

# **The *Ayodhyā* Twist: A Hypothesis Modifying the New Consensus about its History**

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## **Abstract**

Most overviews of the decades-old and just-concluded Rāma Janmabhūmi affair grossly neglect the decisive role of the historical evidence. We survey it here, and add an element that most historians have overlooked: while the role of the theology of iconoclasm has been correctly identified, the chronology on which most agree, is less certain,-- yet the bottom-line remains the same: a temple marking Rāma's birthplace was indeed removed and forcibly replaced with a mosque.

**Keywords:** Ayodhyā, Rāma Janmabhūmi, Bābrī Masjid, Indian history, Iconoclasm

## Introduction

*Ayodhyā* has for decades mainly been known as a flashpoint of religio-political controversy. Earlier in the year of writing, on 22 January 2024, this has seemingly come to a close with the consecration of a new *Rāma Janmabhūmi* (birthplace) temple. In this paper, we give an overview of the why of this controversy and the how of its *dénouement*.

*Ayodhyā* is a temple town on the Sarayu river, a northern tributary of the Gaṅgā, in eastern Uttar Pradesh. It attracts pilgrims to the many sites where different traditions left a footprint: not just the birthplace of the hero *Rāma* (later interpreted as an incarnation of Viṣṇu), the temple for Hindi *Rāmāyaṇa* writer Tulsi Dās and other Vaiṣṇava sites, but also of other Dharmic currents. First of all Jainism, of which several of the 24 Tīrthamkaras (“ford-makers”, guides), including the very first one, have birthplace temples standing there. The town has also been visited by its 24<sup>th</sup> Tīrthamkara, Mahāvīra Jīna, and by Buddhism’s founder, Śākyamuni Gautama the Buddha (Pandey, 2009, pp. 19). The latter considered himself both a distant nephew and a reincarnation of *Rāma* as per the Dāśaratha Jātaka and the Anāmaka Jātaka (Lal, 2008, pp. 11).

It is also central to Sikhism, with *Gurū Govind Simh* claiming *Rāma* as a direct paternal ancestor of both founder *Gurū Nānak* and himself. *Nānak* went on pilgrimage to *Ayodhyā*, where he claimed to have had *Rāma*’s *darśana* (sighting of the deity) (Singh 1991), and later his son *Śrī Cand* likewise. A few years later, in 1526, *Bābar*, founder of the Moghul dynasty, invaded the area.

It is the Sikhs who triggered the ownership dispute at *Rāma*’s birthplace in *Ayodhyā* into a formal conflict, intermittently the object of litigation, for “the legal dispute over *Ayodhyā* dates back to 1858 (...) A First Information Report was filed on 30 November 1858 by one Mohd Salim against a group of Nihang Sikhs who had reportedly installed a Nishan Saheb [Sikh triangular flag -- KE] and written ‘Ram’ inside the Babri Masjid. (...) the possession of the mosque was restored to the Muslims at some stage.” (Khurshid 2021:1)

According to a widespread tradition based on an inscription on the gate, he had a mosque built by his lieutenant Mīr Bāqī on the site deemed *Rāma*’s birthplace in 1528. The town is currently best known for the controversy about this site, adorned till 1992 by the Bābrī Masjid (Bābar’s mosque), after that by a tent serving as a makeshift *Rāma* temple, and since 22 January 2024 by a fully rebuilt temple with a newly sculpted and newly consecrated mūrti of the child *Rāma*.

## 1. Ancient history

### 1.1. *Rāma*’s chronology and the Solar Dynasty’s capital

The *Purāṇas* (“Antiquities”), a vast Sanskrit corpus committed to writing in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE but building on older traditions, contain king-lists taking us back to pre-Vedic days. These are an imperfect source but basically historical, consistent with the occasional historical data preserved in other texts. They narrate the Flood and the landing in *Manāli* (*Himācal*) by survivor Manu Vaivasvata, who then set up his kingdom in a place he called *Ayodhyā*.

While *Manu*'s other children would start kingdoms elsewhere, his eldest son *Ikṣvāku* continued to rule from *Ayodhyā* as the founder of the *Sūryavamśa* or Solar Dynasty. Scions of his, also ruling from there, included *Daśaratha* and his son, born inside the hereditary royal palace: *Rāma*. This is the setting presupposed and reconfirmed in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* by *Vālmīki* as generally understood.

A problem is the chronology: the excavators had found nothing beyond the mid-second millennium BCE at the site, whereas the Puranic king-lists, though vague, seemed to date *Rāma* beyond 2000 BCE, and some chronologies take him many thousands of years farther back. In the 1970s, Prof. B.B. Lal's excavation campaign "Archaeology of the *Rāmāyaṇa* sites" (Lal, 2008, pp. 15-28) found a common material culture at *Ayodhyā*, *Citrakūṭa* and other *Rāmāyaṇa* sites all datable to a common period, viz. the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. It earned him the wrath of an audience of traditional Hindu godmen, who tend to place the *Rāmāyaṇa* events at a far greater time-depth. (related in Noorani 2003, I:68) As Lal recounted it to me, his reply to them was: "I don't say so, but my spade tells me so." But beyond that very general information, archaeology cannot bring us much closer to *Rāma*.

Unlike in the case of Greece and Troy, no inscriptions exist from any age ever allotted to the *Rāmāyaṇa* events, for in the Gangetic plain, literacy only appeared around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. The writing of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is conventionally dated to the period from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to the 2<sup>nd</sup> CE. There is no chance of finding an authentic plaque: "Today *Daśaratha*'s and *Kauśalyā*'s son *Rāma* was born here". Such a plaque would not be accepted as proof anyway, for there is no custom of marking birthplaces in this manner.

## 1.2. Proving religious claims

The first question concerning *Ayodhyā* addresses *Rāma*'s historicity: is this story about the Solar Dynasty true? It is ancient, yes, with sculptures depicting *Rāmāyaṇa* scenes dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (Jain 2013: 8) and literary references to the *Purāṇas*' dynastic history dating back to the *Ṛg-Veda*, beyond 2000 BCE. Just recently, Jijith Nadumuri Ravi has published the best historical reconstruction, using both scriptural and inscriptional data as well as archaeology. He has made it plausible from context that the "mighty *Rāma*" mentioned as one of sage *Tānva Pārtha*'s patrons in the *Ṛg-Veda*'s youngest layer (ca. 20<sup>th</sup> century BC, RV 10:93:14, Nadumuri 2023:46) is none other than our *Rāma Daśaratha*, contemporary with *Śantanu*, great-grandfather of the *Kauravas* and *Pāṇḍavas*, who is always taken to be the youngest person mentioned in the *Ṛg-Veda*. So: "Thus we can date the birth of *Rāma* safely to around 1920 BC, as a contemporary to *Śantanu*." (Nadumuri 2023:44)

This seems at variance with the archaeological finding of a human presence at the site only centuries later, but he notes that elsewhere in *Ayodhyā*, human finds go back to 1750 BC, and given uncertainty factors, the short interval may yet be bridged. Interesting debate, but we may at any rate agree on the relative dating that Rama lived in the late-*Ṛg-Vedic* age, in expectation of agreeing on its precise absolute date.

The dating of the *Mahābhārata* generation is scripturally testified as slightly more than a millennium before *Mahāpadma Nanda* (early 4<sup>th</sup> century BC), and *Rāma* several generations earlier, so this puts *Rāma* for the present discussion somewhere in the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC. All while being optimistic about an imminent agreement on a more

precise date, this vague period at least we can now take for granted. So far from being “a mythological character who never existed”, *Rāma* was a historical character whose place and time of birth are approximately known.

It is the rule rather than the exception for the founding stories of religions to be indeterminate as to historical accurateness, yet officially unquestioned. The Muslims believe that Adam built, and Abraham rebuilt, the *Ka'ba*, and that Mohammed merely restored a pre-existing monotheistic cult. This story is unlikely and at any rate totally unproven. Yet the Indian Republic facilitates the *Hajj* pilgrimage to the *Ka'ba* without asking these pilgrims for any proof of their sacred site's exceptional status. Similarly elsewhere, e.g. Catholics believe that the Virgin Mary appeared to the girl Bernadette Soubirous in 1858 in Lourdes, France, where the (often militantly) secularist government has generally been skeptical of this belief, yet always provided protection and facilities to the site and its many pilgrims without making these services conditional on proof. Therefore, according to established secular custom, the existence of a belief must simply be taken cognizance of, not questioned.

On the contrary, Indian politicians even disregard or overrule scholarly proof *against* such beliefs, absent in *Rāma*'s case but present in the state-approved Christian claim that the apostle Thomas landed in Kerala in 52 CE and was murdered by Brahmins near Chennai. According to the only original source about his presumed life east of the Holy Land, the *Acts of Thomas*, he came to a desert-like Persian-speaking part of “India”, not quite lush *Malayālam*-speaking Kerala but rather present-day's Afghan-Pakistani borderland. There he is claimed to have perished by execution *be ruhme* (Aramaic: “by spear”, but susceptible to being misread as *brahme*) after he had spurned the local king's offer of mere banishment, itself the measured royal response to his anti-social behaviour. Whereas the *Rāma* story at least has a textual tradition in its support, Thomas doesn't even have that (Ananthakrishna, 2006). Yet the Indian ruling politicians, including those of the supposedly anti-minority BJP, have a firm tradition of paying lip-service to this invented tradition about Thomas. Leading Indian media even reject articles setting the record straight (Sharan, 2010).

So, for public policy, the question whether the Hindu literary tradition about *Ayodhyā* is true, does not normally arise. It is a measure of India's double standards that this is asked in the Hindu case. Yet, historians are free to wonder, and any skeptic will sensibly remark, that this status of being unchallenged doesn't make the story true. So it is important to note that, until recent developments we're about to discuss, we have no hard tangible proof for it, only literary testimony, so we should have some understanding for skeptics. But there is no case *against* this belief either.

### 1.3. Location

Concerning the location of *Rāma*'s birthplace, in the only sources we have about him, viz. the cluster of *Rāma* narratives and the Puranic king-lists, there is a near-consensus that it is *Ayodhyā*. The one exception is the *Rāma* narrative in the Buddhist *Jātaka* 461 (a series of stories about the Buddha's past lives, here the *Dāśaratha Jātaka*, which equates the earlier Buddha with “*Paṇḍita Rāma*”; written centuries after the Buddha's life), which locates the dynasty's court in *Kāśī*. The story's main point is to claim *Rāma* as an earlier incarnation of the *Buddha*, which testifies to the importance *Rāma* already enjoyed in the collective imagination during the last centuries BCE.

Further, which particular site within *Ayodhyā*? No scripture contains a map, though a hilltop can already be deemed a logical place for a seat of royalty. Plausibility is the most that is available, and historians will mistrust even that. After all, if someone wanted to plant an invented tradition, he would care to choose a plausible scenario.

Moreover, there is even legitimate doubt whether the present-day *Ayodhyā* was meant. Hindu tradition itself (chiefly the *Skanda Purāṇa*) has it that sometime after *Rāma*'s passing, his city was abandoned by its population and later rediscovered by one *Vikramāditya*. Traditionalists take this name to refer to the founder of the *Vikram Saṁvat* calendar in 57 BCE, while secularists who always insist on more recent dates, identify it as the honorific of *Candragupta* II of the *Gupta* dynasty, ca. 400 CE. Skeptics may say that this tradition masks a purely arbitrary identification of a convenient site with the prestigious but by then legendary and lost *Ayodhyā*. However, Buddhist and Jain sources, often better datable than epic and Puranic data, assure a continuity in their location of *Saketa/Ayodhyā* (names for different parts of the city or for the whole city) from centuries before the first to centuries after the second *Vikramāditya*.

Likewise, another Buddhist testimony mentions an inundation: “The early Buddhist literature, however, mentions the occurrence of flood at the place” (Pandey, 2009, pp. 16). This may or may not refer to a flood claimed to have taken place in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC due to tectonic events, which must conveniently have destroyed the really ancient (pre-mid-2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC) archaeological evidence of *Rāma*'s and ultimately *Manu*'s *Ayodhyā*: “The floods had washed away the constructions of this period. All the archaeological remains (...) were of the post-flood period and nothing before” (Hari & Hari, 2010, pp. 80).

The motive behind highlighting such hypotheses of a history preceding the oldest archaeological remains may be pro-Hindu, viz. to augment the antiquity of the “real” *Ayodhyā* beyond the available evidence, and thus fit the Puranic timeline, but risks smashing the Hindus' own window; for if true, the search for the historical *Ayodhyā* of *Rāma*'s ancestors, which must have existed, can start all over.

Not that this is dramatic. Jijith Nadumuri Ravi has recently pioneered a uniquely detailed rereading of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s historical data and shown that the present city known as *Ayodhyā* was built by *Rāma*'s grandfather *Aja*, who had moved from another city already called by the same name. This is illustrated by *Vālmīki*'s own description of *Rāma*'s ancestor *Sagara*'s capital city: “*Sagara*'s *Ayodhyā* was different from *Daśaratha*'s *Ayodhyā*.” (Nadumuri, 2023, pp. 55).

This implies it will be no use to dig for the earlier Solar capital of *Rāma*'s ancestors in the *Ayodhyā* now known by that name. Nadumuri argues that, rather than resulting from some mysterious or age-old history, the new construction of the present *Ayodhyā* (and of nearby historical cities like *Kāśī*) fits neatly in the scripturally and archaeologically attested expansion eastwards from the Vedic part of the Harappan era during the desiccation of this area after the drying-up of the *Sarasvatī* river ca. 2000 BC: “This corresponds to a narrative in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (1.4.1.14): *Agni* burns the earth and moves eastwards, crossing many rivers (...) *Agni*'s eastward movement signifies the expansion of the Vedic culture from *Sarasvatī* (Haryana) to *Sadānīrā* (Bihar)” (2023, pp. 37).

This seems to imply that the original *Ayodhyā*, *Manu*'s and *Īkṣvāku*'s capital, was elsewhere, viz. in the Harappan area. Archaeologists thus have an exciting job cut out for them: where is *Manu*'s and *Īkṣvāku*'s (rather than *Rāma*'s now well-known) *Ayodhyā*? But at any rate, it poses no problem for the common assumption that *Rāma* was born in the present-day *Ayodhyā*.

## 2. Medieval history

### 2.1. Architecture at the site

In 2002, the UP High Court was presiding over a Court case started in 1950 by the Hindu *Nirmohī Akhādā* (the local establishment of the *Rāmānandī* sect) demanding possession of the disputed structure, then followed into litigation by the ad hoc Viśva Hindū Pariṣad organ *Friends of Rāma Lālā*, and by the local Muslim Waqf Board. To get a better grounding in the material data, it ordered first a scan of the site's underground with Ground Penetrating Radar, and when this proved promising, then a full professional excavation. After the Court-ordered excavation, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) submitted its report (ASI, 2003). It throws unprecedented light on the construction and demolition history of the site. We quote from its summary:

“Excavation at the disputed site of *Rāma Janmabhūmi -- Babrī Masjid* was carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India from 12 March 2003 to 7 August 2003. (...) 82 trenches were excavated to verify the anomalies mentioned in the report of the Ground Penetrating Radar Survey (...) The site has also proved to be significant for taking back its antiquarian remains for the first time to the middle of the thirteenth century BC. (...) during the early medieval period (eleventh - twelfth century AD) a huge structure, nearly 50 m in north-south orientation, was constructed which seems to have been short lived, as only four of the fifty pillar bases exposed during the excavation belong to this level with a brick crush floor. On the remains of the above structure was constructed a massive structure with at least three structural phases and three successive floors attached with it. The architectural members of the earlier short lived massive structure with stencil cut foliage pattern and other decorative motifs were reused in the construction of the monumental structure having a huge pillared hall (or two halls) which is different from residential structures, providing sufficient evidence of a construction of public usage which remained under existence for a long time during the period VII (Medieval-Sultanate level - twelfth to sixteenth century AD). It was over the top of this construction during the early sixteenth century, the disputed structure was constructed directly resting over it.”

This has the large structure built towards the later 11<sup>th</sup> century over the ruins of a short-lived 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>-century structure, and itself being destroyed, then being overbuilt in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Here, the large structure is assumed to have existed all through the Sultanate period, before being destroyed, which coincided with the common assumption behind the Hindu claim. Moreover, there is no doubt that this building discovered below the mosque had been constructed as a Hindu temple:

“Now, viewing in totality and taking into account the archaeological evidence of a massive structure just below the structure and evidence of continuity in structural phases from the tenth century onwards upto the construction of the disputed structure along with the yield of stone and decorated bricks as well as mutilated sculpture of divine couple and carved architectural members including foliage patterns, *āmalaka* [a fruit motif], *kāpotapālī* [a

‘dovecot’ frieze or cornice] doorjamb with semi-circular pilaster, broken octagonal shaft of black schist pillar, lotus motif, circular shrine having *pranāla* (waterchute) in the north, (...) are indicative of remains which are distinctive features found associated with the temples of north India” (ASI, 2003, summary).

This ought, at any rate, to lay to rest all doubts about a pre-existing temple at the site. What we have is several layers of construction starting in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, with the last two being two successive Hindu temples, large and even larger, and then the Babri Masjid. This tangibly confirms the historical reconstruction that a temple was standing there but got destroyed in 1030, and a new and larger temple was built there later in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, that was destroyed before the *Bābrī Masjid* was built. For now, we leave open when exactly it was destroyed.

In 1976, Prof. Braj Basi Lal, the dean of Indian archaeology, led ASI excavations around the *Babri Masjid*, already discovered the temple’s pillar-bases. Back then PM Indira Gandhi prohibited him from mentioning this discovery to anyone; but during the scholars’ debate of winter 1990-91 it would resurface (in answer to a claim that BB Lal’s excavations should have found temple remains but hadn’t) and play a central role.

One of his junior assistants back then was Karingamannu Kuzhiyil Muhammed, who was to take a leadership role in the 2003 excavations. His emphatic and public testimony in favour of the excavated temple remains is important, because of his expertise combined with his identity as a Muslim. In scientific practice this personal detail ought not to matter, but here it was widely rumoured that the BJP government had forced the ASI to avoid employing Muslims. This was nonsense: when dealing with such a communally charged topic, the ASI was of course making sure to include Muslims in its workforce. At any rate, here was a Muslim archaeologist who did participate, publicly defended the much-maligned BB Lal during the scholars’ debate in 1990-91, and strongly upheld the ASI findings after 2003. (e.g. Antony, 2016; Singh, 2017; Muhammed, 2019; Thirumalai, 2019).

These findings fit the data from political history. The big temple from the 11th century over which the *Bābrī Masjid* was built, had been built in replacement of an earlier temple, and this because the latter also got demolished, viz. by an earlier Muslim conqueror known to have been both an iconoclast and a conqueror of *Ayodhyā* in 1030: *Salār Masud Ġaznavī*, *Mahmud Ġaznavī*’s nephew. He was soon to be defeated by a Hindu alliance led by *Suhaldev Pāsī*, including philosopher-king *Rājā Bhoja*, in the 1033 battle of *Bahrāic*, so *Ayodhyā* reverted to Hindu rule.

But in 1194, after *Muhammad Ġorī* had conquered Delhi, his lieutenants expanding from Delhi overran the whole *Gaṅgā* plain. They made no compromise with the Infidels and demolished every incarnation of Heathenism they came across, most famously the numerous temples of *Vārāṇasī* and the Buddhist university of *Nālandā*. Subsequently, this entire area became part of the Delhi Sultanate with *Ayodhyā* as a provincial capital, complete with a governor and political establishment plus a Sultanate army. Could a major Hindu temple have survived there?

### **Islamic theology of iconoclasm**

Having established an outline of *what* happened, we must now come to realize *why* it happened. The one subject towering over the whole *Ayodhyā* debate, the elephant in the room carefully left unmentioned even by the Hindu parties involved, is the Islamic theology of iconoclasm. Sita Ram Goel’s two-volume book *Hindu Temples, What Happened to*

*Them?* (1990-91) documents the fact of Islamic iconoclasm and its theological motivation in great detail, citing purely from Muslim sources. It lists 1862 Indian cases of mosques standing on the sites of demolished temples, verifiable instances as a standing challenge to those who deny this history. Even today, not a single item in the list has been shown to be incorrect.

Goel traces the practice to the precedent behaviour of Mohammed, the single most decisive source of authority in Islamic jurisprudence. The second mosque of Islam (we have no relevant data on the first), the main mosque of Medina, was built on a Pagan graveyard after digging up the bodies and chopping down a grove of date trees, a sacrilege according to Arab Pagan ethics. But the really important precedent is the *Ka'ba*, where the Prophet and his nephew Ali destroyed all the 360 idols with their own hands, thus turning it into a mosque. (Ibn Ishaq tra. Guillaume, 1987, pp. 552; Goel, 2003, pp. 354-358).

Hundreds of Muslim rulers emulated their Prophet and destroyed idols and idol-houses in the lands they conquered, typically accompanying the act with an appropriate line from the *Qur'an* (17, pp. 81-83): “The truth has come and falsehood has passed away. Verily, falsehood is bound to pass away”, which Mohammed himself had uttered when breaking the *Ka'ba* idols.

The deeper roots of this doctrine of aniconism resulting in iconoclasm is the Prophetic-Monothemism doctrine of Creation. In Monistic doctrines like *Vedānta* and *Neoplatonism*, the Many emanate from the One and are consubstantial with it. But in the Abrahamic traditions, there is a radical separation between the creatures and the Creator. It follows that confusing a creature with the Creator, or “associating” (*Širk*) it with Him, is radically wrong. It is deduced that worshipping the Sun, the King, the Elephant, a painting or sculpture, or any other creature is the worst sin; and stopping this worship, even by annihilating the object of worship, is virtuous.

### **A way out?**

Having lost the debate over the temple's existence and demolition fair and square, the anti-temple faction fell back to (and still takes) a position outlined by the American historian Richard Eaton (2004): yes, some temples were indeed destroyed, but Muslim rulers only did this in imitation of what Hindu rulers had done.

Some Pagan rulers, first noticed in Mesopotamia but sparsely also in India, celebrated a military victory by abducting a prestigious idol from the loser's main temple. Note first of all that this is not at all the same thing as *destroying* an idol (and its house, the temple): after an idol was abducted, it got re-installed in the victor's temple, re-consecrated, and worshipped again in the following years. So the religion was not interrupted, the worship of this god simply continued though at another site – and at the loser's site, nothing stands in the way of consecrating a new idol of the same god and resuming his worship. Muslims will be imitating this the day they bring a *Kṛṣṇa* or *Durgā* statue to their mosque and put this *idol* up for worship,-- the single worst sin in Islam.

Secondly, it is ludicrous to think that Muslim iconoclasts would cite Hindu precedents in justification; no examples are ever mentioned. Instead, they cited in justification the conduct of earlier Islamic iconoclasts, and especially Mohammed's idol-breaking in the *Ka'ba*.



## The Hindu movement's understanding of iconoclasm

The Islamic justification of and injunction to iconoclasm is of course denied (or passed over in silence) by anti-temple historians and their acolytes. But it doesn't follow that their Hindutva opponents take the opposite position: emphasizing and highlighting the Islamic angle.

Just as the Marxists replace religious by economic reasons, e.g. when claiming that temples were "plundered for their gold" rather than destroyed out of a religious hatred for a wrong religion, the Hindutva current replace religious reasons by pro- vs. anti-patriotic concerns, pitting the "Indian hero" *Rāma* vs. the "foreign invader" *Bābar*. Throughout the BJP involvement in the *Ayodhyā* movement, the whole issue was framed in these terms. In reality, foreignness has nothing to do with it.

There is a notion abroad that the Hindu movement is anti-Islamic. In reality, while its rank and file has indeed sometimes been forced into street fights with Muslims, its spokesmen never utter criticism of Islam; not at the time of the *Ayodhyā* controversy, and even less today. On the contrary, their line is that all religions are equally valid paths to the same goal, Islam is a great religion, Mohammed was a great Prophet, and any Muslim conduct harmful to Hinduism is merely a "*perversion* of Islam at the hands of its power-drunk followers" (Golwalkar, 1996, pp. 73, emphasis added). In the *Ayodhyā* campaign, the handful of scholars who came forward to argue the historical case for the temple did focus on the doctrine of iconoclasm; but the Hindu leaders have systematically downplayed this religious aspect of the confrontation.

Key documents taken to prove the Bharatiya Janata Party's communal intentions, such as its very decision to take up the *Ayodhyā* cause, actually peddle Secularist stereotypes. The BJP's Palampur resolution of 11 June 1989, in which the party committed itself to the *Ayodhyā* campaign, stated that temple destruction or temple usurpation is "against the tenets of Islam" and blamed Muslim opposition to the temple's reconstruction not on their Islamic convictions nor on the Secularists' prodding, but on intrigues by "the vile Britishers in pursuance of their policy of divide and rule" (Anand & Nalwa, 2020).

In this case the BJP has come to espouse the Gandhian fiction that Hindus and Muslims had always stood together until the wily British came to divide them (hence the popularity in BJP circles of the Congressite fiction that it was the British who foisted Partition on India), and that temple destruction is an aberration from true Islam. The reality is that Islamic iconoclasm is as old as Islam itself and didn't need outside encouragement.

In the official Hindu nationalist discourse, if Muslims ever demolished Hindu temples, it was never for Islamic reasons. The Lucknow bench of the UP High Court was repeating a phrase from the affidavits of both the *Hindu* litigants when it opined in its 2010 verdict that building a mosque in forcible replacement of a temple is "against the tenets of Islam". So according to BJP theologians, Mohammed who set the precedent of usurping others' places of worship was a bad Muslim?

As Sita Ram Goel observed, "the movement for the restoration of Hindu temples has got bogged down around the *Rāma Janmabhūmi* at *Ayodhyā*. The more important question,

namely *why* the Hindu temples met the fate they did at the hands of the Islamic invaders, has not been even whispered. Hindu leaders have endorsed the Muslim propagandists in proclaiming that Islam does not permit the construction of mosques at other people's places of worship. One wonders whether this kowtowing to Islam is prompted by ignorance, or cowardice, or calculation, or a combination of them all. The Islam of which Hindus are talking exists neither in the Qur'ān nor in the Sunnah of the Prophet" (Goel, 1993: cover text).

Worse, the "unkindest cut of all came from the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party. (...) they were trumpeting from the house-tops that Islam did not permit the destruction of other people's places of worship, and that *namāz* offered in a mosque built on the site of a temple was not acceptable to *Allāh!* They were laying the blame for the destruction of the *Rām Mandir* not on Islam as an ideology of terror but on *Bābur* as a foreign invader!" (Goel, 1993, pp. v).

This is a wider problem, a blind spot in the historical consciousness of most modern Hindus, including even the creamy layer of historians. Many of them are hesitant to take the Islamic doctrine and historical practice of iconoclasm seriously (at least in the recent past, well after the earlier age of formidable historians like Jadunath Sarkar or RC Majumdar). Thus, the aforementioned archaeologist R. Nath thinks that iconoclasm was an individual aberration of *Bābar's* rather than an Islamic command, and that Islam judges against the Islamization of others' religious sites: "The Baburi Masjid stands on an unlawfully acquired site and is built of unlawfully acquired material and, as such, according to the strict *shariat* point of view, as distinct from a militant *siyasat* [political – KE] interpretation and application of a defunct concept of *Jihad*, *namaz* offered within its precincts is not valid" (Nath, 1991, pp. 79).

According to the orthodox biography of the Prophet (tra. Guillaume, 1987), the *Ka'ba* itself had been seized from the Pagans who had practised Pagan forms of worship ("idol-worship") there, and this never led to questioning the validity of Islamic prayers offered in there. Outside *Ayodhyā* and outside India, numerous mosques are located on what were places of worship of other religions, and Islamic chronicles and conquerors' diaries express pride in it.

Numerous people, in the West as well as in India, refuse to take the full measure of the challenge Islam poses. In today's world, many Muslims including Muslim rulers have been "domesticated" out of iconoclasm in sufficient measure for them to tolerate non-Muslim places of worship, *vide* even in contemporary Arabia. In India itself, Muslim attacks on Hindu processions are frequently in the news (or at least in the local vernacular press and on social media, for the English-language media and the foreign India-watchers prefer to obscure these incidents), but by and large, Muslims seem to have made their peace with the ambient Hindu society. The situation in Pakistan and Bangladesh is already fiercer, and that under the Delhi Sultanate or Aurangzeb even much worse again. But many people's wishful thinking is that the Islamic challenge should be construed as a gentle affair: minimized as a historical or present-day fact, and spun as non-essential, as some kind of aberration explainable by external factors.

In the present case, *Bābar*'s foreignness was one of the popular explanations within the BJP discourse deployed at the time of the *Ayodhyā* controversy: the “foreign invader *Bābar*” against the “native hero *Rāma*”, rather than the “Islamic invader *Bābar*” against the “Hindu hero *Rāma*”.

But native convert *Malik Kafūr* and Indian Muslim *Tipu Sultān* were not foreigners yet displayed the same iconoclastic zeal. By contrast, the Greeks were foreign invaders, yet they did not destroy native places of worship. On the contrary, they embraced native culture: Heliodorus became a prominent *Kṛṣṇa* worshipper, Menander/*Milinda* a prominent Buddhist, and their artists in *Gandhārā* and Bactria pioneered great new forms of Buddhist art. Or take the British: they wrecked India's economy, causing impoverishment and terrible famines, etc., yet they didn't destroy temples. Instead, they dug up forgotten Sanskrit texts and Harappan cities, deciphered the Brahmi script, and did much to preserve elements of the native culture in new archives and museums, so that natives could revive them. Clearly, *Bābar*'s foreignness won't account for his anti-Hindu behaviour, whereas his religious affiliation will.

Yet, if at all the fact of Muslim temple-destruction is admitted, it is at once explained away as unrelated to Islamic doctrine. This is the easy way out: dealing with Islam becomes like any other negotiation with partners who admittedly have their own distinctive interests, but are not per se hostile. It's easier to conclude that some 16<sup>th</sup>-century religious persecutions were the effect of *Bābar*'s personality, an anecdote of history of no present-day consequence, rather than facing the problematic circumstance that they followed from his commitment to Islam, which is still with us today to act as the cause of Partition in 1947, the East Pakistani massacres in 1971, the Kashmiri religious cleansing in 1990, or the murders of seven supporters of truth-speaker Nupur Sharma in 2022.

The consequence for the present debate is that many participants act as if the temple demolition is about an individual called *Bābar*, not about an ideology called Islam. A famous maxim, usually but wrongly ascribed to Eleonore Roosevelt, says that “great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, and small minds discuss people”. In the case of the Eminent Historians, their denying or ignoring the larger context of theologically justified iconoclasm and their pretence that this is all merely a court case about a property dispute and involving a certain *Bābar* is but a matter of pursuing their self-interest. For them, it is rational to shift the focus from ideas (like the ideology behind iconoclasm) to personal issues (like *Bābar*'s guilt). But for Hindus wedded to the temple cause, it is weak and counterproductive to focus on the anecdotal case against *Bābar* rather than the principled case against the theology of iconoclasm.

Yet, this obvious explanation of the fact of iconoclasm through the religious doctrine of iconoclasm, which is supported by the *Jihādīs*' own testimonies, has been shunned by numerous Hindus. And this has led them to an interesting mistake.

## A twist in the tale

The refusal to face the seriousness of Islamic iconoclasm may have landed the Hindu polemicists in a tight corner. It has made them maintain that the Hindu temple from ca. 1100 was still standing at the time of *Bābar*'s arrival in 1528, i.e. after 334 years of Muslim rule. This seems to match the archaeological discoveries in 2003 cited above, yet it's a bit more complicated.

When Muslim invaders destroyed a Pagan place of worship, several scenarios were possible. Often it was destroyed and overbuilt, but sometimes, the preceding structure was simply taken over and transformed. Thus, in Constantinople the *Aya Sophia* cathedral was expropriated and turned into a mosque. The *Ka'ba* itself set this model: as an ancient Pagan temple, it was "freed" of its 360 idols by Mohammed and then turned into the principal site of Islam. There are also halfway scenarios: part-destruction and part-integration into the new mosque, such as the Ummayyad mosque in Damascus; or the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi, built on and partly incorporating the original *Kāśī Viśvanāth* temple to show off the victory over Infidelism. In the *Bābrī Masjid* too, fourteen temple pillars brought from elsewhere were incorporated. As anti-temple campaigner Syed Shahabuddin (1990, 2:200) observes, "the pillars do not support the mosque or the arches; they are only used decoratively".

Shahabuddin explains how after several forays into the region by Muslim invaders, "*Ayodhyā* (...) was finally taken in 1194 AD. Assuming that the local dynasty had constructed a temple on the site where Babri Masjid stands (...), how did the mandir survive the 'fanatical zeal' of the Afghans and the Turks for nearly 350 years?" (Shahabuddin 1990, 1:190). As for the temple at the site, "Was it at the pinnacle of its glory when the Turks and Pathans took Ayodhyā in 1194? Did they destroy it? If they did, then Babar cannot be accused and then no temple existed when Babar or Mir Baqi constructed the Babri Masjid" (Shahabuddin, 1990, 2:199).

Shahabuddin's point is valid. If there really was an Islamic practice of iconoclasm, then the massive conquest in 1194 would have been *the* occasion for it. Which indeed it was, e.g. in *Ayodhyā*: "Two tombs attributed to Paigambar Sis and Ayub (i.e. patriarchs Seth and Job) occupy the site where the extraordinary 'toothbrush' tree of Buddha had once stood, according to Fa Hien and Huen Tsang" (Chatterjee, 1990, 2:185). In some cases, monuments still pinpoint the time of destruction as that of the Ghurid invasion: "The ancient Jain temple of Adinath was destroyed by Maqdoom Shah Jooran Ghorī, a commander of Mohammed Ghorī, who later had his own tomb built on top of the ruins of Adinath, which survives till this day as Shah Jooran ka Tila" (Chatterjee, 1990, 2:185). It would be strange if a *Rāma* temple had survived where the *Ādināth* temple perished.

Since *Ayodhyā* was a provincial capital, opportunities for wresting the site from Muslim control were fewer than in the case of the outlying *Somnāth* temple, which was rebuilt again and again. Only times of infighting among the Muslim elite could give rebellious Hindus a chance to challenge Muslim power by maintaining an idol temple. More likely, as affirmed by Babri Masjid Action Committee advocate Suraj Bhan (2003), "a mosque belonging to the Sultanate period was expanded to build the Babri Masjid".

This doesn't alter the moral case for the temple, though. Whether demolished by *Šāh Zurān Ghorī* in 1194 or by *Bābar* in 1528, the temple became the victim of Islamic iconoclasm in either event. The site was still taken from Hindus by Muslims, and the Hindu claim is still

one for restoration of what was once theirs and has remained their place of pilgrimage all through.

Let us first get the record straight regarding a fallacious claim: “Nor is there any reference in *Bābar*’s memoirs to the destruction of any temple in *Ayodhyā*” (JNU historians, 1989, repr. Noorani, 2003, I:31). This is a false proof *e silentio*, for there is no source extant that should have furnished such a testimony. The part of the diary comprising *Bābar*’s stay in *Ayodhyā*, for which the assumption of speaking out on the temple/mosque would have been reasonable, has gone missing during *Bābar*’s lifetime itself, as noted by its first English translator, Mrs. Beveridge: “the pages for five months after 28 March 1528 when *Bābar* noted his arrival (...) causes a narrative gap (...) There is no reliable account for these months” (Beveridge & Hiro, 2006, pp. 309). It is most unlikely that each of these historians was ignorant of this.

Possibly *Bābar* did encounter a Hindu presence at the site, e.g. because in the turmoil of the war between the Sultanate and the incoming Moghuls, Hindus had managed to recover the site. We may have to envisage the possibility that by 1528, the Sultanate mosque had become what the Babri Masjid was in 1949-1992: a mosque building serving as a temple (or even, closer to the common assumption, a temple building used as a mosque but then turned into a temple again).

Most Hindu participants in the *Ayodhyā* debate, including the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), have maintained that the large temple from ca. 1100, of which the foundations were dug up in 2003 by the ASI, was destroyed by *Bābar*. According to the inscription on the gate, *Bābar* was linked with a mosque built on the site where a temple had been demolished. The problem is: such temple destruction by *Bābar* would imply that it was still standing at the time of *Bābar*’s arrival, i.e. after 334 years of Muslim rule. This included three centuries of Delhi Sultanate, the most iconoclastic regime in history, when *Ayodhyā* served as a provincial capital. So there was a Sultanate governor and a Sultanate army stationed in *Ayodhyā*, yet the regime that had destroyed all the temples of *Kāśī* and indeed of *Ayodhyā*, as well as all the Buddhist universities, just sat and watched generations of Hindu worshippers celebrate their Infidelism in one of its high places, the grand *Rāma Janmabhūmi* temple?

Shahabuddin’s point is that either Islam is not iconoclastic, as illustrated by centuries of survival for a major Hindu temple, or it can’t have allowed this temple to remain standing all through the Sultanate period, so that it was still available for *Bābar* to destroy. If there really was an Islamic practice of iconoclasm, then the massive conquest in 1194 would have been *the* occasion to display it.

And indeed it was. In a few years’ time, all the Hindu temples in the conquered cities, including *Kāśī*, were demolished. Because the communities worshipping there mostly survived and seized latter opportunities to rebuild their temples, the result is less conspicuous than in the case of the Buddhist establishments in the *Gaṅgā* basin, including the university of *Nālandā*. These were all leveled, along with their inmates. Unlike establishments of Deva-worship, they were never rebuilt because the Buddhist community perished along with the institutions in which it was concentrated. Thus, in *Ayodhyā*: “Two tombs attributed to Paigambar Sis and Ayub (i.e. patriarchs Seth and Job) occupy the site where the extraordinary ‘toothbrush’ tree of Buddha had once stood, according to Fa Hien and Huen Tsang” (Chatterjee, 1990, pp.185).

In some cases, monuments still pinpoint the time of destruction as that of the Ghurid invasion of 1192-94: “The ancient Jain temple of Adinath was destroyed by Maqdoom Shah Jooran Ghorī, a commander of Mohammed Ghorī, who later had his own tomb built on top of the ruins of Adinath, which survives till this day as Shah Jooran ka Tila” (Chatterjee, 1990, pp.185; the *Ādināth* temple was later rebuilt, for unlike the Buddhist community, the Jains as such survived and could later rebuild their temples.-- KE). It would be strange if a *Rāma* temple had survived where the *Ādināth* temple perished.

It was built in the Sharqi style developed ca. 1300, so Sushil Srivastava and R. Nath, reckoned among the anti- and the pro-temple camp respectively, have suggested the building belongs to the Sultanate period: “architectural design does help us to conclude that the mosque belongs to a period before Babur” (Srivastava, 1991, pp. 92). And: “It is quite probable (...) that a mosque was first raised during the Sultanate period (...) on the site of the most important temple associated with the life of Rāma, and Mir Baqi just *restored* that mosque during his occupation of *Ayodhyā*” (Nath, 1991, pp. 38, emphasis in the original).

So, we still have several probabilities rather than certainties. *Salār Masūd Ġaznavī* may have destroyed the preceding temple in 1030; *Šāh Zurān* (“Jooran”) *Ghorī* may have destroyed the major temple in 1194; and *Bābar* may have destroyed the restored Hindu use of a former mosque in 1528. But we know for sure that a Hindu temple has existed at the site, that Hindu pilgrims would never leave it alone, and that a mosque could only come up at this intensely Hindu site by forcefully imposing it. Whatever *Bābar* and the others have done, it was a case of Islamic iconoclasm. And whoever destroyed their *Rāma Janmabhūmi* temple, Hindus had a right to rebuild it.

### **The twist: a second look at the *Bābrī Masjid***

We must admit that here, the anti-temple party’s position was more consistent. *Ayodhyā* was a provincial capital of the Delhi Sultanate, so opportunities for wresting the site from Muslim control were certainly more limited than in the case of the outlying temples like the *Mahābodhi* temple, which deep in the forest was never demolished, or the *Somnāth* temple, which was demolished alright, but rebuilt again and again. Only times of infighting among the Muslim elite may have given rebellious Hindus some opportunities for rebuilding temples or at least seizing their sacred sites back (which is what may have happened in the years before *Bābar*’s conquest of *Ayodhyā*); but most of the time, they were in no position to challenge Muslim power by maintaining a proud idol temple right in front of a Sultanate governor’s palace.

Prof. Suraj Bhan, who was employed by the Babri Masjid Action Committee (BMAC) during the scholars’ debate in 1991, asserts in reaction to the ASI-certified finding of the temple in 2003: “A mosque belonging to the Sultanate period was expanded to build the Babri Masjid and that is the truth no matter how the ASI interprets it” (Bhan, 2003).

In spite of his disputed objectivity, his critics must admit his logic here is valid. The mosque was built on top of a temple, alright, but *Bābar*’s own role has not been proved by the excavations. He may have been innocent, not of religious fanaticism in general, but at least specifically of the destruction of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century temple in the *Rāmkot* area of *Ayodhyā*.

The same position had already been taken by others. Anti-temple historian Sushil Srivastava suggested that the mosque, built in the Sharqi style developed ca. 1300, does belong to the Sultanate period: “architectural design does help us to conclude that the mosque belongs to a period before Babur” (Srivastava, 1991, pp. 92). Our archaeologist R. Nath wrote: “It is quite probable, and possible too, that a mosque was first raised during the Sultanate period (..) on the site of the most important temple associated with the life of Rama, and Mir Baqi just *restored* that mosque during his occupation of Ayodhyā” (Nath, 1991, pp. 38, emphasis in the original).

To be sure, *Bābar*’s campaign was only the very start of the Moghul period, no distinctive Moghul style of architecture had yet been developed, so it is also possible that the style from the just-concluded Sultanate period (1206-1625) was used once more by *Bābar*’s men. The question is still open, but at least it is possible that *Bābar*’s role was limited to a restoration of an already-existing mosque, after Hindus had managed to wrest the site from the Muslims in this crisis period.

Unfortunately for the Eminent Historians and the BMAC, this doesn’t alter the basic moral case for the temple. Whether demolished by conqueror *Šah Zuran Ġorī* in 1194 or by *Bābar* in 1528, the temple became the victim of Islamic iconoclasm in either event. The site was still taken from Hindus by Muslims, and the Hindu claim is still merely one for restoration of what was once theirs. Advocates for the defence resort in such cases to a next line of defence, viz. that this shift in ownership is sanctioned by time. But in law, this principle only counts if the aggrieved party acquiesces, and this is not the case here. As is well-attested for *Rāma*’s birthplace site (Jain, 2013, pp. 104-116; 2017, pp.17-47), Hindus always kept coming back to sites important to them.

### **The Lodi gambit**

This then explains the tradition that *Bābar* destroyed a Hindu temple. Hindus kept on coming back as close as possible to the site. In the turmoil of the war between the declining Sultanate and the incoming Moghuls, Hindus must even have found a way to recover the site from Muslim control.

It has been argued that the declining Lodis may have sought to win Hindu support by handing them the site, though covered with a mosque building. According to Richard Eaton (2001), citing Akbar’s chronicler Nizamuddin Ahmad, “Muslim jurists advised the future Sikandar Lodi of Delhi (reign: 1489-1517) that ‘it is not lawful to lay waste to ancient idol temples’”. This is theologically totally incorrect, and thus very unlikely to have come from the mouth of “Muslim jurists”. If true, maybe Lodi’s advisers considered it politically expedient in the circumstances? Or maybe Ahmad adapted his party-line to his employer’s new pro-tolerance policy? It is at any rate at variance with Sikander Lodi’s record of actually having demolished numerous temples including the *Kṛṣṇa Janmabhūmi* temple (Jain, 2021, pp. 125; Krishnan, 2022), like *Mahmud Ġaznavī* earlier and *Aurangzeb* later. At any rate, no evidence for the implementation of such magnanimous advice has been forthcoming.

It reminds us of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century forgery known as “*Bābar*’s testament” to his son *Humayūn*, in which *Bābar* professes tolerance towards other religions, in diametrical contrast with his diary (repr. Noorani 2003, I:1, with approval by Noorani 2003, I:xxii). It has been used in all seriousness by lay followers of the Eminent Historians during the *Ayodhyā* controversy. Indeed, the *Bābrī Masjid* case will be remembered for its frequent use of doctored or forged documents by the anti-temple side (e.g. the cases documented by Shourie, 1989; Khan, 1990; Elst, 1991), or the false and ultimately pin-pricked allegations of forged archaeological finds and inscriptions by the pro-temple side (Jain, 2017, pp. 109-112; 2018).

But for the sake of argument, let *Sikandar Lodī* have made concessions to the Hindus. This would be one way of explaining that Hindus were sufficiently in control of the site to provoke *Bābar* into throwing them out again. *Bābar* can be inferred to have done *something* anti-Hindu, but it was not the demolition of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century temple. That one had already been destroyed much earlier.

It is likely that *Bābar* destroyed a makeshift Hindu temple, or a Hindu use of an earlier Sultanate-era version of the *Bābrī Masjid* itself. But for destroying the grand 11<sup>th</sup>-century temple, we think he came way too late. Earlier *Jihād* warriors had already finished the business of temple-destruction. Only those who don’t take the Islamic theology of iconoclasm and the proven fact of its widespread implementation seriously, can believe that the 11<sup>th</sup>-century birthplace temple escaped this fate.

### 3. Modern history

#### Unanimous belief

Since at least the oldest extant testimony, by English East India Company agent William Finch in 1608 (Foster, 1921), the site was treated as *Rāma*’s birthplace, attracting numerous Hindu pilgrims. He described its location as the “ruins of *Rāmkoṭ*” (*Rāma*’s fort), which points to an undefined history of destruction. Neither he nor Austrian Jesuit Joseph Tieffenthaler in 1767 (Chatterjee, 1991) mentions a mosque: what caught their eye was the Hindu pilgrimage and festivities around *Rāma*’s birthday. The Hindu activities at the site were at any rate more conspicuous than the pedestrian Muslim use (if any at all) of the mosque building. Muslim records do insist on the existence of the mosque, but significantly call it *Masjid-i-Janmasthan*, “mosque of the birthplace” (Narain, 1993).

Tieffenthaler duly notes the story of a temple demolition by *Bābar*, or rather, by either *Bābar* or *Aurangzeb*. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, everybody knew about *Aurangzeb* as the proverbial temple-destroyer, whose achievements were all around, whereas *Bābar* was but a distant memory, whose destructions were limited in number and area, by then known only to few.

Oddly, it is during the steep decline of Moghul power, around 1800, that a local Moghul feudatory, the *Nawāb* of Oudh, manages to assert a real Muslim presence at the site. The structure becomes a real full-time mosque, with the Hindus only tolerated at a makeshift shrine (*cabūtra*) just outside the premises.



When the British secured their colonial power position in the area, Hindus tried to re-acquire the birthplace through the judicial route. In these proceedings, the question never was whether there had been a temple and then its demolition. This scenario was commonly assumed by everyone concerned until the 1980s (e.g. in the 1989 edition, it was still given as fact in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, entry *Ayodhyā*), and not specifically as a Hindu tradition: local Muslims from the Moghul and British period thought likewise, as did European travellers and the British authorities. The question of a need for evidence to establish the pre-existence of a temple didn't arise at all.

In 1886, British judge FEA Chamier ruled against a Hindu demand to hand the mosque over for Hindu worship: "It is most unfortunate that a Masjid should have been built on land specially held sacred by the Hindus, but as that event occurred 356 years ago, it is too late now to agree with the grievance" (Jain, 2016, pp. 69) But note that all the parties to the dispute agreed that the mosque had been built in forcible replacement of a temple.

### **Liberating a Hindu pilgrimage site**

In 1936, after communal riots over the site, the British closed down the mosque. It stood empty until Hindus surreptitiously installed idols for worship in 1949. From then on, it became functionally a Hindu temple, though at first with restrictions: only a priest could go in to perform the rituals. In 1983, a Court Order removed the locks and allowed the masses in for worship.

Still in 1983, in Muzaffarnagar, a committee for the "liberation" of the birthplace (*Śrī Rāma Janmabhūmi Mukti Yajña Samiti*) was formed, with Dau Dayal Khanna, former Minister in the Congress government of Uttar Pradesh, as general secretary; Mahant Avaidyanath (former MP for the *Hindū Mahāsabhā*) as president; and given prestige by the active membership of Gulzarilal Nanda, retired Congress politician and twice interim Prime Minister. Describing the mosques superimposed on *Rāma Janmabhūmi*, on *Kṛṣṇa Janmasthan* in *Mathurā* and on *Kāśī Viśvanāth* in *Vārāṇasī* as challenges to Hindu self-esteem, the committee passed a resolution for their liberation. Remark the absence at this stage of the *Bhāratīya Janatā Party* (BJP, Indian People's Party), that would lay claim to the *Ayodhyā* cause only in 1989 with its Palampur Resolution.

In effect, this meant the Hindu demand for the replacement of mosque architecture with temple architecture, implied the demolition of the Babri "structure". This led to a huge agitation, from 1984 guided on the Hindu side by the *Viśva Hindū Pariṣad* (VHP, Hindu World Council, like the BJP a member of the *Saṅgh Parivār* or "family" of the *Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevak Saṅgh*/"National Volunteer Corps"/RSS) and on the Muslim side by the Babri Masjid Action Committee and marginally by Syed Shahabuddin's rival Babri Masjid Coordination Committee.

Now the local quarrel became a national affair with international ramifications. Between 1988 and 1993, we saw numerous street riots; a political crisis including the fall of VP Singh's Central Government in 1990 and the rise of the pro-temple BJP from 2 seats before the elections of 1989 to 121 after those of 1991; the occasion for starting the *Satanic Verses* affair, with the ban on Salman Rushdie's novel as a bargaining chip for the cancellation of a Muslim "march on *Ayodhyā*", followed by the death sentence and the effective killing of several translators; the demolition of the mosque building on 6 December

1992 by Hindu activists defying the orders of their more prudent leaders (*pace* Liberhan, 2009); more political crisis with the dismissal of four BJP state governments; and a crescendo of Muslim revenge violence spilling over to Pakistan, Bangladesh and the UK, culminating in a new model of terrorism on 12 March 1993, when simultaneous explosions at different localities in Mumbai killed hundreds.

The sheer size of the terror shocked everyone into introspection and self-control, so India became peaceful for almost seven years. The very next round of communal violence was again *Ayodhyā*-related, though: the Godhra murder of 59 pilgrims returning from there in 2002, with subsequent revenge operations. (International media have only reported the revenge, somehow fallen from heaven without cause.) But after that, no more *Ayodhyā*-related has occurred.

### **Why the affair became so prominent**

A crucial role was played by a media polemic featuring a school of (mostly vaguely, some card-carrying) Marxist historians from Jawaharlal Nehru University that denied the pre-existence of a temple and its demolition. Against the old consensus, these “eminent historians” had started arguing that there never had been a temple at the site. In a statement issued in 1989, *The Political Abuse of History*, they argued that this consensus, now rebaptized “the Hindutva claim”, was based on concocted data. Suddenly it seemed that the *Bābrī Masjid* had become the last bulwark of secularism besieged by irrational forces. This contributed substantially to the shrillness of the controversy, making it acquire a Holy War character, needlessly dramatic and bloody.

While many middle-of-the-road politicians led by PM Rajiv Gandhi were working towards a compromise with some goodies for the Muslim leadership in exchange for the Hindu temple (till then it had still seemed that the usual Congressite horse-trading could solve the controversy), the JNU statement put them on notice that the defence of the mosque structure was a matter too serious to some routine politicking. It queered the pitch enormously. Politicians who had earlier been willing to allow a Hindu temple to come up again at the site (in the 1980s the Congress Party’s official position (Noorani, 1998), now developed cold feet.

In 1991, the Chandra Shekhar and Narasimha Rao governments channelled the polemic into a scholars’ debate (anti-temple case in Sharma et al., 1991; pro-temple in VHP, 1991; VHP & Goel, 1991; Goel, 1990, pp. 91), but that was broken off without conclusion and especially without being able to overrule the public impression created by the JNU historians’ first strike.

Immediately, most scholars of related fields and India-watchers abroad started saying that the old consensus (of which many hadn’t even known) was but a figment of the Hindu extremist imagination. Scholars who had earlier upheld it and even added material to it, reversed course to follow the new party-line (e.g. Van der Veer, 1994, pp. 161; *vide* Elst, 2002, pp. 21). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* disowned in later editions what it still had articulated in its 1989 edition (entry *Ayodhyā*): “Rāma’s birthplace is marked by a mosque, erected by the Moghul emperor Bābar in 1528 on the site of an earlier temple.”

Yet, the JNU academics never had even one new fact at their disposal when overruling the otherwise unchallenged centuries-old consensus. This became clear and undeniable when one

after another, each of the Eminent Historians collapsed when put on the stand in Court (Jain, 2013, pp. 240-261).

Let us at least get the record straight regarding a fallacious claim precluding this question: “Nor is there any reference in *Bābar*’s memoirs to the destruction of any temple in *Ayodhyā*” (JNU historians 1989, repr. Noorani, 2003, I:31). This is a false proof *e silentio*, for there is no source extant that should have furnished such a testimony. The part of the diary comprising *Bābar*’s stay in *Ayodhyā* has gone missing during *Bābar*’s lifetime itself, as noted by its first English translator, Mrs. Beveridge: “the pages for five months after 28 March 1528 when *Bābar* noted his arrival (...) causes a narrative gap (...) There is no reliable account for these months” (Beveridge & Hiro, 2006, pp. 309).

Strangely, the Eminent Historians’ narrative was not just wrong about its history. Dragging in history, whether well-founded or not, was an uncalled-for diversion to begin with. Hindus had claimed the site because it was their place of pilgrimage *in the present*. Politicians had sought a workable compromise because they saw Hindus going there *now*. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century too, Father Tieffenthaler couldn’t get certainty from his local informants about whether the culprit had been *Bābar* or *Aurangzeb*, 250 c.q. 100 years earlier, because they *didn’t care*; they cared for their own *Rāma* worship in their own lifetimes. You can make a sensible choice between an exceptional pilgrimage site for millions from one community and a humdrum place of worship for a handful from another community without even considering the negative motive and method behind the construction of that humdrum building long ago. That historical research now turns out to confirm the Hindu claim is fine, but what really matters is that it’s a Hindu pilgrimage site *in the present*.

### **Court verdict**

When the logic of confrontation had run its course and the Mumbai bomb attacks of 12 March 1993 had served as a call to let it rest, the affair left the streets and reverted to the judiciary. In 2002-3 it had radar searches and excavations carried out. Earlier excavations by BB Lal in the 1970s (and tangentially even in the 1950s by AK Narain) near the site had already indicated a pre-existing temple, but now nothing impeded a full excavation. This brought to light the foundation of a huge 11<sup>th</sup>-century temple and earlier layers of human habitation stretching back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE. The artificial doubt about the temple’s existence created in the late 1980s had been cleared for good, the old consensus scientifically confirmed.

That this excavation had a stamp of authority was useful, but again, it only confirmed what we already knew. As archaeologist R. Nath could conclude already in 1991, long before the more complete excavation of 2003 removed all doubt: “The foregoing study of the architecture and site of the Baburi Masjid has shown, unequivocally and without any doubt, that it stands on the site of a Hindu temple which originally existed in the Ramkot on the bank of the river Sarayu, and Hindu temple material has also been used in its construction, and we are of the firm opinion that *the mosque was never built anew on virgin land*. Syed Shihabuddin and his associates have already agreed, in principle, ‘to demolish the mosque with their own hands’ if it is proved that it stands on a Hindu temple site and is built with Hindu temple materials. *It is.*” (Nath 1991:78, emphasis in the original.)

Another novel achievement by the UP High Court was calling some of the eminent historians to the witness stand. Professor Meenakshi Jain (2013, pp. 240-262) has documented the embarrassing collapse of their narrative now that their audience did not consist of gullible or partisan media but investigative judicial questioners. For one example, Dr. D. Mandal, whose 1993 on the disputed site's archaeology had been eagerly quoted in the media, is quoted as declaring in answer to judicial questions: "I never visited Ayodhya" (2x) (Jain, 2013, pp. 252-253). History is a discipline mostly practised in dusty archives and libraries, but archaeology requires a hands-on presence on the ground.

After the Court verdict of 2010, the surviving Eminent Historians have turned conspicuously silent on the *Ayodhyā* evidence. It is only ignorant outsiders whom you may still hear repeating the anti-temple arguments bandied about ca. 1990. What most hostile media now do is to bank on those arguments through the incredulous atmosphere they created regarding the scientific (a.k.a. the "Hindu fanatic") arguments.

On 30 September 2010, the Court gave its verdict. The contentious territory was divided in three equal parts. The "Friends of *Rāma Lālā*" (baby *Rāma*), an ad hoc organ of the VHP, would get the portion where the central dome of the Babri Masjid used to be, and where the idols of *Rāma* and *Sita* were kept in a makeshift temple. The place outside the former mosque where for centuries the Hindus had used an open-air altar (witnessed already by Tieffenthaler (Chatterjee, 1990, 1:178-180), was allotted to the *Nirmohi Ākhārā*. The remaining one-third was allotted to the Muslim claimant, the local *Sunni Waqf Board*, though the verdict denied its claim of ever having been in possession of the *Bābrī Masjid*. The more credible Muslim candidate as title-holder, Javed Hussain, the mosque's caretaker until 1935, had never filed a suit.

Many observers pleaded that dividing the land would only reproduce the situation before 1936, when Hindus and Muslims worshipped side by side and fought pitched battles. Moreover, all claimants wanted the entire territory for themselves, so each appealed to the Supreme Court. So, a new trial.

The Court clearly didn't have its heart in it. It tried to procrastinate and had to be admonished by the Law Minister, Ravi Shankar Prasad, to hurry up. It tried to shift the case to a non-judicial forum led by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar for an "amicable solution". But finally it did get down to business.

Its verdict came on 9 November 2019 (30 years to the day after the prospective temple's first stone had been laid, the *Śilānyās*) and confirmed the allotment of the contentious site to the Hindu side for construction of a *Rāma* birthplace temple. The Muslim side was given space for a mosque elsewhere in town, at a safe distance. The construction of the new temple, planned since long, was started forthwith.

### **The Hindu movement's understanding of iconoclasm**

In private, Hindu nationalists bemoan and curse this denial of Islamic iconoclasm, but in public, they avoid mentioning a crucial element in it: its Islamic motive. There is a notion abroad that the Hindu movement for the "liberation of Sri Ramajanmabhumi" is anti-Islamic. In reality, while its rank and file has indeed sometimes been forced into street fights with Muslims, its spokesmen never utter criticism of Islam; not at the time of the *Ayodhyā*

controversy, and even less today. On the contrary, their line is that all religions are equally valid paths to the same goal, Islam is a great religion, Mohammed was a great Prophet, and any Muslim conduct harmful to Hinduism is merely a “*perversion* of Islam at the hands of its power-drunk followers” (Golwalkar, 1996, pp. 73, emphasis added). In the Ayodhyā campaign, the handful of scholars who came forward to argue the historical case for the temple did focus on the doctrine of iconoclasm; but the Hindu leaders have systematically downplayed this religious aspect of the confrontation.

Key documents taken to prove the Bharatiya Janata Party’s communal intentions, such as its very decision to take up the *Ayodhyā* cause, actually peddle Secularist stereotypes. The BJP’s Palampur resolution of 11 June 1989, in which the party embraced the *Ayodhyā* campaign, stated that temple destruction or temple usurpation is “against the tenets of Islam” and blamed Muslim opposition to the temple’s reconstruction not on their Islamic convictions nor on the Secularists’ prodding, but on intrigues by “the vile Britishers in pursuance of their policy of divide and rule” (Anand & Nalwa, 2020).

In this case the BJP has come to espouse the Gandhian fiction that Hindus and Muslims had always stood together until the wily British came to divide them (hence the popularity in BJP circles of the Congressite fiction that it was the British who foisted Partition on India), and that temple destruction is an aberration from true Islam. The reality is that Islamic iconoclasm is as old as Islam itself and didn’t need outside encouragement.

In the official Hindu nationalist discourse, if Muslims ever demolished Hindu temples, it was never for Islamic reasons. The Lucknow bench of the UP High Court was repeating a phrase from the affidavits of both the *Hindu* litigants when it opined in its 2010 verdict that building a mosque in forcible replacement of a temple is “against the tenets of Islam”. So according to BJP theologians, Mohammed who set the precedent of usurping others’ places of worship was a bad Muslim?

As Sita Ram Goel observed, “the movement for the restoration of Hindu temples has got bogged down around the Rāma Janmabhūmi at Ayodhyā. The more important question, namely *why* the Hindu temples met the fate they did at the hands of the Islamic invaders, has not been even whispered. Hindu leaders have endorsed the Muslim propagandists in proclaiming that Islam does not permit the construction of mosques at other people’s places of worship. One wonders whether this kowtowing to Islam is prompted by ignorance, or cowardice, or calculation, or a combination of them all. The Islam of which Hindus are talking exists neither in the Qur’ān nor in the Sunnah of the Prophet.” (Goel 1993: cover text)

Worse, the “unkindest cut of all came from the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party. (...) they were trumpeting from the house-tops that Islam did not permit the destruction of other people’s places of worship, and that *namāz* offered in a mosque built on the site of a temple was not acceptable to *Allāh*! They were laying the blame for the destruction of the *Rām Mandir* not on Islam as an ideology of terror but on *Bābur* as a foreign invader!” (Goel 1993:v)

The refusal to face the seriousness of Islamic iconoclasm, claimed to be a mere “perversion” of Islam’s real tenets (Golwalkar, 1996, pp. 73), has landed the Hindu polemicists in a tight corner. It has made them maintain that the Hindu temple from ca. 1100 was still standing at the time of Bābar’s arrival in 1528, i.e. after 334 years of Muslim rule.

The transition between the major temple from ca. 1100 and *Bābar*’s mosque of 1528 remains to be reconstructed. In between, we have the decisive Muslim conquest by Mohammed Ghori in 1192. After he entered Delhi, his lieutenants continued eastward, conquering most of the Gangetic plain in the subsequent years. They made no compromise with the Infidels and demolished every incarnation of Heathenism they came across, most famously the numerous temples of *Vārāṇasī* and the Buddhist university of *Nālandā*. Subsequently, this entire area became part of the Delhi Sultanate with *Ayodhyā* as a provincial capital, right under the governor’s eye. Could a major Hindu temple have survived there? An architecturally Hindu structure may perhaps have survived, but on condition that it served as a mosque.

Shahabuddin’s point is valid. If there really was an Islamic practice of iconoclasm, then the massive conquest in 1194 would have been *the* occasion for it. Which indeed it was, e.g. in *Ayodhyā*: “Two tombs attributed to Paigambar Sis and Ayub (i.e. patriarchs Seth and Job) occupy the site where the extraordinary ‘toothbrush’ tree of Buddha had once stood, according to Fa Hien and Huen Tsang” (Chatterjee, 1990, 2:185). In some cases, monuments still pinpoint the time of destruction as that of the Ghurid invasion: “The ancient Jain temple of Adinath was destroyed by Maqdoom Shah Jooran Ghori, a commander of Mohammed Ghori, who later had his own tomb built on top of the ruins of Adinath, which survives till this day as Shah Jooran ka Tila” (Chatterjee, 1990, 2:185). It would be strange if a Rāma temple had survived where the *Ādināth* temple perished.

Since *Ayodhyā* was a provincial capital, opportunities for wresting the site from Muslim control were fewer than in the case of the outlying Somnath temple, which was rebuilt again and again. Only times of infighting among the Muslim elite could give rebellious Hindus a chance; most of the time, they were in no position to challenge Muslim power by maintaining an idol temple. More likely, as affirmed by BMAC advocate Suraj Bhan (2003), “a mosque belonging to the Sultanate period was expanded to build the Babri Masjid”.

An alternative hypothesis arises: that the mosque predates Bābar. It was built in the Sharqi style developed ca. 1300, so Sushil Srivastava and R. Nath, reckoned among the anti- and the pro-temple camp respectively, have suggested the building belongs to the Sultanate period: “architectural design does help us to conclude that the mosque belongs to a period before Babur” (Srivastava, 1991, pp. 92). And: “It is quite probable (...) that a mosque was first raised during the Sultanate period (...) on the site of the most important temple associated with the life of Rāma, and Mir Baqi just *restored* that mosque during his occupation of *Ayodhyā*” (Nath, 1991, pp. 38, emphasis in the original).

So, we still have several probabilities rather than certainties. Salar Masud Ghaznavi may have destroyed the preceding temple in 1030; Shah Juran Ghori may have destroyed the major temple in 1194; and Bābar may have destroyed a former mosque in 1528. But we know for sure that a Hindu temple has existed at the site, that Hindu pilgrims would never leave it alone, and that a mosque could only come up at this intensely Hindu site by forcefully imposing it. Whatever Bābar and the others have done, it was a case of Islamic iconoclasm.

So this tinkering with details doesn't alter the moral case for the temple. Whether demolished in 1194 or in 1528, the temple became the victim of Islamic iconoclasm in either event. The site was still taken from Hindus by Muslims, and the Hindu claim is still one for restoration of what was once theirs and has remained their place of pilgrimage all through.

### **Eminent historians displeased with the Ayodhyā verdict**

Romila Thapar, most eminent among India's eminent historians, protests against the Court verdict acknowledging the historical evidence that the Bābar mosque in Ayodhyā had been built in forcible replacement of a Rama temple. After two decades of living on top of the world, the eminent historians are brought down to earth.

That is when a group of "eminent historians" started raising the stakes and turning this local communal deal into a clash of civilizations, a life-and-death matter on which the survival of the greatest treasure in the universe depended, viz. secularism. Secure in (or drunk with) their hegemonic position, they didn't limit themselves to denying to the Hindus the right of rebuilding their demolished temple, say: "A medieval demolition doesn't justify a counter-demolition today." Instead, they went so far as to deny the well-established fact that the mosque had been built in forcible replacement of a Rama temple.

Note, incidentally, that the temple demolition, a very ordinary event in Islamic history, was not even the worst of it: as a stab to the heart of Hindu sensibilities, the Babri mosque stood imposed on a particularly sacred site. Just as for Hindus, the site itself was far more important than the building on it, for Islamic iconoclasts the imposition of a mosque on such an exceptional site was a greater victory over infidelism than yet another forcible replacement of a heathen temple with a mosque. Though the historians' and archaeologists' ensuing research into the Ayodhyā temple demolition has been most interesting, it was strictly speaking superfluous, for the sacred status venerated by most Hindus and purposely violated by some Muslims accrues to the site itself rather than to the architecture on it. The implication for the present situation is that even if Muslims refuse to believe that the mosque had been built in forcible replacement of a temple, they nonetheless know of the site's unique status for Hindus even without a temple. So, they should be able to understand that any Muslim claim to the site, even by non-violent means such as litigation, amounts to an act of anti-Hindu aggression. Muslims often complain of being stereotyped as fanatical and aggressive, but here they have an excellent opportunity to earn everyone's goodwill by abandoning their inappropriate claim to a site that is sacred to others but not to themselves.

After the eminent historian's media offensive against the historical evidence, the political class, though intimidated, didn't give in altogether but subtly pursued its own idea of a reasonable solution. In late 1990, Chandra Shekhar's minority government, supported and largely teleguided by opposition leader Rajiv Gandhi, invited the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Babri Masjid Action Committee (BMAC) to mandate some selected scholars for a discussion of the historical evidence. The politicians had clearly expected that the debate would bring out the evidence and silence the deniers for good. And that is what

happened, or at least the first half. Decisive evidence was indeed presented, but it failed to discourage the deniers.

The VHP-employed team presented the already known documentary and archaeological evidence and dug up quite a few new documents confirming the temple demolition (including four that Muslim institutions had tried to conceal or tamper with). The BMAC-employed team quit the discussions but brought out a booklet later (Sharma et al., 1991), trumpeted as the final deathblow of the temple demolition “myth”. In fact, it turned out to be limited to an attempt at whittling down the evidential impact of a selected few of the pro-temple documents and holding forth on generalities of politicized history without proving how any of that could neutralize this particular evidence. It contained not a single (even attempted) reference to a piece of actual evidence proving an alternative scenario or positively refuting the established scenario. We have given a full account earlier in our (2002) book.

Unfortunately, no amount of evidence could make the deniers mend their ways. Though defeated on contents, the "eminent historians" became only more insistent in denying the evidence. They especially excelled in blackening and slandering those few scholars who publicly stood by the evidence, not even sparing the towering archaeologist BB Lal. Overnight, what had been the consensus in Muslim, Hindu and European sources, was turned into a "claim" by "Hindu extremists". Thus, the eminent historians managed to intimidate a Dutch scholar, Peter van der Veer (1994), who had earlier contributed even more elements to the already large pile of evidence for the temple demolition, into backtracking.

Most spectacularly, they managed to get the entire international media and the vast majority of India-related academics who ever voiced an opinion on the matter, into toeing their line. These dimly-informed India-watchers too started intoning the no-temple mantra and slandering the dissidents, to their faces or behind their backs, as "liars", "BJP prostitutes", and what not. In Western academe, dozens chose to toe this party-line of disregarding the evidence and denying the obvious, viz. that the Babri Masjid (along with the Ka'ba in Mecca, the Mezquita in Cordoba, the Ummayad mosque in Damascus, the Aya Sophia in Istanbul, the Quwwatu'l-Islam in Delhi, etc.) was one of the numerous ancient mosques built on, or with materials from, purposely desecrated or demolished non-Muslim places of worship.

Until the Babri Masjid demolition by Hindu activists on 6 December 1992, Congress PM Narasimha Rao was clearly continuing Rajiv Gandhi's plan of a bloodless hand-over of the site to the Hindus in exchange for some concessions to the Muslims. The Hindu activists who performed the demolition were angry with the leaders of their own *Bhāratīya Janatā Party* (BJP) for seemingly abandoning the *Ayodhyā* campaign after winning the 1991 elections with it, but perhaps the leaders had genuinely been clever in adjusting their *Ayodhyā* strategy to their insiders' perception of a deal planned by the PM.

After the demolition, Rao milked it for its anti-BJP nuisance value and gave out some pro-mosque signals; but a closer look at his actual policies shows that he stayed on course. His Government requested the Supreme Court to offer an opinion on the historical



background of the Ayodhyā dispute, the so-called “one-point reference”, knowing fully well from the outcome of the scholars’ debate that an informed opinion could only favour the old consensus (now perversely known as the “Hindu claim”). In normal circumstances, it is not a court's business to pronounce on matters of history, but then whom else could you trust to give a fair opinion when the professional historians were being so brazenly partisan?

The Supreme Court sent the matter on (hence a criticism by Dasgupta et al., 1995) to the Allahabad High Court, which, after sitting on the *Ayodhyā* case since 1950, at long last got serious about finding out the true story. It ordered a ground-penetrating radar search and the most thorough excavations. In this effort, carried out in 2003, the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) employed a large number of Muslims in order to preempt the predictable allegation of acting as a Hindu nationalist front, among them KK Mohammed who publicly and repeatedly confirmed the temple claim. The findings confirmed those of the excavations in the 1950s, 1970s and 1992: a very large Hindu religious building stood at the site before the Babri Masjid. The picture emerging from all this clutching at straws was clear enough: there is no such thing as a refutation of the overwhelming ASI evidence, just as there was no refutation of the archaeological and documentary evidence presented earlier. The Allahabad High Court accepted these findings by India's apex archaeological body.

But not everyone is willing to abide by the verdict. In particular, the eminent historians were up in arms. In a guest column, Prof. Romila Thapar (2010) claims that the ASI findings had been "disputed". After two decades of living on top of the world, with the media and the India-watchers safely in their pocket, the eminent historians finally had to face a powerful counter-force. They were brought down to earth.

Oh well, it is true that some of her school had thought up the most hilariously contrived objections, which I held against the light in my booklet Thus, it was said that the presence of pillar-bases doesn't imply that pillars were built on it; you see, some people plant pillar bases here and there once in a while, without any ulterior motive of putting them to some good use. And it was alleged that the finding of some animal bones in one layer precludes the existence of a temple (and somehow annuls the tangible testimony of the vast foundation complex and the numerous religious artefacts); and more such hare-brained reasoning.

Today, I feel sorry for the eminent historians. They have identified very publicly with the denial of the Ayodhyā evidence. While politically expedient, and while going unchallenged in the academically most consequential forums for twenty years, that position has now been officially declared false. It suddenly dawns on them that they have tied their names to an enterprise unlikely to earn them glory in the long run. We may now expect frantic attempts to intimidate the Supreme Court into annulling the Allahabad verdict, starting with the ongoing signature campaign against the learned Judges’ finding; and possibly it will succeed. But it is unlikely that future generations, unburdened with the presently prevailing power equation that made this history denial profitable, will play along and keep on disregarding the massive body of historical evidence. With the Ayodhyā verdict, the eminent historians are catching a glimpse of what they will look like when they stand before Allah’s throne on Judgment Day.

## The Ayodhyā debate

Physically useless, they were included for another purpose, viz. as carriers of the message that on this site, Paganism had made way for Islam. The same inclusion of Infidel relics is in evidence in the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi, incorporating remains of the Kashi Vishvanath temple destroyed by Aurangzeb, or in the Ummayad mosque in Damascus incorporating parts of the preceding Christian cathedral of John the Baptist, or in the Aya Sofia, which retains the architecture of the Christian Cathedral of the Hagia Sophia (“sacred wisdom”). Likewise the Ayodhyā mosque was definitely built in iconoclastic replacement of a temple. But by whom?

### Only 99% of evidence

Many details of the story still elude us. Archaeologists were successful in digging up the evidence, so that since at least Indira Gandhi 1976 the anti-temple side always tried to prevent upcoming (or pooh-pooh completed) archaeological excavations (see Goradia, 2021). Together with art historians they can ever-better determine when a temple was built; but not yet when it was demolished. We know that in the later part of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, a grand temple was built, of which the foundation and many relics have been dug up. But do we know that it was *Bābar* who did its demolishing? The mosque structure that used to stand there until 1992 clearly has a link with *Bābar*, but to what extent is it *Bābar* who ordered its building?

Part of the reason for this uncertainty is simply the nature of historical research: it is dependent on findings. If no data are found, we won't know what exactly happened, until such time as those data are kind enough to offer themselves for discovery. Thus, about Moghul conqueror *Bābar*'s doings in Ayodhyā, we almost had an exceptionally useful source, viz. his very own diary (tra. Beveridge, 2006), which throws a flood of light upon his motives, his opinions of Hindustan and Hinduism, and his activities in many other places. Yet, his prized account of his encounter with Rama's birthplace has gone missing. As noted in a younger section of the diary, the relevant pages were blown away by a storm-wind. So, any hypothesis on what he himself did there is necessarily based on mere second-hand or circumstantial evidence.

That he was an active iconoclast and persecutor of Infidelism was known from musings and boasts elsewhere in his diary as well as from other people's testimonies, such as Guru Nanak's: “The great Guru's *Bābar-vānī* contains the strongest-ever condemnation of *Bābar*'s vandalism. The text mentions, inter alia, that thanks to the vandal's destruction-mania, temples as strong as a thunderbolt were set on fire” (Narain, 1993, pp. 14). But that he applied this in the particular case of Rama's birthplace, we can only infer. We don't really *know* (in the strong sense of the term) what exactly *Bābar* made himself guilty of there, if anything at all.

The inscription on the gate to the mosque did connect the building to *Bābar*, asserting that it was built at his command by his noble Mir Baqī. It is stylistically of one piece with the inscriptions on other mosques built on *Bābar*'s behalf (Nath, 1991, pp. 21-24) and there is no reason to doubt its genuineness. But the disappointing fact is that it remained silent on what went before at that location or what had prompted him: no mention of a temple or a

demolition. Nor, for the minimizers, their desired specific reason other than the Islamic doctrine of iconoclasm. And in the background, there is always the historian's awareness that even what little contemporaneous information we do have, can still be intentionally untruthful.

Even the most direct testimony by a contemporary doesn't give sufficient detail. Srichand Baba, son of Guru Nanak, wrote: "Khiljis, Tughlaqs, Lodhis, Saiyads, Suris and then Moghuls established their rules forcibly. They massacred people, covered the earth with cut heads. The land appeared to wear the veil of the blood of innocents. Mosques were constructed on the birthplace of Rama and Krishna. The Shivalinga of Kashi entered a well. Temples have been destroyed, Murtis broken. What will happen tomorrow now -- who knows. Oh Lord, when will you come to protect the weak?" (repro. in Priyatam Prakashan, 2000, pp. 103).

Note that he blames Muslim conquerors in general for destroying Rāma's birthplace temple, not *Bābar* specifically. For a historian (not to speak of a police inspector) looking to identify an individual culprit, this is disappointing. But from a theological viewpoint, it is all that matters: what doctrine accounts for the will to destroy this idol temple?

This sums up the over-all picture of Islam's role in India, like a premodern version of Will Durant's famous phrase that "the Islamic conquest of India is probably the bloodiest story in history". Bābar as the first Moghul is included in this cruel enumeration, he must have been bad, but it is not specifically said that he demolished a temple at the Rama Janmabhumi site.

Likewise, *Goswāmī Tulsidās*, the writer of the Hindi Rāmāyaṇa, who lived for some time in Ayodhyā two generations after *Bābar*, testifies in verses 86-92 of his *Dohā Śataka* (Singh ed. 1944, original 1590) that the Muslim rulers including Bābar persecuted and humiliated the Hindus, but without specifically pin-pointing that Bābar destroyed the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Rama temple. He comes close, though: "Tulasīdāsa says that in the hard and inappropriate age, [they, the *Yāvanas*] forcibly made the Hindus bereft of *Śikhā* (the hair tuft) and *Sūtra* (the sacred thread) and made them wander [as homeless people], after which they expelled them from their country (native place). The barbaric Bābar came, with a sword in his hand, and killed people after repeatedly calling out to them. Tulasīdāsa says that the time was terrible. Tulasīdāsa says that in the Saṃvat 1585 (1528 AD), sometime around the summer season, the ignorant *Yavanas* caused disaster and sorrow in Awadh (Ayodhyā). Destroying the temple at Rāmajanmabhūmi, they constructed a mosque. When they killed many Hindus, Tulasīdāsa cried out - Alas! Mir Baqī destroyed the temple in Awadh (Ayodhyā) and the *Rāmasamāja* (the idols Rāma Pañcāyatana – Rāma, Sītā, Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa, Śatrughna, Hanumān). [On thinking of this,] Tulasīdāsa cries, beating his chest, O the best of Raghus! Protect us, protect us! Tulasīdāsa says that in the midst of Awadh (Ayodhyā), where the Rāmajanmabhūmi temple was resplendent, there the wicked and vile Mir Baqī constructed a mosque. Tulasīdāsa says that where there was constant ringing of the bells and the narrations (*upakhāna*, from Saṃskṛta *upākhyāna*) of the Rāmāyaṇa, Veda and Purāṇa, the ignorant (*ajāna*) Yavana read (literally, 'did') the Quran and the Azaan (*ajāna*)" (translation by Nityanand Misra).

So, the blame for the temple destruction goes to the *Yāvanas* (originally "Ionians", i.e. pre-Christian Greeks, later any invader from the West) in general, and for the mosque construction to Mir Baqī. Bābar is very present, but is not explicitly said to be actively

involved in the temple/mosque affair. For historians a serious probability, but in a Court of law it falls short of “proof beyond reasonable doubt”, so any good lawyer would get *Bābar* acquitted. Moreover, born in 1511 in far-away Chitrakoot, Tulsidas was probably not really an eye-witness. And we still don’t know what “temple” means in his account. It is clear by now that during much of Muslim rule there was a Hindu presence at the site, Hindus managed to celebrate *Rāma Navamī* there when not militarily prevented (the probable situation under the tottering Lodi regime), but this doesn’t require Hindu temple architecture.

Indeed, Tulsidas’ own experience with Rama’s birthplace illustrates this, as can be glimpsed from a work popularly ascribed to him, the *Kavitāvalī*, composed sometime between 1608 and 1614 AD during the reign of *Jahāngīr* (Narayan, 2021). In this work the old Tulsidas asserts that he does not care for the world. In the last verse he utters the famous line: "I will ask to eat (= beg), and will sleep in the mosque." To sleep in a mosque was a common thing for travelling Muslims, but the entry of non-Muslims was prohibited. As per a common interpretation, also upheld in 2003 by Swami Jagadguru Ramabhadracarya when he deposed as an expert witness for religious matters in the Ayodhyā trial before the UP High Court, the "mosque" referred to here was the disputed structure, of which the status as Rama’s birthplace must have attracted Tulsidas. If this is true, Hindus must have taken control of (a portion of) the disputed structure at the time. And indeed, under the older Akbar, and largely persisting under Jahangir and Shah Jahan, Hindus were allowed to rebuild their temples. In the case of Ayodhyā, the compromise seemed to have been that the mosque building remained but was (partly, intermittently?) used for Hindu worship. Hence the Hindu poet could find shelter there, close to his deity.

### ***Ayodhyā* and politics**

The BJP has two reputations. One is wildly propagated by the secularist and international media, viz. that it is fanatically Hindu. This paradoxically endears it to the masses of Hindu voters, so the BJP is happy enough that its enemies do this propaganda job. All the more so because this allows the party itself to deny the Hindu character which it is credited with and which it once really had, viz. when Shyam Prasad Mookerjee founded its earlier incarnation, the Jan Sangh, in 1951. It still had a Hindu face when it joined the *Ayodhyā* movement in 1989 and staged a *Rath Yātra* in 1990 featuring party chairman LK Advani; but after winning the 1991 elections, when it became the biggest non-Congress party, it lost its zeal. Yet when the long march ended victorious with the Supreme Court verdict in 2019 and the temple came up, it was happy enough to take the credit.

Over-all, the party gradually became ever less Hindu since Mookerjee’s death in 1953. When the voters express their disappointment after the BJP has, in their judgment, once more betrayed the Hindu cause (by maximizing minority appeasement, contrary to its 1990s’ slogan “Justice for all, appeasement of none”; by expressing pride in how they outdo other parties in appeasement; by neglecting to abolish the anti-Hindu discriminations in the Constitution; or by sacking its spokeswoman Nupur Sharma for soberly speaking the *Qur’ān*-certified facts about the Prophet), it can truthfully reply: we never promised you anything Hindu, our election manifesto only promised secular values like development.

And this is the other BJP, which sometimes figures in Secularist discourse as well: a party that is for sale, that has no principles of its own, as corrupt as the other parties, and that only uses the Hindu card opportunistically. This wobbly unprincipled stand in the *Ayodhyā* affair exemplifies it. Thus, Sushma Swaraj, Foreign Minister in the AB Vajpayee Cabinet, said: *Ayodhyā* is but an electoral card which you can't play twice. Or the then Justice Minister Arun Jaitley assured the US Ambassador in 2004: *Hindutva* is but an electoral ploy, and after winning the elections we can return to secular business as usual. It is not this BJP that will put up a spirited fight for Hindu causes.

Then again, this is not the whole story either, and it remains undeniable that numerous BJP rank-and-file feel strongly about the *Ayodhyā* temple. The party's UP CM Kalyan Singh played a crucial role in making the *Kar Seva* of 6 December 1992 possible, together with Congress PM Narasimha Rao. LK Advani, who was the pro-temple face of the BJP, said, after the final verdict in 2019, that he felt "blessed and vindicated" (PTI, 2019). But formally the achievement of the rebuilding of the *Rāma Janmabhūmi* temple was not the BJP's. The movement for its liberation was started by politicians from Congress and the *Hindū Mahāsabha*, it was organized by the VHP, some efforts in the right direction were made by Congress PM Rajiv Gandhi and Home Minister Buta Singh, it was furnished with a documentary and archaeological basis by an ad hoc conglomerate of independent scholars (among whom only archaeologist SP Gupta was affiliated with the Sangh, and which included Muslims AR Khan and KK Muhammed).

This evidence was then taken to heart by the Courts, who gave their verdicts in full independence from the political parties. During the 2024 election campaign, the BJP routinely claimed that the Supreme Court in 2019 had only dared to give a pro-temple verdict because the BJP was in power, both in Uttar Pradesh and at the Centre. This is contradicted by the UP High Court's pro-temple verdict of 2010 when the BJP was not in power at either level. Moreover, it wrongly implies that India is a banana republic where the three Powers are not independent from one another but the Executive can dictate verdicts to the Judiciary. While that dim view of India has many takers among India-watchers abroad, we don't agree with it.

## **Conclusion**

The mere fact that the *Rama Janmabhumi* site in *Ayodhyā* is well-established as a sacred site for Hindu pilgrimage, ought to be reason enough to protect its functioning as a Hindu sacred site, complete with proper Hindu temple architecture. *Ayodhyā* doesn't have this status in any other religion, most certainly not in Islam, which imposed a mosque on it. So, the sensible and secular thing to do, even for those skeptical of every religious belief involved, is to leave the site to the Hindus. The well-attested fact that Hindus kept going there even when a mosque was standing, even under Muslim rule, is helpful to know in order to gauge its religious importance; but is not strictly of any importance in the present. For respecting its Hindu character, it is sufficient that the site has this sacred status today.

Due to the polemic around its history arising in the 1980s, the historical and archaeological record has been inspected, first by scholars and then by the judiciary. This showed it has been a Hindu site since thousands of years, and thus confirmed the common-sense position that the site belongs to the Hindus. The consecration of the rebuilt temple brings this long story full circle: back to normal.

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