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Somnath Mandir in a play of mirrors: heritage, history, and the search for identity of the new nation (1842–1951)

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Abstract

The story of the Somnath temple, in the northwestern Saurashtra peninsula, has often been taken as an example of the contentious legacies of the penetration, settlement, and political establishment of Muslims in India. Its history testifies to the complex relationship between history, heritage, and the consolidation of collective memories of past events and processes.

This article focuses on two key moments in the temple's recent history: the retrieval of the Somnath gates by Lord Ellenborough in 1842 and the reconstruction of the temple between 1947 and 1951. At these two moments—one during colonial times and the other at the creation of the independent state—Somnath became the battlefield for questioning how the state should be positioned with regard to religious places, histories, symbols, and practices.

While the temple was apparently dealt with as a tangible place of heritage, both episodes show how the value endowed upon the temple had far more complex meanings. The analysis proposed in this article ends with the reconstruction of the temple. This shows the way in which architects of independent India addressed the country's history, directly or indirectly engaging with the construction of a heritage for the new state. Their efforts aimed to strengthen a shared memory of the past, which could in turn consolidate membership and a sense of belonging to the new nation. Advocates and promoters of the temple's reconstruction, among whom were Vallabhbhai Patel and K. M. Munshi, envisioned that the reconstruction would embody the long-awaited liberation of India from centuries of continuous domination by 'foreign' powers. In contrast, secular politicians, with Nehru at the helm, opposed the reconstruction, fearing that Somnath might become the symbol of a sectarian vision of the nation and, in the wake of partition, derail efforts to characterise independent India as an inclusive country. While the reconstruction did eventually take place, the entire episode invites us to question the relationship between the framing of Indian nationalism and the heritagisation of Indian history. Following a critical theoretical approach to Heritage studies, where heritage has less to do with the item that is preserved than with the value with which it is endowed, this article proposes to investigate the meanings that heritage preservation, conservation, and reconstruction acquired as part of the project of nation- and state-building.

Keywords: Somnath temple; post-colonial nationalism; contentious history; heritage politics

Events in the history of the temple at Somnath have often been used as symbolic landmarks to interpret the twists and turns in the encounter between Islam, Muslim 'invaders', and South Asia. From the invasions of Mahmud of Ghazni at the beginning of the eleventh century, and the initial plunders of the temple and citadel, the history

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of Somnath has often been told as one of cyclic conquests, destruction, and restoration, up until the final strike inflicted on it by order of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in 1701.¹ From this observation point, the narrative regarding the once-magnificent Hindu temple, at the centre of a flourishing merchant community facing the Indian Ocean, has corroborated an understanding of the history of the penetration of Islam into the subcontinent as driven by religious fanaticism, bigotry, and the rush to plunder its riches.

So much has the fate of Somnath aroused the curiosity and imagination of chroniclers, travellers, and historians that they have often recounted its story, fuelling a myth that found substance in the nearly abandoned ruins above the sea that hinted at a past of abundance and richness lost in time. From colonial times, however, Somnath acquired a different kind of importance, one derived from the meanings and values that have been repeatedly attributed to those ruins, and to the history they supposedly represented. These meanings and values have become stratified over the course of time, conferring on the temple a new life as a political object in post-colonial India. In its later life, the temple was rebuilt (in 1951) on the same site as the ancient one (or at least that was the aim of its promoters), with the ill-concealed intention of making it the first monument to represent a finally independent India after a millennium of domination by alien rulers.

Such a bestowal of significance speaks, of course, only to a portion of the population (and of the electorate), namely those who identify themselves with the idea of an Indian nation encompassing Hindus alone. Yet two aspects immediately appear of interest. First, seeing the Somnath temple as a symbol of independence rests on a partial and univocal interpretation of Indian history, emphasising clashes and conflict between compact communities rather than encounters and exchanges. Such an interpretation of India's past is not the invention of Hindu fundamentalists but has its roots in colonial historiography. Moreover, as we will see, the events involving Somnath from the nineteenth century speak of the powerful symbolic potential that tangible testimonies from the past have in conveying and casting imageries, understandings, and beliefs that affect, directly and indirectly, the way in which people interact and place themselves on the chessboard of different identities and in religious and cultural categories. Such powerful potential, very clearly present in the minds of colonial administrators and, later, Indian politicians who participated in the construction of the independent nation-state, leads to the second interesting aspect of the events relating to Somnath. The historical and archaeological values have become (or perhaps have always been) of secondary importance with respect to the meanings that have been attributed subsequently to the temple in terms of religious, cultural, and political understanding.

The potentially disruptive political meaning with which the temple and its reconstruction was encumbered was clear to Nehru, Patel, and Gandhi in 1948, just as it is clear today. The site has become a landmark of Hindu fanaticism in post-colonial India, marking the rise of political Hinduism in a specular association with Ayodhya: while the latter has been at the centre of a political and judicial case that is still somewhat unresolved, from the time of its reconstruction the former has assumed the role of a safe home for the desire of Hindu extremists to build a Hindu nation.² Moving forward from these

¹ K. M. Munshi reported Aurangzeb's order to destroy the temple and convert the site into a mosque as the final point in the temple's trajectory, obviously before its 1951 reconstruction. K. M. Munshi, *Somanatha, The Shrine Eternal* (Bombay, 1976; 1st edn 1951), p. 61. Romila Thapar also reports Aurangzeb's order but questions the idea that by then the temple was a symbol of Hindu resistance to Muslim rule. Romila Thapar, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* (New Delhi, 2004), p. 62. At any rate, from the eighteenth century onwards the site was mostly abandoned as a place of worship, irrespective of whether it was still a temple or converted into a mosque.

² The events that marked the rise of political Hinduism during the 1980s and early 1990s are the object of extensive literature and well beyond the scope of this article. For the parallelism with Ayodhya, I am referring

observations, this article investigates the contradictions, assumptions, and claims that led the temple at Somnath to become the symbol of a contested history in contemporary India. Drawing upon an epistemological perspective that intertwines historical analysis with recent debates in the field of critical Heritage studies, this article looks back to the history of Somnath from early colonial times to show how the temple acquired its importance because of the past that it was meant to represent. Within this framework, the value with which it was endowed as a piece of heritage became the terrain of contestation between different interpretations of how the newly independent state should be fashioned, what values it should represent and defend, what idea of the nation it should incarnate, and for whom.³ The aim of this article is also to show that such controversies did not involve only the high sphere of national politics and debates. Discussions were held and decisions were taken on much more worldly, trivial issues, involving middle and lower rank functionaries at both the state and local levels: for instance, disputes emerged on who should bear the costs of an archaeological survey, whether it should be from public or private funds; or about the position of the new prospective temple, whether it should be reconstructed over the old ruins or on a new spot in order to preserve the ancient site. Taken together, these controversies show that the tangle, produced by the consolidation of historical narratives through tangible sites, opened a terrain of negotiation. In this space, even the smallest issues involved thinking and consciously acting in favour or against specific ideas of how the state should govern its past, and the disruptive potential this could have in the present.

The core of the historical reconstruction presented here is based on documents from the India Office Records in London and the Indian National Archives in New Delhi.⁴ The reading of two key moments in the process of the heritagisation of Somnath, such as the affair of Lord Ellenborough's proclamation concerning the temple's gates in 1842 and the final reconstruction in 1951, ideally defines the timeframe within which this article develops its analysis.

On historiography and the construction of a myth

Several studies, at different times, have dealt with Mahmud of Ghazni's AD 1026 invasion of the subcontinent which culminated in the plunder and desecration of the Somnath temple. In most colonial histories of the subcontinent, the invasion was considered the moment at which Islamic penetration became a rising domination. In his *History of British India* (1817), James Mill mentioned the episode in the chapter on Mahmud's invasions, which in general are described as being the turning point for the end of the Hindu era on the subcontinent:

Mahmood subverted the throne of the Samanides, reduced [it] to a shadow [of] the power of the Bowides, and reigned from the Tigris to the Jaxartes. He also made

in particular to Gyanendra Pandey's reflections on the Babri Masjid issue, in G. Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* (Stanford, 2006), chapter 4, 'Monumental history', pp. 68–102.

³ The idea that items of heritage become such because of the value with which they are endowed is conceptualised and systematised in the work of Laurajane Smith, which has become, critically, a reference point in the field of Heritage studies. See, in particular, Laurajane Smith, *The Uses of Heritage* (London, 2006), pp. 53–57, 80–84.

⁴ Documents in the Indian National Archives (INA) were consulted in two research periods during the winter and summer of 2019 (the pandemic preventing further research on site), in particular in the archives of the Somnath Temple Trust. Documents related to the colonial periods, Lord Ellenborough's rescue of the gates, and the Afghanistan expedition are at the British Library in London; the papers, letters, and reports about the reconstruction plan, the ASI excavations, and the controversies over the inauguration ceremony were consulted at the INA.

extensive conquests towards the South, and as he was the first who in that direction bore the crescent beyond the furthest limits of the Persian empire, and laid the foundation of the Mahomedan thrones in India, we are now arrived at the period when the Mahomedan history of India begins.⁵

Fifty years earlier, in his monumental historical work, Edward Gibbon dedicated a chapter to Mahmud of Ghazni's conquests, pausing on his incursions into the subcontinent, in particular his desecration of the Somnath temple.⁶ Both historians attributed great importance to the event, using it to frame the Afghan conqueror as an orthodox Muslim general, the battering ram of Islamic expansion into the subcontinent. Lingering over descriptions of religious life and the socio-economic context, the same narrations describe the temple, and all that surrounded it, with an abundance of detail. Resorting to the main tropes of Orientalist imageries, the temple 'was endowed with the revenue of two thousand villages; two thousand Brahmins were consecrated to the service of the deity, whom they washed each morning and evening in water from the distant Ganges; the subordinate ministers consisted of three hundred musicians, three hundred barbers, and five hundred dancing girls, conspicuous for their birth and beauty'.⁷ On the other side, 'the faith of Mahmud was animated to a personal trial of the strength of this Indian deity', and when his army finally stormed off the citadel he turned on the temple's idol with rage.⁸ The fact that European historiography, as early as the eighteenth century, adopted and promoted a clearcut interpretation of the penetration of Islam into South Asia as a dynamic of conquest and subjugation has been widely investigated by post-colonial historians.⁹ More so, cases like the desecration of Somnath reflect how such an interpretive frame was based on the assumption that South Asian society was divided into neatly homogeneous groups. Romila Thapar's landmark study on this issue showed how colonial historiography contributed to enforcing such a reading of Indian society long before the advent of what Nicholas Dirks has labelled the 'ethnographic state' in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁰

Starting from the assumption that the events surrounding the temple became central to a highly contested narration of Indian history, marked by an opposition between Hindu and Muslim identities, Thapar rightly shifts the focus from searching for supposed truths about the temple's desecration to bringing to light the contradictory stories that emerge in the various sources, as well as the context in which these were produced and the intentions that they may or may not reveal. Since 'there is no uncertainty about the event having happened', it becomes even more relevant to understand the sources and their historiography, as 'these suggest variant ways of looking at historical problems', as well as the implications of how such sources have been and are still being used.¹¹ Writing in the decade that followed the shocking demolition of the Babri Masjid and the rise of political Hinduism in India's electoral landscape, Thapar posited her investigation as an

⁵ J. Mill, *History of British India*, 3rd edn (London 1826), vol. II, p. 216.

⁶ E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 12 vols (New York, 1906), chapter 67, vol. 6, pp. 147 ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁹ See, for instance, P. Van der Veer and C. Breckenridge (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia, 1993).

¹⁰ Thapar, *Somanatha*; N. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), pp. 43 ff. Before Thapar's account, Richard Davies had devoted ample space to reconstructing the history of Somnath in his inspiring book, *Lives of Indian Images*. See R. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), in particular chapter 6.

¹¹ Thapar, *Somanatha*, pp. 11–12.

answer to a stream of political historiography that aimed at presenting Hindu–Muslim antagonism as embedded in the very history of the subcontinent. Moving away from the debates on communalism, my article places at the centre of analysis the temple and its materiality vis-à-vis the state. In particular, I argue that the way in which British and Indian administrators and politicians dealt with it poses questions regarding the state’s role regarding its subjects and citizens, since the demarcation of a shared understanding of the past defined the terrain where citizenship was discussed and practised.

The way in which Somnath became the symbol of Muslim oppression in India is a necessary starting point to understand why the temple’s ruins were charged with such importance from the nineteenth century, and why it became crucial for some to rebuild it once India had achieved independence. In their description of Mahmud’s expedition, both Gibbon and Mill reproduced Alexander Dow’s translation of Ferishta’s *History*—almost to the letter.¹² When John Briggs proposed a new translation of the work from Persian in 1829, he amended some inaccuracies in the previous translation, noting that Colonel Dow had also ‘filled his work with his own observations, which had been so embodied in the text, that Gibbon declares it impossible to distinguish the translator from the original author’.¹³ But what is primarily worth noting here is that Ferishta’s work became practically the sole reference point for this episode, with the discussion centred on the reliability of the translation and not of the original source. On this matter, as Thapar notes, colonial historiography relied only on sources from the Turko-Persian tradition, without taking other narratives into account.¹⁴ And, if this process can be seen as one example in which ‘a story is embellished by repetition’, the whole matter assumed a totally different perspective—and greater importance—when colonial interest in the temple and its history was charged with political significance, after the Somnath gates affair in 1842.

As has been observed, such flattened interpretations of the events surrounding the temple and its multiple desecrations contributed to the sanctioning of a binary reading of communal relations in South Asia. However, parallel and in relation to this, towards the middle of the nineteenth century, Somnath also gained increasing attention as an archaeological site. The temple ruins began to be studied because of their supposed value as tangible specimens of Hindu religious architecture, as well as evidence of Muslim rulers’ oppression of the Hindu population. What acquired increasing importance, then, was not only the interpretation of the historical processes which contextualised Mahmud of Ghazni’s invasions, but the value that the temple acquired as part of history. Thus, this article proposes a shift in focus from the historiography regarding Somnath to the temple as a tangible element. From 1842 onwards, the temple’s ruins were charged with symbolism and meanings pertaining directly to the contentious terrains of the relationship between state and religion, nation-building, and, later, to the definition of the post-colonial Indian state. From this perspective, the temple acquired centrality in post-colonial India not because it was a significant specimen of ancient architecture, nor as an archaeological site that could provide evidence for a better understanding of past events, but because its reconstruction as a new building was loaded with political meanings.

In her work on what is labelled a ‘difficult heritage’, Sharon MacDonald observed that ‘heritage turns its objects [...] into “identity pasts”, into material that should be preserved

¹² A. Dow, *The History of Hindostan; from the earliest account of time to the death of Akbar* (London, 1768), pp. 84–85.

¹³ J. Briggs, *History of the Mahomedan Power in India, till the year A.D. 1612* (London, 1908, 1st edn 1829), p. vii.

¹⁴ Thapar, *Somanatha*, p. 169. A more composite account of Mahmud’s invasion was published in 1867; however, as Thapar observes, although the work is based on a different set of sources, including but not limited to Ferishta, these were all of the Turko-Persian tradition. H. M. Elliot and J. Dowson, *The History Of India, As Told By Its Own Historians: The Muhammadan Period*, 8 vols (London, 1867), vol. II, pp. 467–476.

because of its significance to a group of people. The heritage effect is, simultaneously and inevitably, an identity effect.¹⁵ The very site of the temple becomes the *locus* where a certain history is identified, constructed, and contested at the same time. When in 1843 Lord Ellenborough, the governor-general of India, issued his famous proclamation on the recovery of the Somnath gates from Ghazni, the debate that followed in Britain raised issues surrounding not just the intentions and appropriateness of Ellenborough's gesture, but assigned to both the gates and the temple a significance that went far beyond their archaeological value: were the gates to be considered a war trophy? If so, then for whom? Or was Somnath a monument of India's past or a place of worship? While debating these, and related issues, members of Britain's House of Commons placed the temple at the centre of a much broader discussion, questioning the state's role vis-à-vis religious symbols and communities, as well as history and memory, implicitly recognising the powerful disruptive potential that making decisions about objects from the past could reveal.

About a century later, in 1948, in the wake of India's independence, when a handful of freedom fighters, political leaders, and devotees proposed to rebuild the temple, the same issues once again came to the fore, with arguments and terminology that were strikingly similar to those used in the previous debate. The temple reconstruction thus became a political issue that engaged part of the leadership of the newly created state, because regarding Somnath as a monument or as a symbol implied completely different approaches to its ruins and, consequently, different ideas of what the new temple should represent. Opinions diverged on whether the temple should be rebuilt or preserved. Such a distinction was not only technical. Again, the temple and its 'representativeness' appeared at the centre of a crucial moment in India's recent history, when the definition of the character of the post-colonial state with regard to secularism and religion was being defined. Adopting a critical approach to heritage involves questioning the processes that led to ascribing certain values to the temple and why its reconstruction appeared important to some and threatening to others.¹⁶ In his work on the production of Muslim politics in post-colonial India, Hilal Ahmed rightly challenges the idea that historic sites are 'neutral', stressing instead the centrality of monuments as both symbolic sites and legal entities.¹⁷ He questions the idea of an objective nature of heritage, while stressing the religious and socio-cultural dimension in conferring political significance on monuments and historical sites. From this point of view, Somnath represents an anomaly and a paradigmatic case at the same time. Since the temple was rebuilt anew, the site did not undergo what Ahmed calls a 'process of monumentalisation'.¹⁸ Its importance as a political site since colonial times allows us to trace a genealogy of the relationship between history, heritage, and memory in defining a position for the state vis-à-vis communal identities.

Just as 'memory is not value free', neither are the sites that are chosen as representative of certain histories, so the meanings that are attributed to them in the present

¹⁵ S. MacDonald, 'Undesirable heritage: fascist material culture and historical consciousness in Nuremberg', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12.1 (2006), p. 23.

¹⁶ R. Harrison, 'Forgetting to remember to forget: late modern heritage practices, sustainability and the "crisis" of accumulation of the past', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19.6 (2013), pp. 585–587.

¹⁷ H. Ahmed, *Muslim Political Discourse in Postcolonial India: Monuments, Memory, Contestation* (Oxon and New York, 2014).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34. On these issues, a useful and very interesting perspective is the one adopted by Kajri Jain in her work on monumental statues in contemporary India. Statues, as new constructions that are filled with symbolic meanings in their shape, dimension, and details, draw an interesting parallelism with Somnath as a 'new' construction. K. Jain, *Gods in the Time of Democracy* (Durham and London, 2021), in particular the Introduction and chapter 1.

are constantly renegotiated.¹⁹ While contributing to crystallising a memory of the past, and an understanding of communal relations in the present, the events surrounding the ruins of Somnath also allow us to question the ways in which secularism, religious belonging, and the role of the state were negotiated via India's transition to independence.

At the origins of the myth: the strange story of Somnath gates

As mentioned above, in 1842 Lord Ellenborough caused controversy when he ordered the British Army to bring back from Ghazni the sandalwood gates of the Somnath temple, which had supposedly been stolen by Mahmud during his 1026 raid, and later used to adorn his mausoleum. In and of itself, this might have passed unnoticed as an episode in which a vainglorious commander committed a great mistake, while being convinced that he was making a grand gesture. However, while this gesture responded to a 'Manichean' understanding of the history of the subcontinent, within the framework of an ongoing conflict between Hindus and Muslims, it must also be noted that it was not the only episode of British manipulation and resignification of monuments and ruins. On the contrary, 'in its espousal of an interventionist and self-consciously politicized framework for understanding medieval architecture, the gesture was unique only in the negative publicity that it attracted'.²⁰ So, the theft of Mahmud's portals from Ghazni at Ellenborough's behest reveals British attitudes towards endowing medieval architecture with manipulated historical significance. The episode of the Somnath gates stands out for the clamour it attracted at the time, which contributed to propagating the myth of Mahmud's devastating invasion 800 years before and reviving the idea that the battle had been a turning point in the subcontinent's history.

The history of how this episode happened is in itself interesting, as it originated from Lord Ellenborough's belief that Mahmud of Ghazni had brought the gates of Somnath back to Afghanistan when he returned from his last expedition to India. Where the governor-general acquired this information is unknown, as no reference to the gates is made in any account written in the immediate centuries after Mahmud's raid.²¹ The issue is an interesting example of how unmotivated and unproven information can be assumed as historical truth and how it can thereby influence the course of future events. Thapar hypothesises that the invention of the existence of the gates may have been derived from a confused interpretation of a letter by Maharaja Ranajit Singh to the exiled Afghan ruler Shah Shujah, in which the former asked for the restitution of the gates of the temple of Jagannath.²² In this interpretation, Jagannath might have been misread as Junagadh, the region where Somnath is located, but as the author herself states, 'it does seem unlikely that the two temples, being so different, would have been confused'.²³ Reading the most popular source at the time—Ferishta's account—one can only ascertain that no reference is made to any gate whatsoever, but other information included suggests why the invention of the gates might have become credible. In both Alexander Dow's and later John Briggs' (more accurate) translation, it is in fact reported that when the 'King' finally got in front of the temple's idol he:

raised his mace and struck of its nose. He ordered two pieces of the idol to be broken off and sent to Ghizny, that one might be thrown at the threshold of the public

¹⁹ Thapar, *Somanatha*, p. 226.

²⁰ F. Barry-Flood, 'Lost in translation: architecture, taxonomy and the "Eastern Turks"', *Muqarnas* 24 (2007): History and Ideology: Architectural Heritage of the 'Lands of Rum', p. 84.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83; Thapar, *Somanatha*, p. 173.

²² Thapar, *Somanatha*, p. 178.

²³ *Ibid.*

mosque, and the other at the court door of his own palace. These identical fragments are to this day (now 600 years ago) to be seen at Ghizny. Two more fragments were reserved to be sent to Mecca and Medina.²⁴

These details about pieces of the idols being brought back to Ghazni, and still being visible in Ferishta's times, may have fuelled the idea that Mahmud had taken some sort of a war trophy with him. Practically, the only information about the destruction of the temple was gathered from the same source that added to the construction of the myth. In a note published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1834, Alexander Burnes described his visit to the temple ruins and wrote that 'the people residing in it related to me, with literal accuracy' accounts about Mahmud's invasion and the destruction of the idol.²⁵ Interestingly, although indulging in a description of the place, the remains, and their state of abandonment, Burnes did not question the reliability of the historical accounts or the variety of the sources, simply highlighting how the temple represented a unique example in which 'the architecture of the Eastern and Western world combined together in one edifice'. While he opened his note by quoting Gibbon, he concluded the article in a way that left little room for any further research: 'Enough, indeed, seems to be known, for rare is it that tradition coincides so much with historical truth as in the accounts given of Pattan Somnath.'²⁶

Issued at about the same time (1836), Hobart Caunter's *The Romance of History: India* included a story about the idol of Somnath. Like the other stories in the volume, the tale was fictionalised, with a plot focusing on death, sensuality, and vice that involved a young Hindu widow who resolved to perform *sati*, in spite of a false promise of salvation from one of the ministers of the temple, during Mahmud's siege.²⁷ When the author inserts passages of more accurate historical description in his narration, the influence of Ferishta is again clearly visible and certain specific episodes are reported line by line. Here, the narrative about Somnath can be seen as hinting at an imagery of India as a place of mystery and magic, where situations and people's actions are described as driven by superstition and primordial feelings, while Mahmud is described as an irreprehensible conqueror.²⁸ In Caunter's narration, Mahmud appears almost as a secondary character but, interestingly, when describing him the author reverts to episodes directly taken from Ferishta that consolidate the myth of the conqueror as a Muslim bigot. Mahmud is defined first in terms of his military ability: when he entered the temple, he struck the idol with his mace (and then had two pieces of it sent to Ghazni). Then he is depicted within the framework of religious and moral rectitude, as he refused an astounding amount of money, offered by the temple brahmins, to convince him to 'desist from further mutilation'; although tempted, he wanted to be remembered as a 'destroyer of idols', rather than as an 'idol-seller'.²⁹

²⁴ Briggs, *History of the Mahomedan Power*, p. 72. In Dow's translation, the same reference to the pieces of the idol being sent to Ghazni appears, although it is not embellished with the statement that those pieces were still visible in Ferishta's time. Dow, *History*, pp. 84–85.

²⁵ A. Burnes, 'Account of the Remains of the celebrated Temple at Pattan Somnath, sacked by Mahmūd of Ghizni, A. D. 1024', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 5.9 (January 1834), pp. 104–107.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

²⁷ H. Caunter, *The Romance of History. India* (London, 1836), pp. 43–135.

²⁸ For a contextualisation of Victorian Britain's fascination with India's magic, mystery, and supposedly primordial aspects, see P. Lamont and C. Bates, 'Conjuring images of India in nineteenth-century Britain', *Social History* 32.3 (2007), pp. 308–324.

²⁹ Caunter, *Romance of History*, pp. 118 and 127–128; the same episode is reported in Briggs, *History of the Mahomedan Power*, p. 72 and Dow's translation on p. 85. In the latter's description of the same episode, curiously the author adds to the pieces of the idol sent to Ghazni two more—one sent to Mecca and another to Medina.

In the early phases of colonisation, the history of Mahmud's attack on the temple became a trope in many British accounts about India, as it made it possible to delineate a plausible periodisation of the subcontinent's history, while simultaneously creating a binary understanding of its society and culture. A history repeated many times, but always in the same way, became the basis for the rise of a myth about Mahmud of Ghazni and his expedition. It is not totally surprising that when Lord Ellenborough organised his controversial expedition to Afghanistan in 1842, he wished to bring back some war trophy that would also have meaning for the 'princes and people' of the subcontinent. Although references to the gates of Somnath are not found in any source, not even in fictionalised accounts such as that of Hobart Caunter's, the repeated hinting at pieces of the idol being sent to Ghazni, and the image of Mahmud raising his mace, may have contributed to convincing Lord Ellenborough that it would be useful to have his army bring back some remains from Ghazni.³⁰ So, along with the dismantling of the fortifications, the 'famous gates of Somnath were removed from the tomb of Mahmoud and carefully deposited in camp; the Governor-General having directed that they should be conveyed to India as a trophy of successful war'.³¹

It was in this way that the inexistent gates were brought to India amid great clamour. Although it soon became clear that they were not what Ellenborough had declared, their recovery marked the start of a fresh history, in which the temple assumed new importance as a site.

Lord Ellenborough's proclamation and the debate in the House of Commons

If the origin of his ideas about the gates remains a mystery, Lord Ellenborough's intentions about how he wanted to use them were clear: after stealing them from Mahmud's mausoleum in Ghazni, the gates were to be brought to India in triumph.³² By order of the governor-general an escort of army officers and 101 sepoy was gathered to bring the gates from Sulej to Somnath, supposedly retracing the journey the Sultan had made 800 years before:

First of all comes the ADC on a white arab, with 25 troopers as his escort, looking uncommon proud, next the political Major Leech and the officers of the escort, the 101 (Brahmin) Sepoys, and the drawn slowly and solemnly by four and twenty bullocks the car containing the Gates surmounted by a tall and imposing Canopy of Red cloth with fringes of silk and tinsel, the curtains are so arranged that when a sufficient number of villagers are collected round the car, the curtains can be raised for them, and their souls gladdened with a view of the most holy Gates.³³

This description, by Ellenborough's aide-de-camp, Captain William Robert Herries, who was assigned to the escort the gates, shows that the parade was meant to be a memorable

³⁰ In his order to General Nott, Ellenborough in fact told him to 'bring away from the tomb of Mahmoud of Ghuznee his club, which hangs over it; and you will bring away the gates of his tomb, which are the gates of the temple of Somnath'. 'Lord Ellenborough's Proclamation—Somnath', *The House of Commons Debate*, 9 March 1843, Hansard (online access, November 2021).

³¹ *Recollections of the First Campaign West of the Indus, and of the Subsequent Operations of the Candahar Force, Under General Sir W. Nott, G.C.B., by a Bengal Officer* (London, 1845), p. 77.

³² General Order Regarding the escort of the Gates of the Temple of Somnath, 15 March 1843, Indian National Archives (INA), Military Department. Ellenborough had annexed Sind one month before, so having a grand event crossing the region can also be read in this context.

³³ William Robert Herries Papers (henceforth Herries Papers), 16 January 1843. The Robert Herries Papers are at the India Office Archives at the British Library.

event. Wherever the procession stopped, a ceremony was staged to show the gates to the people and highlight the benevolence of the British who had recovered them. While the army was marching back to the subcontinent in November 1842, Lord Ellenborough issued a proclamation that announced the recovery of the gates to the ‘princes and people’ of India with solemn words.³⁴ It mattered little that the gates were soon discovered to be false, or whether the ruins of the temple were those from the construction that was desecrated in AD 1026; Somnath became the place that embodied the supposed contamination of a purely Hindu India and the loss of religious homogeneity and harmony.

The opening of Ellenborough’s proclamation is a hymn to a complacent self-representation:

My Brothers and My Friends,
Our Victorious army bears the gates of the temple of Somnath, in triumph from
Afghanistan, and the despoiled tomb of Sultan Mahmood looks upon the ruins of
Ghuznee.

The insult of eight hundred years is at last avenged. The gates of the temple of Somnath, so long the memorial of your humiliation, are become the proudest record of your national glory; the proof of your superiority in arms over the nations beyond the Indus.³⁵

Based on the assumption that Mahmud’s invasion had stratified itself in the collective memory of the people of the subcontinent as an unhealed trauma, the purpose of Ellenborough’s proclamation was clearly to show that it was the British who had re-established India’s ‘national glory’, and also to legitimate the British as India’s domestic rulers. The victorious military effort is described as ‘yours’, thus hinting at the value of the native soldiers who were part of the Afghan expedition. At the same time, the theme of humiliation-suffered and honour-now-restored found perfect expression in the gates: the fact that only ruins were left in the site and that there was no temple where the gates could be installed, was of secondary importance. What Ellenborough was in search of was a symbol to showcase.

One might question whether anything regarding this story, in fact, found correspondence in some sort of collective feeling among the people, and of what kind? Contradicting Alexander Burnes’ 1834 account, four years later James Tod visited the site and reported that, to his own surprise, he had found no memory of the invasion alive in and around the temple.

Such is the chief temple of paganism, the destruction of which [...] was deemed by the Sultan of Ghizni an act of religious duty. It might be supposed that the record of this war, a theme of glory for the Islamite historian, and in deeds of chivalry not surpassed by any in the annals of the Crusaders, would have been written with an adamant pen on every stone of the temple; but it is no less true than unaccountable, that the earliest and direst scourge which ever inflicted misery on a nation, Mahmoud the Great, is unknown alike by Brahmin, Banya, or Byrajee, as well as by Mooslem, even in name, within the city of the god.³⁶

³⁴ Political Department, Simla, the 16th of November, 1842, enclosed in Herries Papers, 13 January 1843.

³⁵ From the Governor General to all Raja Praja, Notification, Political Department; Simla, the 16th November, 1842. The proclamation was issued in thousands of copies; the one I consulted was in the Harries Papers, but there are several others in the Indian Office Archives.

³⁶ James Tod, *Travel in Western India, embracing a visit to the sacred mounts of the Jains, and the most celebrated shrines of Hindu faith between Rajpootana and the Indus; with an account of the ancient city of Nehrwalla* (London, 1839), p. 344. The same findings were confirmed by Captain Postans in an 1844 article—but based on a visit to the temple made in 1834—while Alexander Burns, as we have seen, in his 1834 description had reported

When reporting his first-hand impressions of the procession, Captain Herries seemed to confirm James Tod's findings from a 'field' perspective. He described as 'very droll' the small ceremony that was staged to show the gates in every village, adding that it would begin when 'a sufficient number of villagers are collected around the car', conveying more the sense of an imposed ritual than a spontaneous gathering.³⁷ If the whole operation went almost unnoticed among the Indian population, the opposite could be said for Britain, where Lord Ellenborough's venture was received with no great favour. The publicity that was given to the proclamation in the subcontinent, where it was translated into Hindi and distributed in the provinces and princely states, was seen as imprudent, if not arrogant, on the part of the governor-general. The dispatch that accompanied the copies of the Hindi proclamation stated that 'it is the wish of the Governor-General that the fullest publicity should be given to this address among the Hindoo population'.³⁸

In London, this affair was perceived by many as a display of Ellenborough's conceit and the matter reached the House of Commons on 9 March 1843. The debate revolved around the proclamation, its presentation of the British government as actively involved in religious matters, and the possible negative consequences that might have for the image and the stability of British rule. Romila Thapar sees the debate as one of the milestones that contributed to establishing an understanding of India that viewed the relationship between Hindus and Muslims solely in terms of religious antagonism.³⁹ Apart from testifying to how, in the eyes of British functionaries and politicians, Indian society could be broadly explained within such a binary framework, the debate in the House of Commons proved important in two other ways: first, it objectified the narrative about Muslim alterity and aggressiveness towards Hindus by making Somnath a tangible *lieu de mémoire* sanctioned by an authorised historical narrative; second, the debate engaged directly with the controversy about what role, if any, the state should play in response to religious sentiments, and also in the preservation of sites that embodied potentially contentious histories. In a sense, what was at stake was not only the sanctioning of a certain version of history, but making the state a custodian of collective memory.

Why was Ellenborough's proclamation given so much attention and why did it create controversy in British political circles? Was the supposed recovery of the gates an act meant to entice one religious community over another? While debating these issues, the gates and the temple were called into question as potentially disruptive elements, because of the meanings they were felt to convey. Richard Davis relates the debate to the growing campaign against idolatry fostered by Evangelists against the involvement of British officials in the religious affairs of the Hindus.⁴⁰ Against this background, what also emerges is the fear that the colonial government could be perceived by the native population as openly taking the side of one community over another. In the words of Whig member of parliament, Vernon Smith, for instance, the core of the

that 'the people residing in it [the town] related to me, with literal accuracy, the facts recorded of the sultan's smiting the idol'. In fact, Burns reports a version of the story that again seems brought directly from Ferishtah. Captain Postans, 'Art. VIII—A few observations on the Temple of Somnath', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8.15 (January 1846), pp. 172–175; Alexander Burns, 'Art. VII—Account of the Remains of the celebrated Temple at Pattan Somnath, sacked by Mahmúd of Ghisni, A.D. 1024', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 5.9 (January 1834), pp. 104–107.

³⁷ Herries Papers, 14 January 1843.

³⁸ Company Papers, India Political Department, Collection n. 30, 1844, 'Respecting the recovery of the sandalwood Gates of the temple of Somnath'.

³⁹ Thapar, *Somanatha*, p. 181. Notably, Davis highlights that 'the idea that Indians would harbour a grievance continuously over eight centuries was consonant with developing British ideas about Indian society as unchanging and timeless'. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, p. 202.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

problem was that the act had been intended to ‘gratify’ the Hindus, and would undoubtedly be understood by the people and princes of India in this way, rather than in terms of the authenticity of the gates themselves. It is noteworthy that the value of the gates was immediately identified as not residing in the object per se, that is, in the gates’ antiquity (real or imagined) or in the historical meaning they might embody as an artefact, but in the narrative they represented. ‘There is nothing very attractive in the object itself’: since it was already clear that the gates were likely to be false, the critical issue was that their ‘recovery’, and the publicity that surrounded the event, would give the impression that the British had failed to maintain neutrality in a religious controversy.⁴¹

While the potential loss of neutrality was one of the main issues raised by Ellenborough’s detractors, his supporters developed their arguments along similar lines of thought. They emphasised the importance of the gates, which was sanctioned by their being the object of an agreement between Shah Shujah and Ranajit Singh. The gates were in fact to be seen not as a religious relic, but as a ‘national trophy’ for the Indians and the trophy of a successful war for the British.⁴² The distinction between ‘religious relic’ and ‘national/war trophy’ became the key from which a chain of meanings and political consequences emerged, and in fact the operation as a whole assumed a completely different meaning whether the gates were seen—or understood—by the population in one way or the other.

In his proclamation, Ellenborough had stated that the gates would be brought to the ‘restored temple of Somnauth’ but, as Thomas Macaulay noted, at that time the temple was in fact in ruins. Did Ellenborough mean that the British government would see to its restoration as a place of worship, at its own expense? Was it appropriate that ‘public revenue [...] be expended in creating a new place for the worship of the idols of the Hindoos—in erecting a new shrine for the exhibition of the revolting spectacles which have in former ages disgraced the locality of this temple—in hiring fresh hordes of dancing girls to do honour to the gods of idolatry’?⁴³ The way in which the whole question was understood thus had strong practical implications. There was no point in bringing back two gates if there was no place to mount them, but restoring the Somnath temple would have involved the British government in India actively and financially intervening in religious matters, which of course would not be acceptable. In the eyes of several members of parliament, the endeavour affected the way in which the British dealt with the native population, betraying an already well-structured binary racial understanding of religious communities as well-defined and homogeneous groups. While the ‘Indian Mahometan’ was ‘ready to support with his service or with his purse, his national cause against all others’, because religion and government ‘are never separated’, for the Hindu it was impossible to identify himself with any sort of national cause.⁴⁴ Since the proclamation was aimed at the Hindus, who did not nurture national consciousness, the Muslims would have felt ‘outraged’ by governor-general’s act.

As the interventions by Palmerston and Robert Peel also showed, the questions central to the debate went beyond the episode of the gates and involved discussion of the entire paradigm of British Afghan and Asian politics, at a time when the First Opium War had just concluded and tension with the Sikh kingdom pointed to the outbreak of a new war. The proclamation thus acquired centrality because it was recognised as an act

⁴¹ ‘Lord Ellenborough’s Proclamation—Somnauth’, The House of Commons Debate, 9 March 1843, Hansard (online access, November 2021).

⁴² James Emerson Tennent, in *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴³ Thomas Macaulay, in *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁴ Ross Donnelly Mangles, in *ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

that positioned the British government in relation to Indian society and provided a historical seal to a narrative of communal antagonism in the present.

The question of whether the gates should be seen as a religious or national trophy somehow remained unresolved and, in the years that followed, lost importance. But the history of Somnath gradually became part of the popular imageries in Europe and India. Contextually, policies towards monuments and symbols of the past remained ambiguous throughout the colonial period, being suspended between statutory protection and the need to legitimise colonial authority.⁴⁵ With striking continuity and similarity, the controversy over whether Somnath should be considered a religious or national symbol, and what stand the state should take on the proposed reconstruction of the temple, arose again in the late 1940s. The correspondence between the foundation of the post-colonial state and the temple's reconstruction posed issues that were at the same time symbolic and eminently pragmatic in both their implications and socio-cultural consequences.

'The temple should be built in all its former grandeur of glory, to eradicate communal trouble forever': state and nation at the crossroads of independence⁴⁶

The temple at Somnath was neither restored nor preserved during colonial times, but its ruins continued to attract interest as an archaeological site. Although Ellenborough's pompous claim that he had 'avenged' the 800-year-old insult was practically ignored in the framing of official policies, the idea that the temple did in fact represent some sort of mischief remained. Later accounts that discussed the temple from an archaeological point of view reproduced the same framework of Hindu-Muslim binarism in discussing the supposed historical roots of the gradual abandonment of the temple, starting from Mahmud's raid and desecration.⁴⁷ It does not come completely as a surprise, then, that the temple again became a focus of public debate near the end of the colonial period. In the struggle to define a character for the new nation-state—and therefore secularism—those who believed that national belonging should essentially be identified with the Hindu population comprised a large and varied group. In that heterogeneous blend of feelings, what could better symbolise a moment of national consciousness than the rebuilding of the Somnath temple? At that point in time, not only would its restoration have marked the end of British domination with the reconstruction of a monument destined to represent the reappropriation of national identity and pride, but it would have done so by marking a direct continuity between colonial domination and the centuries of so-called 'Muslim rule'.

What is only slightly more surprising is that the proposal stemmed from within the Congress Party and not—or not directly—from the ranks of the Hindu nationalist associations, at a time when the antagonism between Hindus and Muslims had played out in the massive human tragedy of partition. The origin of the idea of rebuilding the temple can be traced to November 1947 and attributed to Vallabhbhai Patel, at the time the Minister of Home Affairs and States in the newly formed independent government of India. He was visiting Saurashtra while operations to annex the princely states to the Union were under way. The decision to rebuild the temple was reportedly taken during a visit to the site by members of the Congress (and of the newly formed government): as one of

⁴⁵ Jyoti Pandey Sharma, 'From appropriation to conservation: Mughal monuments, colonial tourism and the Dak Bungalow', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25.3 (2019), pp. 312–328.

⁴⁶ Extract from a letter to Vallabhbhai Patel, 'Somnath temple File 1948–1950', p. 52.

⁴⁷ An example of this can be seen in 'Somnath and its Conquest by Sultan Mahmud', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, General Meetings of the Society 60.1 (1928), pp. 167–175.

the participants, the Jam Saheb of Saurashtra recalled, ‘all of us who accompanied him witnessed how deeply he was touched when he saw the ruins. He decided on the spot to rebuild the temple, and the decision appeared to have given him spiritual solace and to have provided an outlet for a deep emotional upsurge.’⁴⁸ Others attributed the idea to Nahrar Vishnu Gadgil, the Minister of Works, Mines and Power and a close associate of Patel, who was also a part of the visiting group. No matter the paternity of the idea, what emerges from the accounts of that visit is the aura of romance that encircled the temple and all the events that had happened around it—as if the decision to rebuild it was not a political act but the outcome of an emotionally driven urgency.⁴⁹ The announcement that the temple would be rebuilt was made during that 1947 visit and marked the start of a process that, over the next four years, would lead to the official inauguration of the temple.

The news of the intended reconstruction immediately evoked contrasting reactions inside and outside the Congress, in particular regarding the financial aspects of the operation and the fact that those who were promoting the initiative also held government offices. Should the government be in any way involved in the reconstruction of a place of worship? And, consequently, should public funds be employed in the enterprise? The fact that the announcement was made by Home and Deputy Prime Minister Patel, and at a public meeting, upset those in the Congress who believed that the state should not take part in issues that involved religious matters at any level. Moreover, the proposal was accompanied by a commitment made by the Jam Saheb of Nawanagar, Digvijaysinhji Ranjitsinhji Jadeja, to allot a sum of one lakh rupees for reconstruction work. After the annexation, he became the governor of Saurashtra (or Raj Pramukh) and was a key figure, along with Patel, Gadgil, and K. M. Munshi, in managing the reconstruction. But at the same time, their understanding and actions remained ambivalent regarding the direct or indirect involvement of public bodies in the operation. Officially, the government and public administration were external to the management and funding of the proposed reconstruction, which were entrusted to the Somnath Temple Trust, founded in October 1949. The ambiguous aspect was that members of the Trust were primarily public officials, whose role should have meant no involvement in the reconstruction.

In the months following Patel’s visit, as soon as newspaper reports on the reconstruction of the temple were published, letters began to arrive at the Ministry of Home Affairs, asking for details of the proposed plan.⁵⁰ Most of these letters were addressed to Patel and, predictably, made no distinction between his role as Home Minister and as a key figure in the plans for the reconstruction. Letters—mostly in English—came from private citizens as well as representatives of various religious associations and corporate organisations scattered all over the subcontinent. Many wrote to explore the possibility of contributing either financially or by offering their services, others just to express their enthusiasm at the initiative. Interestingly, many letters recalled the history of Somnath through the myths that had been consolidated from colonial times, while identifying Patel as the figure who stood in defence of the dignity of the Hindu people. ‘May Shri

⁴⁸ ‘Letter from the Rajpramukh of Saurashtra, Digvijaysinhji, to the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru’, 6 May 1951. Other accounts dwell upon the episode, adding emotional details to the narrations, such as ‘Sardar’s heart [being] literally moved to tears’ at the sight of the temple ruins. See M. Patel, *This was Sardar: Commemorative Volume—Part III* (Ahmedabad, 1974).

⁴⁹ J. Pathak, ‘Somnath series: historic visit by Sardar Patel, Gadgil, Jam Saheb that paved the way for reconstruction of ruined Somnath Temple’, *Desh Gujarat*, 27 August 2017, <https://www.deshgujarat.com/2017/08/27/somnath-series-historic-visit-by-sardar-patel-gadgil-jam-saheb-that-paved-the-way-for-reconstruction-of-ruined-somnath-temple/> (accessed 12 June 2023).

⁵⁰ Correspondence Regarding the Reconstruction of Somnath Temple, 1948, File no. 92/47 R; Somnath Temple File (1948–1950).

Somnath bless you to be a saviour of Hindu culture' concluded a letter from the president of the All Kerala Hindu Young Men's Association, dated 28 November 1947. Most of the letters that reached Patel in these months show that the announcement had successfully mobilised Hindu religious associations and that they recognised him, an elected government official, as a potential patron for their aspirations.⁵¹ Interestingly, much of the correspondence made references to Mahmud of Ghazni's legendary offence to all Hindus, reproducing a version of the story that had by then become part of an established memory. Even the episode of the gates reappears from time to time in letters which question what was by then an established fact: that the gates were false.

The letters give us an idea of the way in which the narrative about Somnath had become a foundational part of a history of Muslim domination over Hindus. They also tell us how many people envisioned that the nascent nation-state would protect and promote the interests of the Hindu community. For instance, a letter to the Home Minister from an organisation called the All India Hindu National Front expressed its pleasure on hearing the news of the temple's rebuilding and included a resolution that faithfully reflected the feelings and hopes of many Hindu religious associations. After expressing 'felicitations' at the 'wise decision' to rebuild the shrine at Somnath, the letter called 'upon Hindu leaders to take similar steps for reclaiming or renovating the other important temples which have been desecrated in the past, such as that of Sree Vishwanathji at Kashi, Sree Ramchandrajai at Ayodhya, Shri Krishnaji at Mathura and of Shree Narashima at Hampi Vijanagar'.⁵² Thus, between the end of 1947 and the first months of 1948, the proposal for reconstruction was widely publicised. At a time when the founding principles of the independent state were under discussion, the involvement of state apparatuses and officials in this project had a disruptive potential. Home Minister Vallabhbhai Patel clarified that the initiative was being taken by leaders on a personal and private basis, and even involved the elderly Gandhi in the matter, for the Mahatma referred on several occasions to the issue by stating that the state should not finance the construction of a Hindu temple, and if it did, it would have to provide funding for mosques and churches too. The message about the role of the state was instead received differently by the public.

With Gandhi's murder in January 1948, the national movement not only lost its most inspiring leader, but also the figure that had most steadfastly promoted the idea of a secular state by talking from a religious point of view. Gandhi had undoubtedly been a leader of religious inspiration for the masses, and this had contributed to making his call for a secular state even more authoritative. In the years that followed, tensions surrounding the reconstruction remained latent, only to explode publicly as the inauguration ceremony approached in May 1951.

Whose heritage?

In the years between the end of 1947 and the middle of 1951, when the inaugural ceremony of the temple took place, tensions frequently emerged between people involved in the reconstruction. The fact that the key figures in the reconstruction also held important public office produced a complex dynamic of confrontation and negotiation that necessarily involved personal relations. Official and 'demi-official' roles overlapped in a web of exchanges that revealed how different ideas about the temple, and its value, were based on different views of the state, a sense of national belonging, and the nation's history. Confrontation mainly arose from practical matters such as the archaeological excavations, costs, and travel allowances: it was in such arguably minor matters that

⁵¹ In *ibid.*

⁵² 'All India Hindu National Front: resolution Re. Somnath', in *ibid.*

the involvement of the state was negotiated and balanced, and that resistance to allowing the state to take responsibility for the project emerged most clearly. While officially all possible steps were taken to ensure that the reconstruction would be managed independently from the state, both financially and practically, in practice the separation was much more inconsistent.

Two particular instances emerged at the time, both directly and indirectly involving the Department of Archaeology, supervised by the Minister of Education, Abdul Kalam Azad, and concerning ideas about how the ruins of the temple should be managed. The first emerged soon after the proposal for reconstruction was made public. In the spring of 1948, the then director of the Department of Archaeology, Mortimer Wheeler, wrote to Patel expressing the concern of his department that the new construction might damage, or even 'destroy', the ruins of the ancient temple. The department considered the site 'one of the most notable Hindu monuments in Western India' and expressed its concern over its preservation: 'if a new Somnath Temple has to be built it should be constructed on a new site, leaving the old building as intact as time and its checkered history have left it'.⁵³

Patel took about a month to reply, but when he did the contents of the letter showed that there were divergent views on the question of whether the new temple should be built over the ruins of the old one or at a new site. 'The H.M. [Home Minister] agrees that the old Temple should be preserved as a monument *but a suitable idol should be placed [inside] the temple*'.⁵⁴ This statement by Sardar Patel contains one of the key elements underlying the tensions between the Trust and government offices about how the project would proceed. Qualifying Somnath as an ancient monument of outstanding archaeological and architectural value meant considering it an object of study and research. In this understanding, priority would be given to its preservation, which would keep it accessible for further archaeological research and possibly tourism. However, that was not the idea nor the intention of the group of people who promoted the reconstruction, with Munshi in the lead: their objective was to rebuild the temple so that it would once more be a place of worship, restoring the usage—and the ancient glory—of a site that had once been one of India's most important Hindu temples. Patel's proposal to reinstall an idol inside the old structure was thus the first step in re-establishing it as a shrine, reopening it for religious ceremonies, and turning it into a pilgrimage site. In addition, the Somnath Temple Trust envisioned the construction of new structures such as a Sanskrit University and a *dharamshālā* for prospective pilgrims. In this sense, installing an idol would have led to a confrontation that not only implied diverging visions and traditions about how to deal with objects from the past (preservation versus reconstruction), but would also have polarised the positions of those who wanted Somnath to become a place of worship again and those who wanted it to be recognised primarily as an important monument from the past. In both cases, it had the potential to become a national symbol, but the meaning and message it was bound to convey were completely different.⁵⁵

In the years that followed, discussions around the renovation/reconstruction of the temple proceeded with intense exchanges of letters and notes between the Home Minister, the Ministry of Education, the Department of Archaeology, and the Saurashtra state. Starting with the idol, the confrontation involved several connected issues, from the ownership of the land to the need to conduct excavations. Divergences always

⁵³ *Somnath Temple Reconstruction*, Director General of Archaeology (D.G.A.), Min. of Edn., 2 March 1948.

⁵⁴ *Somnath Temple Reconstruction*, Ministry of States, 8 April 1948.

⁵⁵ The debate on historical traditions about heritage still exists and has informed the history and politics of UNESCO during the last 30 years. For a summary of the debate, see A. Gfeller, 'The authenticity of heritage: global norm-making at the crossroads of cultures', *The American Historical Review* 122.3 (June 2017), pp. 758–791.

arose when it came to defining whether and to what extent the government should increase its patronage over the operation. In July 1950, K. M. Munshi, in his double role as founder of the Somnath Temple Trust and minister in the Nehru government, wrote to Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad to ask the Ministry of Education to allow the appointment of an official from the Department of Archaeology to conduct excavations at the site. The note focused on the fact that the excavations were needed because of the outstanding historical interest of the site, where several stratified structures had already been identified. But Munshi also noted that the archaeological campaign needed to be conducted soon, 'before the temple [was] pulled down to reconstruct another'.⁵⁶ He suggested also that the department should bear the costs involved.

This request, as minor as it may appear, ignited a bitter exchange in the following months between Munshi and the secretary of the Ministry of Education, Tara Chand, with the main issue apparently about who would bear the costs of the excavations. What emerges from their correspondence is in fact a confrontation about the extent to which the state should be involved. Azad agreed that the Department of Archaeology should assign an officer, B. K. Thapar, to conduct a month-long survey but only on the condition that his cost would be borne by the Trust, while the Ministry would cover his travel expenses. This annoyed both Munshi and the Trust. The formal reason for not using the Archaeology Department's funds to pay for Thapar's assignment was that the Somnath temple was not on the list of protected monuments, nor could it be added to it because the department had no formal jurisdiction in the Saurashtra state. The month-long excavation that the two parties had agreed upon began in October 1950, but the problems did not end there. The annoyance of the Ministry of Education with the Trust became manifest during the autumn, when Munshi asked that Thapar be sent to Somnath for another round of excavations.⁵⁷ While Munshi went on pressuring the government to take charge of the excavations and employ him for a longer period of time ('Munshi is anxious that the work at Somnath should finish as early as possible'⁵⁸), the Department of Archaeology and the Ministry of Education rejected the proposal and only allowed one additional week.

Considered along with the discussion about the idol and whether or not to build the temple over the old one or on a new site, the quarrel about the duration and costs of the excavation shows how the different people involved had diverging ideas about the use that should be made of the rebuilt temple. More importantly, it also testifies to how the promoters of the reconstruction exploited their proximity to the Centre to influence decisions on the matter, thus making it unclear whether the government was remaining aloof from religious matters. While Munshi, in his anxiety to speed up the excavations, conveyed the feelings of those who wanted a new temple built over the ruins of the old one, the Department of Archaeology and the Ministry of Education had to constantly reaffirm their respective roles and insist that the boundaries between state intervention and religious affairs be respected.

The death of Sardar Patel on 15 December 1950 had an emotional impact on other members of the Trust. Unlike Munshi, Patel had publicly taken a more moderate position in order to mediate with those in the government who were openly opposed to the project. Patel's death did not stop the project, however. At that point, archaeological studies had been completed; the Archaeology Department had clarified that they would not

⁵⁶ *Excavations in the precincts of the Somnath temple—Deputation of Shri B.K. Thapar for the work*, letter from K. M. Munshi to A. K. Azad, 13 July 1950.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 'K. M. Munshi to P. N. Kripal, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Education', 30 September 1950.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 'P. N. Kripal to the Joint Director General, Department of Archaeology', 10 November 1950.

devote any additional personnel or resources to the excavations, while Thapar had issued a report on his findings. A curious end to the controversy was that when Thapar's report was ready in February 1951, the Department of Archaeology decided it should be published in *Ancient India*, the bulletin of the Archaeological Survey of India, only to withdraw it so as to give Munshi the chance to include it in his pamphlet *Somanatha: The Shrine Eternal* that was to be issued on the occasion of the inauguration ceremony in May 1951.

Thus, it appeared that all the hurdles had been overcome and the inauguration was to take place exactly in the manner the government had discouraged from the beginning: with a ceremony for the installation of an idol in the ruins. Voices expressing concern at what was going on arose until the last moment. A note from the Press Information Bureau of the Government of India, dated 15 March 1951, warned that the influential Gujarati weekly *Praja Bandhu* had published a letter signed by 'seven learned men of Gujarat, who express views opposing the demolition of the historical ruins [...] and reconstruction of a new model of the temple on the same site'.⁵⁹ No member of the Somnath Trust or government official reacted but, significantly, the Information Bureau reckoned the article relevant enough to report it to the government.

From Nehru to Modi, secularism and national identity in the shadow of the temple

It is known that Nehru, despite his silence in the early phases of the process, was adamantly against the reconstruction of the temple, as he feared that it could be promoted as a symbol of a sectarian interpretation of nationalism in association with the constitution of the independent state. He openly opposed the attendance of India's president, Rajendra Prasad, at the inauguration ceremony, concerned about the publicity this would give to the event in the news. In his exchanges with the president, Nehru clearly expressed his misgivings about any move that might suggest to the public that the government was associated with the reconstruction.⁶⁰ The prime minister voiced his concerns regarding the government's role and argued that it was necessary to remain secular: 'we are asked how a secular government such as ours can associate itself with such a ceremony which is, in addition, revivalist in character'.⁶¹ The president, in opposition, argued that it was not against secularism to take part in the ceremony; instead he would participate in it because he was secular. 'I would do the same with a mosque or a church if I were invited,' he reasoned.⁶² Here we can see two different, divergent ideas of secularism condensed in the official positions that both Nehru and Prasad held. Nehru maintained that the only possible secular approach was one which precluded the state from engaging directly with any affair involving religious institutions and people's religious beliefs; Prasad instead argued that engagement with religious communities was possible, as long as the state provided patronage to all cults and forms of religiosity.

Nehru was afraid that the revived Somnath temple could be used as a symbol for proposing a sectarian understanding of the Indian nation that would represent and legitimise

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 'Press Information Bureau, government of India', 15 March 1951.

⁶⁰ Sarvepalli Gopal, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru* (Delhi, 1984), Series 2, vol. 16, March 1951–June 1951, Part I, pp. 603–612.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 607.

⁶² Quoted in J. Pathak, 'Somnath series: how Jawaharlal Nehru opposed President Rajendra Prasad's decision to attend Somnath ceremony', 11 May 2019, <https://www.deshgujarat.com/2019/05/11/somnath-series-jawaharlal-nehru-opposition-to-president-rajendra-prasads-decision-to-attend-somnath-ceremony/> (accessed 12 June 2023).

an idea of membership based on belonging to a religious community. On the contrary, for the promoters of the reconstruction, who recognised no clear distinction between the nation and the Hindu majority, it was not contradictory to consider the Somnath temple a national symbol merely because it was a place of worship. Therefore, it was not objectionable if state apparatuses were involved in its reconstruction.

Besides his correspondence with Rajendra Prasad in the month before the installation ceremony, Nehru sent out several letters and notes, expressing his anxiety about the extent to which public opinion perceived the entire project as having been directly sponsored by the Government of India. The death of Vallabhbhai Patel a few months earlier had left the Somnath Trust without his strong but wise political guidance that might have been able to counterbalance Nehru's and the other secular ministers' aversion to the operation. But while the exchange with Rajendra Prasad was entirely based on a divergence of ideals, Nehru, more significantly, intervened directly, and much more bitterly, against the Raj Pramukh of Saurashtra, who was also the president of the Somnath Trust. As preparations for the installation ceremony were nearing completion, in March 1951 the Raj Pramukh had written a note to Indian's foreign missions asking them to collect and send samples of soil and water from the 'seven oceans' that would be used in performing the ceremony to install the new idol in the temple.⁶³ When Nehru learned of this at the end of April 1951, he wrote to both Munshi and the Raj Pramukh rebuking them for what he perceived as a confusing and contradictory act, which supported the 'widespread belief that [the installation ceremony was] a governmental affair'.⁶⁴

Confronted with Nehru's disapproval, the Raj Pramukh reacted by affirming that his move had been totally in line with accepted government practice, which made it unnecessary for him to request authorisation for a 'purely routine' and 'non-political' matter.⁶⁵ Interestingly, the Raj Pramukh dismissed accusations of misuse of the state apparatus precisely on the grounds of a different interpretation of the secular ideal: 'I wrote also to our Consul General in Jeddah and requested for a ¼ lb. of soil from Mecca. [...] We asked for water, vegetation and soil from Jerusalem and Rome also. We have received these things.'⁶⁶ Where then was the problem, he asked, when the Trust (in whose name Digvijaysinhji was writing) had moved within the framework of government rules—he quoted a circular from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—and formally respected all religious sensibilities? In his correspondence with Nehru, the Raj Pramukh insisted that he had respected secular principles, despite the frail coherence of his argument, and justified his requests to the foreign missions by stating that the soil and water were needed in order to organise a celebration 'on a scale which will make the occasion one of All India importance'.⁶⁷ Notwithstanding Nehru's concerns, and although he pointed out possible negative consequences for the country's relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan, the inauguration ceremony was held, with the participation of President Rajendra Prasad, in May 1951, inaugurating the reconstruction of a new temple over the old ones.

Contrary to Nehru's adamant conviction that the state should remain completely above religious affairs, the process that led to the reconstruction of the temple at Somnath operated in the ambiguous terrain where state competences and private initiative overlapped in people who held government offices and 'privately' were members of the Trust. What

⁶³ Sardar Patel Archives, Letters on Hyderabad, Somnath Temple and others, pp. 24 ff. Available online at <http://sardarpatel.nvli.in/media/1350> (accessed 12 June 2023).

⁶⁴ Gopal, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, p. 609.

⁶⁵ 'Letter from Digvijaysinhji to V. P. Menon, 8 April 1951', in Sardar Patel Archives, Letters on Hyderabad, Somnath Temple and others.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ 'Circular n. 332 from Digvijaysinhji to Indian Missions abroad, 20 February 1951', in Sardar Patel Archives, Letters on Hyderabad, Somnath Temple and others.

emerged in this case were also diverging ideas on how the state should interpret and practise secularism, reflecting tensions within the government and the Congress Party that lasted and became increasingly antagonistic in the decades that followed. In a way, Nehru's fear that the state's role in leading the reconstruction process could convey a sense of partiality and pro-Hindu sectarianism favoured rather than blocked the contradictory trajectory that the temple followed during those years. The concern that the government could be associated with the promotion of a sectarian cultural heritage left the door open for sectarian forces to appropriate not only the tangible site and structure of the temple, but also the narratives and histories that these conveyed and had been deeply stratified in portions of the country's collective memory since colonial times.

As a tangible site of a contested narrative of the Indian past, by the time of its reconstruction, Somnath was seen as the symbol of a potentially disruptive collective feeling, representing and serving as a physical reminder of the centuries of antagonism between Hindus and Muslims, and latter's oppression of the former. Instead of seeking a way to deal with the contradictions embedded in this understanding, under Nehru the government maintained its extraneity and chose not to confront the tangles of historical interpretations and false myths that surrounded Somnath and were in fact consolidated in collective memory, as revealed by the many letters to Patel following the announcement of the reconstruction.

After the 1951 ceremony, the temple was rebuilt and inserted into a new complex of buildings and institutions. The fact that the state had chosen to disengage from it certainly contributed to diminishing its importance in the landscape of official sites recognised as the historical heritage of India's past, but at the same time conferred new life and meaning to Somnath and allowed it to thrive. As the appendix to the fourth edition of Munshi's book, *Somanatha: The Shrine Eternal*, penned on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, states:

In the beginning, some persons, *more fond of dead stones than live values*, pressed the point of view that the ruins of the old temple should be maintained as an ancient monument. Munshi was, however, firm in his opinion that the temple of Somanatha [...] lived in the sentiments of the whole nation and its reconstruction was a national pledge. Its preservation was not a mere matter of historical curiosity.⁶⁸

Diverging interpretations on matters regarding preservation also came to essentialise opposing ideas regarding the way in which the post-colonial state should be framed with regard to religious communities. In fact, building the new temple on the same spot as the old one became a matter of primary importance for the Trust and its supporters, as if reclaiming that precise portion of land meant affirming a truth of the past in order to claim the restoration of an order disrupted centuries back.⁶⁹ Under Nehru, the post-colonial state chose to remain outside this contested terrain, with the explicit aim of avoiding the spread of revivalist historical narratives of Hindu-Muslim antagonism and the sacralisation of the site. In doing this, however, the government failed to understand the role of heritage as a driving force in historical consciousness, at a time when communal antagonism had just reached its peak.

The Somnath myth has not faded with time and, in its new guise as a modern temple, the site has not lost any of its sacredness. Instead, in the eyes of Hindu fundamentalist sympathisers it has become the symbol of a reappropriation of spaces and legitimacy, of the

⁶⁸ Munshi, *Somanatha*, p. 174. The reference here is to the Gujarati intellectuals who signed the letter mentioned above condemning the reconstruction. [Emphasis added.]

⁶⁹ Pandey, *Routine Violence*, pp. 78 ff.

realignment of cultural landmarks with national aspirations. The similarities with the way in which the debate about the Babri Masjid/Ram Janmabhumi was framed four decades later are striking. As Pandey observed, ‘the monument, one might say, is the history’, a history that was promoted with endless repetitiveness in hundreds of pamphlets and booklets distributed by Hindu fundamentalist associations in order to assert the Hindu claims over the nation. Curiously, the Somnath campaign was for the construction of a temple, while that for the Ram Janmabhumi had, as a starting point, the destruction of a mosque. Both, however, challenged the foundations of the post-colonial state, aiming at resignifying the notion of secularism and citizenship in an exclusionary way.

It is well known that the mobilisation for the re-establishment of a Hindu temple at the site of Ram’s birthplace started from Somnath with the Rath Yatra in 1991.⁷⁰ Since that time, with the rise of a militant form of Hinduism, the site has continued to be a point of reference, a symbolic place which in fact testifies to the success of campaigning for a revisionist interpretation of Hindu nationalism. Today, under Modi’s prime ministership, the Government of India has adopted a much more interventionist approach to heritage and the framing of historical narratives. Somnath no longer represents a contested site from the point of view of either historical interpretation or possible usage;⁷¹ its meaning as a place of encounter, and at times antagonism, between the cultures and powers that crossed the history of the subcontinent has been lost. The Somnath temple website suggests that the temple ‘was built 79,925,105 year ago’, marking this site as the icon of an undefined past where epic overrides history.⁷² Investigating the processes and choices that conferred on the site its status shows how heritage politics represented a contested terrain where ideas about the state and the nation, citizenship and belonging were—and are—being constantly negotiated.

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Conflicts of interest. The author reports none.

⁷⁰ S. Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Rise of Communal Politics in India* (London, 1991); T. B. Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton, 1999).

⁷¹ On Modi’s focus on heritage, see T. Bobbio, ‘National revisionism and commodification in the production of India’s heritage. Ahmedabad as UNESCO World Heritage site’, *Quaderni Storici* 54.2 (2019), pp. 417–442.

⁷² ‘Somnath Darshan’, <https://sornath.org/sornath-darshan/> (accessed 12 June 2023). As an ironic conclusion to this study, it is worth noting that Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the chairman of the Somnath Trust in January 2021. ‘Narendra Modi is new chief of Somnath Temple Trust’, *The Times of India*, Ahmedabad edition, 19 January 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/modi-is-new-chief-of-sornath-temple-trust/articleshow/80336638.cms> (accessed 12 June 2023).

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