Sangam Sponsors Discussion on Babri Masjid

Over 200 students attended a panel discussion Friday on "India: One year after the demolition of the Babri Masjid." The event was sponsored by the Indian Students' Association, which is a student group at MIT. Mukund Modi, President of the Overseas Friends of the Hinduja Janata Party, spoke for the Hindu nationalists. Amartya Sen, a renowned professor of philosophy and economics at Harvard University, and Sanjoy Hazarika, a reporter for the New York Times, presented the views of secularists.

Weiner traced a series of events culminating in the demolition of the mosque, even as Hindu nationalism was becoming an important political force in India.

On Dec. 6, 1992, a large crowd mobilized by Hindu nationalists demolished the Babri Mosque in the town of Ayodhya, setting off a wave of riots in the country. The mosque was built in 1528 by Babar, the founder of the Moghul empire, reportedly on the site of a temple marking the birthplace of Lord Rama, an important Hindu god.

Weiner asked why Hindu nationalism, or Hindutva, was sweeping the country. According to Modi, Hindu nationalism is "a movement from below" involving one of the largest masses of people in history. Modi maintained that the BJP is a secular party, not anti-Muslim. He also said that it is committed to the ideals of pluralism and democracy in Indian society, and favors economic liberalization.

Although Sen disagreed with the BJP's identification with issues, he agreed with their questioning of unequal laws in a secular country. He views the proponents of Hindutva as Hindu sectarianism, who are but a minority themselves. He called for the basic issues such as poverty and illiteracy to be addressed rather than to conduct religion and caste-based politics.

While the panelists disagreed in their perception of events, there seemed to be agreement about the "terrible reporting of India in the United States." The lack of information was criticized, as well as the observation that the media mainly featured news about disasters. Sen added that he relied on publications from Europe to present him better reports.

Uday Jhunjhunwala '95 said he was "highly impressed by Prof. Weiner's opening comments." Responding to why this panel was put together, organizer Sankar Sunder G said, "Only in academic institutions can such contentious issues be addressed in a civilized manner where all sides of the issue are represented."

Rahul Garg '96 felt that this was an impressive effort by Sangam and would like to see more of these discussions.