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Poetry on Combat for Secularism and Democracy
Witnessing[1] Ayodhya 1992

ABSTRACT: The tragic events that followed the demolition of Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992 in Ayodhya were the culmination of a conflict simmering for almost the entire period of independent India, especially after the 1980s, striking at democracy and secularism, two values on which independent India was built. The Hindi literary world did not remain silent to these developments. However, the literary output that emerged on the subject during this time, though largely known and studied from the perspective of communal conflict and politics, has not been explored in the context of bearing witness by the literary community—their specific gaze as a witness. This article attempts to fill this gap by looking at two poetry collections, *Apnī zabān*, and *Yah aisā samay hai*, edited by Asad Zaidī and Viṣṇu Nāgar, and published by SAHMAT in 1994. It offers a contextualised analysis of the creative expression offered by poets acting in defence of a democratic, secular state.

KEYWORDS: Ayodhya, *Apnī zabān*, Asad Zaidī, communal conflict, Viṣṇu Nāgar, *Yah aisā samay hai,* witness literature

[1] I allude here to the title of the book by Jakub Wilanowski-Hilchen (2015), with whom it has been a long time since we last talked about witness literature.

1. Introductory notes

6 December 2022 marked thirty years since the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya; an incident that triggered communal riots across the Indian subcontinent and resulted in the deaths of thousands of people.[2] These tragic events were the culmination of the Hindu-Muslim conflict around the issue of Ayodhya, escalating almost throughout the entire period of the independent India, but more specifically since the 1980s, and amidst India's other pressing problems related not only to secularism[3] and democracy, such as Sikh ethno-nationalist movement and the events of 1984 which led to anti-Sikh pogroms.

The Hindi literary world did not remain silent in the face of the escalation of violence during that time. Neither did it allow this violence to become a 'cultural secret' which, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub point out in the Foreword to *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, their fundamental book on witness literature, is kept "from ourselves, through various forms of communal or of personal denial" (Felman and Laub 1992: xix). Nevertheless, to my knowledge, the literary production that emerged on this subject, though largely known and acknowledged as well as examined from the point of view of communal conflict, communal politics or politics in India in general, has not yet been explored and reflected upon in the context of bearing witness by the Hindi literary community—their specific witness gaze at a short temporal remove from the actual event/s. This paper, therefore, constitutes a modest attempt to fill this gap by considering two collections of Hindi poetry

[2] Estimates range from a few hundred to a few thousand. On the twentieth anniversary of the Ayodhya events in 2012, BBC World News reported that 2,000 people died in the riots following the demolition of Babri Masjid (BBC 2012).

[3] The term 'secularism', as it is understood and practised in India (with marked differences from the Western practice), is a controversial topic surrounded by extensive literature. While it essentially implies the separation of state and religion and equality before the law, the main issue fuelling legal and political discussions on the subject in India is the existing overlap between religion and the state. For more on the subject, see, e.g.: Smith 2016 [1963]: esp. 3–21; Verma 2017: 214–230, and Rajan 2024.

published in 1994—*Apnī zabān: sāmpradāyiktā virodhī kavitāõ kā saṅgrah* (One's Own Language: A Collection of Anti-Communal Poems) and *Yah aisā samay hai: samkālīn hindī kavitā kā ek cayan* (It's Such a Time: A Selection of Contemporary Hindi Poetry), edited by Asad Zaidī (b. 1954) and Viṣṇu Nāgar (b. 1950).[4] Both volumes are eloquent examples of an artistic response to the rising tide of communalism in the 1980s and early 1990s, which posed a threat to democracy and secularism—the foundational values of independent India. This analysis attempts to demonstrate that both collections function as witness literature, reflecting the communal conflict/s during this period.

In the context of this paper, it is worth noting that *Apnī zabān* and *Yah aisā samay hai* were both published by SAHMAT—the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust—founded in 1989 to defend pluralistic and democratic creative expression after Safdar Hashmi (1954–1989), a political activist, actor, playwright and poet, had been brutally killed in broad daylight during a street performance in Sahibabad near Delhi (ibid.: 5).

2. Sources

Apnī zabān is a collection of Hindi and Urdu poetry, featuring many instances of traditional forms such as *gīt*, *ġazal*, *dohā*, and *soraṭhā*, written by eighty-four lesser- and better-known authors (by coincidence, because their sequence follows the Devanāgarī script, exactly in that order).[5] All the poems, composed in Hindi and Urdu, are printed in the Devanāgarī script.

Most of the published works were selected from the thousands that had come in response to the call issued by SAHMAT in July 1992

[4] In 1994, SAHMAT also published a collection of short stories, *Āj kā path,* by the same editors (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994c); *SAHMAT 20 Years 1989–2009*: 32, 360, 361.

[5] Let us observe here that around one-third of the eighty-four authors are of Muslim background, some of them writing in Hindi (e.g. Abdul Bismillāh), some in Urdu (Kafīl Amrohvī or Kaifī Āzmī).

through newspaper advertisements requesting submission of anti-communal works (*sāmpradāyiktā virodhī*). In addition to this open call, the editors had also invited a number of established poets. Besides, they included works by the then just deceased Śamśer Bahādur Siṁh (1911–1993), as well as by Śīl (1914–1994), Nāgārjun (1911–1998) and Trilocan Śāstrī (1917–2007), believing that such a collection would have been inconceivable without their contributions, as they were always close to the problems of the common people of India and gave a new form, a new dimension to the prevailing poetic styles in their poetry (cf. Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: iv[6]). Originally, the volume conceived in this way was to be released on the occasion of the SAHMAT programme scheduled for 15 August 1992 at Ayodhya, but in the heat of events at the time, it could not materialize as planned. It was not until over a year later that the collection *Apnī zabān* was published, with the explicit subtitle *Sāmpradāyiktā virodhī kavitāõ kā saṅgrah* (A Collection of Anti-Communal Poems).

In the Preface to *Apnī zabān*, Zaidī and Nāgar write:

> The arrival of thousands of anti-communal compositions in difficult times was, in itself, a good sign. From this, it became evident that the penetration of communal forces in the villages, towns, and cities of Hindi[-speaking] states was not as deep as seen through the mass media. Our millennia-old traditions of mixed culture are alive and still active despite all efforts to destroy them. (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: iii)[7]

These words from the editors are very symptomatic. On the one hand, they offer a rather optimistic vision of the prevailing milieu as well as the future of the non-communal India, and on the other hand,

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[6] *inhõne hameśā is deś ke sādhāraṇ jan kī samasyāõ se apne ko joṛā hai…inhõne practicality kāvya rūpõ ko ek nayā rūp, nayā āyām apnī kavitā mẽ diyā hai.*

[7] *kaṭhin samay mẽ hazārõ kī tādād mẽ sāmpradāyiktā virodhī racnāõ kā ānā apne āp mẽ ek śubh saṅket thā. isse tabhī zāhir ho gayā thā ki hindī pradeśõ ke gm̃võ-qasbõ-śahrõ mẽ sāmpradāyik tāqatõ kī paiṭh utnī gahrī nahm̃ hai jitnī ki vah pracār mādhyamõ se nazar ātī hai. milī julī saṁskṛti kī hamārī hazārõ sāl kī paramparāẽ naṣṭ karne kī tamām kośiśõ ke bāvjūd jīvit evam sakriy haĩ.*

they lay the ground for the idea of including Hindi and Urdu poets in one collection. The content of the volume is also informed by the lines on the title page: "Dedicated to the democratic and secular tradition of our times" (*hamāre samay kī loktāntrik aur dharmnirapekṣ paramparā ko samarpit*).

The other collection under scrutiny, *Yah aisā samay hai*, bears the same title as the well-known poem by Mangleś Ḍabrāl (1948–2020) written in 1992.[8] In the Preface, the editors write that it was Ḍabrāl who suggested this title for the entire volume (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: vii). Going by the title and content, it can be said at the outset that the poems in the collection are generally concerned with times difficult to grasp and understand[9], times that, in line with Ḍabrāl's poem, are "when anybody can turn blind crippled / deaf homeless mad."[10]

The idea behind the collection is further laid out in its subtitle that reads "A Selection of Contemporary Hindi Poetry" (*Samkālīn hindī kavitā kā ek cayan*), indicating the intention to create a volume representative of contemporary Hindi poetry. The editors declare:

> We have tried to ensure that most contemporary Hindi poetry is represented here. Especially bearing in mind the scope as well as the purpose that was fundamental to the preparation of this collection. (...) At the same time, our aim is to give you a specimen of contemporary Hindi poetry. (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: vi–vii.)[11]

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[8] For the poem as published in 1994, see Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 138. This poem was later published in a different version under a slightly changed title, *Aisā samay* (see, e.g., Dabral 2016: 82). For Ḍabrāl, the creative process did not end at the time of a poem's publication—the poet remained open to achieving a better expression for the message of the work; Manglesh Ḍabrāl, personal communication.

[9] Cf. Manglesh Ḍabrāl's statement available on YouTube: Dabral 2015.

[10] *jab koī hi jā saktā hai andhā laṅgṛā / bahrā yā pāgal*; lines from the poem *Yah aisā samay hai*; translated by Sarabjeet Garcha as *These times* (Dabral 2016: 83).

[11] *hamne bharsak prayatn kiyā ki samkālīn hindī kavitā ke adhikāṁś kā pratinidhitva yahā̃ ho sake. xāskar us sīmā yā uddeśya ko sāmne rakhte hue jo is saṅkalan ko taiyār karne kī buniyādī śart thī. (...) sāth hī āpko samkālīn hindī kavitā kī ek bāngī bhī mile, yah hamārā uddeśya hai*.

It thus includes poems by 105 poets, most of them distinguished and well known outside the Hindi literary world, but the principle on which the works were procured for this volume is not entirely clear (cf. ibid.).

Let us note that 'the scope as well as the purpose' fundamental to the collection—the democratic and secular tradition, mentioned in the dedication line (*hamāre samay kī loktāntrik aur dharmnirapekṣ paramparā ko samarpit*)—is shared by both volumes and prominently displayed on the title page. In addition to this, *Yah aisā samay hai* is dedicated to the memory of Śamśer Bahādur Siṁh and Raghuvīr Sahāy (1929–1990), two important 'conscience-keepers' (cf. Kumar 2018) of Hindi poetry and Hindi literary sphere.

3. The world envisioned in poems: Themes and motifs

Both collections, *Apnī zabān* and *Yah aisā samay hai*, largely share the same themes. However, at the level of motifs, understood as elements of the main theme, the irreducible part of a work (Tomashevsky 1965: 67), as well as at the level of their presentation, they are much more nuanced in *Yah aisā samay hai*, and this issue will be addressed further in this paper. At this point, let me identify the thematic groupings that are most easily discerned in both collections. They are as follows:

1) The communal reality of religious differences, with communal violence and its aftermath (e.g. Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: 5, 6, 8–11, 12, 23, 109–110, 111, 121, 125–126, 136; Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 10, 13, 56–57, 99, 107–109, 196–199, 212–214, 273, 279–281).
2) The call for unity and/or peace (e.g. Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: 3, 26–27, 53, 80, 93, 76, 77, 142; Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 19, 178).
3) The human being and humanity in the world of walls and divisions (e.g. Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: 28–29, 39–40, 55, 59, 70, 74–75, 81, 96, 98–99; Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 38, 114, 138, 155, 162–163, 171–173, 183, 189–191, 244–245, 258–259, 261, 276).

4) The state–society–citizen (e.g. Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: 66–69, 86, 89, 103, 116; Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 33, 74, 93, 157, 158–159, 177, 200).
5) Ayodhya and (6 December) 1992 (e.g. Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: 34, 111, 139; Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 5–6, 45, 60, 77–78, 89, 201, 209–210, 231, 256).

While these groupings can be enumerated separately, in most of the poems, the themes and motifs that define them are so intertwined that, more often than not, they should be considered in close connection with each other, especially groups 1, 2, and 3. Among the motifs recurring in both collections, graphic images related to the communal violence and its after-effects dominate, especially in *Apnī zabān*.

Let us examine, then, a few examples illustrating the thematic complexity of both volumes and open our overview with a short poem by Anāmikā Śiv titled *Samay kā śāp* (The Curse of Time) and its harrowing imagery:

any day
dad comes back from the shop
he won't find any of us alive
mum's wrist
will be cut off along with bangles
and my ears ripped out with earrings
Pinky's and Rinky's eyes
will be torn open
the neighbours will tell all
like a storyteller
when dad comes back from the shop. (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: 5)[12]

[12] *kisī bhī din / jab pāpā dukān se lauṭkar āyẽge / hammẽ se kisī ko bhī jīvit nahī̃ pāyẽge / mamī kī kalāī / cūṛiyõ samet kaṭī hogī / aur mere kān bāliyõ samet ukhāṛe gaye hõge / pinkī rinkī kī ā̃kh phaṭī kī phaṭī rah gaī hogī / paṛosī qissāgoī ke andāz mẽ / sab kuch batāyẽge / pāpā jab dukān se āyẽge.*

How different in expression, though not so much in content, is the evocative image of a lifeless man, depicted as a deflated inner tube of a tyre, that features in Kumār Aśok's poem *Ādmī* (A Man). While, as we know, a punctured tube can be fixed, it is impossible to 'fix' someone whose the life-giving breath has escaped for good—someone cast into the turmoil of history and to whose tattered human remains it makes no difference whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim. This reflective poem opens with the following lines, which end with a rhetorical question:

This middle-aged
Imamuddin is a man
Who fixing punctured inner tubes
Has today become one of them.
Will any page of history
Be able to fix him? (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: 29)[13]

Seemingly more distanced is the poem *Sāl-e-nau ke mauqe par* (On the Occasion of New Year) by the Urdu poet 'Kafīl' Amrohvī.[14] In fact, it is a shocking testimony that takes the form of an image of a world turned upside down, distorted by the prevailing evil. It unfolds as a monologue in which the lyrical subject contemplates the ideal New Year gift for his friend.

My bosom friend, my friend!!!
Finally, what should I give you
As a New Year gift?

Winds of stones, gusts of blood, whiffs of smoke,
Flocks of vultures, barking dogs,
Deserted streets, desolate roads,

[13] *yah adheṛ / imāmuddīn hai ādmī / jo ṭyubõ par pañcar joṛte joṛte / āj xud ek ban gayā hai / kyā ise joṛ sakegā itihās kā koī panna.*

[14] Amrohvī is especially famous for his *nazm*: *Bāt niklegī to phir dūr talak jāegī* ("If the word gets out, it will spread far and wide") sung by Jagjit Singh.

Squads of killers on the unarmed,
Bloodthirsty beasts of prey at every step,
Unfledged hungry birds,
Severed tongues, burned shops,
Conch shells, axes, fearful calls to a prayer [in mosques],
Acid water from the Ganges,
The poisonous water of the Zamzam Well,
The morning wound, the night of pain?
My bosom friend, my friend!!!
Finally, what should I give you
As a New Year gift? (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: 23)[15]

The image of a world turned upside down by omnipresent oppression and violence, against the background of the state's withdrawal from its duties towards the citizens, can also be found in the works of other poets; for example, in Aruṇ Kamal's *Vaqt* (Time), where we read:

Speaking is a crime
Coughing is a crime
Laughing of women in the courtyard is a crime
Goondas brandishing knives roam free
And a man is being killed
on his very doorstep. (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 13)[16]

The poets are not only concerned about people but also draw attention to cultural heritage that is, if not more, fragile than humankind.

[15] *mere hamdam. mere dost!! / sāl-e-nau ke mauqe par / āxir tujhko / kaunsā tohfā peś karū̃ / saṅg havāẽ, lahū sabāẽ, dhuā̃ fazāẽ / giddhõ kā jhurmuṭ, bhaũkte kutte / sūnī galiyā̃, virā̃ raste / laśkar-e-qātil aur nihatthai / qadam-qadam xũx-ār darinde / be bāl-o-par bhūkhe parinde / kaṭī zabāne̊, jalī dukāne̊ / śaṅkh tabar aur qahar azāne̊ / gaṅgā jal bhī tezābī / āb-e-zamzam zahrābī / subh jarāhat, dard kī rāt / mere hamdam. mere dost! / sāl-e-nau ke mauqe par / āxir tujhko / kaunsā tohfā peś karū̃.*

[16] *bolnā gunāh / khā̃snā gunāh / ā̃gan mẽ auratõ kā hãsnā gunāh / churā bhā̃jte guṇde chuṭṭā ghūm rahe haĩ / aur apne kī caukhaṭ par baiṭhā ādmī / mārā jā rahā hai.*

Uday Prakāś gives expression to this concern at the beginning of his poem *Tīlī* (A Match):

> The easiest to destroy
> Are the things most difficult [to get] and grandest
> Just one match
> To turn the oldest and rarest
> Historical manuscript to ashes. (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 31)[17]

Somewhat different notes echo in the opening lines of the poem *Anahad garjai* (Let it roar) by Ṛturāj. Its lyrical subject speaks of his dying amidst the collapse of the state and the structures essential to living—the destruction of fundamental values, which, however, is not officially acknowledged:

> I'm dying in my house:
> In Parliament, they said
> The nation-state has been established
> [Its] fundamentals, [its] principles, brotherhood,
> Etc., etc. (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 33)[18]

Symptomatically, in many places, the poets engage in the symbolism of walls (interchangeably: borders), a motif common to different parts of the world, wherein metaphorical and non-metaphorical walls divide people and deprive them of freedom.[19] For example, walls be-

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[17] *sabse saral hai / sabse muśkil aur sabse mahān cīzõ ko naṣṭ karnā / phir ek tīlī / itihās kī sabse prācīn aur durlabh / pāṇḍulipi ko rākh banā dene ke lie.*

[18] *mere ghar mẽ maĩ mar rahā hū̃ / saṁsad mẽ unhõne kahā / ab rāṣṭr ho cukā hai / ādhārbhūt tatva, siddhānt, bhāīcārā / ādi, ādi.*

[19] In this context, it is worth referring to the protest song, *Walls* (Mury), by the Polish singer Jacek Kaczmarski. It was adapted from the Catalan song *L'Estaca* (The Stake) by Lluis Llach, in which the stake symbolises bondage. In the 1980s, it became the informal song of the Polish Solidarity movement, sung at rallies, meetings, and civil protests. Thirty years later, in 2020, it also gained popularity in Belarus (in a Belarusian adaptation) during protests following the manipulated presidential election.

come the central theme of Trilocan Śāstrī's poem with an emblematic title *Dīvārẽ, dīvārẽ, dīvārẽ, dīvārẽ* (Walls, Walls, Walls, Walls; Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 276). The same applies to the poem *Dīvārõ ke bare mẽ* (On Walls) by Kātyāyanī, which constitutes a concise reflection on the essence of the existence of walls—their destiny was/is not to exist:

> There have never been walls
> Where they are today.
> Where they are today
> There will never be walls.
> Walls are
> Not to be. (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 38)[20]

As both volumes came in the aftermath of the tragic events of 6 December 1992 in Ayodhya, it is evident that many poems address these incidents, some more subtly and others more directly, from various perspectives, with several of them referencing epic, mythical, religious, and political dimensions. Among them are also poems where Ayodhya, with its various meanings, serves as a central motif already expressed at the title level, thereby establishing the initial interpretative framework for the work in question. They are simply titled *Ayodhyā*, as for example poems by: Harīścandra Pāṇḍe (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: 139), Anil Kumār Siṁh (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 5–6), Narendra Gauṛ (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 77–78), Narendra Puṇḍarīk (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 89), Vinod Dās (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 209–210), and Śalabh Śrīrām Siṁh (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 231). The first of them, interestingly, incorporates these meanings in a highly condensed format of eight verses.

> Where there is sun, there is day
> Where there is Rama, there is Ayodhya
> How great was

[20] *kabhī vahā̃ nahī̃ thī̃ dīvārẽ / jahā̃ āj haĩ. / jahā̃ āj haĩ / kabhī vahā̃ / nahī̃ hõgī dīvārẽ / dīvārẽ hotī haĩ / nahī̃ hone ke lie.*

Ayodhya entrusted
To us by Tulsi
And how small
Has Ayodhya become.

Smaller than a ballot box. (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994a: 139)[21]

This poetic condensation of the political entanglement of Ayodhya's epic and religious dimensions vividly illustrates how poets—who are, at the same time, India's citizens—visualize the result of the transformation that has unfolded over the years in the wider context of Ayodhya. It is worth noting that the message conveyed in lines 2 to 8 of the above-quoted poem, while more succinct mainly due to its condensation, mirrors that of *Ayodhyā, 1992*, a famously vocal poem by Kuṁvar Nārāyaṇ featured in *Yah aisā samay hai* (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 45).

O Rama
(…)
What more can our misfortune be
that your kingdom lies shrunk
to a stage of dispute so petty.

Ayodhya is not your war-free realm now
but a warrior's Lanka of old,
and 'Manas' not your virtues
but slogans that elections hold. (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: 45)[22]

[21] *jahā̃ sūrya vahā̃ divas / jahā̃ rām vahā̃ ayodhyā / kitnī baṛī ayodhyā saũp gaye the tulsī hamẽ / kitnī choṭī rah gaī hai ayodhyā. / matpeṭikā se bhī choṭī.*

[22] *he rām,* (…) *isse baṛā kyā ho saktā hai / hamārā durbhāgya / ek vivādit stal mẽ simaṭ kar / rah gayā tumhārā sāmrājya. / ayodhyā is samay tumhārī ayodhyā nahī̃ / yoddhāõ kī laṅkā hai, / 'manas' tumhārā 'carit' nahī̃ / cunav kā ḍaṅkā hai!* translated by Apurva Narain (Narain 2008: 51).

4. Beyond themes and motifs: Concluding remarks

As has been said, both volumes are dedicated to democratic and secular traditions in times that pose a threat to them, abound in violence and are difficult to grasp and comprehend. The Hindi poets, however, do not remain silent; they resort to writing and share their views with other people. Their poems are based on testimonies of those who lived through the times of turmoil in Ayodhya and elsewhere, their fears, reflections, and imaginings of what the world they live in is and what it should be. In this sense, they are witnesses, for "One does not become a witness only by observing an event with one's own eyes. A witness is a person who speaks out and says, 'I was there, I saw it, I can tell people!'" (Engdahl 2002: 3).

The two collections comprise complementary attempts to accurately grasp the times and bear witness to them, though they differ slightly in their poetic diction. One reason is the authorship of most of the poems included in *Apnī zabān*, which were essentially, as previously mentioned, a response to the general call issued by SAHMAT in July 1992, with only some established poets invited by the editors. The major difference between them is underlined by both their subtitles and, to some extent, by the main points highlighted in the respective prefaces written by Zaidī and Nāgar. Thus, *Apnī zabān*, in line with its subtitle—*Sāmpradāyiktā virodhī kavitāõ kā saṅgrah* (A Collection of Anti-Communal Poems)—in its thematic orientation decidedly focuses on communalism. A distinctive feature of this collection is the mode of expression, which in its form often resembles an experience-based factual documentation of events and situations. Images tend to be very naturalistic and, as such, intrinsically very drastic. They are a consistent constitutive element of many of the poems (e.g., *Samay kā śāp* or *Sāl-e-nau ke mauqe par*), which allows them to be seen as a gaze of witness—the poets' testimony of the times in which they live. These images, while an important tool of imagery, appear to be not only an artistic means of representing actual experience but also an escape from the memory of lived trauma or the fear of living through it again. At the more general level, they also serve as a protest

by poet-witnesses and poet-citizens, a memento of similar tragedies addressed to all. This broader plane is much more evident in the collection *Yah aisā samay hai* that appears to constitute a wider-ranging attempt to diagnose the condition of the state and its society. Thus, while this volume often addresses the same issues as *Apnī zabān*, it takes a more distanced perspective, allowing for a greater objectivization of emotions and makes the tenor of *Yah aisā samay hai* seem even stronger (cf. Pāṇḍey's *Ayodhyā* and Nārāyaṇ's *Ayodhyā, 1992*).

For all the above-mentioned reasons, both collections make for very valuable examples of witness literature concerning the communal conflict in independent India, especially in the 1980s and early 1990s. An attempt to approach the modes of creative expression adopted by the poets in defence of the democratic, secular state seems all the more interesting and justified in view of the note made by the editors in the Preface to *Yah aisā samay hai*. Zaidī and Nāgar observe:

> Contemporary Hindi poetry is essentially a product of its own time and understanding. This is its own true self. It cannot remain lost in history for long or venture far. It is not in its nature to dwell in the past and praise it. Perhaps this is its limitation. (Zaidī and Nāgar 1994b: v)[23]

In this sense, this poetry is also truly a "poetry of social conscience" (cf. Kumar 2018).

In conclusion, let it be noted at this point that over thirty years after the Ayodhya events, which were the driving force behind the publication of the two volumes, the Hindu-Muslim communal tensions do not seem to have been resolved. This is so in spite of, or maybe due to, the construction of the Ram temple on the site of the demolished mosque, a temple which was inaugurated on 22 January 2024 with the participation of India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. The definitive settlement of this ongoing issue appears to pose one of the

[23] *hindī kī samkālīn kavitā buniyādī rūp se apne samay aur samāj se pratikṛt kartī āyī hai. yah uskā nijī svabhav hai. vah bahut der aur dūr tak itihās mẽ khokar nahī̃ rah saktī. atīt mẽ thamkar uskī stuti karnā uskī prakṛti mẽ nahī̃ hai. ho saktā hai yah uskī sīmā ho.*

most important, if not the most important, tests for democratic India, as evidenced, for example, by the oft-repeated slogan "Ayodhya is just a trailer, Kashi and Mathura still remain!" (*Ayodhyā to bas jhā̃kī hai, Kāśī, Mathurā abhī bāqi haĩ!*; cf. Murthi 2022). Will the slogan persist just as an empty phrase that, over time, like so many others, fades into the mists of history, or will it effectively push fundamentalist forces into action? Will Kashi or Mathura be next (cf. WAA 2024)?

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