

Ram temple, hardening Hinduism and the strength of diversity

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When PM Narendra Modi sent out his closest bureaucrat, Nripendra Misra, from the PMO to Ayodhya to head the Shri Ram Mandir Construction Committee in February 2020, he was clearly signalling that Ram Mandir was his highest priority. The Supreme Court had delivered its 1,045-page verdict in November 2019 and it was, thus, imperative that the victors clear the debris of Babri Masjid, re-write history as victors always do, and start work. It was a dream come true for the millions of Hindus who had sworn for over two decades that they would build the temple right there, come what may — “*Mandir hum wahin banayenge*”!

Funds, plans, visuals and architectural drawings were all in plenty — but time and execution were the essence of it all. Working backwards, it was clear that unless massive efforts began right away, an overwhelming [Ram Mandir](#) could not be complete by early 2024 before the general elections.

The war machine swung into action, and by August of 2000, PM Modi could perform the Bhumi Pujan or ground-breaking ceremony. Now, as India waits with bated breath for the event of the century — the grand inauguration on January 22 — it may be worthwhile to go over some critical issues.

A neglected dusty town, Ayodhya, is being transformed into a 21st century pilgrimage centre, so says government’s press bureau. One is not sure if publicising a religion’s temple is within its task and propriety, but it is interesting to note that three-fourths of the PIB report describes the wonders of digital payment. God and commerce will surely meet at this pilgrimage, as it does in all others, and there is no doubt that the infrastructure and economics of this blessed town will improve.

More important is the fact that the Hindu faith is now offered its first planned version of the Vatican or Mecca, which may, with some effort, compete even with Jerusalem in terms of antiquity. We seem to be filling up one of the two gaps that separate us from Abrahamic religions — a single holy book and one indisputable holiest of holy towns. It may still take decades (if not centuries) to convince all into accepting Ayodhya as the religious epicentre of Hinduism but the regime’s Herculean efforts are surely in that direction. Will this help strengthen the “eternal religion” that has succeeded so far because of its decentralised network and its deliberate ambiguity? It has taken every opportunity to reach out to every corner of India and has bestowed upon far-flung regional and ethnic groups their space. The four *dham*s and maths in four corners of India lay down this agenda of unity through dispersal, and the thousands of pilgrim spots scattered in all directions follow this theme. We have 12 jyotirmaths dedicated to Shiva while

Vishnu finds reverence at the *dhams* and many “chief temples”. The Devi is even more dispersed, as some 52 Shakti Peethas cover every ancient site of mother worship — from Kamakshya in Assam to Hinglaj in Balochistan and from Sharda in Kashmir to Kanyakumari.



The Ramayana and the Mahabharata contributed greatly to this unite-Bharat enterprise and the 14 foggy years of the “exile” of the protagonists permitted our countless obscure spots in the religio-mythical tapestry of India. Three widely-apart sites claim, for instance, that they are, indeed, the original birthplace of Hanuman. This provides satisfaction and religious tourism to all three., This decentralisation and the legitimisation of the “periphery” served to unite an impossibly diverse geography. It brought everyone in India together under one great floppy umbrella, strengthening mutual bonds, before Islam and Christianity arrived, to shake things up. The rigidity that Semitic religions impose has always been anathema to Hinduism.

The other issue is that while Ram is surely accepted by all Hindus across the the country, he certainly draws greater devotion from the Ganga basin and its contiguous regions. Take Navaratri or Ram Navami. All agree on the same nine days in autumn and in spring, but whereas the Hindi belt and its adjuncts focus their piety on only Ram, the regions beyond them observe markedly different rituals and worship their own deities. Bengal and the east do not utter Ram’s name or observe any fast or dietary restraint, as they devour fish and meat during their Durga carnival. Andhra and Mysore celebrate neither Ram nor Durga, but the victory of the Pandavas. Tamils pray not to Ram but to three devis — Lakshmi, Parvati and Saraswati. Punjab, too, worships the Devi. People in Maharashtra and [Goa](#) revere the ghat or pitcher as a symbol of fertility and, in Gujarat, this morphs into Garba rituals and the Dandiya Raas dances.

Ayodhya celebrates Ram Navami in spring in grand style — as does [Sitamarhi](#) in Bihar, Bhadrachalam in Telangana and Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu. At the same time, it would be an exaggeration to say that this Ram-centric festival is observed as a major all-India one. In Bengal, hordes of belligerent bhakts came out on growling motorcycles during Ram Navani, flashing open swords and roaring in Ram’s name, but people were so alarmed that they voted the other way. The point we need to understand is that while Ram has his undisputed hold over the north and parts of the west, regional deities prevail in the large swathe of India that lies beyond. The strength of Hinduism lay (and lies) in diversity that buttresses the idea of India.

Hinduism is surely hardening at present and unheard-of ideas like blasphemy are entering through the side door. A large section in a large area of the “heartland” may be turned on by this, but it would be unwise or even dangerous to brush away the time-tested heterogeneity of inclusive Hinduism. It is a choice between short-term political gains and an inclusive civilisation that has

lasted several millennia.

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