

Ayodhya Issue

CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

CERI-Sciences Po/CNRS Paris, France

Ayodhya, in today's Uttar Pradesh, is known in Hinduism as the capital of a kingdom whose famous king was Lord Ram, one of the most popular gods of North India. According to Hindu nationalist ideologues, a temple had been built on the birthplace of God Ram (Ramjanmabhoomi); but in 1528 Babur, the first Moghol emperor, had this temple replaced by a mosque, the Babri Masjid. Although there is no definite archaeological evidence for the existence of a temple on that site, Hindus continued to worship Ram there and, after independence in 1949, Hindu nationalists placed the statues of Ram and his wife Sita in the mosque, by way of reclaiming the place (Jha and Jha 2012). Prime Minister Nehru had the building sealed, and the issue died out for years. It was resurrected in 1984, when the Hindu nationalist movement, also known as the Sangh Parivar—the “Family of the Sangh,” that is, the Rashtriya Swayamasevak Sangh (RSS; the Association of the National Volunteers)—launched a campaign for the (re)building of the temple. The religious wing of the Parivar, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP; the World Hindu Congress), was the key actor in a movement whose central theme was that Ram should be “liberated” (Van der Veer 1987).

This agitation failed to influence the 1984 elections because of the overwhelming impact of Indira Gandhi's assassination and the fact that the political party of the Sangh Parivar, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP; the Party of the Indian People), did not rally

around this cause. The situation was different five years later. During the 1989 election campaign, RSS activists, VHP religious figures, and BJP candidates canvassed thousands of towns and villages to consecrate bricks stamped with Ram's name and destined to be used to “rebuild” the Ram temple in Ayodhya. The bricks were carried in processions imitating those organized for religious celebrations in which idols are carried along a precise itinerary. In several places, these processions resulted in riots that followed an identical scenario in each case: a procession in the form of a show of strength (sometimes involving over ten thousand people) stretched along several kilometers; despite the local authorities' recommendations or interdictions, they entered the Muslim neighborhoods, where they chanted slogans such as *Pakistan aur Kabristan* (there are only two places for Muslims: Pakistan and the cemetery); these provocations prompted the inhabitants to throw stones from neighboring homes, to which procession members, who often turned out to be well armed, retaliated with bloody assaults (Jaffrelot 1999). In Bhagalpur (Bihar) more than one thousand people, mostly Muslim, died.

This pre-electoral communal violence was a clear component of the strategy of the BJP, which wanted to polarize the electorate along religious lines and thus deepened the Hindu group identity, so that its members would end up “voting Hindu”—a scenario that Steven Wilkinson has analyzed in a larger perspective, with special reference to Uttar Pradesh (Wilkinson 2004). Recourse to so-called religious processions thus proved crucial in mobilizing people. The Ayodhya temple campaign contributed to bringing up

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the score of the BJP in the Lower House of Parliament from two (out of 543) seats in 1984 to eighty-five seats in 1989.

In 1990 L. K. Advani, the BJP president, launched a huge “procession” across India (the “Rath Yatra”) in order to mobilize support for building a Ram temple in Ayodhya in spite of the stay order that the Supreme Court had given. In many cities, Advani’s meetings ignited Hindu–Muslim riots. Advani was arrested before reaching Ayodhya, but activists stormed the Babri Mosque and dozens of them were killed in police repression. The movement had its martyrs, whose ashes were taken all over India, in processions that in turn became the root cause for a new wave of riots. When mid-term elections were held the following year (1991), the BJP jumped from eighty-five to 119 seats in the Lower House of Parliament.

The Ramjanmabhoomi movement culminated in the demolition of the Babri Mosque by Hindu nationalists on December 6, 1992. This move was presented as a spontaneous upsurge of Hindu activists by the BJP leaders, who claimed that they had nothing to do with it. But the Liberhan Ayodhya Commission of Inquiry—whose conclusions were leaked in 2009—showed that the BJP had contributed to orchestrate the whole episode, in spite of the judiciary—an authority the party did not respect.

It took the commission in charge of assigning responsibility for the event seventeen years to hand in its report. In fact this report was not submitted to parliament until November 2009, after it had been leaked to the press. The document, drafted by Justice Liberhan, a former Supreme Court justice, held the leaders of the Hindu nationalist movement responsible for the act, and in no uncertain terms. To date, however, no trial has been scheduled on the judiciary’s agenda.

But at the same time the courts examined complaints from Muslims and Hindus

who laid claim to the site on which Hindus, just after having demolished the mosque, had built a small temple amid the ruins, to house statues of Ram and Sita. The Allahabad High Court had handed down a highly controversial judgment in 2010. The three justices in charge of the case were divided. One of them referred to Hindu mythology to recommend that the site be handed over entirely to the majority community. The other two judges, a Hindu and a Muslim, wrote a majority opinion that was based on the principle that the mosque had been built on the Ramjanmabhoomi.

The court in Allahabad thus went against established Supreme Court jurisprudence. In December 1992, Narasimha Rao’s government petitioned the Supreme Court to know “if a Hindu temple or any other religious structure existed prior to the construction of the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid, including the premises of the inner and outer courtyards of the structure” (Report of the Liberhan Ayodhya Commission of Inquiry 2009). After pondering on the issue for two years, the Court finally replied that the question was superfluous and pointless. The judges thus finally admitted that they were not equipped to decide on matters of belief. Sixteen years later, however, lower-ranking judges felt that they were in a position to settle the issue. This prompted a remark from the great Indian lawyer Rajeev Dhawan, who congratulated them for their “theological” expertise.

The two Allahabad justices deduced from these premises that it was appropriate, not to rebuild the demolished mosque, as many Muslim organizations were asking, but to grant the Hindu contesting parties the portion of the land that was found under the central dome of the mosque—an area that they held to be the holiest of holy places of the temple once built, according to them, on the Ramjanmabhoomi. Furthermore,

the magistrates only awarded the Muslims one-third of the land, which was not enough for rebuilding a mosque, and awarded the other two-thirds to the two Hindu parties, the Nirmohi Akhara and the Vishva Hindu Parishad respectively.

All three litigants appealed the verdict before the Supreme Court, which in May 2011 deemed the verdict that had been handed down by the Uttar Pradesh regional court “strange,” simply in virtue of the fact that it recommended a course of action that none of the parties had asked for: partition of the land. The Court was careful not to opine as to the existence of a temple that preceded the mosque, or as to the notion of Ramjanmabhomi. But the fact that the Allahabad court used this notion as the basis for its verdict reflects a change of mindset in legal circles; and the judges may have to intervene again, because, during the 2014 general elections campaign, the winner, the Bharatiya Janata Party, has declared: “BJP reiterates its stand to explore all possibilities within the framework of the constitution to facilitate the

construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya” (Bharatiya Janata Party 2014: 14).

SEE ALSO: Collective Action; Conflict; India; Islamophobia; Religious Nationalism; Riots

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