

H-ASIA

Feburary 25, 2008

Assault by Hindutva mob on the Delhi University History Department

From: Frank Conlon

Earlier this month, our colleague Sumit Guha, forwarded some posts regarding a protest that had been generated by the VHP-linked ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad)--a highly politicized "student" movement of the Hindu right in India. Some of our readers will take exception to that description, but on the basis of all press accounts, I feel comfortable writing it.

Like everything else, the story requires some context, and, remarkably, as in the debacle fifteen years ago when a Hindutva-inspired crowd demolished a mosque at Ayodhya on the pretense that it was built on the actual historical birthplace of the god Rama, Rama once again figures prominently in the story. Over the past months there has been a resurgence of "Rama" publicity arising in part out of a proposed dredging of the sea bed near the southern tip of India for creation of a safe deepwater passage for coastal vessels. This was seized upon by interested parties who argued that this dredging would involve disruption of a natural feature in the seabed, known as "the Rama Setu" that has been credited in mythology to Rama's conquest of Lanka in the Ramayana epic poem.

In popular consciousness mythology usually trumps geology and hydrology--(and I refer here not only to India!) if they ever mix it up in the ring of public affairs. So, much has been written in the past months about reasserting the vitality of Lord Rama and the preservation of the Rama legacy.

Ever alert for issues upon which to mobilize followers and generate press, a substory of the above emerged in Delhi earlier this year. Protests were mounted over what was called a "book" "published" by the Delhi University History Department--and attributed--erroneously--to Professor Upinder Singh, a Professor of Archaeology and Ancient Indian History. The fact that Professor Singh happens to be the daughter of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is, one suspects, not coincidental with the association of her name with the protest. The "book" was in fact not a publication at all, but a collection of "readings" for the Delhi University concurrent course on

Ancient Indian Culture in the B. A. (Honours) programme. The packet included an essay by (late) A. K. Ramanujan, titled "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation", which has appeared earlier in a collection of the works of Ramanuman edited by Vinay Dharwadker and previously in Paula Richman's path-breaking collection of essays _Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia_ (U California Press, 1991). Of course, many readers of H-ASIA are familiar with the broad corpus of A. K. Ramanujan's contributions to the study of the history and culture of India including his wonderful translations of Tamil and Kannada bhakti poetry.

At some point, a packet of these essays was photocopied in a Delhi shop with a "title page" crediting Upinder Singh, and out of that was manufactured a "new outrage regarding the hurting of feelings of devout Hindus" by the Delhi University History Department.

An example of the rhetoric plied against Ramanujan's essay may suffice to give a flavor of the campaign.

From <http://www.hindujagruti.org/news/3819.html>

The Hindu Janajagruti Samiti Jan 18, 2008 post proclaims that Ramanujan in his essay "even sorts out a tale from Santhal folklore and puts forth the greatest outrage to Hindu psyche before the students of literature that Ravan as well as Lakshman both seduced Sita. No one on Earth so far dared to question the character of Sita so brazenly as Shri Ramanujan has done, though, all through under the convenient cover of a folklore!

"Sorting and picking out anything negative found in different versions of Ramayana spread all over the world with malicious intention has become a practice under the UPA [current Indian coalition government]. Despite the repeated protests by Hindu leaders, Shiksha Bharati and Shiksha Bachao Andolan, the practice still continues.

"In a latest instance, the Delhi University for its BA (Hons) second year course has included portions defaming and denigrating the characters of Lord Ram, Hanuman, Lakshman and Sita and projecting the entire episode as fallacious, capricious, imaginary and fake." and it goes on to cite a groundswell of Hindu indignation that such blasphemies could be perpetrated by the Delhi University History department, and, of course, in particular, the daughter of the Prime Minister.

On February 2, 2008, the Delhi University History Department issued the following statement:

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF DELHI,
IN ITS MEETING OF 04/02/2008

1. A number of groups have organised protest and have raised objections to the inclusion of an essay by (late) A. K. Ramanujan, titled "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on

Translation". The essay had been published in Vinay Dharwadker (ed.) *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 131-60; [this was an expanded version of a piece that first appeared in Paula Richman (ed.) *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991]. The said essay is one of the readings for the Delhi University concurrent course on Ancient Indian Culture in the B. A. (Honours) programme, which has been offered in several Colleges from July 2006 onwards.

2. The sole purpose of this course is to create an awareness and understanding of the rich and diverse cultural heritage of ancient India among students, and to acquaint them with original sources. Apart from the reading mentioned in the letter, the course includes readings on Kalidasa's poetry, Jataka stories, ancient Tamil poets and poetry, ancient iconography, and the modern history of ancient artifacts. The essay is part of a unit titled 'The Ramayana and Mahabharata - stories, characters, versions.' It is accompanied by an excerpt from Iravati Karve's book, *Yuganta: The end of an epoch*. Supplementary readings include the Introduction of Robert P. Goldman's *The Ramayana of Valmiki: an epic of ancient India* (the most recent and most authoritative English translation of the epic), which gives a detailed, scholarly introduction to the Valmiki Ramayana.

3. The late A. K. Ramanujan (recipient of several honours, including the Padmashri) was a widely acclaimed scholar with impeccable academic credentials. His expertise in a range of languages including Sanskrit, Tamil and Kannada was perhaps without parallel. His credentials as a scholar, writer, and teacher with extensive knowledge of ancient Indian literary traditions are incontestable. It is sad to see his name and work being subjected to such ill-informed controversy. In the article in question, he illustrates and analyses the great dynamism and variety in what he describes as 'tellings' of the story of Rama within India and across the world.

4. The concurrent course on Ancient Indian Culture and the readings for it went through the same procedure as all other courses in the University of Delhi pass before being adopted. The readings have not been devised or 'compiled' by any individual. Like all the other University courses, they are the product of a consultative process involving many members of the University community. The content and readings for this course were discussed extensively among Department members and College teachers, and were approved through the regular University procedures in statutory bodies, namely the Committee of Courses, Faculty of Social Sciences, Academic Council, and the Executive Council, which include teachers of all disciplines. The Academic Council is the highest statutory body on academic matters in the University.

5. We would like to emphasize that there is no published compilation of the course readings by Dr. Upinder Singh or any other member of the

Department of History. However, it has come to our notice that there is a spiral-bound collection of photocopies of the individual articles and excerpts related to this course at certain photocopying shops. This set of photocopies has a covering page on which Dr. Upinder Singh's name has been typed, without any authorization whatsoever, as a 'compiler.' It is this collection of photocopies that is being incorrectly described as a 'book' compiled by her. There is in fact no book.

6. When readings are prescribed in a course, it is not essential that the course-designers, teachers, or students should agree with or defend each and every word therein. In fact debate, dissent, and dialogue are important parts of the discipline of history. It may be pointed out that the terms that have apparently caused offence to certain individuals should in no way be construed as mischievous or slanderous. There is no question whatsoever of intending or attempting to denigrate or hurt the sentiments of any culture, religion, tradition, or community.

7. The aim of the course in question is to teach University students (who are, after all, young adults) to be able to analyze a variety of source material academically, analytically, and without embarrassment or denigration. That is the spirit in which the course was framed and that is the spirit in which we believe it is being taught.

On the same day The Telegraph (Kolkata) reported that Mayawati, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh had demanded that "the book" be banned. (http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080203/jsp/nation/story_8857319.jsp) under a headline:
"PM daughter in Ramayan row"

New Delhi, Feb. 2: Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mayavati has asked the Prime Minister to ban a text recommended for Delhi University history students that allegedly contains objectionable references to characters in the Ramayan.

Mayavati made the written request to Manmohan Singh after the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the BJP's student wing, protested in Delhi and Lucknow, claiming the contentious text was part of a book compiled by the Prime Minister's daughter Upinder Singh.

Upinder Singh, a professor of ancient Indian history at DU, has, however, denied she had compiled the piece or recommended it to her students.

"I have absolutely nothing to do with this text. The contentious article is not written by me. Nor is there any book of mine which contains the article. I fail to understand why I am being linked to the text," she told The Telegraph.

Sources close to Mayavati confirmed that the chief minister had not yet seen the "book", but said her letter to the Prime Minister was motivated

by concerns over law and order in her state."

The report continued with a quotation from the ABVP Delhi General Secretary Ms. Niharika Sharma "This is a deliberate attempt to hurt the sentiments of the Hindu community." Asked why the ABVP was seeking a ban instead of allowing college students to debate the contents of a research publication, Sharma said the organisation was worried students would feel pressured to replicate Ramanujan's version in their exam.

"If the article is taught, students will be expected to reproduce it in exams as well. IN OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM, UNLESS YOU WRITE WHAT IS TAUGHT IN CLASS, YOU DO NOT GET MARKS [emphasis added] Hindu students will be forced to write something they do not believe in," she said.

The ABVP has already sent memoranda to the DU vice-chancellor and the head of the history department seeking deletion of Ramanujan's essay from the course. "Upinder Singh has most definitely compiled a book with the objectionable text as a chapter. The book has not yet been published but we have a copy," Sharma said."

Karl Rove has nothing to teach the Hindu Right when it comes to generating controversy (and here I will adopt the standard American ploy for remarks that generate offense--I apologize to those who may be offended by my editorial comment. FFC]

To make a long story longer, today I received a report that a group of ABVP activists vandalized the office of the Delhi University History department and physically manhandled the head of the department. The following is reproduced as received including a note from the Head of Department Professor S. Z. H. Jafri and an open letter from department students. It was forwarded by Professor Indrani Chatterjee.

Dear Colleague,

This is to inform you that the ABVP activists had come to the Department around 2.00 p.m. with the intention of causing some damage to the structure and gaining some mileage from it. They partly succeeded in their venture. No injuries to anybody except the glass doors has been caused. The other details you can see from the students letter which follows.

Professor S.Z.H. JAFRI

**DOWN WITH ABVP VIOLENCE ON CAMPUS!
PUNISH THE CULPRITS!**

25th February 2008. At about 2 pm in the afternoon an organised mob of more than 100 people from outside the university led by the ABVP activist Vikas Dahiya gathered outside the building of the School of Social

Sciences. Some 8-10 people came to the office of the Head of the Department of History, Prof S.Z.H. Jafri saying that they wished to speak to him and to Prof B.P. Sahu about the curriculum of BA Part II, History (Concurrent). They insisted on speaking only once the media was present. Once the media arrived, in place of speaking to the department members, they began to ransack the department. Even without speaking or giving a chance to the people present there from the department to speak, these people toppled the table and ransacked the office of the head of the department. One of them also manhandled Prof. Jafri and held him by his collar and hurled abuses at those present there. Considerable damage to the property of the department by breaking the glass panes, damaging books, office files and other objects in the office was done and all in the presence of the media personnel and the very passive police! The outsiders threatened the faculty members and warned them of dire consequences. This is a clear act of vandalism. It is clear that they had come with the clear intention of perpetuating violence in the department and it was a planned action to create an atmosphere of terror.

This incidence occurred in the very presence of the police personnel as well as the media. The media footage would clearly show all that happened in the office of the head of the Department of History on the 25th afternoon. The attack by 8-10 robust hooligans, not belonging to the university, on absolutely defenceless faculty members of the Department of History is a shameful act in itself. Trying to force the faculty members to change the curriculum of history which has been passed by the due legal process of the University through the use of force is a clear act of fascism which is not acceptable in a democracy. Freedom of expression is a fundamental right of every individual and any encroachment on the same is not tolerable. It is democratic structures and values which are seriously threatened.

This is an appeal from the students of history department to everyone in the University to raise their voice against this vandalism and this fascist attempt to scuttle the freedom of expression. We appeal to all students, staff and teachers

To JOIN the
Protest March at 10.30 a.m. at Vivekanand Statue, Faculty of Arts on the 26th of February, 2008.

Whether one feels that A. K. Ramanujan was a great intellectual or not; and whether one agrees that India's past is a fit subject for critical analysis, I believe that H-ASIA members will deplore this 'media-savvy' creation of a physical assault on an academic department at Delhi University.

As of the moment, I have not received an e-mail address to which comments may be relayed, but one immediate possibility would be to send comment for forwarding to Dr. Mahesh Rangarajan <rangarajan.mahesh@gmail.com> at Delhi University. The postal address for the head of the department is:

Prof. Saiyid Zaheer Hussain Jafri,
Head,
Department of History,
Faculty of Social Science building,
University of Delhi,
Delhi-110007.

I will add one more personal editorial note that again will offend some folks (and not the ones offended earlier either)--this episode offers, in my view, the fruits of politicizing the past and our study of it--and while concepts of secular humanistic research in Europe, America and other parts of the world may not resemble the Indian concept in which secularism means "no offense to any religion"--we frequently find ourselves as scholars and teachers facing the "concerns" of various practitioners of what may be called 'identity politics'--in the secure world of North America, the risks of mob action are small--but there are far too many university administrators--wedded to the concept of 'student as customer' who wring their hands over anything academic which smacks of controversy. In other words, Delhi University's misfortune is not quite as exotic as some folks on this side of the kala pani would like to believe.

Frank

Frank F. Conlon
Professor Emeritus of History, South Asian
Studies & Comparative Religion
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195-3560 USA
Co-editor, H-ASIA
President, H-NET Humanities & Social Sciences Online
Managing Director, Bibliography of Asian Studies Online

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