

## AYODHYA KA ITIHAS : SRI RAM JANAM BHOOMI KE PRATHMIK VIDHVANSH

**Dr. Vinit Kumar,**

*Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar (A Central) University,  
Lucknow.*

### ABSTRACT

*The controversy about Ayodhya ka Itihas : Sri Râma Janmabhûmi ke prathmik vidhvansh*

- I. Ancient, viz. Rama's historicity. This is indeterminate, just like most religious foundation stories, e.g. the Muslim belief that Adam built the Kaaba. The tradition about Rama's life in Ayodhya is, by contrast, solid since at least two thousand years.*
- II. Medieval-to-modern, viz. the site's history as a Hindu pilgrimage centre, the temple's alleged forcible replacement with a mosque, and the Hindu attempts to regain the site. The archaeological evidence for successive Hindu temples is plentiful, as is the documentary evidence for the iconoclastic nature of its Islamic replacement. We have nonetheless found important unknowns for the period 1194-1855, e.g. the status of the site under the Delhi Sultanate.*
- III. Contemporary, viz. the political and intellectual struggle over the site's future, in which the Congress is shown to have done more for the temple than the BJP.*

The dispute over the Ayodhya temple/mosque has regained importance when the litigation over the contentious site, started in 1950, reached a provisional conclusion at last with the Allahabad High Court (three-member Lucknow Bench) verdict of 30 September 2010. The majority acknowledged that a mosque had been built in forcible replacement at the site, and all three jointly decided to treat the disputed site as the birthplace of Rama. The Court awarded two-thirds of the terrain including the exact spot of the Babri building to one of the Hindu claimants. The Friends of *Râm Lalla* (baby Rama), an ad hoc organ of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council), would get the portion where the central dome of the Babri Masjid used to be, and where at present the idols of Rama and Sita are kept in a makeshift temple. The place outside the former mosque where for centuries the Hindus had used an open-air altar, the *Râm Cabûtrâ*

(“platform”, witnessed by Austrian Jesuit Joseph Tieffenthaler ca. 1770 [Chatterjee 1990/1:178-180]), is allotted to the Nirmohi Akhara, the local establishment of the Ramanandi sect. 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 Babri Masjid. The more credible Muslim candidate as title-holder, Javed Hussain, the mosque's Mutawalli (caretaker) until 1935, never filed a suit.

Almost immediately, the Hindu claimants as well as the Muslim claimant have appealed against this allotment. They and many observers pleaded that dividing the land would only reproduce the situation of 1855 and 1935, when Hindus and Muslims worshipped almost side by side and pitched battles were fought. Nobody of consequence heeded the plan proposed in some Muslim circles,

viz. to build an Islamic-style peace monument rather than a mosque on their part of the land; just as earlier proposals by Muslim moderates to leave the site to the Hindus had always been disregarded. Each of the litigants is claiming all three parts, so the final verdict is still awaited from the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, we take stock of the historical elements underlying the dispute.

The entire judgment delivered by the three Honorable Judges separately runs into 8500 pages and is available on the website of India's National Integration Council: [rjbm.nic.in](http://rjbm.nic.in). Mr. Justice Dharam Veer Sharma opens by affirming: "The disputed site is the birth place of Lord Ram." Mr. Justice Sudhir Agarwal concurs: "The area covered under the central dome of the disputed structure is the birthplace of Lord Rama as per faith and belief of Hindus." The one Muslim on the Bench, Mr. Justice Sibghat Ullah Khan, isn't equally affirmative on this point, and merely accepts: "That after some time of construction of the mosque Hindus started identifying the premises in dispute as exact birth place of Lord Ram". That is why: "[M]uch before 1855 Ram Chabutra and Seeta Rasoi ['Sita's kitchen'] had come into existence and Hindus were worshipping in the same."

As for the mosque's construction, Sharma opines: "The disputed building was constructed by Babar, the year is not certain, but it was built against the tenets of Islam. Thus, it cannot have the character of a mosque." Khan confirms: "The disputed structure was constructed as mosque by or under orders of Babar." What preceded the mosque? Sharma: "The disputed structure was constructed on the site of old structure after demolition of the same. The Archaeological Survey of India has proved that the structure was a massive Hindu religious structure." Agarwal: The building in dispute was constructed after demolition of Non-Islamic religious structure, i.e., a Hindu temple." Here Khan dissents: "No temple was demolished for constructing the mosque." He acknowledges that a temple had stood at the site, but that the mosque's builder had had nothing to do with the temple's demolition:

## COURT VERDICT

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demolition: "Mosque was constructed over the ruins of temples which were lying in utter ruins since a very long time before the construction of mosque and some material thereof was used in construction of the mosque." All the same, Khan concurs with his colleagues in the final settlement: "That in view of the above both the parties are declared to be joint title holders in possession of the entire premises in dispute and a preliminary decree to that effect is passed with the condition that (...) the portion beneath the Central dome where at present makeshift temple stands will be allotted to the share of the Hindus."

## COURT-ORDERED EXCAVATIONS REVEAL TEMPLE FOUNDATIONS

When the debate over Ayodhya's history erupted in 1989, the first stance of the anti-temple party was to blame the belief in the temple destruction by Babar on the British. Thus, "the myth is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century creation – by the British." [Noorani 1990:66] Srivastava [1991:26] makes an even more implausible claim: "I am convinced that before the second half of the nineteenth century, the idea that the Moghul emperors had desecrated Hindu holy places was quite unknown. It was with the advent of the British in Ayodhya that this belief started spreading." Prof. Harbans Mukhia confirms: "The link between the Rama temple and the Babri Masjid has a history of no more than 150 years behind it." [*The Hindu*, 27 June 2003, repr. Noorani 2003:xviii] The British concoction thesis, with "the bias of British officialdom" as one factor that "fed the belief that the Mosque was built after the destruction of a temple" [Mandal & Ratnagar 2007:6], has been upheld in some circles for at least 18 years.

Wiser elements in the anti-temple camp have shifted their position when the pro-temple camp presented evidence of pre-British confirmation by local Muslims and one Hindu and by European travelers [Chatterjee 1990, Narain 1993], starting with William Finch in 1608 who saw "the ruins of Ra[m]chand's castle and houses, which the Indians acknowledge for the great God" [repr. Foster

1921:176, analysed in Narain 1993:39-40], and Hindi poet Sant Laladasa, who ca. 1670 described the birthplace of Rama as securing heaven for whomever pays a visit to it [presented by Narain 1993:13]. They now prefer to link the “emergent” belief in the location of Rama’s birth at the Babri Masjid site with the settling and increasing prominence of the Rama-worshipping Ramanandi monastic order in Ayodhya between the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They never presented any documentary evidence for this, but the hypothesis is more reasonable than the British concoction scenario. (Less reasonable is the unexplained implication that the Ramanandis, while inventing out of the blue a site for Rama’s birth, should have picked the site of a prominent mosque at a time when Muslim power was firmly established.)

In order to leave the realm of multi-interpretable textual evidence and pure speculation, an appeal was made to the more tangible evidence of archaeology. In 2002, the High Court had asked for an investigation of the site, first with Ground-Penetrating Radar, and when this seemed to confirm the long-standing tradition of temple remains underneath the disputed site, with excavations by the ASI. The resulting findings were in the public domain since mid-2003 and have been intensely debated [vide Elst 2003]. We quote from the ASI Report [ASI 2003]’s summary: “Excavation at the disputed site of Rama Janmabhumi - Babri Masjid was carried out by the Archaeological Survey of India from 12 March 2003 to 7 August 2003. During this period, as per the directions of the Hon’ble High Court, Lucknow, 82 trenches were excavated to verify the anomalies mentioned in the report of the Ground Penetrating Radar Survey which was conducted at the site prior to taking up the excavations.” “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 B.C. (1250 ± 130 B.C.)(...)” “Subsequently, during the early medieval period (eleventh - twelfth century A. D.) 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 A. D.) It was over the top of this construction during the early sixteenth century, the disputed structure was constructed directly resting over it.”

“The Hon’ble High Court, in order to get sufficient archaeological evidence on the issue involved ‘whether there was any temple/structure which was demolished and mosque was constructed on the disputed site’ as stated on page 1 and further on p. 5 of their order dated 5 march 2003, had given directions to the Archaeological Survey of India to excavate at the disputed site where the GPR Survey has suggested evidence of anomalies which could be structure, pillars, foundation walls, slab flooring etc. which could be confirmed by excavation . 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 alongwith the yield of stone and decorated bricks as well as mutilated sculpture of divine couple and carved architectural’ members including foliage patterns, *âmalaka* [a fruit motif], *kâpotapâlî* [a “dovecot” frieze or cornice] doorjamb with semi-circular pilaster, broken octagonal shaft of black schist pillar, lotus motif, circular shrine having *pranâla* (waterchute) in the north, fifty pillar bases in association of the huge structure, are indicative of remains which are distinctive features found associated with the temples of north India.” This ought to lay to rest all doubts about a pre-existing

temple at the site of the mosque. But a number of unknowns remain. Both parties to the debate are so cock-sure about their theories, when in fact the transition between the Rajput-built temple ca. 1100 and the Babri mosque of 1528 remains to be reconstructed. In particular, the highs and lows in Islamic iconoclasm against Hindu temples in Ayodhya have not been mapped in detail and are in dispute.

## THE REAL YEAR OF DESTRUCTION

The refusal to face the seriousness of Islamic iconoclasm has landed the Hindu polemicists in a tight corner. It has allowed them to maintain that the Hindu temple from ca. 1100, of which remains have been identified by the ASI, was still standing at the time of Babar's arrival, i.e. after 334 years of Muslim rule. Anti-temple campaigner Syed Shahabuddin explains how after several forays into the region by Muslim invaders (esp. Mahmud Ghaznavi ca. 1000 and his nephew Salar Masud Ghaznavi ca. 1030), "Ayodhya (...) 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 Ayodhya 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]

One of the ugly aspects of the Ayodhya debate is the way polemicists have tried to neutralize opponents by simply labeling them as "extremists" and what not; as if that made any difference to the truth or otherwise of their arguments. In this case, though Shahabuddin's name is a by-word for Islamic fanaticism, his point is entirely valid. If there really was an Islamic practice of iconoclasm, then the massive conquest in 1194 would have been *the* occasion to display it.

Which indeed it was. In a few years' time, practically all Buddhist establishments in the Ganga basin, including the university of Nalanda, were leveled. Unlike Hindu establishments, they were never rebuilt because the Buddhist community perished along with the institutions in which it was concentrated. Thus, in Ayodhya: "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 Rama temple had survived where the Adinath temple perished.

On this point, the anti-temple party's position made more sense. Since Ayodhya was a provincial capital of the Delhi Sultanate, opportunities for wresting the site from Muslim control were certainly more limited than in the case of the outlying Somnath temple, which was rebuilt again and again. Only times of infighting among the Muslim elite may have given rebellious Hindus some opportunities; 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.

The archaeological key lies in the layer between the Rajput temple (ca. 1100) and the Babri Masjid (1528): "For one thing, lime mortar and *surkhi* [a type of mixed cement], the recognized marks of Muslim construction, are present in practically all the excavated walls. The strong inference that the floor found below the Babri Masjid's own floor and the walls connected with it, belonged to an earlier mosque, has now been confirmed", according to Prof. Irfan Habib [*Hindustan Times*, 6 July 2003, repr. Noorani 2003:xxiv] "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", according to Prof. Suraj Bhan. [*Outlook*, 6 Sep. 2003, repr. Noorani 2003:xxviii] In the scholars' debate organized by the Government of India in 1990-91, both Habib and Bhan worked for the Babri Masjid Action Committee, so their objectivity will be doubted, but here their logic is valid.

Unfortunately for them, this doesn't alter the basic moral case for the temple. Whether demolished by Shah Juran Ghori in 1194 or by Babar 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.

But it does raise new questions. Most importantly: if a mosque stood at the disputed site during the Sultanate period, why did Babar have to build a new mosque on it? A mere redesigning of an unperturbed existing mosque would not justify renaming it after oneself, would it? An indication is given by the Hindu pillars incorporated in the Babri Masjid, following the pattern of including broken idols or other recognizably Hindu elements (but not whole idols) into mosques to visualize and celebrate the victory over Infidelism. According to Shahabuddin [1990/2:200], "the pillars do not support the mosque or the arches; they are only used decoratively". Physically useless, they were consequently used 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. But we don't know whether the incorporation was ordered by Babar and Mir Baqi or by the Ghurid conquerors.

Possibly Babar 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 found a way to recover it. Alternatively, the declining Lodis may have sought to win Hindu support by handing them the site, though

covered with a mosque building. According to 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 ancient idol temples'". Unlikely as it sounds, 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. At any rate, for now, these are open questions calling for fresh research.

## CONCLUSION

"Mosque was constructed over the ruins of temples which were lying in utter ruins since a very long time before the construction of mosque and some material thereof was used in construction of the mosque." All the same, Khan concurs with his colleagues in the final settlement: "That in view of the above both the parties are declared to be joint title holders in possession of the entire premises in dispute and a preliminary decree to that effect is passed with the condition that (...) the portion beneath the Central dome where at present makeshift temple stands will be allotted to the share of the Hindus." In 1947, the Babri Masjid was an empty building shielded from the public by Government order. Hindu devotees started agitating for unlimited Hindu access and for its replacement with proper Hindu architecture, not at the initiative of but with increasing participation from the VHP, and ultimately with official support from the BJP. At the political level, however, not the Hindu nationalist BJP but the Congress Party has been the main driving force in the gradual acceptance of the Hindu claim to the disputed site. By repeatedly linking policy to the question of the site's history, it favoured a pro-temple outcome. The Ayodhya verdict by the Lucknow Bench of the Allahabad High Court has directed the focus once more to the historical evidence. Of the pre-existence of a Hindu temple at the site, the evidence is definitive, though the details about its history between the first temple demolition in 1194 and Babar's intervention remain elusive. Of Rama's life and whereabouts, no evidence could ever be final, but the Court has taken

the position that it should respect Hindu traditional lore about its sacred sites as much as that of other religions. This restores normalcy where Hindus had felt treated as second-class citizens.

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