

Saiyka Chowdhury

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The Ram Temple Dispute and Indian Nationhood

The birthplace of two major world religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, India has historically fostered many different religious groups. A defining characteristic of post-independence India was the victory of secular nationalism, evident from the 42nd amendment to the Indian Constitution which described the state as a “sovereign, secular democratic republic.”¹ Considering the religious diversity in India, this proclamation was meant to aid the state in enabling all citizens to coexist harmoniously despite differences in religious belief. However, unlike originally intended by the founders, secularism has increasingly struggled to maintain its hold as a defining ideology for India, never more so than after continued electoral success of the right-wing, Hindu nationalist, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Hindu nationalists hold the view that the identity of being Indian is closely aligned with being a follower of Hinduism, as the religion attracts the country’s largest community of followers. India does not have a state religion, but Hinduism and the nationalism associated with the faith acts as a major centripetal force in India. Considered under the lens of political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities, Hinduism is a force that compels Hindus in India to identify as part of an imagined political community because their

¹ “The Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976,” Legislative Department. Ministry of Law and Justice. Government of India. Online at *India.gov.in*.

common faith influences them to develop a sense of nationhood with other followers of the same faith.² In contrast, Hindu nationalism also works as a major centrifugal force in India, owing to the state being home to a sizeable Muslim minority. In fact, according to a report published in 2009 in the World Bank's Central Data Catalogue titled, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population," India had the world's third-highest Muslim population in 2009, despite Islam not being the state's majority religion.³ Consequently, the tensions inherent in what it means to be Indian have come to a boiling point in the recent years. This paper argues that in the current day, India is seemingly going through a period of desecularization under the BJP government, creating a unique situation where Hindu nationalism is acting as a centripetal and centrifugal force, simultaneously, because of the state's religious diversity. In order to advance the aforementioned argument, this paper will examine a current event, the building of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, and explore the implications of the said event on the nationhood that Indian individuals feel with their greater communities.

The Ram Temple is a Hindu temple currently under construction in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, India. The ground-breaking ceremony of the said temple which was performed by the Indian Prime Minister and BJP leader, Narendra Modi, occurred on August 5th, 2020 and was what many considered to be a prevailing moment for India's Hindu-base considering the communal violence between Hindus and Muslims that has persisted for decades over the site that

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016; orig. 1983), 11-13.

³ "Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population," Pew Research Center (October 2009), online at *Pewforum.org*.

this temple is currently being built on.⁴ The site that the Ram temple is currently being built on is considered by many Hindus to be the alleged birthplace of the widely worshipped Hindu deity Ram.⁵ However, the said site in Ayodhya was previously the site of the Babri Mosque built in the 16th century under the Mughal Empire, until the mosque was assaulted and demolished by right-wing Hindu nationalists in 1992.⁶ Consequently, the infamous site in Ayodhya has been a focus that has warranted communal dispute and violence in India finally culminating in a Supreme Court Order that approved the construction of the Ram temple on the disputed site.⁷ However, despite the dispute creating tensions between Hindus and Muslims, the building of the Ram temple has reaffirmed the sense of Hindu nationality and reinforced the connection between the Hindu community not just in India. But worldwide.

Many Hindu nationalists view the Muslim community in India as a consequence of violent invasions by foreign empires such as the Mughal Empire.⁸ Consequently, sites associated with the Muslim faith such as the Babri mosque are viewed by many Hindu nationalists with thinly veiled contempt who culturally define India as a Hindu nation-state. For many Hindu nationalists, turning India into a Hindu nation-state necessitates the eradication of Muslim influences such as the Babri mosque.⁹ Another example of this effort to eradicate Muslim influence is the renaming of a city which was previously named Allahabad by the

⁴ Jeffrey Gettleman and Hari Kumar, “Modi Finds Temple on Mosque's Ruins, in Triumphant Moment for Hindu Base.” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2020, online at *Nytimes.com*.

⁵ Sunetra Choudhury and Pawan Dixit. “Ayodhya's Tryst with Destiny,” *Hindustan Times*, August 5, 2020, online at *Hindustantimes.com*

⁶ Gettleman and Kumar, “Modi Finds Temple.”

⁷ Choudhury and Dixit, “Ayodhya's Tryst with Destiny.”

⁸ Gettleman and Kumar, “Modi Finds Temple.”

⁹ Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot, *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 12.

Mughal emperor Akbar, to Prayagraj.¹⁰ Consequently, the groundbreaking ceremony for the Ram Temple was a momentous occasion for India's Hindu base and an event that reaffirmed the close alignment between being Indian and Hindu, which is exactly the type of sentiment that the Hindu nationalism movement relies on to gain traction. At the ground-breaking ceremony, the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, himself, described the Ram temple in Ayodhya as a "Modern symbol of faith, national sentiment, and the collective power of the people," alluding to the diverse appeal of the deity, Ram.¹¹ Another attendee, known as Iqbal Ansari, who has been identified by an article published in the Hindustan times covering the event as one of the only three Muslim invitees to the ceremony, stated that, "Lord Ram belongs to everyone. Ram temple will also bring overall development to Ayodhya." However, while it is evident that the building of the Ram temple is acting as a centripetal force and reaffirming the shared sense of nationhood that Hindus in India feel with the greater Hindu community in India and maybe even worldwide, the secularist identity that India was built on is crumbling due to the state giving advantages to the majority religious group, evident from the Supreme Court approving the construction of the Ram temple on what can be considered the ruins of the Babri Mosque. Consequently, unlike what Modi and Ansari have claimed, the building of the Ram temple is not a symbol of national sentiment but of Hindu national sentiment because Indian Muslims cannot logically be a part of the vision of India as a Hindu majoritarian nation.

Thus, while Hindu nationalism reaffirms the shared sense of nationhood that Hindus in India feel with the greater Hindu community in India, the surge of Hindu nationalism under the BJP is simultaneously acting as a centrifugal force in India because the process of

¹⁰ Chatterji et al. *Majoritarian*, 43.

¹¹ Choudhury and Dixit, "Ayodhya's Tryst with Destiny."

deseccularization is lessening the affinity that Indians feel because of their shared national identity that was meant to be not contingent on religious faith at India's inception. With the right-wing Hindu nationalist, Bharatiya Janata Party being at the forefront of Indian politics since 2014, the marginalization of non-Hindu communities, especially Muslims has become a recurring issue in India, the Ram temple issue being an adequate illustration of this. Although the assault and demolition of the Babri mosque was openly credited to Hindu nationalist offenders, as of when this paper was being written, any charges have yet to be filed and legal action yet to be taken against the alleged offenders.¹² Ultimately, despite no conclusive archaeological evidence that the Babri mosque was built on the place of a former Ram temple, a claim that many Hindu nationalists make, and the acknowledgement of the assault on the Babri mosque being criminal activity, the Supreme Court finally approved the construction of the Ram temple on the disputed site in Ayodhya.¹³ Consequently, the Ram temple example demonstrates how authorities such as the Supreme court are failing to acknowledge the rights of minority communities and in turn failing to uphold the secular character of the Indian constitution.

Despite being a Hindu majority state, the Indian constitution has assured the rights of non-Hindu communities on paper, since the inception of India. However, with the rise of the right-wing Hindu nationalist, Bharatiya Janata Party and the consequent surge in Hindu nationalism, the meaning behind what makes one an Indian is being increasingly questioned. Many Hindus in India identify as part of an imagined political community because their common faith which influences them to develop a sense of nationhood with other followers of the same faith. As a result, their sense of nationhood is contingent on shared political belief. On the other

¹² "Memorandum of Action Taken on the Report of the Liberhan Ayodhya Commission of Inquiry," *Liberhan Ayodhya Commission*, Ministry of Home Affairs. Online at *Mha.gov.in*.

¹³ Gettleman and Kumar, "Modi Founds Temple."

hand, the surge of Hindu nationalism simultaneously acts as a centrifugal force because the process of desecularization lessens the affinity that Indians feel because of their shared national identity that was not meant to be contingent on religious faith at India's inception. In fact, secularism periodically flourished in India well before post-independence, namely under the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, who himself followed Buddhism, and also the Mughal emperor Akbar who in order to promote religious unity in his empire, founded a syncretic religion known as Din-i-Ilahi. Therefore, the rise of Hindu nationalism is disrupting a centuries old tradition of many different religious communities coexisting peacefully. Instead, this new wave of desecularization can be expected to increasingly polarize communities subscribing to different faiths and redefine the concept of being Indian which was previously dependent on a shared national identity regardless of religious belief.

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