THE UNWANTED OFFERING. UBIQUITY AND SUCCESS OF FAILURE IN A RITUAL OF THE HINDU RIGHT

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If the saints agree, I would not hesitate to even dump these shilas (pillars) into the gutter.
Mahant Devendra Prasad Acharya, religious leader, Ayodhya, March 2002

The successful completion of the ‘shila daan’ ceremony on schedule constituted a victory for the forces of Hinduism... Today, the VHP overcame all obstacles sought to be placed in its path, and successfully completed the ‘shila daan’ on deadline.
Praveen Togadia, International Secretary, VHP, at a press conference in March 2002

...ironically, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad’s ‘shila puja’ and ‘shila daan’ campaign ended with its working president, Ashok Singhal, being shouted down by the couple of hundred supporters who had collected around the ‘karsevakpuram’ compound this morning. The gathering of ‘sadhus’, indigent ‘pujaris’ and ‘mahants’ and a handful of young men said it was incensed at having been ‘tricked into accepting a deal which fell far short of expectations... Mr. Singhal maintained silence on the day’s events. It was Vinay Katiyar, BJP MP from Ayodhya and Bajrang Dal leader, who admitted that the VHP’s campaign had not gone ‘according to its plan’. And that some things had gone wrong.
(Mody 2002a).

These three quotes have been chosen as introductory landmarks designating parts of the territory through which this paper will move in its discussion of failure in Hindu nationalist ritual performances. All three represent different perspectives on the so-called shila puja (‘pillar ceremony’) or shila daan (‘pillar offering’), a ritual that was performed by orthodox Hindu nationalist leaders in the north Indian pilgrimage city of Ayodhya in March 2002. The first one is from the head of a

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temple in Ayodhya, who angrily refused to allow the allegedly sanctified pillars to remain in his compound after the procession’s conclusion. The alliance of sanctity and “gutter” do not need much explanation and clearly refer to the provocative denial of the ritual authority and credibility of this particular event, as well of its performers. The rejection of an offering in a ritual context points to the fact that something had really gone wrong!

The second quote stems from Praveen Togadia, International Secretary of the World Hindu Congress (Vishwa Hindu Parishad, hereafter VHP), one of the fiercest and best-known speakers of the extreme Hindu Right, the last one from an analyst of an Indian weekly. These quotes show that the question of risk occurs on various levels of ritual performance, and for various agents involved in its conduct. The fact that risk emerges in different ways points us towards the dynamics of ritual in terms of its imagined (expected) and its actual efficacy. Even if a ritual may have no further consequences for the appearance of a religio-political movement in public (on the long run, for example, that it becomes a ‘landmark’, a recurring point of reference for the movement), its discussion enables us to ponder relationships between various social agents in a field of conflict, and the issues that are at stake here, as well as how they are negotiated. While both the ritual as well as its potential failure may be perceived as a real threat to organisers and critics, it ‘works’ equally powerfully as a virtual emblem and challenge to others. I want to show here that the risk of ritual failure is an important factor for ritual performers, participants and those opposed to, or trying to stop it for various reasons. Before, during and after the ritual, the ‘right balance’ and tension between success and failure has to be kept, and a whole ecology of rhetoric is developed in order to do so. Hardly ever would ritual performers acknowledge that things could be ‘done the wrong way’, that something or somebody went ‘out of control’. At the same time, there are moments when this risk is consciously worked in, either to adjust the ritual dynamics to external factors (for example, a ban on the ritual), or internal factors (lack of support among the ‘members’ of the movement). Thus, ritual failure constantly works within, or moves along the lines of shifting and contesting frames of credibility and authority.

In order to tackle this multi-layered notion of ‘doing things wrong’, the question of perspectivity onto a particular ritual must be a central focus of attention for us. While Togadia interpreted the overall performance of the particular ritual that is at centre-stage in this article,