

The Resurgent India

A Monthly National Review

January 2024



“Let us all work for the Greatness of India.”
– The Mother

Year 14

Issue 10

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SUCCESSFUL FUTURE

(Full of Promise and Joyful Surprises)

Botanical name: Gaillardia Pulchella

Common name: Indian blanket, Blanket flower, Fire-wheels

Year 14

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A Declaration

We do not fight against any creed, any religion.

We do not fight against any form of government.

We do not fight against any social class.

We do not fight against any nation or civilisation.

We are fighting division, unconsciousness, ignorance, inertia and falsehood.

We are endeavouring to establish upon earth union, knowledge, consciousness, Truth, and we fight whatever opposes the advent of this new creation of Light, Peace, Truth and Love.

– The Mother

(Collected works of the Mother, Vol. 13, pp. 124-25)

RAM JANMABHOOMI: OBSTACLES TO NATIONALISTIC AND CULTURAL RESURGENCE AND THE WAY FORWARD

“The Ramayana embodied for the Indian imagination its highest and tenderest human ideals of character, made strength and courage and gentleness and purity and fidelity and self-sacrifice familiar to it in the suavest and most harmonious forms coloured so as to attract the emotion and the aesthetic sense, stripped morals of all repellent austerity on one side or on the other of mere commonness and lent a certain high divineness to the ordinary things of life... The work of Valmiki has been an agent of almost incalculable power in the moulding of the cultural mind of India: it has presented to it to be loved and imitated in figures like Rama and Sita, made so divinely and with such a revelation of reality as to become objects of enduring cult and worship, or like Hanuman, Lakshmana, Bharata the living human image of its ethical ideals; it has fashioned much of what is best and sweetest in the national character, and it has evoked and fixed in it those finer and exquisite yet firm soul tones and that more delicate humanity of temperament which are a more valuable thing than the formal outsides of virtue and conduct.” – Sri Aurobindo (CWSA 20, 1997, pp. 347-49).

The Ram Janmabhoomi movement has left a deep imprint on the Indian psyche. Waged over centuries and with many lives consecrated, the battle for reclaiming the Ram Janamsthan in Ayodhya has had such a permanent impact on the nation that it can be regarded as India’s second freedom struggle. This time the struggle was much longer – waged over five hundred years – with the battle being waged over the very

soul of the country. It was not just a battle for freedom, but for the liberation of the Indian mind and soul from the shackles which have sought to alienate the country from its own history and civilization. The Ram Janamsthan movement has been a manifestation of this battle.

In 1993, in the belated aftermath of the fall of the Babri masjid, LK Advani – Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) leader and the then face of the Ram mandir movement – had declared that the Ram mandir movement was not simply a movement aimed at erecting a temple but was aimed at creating among people an “awareness of cultural nationalism.” That this movement has played a pivotal role in changing the political, cultural, religious, and social landscape of India is undeniable. The fervor generated, and sacrifice made, among the Hindus during this movement not only led to a massive reawakening, but also changed the very structure of Indian politics in a way that has had a deep psychological effect. Politically, its impact propelled the BJP as a permanent counter-pole to the politics of minority appeasement and pseudo-secularism practiced by the Congress and regional parties. Socially, and more importantly, it acted as a counter to the Mandal politics, by unleashing a counter mobilization of lower castes along the lines of Hindutva.

The Ram mandir movement brought out the long-neglected issue of Ram temple from the dreary confines of the courtrooms to the lives of the people. The movement was reignited in 1980s to politically mobilize the Indian public through an alternative to the socialist-secular ethos that had paralyzed the Indian mind for many decades after Independence. After having traversed a decades-long and bloody trajectory – in many ways, coterminous with the journey of the country from tamasic inertia to nationalistic self-awareness

– the Mandir is now at its significant consecration ceremony.

This article will explore the history and significance of the Ram Janamsthan movement and the serious deeper challenges facing it.

RAMA CULT, AYODHYA, AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of religious and cultural symbolism of Lord Rama for India and the rest of the world has long predated the Janmabhoomi movement. Historian, Dr. Meenakshi Jain, explains that Sanskrit scholars have traced the antiquity of the Ramayana as far back as the fifth century BC, transmitted through generations in the form of oral traditions. She gives literary, sculptural, and epigraphic evidence that, by fourth to fifth century AD, the cult of Lord Rama had an all-India prevalence. This is visible through the works of Kalidasa, Pravarasena II and various scholars at the time, including those writing in Prakrit and those belonging to Jainism (Jain, 2013).

Besides, by the time of Muslim invasions, various dynasties also claimed descent from the dynasty of Lord Rama, styling themselves as incarnations meant to ward off the evil forces, presumably the foreign Mohammedan invaders.

Subsequently, the enlargement of the personality of Lord Rama to cover his depiction as Lord Vishnu further expanded Rama worship all over the country, as the number of temples dedicated to him also increased. Dr. Jain explains that, significantly, among the known examples of Rama temples from the twelfth century, the oldest seemed to have been the one at Ayodhya. The degree of devotion towards Lord Rama, among the Hindus, was evident to many observers and scholars. As

early as 17th and 18th centuries, Occidental scholars such as William Finch and Joseph Tiefenthaler, recorded consistent Hindu worship and devotion at Ayodhya as the birthplace of Lord Rama, including large processions and gatherings on occasions such as *Rama Navami* (Jain, 2013).

Further, references to *Ram Janamsthan* are also evident from Muslim sources. Dr. Jain records that, in 1858, the Mutawalli of Babri Masjid, in his first petition to the British government referred to the disputed structure as *Masjid Janamsthan*. An appeal in 1870 referred to it as *Masjid Baburi Waqia Janamsthan* (Jain, *The Battle for Rama*, 2017). Several works, composed in nineteenth century, in Arabic, Persian and Urdu, also made explicit references to the demolition of the temple and its replacement by Babri Masjid (Jain, *The Battle for Rama*, 2017).

One such example is from a translated work titled *Hindustan Islami Abd mein*, translated into Urdu by Maulana Shams Tabriz Khan, which records the following:

And among them is the great mosque that was built by the Timurid king Babar in the sacred city of Ajodhya. It is believed that Rama Chandra considered to be the manifestation of God, was born here. There is a long story about his wife Sita. There was a big temple for them in this city...Well, the said king Babar demolished it and built a mosque at that very place with chiseled stone in 923 AH (Narain, 1993; Jain, 2017).

Such records provide important insight into the original Janamsthan. Furthermore, there is also a wealth of archeological evidence provided by archeologists like Hans Bakker and early Indologists.

Besides this, historical records also shed light on persistent Hindu-Muslim tensions at the Janamsthan since the British

times. This not only involved extensive legal cases since 1857, but also continuous Hindu efforts to offer worship and reclaim the site. *The efforts put in by Hindus for generations reveal how the Ram Janamsthan movement had at its seed, the blood, martyrdom, and efforts of countless number of Hindus for almost five hundred years. It was such a massive, generations-old sacrifice which laid the foundation of the contemporary Ram Janmabhoomi movement since 1980s.* It is estimated that nearly four lakh lives were lost during the Ram Mandir movement (Pandit, 2024). The Lieutenant-Governor, visiting Ayodhya recorded how during the riots of 1934, a large crowd of Hindu *bairagis* had attacked the Masjid, with at least 200 *bairagis* at work to attempt to destroy the mosque (Jain, 2019).

In 1943, a letter by the Mutawalli of Babri Masjid stated that the mosque had been built on a ground where riots often take place every year. A 1948 report by a Waqf commissioner further verified that Muslims do not offer prayers at the mosque due to the fear of Hindus and Sikhs, as the latter prevents them from entering the premises. The same commissioner also described, in 1948, how *Ramayana patha* had been recited at the site for weeks and the front of the Masjid was dug up by the *bairagis* to hoist their flag there (Jain, 2019).

When the idol of Ram Lalla was placed inside the mosque in 1949, the refusal of Uttar Pradesh administration to remove the idol was based on the following reasoning, which sheds light on the Hindu attachment to the cause:

[The Hindus] are ready to kill and die in this cause. The depth of feeling behind the movement and the desperate nature of the resolves and vows in support of it should not be underestimated... (Jain, 2019).

Despite the wealth of evidence of all types available to show how the Masjid was built by demolishing the temple at the Janamsthan, for many decades, Leftist intelligentsia in India, has mounted a concerted campaign to keep the issue burning and prevent a peaceful resolution.

LEGAL DISPUTE OVER THE JANAMSTHAN

The legal dispute began when, in 1858, an FIR was filed against a group of Nihang Sikhs, who had written ‘Ram’ everywhere on the walls inside the Babri mosque and performed *havan* and *puja* there. They also installed a chabutra there. This was the first recorded legal evidence that the Hindus had staked claim to the temple. Prior to that, records of Hindu worship at the site and of the significance of the Janmabhoomi for Hindus are available through gazetteer’s records and travelogues which – though providing ample corroborating evidence of links between Rama and Ayodhya – have not been considered in the civil legal disputes.

After the tensions in 1858, the British administration decided to divide the mosque site into inner and outer courtyards, with the inner courtyard housing the mosque and the outer courtyard being the site where the Hindus were allowed to worship. In 1885, a Mahant filed a court case asking for a temple to be built in the mosque’s outer courtyard. This was dismissed. The next turning point came during the communal riots of 1934 when a part of the mosque was damaged and later rebuilt by the Britishers. After that, the issue was revived once again soon after Independence in 1949.

Legal Developments from 1949:

1950: Gopal Singh Visharad of Hindu Mahasabha files a

suit for the right to pray and conduct pooja in the inner courtyard. This was allowed by a civil court. Since then, restricted worship has been permitted at the site.

Paramahans Ramchandra Das filed a similar suit.

1959: Nirmohi Akhara filed a suit to take over the management of the site from the receiver appointed by the state government after the December 1949 events.

1961: Sunni Central Waqf Board filed a case for removal of idols and a handing over of the mosque to the Muslims.

1986: An appeal was filed with Faizabad district court seeking for the opening of locks and darshan of the idols found inside the disputed structure. This was a turning point in the Ayodhya dispute.

1989: Suit filed on behalf of Ram Lalla Virajman (deemed to be a legal minor) so that the site can be handed over for the construction of a Ram temple.

1991: Places of Worship Act, 1991 promulgated – it states that existing religious structures as of 15 August 1947 – cannot be altered. But the Ayodhya site does not come within its ambit since there was already a legal dispute around it.

1992: Babri mosque was razed, and a temporary, makeshift temple was erected near the site.

1993: Allahabad High Court held, in response to a petition, that every Hindu has the right to worship at the place believed to be the birthplace of Lord Ram.

Centre acquires 67-acre area within and around the disputed site and sends a reference to the Supreme Court to determine whether there was a temple prior to the construction of the

Babri masjid.

2002: Allahabad High Court starts hearing the case in 2002.

2003: The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) had carried out excavations at the site. According to ASI there is a massive non-Islamic structure, dating to 12th c, below the mosque and items of Hindu pilgrimage.

2010: Allahabad High Court delivers the judgement in 2010, dividing the land between the three disputing parties, namely, Ram Lalla Virajman, Nirmohi Akhara, and Sunni Central Waqf Board.

2011: In 2011, the case is admitted in the Supreme Court.

2019: The Supreme Court rules that the disputed area belongs to Ram Lalla Virajman for the construction of a Ram temple, while a mosque will be constructed elsewhere in Ayodhya. The Court dismissed the Leftist historians' report as mere 'opinion' while upholding the ASI findings as 'scientific.'

CONTEMPORARY RAM JANMABHOOMI MOVEMENT: AN ISSUE THAT HAS UNITED AND DIVIDED THE POLITICAL CLASS

The contemporary, post-Independence inception of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement can be traced to the appearance of idol of Ram Lalla in the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya during the intervening night of 22nd to 23rd December 1949. The idol was surreptitiously and daringly placed inside the Masjid by a devotee, Abhiram Das, who belonged to the Nirvani Akhara. When the matter came under investigation, the Uttar Pradesh (UP) government decided to maintain the status quo and let the idol remain. From the very beginning, the issue has divided

the political class of India, even though those early years after Independence were a time of Congress dominance at Centre and States, under the leadership of PM Nehru. Even though Nehru pressurized the then UP Chief Minister, Govind Ballabh Pant, to remove the idol, the UP administration defied the Prime Minister, and the MLAs and officers even threatened to resign if the idol was removed. The temple, thereafter, went under the receivership of the government.

Once the status quo was administratively and judicially assured, the issue of Ram mandir languished for more than two decades. It was during the 1980s, due to the efforts of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), that the issue saw a revival. The BJP was formed in 1980, after the former Bhartiya Jana Sangh leaders who had merged into the socialist Janata Party decided to part ways due to the decision of the latter to ban all links with the RSS. In 1982, RSS decided to make the Ram Mandir issue a focal point of national mobilization. Some Congress leaders also made common cause with the RSS in this endeavour, such as Dau Dayal Khanna, Dr. Karan Singh, and Gulzarilal Nanda. In 1984, the VHP constituted a committee to liberate Ram Janmabhoomi, headed by Mahant Avidyanath of Gorakhpur, the predecessor of Yogi Adityanath. The committee launched a yatra from Sitamarhi in Bihar to Ayodhya, carrying idols of Ram and Sita (Pathak, 2024). In 1985 came another landmark moment as the Rajiv Gandhi government, after a court order, got the locks of Babri Masjid opened, in a bid to reach out to Hindus after the Shah Bano debacle engineered by the Congress.

It was in 1989 that the movement for Ram mandir began to gather pace. In 1989, at its Palampur session, the BJP passed a resolution on Ram Janmabhoomi which said that the “nature

of the controversy is such that it just cannot be sorted out by a court of law”, and Rajiv Gandhi government allowed the VHP to hold a foundation-stone laying ceremony (*shilanyas*) for the Ram temple. The foundation stone was laid by Kameshwar Chaupal, a Dalit member of the present temple trust. After the shilanyas ceremony, a VHP leader had famously declared that what was witnessed was “not a simple ceremony to lay the foundation of a new temple. We have today laid the foundation stone of a Hindu Rashtra” (Mukhopadhyay, 2018).

Even as the Congress was self-limited by its Muslim vote bank, the BJP, under LK Advani assisted by Narendra Modi, initiated the uninhibited Rath Yatra from Somnath to Ayodhya that culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The Rath Yatra mobilized lakhs of people and was accompanied by enthusiastic *kar sevaks*. During the yatra, Advani was even greeted with *tilaks* of blood, to symbolize the sacrifice that people were ready to make for Lord Ram. When it reached Bihar, Advani was arrested, even as the *kar sevaks* continued onto Ayodhya. In UP, the then Chief Minister, Mulayam Sigh Yadav of Samajwadi Party (SP), ordered police firing upon the *kar sevaks*, thereby leading to killing of hundreds of sadhus and *kar sevaks* in what came to be known as the *Shabeed Gali Massacre* (Kapoor, 2023). The police were accused of disposing of their bodies by dumping them in Saryu River or cremating them at undisclosed locations. Shamefully, as late as 2017, Yadav continued to justify his decision saying that the police should have killed even more if needed (PTI, 2017).

These incidents led to a thorough mobilization of Hindus. It was on December 6th, 1992, that the Babri Masjid was finally brought down when Kalyan Singh-led BJP government was in power in UP, and Narasimha Rao-led Congress government

was in power at the Centre. An estimated over 1.5 lakh *kar sevaks* – with huge number of them being from Dalit and OBC communities – were involved in demolishing the mosque, prior to which firebrand speeches were delivered by RSS and prominent BJP leaders (Outlook, 2022). At a time when power was all that mattered to the politicians, instead of firing at the *kar sevaks*, Kalyan Singh chose to resign as the Chief Minister of UP and allowed the mosque to be felled. The issue remained alive even a decade later, when in 2002, fifty-nine *kar sevaks* – out of which ten were children – returning from Ayodhya were burnt alive in Godhra, after which the Gujarat riots broke out.

The disgrace of supposedly secular politicians has been spotlighted by this issue. Vicious rumors were circulated, implicating the *kar sevaks* in their own murder. When Lalu Yadav became Railway Minister, he appointed a Commission that found the Godhra fire to be an “accident.”

UNITING THE PEOPLE: THE PRESENT IMPACT

The immediate impact of the movement – which has permanently conditioned the national consciousness – on the present generation has been momentous. The issue managed to touch a chord with people in a way that transcended all sectional and caste-based divides. It was the first firm counter to the venomous caste-based divisions and unholy social alliances sought to be fostered by the regional political parties in a bid to keep the Hindus divided. This resurgence not only occurred around the time of the events of 1992 but has stayed subconsciously with the country despite a lag of almost three decades.

Until Narendra Modi entered national politics and formed the government at the centre, the BJP, under Vajpayee-Advani leadership – limited by their own hesitations and in a bid to appease the secular lobby – failed to raise any cultural issues to keep alive the process of mobilizing the Hindus. And the party – whose essence and reason for formation was its ideology of Hindu cultural revival – languished, going from bad to worse, till 2014. With the Supreme Court delivering a decisive verdict granting the disputed land to Hindus in 2019, the BJP government at the centre has wasted no time in starting the construction of the Ram mandir.

Right from the *bhoomi poojan* in 2020 to the consecration ceremony in 2024, there has been a conscious attempt to reach out to the common masses and connect with the people from time-to-time. Two years prior to the consecration ceremony on January 22nd, 2024, organizations of the Sangh Parivar – most prominently, the VHP – launched a massive fund collection drive from the people, with the lowest denomination being ten rupees.

The idea was that everyone should feel they are contributing, instead of contracting the construction to a big corporate house, as was done in case of Swaminarayan temples. This made it a truly national effort, and resulted in not just Hindus, but even people from Buddhist, Sikh and Muslim communities contributing their share. From beggars to elderly to transgender community to Adivasi communities, people enthusiastically gave as much as they could. Some had saved especially, while some sold their land or borrowed money to make their contribution (Das Y. S., 2023).

Further, in the run-up to the ceremony, BJP workers and

those of the Sangh Parivar went door to door, with yellow *akshat* (whole rice) in preparation for the grand event. Such was the sentiment sweeping the nation that Gita Press in Gorakhpur had run out of copies of *Ramcharitmanas*. To further mobilize the people, the UP government, recently, announced the building of a memorial for the ‘Ayodhya martyrs.’ The extent to which the Ram mandir has played a role in contemporary Indian political mobilization of the people will reverberate through the ages.

CEREMONY MIRED IN CONTROVERSIES

“...the Indian governs his life not by the Shastra but by custom and the opinion of the nearest Brahmin. In practice this resolves itself into certain observances and social customs of which he understands neither the spiritual meaning nor the practical utility. To venerate the Scriptures without knowing them and to obey custom in their place; to reverence all Brahmins whether they are venerable or despicable...this in India is the minimum of religion. This is glorified as Hinduism and the Sanatana Dharma.” – Sri Aurobindo (CWSA 1, 1997, p. 492).

As expected, despite the unity and momentum gathered by the Ram Mandir ceremony, certain ritualistic and political controversies have also inevitably arisen. This was expected; for, in the age of Internet and social media, every second person fancies oneself an expert. The following are some ritualistic and political issues raised:

Pran Pratishtha:

Doubts are being raised about the Pran Pratishtha and that the Pran Pratishtha of Lord Ram who has lived in Ayodhya for thousands of years can be performed by the Prime Minister. It

must be clarified that it is the Pran Pratishtha of the new idol that is being done at the consecration ceremony. The old idol of Ram Lalla has already been placed in the “Garba Griha” and its Pran Pratishtha is not being done. Pran Pratishtha of new idols is the ordinary norm.

Politicization of Religious Figures:

The issue of Shankaracharyas refusing to attend the ceremony has been greatly magnified, even though, except one, none of the other Shankaracharyas have raised any objections regarding the mandir ceremony. In a country where the former Shankaracharya of *Kanchipeeth* was arrested in 2004 under the watch of the Congress, and Swami Lakshmananda Saraswati was mercilessly murdered in 2008, under the watch of the Congress, it is indeed refreshing to see the Congress-led Opposition giving so much of weightage to the absence and opinions of Shankaracharyas (Verma, 2024). It is also astounding that the opinions of Shankaracharyas – many times in news for making political statements – would be considered so significant, especially if viewed in context of statements, such as those made by Swami Swaroopananda Saraswati in 2018, claiming that no mosque ever existed in Ayodhya at the disputed site and that in 1992 the structure that the *kar sevaks* had demolished was a temple (PTI, 2018).

Coils of Ritualism:

Many ritualistic objections have been raised regarding the consecration ceremony. It has been pointed out in many quarters that there can be no Pran Pratishtha unless the temple is completed. Many have been divided over the issue. After all, even complete temples undergo reconstruction, renovation

and other necessary changes from time-to-time, and the deity inside the temple is not removed or disturbed just because renovations or reconstructions take place. It has also been stated that only the construction of the “Garba Griha” or the sanctum sanctorum needs to be completed before the Pran Pratishtha ceremony happens and the Garba Griha is already ready. *However, aside from the outer ritualistic debates which are neither conclusive nor meaningful, it must be noted that ideally the government should have waited for the completion of the temple before doing the Pran Pratishtha;* for, resuming construction after the consecration is insensitive and will disturb the deity. Choosing to do consecration before the temple is completed is a deliberate political choice, likely with a view to impacting the public psychology before elections. It may not have been necessarily the most appropriate.

The Ramanandi Akharas and Their Break in Dominance

The Ram Mandir issue has also seen controversies within the Hindu samaj itself. There are three main Akharas among the seers of the *Ramanandi* sect, who have traditionally exercised unchallenged dominance over the temples in Ayodhya, including overseeing the worship at Hanumangarhi and of Ram Lalla at the makeshift Ram mandir till 2019. These groups are Nirvani Akhara, Nirmohi Akhara and Digambar Akhara.

The seers of the Ramanandi sect who have traditionally enjoyed dominance appear to have been sidelined with the creation of the government-appointed Ram Janmabhoomi Temple Trust in the wake of the Supreme Court judgement in 2019. One of the Akharas – Nirmohi Akhara – was a litigant in the Ram Mandir title dispute, and lost the case. While Nirmohi

Akhara welcomed the Supreme Court judgement in 2019 and said that ultimately it was Ram Lalla who had won, discontent has continued to fester. In this context, there are several inexplicable things that should be noted with regard to the position of Nirmohi Akhara:

First, their perceived discontent against the government is despite the fact that the 15-member government-appointed Ram Mandir Trust also has two members from the Ramanandi Akharas – Mahant Nritya Gopal Das and Nirmohi Akhara head Mahant Dinendra Das, with the former, in fact, being the President of the Trust.

Second, it should be noted that the pivotal role with regard to installation and worship of the original Ram Lalla idol was played by Nirvani Akhara and not Nirmohi Akhara. The latter was a litigant in the title dispute, whereas it was Nirvani Akhara that occupied a significant position in the actual worship of Ram Lalla. The seers of Nirvani Akhara consider themselves to be the rightful claimants of the legacy of Ram Lalla, saying that they installed the Ram Lalla idol both times, first by Baba Abhiram Das in 1949 and later after the mosque was demolished in 1992. In fact, Satyendra Das, from Nirvani Akhara, was appointed as the head priest of the temporary makeshift temple by a court order in 1992. ***On December 6, 1992, Satyendra Das and his assistants – from Nirvani Akhara – had safely retracted the idols of Ram Lalla and Laxman, Bharat, Shatrughan, and Shaligram from inside the mosque as kar sevaks were razing it.*** This move compelled the Supreme Court to order the central government to maintain the status quo of the demolition site, retain the idols and continue their puja as before. This also allowed the VHP-led Ram Janmabhoomi Nyas to continue the worship of the idols and facilitate the movement of devotees

in a makeshift temple (Desai, 2024). It is, therefore, significant that Nirvani Akhara – and not Nirmohi Akhara – was the one which retrieved the idols during the demolition in 1992 and was the one which consecrated them in 1949.

Third, in 2019, the Supreme Court, interestingly, cornered Nirmohi Akhara for taking a contradictory stand, besides not possessing any evidence or revenue records to show their claim to possession of the Ram Chabutra in the Ram Mandir before 1950.

Fourth, in Court, Nirmohi Akhara had argued that the lawsuit of ‘Ram Lalla’ be rejected and the disputed land in Ayodhya be given to it as it has been the deity’s sole devotee. **The Court pointed out that if the Hindu body was contesting the suit of ‘Ram Lalla Virajman’, it was going against the deity’s title and asking the court to dismiss the suit of the deity himself. The Court had observed that, “When you seek dismissal of the suit of your own deity then you are seeking right against your deity... Claim of the shebait can never be adverse to the deity. If you are contesting the suit (of Ram Lalla) then you are going against the title of the deity. So, as a shebait, you are asking to dismiss the suit of the deity... Suppose the suit of Ram Lalla goes then you have no independent claim... You can’t survive if the deity does not survive” (DC, 2019).**

Fifth, the Court had also concluded that there was nothing unique to indicate that Nirmohi Akhara had any valid legal claims to the site or to the idol. The Court informed Nirmohi Akhara that a ‘shebait’ is a person who is appointed by temple authorities to serve the deity, maintain the property and manage it. The office of ‘shebait’ comes with rights, whereas a ‘pujari’

who conducts worship at a temple is not elevated to the status of a ‘shebait.’ The Court had found that, “at its highest, these exhibits show that the Nirmohis were present in and around the disputed structure and assisted the pilgrims. It does not, however, evidence any management over the idols or the disputed site itself... Though it cannot and has not been denied in the present proceedings that Nirmohi Akhara existed at the disputed site, the claim of Nirmohi Akhara, taken at the highest is that of an intermittent exercise of certain management rights. Their rights were peripheral, usually involving the assistance of pilgrims and were constantly contested” (News18, 2019).

Sixth, the issue of power play has been visible in the dynamic between the Akharas and the government-appointed Ram Mandir Trust. The Akharas are disgruntled for having been sidelined, as their perspective on temple management differs from that of the government. The government is seeking to make this a nationally inclusive project, seeking to hire priests from across the country and train them in Ramanandi tradition and rituals, whereas the Akharas want that only those belonging to their sect should be given the rights of worship rather than outsiders. That is why some seers criticized the government decision to bring a priest from Kashi to perform the consecration. Like everything else, this was also described as a political decision. The Akharas may be justified in their reasoning – they assume that ritualistic purity and discipline will be compromised or that their dominance will be broken which they will not openly admit. ***However, from a wider perspective, it also cannot be denied that the government is seeking to bridge the regional gap and look at the temple issue not only from a narrow religious perspective, but a national one*** (as evident, for example, through the massively popular Kashi-Tamil Samagam).

For the government, the Ram Mandir does not symbolize a narrow religious issue, but a wider project of national awakening and reconstruction in which these petty power plays should not have any space.

As has been rightly pointed out by Mahant Mithilesh Nandini Sharan – from the Ramanandi sect and a member of the Shri Ram Sevavidhi Vidhan Samiti – like thousands of countrymen, the Akharas also fought in the Janmabhoomi agitation, but they “don’t own Ram Lalla and he belongs to everyone” (Desai, 2024).

Allegations of Pre-election Politicization

It has been widely argued – by the Opposition and from other quarters – that the consecration ceremony is nothing but a political gimmick. That much is undeniable. But, perhaps, it would be meaningful here to revise what is the meaning of the term political. The term, historically, referred to any act of public participation. In modern times, the term is a much reviled one and wrongly associated exclusively with what governments and politicians do, but also necessarily involves people. It means reaching out to people to create awareness. Without politics and without power, it is not possible to awaken the people or enlist their participation in any issue. Political activity and mobilization were, therefore, an important aspect of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement.

It was due to the political mobilization that people were reached and which made it possible to enlist the sentiments, participation, and emotional and physical involvement of lakhs of people, many of whom gave their lives for this issue. While the religious and emotional value of Lord Ram to the people of

this country has always been there, without this kind of political mobilization, it would hardly have been possible to awaken the public to a centuries-old injustice that was done.

Therefore, while it is true that the present Pran Pratishtha ceremony of the new idol in an incomplete temple is a politicized event, likely to be capitalized on during the upcoming Lok Sabha elections in 2024, it should also be remembered that such events contribute to a constant process of reawakening among the people. Such ceremonies – like the *Ashvamedha yajna* of the past – have performed this role for the masses since ancient times. In the present democratic setup, vitiated by selfish politics, it is hardly likely that such events would be infused with impeccable spirit. The timing of the event, therefore – a few months before the election – is naturally, as expected, a political choice. However, in itself and for the people of the country, the Ram mandir consecration ceremony is much more than a mere political issue and should be viewed as a moment that can unite Indians cutting across all petty divides. *The fact that it comes right before the next general election does not necessarily make it a negative development – for, an issue that mobilizes people along lines of nationalism and culture is a far more noble political agenda than petty electoral discourses of freebies, welfare, and divisions that political parties normally make their agenda.*

NATIONALISM AS WAY FORWARD

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that if there is one major yardstick to judge the manner in which the government has handled the Ram Mandir construction and consecration ceremony, it has to be nationalism; for, nationalistic and cultural revival has been the essence of this movement for the country.

It is, based on this latter consideration, that the apparent conflict – created in the first place by private vested interests and subsequently fueled due to its widening – between the Ram Mandir and the adjoining Sri Aurobindo Sadhanalaya becomes particularly disturbing, especially to the devotees of Lord Ram and Sri Aurobindo. For, such a conflict does not bode well for the nationalistic and cultural resurgence of the country, for which the Ram temple movement was started.

Such nationalistic resurgence has formed an integral part of the life and works of Sri Aurobindo, about whom, freedom fighter and statesman Deshbandhu C R Das – the defense lawyer in the Alipore Bomb Case – had once said, *“Long after this controversy is hushed in silence, long after this turmoil, this agitation ceases, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity. Long after he is dead and gone his words will be echoed and re-echoed not only in India, but across distant seas and lands”* (Das M. , 2018).

Sri Aurobindo Sadhanalaya and Ram Mandir

The conflict around the possible acquisition of Sri Aurobindo Sadhanalaya – which adjoins the Ram Mandir – during the construction of the Mandir has emerged as a source of great pain to the devotees of Shri Ram and Sri Aurobindo.

Significance of the Sadhanalaya

The 3-acre land for Sri Aurobindo Sadhanalaya in Ayodhya was gifted to the Mother – the spiritual guru-devi of Sri Aurobindo Ashram Pondicherry – in 1959 by the Rani of

Amawa, Late Bhuvaneshwari Kuenr. The gift deed clearly specified the use to which the property should be put, that is, it was given for the purpose of advancing the work and teaching of Sri Aurobindo in Ayodhya. The gift deed clearly specified that the land cannot be alienated or used for any other purpose.

Subsequently, Sri Aurobindo Sadhanalaya at Ayodhya was established during the 1980s and grew into an abode for meditation and sadhana. In the year 1989, Sri Aurobindo Sadhanalaya saw the enshrinement of the sacred relics of Sri Aurobindo, with great fervour and enthusiasm, by Shri Ramakrishnadas Babaji. This was a moment of great significance; for, places enshrining Sri Aurobindo's relics are rare, as the relics are of utmost spiritual value and contain the very living presence of Sri Aurobindo. Once placed, the relics cannot be moved. Further, with the Grace of the Divine and Shri Rama Himself, after the events of 1992, when the Central Government acquired most of the land around Shri Rama Temple, this Sadhanalaya was deliberately exempted by the then government of Sri Narsimha Rao. It has continued to flourish as a site of great spiritual presence, spreading the light of Sri Aurobindo.

The religious fervour at Shri Ram Mandir is augmented auspiciously by the corresponding spiritual atmosphere provided by the Sadhanalaya. Together, they represent the destiny towards which the country is progressively moving. One is not – and can never be – exclusive of the other. Indeed, it could not be a mere coincidence that a Sadhanalaya, with Sri Aurobindo's Sacred relics enshrined there, is located adjacent to the Sri Ram Janmabhoomi Temple. This makes this place a concrete proof of the consonance of Sri Rama's work with Sri Aurobindo's.

Yet, despite such a mighty endeavour, it is startling that a minor contention related to land would cause friction. The contention over Sri Aurobindo Sadhanalaya at Ayodhya, which adjoins the Ram Mandir, underscores this irony. The ironic contention is over the fact that at a time when the Central Government was celebrating the 150th Birth Anniversary of Sri Aurobindo, the members of Sri Ram Mandir Teerth Kshetra Ayodhya were attempting to relocate the Sri Aurobindo Sadhanalaya adjoining the Shri Rama temple and thus remove the Divine Relics of Sri Aurobindo enshrined there.

Thus, by showing – to put it very mildly – disrespect for Sri Aurobindo, such attempts are causing deep anguish to his innumerable devotees. This is being attempted so that the land on which Sri Aurobindo Sadhanalaya is located can be made a part of the Shri Rama Janmasthanam, and in lieu of this, Sri Aurobindo Sadhanalaya can be located elsewhere in Ayodhya. While initially resistant to this idea, the trustees of Sri Aurobindo Ashram Pondicherry now appear to be embarking on this deeply unjustified path, without any regard to the wishes of the devotees or the purpose of the Sadhanalaya.

The issue has escalated in relatively recent times, as the trustees of Sri Aurobindo Ashram – based in Puducherry – abandoning their original stand (not to sell/exchange the land) have agreed to alienate the land to Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, Ramkot, Ayodhya, under allegedly external political pressures. The fact that the Ashram has sought to alienate the Sadhanalaya land, against the wishes of the devotees, has created an unfortunate situation. Therefore, the government – and Shri Ram Janmabhoomi trust – is in talks with the Sri Aurobindo Ashram trust as the official authority.

In this entire saga, which is now also on course to be considered by the courts of law, it is imperative for the central government to make a course correction. The right spirit would be for the government – and the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi trust – to come out of the machinations being done by individual vested interests, on all sides, and display greater sensitivity towards the divine Presence of Sri Aurobindo and his role in shaping the destiny of India and the human race. A show of disrespect for Sri Aurobindo is nothing short of being Asuric and may have catastrophic consequences for those who indulge in it.

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HIGHLIGHTS

DEVELOPMENTS IN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

The Russia-Ukraine war continues without any resolution. Here are some of the latest developments:

First, in the most recent development, a large Russian military transport plane crashed in the Belgorod region near the border with Ukraine, killing everyone onboard. The plane had been carrying 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war who were to be exchanged for Russian service personnel. Russia accused Ukrainian forces in the nearby Kharkiv region of launching two missiles that struck the aircraft. While Ukraine did not comment directly on the accusations, the country's military intelligence agency hinted at what could have been a tragic mistake, saying that Russia had not informed it that prisoners would be flown to Belgorod's airport.

Second, Russia has been conducting hypersonic and cruise missile attacks on not just the war frontlines, but also in central and southern parts of Ukraine, targeted at its defence infrastructure (unlike last year, when the target was the power infrastructure of Ukraine).

Third, even as a little headway is made in the war, another major military scam was unearthed in Ukraine – the last one was stifled by the government after a quick change in the Defence Ministry. The SBU Security Unit of Ukraine exposed the scam, which showed how Ukrainian officials looted \$40 million for purchase of arms in a mass procurement fraud, with no arms being provided. While endemic corruption has plagued the country for a long time, this fraud comes amidst allegations that the government is also trying to stifle Opposition

and independent media, labelling anyone who opposes the government as a Russian agent.

Amidst these developments, the overall situation in the war continues to be bleak, with no rapprochement or negotiation in sight. While the internal situation in Russia continues to deteriorate – with rising crime rates and public opinion against the war – it has not made much impact on the Russian calculus. From the perspective of Ukraine, while arms continue to flow from the West, the country has thoroughly failed in taking back its territories and continues to receive a battering. From the perspective of the West, it would appear that the prolongation of the war suits the US, as its defence industry flourishes and the war has successfully managed to weaken Russia and limit its power to the Eurasian theatre, thereby diluting its presence in the Middle east. Overall, this war has become a new status quo which no party is willing to break.

DEVELOPMENTS IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) continues unabated, even as regulators continue to issue warnings about the unforeseen implications of this technology. One such implication that has recently come to light is the deceptive ability of AI systems to be benign during testing but behave differently once deployed. Attempts to remove this two-faced behaviour can make the systems better at hiding it. These deceptive abilities of AI systems have recently been exposed and are still being investigated.

Even as this comes to the fore, another pathbreaking development has taken place in the form of brain implants pioneered by Neuralink – a technology company run by Elon

Musk. The wireless brain implant contains chips and electrodes which are meant to register thoughts related to movement. Recently, the first human surgery with such brain implant in a human being was successfully performed. This surgery marks a new moment in human-computer interface.

Thus, a person may type on a computer or a phone or any digital device and control that device simply by thinking about it. This telepathic technology certainly resembles the world of science fiction and imagination, and yet it is here, has been approved by US regulators and now portends endless possibilities. For it will not simply enable a human-computer one-to-one interface, but thanks to the networked nature of technology, powered by AI systems, the reach of such interface will be wider. This technology claims to address physical and cognitive disabilities among humans, enhance memory and other cognitive abilities and treat neurological disorders, among other things.

It takes privacy to a whole new level, raising questions like, who will control data gleaned from the brain and how this can be misused. Also, how will it impact the future of wars, governance and society when it will become possible for humans to remotely control any networked system. Once the technology becomes scalable and falls into common hands, how unpredictable it will become is another question. Finally, and most importantly, what reverse effect this will have on human psychology is also of concern; for, it raises questions about whether humans are controlling the technology or will it eventually become the other way round.

GYANVAPI MOSQUE SURVEY

The report of a survey conducted by the Archaeological

Survey of India (ASI) – on the directions of a district court in Varanasi in 2023 – has finally been released. The released report confirms the presence of a Hindu temple over which the Gyanvapi Mosque was built. The report says that “Based on scientific studies/survey carried out, study of architectural remains, exposed features and artefacts, inscriptions, art and sculptures, it can be said that there existed a Hindu temple prior to the construction of the existing structure.”

The report also notes that “The Arabic-Persian inscription found inside a room mentions that the mosque was built in the 20th regnal year of Aurangzeb (1667-77). Hence, the pre-existing structure appears to have been destroyed in the 17th century, during the reign of Aurangzeb and part of it was modified and reused in the existing structure.” The report further notes that “This is also brought out by the biography of Emperor Aurangzeb, *Maasir-i-Alamgiri*, which mentions that Aurangzeb issued orders to the governors of all provinces to demolish the schools and temples of the infidels...On September 2, 1669; it was reported that, according to the Emperor’s command his officers had demolished the temple of Vishwanath at Kashi.”

The following were the key findings of the survey:

First, the report talks about “Existing architectural remains, decorated mouldings, on the walls, karna-ratha and pratiratha of central chamber, a large decorated entrance gate, with Torana on the eastern wall of the western chamber, a small entrance with mutilated image of *lalatabimba*, birds and animals carved for decoration in and outside suggest that the western wall is remaining part of a Hindu temple.”

Second, the survey uncovered fragments of what appear to be damaged statues of Hindu deities, including those

of Hanuman, Ganesha, Nandi, Shivalinga, Vishnu and Krishna. Several yonipattas – the base of a Shivling – were discovered during the survey, and a Shivlinga with its bottom part missing was also found. Swastik and Trident (trishul) marks were also found on the structure.

Third, the report notes that several inscriptions were noticed on the existing and pre-existing structures, with a total of 34 inscriptions recorded during the survey and 32 estampages taken. They include inscriptions in Devanagari, Grantha, Telugu and Kannada scripts. These inscriptions were found on stones of the pre-existing temple which were reused in the construction/maintenance of the existing structure, that is, the mosque.

Fourth, a pillar decorated with bells, niches for keeping lamps, and bearing an inscription of Samvat 1669 was reused in cellar N2, as per the report.

Fifth, the report points out that three names of deities such as Janardhana, Rudra, and Umesvara were also found in the inscriptions discovered. Further, the reports notes that “Terms such as Maha-muktimandapa mentioned in three inscriptions are of great significance.”

Sixth, the pillars and pilasters used in the existing structure were taken, with a little modification, from the pre-existing structure. The report notes that “For their reuse, in the existing structure, Vyala figures carved on either side of lotus medallion were mutilated and after removing the stone mass from the corners that space was decorated with floral design.”

Sixth, the report also stated that all other objects recorded during the scientific survey were also noted. These included inscriptions, sculptures, coins, architectural fragments, pottery,

and objects of terracotta, stone, metal, and glass.

In the aftermath of the report, on January 24th, the Varanasi district administration had taken possession of the southern cellar of the Gyanvapi mosque complex. This was following a Varanasi District Court order of January 17th, through which it appointed the district magistrate of Varanasi as the receiver of the cellar, also called '*Vyasji ka tebhana*.' Subsequently, in yet another significant order, the Varanasi District Court, allowed the commencement of puja in the southern cellar or *Vyasji ka tebhana* of the Gyanvapi mosque. This *tebhana* faces the Nandi statue placed inside the Kashi Vishwanath complex near the sanctum sanctorum. The Vyas family had been conducting prayers and other rituals inside the *tebhana* for more than 200 years, but the practice was stopped in December 1993, on the orders of Mulayam Singh Yadav government in the wake of Babri Masjid demolition.

With the puja being resumed in the southern cellar, the Muslim side – represented by the Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Committee that runs the mosque – had approached the Allahabad High Court seeking an interim stay on the puja being conducted inside the cellar of the mosque. However, the High Court declined to give a stay.

Even as further developments are awaited in the wake of the release of the ASI survey report, the recent developments have reignited the debate over the reclaiming of Hindu temples.

POLITICS BEFORE 2024 GENERAL ELECTIONS: CHANGES IN BIHAR AND JHARKHAND

The politics of eastern states has undergone a significant change in recent times. In Bihar, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar

of Janata Dal (United), who appears to have mastered the art of switching political alliances, has yet again switched back to the BJP, with no reasonable justification other than the desire for staying in power. He has now formed a new government in Bihar along with the BJP and has been sworn in as the Chief Minister again. The fact that he came back to the BJP, after vowing never to join it again, shows the extent to which he takes the electorate for granted. Equally surprising is the readiness with which the BJP embraced Mr. Kumar – even though Home Minister Amit Shah had famously declared that the doors of the BJP are closed to Mr. Kumar forever.

Mr. Kumar has a history of switching alliances. In 2017, he betrayed the mandate of 2015, and in 2022, he betrayed the mandate of 2020. In 2020, JD(U) won the election in alliance with the BJP. Two years later, he broke off with the BJP and formed a new government with the RJD and the Congress in Bihar. In 2023, he has now made another U-turn and has come back into the BJP fold, just ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

There might be several reasons for this, but they all boil down to the desire of Mr. Kumar to stay in power, regardless of who he allies with. He has also realized that the INDIA alliance – which disappointed him by not appointing him as its convener and choosing Congress leader Mallikarjun Kharge instead – is on a weak footing. Further, he has probably come to see that the caste census which his government had so famously conducted in Bihar did not make any significant political impact. Even though these antics of switching sides will severely dent the reputation of Mr. Kumar and he might stand to be a big loser in such developments, he has assured his place in power for now.

On the part of BJP, the reasoning was also based on pure politics. The following reasons can be assessed:

First, the BJP realizes that this switching of alliances would further weaken the reputation of Mr. Kumar – a desirable outcome for the BJP in the long run, as it would help to break the dominance of a significant regional party.

Second, the BJP is always on the lookout to ensure that regional caste-based mobilization does not dent the national agenda, as was sought to be done by the caste census conducted in Bihar. By coopting Mr. Kumar, the BJP has considerably defanged his plot of caste-based mobilization.

Third, the BJP also realized the short-term, electoral dividends of being with Mr. Kumar, as he commands significant popularity among non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The BJP assessed that the JD(U) – with around 15% vote base in Bihar – could disintegrate post-Nitish Kumar era, and if the BJP did not keep the party close, the RJD would be in a pole position to takeover a large portion of the vote-base of JD(U), leading to the dominance of another corrupt and debased regional player that the central government has painstakingly settled. Such a scenario would have been politically suicidal for the BJP.

Fourth, the BJP assessed that the political outcomes arising out of separation from the JD(U) would be more diminished in the present scenario, as compared to the advantages of coming together. When the JD(U) exited the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 2022, the NDA lost 17 MPs. Ground surveys indicated huge loss for both BJP and JD(U), indicating that the former may win only 24 seats.

Finally, the BJP has assessed that the latest U-turn by Mr. Kumar would substantially harm the Opposition-led INDIA alliance. It must be remembered that the BJP, under Mr. Modi, is much less complacent than the earlier BJP under Atal Bihari Vajpayee or LK Advani. Under Vajpayee government, when the BJP-led NDA lost the 2004 general election, the defeat was baffling for the BJP, as economy was doing well, and other parameters were also fine. However, the inability to influence political equations at the state level through politics severely harmed the party, which only superficially focused on economy and other feel-good positive factors. The BJP has now realized – such is the state of Indian politics and electorate – that merely harping on feel-good factors or talking about development will be of no use without the use of political sharpness.

Predictably, after the developments in Bihar, the fall of Mr. Hemant Soren – chief of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) and former Chief Minister of the state – came as no surprise. For nearly a year, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) had been investigating Mr. Soren due to his implication in corruption scams. When the ED intensified its attempts recently, Mr. Soren initially went missing and there were speculations that his wife might take over as the Chief Minister of Jharkhand. However, he resurfaced soon after and resigned in order to deal with the ED inquiry. The government is still being run by JMM-Congress-RJD alliance, but with Champai Soren as the new Chief Minister, after the latter won the floor test in the state assembly.

Over the years, under Mr. Hemant Soren since 2019, Jharkhand has been in news for many wrong reasons, most

notably the rampant forceful conversions being done by Christian missionaries on a large scale in the state. Mr. Soren has been an ardent admirer of these missionaries. During the COVID19 crisis and later in 2021, he ostensibly lauded them for their contributions towards education, particularly for tribals and the downtrodden in the state. Then, Mr. Soren had claimed that “If we look at the level of education and work done in the academic sphere in the state, the missionaries have contributed more than 50 per cent. There was tremendous cooperation for tribals, backwards, minorities and poor in the missionary schools” (Pandey, 2022).

At the national level, Mr. Soren has been a vocal critic of the Centre on issues concerning missionaries. He has attacked the central government on the arrest of Stan Swamy – a Roman Catholic Jesuit priest, a Naxal sympathizer and a famous Leftist intellectual and activist – on terror charges by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in 2020 in connection with the Bhima Koregaon violence case.

The level of admiration of Mr. Soren for Christianity has been such that all laws and restrictions to regulate conversions have been diluted. Previously, according to Jharkhand BJP general secretary, “permission to convert someone to a different religion had to be obtained from the District Magistrate. However, no one is now abiding by the law. Conversion to Christianity is now taking place under the protection of the state. Complaints are no longer investigated by the police administration. Previously, religious conversion occurred in secret in remote areas, but it is now occurring publicly in towns such as Jamshedpur. The missionaries do not fear anyone now” (Pandey, 2022). Besides this, there have also been systematic attacks on Hindus in the state.

BHARAT RATNA FOR KARPOORI THAKUR: CREMATING THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The central government has conferred Bharat Ratna on late Bihar Chief Minister, Karpoori Thakur, coinciding uncannily with the timing of the *Pran Pratishtha* ceremony of the Ram Mandir. The legacy of Karpoori Thakur – born in a backward caste – has been associated with championing Other Backward Classes (OBC) reservation in India during the 1970s, when Mandal Commission report was first initiated, but later shelved by the Indira Gandhi government. Thakur implemented 26% OBC reservation in Bihar in 1978 and was also one of the first leaders to initiate the debate on the sub-categorization of OBCs, so that the more marginalized among them could get the benefits of reservation. He even carved out a space for Muslims in his reservation nexus. In his time, he was considered as a Leftist, and a great enemy of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Hindutva politics. He is credited with breaking the upper caste monopoly in Bihar on which the vote bank of BJP had traditionally relied.

Back in the day, the Jana Sangh – parent organization of the BJP – had withdrawn support from the Thakur administration in Bihar over the reservation issue in 1978, and RSS and BJP had vociferously opposed him. When Mandal Commission (which had rejected the idea of sub-categorization of OBCs as the basis for reservation) was finally implemented in 1990, BJP leader, LK Advani, had famously taken out a *rath yatra* to oppose it and mobilize the country in the name of Shri Ram. The BJP-RSS combine was aware that any success of backward class mobilization by the likes of Mandal proteges – Lalu Yadav

and Mulayam Singh Yadav – would spell a major blow to the social and political structure of the country. An alternative was needed, which would have the power to draw away the backward classes from the compelling politics of reservation and social justice. This power was the name of Ram. Thus, began the Mandal versus Mandir (Mandal-Kamandal) debate which has since polarized the Hindi heartland.

The rath yatra led by Advani to counter social justice politics in the name of Ram was successful. It has, over the years, systematically drawn away the backward classes and Dalits from the social justice plank, and made them embrace a larger, nationalistic Hindutva identity. Under Modi government, this phenomenon reached its heights. Modi was successful in using OBC politics – showing a sympathy for social justice and reservation issues, even as he fought vociferously against the Bihar caste census – to draw the OBCs away from it. In the process, the whole social justice politics has taken a severe beating under this government.

It may be, therefore, no coincidence that the Modi government has decided to honour the arch-rival of Hindutva, the late Mr. Thakur, when the very same Ram Mandir is now being consecrated. That these developments – Mandir and Mandal – should symbolically coincide yet again after thirty-four years, is no mere fluke. Indeed, in the light of the history of Mandal-Mandir conflict, the honour comes across more as a final burial and cremation of Mandal politics than anything else. By honouring Thakur – whose ideology BJP has, in practice, diluted systematically, even to the point of opposing caste census recently – the Modi government has shown that there are no longer any contradictions between Hindutva and social justice.

The message given out is also that Hindutva and nationalism take precedence over caste politics, and that self-proclaimed warriors of social justice no longer have any past leaders or ideology to appropriate. Finally, the Modi government – it was the first government to act on it – has taken the lead in initiating the sub-categorization of OBCs (an idea championed by late Thakur), which it sees as an important policy plank. For, subcategorization would ensure that those not deserving of reservation are systematically removed from appropriating reservation benefits at the cost of those who genuinely need it. Not only will this make the reservation regime more transparent, but also perhaps dilute it over time. In honouring Mr. Thakur symbolically, the government is also ensuring that its implementation of subcategorization eventually does not face ideological opposition.

ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

The Israel-Palestine war has inevitably widened, and its regional consequences are visible. Even as Israel has shifted the war tactics from widespread ground assault to targeted attacks with many Hamas and Hezbollah fighters and commanders being killed, the terror outfit is not close to being destroyed – US intelligence reports suggest that around 30% of Hamas fighters have been eliminated and 80% of their underground tunnel network in Gaza remains intact – due to the ingrained sympathy for Hamas among the Palestinians. Israel is also resorting to targeted strikes against terror sites in Syria and Lebanon. In these strikes, Israel is targeting Iranian communications infrastructure in Syria – which acts as Iranian weapons lifeline to its terror proxies in the region.

Regional Chaos

Due to the persistent Israeli attack, the Houthis too jumped into the conflict, thereby turning the Red Sea into a new battlefield. The terror outfit – funded by Iran and controlling major part of Yemen – had already been at war with West-backed Saudi-UAE alliance in Yemen. Just when ceasefire was achieved, the Houthis – in a bid to support Hamas – have directly started threatening the Western-backed maritime navigation system, attacking commercial shipping vessels that transit the Red Sea for trade, and disturbing the international shipping and navigation order. The US and UK have not taken this lightly and have launched a series of airstrikes against the Houthis.

In addition, the US has also started launching airstrikes against Iranian terror proxies in Syria. Turkey – not to be left behind – has used the chaos as an opportunity to target the Kurds in Syria and Iraq. Amid this widening regional warfare, came the ISIS-sponsored attack on Iran on the death anniversary of its late commander – Qassem Soleimani who was assassinated by the US in 2020 – which killed hundreds of Iranian civilians. All of this chaos eventually – likely to have disturbed Iran – prompted Iran to display its muscle power and launch back-to-back airstrikes in Syria, Iraq and Pakistan. In these strikes, Iran claimed to have attacked the Israeli spy office in Iraq, ISIS bases in Syria and Jaish al-Adl (the same Sunni terror outfit which had kidnapped Indian navy officer Kulbhushan Jadhav who is in Pakistani jail) bases in Pakistani Balochistan. All three countries condemned this unprovoked assault on their sovereignty and Pakistan even launched counter strikes in Iranian Sista-Baluchistan.

The Political Dimension

Interestingly, even amidst this widening chaos, Israel appears to have the upper hand, politically. It is notable that none of the major West Asian countries – such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Jordan etc. – have made statements or jumped in to defend Palestine. The Palestinian issue had begun to disinterest them – these countries perceived it as a hurdle to their business – since the last few years. The issue also does not evoke much sympathy among these countries as they have no love for Hamas and Hezbollah, widely known as the proxies of their arch Shia rival, Iran. But the timing of the Hamas massacre of Jews on October 7th, 2023 – just when Saudi Arabia and Israel were on the brink of normalizing their relations – was chosen to ensure that the Palestinian issue does not get sidelined amid the changing geopolitics of West Asia.

The ensuing war forced Saudi Arabia to put the normalization of its ties with Israel on hold. But interestingly, the Sunni Kingdom has taken a moderate stand. In a significant interview to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) recently, the Saudi ambassador to London stated that their country continues to be very much interested in normalizing ties with Israel – after the war has ended (Gritten, 2024). These statements and the behaviour of Arab countries show how the Israel-Palestine issue has come a long way. From refusing to recognize the right of Israel to exist, the Arab countries have lowered the bar to merely wanting a ceasefire and, preferably, an independent Palestine coexisting alongside Israel. Israel, on the other hand, has raised the bar to its advantage – rightly perceiving that the Palestine issue has become irrelevant to the Arab strategic calculus – and refuses to condone a two-

state solution anymore, like it initially supported. Even as the war continues, it is business as usual between Israel and Arab world, albeit through backchannels.

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Excerpts from the Translation of Sri Rabindranath Tagore's
"Salutations" to Sri Aurobindo

"Rabindranath, O Aurobindo, bows to thee!
O friend, my country's friend, O voice incarnate, free,
Of India's soul!.....
Where is the coward who will shed tears today, or wail
Or quake in fear? And who'll belittle truth to seek
His own small safety? Where's the spineless creature weak
Who will not in thy pain his strength and courage find?
O wipe away those tears, O thou of craven mind!
The fiery messenger that with the lamp of God
Hath come – where is the king who can with chain or rod
Chastise him? Chains that were to bind salute his feet,
And prisons greet him as their guest with welcome sweet.
.....

When I behold thy face, 'mid bondage, pain and wrong
and black indignities, I hear the soul's great song
Of rapture unconfined, and chant the pilgrim sings
In which exultant hope's immortal splendour rings,
Solemn voice and calm, and heart-consoling, grand
Of imperturbable death, the spirit of Bharat-land,
O poet, hath placed upon thy face her eyes afire
With love, and struck vast chords upon her vibrant lyre, –
Wherein There is no note of sorrow, shame or fear,
Or penury or want. And so today I hear
The ocean's restless roar borne by the stormy wind,
Th' impetuous fountain's dance riotous, swift and blind
Bursting its rocky cage, – the voice of thunder deep
Awakening, like a clarion call, the clouds asleep
Amid this song triumphant, vast, that encircles me,
Rabindranath, O Aurobindo, bows to thee!

24 August 1907

RABINDRANATH TAGORE