rubies and emeralds, the nobles and courtiers were positioned according to rank. Identification with the ruler took place by the gift of khilats, but a sense of belonging was also fostered by the exchange of nasars and gifts, including necklaces, daggers, swords, elephants, palanquins.

With the affirmation of Shi'ism as the formal religion which was an expression of greater autonomy in respect of the prevailing Sunni orthodoxy of the Mughal empire, royal authority was reconsidered. Shi'ism provided a religious legitimisation of the Nawabs' authority, in the shape of the direct rapport established by the Lucknow Court with the shrine cities of Iraq and Iran. The lasting success achieved in Lucknow by Shi'ite scholars who travelled to Najaf and Karbala to study Shi'ite law, together with the generous offerings made by the Nawabs to the shrine cities, resulted in the creation of a genealogy which claimed descent for the Nishapur family from the Imam Musa al-Kazim, the seventh Twelver Shi'ite Imam.

Religious legitimisation was confirmed first and foremost in the introduction on the part of the Shi'ites of Friday congregational prayers. This was a consequence of the predominance among Awadh Shi'ites of the Usuli ulema, who unlike the Akbaris, favoured a clear distinction between lay and clerical spheres. Thus at the Asafi Mosque the katha began to be read in the name of the Nawab. Only later was that function moved to the Jama Masjid. Lastly, religious legitimisation was also confirmed at the ceremony of the coronation of Ghazi-ud-din Haydar by the presence of the mujahid, the senior Shi'ite authority, who placed the crown on the sovereign's head (90).

As Fisher explains, however, when the Company became progressively more established in Lucknow, royal authority weakened appreciably. This became apparent precisely at the crowning of Ghazi-ud-din Haydar, a manoeuvre by Governor General Lord Hastings to move Awadh outside the Mughal orbit. Neither the decision to mint a new coin nor the new coat of arms were able to disseminate the growing influence of the Resident, who sat on the right-hand side of the throne during the ceremony, together with the sovereign's heir.

As Emma Roberts wrote later, the Resident was granted use of the chattri or royal parasol, chaunni (a yak's tail used as a fly whisk) and huqqah in the sovereign's presence, thus awarding him the same rank as the Nawab (91). Thus as time went on and the Residency gained in political importance, the visits of the Resident and the Company's officers did not imply anymore their subordination to the Nawab. In keeping with that idea, the Resident instructed British visitors to refuse the symbolic gifts handed out by the Nawab at official audiences, much to the dismay of travellers such as Fanny Parks, who were astonished by the precious gems showered upon his guests by the sovereign (92).

As royal authority diminished, the receptions to which the Nawab invited the Crown representatives of the East India Company turned into pure exhibitions of luxury. As often occurred in the seventeenth-century Courts of Europe, too, every celebration was transformed into an occasion for entertainment.

This became particularly noticeable in the reign of Wajid Ali Shah, who was forced to abdicate his power even before the annexing of the Awadh. Wajid Ali Shah did not restrict himself to political rituals but exploited architecture, in particular, as a scenario for performing dancing and music or for the recitation of his poetry.

Directed by the Nawab and regularly performed at Court by a company consisting of courtesans, the dancing retained a style in-

(88) For a systematic study on symbols and politics see G. Piccol, Simboli e Politica, Napoli, 1991.
(90) For a detailed account on Usulis and Akbaris see J. Cole, op. cit.
spired by Persia but was based on themes from Hindu mythology, which made it possible for love themes to be more explicitly pursued. Not by chance did Wajid Ali Shah organise his birthday celebrations in such a way that he could appear in public dressed as a yogi and accompanied by royal concubines dressed as yoginis. The celebrations, which took place at Kaiserebagh, continued privately for several days with dances inspired by the amorous adventures of Krishna (93).

Far from showing Wajid Ali Shah’s moral decadence, as the British Residents maintained, these initiatives revealed the evolution of a highly-cultured and refined society, although one that was far removed from moralistic concepts of a Victorian stamp. Moreover, with their playful tone and boldly amoral aspect, the Nawab’s poetry and erotic descriptions of his favourite ladies added an autobiographical dimension to reflections on the concept of pleasure. As such, they denoted Wajid Ali Shah’s inclination towards introspection and scepticism, as well as indicating a profound awareness of precariousness.

b) Religious Rites

Together with the Court ceremonies, the development of a Shi'ite religion aimed at integrating the different religious languages of the heterogeneous Indian society through a ritual of devotional inspiration was intended to help strengthen the Nawabs’ authority. In reality the impact of popular religion was more profound than expected. Indian Shi’ism had previously practised dissimulation so as to avoid being overwhelmed by Sunni orthodoxy, but now it emerged to greater openness and made interaction with other castes and communities possible by virtue of its lack of a solid structure. Thus the celebration of Muharram contributed not only to defining the Shi’ite community, but also to the working out of a civic identity.

While the historical tragedy of Karbala unfolded in a matter of hours, the celebration of Muharram was protracted for ten days ending with the procession of Ashura or else with a further commemoration on the fortieth day. Ashraf and ajlaf Muslims both took part in the Muharram rites. The ashras included Sayyids, both Shi’ites and Sunnis, who often lived in poverty but enjoyed high ritual status on the basis of their supposed descent from the family of the Prophet. The ashras also included the Mughals, whose Persian component was largely Shi’ite, the Pathans and the Shaioks, who were in general Sunnis. Mughals, Pathans and Shaioks had lower ritual status than the Sayyids, but tended to be better off. Muslims of lower extraction, in Lucknow for the most part Sunni such as the jolahas, took part in

Muharram on a large scale. Hindus also took part, mainly Rajputs, Brahmans and Kayasthas, but also lower castes (94).

Social barriers were weakened by collective participation in ritual regimes of fasting and poverty, which were practised even by the wealthiest. Day and night, men and women shunned the charpoys and musnads to lie on simple mattresses laid on the floor. Their diet included barley, bread, rice and peas, while the eating of pan leaves was forbidden. Like Hindu widows, women gave up wearing jewellery, wore black or white clothing and let down their hair, while men dressed humbly and went barefoot. Lastly, social integration was fostered by the constant giving of alms and the distribution of food and drink in memory of the thirst suffered by the martyrs in the Karbala desert.

During the first ten days of Muharram the prayer sessions took place in the imambaras both mornings and evenings with the partecipation of the Shi’ite and Sunni nobility and of the high Hindu castes. The poor were allowed to visit the imambaras before the sessions began. The Nawab gathered the most important dignitaries around him in the brightly lit imambara, while the nobles organised their own prayer sessions in the imambaras of their palaces and the women met in imambaras set aside for them inside the zenana.

The prayer sessions were held amid a crescendo of ecstatic exaltation. The central hall of the imambara was dominated by the taziyas, from the word for ‘grief’, or by extension ‘consoling’. Taziyas were placed pointing towards Mecca and metaphorically represented the tomb of Husain at Karbala. In reality, however, nobody could fail to notice the similarity of these miniature tombs, with their one or more domes, to Mughal monumental buildings (95). This made them familiar to mourners in the subcontinent and brought Hindus closer to Muslims, whose iconoclastic orthodoxy forbade pictorial representation of the martyrs. The richest taziyas were in silver filigree, ivory, ebony and sandalwood, skilfully carved and inlaid by local jewellers and craftsmen. There were even some taziyas from Britain; in particular Mrs. Ameer Ali mentions the taziya composed of green glass with brass moulding manufactured for the Nawabs. Less costly taziyas were buried in the karbalas following the Ashura procession. Composed of bamboo frames, over which was fixed coloured tule, these taziyas were sold in the bazaar for a price which varied between two and two hundred rupees, making them affordable even for the poorer faithful.

From the pulpit, placed close to the taziyas and the standards or

(94) J. COLE, op. cit., pp. 78-85, see also G. ANSARI, Muslim Castes in Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, 1960.
(95) The description of Muharram draws mainly on Mrs. MEER HASSAN ALI, op. cit.
alam, a preacher read in Persian an episode of the martyrdom, taken from a work in ten chapters, each dedicated to one of the ten days of Muharram. After the reading, the participants, who were seated around the pulpits on a cotton carpet, ate sherbet or smoked the hookah. The evocation of the battle of Karbala began again with the reciting in Urdu of the marsiyan or funeral elegies.

The reciting of the marsiyan unleashed an emotional reaction in those present, who joined in by chanting in chorus the name of Husain, beating their breasts the while and finally flagellating themselves, in an atmosphere of collective catharsis.

There were various ways of reciting the marsiyan. Tafzul-last was a form of solo non-musical recital and was recited by an expert in the art of oratory who would interpret the poetic moods of the text by modulating his voice and by cadences and pauses, even resorting to gestures, strictly contained but important. The rozkhan performed shorter marsiyan, used only during Muharram, with a musical recitation in melacholy Indo-Iranian ragas (96).

The dominant theme of the innumerable marsiyan of Mir Anis, regarded as the unsurpassed master of the art, was the struggle between good and evil and the celebration of the victory of good through the conscious immolation of Husain and his followers. Yet, at the same time, marsiyan reflected the values of Lucknow society and their gradual transformation.

The greater part of the marsiyan, which exalted submission to divine will through the heroic deeds of the martyrs, were dedicated to themes linked to the warrior ethic. The celebration of the sword as a symbol of heroism, the chivalry of Husain's followers and their devotion to their leader, the relationship of benevolence and loyalty that united Husain and his servant Habib were all themes that referred to the concept of dynastic loyalty and aimed at projecting a warrior image.

Nonetheless the innovative use of well-known literary conventions by Anis Mir surreptitiously introduced sentiments of affection and feeling. The continual combined use of hyperbole, simile and metaphor involved the congregation more closely in an event which had taken place in the distant past and in a far-off country. The hyperbole underlined the absolute character of each image, because, as Faruqi points out, in the marsiyan the hot midday was not any hot midday, but a zenith of the sun in hell, and the evening was not just any evening, it was midnight in a deserted country graveyard (97).

Metaphors, especially compound metaphors, initially used to amplify the otherwise repetitive descriptions of the battle, began to introduce familiar and comprehensible images. In the marsiyan of Anis Mir the use of similes was above all a way of allowing the action in Karbala to be moved to the plains of Awadh, as is evident from the descriptions of landscape. Furthermore the metaphorical images made the figure of the hero more romantic: in addition to boundless courage he also possessed more human qualities. Metaphors underlined the vulnerability of the warriors through scenes which on occasion described their separation from their mothers, and the grief and suffering of the mothers themselves (98). Such literary devices, together with the description of strong female figures, formed part of the process of the feminisation of male identity, denoting a definitive shift away from the warrior code of Mughal society. At the same time the scenes of widows' grief (for instance the breaking of bangles) often described Hindu widowhood in India (99).

If the prayer sessions fostered integration of the elite, the formation of a civic identity was particularly encouraged by the processions, which brought together rich and poor, Muslims and Hindus. On the one hand these were inspired by the Hindus’ own processions, during which a horse-drawn cart or rath carried an image of the deity whose festival was being celebrated. On the other hand they revived the custom of funeral corteges, in use in Iran since ancient times. The processions culminated in a specific place on which converged various marches, representing the Court and the noble castes, but also the neighbourhoods of the city and the guilds, often involved in the making of the ritual objects for Muharram. Describing the process of civic integration Mrs. Ali wrote: ‘if no greater advantage be derived from the gorgeous display of the wealthy, than the stimulus to honest industry among the several traders, whose labour is brought into the use on these occasions, then is enough in the result to excuse the expenditure of surplus cash in apparent trifles’ (100).

Three different processions were held during the celebrations for the festival. On the fifth day the alams or banners were carried in procession to the Dargah Abbas; on the seventh day the wedding procession was held to commemorate the marriage of Hasan’s son Qasim with the favourite daughter of Husain; during the Ashura procession the taziyas were carried to the karbals and buried there.

In Lucknow Muharram included the consacration of alams in the Dargah Hazrat Abbas, given the enormous popularity of the sanctuary

(96) Mafi, Mafi, Mir Ans, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 48-49.
(97) A.J. Zaidi, Mafi Ans, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 48-49.
(100) Mrs. Meen Hazan Ali, op. cit., p. 55.
with the people of the city. As emblems of confraternities, families and guilds, the banners underscored the religious and civic meaning of the ceremony. For example the double pointed sword emblem carried by the dignitaries in the procession probably derived from the hierarchy of the Muslim brotherhood organizations, in which the sword was the insignia of the intermediate level, those with the sword. The metal flagstaff of the alam bore a crest in the shape of a hand, which had deep symbolic significance. The five-fingered hand represented the Prophet, Fatimah, Ali, Hasan and Husain and thus the Shi'ites, while a hand with three fingers referred to the first three caliphs venerated by the Sunnis. The hand was also a reassuring symbol for Hindus, given that the spread hand was a charm against evil spirits. Mrs Ameer Ali was even of the opinion that the poorest members of the congregation probably mistook the taziyas for bhukkhana or houses of spirits (101).

The processions to the dargah of Rustumnagar were headed by three or four elephants in velvet trappings with zardosi embroidery. Seated on their backs were the bearers of the alam. The banners were of coloured silk with insignia embroidered in gold thread. They were followed by a band with drums, fifes and trumpets and a swordbearer, generally dressed in green, the colour of the Sayyid, and carrying a black pole, on which two swords hung from a bow reversed. Next came the owner of the alam, accompanied by relatives, friends and a preacher, who would pause occasionally to recite passages from the maziyas recounting the heroic deeds of Abbas. He was followed by Duldul, the white Arab steed of Abbas. Since Duldul was killed in the course of the battle, the horse's body was stained with red to represent his mortal wounds. Duldul had embroidered trappings like those of the elephants, while the stirrups and mountings were in solid silver. A turban and a bow and arrows hung from his saddle. An embroidered royal umbrella was supported over the head of the horse, followed by footmen who carried the afzafir (a sun embroidered on crimson velvet) and the chauuri, and by a crowd of servants and footsoldiers. Once arrived at the dargah, the procession passed through the majestic gate and halted in the precinct, where the insignia were consecrated by touching the sacred relic. This ceremony was observed even by the poorest, who approached the dargah accompanied only by a few other people and some musicians.

The celebrations for Muharram were often transformed into a city festival in which the religious significance became almost a secondary consideration. As Sleeman observed contemptuously: ‘The more sober-minded Muslims of Lucknow were much scandalized at the habit which had grown up among them of commemorating every event, wether of sadness or joy, by brilliant illuminations and splendid processions... (The) objective of these celebrations was solely to amuse the population of Lucknow and to gratify the Muslim women and children.‘ (102). No doubt the female half of the population was particularly fond of the procession on the night of Mehndi, commemorating Qasim's marriage with his cousin, which took place on the eve of the battle in which the bridegroom was killed. The various groups marching in this procession carried trays loaded with gifts, usually offered by persons of lower rank to those of a higher status and then carried to the karbala during the Ashura procession. The gifts were followed in the parade by the miniature replica of the tomb of Qasim, the royal palanquin of his bride, Duldul, camels and elephants. The poorer inhabitants were allowed to watch the procession and receive alms.

The culmination of Muharram was the Ashura procession, during which rich and poor brought their taziyas from the imambas to the karbalas. The procession was headed by the alams, followed by a band of musicians and the swordbearer. Close by, a group of mourners carried black poles, on which were fixed long streamers of black unspun silk, symbol of grief and despair. Then came the turn of Duldul, followed by the reader of the maziyas, the owner of the taziya and his relatives and friends. The taziya was covered by a canopy in velvet with zardosi embroidery and was followed by men sprinkling rosewater. Next came the miniature tomb of Qasim, the royal palanquin of the bride, the trays of gifts and the waterbearer. From the elephants which formed the tail of the procession, servants distributed food and money to the poor. The collective emotional tension was heightened by the practice of self-flagellation and the climax was reached at the burial of the taziyas. Once in the vicinity of the karbala, fighting between Shi'ites and Sunnis would sometimes break out.

4. Conclusion

The special character of Lucknow was enhanced both by the way the Nawabs' Court vied with Delhi and the Residency, and above all by the creation of a monumental architecture which encouraged interaction between the royal citadels and the residential and commercial neighbourhoods through the performance of various rituals. Because of this relative integration in Lucknow the Mutiny was a prelude to the establishment of a civic identity.
All the buildings in a city have a life and destiny of their own, which in part determine the quality of the urban space they create. The splendour of the royal citadels was cast into desolation on 4 February 1856, when Outram arrived at the Zard Kothi Palace in Kaiserkhag to deliver to the Nawab a missive from the Governor General, in which it was announced that a new treaty would transfer the administration of Awadh to the East India Company. Wajid Ali Shah, who defied his turban in a symbolic gesture, placing it in the Resident's hands to express his humiliation and powerlessness, had no alternative but to go into exile. A witnesses to the sequence of events commented metaphorically that: "the condition of the town was such that on the departure of the Nawab life became extinct, and the body of the town became soulless. Grief rained down from every door and wall. Every house was lifeless and turned itself into a prison. There was no lane, no bazaar or other dwelling which did not wall out in agony at the departure of the Nawab." (103).

The annexation and the Mutiny hit Lucknow like a storm, repeatedly devastating the city and redrawing the map of its territory, in a fashion so dramatic as to make the creation of a deep-set collective memory of the events inevitable. Annexation brought about the occupation of the city. After the occupation of the city by the British forces, from exile in Calcutta, Wajid Ali Shah complained in a despairing letter to the Governor General that the edifices and monuments of his ancestors had been pulled down, while Farhat Baksh, where his throne was placed, had been used as a dog kennel and a stable. Royal palaces, parks, gardens, menageries, jewellry, household furniture, together with the royal museum and the library containing books and manuscripts of immense value, had been sequestered. There was more: the Company's officers had treated the mahals, the ladies of the royal harem, with disrespect, throwing them out of their quarters inside the Chattar Manzil enclosure without finding suitable new accommodation for them (104).

In January 1857 the troops of the 32nd Regiment took over the palaces of Chattar Manzil, the Chaupar Stables and various houses in the street leading from Hazratganj to La Martiniere. The greater part of the occupying force was concentrated in the Marrion Cantonment, three miles from the Residency. When violence first broke out in the Marrion Cantonment, the 32nd Regiment was transferred there from the Chaupar Stables in order to prevent contact between the sepoys and the inhabitants of Lucknow. In the meantime the British civilians took refuge in the Residency, to which the mutineers laid siege from 30 June, after the British defeat at Chintau.

The Mutiny was not simply the consequence of the city's identification with the destiny of the Court, or of the nobility's observance of a warrior code, or of their sentiments of loyalty to the royal dynasty. As E. Hulton, a student at La Martinière at the time of the Mutiny, was to write a few years later, "the Company had done very little to deserve the love of Lucknow's inhabitants and much to merit their detestation." (105) Annexation was the final blow to the entire city. The nobles and courtiers were reduced to poverty, their followers and servants were out of work, the local regiments were disbanded, trade and production of luxury goods declined, and the poorer inhabitants complained of the levying of new taxes. Even the beggars were worse off without the generosity of the Nawabs.

In Lucknow the mutineers, composed of sepoys and armed bands led by taluqdar from neighbouring districts, were joined by a part of the city's hostile population, who were dismissed by the British as "bad characters" or "rabble of the town". The rebels who fought to liberate the city were not led by valiant warriors, who were a dying breed, but by a former concubine from the royal harem, Hazrat Ma'hal, the mother of Birjis Qadri, one of the sons of Wajid Ali Shah, installed on the throne by the mutineers.

By early July Lucknow was in the hands of the mutineers. The mutahhars, situated close to the Residency and evacuated before the Machhi Bhawan was blown up by the British, were fortified and occupied by the rebels. In the following months thousands of mutineers besieged the Residency, but their inadequate military resources made a successful final attack impossible. However in September they prevented a British relief force which had reached the Residency via southern Charbagh from evacuating the besieged.

Between late September and the end of March 1858 the rebels fought to the last against a superior military force, in similar circumstances to the battle of Kebalba which for years they had so passionately evoked.

On 14 November the Highland brigade under General Colin Campbell marched from Alambagh to Dilkusha, La Martinière, and after severe fighting proceeded to Sikander Bagh and Moti Mahal. After reaching the Residency and with difficulty evacuating the be-

siegèd already on the point of exhaustion, the British were forced by the fury of the rebels to withdraw without capturing Kaisergah.

In March 1858 when the final attack was launched, the British troops found a city whose defences had been strengthened, especially around Kaisergah. The three lines of defence were formed by earthworks, parapets, or ridges, fronted by ditches, and strengthened by bastions, while the principal streets were barricaded and palace and garden walls were loopholed (106).

On the 2nd of March Colin Campbell started his march towards the royal citadel from Dilkusha, while General James Outram was ordered to advance on the other bank of the Gumti. From palace to palace, from garden to garden the defenders opposed the new invasion with strenuous resistance, but after bloody fighting Campbell's and Outram's troops prevailed. On 14 March the British stormed the Bara Imambara and finally captured Kaisergah.

As The Times correspondent W.H. Russell reported the desecrated Imambara was a scene of destruction (107), the marble pavement covered with broken mirrors and chandeliers, while British troops were busy smashing the rest of the furnishings. In Kaisergah the scene was as distressing: amidst the orange groves were dead sepoys and the white marble and plaster statues were reddened with blood. Drunk with plunder soldiers rushed from one palace to the other carrying precious stones, silver pieces, vessels of jade, arms encrusted with gems and gold. In the centre of a court brocades and embroidered shawls were burned in a fire to extract gold and silver thread; china was dashed to pieces and furniture were smashed (108).

The whole town was devastated. Yet when Russell climbed a minaret in proximity to Kaisergah, the picturesque view of Lucknow appeared to him as a vanished oriental dream. And with nostalgic feel-

ings he wrote: "Alas words! words! how poor you are to depict the scene which meets the eye of the infidel from the quiet retreat of the mezzanine... (109). Not Rome, not Athens, not Constantinople, not any city I have ever seen, appears to me so striking and beautiful as this; and the more I gaze, the more its beauties grow upon me... (110)."

Over the next few years, in accordance with the plan of Colonel Robert Napier, entire quarters of the dense town were demolished, wide roads were opened and military posts of control were established transforming the Nawabs' city symbol into a colonial town.

(107) The destruction of the city of Lucknow is portrayed in the photographs taken by Felice Beato. Felice Beato (1820-1907) was probably born in either Venice or Corfu. He acquired the photographic practice from his brother-in-law, the photographer James Robertson, and he photographed the war in Crimea and the Mutiny in India. His most famous photograph of the Lucknow series is a view of the Silender Bagh, where he recreates the scene of the slaughter of 2000 sepoys by re-arranging dismembered bones. This biographical note is summarized from D. Harris, Topography and Memory: Felice Beato's Photographs of India, 1858-1859, in V. Dossa (ed.), India Through the Lens, Photography 1840-1911, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, 2000. See MSS Eur E 290/102(2) Silender Bagh interior showing breach through which it was entered, Lucknow, May 1858; see also Photo 499(54) View of a group with the site destroyed by mines, Lucknow, 1858; MSS Eur E 290/102(16) Chota Imambara, gate Guard, Madras Postscript, Lucknow, 1858; Photo 10077/13/2717 Ruins of the Residency, Copy of an old photo, Lucknow, 1858.
(110) Ibidem, p. 345.
THE ROLE OF BENARES IN CONSTRUCTING POLITICAL HINDU IDENTITY

by MARZIA CASOLARI (*)

1. From Present to Past: an Episode to start with

Until recently, observers and public opinion had practically abandoned all thought of Varanasi as a place of potential social unrest, and had come to consider it a peaceful community. In February 2000 this impression let down abruptly, when the city came again into the limelight with new upsurge. The Mehta affair, its developments and the subsequent polemics occupied the media for the entire month.

On January 29, Deepa Mehta, the world famous Indian film-maker based in Canada, started shooting her new movie, Water, on the banks of the Ganga. This is supposed to be the last film of Mehta's trilogy named after the three elements, Fire and Earth being the other two. Water portrays the pitiful conditions of Indian widows in the 1930s, with one of the heroines forced into prostitution by the necessity to survive. The reference to the present is clear. Moreover, title and setting seem to allude to Ganga's sacred waters as a symbol of the Hindu conservatism behind the extremely low social status of widows. The movie provoked violent reactions right from the start, when Deepa Mehta received obscene, threatening phone calls, including death threats. The movie had obtained the Centre's clearance, with the Minister of Information and Broadcasting (I&B), Arun Jaitley, asking for just a few minor changes. He and, it seems, the Prime Minister, decided to ignore the overwhelming protests against the movie coming

(*) The reader may wonder why in this paper Benares is called with so many different names. The reason is because Benares has several names. The city has been and is now called with different names, according to the reference to different historical, cultural or political frames. So, if we refer to colonial Benares and the historical facts connected to the British, it is spontaneous to speak about Benares. If we refer to the classical city, to its historical and cultural background, in the broader sense, not excluding all possible contributions, from Buddhism to Islam, we may prefer to use the name Varanasi. If we talk about the vision of the brahmanical orthodoxy or the political use of Benares as a symbol, we should not forget that both orthodox brahmans and Hindutva militants prefer to call the sacred city with its Sanskrit name: Kashi.
from Sangh Parivar and BJP supporters. In spite of this, as soon as Deepa Mehta began shooting, the Uttar Pradesh government denied her permission to film in Varanasi. The day after, a mob of five hundred people tore down and burnt parts of the sets at Tulsi Ghat. The Kashi Sanskriti Raksha Sangharsh Samiti (KSRRS), an organisation that includes members of the Sangh Parivar, led the attack. Hooligans chanted slogans like Tirth sthan ka aapnami nahi sahega Hindustan “India will not tolerate the insult of its holy places” (1). The other point raised by protesters is that Water is “a 100 per cent blue film about our widow sisters” and an “onslaught on Indian culture”. According to the views of its opponents, Mehta’s film is doubly blasphemous: showing the crude reality of their conditions, it offends not only Indian widows, but does so in one of the most sacred places in India. This is seen as a “contamination” of the holy city.

As far as the political identity of the agitators is concerned, the Sangh Parivar has denied any involvement in the protest: both RSS(Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) dissociated from the agitation. This does not mean that they had an unambiguous position. The editor of “Organiser”, Seshadri Chari, declared at the same time that “film-makers, writers and other artists should not transgress the limits of what the society they are working within considers permissible”, that “RSS does not believe in laying down any cultural policy” and “creativity arises out of inner convictions, which cannot be dictated by policy”. These declarations contrast sharply with the admission of a senior RSS officer, according to whom “the agitation was planned by the Sangh right down to the last detail”. In December, we received word from Delhi that this could be an issue which we could use” (2).

Alongside this double faced attitude of the Sangh Parivar, there were conflicting positions between Centre and State and between the BJP and other Sangh Parivar organisations. Mr Vajpayee and the I&B minister showed a permissive attitude towards the movie, and also went further. Before the incidents, Arun Jaitley met the representatives of protesting organisations and tried to mediate between the parts. After the attacks on Mehta’s set, Mr Vajpayee declared that “he will not tolerate a repeat of the Varanasi-type vandalism”. Later on he “had informally conveyed to the Chief Ministers of Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal — the two states which have invited Mehta to shoot — to crack down on anyone, including Sangh bodies who overstepped the norms of ‘civilised conduct’” (3). On the other hand, Chief Minister Giriraj Kishore asserted that “there are many things which, even if true, should not be talked about. The film is a deliberate attempt to defame Hindu institutions. In the name of communal harmony, such films should not be made, nor be screened” (4). Finally, the reason for denying permission to shoot is that the State government was, by its own admission, incapable of maintaining public order. The opposition was therefore between the Centre and the UP Government, between Vajpayee’s and Jaitely’s moderate stance and the “hawks’” repressions. An instructive example of lack of unity.

One can object that these facts have little to do with the topic of this paper, but we must also remember that the unrest provoked by Mehta’s movie represents the most serious outbreak of violence in Varanasi in the last decade. All the more so, those who violently opposed the shooting of the movie have openly connected the Mehta issue with another sensitive matter in their agitational agenda, the Vishvanath Temple question. These two elements make the entire affair much more significant.

In fact, while the Mehta issue ended with the director’s decision to postpone shooting, the Sangh Parivar’s attitude is reflected in the intention to carry on with its policy of strengthening Hindu identity by creating and manipulating potentially conflict-raising issues.

It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss and test the validity of the versions of events described above. The difficult task of forecasting whether the Sangh Parivar will choose the most extreme policy is also beyond the scope of this paper. At present it is not clear whether they are just waiting for the right moment to adopt a more intolerant policy and, in that case, go so far as to repeat what was done in Ayodhya. Another possibility is that the Sangh Parivar is quite simply engaging its adversaries in a war of nerves, keeping the tension high regarding the issue of holy places. This strategy has the double purpose of intimidating the Muslim population and aggregating the Hindus. These questions are bound to remain unanswered at this stage.

Since, on the whole, attention has been concentrated on the Ayodhya issue — as the most disruptive — the role of Benares in the construction of political Hindu identity and symbolism has been underestimated. A historical overview of the evolution of this role can shed light on contemporary events.


(2) S. Varadarajan, Voices from Varanasi, From Water to Mandir Flows the Protest, “The Times of India”, February 13, 2000. The quotation is from the original.


(4) S. Varadarajan, Voices from Varanasi...
2. Benares, the Sacred City of the Hindus

There is no doubt that Varanasi's history is marked by an uninterrupted line of sacredness. An urban settlement has existed here since the 4th century BC. One of the sacred Hindu cities, Varanasi has been associated with Shaiva cults since the 6th-5th century BC. The importance of Varanasi as a place of pilgrimage is confirmed by the association with Sarnath, the Buddhist site less than 10 km away. Here, Buddha pronounced his first sermon. Between the last centuries BC and the first centuries AD, Varanasi was already an important centre of religious and Vedic studies. The religious and cultural importance of Kashvi, or Varanasi, was not cancelled by the Muslim invasions and the subsequent destruction of Hindu monuments and temples, which were systematically reconstructed by the local Rajputs and powerful merchants. The process of demolition and construction lasted for a few centuries, strengthening, rather than weakening, the image of the sacred city. The Mughals' attempt to transform Varanasi into a Muslim city with the name of Muhammadabad did not succeed (5). With the decline of the Mughal Empire, three power groups emerged. They were represented by the local Rajput dynasty, the merchant-bankers and "mendicant traders-soldiers" usually defined as gossains (6). These groups interacted significantly. The gossains represented "a body of brokers between different social groups. They attracted veneration from the mass of the people and also had a close hand in the running of the merchant communities" (7). On the other side, the merchant-bankers were able to attract and control huge amounts of capitals, part of which could flow in the form of loans to the Raja, when he had to pay his tribute to the Nawab of Awadh. The political and economic power of these groups was deeply interrelated with "cultural patronage" (8). While in the early 18th century Benares was a "mughalizing city", in the early 19th century the three power-holding groups played a crucial role in "reinventing" a Hindu tradition which could cope with their own interests.

Since 1775, when the British took Benaras over from the Nawab's control, their relationship with the Bhumilah dynasty of Be-

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(6) For reasons of space, we can only give a brief account of Benares' social and economic context at the end of the eighteenth century. For a much more detailed description see S. FREITAG (ed.), Culture and Power in Benares, Berkeley, 1992.


(8) S. FREITAG's definition, pp. 8-9.

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nara Raja was characterised by several ups and downs (9). In 1910-11, the final decision to reinvest the Raja with the powers which previously had been partially withdrawn, was motivated by the Raja's capacity to keep "conservative Hinduism at Banaras" on the British side (10). Already from this early stage, there was a substantial alliance between the British raj and conservative Hinduism. Maharaja Prabhu Narain Singh, who ruled from 1889 and 1931, has always been considered a precious ally of the British, because of his anti-Congress attitude (11). This situation seems to be similar to that generated at the nation-wide level in the late 1930s, when Hindu nationalism diverted its target from the British to the Muslims and the Congress (12). Going back to Benaras, we have to notice that the aggregation strategy adopted by the Raja was based on the reinforcement of the Ramila celebration, from the early 19th century. Sponsored by the Maharaja and the Hindu merchants, the festival was a symbolic representation of the Maharaja's mythical role and his identification with Shiva as "the lord of ancient holy Kashvi" (13). It is difficult to agree with the interpretation according to which the festival had the main function of appealing to a wider audience, including Muslims (14). The fact that up to the late 19th century the Hindu population used to participate in Muharram (15) celebrations does not suffice to prove this interpretation. There is no doubt that the economic interest of the Muslim weavers and the Hindu merchants were deeply interconnected. There is also little doubt that the Muslim weavers represented pressure groups with a certain range of power. This does not mean that "their civic integration" (16) was balanced and fair. It is indeed a matter of fact that the Muslim population, a quarter of the total, was represented by a majority of lower class

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(9) Ibidem, pp. 10-11.

(10) Ibidem, p. 11. Freitag's quotation is from India Office Library (IOI), L/IP/S/173, file 876, p. 2.

(11) A. CONSOLAZIO, Madre India..., op. cit., p. 32.


(13) S. FREITAG, (ed.), Culture..., op. cit., p. 12.

(14) Ibidem, pp. 12-14. Contrary to what S. Freitag asserts, this was not a peculiarity of Benaras. At the end of the 19th century also in Poona Hindus used to celebrate Muharram in a climate of harmony with the Muslims. According to Stanley Wolpert's interpretation, the Ganapati festival was introduced in Poona precisely to counter Muharram. It is noteworthy that after the introduction of the Ganapati festival the climate of peaceful participation was cancelled. For more details, see S.A. WOLPERT, Tulik and Gokhale. Revolution and Reform in the Making of Modern India, Berkeley, 1962, p. 69.

(15) Muharram is a ten day period of mourning in the first, homonymous, month of the Muslim calendar. The festival of Muharram celebrates the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Husain who died in the battle of Karbala, which closed a quarrel concerning the correct succession to the Prophet.

(16) S. FREITAG, (ed.), Culture..., op. cit., p. 15.
groups, among which the weavers were prominent, and a small minority of members of the old Muslim aristocracy. It is also a matter of fact, implicitly and explicitly proved by studies on the topic, that after the decadence of the Mughal Empire, the Muslim population was permanently confined to a subaltern role — a situation lasting up to the present day. It has been shown how in the pre-colonial and the early colonial period the conditions of the ullahas, or Muslim weavers, were fluctuating. They depended on market variations and changes introduced into the economic system. The precarious economic conditions of the ullahas lay behind many occasions of strife between Muslim weavers and the mercantile classes, predominantly Hindu.

In more recent times, the serious riots of October 1977 (18) demonstrate that a supposed ideologic integration between Muslim weavers and the Hindu population in Varanasi has not been realised. As normally happens on these occasions, the tensions immediately took a communal form, but from a careful analysis of the facts other elements emerged. It seems that behind the supposedly religious reasons for the riots there were economic motivations, connected precisely with the producer/dealer relationship in the silk industry. Some prominent Hindu sari dealers, who traditionally control the market, feared the rising competition of a number of Muslims who traditionally occupied the position of subaltern producers but who had become dealers. The Hindu dealers wanted to “break the backbone of the rising Muslim businessmen who are mainly concentrated in the Mandapura area” (19). Hindu dealers provided some funds to organise the riots and to support the men who had to create the violence against the Muslims. Evidence that economic competition was the real reason for the riots is provided by the fact that a large number of shops, factories and properties belonging to the Muslims were looted and destroyed. It is clear that Hindu dealers aimed at confining their Muslim rivals to a subaltern role. Even today, in most cases, the conditions of the Muslim weavers continue to be characterised by poverty, while their identity is almost invisible to an external, uninform eye. When tourists are taken around the silk factories, nobody provides any information as to the identity of Varanasi silk weavers, who have, nevertheless, made a fundamental contribution to the economic prosperity and the cultural heritage of the town.

Certainly, compared with other Indian cities and areas, over the last ten years, Benares has been a relatively peaceful place. Excluding post-Ayodhya tensions, the last dramatic episodes of violence date back to summer 1990, a consequence of the Janata Dal government’s decision to put in practice the recommendations of the Mandal Commission. In summer 1990 the violence took a communal form and the Benares Hindu University (BHU) became the main focus in town, with bitter clashes between Hindu and Muslim students.

In the last few years the target of communal violence shifted from Muslims to Christians, in UP as well as in other parts of India. Nevertheless, if we look at the following table showing the occurrence of communalist violence towards Christians in the first semester 2000, we notice that Benares is not mentioned at all. The attacks occurred in many other centres in UP, including Agra and Mathura, but not in Benares, in spite of the presence of an important urban Christian community.

**Attacks on Christians (January - May 2000)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Place/State Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. January</td>
<td>Phillaur, Punjab St. Peter and Paul Church robbed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. January</td>
<td>Phillaur, Punjab St. Joseph’s Convent robbed</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Jan 3</td>
<td>Gujranwala, Orissa 17, Dalit Christian house torched 12 killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Jan</td>
<td>Panipat, Haryana Fr. Vikas of St. Mary’s Church attacked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Feb 4</td>
<td>Rajgarh, MP Hostel forced to closed down</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Feb 20</td>
<td>Puducherry, Kerala Statues of Mary destroy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Feb 20</td>
<td>Sevi, Gujarat Protestant Church damaged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


(18) Behind the first clash was a territorial quarrel aiming at denying the right of the Muslim weavers living in the area adjoining the Anglo-Bengali college to occupy a space in which they had lived for a long time. The wall of the college playground was broken on the side of the Muslim residential area. In this way the students had a shortcut to the school, while the weavers had extra space to spread the yarn, when the ground was free of playing children. According to a reconstruction of the facts “this situation has existed for many years. Neither the college authorities nor the students had ever objected to this informal use of the part of the field by the weavers. On 1 October 1977 a group of students from the college asserted that the weavers’ yarns were taking up space for playing. The quarrel degenerated into a clash between a number of students and Muslim men. When the police from the nearby station intervened, the people from both communities had already formed mobs. The police were repelled. The sub-inspector was beaten up and his revolver was reportedly stolen. Later in the afternoon the police came back in greater force, looted and burnt various houses and beat a number of people, including women and old men. The area where the clashes took place is contiguous to Mandapura, where the most prosperous Muslim population of Varanasi is to be found. Just behind Mandapura is an area densely populated by low caste Hindus, mostly Bengali and Alars. Some people from this area, particularly those involved with the police had done to the Muslims, mobilised again at the end of the same month, implying violence with a religious shade. This took place on the occasion of Durga Puja.

3. Against the Theory of the Idyllic Coexistence

In the 19th century, riots were a common event in Benares. A particularly violent one is recorded in October 1809. There are several accounts of the riots, which contradict each other regarding the causes, areas where the riots took place, and the numbers of casualties (20). According to the Gazetteer of 1929, the site of the riots was the area of the Aurangzeb mosque (known also as Gyanvapi mosque). Regarding the number of casualties, the Gazetteer reports that several hundred people lost their lives. The other five published sources reporting on the riots (Heber, Prinsep, Miller, Mill, Buyers), locate the first outbreak at the Lat Bhaiara, but they do not agree as to the causes. Only one of these refers to the casualties: twenty Muslims killed, seventy people wounded. As far as the causes of the riots are concerned, the Gazetteer points to the construction of the Aurangzeb mosque on the site of the old Vishvanath temple. The other sources provide different versions: destruction of the Lat (Heber), Hindu reaction to Muhammadan lamentations (Prinsep) (21), an altercation between Hindus and Muslims, leading to damage to the imambara close to the Lat and demolition of a mud structure housing a Hanuman shrine in the same compound (Mill), and a clash between Holy and Muhammadan processions (Buyers). Of the various contradicting accounts, the most reliable reconstruction seems to be provided by a letter sent from the local Magistrate to the government a few days after the end of the disorders (22). According to this document, on the site of the Lat Bhaiara there were also a mosque and an imambara erected at the time of Aurangzeb. In the same compound there was also a mud structure housing a Hanuman shrine. A Brahmin wanted to convert it into a stone


(21) Mubarak was in early February 1810.

(22) JOL, Board’s Collection, vol. 356 (JF/3635), no. 9095, from W.W. Bird, Acting Magistrate, Benares, to Dowden, Secretary to the Government, Judicial Department, 30 October 1809, quoted by G. Parley, The Construction..., op. cit., pp. 33-34.
temple in fulfilment of a vow. The Muslim weavers opposed the construction of the temple, which was, according to their perception, a violation of their holy site. Hindus and Muslims involved in the litigation agreed to wait until the end of Dasehra, on 19 October 1809, and then to submit the case to the court. On the evening of 20 October, a group of jutahas (Muslim weavers), instead of referring to the court, gathered at the site and contaminated the Lat Bhairava. The riots started the next day. A mob of Hindus of all castes, in particular Nagirs, Gosains, and Rajputs damaged the inambura. The tension flared up very rapidly, with more destruction, people taking up arms, and wounded and dead.

The reasons for these contradicting versions in British accounts have been clearly explained. In brief, the British sources focused on supposed Hindu/Muslim fanaticism to which they opposed the 'civilising' role of the colonial domination. They did not look into the more relevant details, which had the only fault that they were useless from the point of view of political manipulation. The versions propagated by the published sources served the purpose of British rule. What is represented as a 'tradition' of strife between Hindus and Muslims "becomes, indeed, the justification for colonial rule" (23). In a way, one might say that the colonial discourse on communalism was part of the 'divide and rule' strategy. By describing Hindus and Muslims as naturally inclined to reciprocal intolerance, the British found justification for superimposing their own order, necessary to avoid a possible final disaster. In doing so, they contributed to foster, rather than pacate, communal hatred. It can be said that they ultimately sanctioned communalism.

Coming to the point of this paper, apart from the interpretation of causes and diverging estimates of casualties and contradictions on places, what emerges unambiguously from the published and unpublished literature is that serious disturbances took place in Benares in October 1809. This contradicts the vision of Benares as a place in which the integration between Muslims and Hindus has been successful. I agree with the interpretation according to which behind the religious explanation for the 1809 riots there were economic and social reasons and that the clashes between Muslims and Hindus should rather be considered as class struggle, determined mainly by loss of power on the part of the local Bhumiar dynasty (24). Hindu hegemony was then established in Varanasi under the banner of religion.

(23) Ibidem, p. 45.

4. University and Town across the Independence and after

One can say that the British in one way or another helped the Hindus to strengthen their identity in opposition to the Muslim identity. They sanctioned the difference quite simply by underlining it, at the political as well as symbolic level. The first partition of Bengal in 1905 and the introduction of the separate electorates in 1909 are the most dramatic evidence of this policy at the beginning of the 20th century.

When, in the 20th century, Indians began to politically organise themselves, this difference was already the ground for politically reshaping the society. Benares became one of the centres, if not the main centre, for the construction of a politicised Hindu identity. The life of the town was involved at several levels.

One of the key figures of this process was certainly Madan Mohan Malaviya (25). He was associated to the Bharat Dharma Mahamandal right from its foundation at Haridwar in 1887 (26). While the Maharaja of Darbhanga was the main patron of the organisation, Malaviya, at the time director of the newspaper "Hindustan" was elected mahapradhak, or chief preceptor. In 1902 the association was officially registered according to the Society Registration Act, and was given a more solid structure and a Board of Directors. In 1903 the association opened a branch in Benares. The Mahamandal was founded in opposition to the Arya Samaj. Its goals were the promotion of religious education according to the principles of sanatan dharm, knowledge of the sacred texts, Sanskrit and Hindi literature, the reform of religious institutions and holy places, according to the principles of the shasthas, the foundation and management of "Hindu Colleges, Schools, Libraries and publishing establishments in consonance with the objects of the Association" (27). Then, in 1910, the British authorities began to consider the association as a dangerous body, one which might promote potentially seditious activities, Malaviya dissociated from the Mahamandal but continued to take part in its annual meetings. From 1915 the main leaders of the Mandal were Swami Gyananad (already organising secretary) and Swami Dayanand. Under their leadership the association became a very important segment of the Hindu Mahasabha, and very active in the shuddhi and harijan movement.

Madan Mohan Malaviya had been much more involved in the ac-

(26) A. Consolandi, Moder India..., op. cit., p. 70, quoting National Archives of India (NAI), Home Poll. 313/1925, "Short Note on the Shi Bharat Dharma Mahamandal, Benares" and Home Poll. conf. B. February 1910.
(27) A. Consolandi, Moder India..., op. cit., p. 71.
tivities of the Prayag Hindu Samaj, right from its foundation in Allahabad in 1880. This association had a more militant outlook than the Mahamanadal. It promoted the improvement of Hindu society and religion and the training of Hindus to oppose and resist their enemies. As an eminent member of the movement for the promotion of Hindu as national language and the creation of Hindu educational institutions, at the end of the 19th century, Malaviya began to consider the foundation of a Hindu University (28). In 1904-05 he began to work concretely on this project. The University had to be founded in Benaras, centre of Hindu culture from time immemorial. The concept of traditional Hindu culture was revised and somehow officialized. From the most important centre of traditional Hindu culture in India, Benares became the seat of the most important Hindu cultural institution at the highest level. With the foundation of the universities, the places where culture was preserved, developed and transmitted shifted from royal courts and pandits’ houses to official educational institutions.

Between the second half of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th, almost every section of the Indian society was organising itself along political lines. Education was one of the primary aspects involved in this process. Education had to be reorganised in such a manner to facilitate the process of identification and aggregation of the different spheres of Indian society. It was no longer sufficient to cultivate Sanskrit, Vedic and traditional Hindu studies in private circles, under the pandits’ skillful supervision. The times required organised structures, that should counteract British (mainly Christian) and Muslim institutions. In Benaras this transformation could carry on in uninterrupted continuity with the past. The political function of such an institution was clear. According to the initial scheme for a Hindu University (1905), the causes of the decline of the Hindu population, the majority of Indians, was the physical and moral decadence of Hindus. The main reason for this decadence was the Hindu population’s abandonment of its religious principles. These principles and values had therefore to be revived. Technical subjects had to be taught, but religious subjects and indigenous languages, Sanskrit in particular, should have a prominent role in the syllabus. The theme of the decadence of the Hindus and the need to revive traditional values and reorganise Hindu society accordingly was common to the entire Hindu milieu at that time. A similar course was expounded and propagated by Tilak and from similar premises the RSS was founded in 1925.

According to the university scheme, the patrons of the Hindu University of Benares were to be recruited among Hindu aristocrats and other eminent members of the Hindu society. When Malaviya began the fund raising campaign for the University, among the donors were not only rajas and maharajas (with whom Malaviya’s family had some connection) and zamindaries; the common people also provided financial support for the University. This proves that the Hindu University had already become an element of identification. The Benares Hindu University received the Government’s sanction at the end of 1915, was inaugurated in February 1916, and started to function officially on the 1st April of the same year. Malaviya was Vice-Chancellor from 1919 to 1939. According to the initial scheme, the official language of the University was to be Hindi and traditional subjects were to be given prominence over Western studies. In the end, after a controversy with the British authorities, a Western curriculum was adopted with English as the official language, although Sanskrit, Hindi, philosophical, religious and traditional studies had a prominent place. Apart from syllabus, curricula, and official language, it is important to notice here that under Malaviya’s direction the BHU became a workshop in the construction of political Hinduism, not only at a local level. This was due mainly to Malaviya’s personal charisma and his appeal to orthodox Hindus of northern India. Regarding his views on the Hindu/Muslim relations, on one hand he used to make assertions such as the following: “It is not the Hindus alone who now live in Hindustan. Hindustan is no longer exclusively their country. Just as Hindustan is the beloved birthplace of the Hindus, so it is of the Muslims too. Both these communities now live here and will always live here … To establish real affection and brotherly love among these two communities and all the communities of India — Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsis — is the greatest duty before us all” (29). Referring to the BHU, Malaviya asserted that it “would be a denominational but not a sectarian institution” (30). On the other hand, he also made continuous reference to the realisation of Hindus, and, in his view, the Muslim problem occupied a totally subordinate position. This attitude could only lead to alienating Muslims and members of other communities. Almost all other “denominational” institutions of India had been virtually opened up to all castes and communities, but the BHU’s policy of encouraging the uplift (31) of the members of the community they represented had the effect of discouraging all others. This is the case,


(31) The expression is used by Pandey, with reference to Hindus. I keep it vague, because it can refer to Muslims as well. I agree with Pandey’s interpretation, according to which “The underlying logic of the different political positions adopted by Hindus and Muslim
for instance, of Moonje’s Bhonsla Military School, which formally was open to all Indians, irrespective of caste and creed. However, the educational policy of the School, with its strong sense of Hindu militancy, did not attract Muslims at all.

The foundation of the BHU was the accomplishment of Malaviya’s efforts to strengthen the Hindu sense of identity and cohesiveness. The BHU thus became the public platform from which Malaviya propagated his political ideas. His was a two-pronged approach. As a prominent member of the Hindu Mahasabha, of which he was president in 1925, he could finally extend his programme of reorganising Hindu identity and society to the national level. Founding Hindu primary schools with Hindi as official language, and grass-root level Hindu organisations, as well as participation in the shuddi movement, were the main lines of Malaviya’s political involvement. I do not agree with the interpretation according to which “the Hindu Mahasabha was the daughter of the movement for the creation of the BHU” (32). I think it was just the opposite; the BHU was the result of the increasing sense of militancy in the Hindu segment of Indian society. Ultimately, Malaviya’s project of founding a Hindu University was part of a wider project for the promotion of Hindu education, and it also attracted many other organisations and supporters in other parts of northern India. He was part of a political milieu that considered Gandhian non-violence a form of cowardice and harmful to Hindu society, because it would stigmatise the Hindus as weak and ‘emasculated’, according to the terminology used at that time. Like other members of Hindu organisations, including Hedgewar and Moonje, Malaviya was convinced that Hindu militancy might serve as a valid deterrent should Muslim demands became detrimental to Hindu interests. According to this view of Hindu/Muslim relations, peace between the two communities could be maintained only by showing to each other the possible destructiveness of a reciprocal attack. It was therefore necessary to delete any impression of weakness of the Hindu community (33). Certainly, Malaviya’s project had a great deal in common with the RSS programme of building up the Hindu national character. Physical education and military training of BHU students took place under Malaviya’s exhortations. Indeed, the BHU had a most vigorous University Training Corps (UTC) (34). Malaviya had never been a member, but he encouraged students to take part in the activities of the RSS and authorised an RSS building within the campus. The BHU branch of the RSS became very active from 1928, thanks to Malaviya’s sanction and the activity of a number of volunteers (35). The BHU was thus finally absorbed in the milieu of militant Hinduism. Nevertheless, on several occasions in his public speeches Malaviya underlined the necessity to indiansize military service, almost in the same terms and with the same emphasis used by B.S. Moonje (36).

Gelwarkar was himself a ‘creature’ of the BHU, where he graduated in biology and subsequently worked as a zoology lecturer. He joined the RSS at the BHU, after a visit by Hedgewar to the University in 1931 (37).

On Malaviya’s invitation, Jawaharlal Nehru also visited the BHU in November 1935. He considered “the Hindu University as the very citadel of Hindu communal thought” (38). It was not out of coincidence if in his speech he condemned communalism and criticised the activities of the Hindu Mahasabha. He labelled the organisation as reactionary and allied to other reactionary elements in India and in Britain. From the point of view of a secular observer of the 1930s, the BHU therefore presented itself as a workshop of communal ideas and policies.

The town itself had a consolidated tradition of militancy. This existed long before the political reorganisation of Hindu militancy and was represented by the tradition of the akharas, that in Benares took the peculiar shape of the banarsipan. The akhara is an organisation whose members are recruited on the basis of free association. They reproduce in part the scheme of the guru/leader-followers/member. The range of activities covered by the akharas is wide, from cultural activities such as theatre, classical music and dance, to the transmission of traditional values through the reading and interpretation of religious texts. Among its activities, the most relevant is gymnastics and paramilitary exercises, including wrestling and sword and stick performances. The akharas activities were so peculiar to Benares that they became an integral part of the notion of banarsipan or Banarasaness, or being a Banarasi. With the increasing politicisation of social life and religious moments, the akharas and the activities they promoted became the basis of the marauding gangs involved in communal riots. It has been noted that the term

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(32) A. Consolaro, "Madre India", op. cit.
(33) P. Malaviya, Malaviya ki..., op. cit., chap. 14.
(34) P. Malaviya, Malaviya ji ke..., op. cit., pp. 493-496.
(35) A. Consolaro, "Madre India", op. cit.
(36) P. Malaviya, Malaviya ji ke..., op. cit.
(38) P. Malaviya, Malaviya ji ke..., op. cit., p. 908-9.
banarsipan defines both Hindus and Muslims. The akharas' life style and discipline, too, were part of the heritage of both communities (39). I do not wish to deny here that each community had its own tradition of militancy, that both communities had been engaged in fostering communal tensions or that both had their own responsibilities in communal outbreaks. However, with the progressive appropriation of the city's institutions and symbols by Hindu organisations, even the akharas' tradition was absorbed by the Hindu political milieu. This process was completed by almost total identification of the RSS shakas with the akharas.

The BHU played a key role in reshaping the Hindu identity of the city. Osmosis between University and town was at the basis of such process. In fact, "Benarasi Hindu University served as a base for those interested in agitation in the city, hence the prominence accorded to student activists, and a recognition of collective authority assigned to Hindu scholars in the city" (40).

The strict connection between the University, the controversies affecting the town, and, less directly, the relevant issues of national politics is evident even today. With the process of modernisation undertaken by the nation from pre-to post-independence times up to the present, the situation has not considerably changed and it is possible to trace a substantial continuity between past and present in the role of the BHU. Over the years, the BHU has acted at the same time as a resonance box of political controversies at local and national levels and as a workshop for the creation of political images and discourses. It also played a crucial role in moulding part of the contemporary Hindu political class. We can examine here just two meaningful examples. One is represented by the profile and role of Kodipakam Nilmegacharya Govindacharya. Aged 57, Govindacharya, currently general secretary of the Bharatiya Janata Party, obtained his post-graduation in mathematics from Benares Hindu University and from Varanasi he "embarked on a political journey" (41) on joining the Sangh Parivar in 1960. Five years later he was sent to Bihar as a pracharak "to spread the parivar network". He was responsible for the development of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad in every district. After a decade of militancy and mass protest organisation, in 1988 he became political secretary to BJP president, Lal Krishna Advani. Govindacharya is reported to have created the image of Advani as a "hard-liner, opposed to Atal Bihari Vajpayee who represented the moderate face of the party". He is considered to be the mind behind "Advani's rath yatra in 1991 and the subsequent demolition of Babri Masjid in December 1992". He predicted that this demolition might determine a positive electoral result for the BJP. He was right. He continues to be a "favourite" in the party, because he is considered the connecting link between the South, where he comes from, and northern India, where he grew up politically, developing an uncommon knowledge of the local political context.

The second example is represented by Kaushal Kishore Mishra, former president of the BHU teacher's association and reader at the same University, he heads the Kashi Sanskriti Raksha Sangharsh Samiti (KSRSS). This organisation includes members of the Sangh Parivar, and is one of a number of organisations engaged in the endless process of protecting and revitalising Hindu culture in Varanasi. Together with the VHP and the Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust, the KSRSS is involved in every controversy connected with the protection and correct transmission of the Hindu tradition. In Varanasi all this is connected with the preservation of what we can define as 'Banaras-ness', that here, in the sacred city of the Hindus, becomes synonymous with 'Hinduness'. The construction and use of symbols, as well as the creation and use of the related language, is one of the main tasks of these organisations. Necessarily, they act as censors of possible misuse of symbols and terms. Among other organisations involved in the controversy, the KSRSS had a prominent role in the Deepa Mehta affair. The KSRSS not only raised its voice in criticising the movie, but some of its members joined the furious mob which destroyed Mehta's set. More recently, the KSRSS intervened in a dispute regarding some objectionable scenes in the movie Mohabbatein, where the famous actor Amitabh Bachchan recites the Gayatri mantra with his shoes on. The Ved Parayan Kendram, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust and the KSRSS undertook a prayaschitti yagna (repentance ritual) "to atone for the insult of the sacred mantra" (42). The 'battle' engaged by the organisations of the Sangh Parivar in defence of the bulwarks of Hinduism has changed its features and targets throughout the years, but it has not changed its intimate essence. As opposed to other parts of India, in Varanasi, the Sangh's efforts to protect and strengthen Hindu values have been realised in striking continuity between past and present.

(42) Diwali releases said to irk religious leaders, "India Abroad", December 8, 2000.
5. Building up Hindu Identity and the Construction of Symbols and Myths: the Vishvanath Temple Issue

"In Kashi the Ganga is known as uttaravahini because it flows from south to north. Assi is in the south of the city. From here our movement will go north. It will finish with the reconstruction of the Kashi Vishvanath Mandir" (43). The sentiment behind these words is certainly shared, in Varanasi, by a considerable number of people involved in the project of Reviving Hindu symbols. They were pronounced by a RSS functionary during the protests against the shooting of Water. Assi is the area where Mehta’s sets were destroyed. The threat is an ominous one: to build a temple on the site of the Gyanvapi Masjid means the demolition of another Muslim monument. The Vishvanath Mandir issue is not a new one. It goes back at least to the mid-seventeenth century. In other words, it started immediately after Aurangzeb’s death in 1707. According to The Penguin Guide to the Monuments of India “For more than a thousand years, Vishvanatha was the principal Shiva sanctuary at Varanasi ... The reconstruction of the temple on a large scale was undertaken in 1585 ... But in less than a century the temple was dismantled at the command of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb to provide material for a new mosque that was erected nearby” (44). This volume dates the present temple 1777. According to the India Handbook 2000 “Vishvanath Temple (1777) has been the main Shiva temple in Varanasi for over 1000 years. The original temple, destroyed in the 12th century, was replaced by a mosque. It was rebuilt in the 16th and again destroyed within a century”. No reference, therefore, to Aurangzeb (45). These contrasting versions should not surprise the analyst. In fact, controversy about who destroyed the temple and why, and regarding the very existence of the temple, has accompanied this monument from its foundation up to the present. According to one of the most detailed investigations (46), carried out with scientific accuracy, apart from the dominant version according to which Aurangzeb was the ‘destroyer’, there are at least three variants. These variants reflect a less prevalent view as to the existence of the temple and its destruction. According to the first variant

(43) Statement made by a Varanasi RSS functionary, quoted by S. Varadarajan, Voices from Varanasi, cit.

“...The major ruin in the centre of the city was not that of a temple”, but the remains of a building erected by Akbar. The building collapsed later on or was demolished by Aurangzeb, who was hostile to Akbar. According to second variant “The ruin is the remain of a Hindu temple that was destroyed either by a Hindu, Jnan Chand, or at the command of Aurangzeb, but for reasons unconnected with religion”. The reason was the contamination of the temple by “the looting, rape or murder by priests of a Hindu woman or women” related to Aurangzeb or to one of his officials. According to the third variant “The ruin was that of a Buddhist temple destroyed in ancient times by Hindus”. Nevertheless, according to several documents and inscriptions, Aurangzeb “made donations to various temples and monasteries in Banaras”. His firman (edict) at the BHU Museum instructs that “although no new temples were to be built, existing temples in Banaras were not to be damaged”. Bhattacharjee, a qualified historian at the BHU, not only denies that Aurangzeb destroyed the temple, but also that there was a Vishvanath Temple at all in Banaras in the Middle Ages (47). Finally, “...It is interesting that a Sanskrit account (varadaraja) of a visit to the temples of Banaras during the reign of Aurangzeb mentions only the Adishvishavara temple near Bhinda Madhava near Pangchanga Ghat”. The modern editor of the text supposes that the Adishvarahara Temple must have been the Vishvanath temple”. In Sherring’s Benares, The Sacred City of the Hindus, we learn that “The mosque built by the Emperor Aurangzeb on the foundation of what is commonly, though erroneously, regarded as the old or original Bisheshwar temple ...” (48). Sherring identifies the ruins around the mosque with those of a previous Buddhist complex, on the southern side of which he locates “the chief temple, which, on the suppression of Buddhism, passed into the hands of the adherents of another religion, who transformed it according to their own tastes” (49). Contradicting in part what he wrote in the previous lines, he asserts that “The mosque on this side is altogether composed of the remains of an ancient temple, of large dimension and of very elaborate workmanship ... These remains are, chiefly, Hindu; and it is unquestionable that the edifice, which was destroyed in order to make way for the mosque, was an old temple of Bisheshwar”. Sherring identifies the remains as “not entirely Hindu”, but also Buddhist and Jain. The mosque should therefore be an architectural ‘concoction’ made of parts of remains of Buddhist, Jaina and Hindu buildings. What seems to be more likely, on the basis

(47) Ibidem, p. 156.
(49) Ibidem, p. 317.
of Sherrin reconstruction, is a superimposition of buildings, so common in ancient towns, where different historical and architectural periods follow one upon the other in an uninterrupted sequence. Rome and most Italian cities of ancient origin are of this kind. Sherrin refers to the “Ad-Bisheshwar temple situated at a short distance from Aurangzeb’s mosque”. In Sherrin’s time the temple was commonly considered the oldest temple of this deity. Sherrin states that “Only a doubtful interpretation of its name may bear out this supposition; for the temple itself, from the pinnacle to the base, has nothing ancient about it” (50). According to Sherrin’s reconstruction, a mosque was erected about the end of the 18th century nearby the modern “Ad-Bisheshwar” temple. The mosque, unaccomplished, stands, Sherrin suggests, on the site of the old Ad-Bisheshwar temple. The modern temple close to the mosque was reconstructed, according to Sherrin’s interpretation, by the Hindus to perpetuate the worship of their old god (51). The confused reconstruction proposed by Sherrin does not therefore refer to the existence of any Vishvanath temple, unless we come to the conclusion that the temple at present defined the Vishvanath temple is the old Vishveshvara temple, erected on the remains of Buddhist and Jain shrines and eroded by the construction of Aurangzeb’s mosque, with the old Adivishveshvara temple now lying under the structure of the unfinished mosque.

It is not the task of the present paper to shed light on this complicated reconstruction. It is important to note here that Sherrin shared the already dominant perception, according to which “the old temple of Bisheshwar” was demolished by the emperor Aurangzeb, the “bigoted oppressor of the Hindus” (52). What until the mid-19th century was little more than an unorganised belief, commonly shared by the Hindu population of Varanasi, toward the end of the 19th century, was transformed into an increasingly politicised issue. “Over the centuries there have been many riots and court cases concerning the use of space around the mosque and the new Vishvanath temple” (53). In a similar manner to the Babri Masjid issue, the Vishvanath temple issue has played a key role in the construction of what I call the ‘Hindu political mythology’. In the 20th century the Vishvanath temple issue has been finally introduced in the Hindu agitational agenda. The shrine has been regarded as one of the Hindu locations violated by supposed Muslim destructive fury. I do not want to deny here that Muslim invaders and rulers had actually destroyed a good many Hindu monu-

ments. It is nevertheless necessary that the responsibilities be ascertained according to a more ‘scientifically correct’ procedure. In the case of the Vishvanath temple, but also in many other similar cases, including Ayodhya, careful examination of archaeological, historical, and epigraphic sources leads at least to an unclear picture, where the responsibility of a specific Muslim ruler is far from being univocally confirmed. In most cases there are no records proving that a given temple was in use up to a certain date, after which it was destroyed. In the case of the Vishvanath temple in Varanasi, from the scientific point of view, which always has little to do with politics, we cannot even be certain about the existence of an old Vishvanath temple in town. Even in presence of incontrovertible proof of the previous existence of a more ancient building, the demolition of an ancient monument is always a shameful act, and has no justification. Superimposition of architectural structures denoting the passage of successive historical periods is a peculiarity of culturally rich countries. This is obviously not the logic of demagogic policies requiring a focusing of collective mobilisation on or against a particular target. The political narration of the destruction of Hindu temples by Muslim invaders has turned out to be, from one decade to the next, one of the most efficacious tools with which to create sympathetic attitudes toward the cause of political Hinduism. The colonial narrative played a remarkable part in contributing to the construction of this rhetoric. “By the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant strand in colonialist historiography was representing religious bigotry and conflict between people of different religious persuasions as one of the more distinctive features of Indian society, past and present” (54). Sherrin’s view of the ‘masjid/mosque’ controversy is a meaningful example. The British approach to Indian history and the official portrayal of Indian society, and the political handling of situations in like manner, contributed to the construction of the communal mentality and sentiments. By the mid-19th century, Benaras was already perceived by an external observer as a predominantly Hindu city. This view was in part created by the British and entirely sanctioned by them. Today, Benaras is collectively perceived as an entirely Hindu city.

In modern Hindu political literature, the Vishvanath temple at Varanasi — or Kashi, as preferred by the reintroduced pure Hindu terminiology — figures at the top of the list of Hindu sites to be reconstructed and returned to the Hindu faith. The Vishvanath temple shares its position at the top of the list with the more famous and conflict-bearing Rama Janma Bhumi of Ayodhya, followed by the Somnath
and Mathura temples (55). Over the decades the list of controversial monuments (threatened with demolition) has lengthened to such an extent that it now comprises dozens of buildings. The list includes the Taj Mahal as well as the less famous, beautiful 15th century Kamal Maula Masjid at Dhar, Madhya Pradesh, banned to visitors as a consequence of the riots following the demolition of Ayodhya.

Also in Banaras, the entire Ayodhya issue had its own repercussions, following the High Court’s decision of February 1, 1986 to unlock the gates of the mosque. While Hindu forces spread the slogan all over India that “Ram Janmabhoomi had been liberated” (56), Muslims of every corner of the country considered this date a ‘black day’. In Banaras there were riots, imposition of curfew, “Urdu posters urging Muslims to march on the site and do jihad (holy war, literally “exertion”) (57), and speeches from leaders of the fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party urging Hindus to reinstate the icon of Vishwanath in the Jnan Vapi Mosque now that ‘the time is ripe’” (58). In 1986 a case for full access to the mosque was immediately filed before a lower court and a decision to remove all restrictions was taken “with unprecedented speed, in fact, within several hours” (59). The case for allowing Hindus to worship inside the mosque had been lying at the High Court since the 19th century. It was revived in the 1950s, when only restricted rights were granted. Since 1986, the VHP mobilisation to bring bricks from all over India to build a new temple has been increasingly successful.

6. Back to the Present

It has been shown elsewhere that the mobilisation strategy focusing on highly evocative Hindu symbols adopted by the BJP and its political affiliates contributed to the BJP’s unprecedented electoral triumph in UP in 1991 (60) and the subsequent victories in 1996, 1998, and 1999. As has been clearly pointed out elsewhere (61), the successful strategy adopted by the forces of political Hinduism is not the only reason behind the BJP’s victory. The failures of the Congress and the consequent inexorable decline of the party in the 1980s is probably the main cause of the BJP's advancement in UP (62). What is more important to note is that the Congress itself contributed to paving the way for the aggressive communal policy of the Hindu forces and the BJP. This contribution is mainly represented by the Congress compromise with increasingly communal tendencies and sentiments within the context of UP politics in the 1980s. The “Ayodhya strategy” was originally conceived by the Congress as “a winning political gamble” (63), over which the Congress then ruinously lost control. This strategy “was not specifically designed for Uttar Pradesh, but it dramatically changed the agenda of this state” (64). The case is particularly fortunate, because the country’s most important and most disputed shrines — Ayodhya, Mathura, and Varanasi — are concentrated in UP. Varanasi became therefore a central piece of this strategy. If the “Ayodhya strategy” has changed the UP political agenda, it has also strongly influenced politics nationally. It was designed for this purpose. From a relatively peripheral town, far from the Lucknow/Delhi political elites, from the mid-1980s onward, Varanasi has become one of the most important elements of Hinduva’s symbolic narrative. This role has determined the political significance of the city, traditionally very different from India’s policy-making centres. In other words, although political cadres were and are trained elsewhere, Varanasi has played a crucial role in designing Hinduva’s mobilisation in the last decade and a half. This does not mean that Varanasi has merely been for all these years a more or less mute symbol of political Hinduism. Varanasi was therefore not just part of the ‘save Hinduism’ strategy. The Hinduva made considerable efforts to prevent divisions within Hindu society, especially after the upper/lower class tensions provoked by the Mandal Commission issue in 1990-91. The Hinduva movement turned to significant work at the grass roots level, marked by the flowering of Sangh inspired organisations operating among lower castes, youths, women, and disadvantaged categories in general. The number of VHP swayis in Varanasi is 7410, 6350 in Awdh, 3463 in Meerut, 13042 in Jaipur, 80848 in Tamil Nadu, 18 in Kerala, and 106757 in Ukul, but none in Delhi. There are about 200 Sangh-inspired sevakaryas in Varanasi, involved in health, education, social, and economic development programmes.

Apart from the social work, which certainly contributed to consensus-building, the policy based on strong and divisive religious symbols is clearly backed by a demagogic and power oriented strategy. The question now is not if we shall fear for another demolition in

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(55) Restoration of the Glory of Temples: A Historic Task, from the VHP web site.
(57) Author’s brackets.
(58) M. SARKER-CHATTURBI, Religious Division..., op. cit., p. 156.
(59) Ibidem.
(61) Ibidem, in particular pp. 90-94.
(62) Ibidem, pp. 84-87.
(63) Ibidem, p. 95.
(64) Ibidem, p. 91.
Varanasi, but how long the policy adopted up to now will be successful. The capacity to solve the chronic problems of the state — unemployment, poverty, and underdevelopment — will acquire crucial importance in determining further political developments. The difficulties of the Vajpayee government may produce fall-out on a local level. The main difficulties of the government are represented by the troublesome relationship between the Prime Minister and his allies, and in particular the PM’s relationship with the most riotous and bulky supporter, the RSS (65). The danger is that of constantly diverting attention from the country’s problems, in order to accommodate dissent among coalition members and between the ruling party and its influential supporters. This situation could easily alienate the grass roots base. A sign of this is BJP’s ruinous results during the Uttar Pradesh panchayat elections of June 2000. The districts affected by the most “humiliating defeat” were Lucknow, Kanpur, Gorakhpur and Varanasi (66).

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**INDIA’S XIII LOK SABHA ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN: THE IMPORTANCE OF UTTAR PRADESH AND AMETHI IN SONIA GANDHI’S CLAIMS TO INDIANNESS**

by SIMONA VITTORINI (*)

This paper deals with the XIII Indian General Elections that were held in the autumn of 1999. In May 1999, after only 18 months from the previous general elections, the coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost a confidence vote in Parliament and was forced to call for new elections. Because of the country’s enormous geographical, climatic and cultural diversities, the Election Commission, in scheduling elections had to take into accounts a variety of factors as diverse as weather, agricultural cycles, exams schedules, religious festivals and holidays that in a country as huge as India vary considerably from one state to the other. It therefore was able to set the date for the XIII General Elections for the following September-October, thus opening one of the longest electoral campaigns in India’s history.

This essay focuses on the themes that dominated the hot summer months of 1999 in the run-up to the elections. For the press, it was possibly the bleakest election ever recorded. At a national level, the electoral battle was reduced to the confrontation of the two most important Indian parties: the Bharatiya Janata Party, and the Congress party. Since the disintegration of the Third Front, Indian politics have become bipolar in nature with the BJP and the Congress being the undisputed leaders in the national arena. Moreover, the XIII Lok Sabha polls were in a sense plebiscitary revolving around personalities, not programmes. Manifestos issued by the two parties differed on minimal issues while their nuclear, foreign and economic policies were pretty much the same. The 1999 elections were therefore characterised by a US presidential-style campaign. For

(*) In writing this essay, I would like to thank Dr Sudipta Kaviraj who has helped me shape and refine the concepts presented here. I must also thank Dr. SebastianoVittorini and Alan Muddon for providing improving suggestions and unfailing support. I am also grateful to Simonetta Casal for her constant encouragement.
the conflict between two contrasting definitions of Indianness: the pluralistic one represented by the Congress tradition, and the exclusivist xenophobic one epitomized by the Bharatiya Janata Party, as demonstrated by the resurgence of a belligerent strain of nationalism that dominated the electoral campaign. As a final remark, the paper will note how the whole issue surrounding the nationality of Sonia Gandhi was symptomatic of the Congress party’s demise, now forced to elect a Gandhi-by-proxy as its president and to exploit the dynastic card as much as possible.

1. The Parliamentary Crisis

In April 1999, only 13 months after the second Bharatiya Janata Party’s government was sworn into parliament, India faced another general elections. The XIII Lok Sabha election were prompted by a parliamentary crisis, which saw the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) — the largest party in the Bharatiya Janata Party’s coalition government — withdrawing its support for the government. On request from the President of India, the Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee went through a confidence vote, and on April 17 1999 with 269/270 votes, the government lost the majority in the Lok Sabha.

On May 4, the Election Commission (the independent body elected at the superintendence, direction and control of the electoral processes in India) fixed the new general elections for September 1999 thus starting one of the longest electoral campaigns in Indian history. The BJP’s government opened the electoral battle by rallying the issue of Sonia Gandhi’s non-Indianness. They invoked the amendment to art. 5 of the Constitution to bar non-natural born Indians and naturalized citizens occupying the highest offices in the country. Because of her foreignness, the BJP declared Sonia Gandhi, the president of the Indian second largest party, to be incapable of holding high offices and unable to understand Indian national needs and priorities.

2. Resurgence of Nationalism

This was not the first time that the BJP had tried to capitalise on the issue of Sonia Gandhi’s identity. Previous attempts were made during the 1998 Lok Sabha elections and State Elections (2). But the

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(1) A tahsil is the administrative subdivision of a district.

(2) Sonia Gandhi Italian origins became a source of vulnerability first to her mother-in-law and later to her husband since she arrived in India in 1968. The press repeatedly alluded to her Italian origins, while efforts were being made by the Gandhi supporters in order
issue snowballed into previously unseen proportions during the 1999 Lok Sabha elections. What made the matter crucial during the 1999 elections was that Sonia Gandhi’s disputed nationality dominated the 1999 electoral campaign. Clearly, the objectives of the Constitution-makers and the framers of the Indian Constitution were not to alienate the sentiments of raised nationalism. In fact, while opening with a confirmation of Sonia Gandhi’s role as leader of the opposition, the XIII Lok Sabha election campaign was characterised by the intensification of the proxy war with Pakistan on the Himalayan district of Kargil. On the eve of the election, with the national sentiments already awakened by the conflicting situation with Pakistan, Sonia Gandhi’s foreign origin not only turned out to be the major electoral issue (although politically marginal), but it also became central to the discourse of Indian-ness and a symptom of the resurgence of a certain strain of Indian nationalism.

These factors triggered a debate on one of the heartiest questions of Indian nationalism: the definition of the Indian identity. This time, the BJP and the Congress were set to settle this thorny question once again. On the one hand, there was the xenophobic and exasperated approach on the part of the BJP, while on the other, stood the pluralistic and inclusive brand of nationalism of the Congress tradition.

The Congress’s inclusive concept of Indian identity is based and inherited from the national movement and the pluralistic approach which became dominant at the time of independence. Democracy itself in India is built on the value of non-discrimination. The article 15 (1) of the Constitution states: “The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.” The framers of the Indian Constitution made non-discrimination the basis of tolerance in independent India in order to dismantle the system of discrimination of the caste-system and pre-empty the risk of religious discrimination after the atrocious events of partition of India and Pakistan. The Indian Constitution went even further by not distinguishing among citizens on the basis of how they acquired their citizenship. The objective of the Constitution-makers was evident the August 1945 debates on the issue of citizenship in the Constituent Assembly — were not exclusionist. They were concerned with prescribing general qualifications for citizenship and left it to the Parliament to decide the position of persons who are not born Indians.

This scope was achieved by the Citizenship Act enacted in Parliament in 1955. It is to the credit of the Indian Constitution that India does not distinguish the rights of citizens on the basis of how they acquired citizenship. The Indian Constitution does not create different classes or categories of citizens and it does not restrict eligibility to the top constitutional offices of President and Vice President to natural-born citizens.

The debate of Sonia Gandhi’s nationality — although symbolically crucial — could have been relatively important because she was acting within the limits established by the law. Legally, there was nothing barring Sonia Gandhi from becoming next the Prime Minister of India. Her credentials as an Indian citizen were beyond challenge (3).

Moreover, as it has just been pointed out, the Indian Constitution does not distinguish the rights of citizens on the basis of how they acquired citizenship, be it by birth, descent, registration, naturalisation or incorporation of the territory.

But even so, detractors of Sonia Gandhi were speculating that she had not renounced her Italian citizenship since that country allows dual citizenship. Former Congress Working Committee’s speaker Sangeeta, who was later expelled from the party, raised the question that Sonia Gandhi had recently travelled to Europe on her Italian passport enjoying dual citizenship that is barred under the Indian Constitution, thus committing a crime (4). The BJP and its allies went as far as to include in their respective manifestos and in the conjunct electoral mani-

(3) Sonia Gandhi became an Indian citizen on April 27, 1985, when she voluntarily renounced her Italian citizenship by surrendering her Italian passport to the Italian Embassy in New Delhi. She qualified for citizenship through registration as provided under Section 5(1)c) of the Citizenship Act 1955, by virtue of her marriage to Rajiv Gandhi in 1968.

Under this provision, persons who are, or have been married to, citizens of India and are ordinarily resident in India and have been so resident for a period of 12 months immediately before making an application for registration, would be eligible to apply for Indian citizenship by means of registration. (This provision was amended in 1986 whereby the requisite regarding the length of residence was made five years.) Based on her application under this Section, she was issued a certificate of citizenship by the Government of India on April 30, 1983.

(4) Even Sushma Swaraj in a BBC programme alleged that Sonia Gandhi still retained her Italian citizenship (quoted in Citizen Sonia, an article appeared on Sonia Gandhi’s web page, www.sonigandhi.org).
festo, promises to amend the Constitution in order to restrict high constitutional posts to natural-born citizens of India, an amendment that as we have seen, militated against the overall spirit of the Indian Constitution of guaranteeing equality before the law to all.

The debate about Sonia Gandhi’s identity, the Kargil proxy war with Pakistan accompanied by the Cricket World Cup became the central themes of the BJP electoral propaganda, which were employed to flare up Indians’ dormant nationalist loyalties. In fact, a nationalist discourse was being made urgent in India. Never before as in the hot summer months of 1999, were the Indians exposed to such a continuous demand on their national allegiances. The BJP together with its allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Sangh Parivar (the “family of organisations”, a triad made up by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) its missionary agent with means of proselytisation and spearhead of militant Hindu revivalism; and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) the repository of Hindu ideology and co-ordinator of a powerful organisational network) aimed at building a “proud and prosperous” India, and at repositioning India into a newly arranged world map where people are proud to be called Indian. This process necessitated strong doses of nationalism in order to shake off the shackles of colonialism, to re-locate third-worldism, and to gain a prominent place in the global economy along with the other “first-world” nations. The nuclear explosions at Pokhran in 1998, the direct government involvement in a peace process with Pakistan initiated by Vajpayee in February 1999 with what goes under the name of “Bus Diplomacy”, the refusal of any intermediary to resolve the conflict with Pakistan in Kashmir, the strong emphasis on svadeshi in economic matters, deliberately projected a strong and assuring image of India. That is why the debate on Sonia Gandhi’s foreignness became so crucial. Sonia Gandhi’s candidacy for the highest office in Parliament was seen as contrasted with this strong imagery, reopening the wounds of colonial humiliation and post-independence subjugation to the Western world. For the BJP, India must be built by Indians and must advance its svadeshi agenda at all costs, whereas everything that smacks of foreignness is by definition, against the interests of the nation.

The two major contenders in the 1999 electoral fray — the BJP and the Congress — approached the issue of Sonia Gandhi’s nationality from different sides. On the one hand, Sonia Gandhi tried to stress her relationship to the country by invoking an inclusive kind of nationalism, loyal to the pluralistic tradition of the Congress and by pointing to another barometer of her patriotism: her deep emotional attachment to the country where she spent nearly two-thirds of her life. On the other hand, the BJP denied this form of vague — non-quantifiable — patriotism typical of a “housewife” (mother, wife and daughter-in-law) (5) looking for more rigid (legal and constitutional) and quantifiable (years of residence, date of application for nationality, languages spoken, scripts read, etc) parameters to measure her (un)patriotism (6).

3. The BJP - NDA Electoral Campaign

The BJP government remained in office ad interim, and enjoyed de facto full powers till September 1999, despite the President Narayanan dissolved it officially on 26 April 1999. Cashing in on the successes reported by the army in the Kargil conflict (7), the BJP was in an advantageous position to run its electoral campaign for over three months. Given the climate of raised nationalism, the BJP campaign concentrated on issues of identity and authenticity, rather than substance. It centred on a process of instilling notions of national loyalty and put people on the defence. The BJP and its allies took on Sonia Gandhi’s nationality in their electoral campaigns. They urged voters to reject Italian-born Sonia Gandhi because she was unfit to hold high office, not in tune with India’s national aspirations and alien to Indian ethos. The BJP made it clear that the candidature of a foreign-born/naturalised Indian citizen should not be allowed and invoked in its political manifesto the amendment of art. 5 of the Constitution, which up to this moment does not bar naturalised citizens from holding high offices in the country. In its official and unofficial campaign, the BJP invoked the years of subjugation under foreign rule and the sacrifice made by freedom, fighters in the struggle for independence (8).

(5) As we will see, it was Sonia Gandhi who chose to use the title of the female gender; she described herself as “daughter-in-law, mother and widow in order to stress her Indian-ness and to claim the post of Prime Minister of India.

(6) With regards to her loyalty to the nation, it was reported that Sonia Gandhi declared that her patriotism does not lie in her passport, but in her heart. “AsiaWeek”, October, 1999.

(7) In May 1999, in a survey conducted by the poll group TN Sofres-Mode and published by the magazine “The Week” to the question “Whom will you vote for?” Sonia Gandhi’s Congress party was given 36% support against 35% for Atal Behal Vajpayee. By the end of July, when the Kargil conflict was over, the survey showed a different picture. Support for the Congress dropped from a leading 38% to a mere 20%, while support for the BJP shot up to 56%. “The Week”, August 13, 1999.

(8) See for instance the “Organiser”, 8 August, 1999; “After the era of British Dynas-ty, can this be a return to power for a foreigner to rule India again?” The theme of humiliation was repeatedly rallied by the BJP. A leaflet distributed at a BJP rally in May 1999, read: “In India there are hundreds of thousands of children. Why the Congress party needs a foreigner to be the country’s Prime Minister? The world will laugh at us, and it will say: ‘With hum-
By reviewing the antagonist press and in particular the “Organiser” and “Panchjanya” — two of the most influential weeklies linked to the Sangh Parivar — it is possible to show the extent which the Sonia Gandhi issue reached in 1998. In particular, these two unofficial party organs verbalised the content of the symbols employed in the BJP’s electoral propaganda. By rallying the symbol of national pride, they merged patriotism with the choice of language and place of birth as necessary criteria.

In 1999, the press, in an attempt to come to terms with a definition of Indianness created a new expression, “natural-born Indian”. The “Organiser” defined a natural born Indian as “… one who is born in a country and is heir to its history, ethos and culture. In fact, right from birth the child cultivates political allegiance to the country of his birth. It becomes a natural part of his personality.” The editor then continued by saying that in the case of a foreign-born “political allegiance (…) is not as inseparable, indivisible, permanent as in the case of a natural-born because the latter has a natural attachment to a place where he (sic) belongs. The person has to be a son of the soil” (9). By focusing on the natural and hence genetic ties with one’s country of origin, the “Organiser” declared Sonia Gandhi “anti-national”, and by insisting that her Prime Ministership would let the Kashmiri border open to the Pakistani army and would scrap Vajpayee nuclear programme, they alleged that she could commit a crime as grave as that of high treason in favour of foreign interests (10). On September 10, Vajpayee declared: “The security of the country will be compromised if a foreigner became Prime Minister” (11).

This argument was reflected in the BJP’s official electoral campaign. One of the BJP’s posters, where Vajpayee was portrayed looking confidently at the camera, read: “Don’t vote for him because HE was born in India. Vote for him because YOU were”. As other BJP’s posters that were part of the BJP official campaign, this one was aimed at celebrating Vajpayee’s achievements and at promoting his personal

decedes of krore of people, is it impossible to find a suitable Indian? People of the country! Awake, and save the honour of the country! Sonia Gandhi, go back to Italy!” (8).

(9) Shri Pran Nath Lekhi — the “Organiser” August 8, 1999. The fallacy of such arguments promoting Indians on a territorial basis was made clear by the desire to include the NRIs — Non-Resident Indians — in the definition of Indianness. In this case, foreign residency and place of birth were not considered crucial: although resident abroad, one’s emotional, and political allegiances still rest in the country of “origin”. Love for the homeland, and true patriotism were believed to be genetically transmitted both to recent Indian immigrants and even to second and third generation Indians of the diaspora.

(10) See also, “Panchjanya”, August 1999. “On one side there is the victor of Kargil, the man whose very existence is Bharatbhumi (Indianness), and on the other there is a foreigner who has debased that victory. Never we dreamt that in free India we would have to fight to keep its leadership Indian.”


qualities as a statesman. However, without any reference to Sonia Gandhi’s name, the poster encapsulated the debate regarding Sonia Gandhi’s foreignness. In fact, it promoted Vajpayee for his love for the motherland (“He does not go around saying that this is his country”), for his firmness against foreign sanctions which the country incurred after the nuclear explosions at Pokhran, for his ability of keeping the people together in a communal-free India and for his experience in parliament for over 40 years. This poster through the use of the implication insinuated that there are people whose allegiance to India is not obvious and who need to trumpet their patriotism. It also implied that these same people wouldn’t be able to defend India against foreign sanctions due to their own foreignness. Furthermore, this poster suggested that other governments in the past were unable to keep the country at peace, making direct reference to the most recent communal riots that ensued after the Ayodhya dispute, which happened under Narasimha Rao’s Congress government. Finally, with the closing statement, it inferred that other people contesting for these elections do not have as vast a parliamentary experience as Vajpayee, clearly alluding to Sonia Gandhi’s lack of political experience.

In other instances, Sonia Gandhi’s inadequacy to rule the country was related to her non-fluency in spoken Hindi and in the Devanagari script (12). Her lack of oratorical skills and laborious reliance on pre-structured (and transcribed) scripts was compared to Vajpayee’s knack for extemporaneous performances.

4. The Congress Electoral Campaign

The Congress campaign revolved around the nationality issue as much as the BJP’s. If the BJP challenged Sonia Gandhi’s stated Indian-

(12) See the “Panchjanya”. June 1, 1999. “… the lady from Milan (sic) was desconcealing in the script she read out without knowing how to pronounce even the simple word like ‘water’, for which Congressmen once upon a time gave their lives”. See also the article “Madam’s Hindi speech written in the Roman alphabet have clearance from Rome”, appeared on the “Organizer” (August 8, 1999) where again, by rallying the slogan “Ram Rajya vs. Rome Rajya”, Sonia Gandhi’s non-fluency into one of the Indian languages, associated with her foreign origins, were read as a symptom of foreign domination. The Maharashtra BJP as part of its electioneering strategy, released a video film entitled Anil Surtar, Ahdil Surtar. Its central theme was to highlight the achievements of the Vajpayee and to domesticate the Congress president Sonia Gandhi. There was a constant hammering at Sonia Gandhi’s foreign origin and her lack of knowledge of things Indian. In the film she is called Korma Ya (Who is She) and she is invariably accompanied by an interpreter who tries to explain to her various nuances of Indian languages (“Times of India”, August 16, 1999). Interestingly though, the press regarded Maneka Gandhi’s son Vijay’s poor Hindi as “picturesque”, “Outlook”, September 13, 1999, p. 43.
ness (13) by gauging her language fluency and checking the status of her passport (did she travel to Europe with her Italian passport after obtaining Indian citizenship?), Sonia Gandhi defined it by stressing her relationship to the country and by invoking an inclusive kind of patriotism. The Congress campaign aimed at portraying Sonia Gandhi as the party’s main legitimate candidate, and ultimately at promoting and defending her “Indianness” by establishing strong links with the Nehru-Gandhi family.

a) Sonia Gandhi’s Political Career

But who is Sonia Gandhi, and how did an Italian woman find herself at the wheel of the oldest party of the world’s largest democracy?

Officially, Sonia Gandhi entered politics and in no less than 15 months she passed from being an ordinary Congress member, to become the prime ministerial candidate of the oldest party in post-independence Indian history. The recourse to Sonia Gandhi as party leader clearly represented the simplest route for the Congressmen to revamp a disintegrating Congress. Yet, the choice was remarkable on several counts: though she became a naturalised Indian in 1983, she was born and brought up in Italy, she was a Roman Catholic, and she had never shown any interest in politics.

Sonia Gandhi’s increasing involvement in politics and her sudden rise to power in 1998 was ultimately determined by the Congress most recent history (and by default by Indian political history) and hugely rests on the fortunes of the Nehru-Gandhi family. In fact, Sonia Gandhi by marrying Rajiv Gandhi, did not just marry into a wealthy Indian family, but into one of South Asia’s most prestigious and politically influential dynasties. By marrying Rajiv Gandhi, Sonia entered Indian history by inheriting the family’s legacy of the nationalist movement and the family’s leadership tradition at the helm of the country for over 40 years of India’s independent life.

When Sonia Gandhi arrived in India from Italy in 1966, she was just 22 years old. Indira Gandhi — the then Prime Minister of India and her mother-in-law — was the daughter of the late Jawaharlal Nehru, who led India towards independence and who ruled the country as a Prime Minister till his death in 1964.

Although living in the hub of political activity, Sonia and her husband Rajiv Gandhi, an Indian Airlines pilot, showed no interest in politics and led a peaceful life. It was Rajiv’s youngest brother, Sanjay, who entered politics following into his mother footsteps during the

(13) “I don’t feel any bit Italian” — Interview to Sonia Gandhi on Star TV, September 1999.

Emergency period in the second half of the 70s, becoming Indira’s right-hand man. Sonia Gandhi’s first brush with politics happened when events precipitated with Sanjay’s sudden death in a plane crash in 1980. The political shy Rajiv Gandhi was therefore catapulted into politics. Although reluctant to join active politics, he felt it as a duty towards his mother. He contested the June 1981 by-elections in Amethi where he won a seat in Parliament, but brushed aside suggestions that he might one day succeed his mother. When Indira Gandhi was assassinated in 1984, the Congress political leadership asked Rajiv Gandhi to become Prime Minister and to be sworn in on that same night. Later, he called for new general elections to be held at the end of the same year. The Congress won the election with a large majority and Rajiv Gandhi was confirmed Prime Minister.

With Rajiv’s political engagements becoming more and more pressing, Sonia Gandhi started to take an interest in politics and began nurturing his parliamentary constituency, Amethi. She had already accompanied him on his electoral rallies in 1981 but since the late 80s she showed a desire to know her husband’s constituency better and took a deep interest in formulating welfare projects for the area.

With the new general election scheduled for June 1991, it was decided that Sonia Gandhi would have to campaign for Rajiv in Amethi. Rajiv and the Congress leaders left the canvassing to her and she camped there for three weeks, while Rajiv travelled to other parts of India. It was in one of his rallies in Tamil Nadu, that on May 21, Rajiv was killed in a bomb blast. Without her being previously consulted, on the twenty-second of May 1991, the Congress Working Committee unanimously elected Sonia Gandhi as the party’s president. Sonia firmly declined not once but twice, and P V Narasimha Rao was eventually elected the party’s president (14).

Sonia Gandhi’s political involvement became more demanding with the coming of the XII Lok Sabha elections, held in February 1998. These elections proved to be particularly important for the Congress. As a matter of fact, since 1986 none of the parties was given a majority by the electorate and unstable coalition governments at the centre became a recurring phenomenon. In particular, in the XI Lok Sabha elections, the Congress obtained 140 seats, while the BJP became the largest party in India. The BJP, which won only two seats in the lower house of Parliament in 1984, in the 1996 general election

(14) To many political observers the selection of Sonia Gandhi as Congress leader was aimed to make the most of the “sympathy factor” and win the parliamentary elections. In fact, in the first round of elections in which votes were cast for forty per cent of the seats, Congress(I) did not fare very well. It was only in the second and third rounds — after Rajiv’s death in the middle of the election — that Congress(I) pulled ahead.
captured some important states in the north, including Uttar Pradesh, the most populous of the Indian states and the traditional base of the Nehru-Gandhi family. It won 161 seats, and with its allies, it was called to form a government in the aftermath of the 1996 parliamentary elections. However, this government lasted only 13 days, and lacking a majority Prime Minister Vajpayee and his BJP ministry resigned. Two United Front governments followed, supported from the outside by the Congress.

The XII general elections were called after a minority United Front government lost the majority in parliament, when the Congress withdrew its support to the government on the Jain Commission’s Interim Report on Rajiv Gandhi’s death.

The Congress was now the second largest party in India. Having forced an election upon the country, the Congress found itself ill prepared for the new general elections. For the first time since Independence, the party was going to the polls without a charismatic leader or recognisable slogan. In the past few years, the decline of the Congress system of governance in terms of popular support, vote share and governing reached a critical stage.

In December 1997, Sonia Gandhi surprised everybody by expressing her willingness to campaign for the Congress. She did not desire to candidature herself, but decided to “step out to make the Congress party strong once again”. Her decision took by surprise many in the political environment. In particular it shattered the BJP’s hopes of getting a majority on its own. During the 1998 electoral campaign the BJP looked, without finding any, for solutions to deal with the Sonia Gandhi phenomenon.

Sonia Gandhi’s entry into politics was no doubt “cosmetic”. As the elections loomed, the Congress was torn with internal strife and could not recognise itself in Sitaram Kesri, its party president. Sonia Gandhi could literally give a face to Congress and revive the Nehru-Gandhi’s legacy to win back traditional Congress votes.

Yet, Sonia’s decision to campaign for the Congress was more than “cosmetic”. Two factors contributed to her stepping into the electoral fray. First, Sonia Gandhi had the moral responsibility for having forced the election on the country. The Congress made in fact clear that it pulled down the United Front government on the Jain Commission Interim Report in order to protect the interests of Rajiv Gandhi. Second, the instability of the Congress party’s leadership and inner party manoeuvres were challenging whatever clout the Gandhis still had in the party. Therefore, some political analysts believed that her entry in politics was the first step towards taking total control of the party.

However, to V N Gadgil, the then Congress main spokesperson, Sonia Gandhi’s entry in the electoral campaign “made a world of a difference”. She became the principal Congress campaigner across the country. She galvanised Congress workers and pulled large crowds to her public meetings, matching the mass appeal of senior leaders. Sonia Gandhi started her electoral campaign on December 29 1997 and ended it on February 6, 1998. A hectic scheduled campaign tour took her all over the country at times addressing as many as six public meetings a day. On her carefully managed campaign trail she hit towns and cities chosen for their sentimental link to her private life and to the Nehru-Gandhi legacy. The locations, if they were not chosen for straightforward links to Nehru-Gandhi family, were selected for their links with the nationalist movement and their indirect reference to the role of the Congress in the struggle for independence.

In 1998, Sonia Gandhi started the campaign in Sripurumbidir in Tamil Nadu, where Rajiv Gandhi was killed. Later, she campaigned from Bangalore, Hyderabad, Bhubaneswar, Jodhpur, Chandigarh, Bardoli, and many other places linked to the Nehru-Gandhi family’s history. Sonia Gandhi attended some 138 public meetings, many of which held in BJP constituencies with the aim of wean away sections of voters who supported the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) of Ms Mayawati and Kanshi Ram and the Samajwadi Party (SP) of Mulayam Singh Yadav. The Congress won 49 of the 138 constituencies she campaigned in and in some cases the Congress did not even retain the seats. But even in Uttar Pradesh, where she held more rallies and addressed the largest number of public meetings, the Congress failed to improve its mass support, even in Rae Bareil and Amethi, the traditional Nehru-Gandhi strongholds.

She did not have any relevant experience in mass politics, no known political ideology and no concrete political platform. Even loyal Congress political analysts thought it unrealistic to expect a miracle recovery of Congress past fortunes.

Yet, the Congress, which had witnessed its popularity declining since its era of national dominance, in 1998 saw its downfall arresting. The party gave credit to Sonia Gandhi for maintaining and even increasing the Congress seats in the Lower House of parliament from 137 to 141. Yet, Sonia Gandhi’s entrance into politics did not stop the BJP from becoming the single largest party in the country and from being called to form the government. In addition, although Sonia Gandhi attracted large crowds during her intense electoral campaign, the electoral outcome for the Congress was nothing short of disastrous with its vote share falling from 28.8% to 25.4%.

The period following the 1998 general elections saw Sonia Gand-
hi becoming more engaged in politics. Having been held responsible for saving the moribund Congress during the XII Lok Sabha elections, in March, the Congress Working Committee elected Sonia Gandhi as Congress president. In the same instance, in a blatant transgression of the party's constitutions, Sonia Gandhi was also elected Congress Parliamentary Party leader. Soon afterwards, taking stock of the party's deficiencies that led to a not-so-good performance during the XII Lok Sabha elections, Sonia Gandhi initiated a programme of reforms to revamp the party. Lacking solid political experience, Sonia Gandhi needed trusted deputies within the party. To start with, Sonia Gandhi decided to reshuffle the Congress Working Committee by sacking Vice President Jitendra Prasada, and a couple of chief ministers. Three new members — Rajesh Pilot, PA Sangma, and Sushil Kumar Shinde — were induced. Furthermore, the following September, Sonia Gandhi got the Congress Working Committee to adopt a code of conduct for party members. Yet, these actions were nothing more than cosmetic moves, and did not offer a clue on how the Congress was going to face the following assembly elections.

In November 1998, State Assembly elections were held in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Mizoram. In the 1998 State Assembly elections the odds were in favour of the Congress and a strong anti-incumbency wave risked eroding BJP's popularity. The Congress party was successfully elected in three out of four states and only nine months after it climbed onto power in New Delhi, the BJP suffered a serious defeat. Never in India a party has managed in such a short period of time to squander public support in a similar way. In Delhi there was a 17% swing against the BJP since the last Lok Sabha elections, when it won six of the seven parliamentary seats. In Rajasthan the swing was of eleven percentage points while in Madhya Pradesh it was reduced to 7%. Moreover, the 1998 state elections were held as a referendum against Vajpayee's government and the results not favourable to the BJP, showed cracks in the 18-strong coalition government.

The 1998 State Assembly elections results confirmed Sonia Gandhi's importance in the Congress party. The Congress's victory reinforced the party's position and increased people's confidence in its leadership. The Congress victory contributed to increase Sonia Gandhi's political credibility as opposition leader. It provided Sonia Gandhi a launch pad to aim for bigger things at the national level. To a lot of senior Congress leaders, the 1998 state elections' results were a clear mandate for Sonia Gandhi and the Congress in general. Its leadership started to believe that the Congress could once again become the single largest party in the next general elections.

In the wake of this unexpected success, the Congress launched a new round of revamping measures. The All India Congress Committee (AICC) on December 18 1998, approved reservation of organisational posts to women, dalits (oppressed and ex-untouchables) and minorities. Moreover, it constituted an independent electoral authority to conduct party elections.

The 1998 assembly elections while reinforcing the Congress and sanctioning Sonia Gandhi's political maturity, they also paved the way for the constitutional crisis that toppled the Vajpayee's government at the end of April 1999. The Congress's leader was held responsible for the constitutional crisis that led to the calls for fresh general elections only 18 months from the last ones. Her teaming up with one of the most temperamental BJP's allies — the AIADMK's leader, Jayalalita — induced the latter to withdraw support from the government hoping to be able to form a minority government with Congress thus reinforcing the AIADMK position in parliament. However, Sonia Gandhi was not able to present an alternative government and the Indian President called for fresh elections. This event placed Sonia Gandhi in a bad light due to the miscalculations that made her first declare that the Congress was able to create an alternative government and then to retract the statement few days later when it became clear that no such majority was available in parliament. However, it also confirmed Sonia Gandhi's status as the second most important political leader in the country. During the XIII Lok Sabha election Sonia Gandhi's political career gathered momentum. She was chosen as the Congress prime ministerial candidate and fought her first parliamentary election.

b) Strengthening the Family Tie

In order to strengthen her patriotic sentiments and her attachment to India, Sonia Gandhi's campaign was set to reinforce her links to the Nehru-Gandhi family.

In particular, Sonia Gandhi's speeches were very evocative and sought to efface public memory on some of the most traumatic events of the recent past in which the Congress under the leadership of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi bore direct contribution or responsibility (15).

There was a strong emphasis on the contribution of "my family" as if the only Indian political leaders worth mentioning in the history of Independent India were those belonging to the Nehru-Gandhi family:

(15) Such as the Bofors Scandal, Operation Blue Star but also other important achievements: "We have always been active in the struggle for democracy, social harmony and justice for all", as she stated during her speech given in May 1999 at the Talkatora Stadium in Delhi when she withdrew her resignation as party's president.
"I remember the clarity of purpose of members of my own family who single-mindedly devoted themselves to the service of the nation. Jawaharlal Nehru, the builder of modern India, gave us a vision of our immense capabilities and charted the course for us to follow. Indira Gandhi never wavered in her purpose to break the strangulation of poverty and to make us a self-sustained and proud people. My husband Rajiv Gandhi, who forsook his personal inclination to work in the public domain, focussed the energies of our people with a sense of mission towards achieving greatness in the 21st century."

In particular, the symbolism of "blood" as a metaphor of family relations was recurrent:

"Meere khoon ki ek ek boond mathi hain ke main yahi meri khoon ki ek ek boond is desh ki sauraksha mein bahegi" ("Every drop of my blood tells that I belong here. Every drop of my blood will be for the protection of my country"") (16)

While invoking primordial attachments to the nation, here "blood" evoked that spilled by her mother-in-law and her late husband on the altar of "national duty" (17). This reference is not simply rhetorical: Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv both died terrible and violent deaths (18).

It is through the employment of this symbolism of blood that Sonia Gandhi was called the "official baahubali of India", the daughter-in-law par excellence (19). The term evokes strong family values and places Sonia Gandhi in one of India's greatest social traditions, while using the BJP's favourite tool of the Hindu ethos. In the speech delivered at the Talkatora Stadium in Delhi in May 1999 when Sonia Gandhi officially withdrew her resignation as party president, she thus defended her patriotism (20):

(16) Ibid.
(18) The deaths of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv are still vivid in people's imagination and are deeply imprinted on the collective memory of the people. At the Indira Gandhi Memorial Museum in Delhi, on show there is a somewhat macabre crystal plaque, flanked constantly by two soldiers, which protects a few brown dots of Indira Gandhi's blood on the exact spot where she actually fell after being shot in 1984 and her suit worn at the time of assassination is still displayed as a memento to the visitors. Significantly, here it is blood not as a metaphor for family values and lineage, but as a symbol of nationalism and patriotism, that it is displayed in its most concrete and visible form. Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a human bomb in Tamil Nadu while campaigning for the 1991 general elections. At the time of his death, images of his horrified mutilated body lying in a pool of blood were widely published by the national press.
(19) Employing the terminology usually used in the advertising field, Jaya Jaitley in the Indian Express regarded Sonia's status of daughter-in-law as her USP, unique selling point. The baahubali Inheritance, "Indian Express", June 28, 1999.
(20) For a definition of patriotism, see the on-line Congress's page: "Yes, you must compare the track record before you vote!" Here Congress and BJP's achievements are reported side by side, and under the Congress column it is stated that: "A true Indian is one who has the interest of the country dear to the heart".
(21) Note how on this occasion Mr George Fernandez — the then Minister of Defence — remarked that the contribution of two children to the population of India was not enough qualification to claim the post of the Prime Minister of India. Marrying into a family and producing heirs is simply not enough. Similarly Tavleen Singh — columnist of "India Today" — defined her "a politician by marriage", "(India Today", June 7, 1999).
(22) In the Indian tradition, women's status predominately depends on their relationships to men; they are generally significant as mothers, wives, and widows.
(23) The Ramayana recounts how, after going through the ordeal of fire to clear her reputation, Sita returned to Ayodhya with Ram. However, the subjects of Ayodhya still question Sita's virtue and Ram was compelled to abandon her by the constraints of his auras, his royal responsibilities. After some time, during the celebrations of the royal sacrifice..."
By employing the symbolism of blood, Sonia Gandhi subtlety referred to the question of the Kargil war without mentioning it directly. Although India was internationally recognised as having handled the war wisely, it nonetheless suffered high losses. During the acute stages of the conflict, the country showed great patriotism that was expressed in many different forms (24). In general, the press was overwhelmed by tributes to the martyrs of Kargil. Newspapers and magazines had articles about the medals and honours conferred to the dead, the compensation granted to the families by the government, the injured and their families, etc. The blood spilled on the altar of patriotism was the dominant theme. Sonia Gandhi was not to support the Kargil war directly (since the beginning of the Kargil conflict the Congress criticised the Government for the alleged intelligence failure that led to the conflict with Pakistan) but managed to refer to the symbolism of martyrdom through her own personal experience — as a be reaved daughter-in-law and a widow — thus making herself a true patriot paralleled to the freedom fighters and the young soldiers who died on the hills of Kargil.

In order to reinforce her identity as the "official bahu of India", Sonia Gandhi's public image played with the popular image of the traditional (and submissive) daughter-in-law. In the large cutouts, posters and even in the national press she was generally represented draped in simple, cotton and perfectly worn saris and with her head covered and her hands joined in namaste. She always looked demure, composed, dignified and respectful like a good wife, daughter-in-law and widow should.

The continuity of Sonia Gandhi's blood lineage was further stressed by the presence of Priyanka and Rahul on the electoral scene. Although not everybody in the Congress was well disposed towards "dynasty rule", according to which the most effective or desirable candidates are not chosen from within the party, but selected from the Nehru-Gandhi family, it was widely believed that Sonia Gandhi's charisma lay in her ability to evoke public memory in the name of her husband's family. Moreover, it was probably the supposed swaying of the electorate that the Gandhi name was said to achieve, which made the Congress leaders inclined to accept Priyanka. Priyanka in particular was appointed campaign manager and was to become — at the closing of the electoral campaign — a star in her own right. In fact, it was continuously reported and noted how Sonia Gandhi's daughter looked Indian, spoke flawless Hindi and generally sparkled in public — while her brother Rahul had more a European than Indian look and spoke poor Hindi.

In this respect, the official website dedicated to Sonia Gandhi is quite telling. An oval framed picture of Sonia Gandhi dominated the centre of the page. This picture was flanked by the images of Rahul and Priyanka. More than a party's website, this one looked indeed like a family portrait, imbibed as it was with a hint of religious symbolism that recalled the representation of the holy trinity — both in the Hindu and Catholic iconographic traditions. The caption "The bahu of India" inscribed underneath her photograph is emblematic, like the website's address, which is aptly named: www.soniagandhi.com/bahu, where again Sonia Gandhi's identity is established by her marital status.

c) The Love for the Land: Bellary and Amethi

Even the choice of Sonia Gandhi's parliamentary constituencies was aimed at reinforcing her patriotism. Sonia Gandhi's choice to run from two parliamentary constituencies, Bellary in the southern state of Karnataka, and Amethi in Uttar Pradesh (25).

Both Bellary and Amethi were believed to be secure Congress seats. The choice of these two parliamentary constituencies was not casual. Since the 1980s, Amethi has been the Gandhi's parliamentary constituency, while Bellary, always returned a Congress candidate. In the light of the issue revolving around Sonia Gandhi's disputed identity, the two constituencies also acquired a new symbolic meaning.

Sonia Gandhi's decision to contest from the constituency of Bellary (decision that was taken on the ground of guaranteeing Sonia Gandhi a safe seat), turned to be a major liability for the Congress, as far as concerned the debate on Sonia Gandhi's foreignness. When in a surprising move Sonia Gandhi filed her nomination papers from the Bellary Lok Sabha constituency in Karnataka in August 1999, one of the BJP's most prominent leaders, Sushma Swaraj, was hastily chosen to contest the seat in Bellary, creating a battle royale in an otherwise dull election campaign. "It is a fight between a svadeshi and a videshi woman", the press declared. Dressed as an exaggerated bharatviy rafi Sushma Swaraj flew into Bellary draped in the BJP's colours — a

of the Ashram, Ram decided that it was time to take Sita back and put her to a new test to remove all doubts and suspicion from the minds of the people. While Sita was damning her declaration of innocence, the earth opened up and the godess Madhavi, queen of the earth took Sita into her arms (then, to her bosom) while the earth closed back over their heads.

(24) During the war, a poster hung in a shop in the most central area of New Delhi — Connaught Place — read: "We salute our Defend Forces and give special discounts!"
green blouse and an a bright orange sari — complete with bright bindi and sindoor, bangles and mangalsutra (26). She obviously and loudly was the pictorial and living enactment of the BJP’s decision to make Sonia’s foreign origin an election issue (27). She represented the BJP’s own version of the ideal Indian bahu who will fight the videshi bahu, “for India’s self-respect” (28). The Svadeshi/Videshi slogan eventually became the campaign refrain. Sushma Swaraj publicly admitted that she did not intend to contest the election to become a member of Parliament (29), and agreed that “fighting Sonia and exposing her over- ambition to become the country’s prime minister is (the BJP’s) national mission”.

Few days later, Sonia Gandhi also filed her nomination papers for Amethi. The choice of Amethi was a tactical one in the Congress leaders’ eyes this Uttar Pradesh’s constituency could easily secure a safe parliamentary seat for Sonia Gandhi’s first elections. Most importantly though, Amethi could reinforce Sonia Gandhi’s declaration of Indian- ness.

In the past, not only Amethi but the whole state of Uttar Pradesh was regarded as the stronghold, or as some used to say, the backyard, of the Congress party, and of the Nehru-Gandhi family in particular. The United Provinces - how the state of Uttar Pradesh was called before Independence - and in particular the city of Allahabad are closely linked with the history of the Nehru-Gandhi family since the beginning of the nationalist movement. In the crucial years of nationalist mobilisation that characterised the last thirty years of the British Raj, Northern India became the nerve centre of all political activity. On the whole, the movement was a very urban phenomenon, Allahabad, became the centre of nationalist agitation, with the Nehrus, one of the most prestigious and influential families in the capital, occupying a prominent position in the nationalist movement.

At the time, Allahabad was the capital of the United Provinces, one of the most important and largest provinces of the British Empire. Before the advent of the British, the area was part of the administrative centre of the Mughal Empire and it had — and still has — a large Muslim population. In 1921, the Muslims were 14.5% of the total population of the United Provinces. However, as a vestige of the Muslim rule in India, in the urban centres this percentage rose to 37%.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the provinces were predominantly agricultural with only some manufactures. While the countryside was characterised by extreme poverty, a landed aristocracy and a rising middle and upper class engaged in the service professions, dominating the urban centres.

The electoral reforms introduced by the British in 1919 increased Indian representations in local and provincial councils and extended the franchise to the Indian population (30). In addition to this, substantial improvements in the education sector with an overall growth of literacy helped the development of a political consciousness especially among young men and women who became more involved with the Indian nationalist movement of the ’20s and ’30s.

Previously, the centre of Indian political activity was concentrated in the major coastal cities of the British Presidencies, in particular Bombay and Calcutta. However, in the subsequent years, the changing of the Indian nationalist movement from elite to mass movement - which coincided with the emergence of Gandhian politics - was accompanied by the development of new centres of political influence. The rapid growth of the nationalist movement was particularly acute in the United Provinces, which by the ’20s where already regarded as politically active and advanced.

In those years, the Congress was a consolidated organisation in the United Provinces. It was the sole political group that could challenge the government in dominating the political life of the period and
Congress men were successfully elected in local and provincial councils.

By 1880 Allahabad had already become an important administrative centre of the British Raj and of the English language press. By becoming capital of the United Provinces and seat of the High Court, Allahabad, a city characterised by being a part trading, part service town, recorded considerable growth. The city was dominated by a powerful local elite of professionals, traders and bankers. Among them, the Nehrus were particularly influential.

Like many other Kashmiri Brahmins, the Nehrus arrived in Allahabad after having served the Mughal rulers in Delhi and Agra before the decline of the empire. Having spent their life at the service of the Mughals, the Nehrus were highly cultured and versed in Persian and Urdu poetry. Even Motilal - Jawaharlal's father - who was brought up away from Delhi and the Mughal's Court, was only fluent in Persian and Urdu and did not speak any English at all till the age of twelve. However, when Motilal embarked on his career as a lawyer, he became one of the most respected and acclaimed lawyers of Allahabad High Court. He became enormously wealthy and notorious for his great spending and luxurious lifestyle.

Influenced as he was by Mughal culture and social customs, Motilal's openness towards the Muslim community, when he became involved in politics, gained him the appellation of pro-Muslim, while simultaneously his political adversaries denounced him as anti-Hindu.

With the beginning of the twentieth century and the change in the Indian political climate, the Nehrus became more involved in politics. Already in 1909 Motilal was elected to the provincial council of the United Provinces and was mainly concerned with the problem of Hindu-Muslim unity after the Raj had granted the Muslim separate electorates. With the procession of time their involvement became so great that Anand Bhavan - the fabulous mansion that Motilal bought in the prestigious Civil Lines of Allahabad where the British officials used to live - became the centre of the political activity and a regular meeting place of the nationalist leaders in the '20s and '30s.

By 1920, Motilal became a member of the Congress Working Committee, a small group of Congress leaders who directed the affairs of the Congress. Significantly, the Congress Working Committee's offices were located in Anand Bhavan.

It is generally believed that the uprising and agitations that characterised the last thirty years of British rule in India were not simply the result of the economic crisis or of the extreme poverty suffered by the majority of the population. They were also the product of constant propaganda and organisational work of the Indian National Congress (31). The Congress employed several means of national agitation and Anand Bhavan became an important organisational centre.

By this time, Jawaharlal became fully engrossed by Congress politics and inspired by Gandhian doctrines, incessantly toured the United Provinces. Jawaharlal later referred to Uttar Pradesh as his karmabhoomi (the land of his dharma or righteousness). Uttar Pradesh became prominent in his discovery travels of India and in his political formation. After independence, in the frenzy of name-changing activities, Jawaharlal Nehru fiercely fought against his fellow Congress members to retain the abbreviation UP for the state, after some fellow Congressmen suggested calling it Aryavarta.

Indira Gandhi too, built her political experience in Uttar Pradesh through her involvement in local Congress politics by coordinating local Congress workers and supervising the activities at Anand Bhavan, during her father's frequent incarcerations. All of the Nehru-Gandhi chose their parliamentary constituencies in Uttar Pradesh. Jawaharlal Nehru chose Phulpur, Indira Rae Bareily, while Sanjay and Rajiv opted for Amethi. Phulpur was lost to the Congress long ago, while Rae Bareily and Amethi slipped progressively out of the family's hands.

Amethi is the smallest of the four tahsil of the Sultanpur district in central Uttar Pradesh. The whole district of Sultanpur lies in the watersheds of the Gomti River, which runs southeasterly through the district. The tahsil of Amethi is for the most part poor and predominantly agricultural. The area of Amethi is a belt of rice lands interspersed with large arid plans (of usar, alkaline soil). Usar plans constitute 17% of Amethi's lands and are unfortunately a characteristic of the whole tahsil. In these plans nothing grows, not even grass, only reh, a saline efflorescence particularly obnoxious to vegetable growth. The area is also prone to flooding during the monsoon season. With rural electrification of the area concluded in the period between 1970-1972 and with the construction of roads, there has been an increase in the industrial potential of the area. However, Amethi is still largely rural with more cultivators than agricultural labourers. There are only some small-scale industries, mostly cottage and village industries. Around 28% of the entire tahsil population are dalits. In Amethi there is also a considerable number of Muslims (13%), while Sikhs are only 0.1% of total population and are mostly urban.

(31) "Congress propaganda and initiative undoubtedly played an important part in channelising disparate economic grievances, and perhaps a more general feeling of national discontent, into a non-violent anti-imperialist agitation". G. Powney, The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh 1926-1934. A Study of Imperfect Mobilisation, Delhi 1978, p. 75-76.
Sonia Gandhi’s links to Amethi date back to Rajiv’s Prime Ministerial years. At that time she used to accompany her husband on his electoral rallies. Her involvement in Rajiv’s electoral campaign increased in 1991, when the Congress leadership decided to give her the task of canvassing in Amethi.

She returned to Amethi in 1993 and again in 1996 with her daughter Priyanka, in time for the elections. Since then, although still eschewing politics, Sonia Gandhi’s visits to Amethi increased. In the 1998 general elections she decided to campaign for the Congress, although without personally entering the electoral fray. Despite Sonia Gandhi’s hectic campaigning in Uttar Pradesh where she attended seventeen meetings, it was then that the Congress endured its greatest defeat since independence. The party polled only 6% of the votes without securing any seats. For the first time Amethi passed to a BJP candidate.

Till then, Amethi had been a Congress stronghold since Sanjay Gandhi decided to contest from there in 1977 (and lost). Rajiv Gandhi took over Amethi in the 1982 by-elections after Sanjay’s death. In the subsequent general elections, Amethi returned Rajiv Gandhi two more times in 1984 and in 1989, enabling him to rule the country as a Prime Minister. In 1991 Rajiv Gandhi chose Amethi as his parliamentary constituency once more, but was brutally killed while campaigning in Tamil Nadu. In 1996 Amethi was still under Congress control: Captain Satish Sharma polled 38.8% of the votes.

But the steady decline of the Congress vote share in the Uttar Pradesh meant that in the 1998 general elections, Sanjay Singh — the scion of the erstwhile princely state of Amethi — became the first BJP member to be elected from there. Sanjay Singh obtained over 200,000 votes and defeated the Congress candidate Captain Satish Sharma with a lead margin of 23,270 votes (32).

In 1999, with Sonia Gandhi contesting from there, the Congress regained control of Amethi. Sonia Gandhi broke all previous records and won with over 67% of the votes and with a margin on the runner up of over 300,000 votes. Her victory was ascribable to her personal charisma, to the evocative power of the Nehru-Gandhi family, as well as to the contingent political circumstances of the district. In 1999, a considerable number of votes shifted from the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party - two of the strongest political contenders toward the Congress. In particular, the Muslims - a considerable minority in the area - held the Samajwadi Party’s leader Mulayam Singh Yadav, responsible for preventing the formation of a non-BJP Government in Delhi in coalition with the Congress.

Despite Sonia Gandhi’s personal victory in Amethi, the Congress’s grip in the state was lost a long time ago.

Uttar Pradesh is and has always been politically very important. Being the most populous state in India, Uttar Pradesh sends the highest number of deputies to the Lower House of Parliament, as many as 85 has returned many Indian prime ministers: out of the twelve that have led the country since independence, eight prime ministers came from here.

Till 1989, the Congress party always won the majority of Uttar Pradesh seats in every Lok Sabha election — except in 1977 at the end of the Emergency period. In addition, in post-independence India, and bar three intervals of opposition rule that add up to only 4 years, the Congress always governed Uttar Pradesh. However, in 1989 the Congress party’s votes fell by 20 percentage points, reaching only 31.8% in the Lok Sabha election of that year (33). In 1991, despite the fact that 21 constituencies in Uttar Pradesh went to the polls after Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination, the Congress came in with just five seats from Uttar Pradesh, polling only 18.3% of the vote share. Since then, the fall of the Congress votes has been steady. It was after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, on December 6, 1992, that the Muslim community virtually withdrew its support to the Congress. In the 1996 general election, the Congress vote fell to just over 8% and in the 1998 Lok Sabha elections the Congress reached its nadir, managing to poll only 6% of the votes without securing any seats.

The disappearance of the Congress from the political spectrum in Uttar Pradesh has freed enough space for new parties to flourish. In particular, besides the BJP — which has made of Uttar Pradesh its ideological and political stronghold having built a solid base of support the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have steadily increased their vote shares. The Bahujan Samaj Party of Mayawati and Kanshi Ram took the dalit vote from the Congress party. Mulayam Singh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party walked off with the Muslims and backward castes’ vote, while the upper caste vote seemed to gravitate towards the BJP. In the 1993 state elections a(33) The previous Lok Sabha Elections were held under exceptional circumstances in December 1984 after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister. In that occasion, the Congress party, maybe taking stock of a “sympathy wave”, polled over 51% of the votes in Uttar Pradesh.
coalition made up of the BSP and SP polled over 45% of the votes winning 70 of the 85 seats of Uttar Pradesh. Since then, the Uttar Pradesh government has been in the hands of the BJP. The BJP passed from polling only 10% of the vote share in 1984 to 36% in 1998 (34), while, in the same year, the BSP and the SP polled 21% and 29% of the votes respectively.

Because Uttar Pradesh is the state that sends the largest number of deputies in the Lok Sabha, all parties in India regard this state as a crucial area for their electoral campaigns.

It was in this light, during the 1999 electoral campaign, that the Congress party realised that if it were not revived in Uttar Pradesh, the chances of attaining a majority in any Lok Sabha election or even to improve its vote share, would be marginal. In 1999, the Congress campaign was in an up-beat mood due to Sonia Gandhi’s intention to contest from there. In fact, Sonia Gandhi’s decision to contest from Uttar Pradesh had a double effect. On a personal level, as it has been shown, it strengthened her Indian identity by tightening the emotional tie with the Nehru-Gandhi family and with India. But on a more general level, it gave the Congress party an opportunity for rejuvenation in Uttar Pradesh. A resurgence of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh was essential if the party aimed at improving its vote share and its seats in the Lok Sabha.

For similar reasons, the BJP campaigned heavily in Uttar Pradesh. All the BJP leaders rallied personally in all the state’s key constituencies and even in its most remote areas. Lucknow, the capital, became a “VIP constituency” with Atal Behari Vajpayee contesting from there, a factor that increased the polarisation of the electoral battle in a contest between Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi. The BJP was a time weakened by internal fighting resulting from dissatisfaction with Kalyan Singh governing records and from the upper castes frustration at the growing importance of backward castes in the state under its leadership. Moreover, the party was liable of ideological confusion in that the local leadership and the RSS and the VHP bigwigs continued to push for the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya, while at the same time at the national level, the party had to tone down its ideological agenda after the formation of the National Democratic Alliance.

The changing political situation in Uttar Pradesh, which saw the emergence of regional parties and the “ethnification” (35), of the parties such as the BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) and the SP (Samajwadi Party) K. Chandra, Post-Congress Politics in Uttar Pradesh: the Identification of the Party System and its Consequences in Roy and Wallace (eds.), Indian Politics and the 1998 Elections, New Delhi, 1999, p. 55.

5. Conclusions

At the end of this analysis of the 1999 general elections, which conclusions may be drawn? The XIII Lok Sabha elections were remarkable for a number of reasons. As far as electoral politics is concerned, the 1999 general elections confirmed the BJP as the biggest party in the country and were an indication of a further demise of the Congress. In the XIII Lok Sabha election, the Congress seats drastically
ly diminished, although the party’s percentage of votes polled increased.

On a closer examination, the XIII Lok Sabha elections legitimised Sonia Gandhi’s claim to the leadership of the Congress. Despite her lack of political experience and in spite of having led the Congress to one of its worst electoral performances ever which gained the party only 112 seats in Parliament, Sonia Gandhi became the leader of the opposition in Parliament, in addition to being the chairperson of the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP). By taking oath as a Member of Parliament and by participating in the proceedings of the Lok Sabha, Sonia Gandhi finally acquired legitimacy in Indian politics. Most importantly though, Sonia Gandhi’s personal victory both in Bellary and Amethy, blunted the ‘foreigner’ charge against her waived by the BJP and its allies.

When the BJP questioned the Congress’s leader suitability hold the highest office in the Indian Parliament by attacking Sonia Gandhi’s stated Indianess, she defended it by tightening her ties with the land, (in particular with Amethy and Uttar Pradesh) and by invoking family-relations markers of identity. By personifying the social concept of the family, Sonia Gandhi became the symbol of the Indian family in a country where the family has still held an inviolate social pattern.

Unable to deny her Italian origins, Sonia Gandhi ritualistically and symbolically built her Indian nationality by behaving how ordinary Indians would behave (36) and by conforming to the Nehru-Gandhi’s ethos and traditions. She visited temples, paid homage to the nation’s great leaders (37) and chose Uttar Pradesh and Amethy as her karmabhoomi in keeping with family traditions. As was demonstrated.

(36) Since Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India, Sonia Gandhi started wearing traditional Indian clothes, thus discarding her western wardrobe. Since then she has showed a predilection for simple khadi cotton printed sari and covered her head with palava, as it is traditionally done in conservative Uttar Pradesh and as Indira Gandhi used to do too.

(37) Following this new Congress line of open support of India’s Hindu heritage, on January 30, 1999 Sonia Gandhi visited Tirumala in Andhra Pradesh. During her visit she went to the Venkateswara temple where she offered prayers “in true Hindu style” (Fromline, 26 February 1999). In this way not only did she score a point against the most extremist advocates of Hinduism, who were trying to portray her as a foreigner and as a Christian, but also asserted her commitment to the Hindu ethos. In fact, in the aftermath of the Christian crisis in the early months of 1999, her visit to the Venkateswara temple was very controversial. It is custom of the temple that a non-Hindu is expected to sign a declaration form, before having the darbar of the Lord. The form declares that those who belong to another religion, harems may be permitted to enter the temple, as he/she has faith in Lord Venkateswara, and reverence to his worship. Sonia Gandhi did not sign the declaration form before having darbar. Senior Congress members in fact declared that Sonia Gandhi became a Hindu soon after her marriage with Rajiv Gandhi and hence there was no need to sign the form: “She has been following the tradition of the Nehru-Gandhi family ever since her marriage and therefore the declaration is not necessary”. Earlier Sonia Gandhi presided over the celebration of the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda. Few days later, Sonia Gandhi paid public tribute to another one of the most revered icons of Indian nationalism, Lo-

by her personal success, this strategy turned out to be an effective act of mass communication.

Most importantly though, the Sonia Gandhi’s issue was part of a cultural discourse aimed at exciting nationalism and at a definition of Indianess. The Sonia Gandhi’s debate became a political discourse on the nation, and a critical analysis of the political history of post-independence India and of Congress rule. Both the crisis of the Congress and the non-Indianess of Sonia Gandhi reopened the discussion on what is India and who can be called Indian. For the BJP and allies, Sonia Gandhi was another enemy and a new symbol to demarcate the nation as Hindu. The issue revolving around her identity tended towards a definition of the parameters of Indianess: geographically (by symbolically closing the Indian borders to anything/anything foreigner), constitutionally (by barring naturalised citizens from high offices), culturally (by gauging one’s fluency into one of the country’s official languages and scripts) and genetically (only of Indian origins/natural born).

The debate on Sonia Gandhi’s foreignness and the conflict with Pakistan, stressed different pasts — foreign rule and the colonial past on one hand; and the painful experience of partition and the successive wars with Pakistan on the other — and different others — colonial rulers and Muslims. But together, they reclaimed the importance of being Indian also on the much wider international panorama as Vajpayee’s promise on the implementation of the Indian nuclear program stressed.

Nothing better that this advertisement (signed Bharatiya Janata Party) that appeared on the BJP’s official website during the electoral campaign, which identifies the enemies of the country with the Congress party, the Muslims (Pakistani and Afghani) and the Italians, could summarise these tendencies:

“To be fair, there are some
Who are looking forward
To the Congress This election:
Sushil and Romesh Sharma — Tihar Jail
Dawood Ibrahim — Karachi
Mast Gul — Kabul
Quattrocchi — Italy
I.S.I. — Islamabad

The country is still paying the price for their exploits. Just when they are on the run, will you usher in their mentors back to power? Will you allow them once again to rule India by proxy? Will you vote for this to happen?”

krupa Tilkat in Pune (22 January 1999) in what looked like to be Sonia Gandhi’s attempt to redefine the Congress(I) line on religious matters.
In addition to the above, the Sonia Gandhi’s episode was entirely symbolic and stood between the BJP self-proclaimed monopoly agenda of Indian nationalism and the Congress’s own identity as the self-appointed promoter and defender of a pluralistic India.

As the leaflet mentioned earlier stated and as it was often heard in the street and trumpeted dutifully by the Congress opposition since Sonia first shyly stepped into politics, the choice of the late Rajiv Gandhi’s widow as party leader is either humiliation (“Among a 100 krores of children, a foreigner?”) or symptomatic of the terminal illness of the party. Sonia Gandhi cannot shake off her identity (as an Italian, as a wife of Rajiv, as a Gandhi, etc), which nonetheless links her to the past life of the Indian Republic. Although she does not embody the party’s ideology, and philosophy in the same way that some of her predecessors did, she undoubtedly is at this very moment the supreme symbol of all that the Congress had stood for, good or bad (38). In her very Italianness, non-Indianness and non-Hinduism, womanness, she represents the Congress status as the champion of a pluralistic cultural profile, of a secular and tolerant India. But nonetheless, the Congress dynastic (and undemocratic) principle reverberates throughout her whole persona, exposing the chronic illness of the party now reduced to choose a Gandhi by-proxy as its own leader.

And in fact, the issue of Sonia’s identity had clearly nothing to do with her foreign origin but more with the Congress bankruptcy. It reflected the decay of a political system and the disestablishment of several democratic institutions. It reflected the paucity of a sufficiently persuasive and progressive national agenda and evidence of the will to implement it. Although for most of the fifty years of Independence, India was ruled by the Congress, by virtue first of its leadership role in the freedom struggle and second because of the absence of coherent alternatives at the all-India level, the Congress political hegemony, seriously challenged and eroded as early as 1967, came to a decisive end in the late 80s and in the past decade what stood out was the massive political space that the Congress vacated.

Sonia Gandhi clearly represents the last resort of the Congressmen to save the party from a certain death. The fact that there are already rumours about her two children Rahul and Priyanka entering politics cannot but enforce the general feeling that the party is in a no-win situation. This crisis created a psychological and political vacuum that new and old forces are trying to fill.

(38) As Harish Narain observed, “In spite of its present limitations, the Indian National Congress is an embodiment of a vision of united India. Its destruction or decimation would be the destruction of that very vision of India” “The Hindu”, April 9, 1999.