

An elegy for the old India

Pragya Tiwari

offerings to the gods and swam in the Sarayu River — which we hold to be as sacred as Ram, our family deity — that flows by the town. In Ayodhya, I was at

NEW DELHI Ayodhya is a small, placid temple town in northern India, consid-

ered holy by Buddhists, Jains and Muslims, and believed by most Hindus

to be the birthplace of Ram, one of

Hinduism's most revered deities and

the protagonist of the epic poem the

Ramayana. My family comes from a

nearby village. Though my parents

lived in Kolkata, we spent our summer

and winter vacations in Ayodhya.

In the evenings we would walk

through the streets of the town, which

trimmed with pilgrims of almost every

faith. Hindus frequented shrines of

local Muslim saints; Muslims sold

Hindu religious artifacts outside tem-

ples and revered Ram as a prophet. An

unattended young girl, I ran around,

bought knickknacks, ate sweets sold as

Away from my childish concerns,

Ayodhya was caught up in a decades-

old bitter legal battle for the ownership

of a patch of land, 677 acres long,

where a medieval mosque stood along-

side small temples dedicated to Ram

and his consort, Sita. For residents of

Ayodhya, Ram was omnipresent, but

some Hindu activists claimed that Ram

was born within this contested area.

In the late 1980s, the Bharatiya

Janata Party, then a minor Hindu

nationalist party, ran a campaign to

build a grand temple for Ram in

Ayodhya, contending that a temple to

Ram had existed on the disputed site

until it was razed in the 16th century

and replaced by Babri Masjid, a

mosque built by India's first Mogul

emperor.

In the summer of 1990, when I was 8,

buses full of young men wearing saf-

ron headbands began arriving in

Ayodhya. They would come to our

village, ask for donations and raise the

slogan: "Mandir Wahin Banayenge!

We Will Build the Temple Right

There!"

The stores in Ayodhya started sell-

ing stickers with this ubiquitous slogan

and audiocassettes of vitriolic

speeches calling for a temple to be

built where the mosque stood. I bought

some colorful stickers and offered

sugar cane sticks from our fields to the

sloganeering young men.

They said they were fighting for

Ram. I was too young to understand

they were fighting against the very

idea of India.

On Dec. 6, 1992, a mob mobilized by

the B.J.P. and its affiliates demolished

the Babri mosque. India tore itself

apart in subsequent religious violence;

hundreds were killed. Ayodhya was

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Hindu nationalists outside the Babri mosque in 1990, in Ayodhya, India.

still in shock when we visited from

what was then called Calcutta a few

months later. The dust from the rubble

of the destroyed mosque still hung

thick; bullet holes marked the walls of

modest dwellings;

people spoke in

hushed tones of

blood flowing into

the Sarayu River. I

passed those months

with a sinking feel-

ing I could not quite

name.

I have been think-

ing of Ayodhya in the

past few months as

campaigning for the

elections, which

conclude on May 23,

has picked up. Hindu nationalists rose

to electoral significance in India from

the debris of the Babri mosque.

Though a legal dispute about the tem-

ple and the mosque continues, the

B.J.P., now the ruling party under

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, prom-

ises at every election to work toward

constructing the Ram temple at the

disputed site.

In December, I saw thousands of Mr.

Modi's supporters marching through

New Delhi and raising the slogan,

"Mandir Wahin Banayenge! We Will

Build the Temple Right There!" The

slogan I had first heard as a child in

Ayodhya has come to be the catchall

phrase for the efforts of Mr. Modi's

party to achieve a Hindu majority vote,

and so transform the constitutionally

secular democracy of India into a

majoritarian state.

The feeling of loss I'd first experi-

enced after the demolition of the Babri

mosque in Ayodhya, a sense of fore-

boding that my country was turning

into an unfamiliar place, returned. I

felt it more strongly as a college stu-

dent after the February 2002 Gujarat

riots, in which about 1,000 people,

mostly Muslims, were killed under the

watch of Mr. Modi, then chief minister

of the western state.

Mr. Modi, widely believed to have

been complicit in the violence, was

never formally charged. His political

profile only grew in the 12 years after.

In May 2014, he swept the polls and

became the country's prime minister.

During his five years in office, the

ghosts of Ayodhya returned as hatred

and violence against minorities were

normalized.

Having failed to deliver on his prom-

ise of economic development and jobs,

Mr. Modi and his party have been

seeking re-election by promising the

Hindu majority that their interests will

take precedence over those of the

already disenfranchised Muslim mi-

nority — and that with Mr. Modi at the

helm, India will be a muscular power

ready to dominate Pakistan by any

means necessary.

I returned to Ayodhya recently to try

to understand what lessons my

wounded home might hold for my

country. Ayodhya languishes as an

unheeded cautionary tale, a testament

to the havoc wreaked by divisive iden-

tiy politics. The sunlit lanes where I

played freely as a young girl are barr-

icaded and heavily guarded by armed

police. The town of 55,000 people

lacks even basic medical services and

educational opportunities. Economic

distress is starkly visible.

Hindu and Muslim citizens of Ayodh-

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ya continue to eke out a living together in peace and celebrate each other's religious festivals together — but their anxious assertions of unity betray the fear that they might not be able to save their home from another assault of religious politics.

Thousands of activists and supporters of Mr. Modi's party arrive in Ayodhya on Hindu festivals associated with Ram, to mark the anniversary of the demolition of the Babri mosque. They shout belligerent slogans through the day and dance in the streets at night to songs that call Muslims the vilest of names, threaten to kill them and turn Ayodhya "red" once again. They bring the town to a halt: children find it difficult to get to school, Muslim families move out of town in fear, businesses suffer.

One afternoon in Ayodhya, I met a group of young men huddled over a mobile phone. They were watching "Avengers: Infinity War" dubbed into Hindi. None of them had a stable job. Religious tourism is the core source of revenue in Ayodhya. The town doesn't even have a half decent hotel. The streets are unpaved. Sanitation is poor, and the temples are not weathering well.

The young men believe that if Mr. Modi's party builds a grand Ram temple, it will bring a significantly greater number of tourists, better hotels and markets and create jobs. Yet they understand that the violence unleashed on their town was purely for political expediency.

Ayodhya's desolation today is difficult to reconcile with memories of my childhood. Even the Sarayu River has shrunk over time.

Mr. Modi's B.J.P. has contested the election on an exclusionary idea of India, propelled by the assault from which Ayodhya has yet to recover. If its Hindu nationalist conception prevails over one of inclusion, my hometown and my country as places embodying accommodation and coexistence might only live in our memories.

PRAGYA TIWARI is working on a book about the *Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh*, the parent body of India's various Hindu nationalist organizations.