

The transformation of India is nearly complete

A temple on a disputed site is likely to intensify the Hindu nationalist efforts to turn India into a majoritarian nation.

Hartosh Singh Bal

NEW DELHI On Saturday, fireworks were set off in parts of India to celebrate the verdict by the country's Supreme Court to clear the way for the building of a temple for Rama — the Hindu deity and the protagonist of the epic poem "Ramayana" — in Ayodhya, a northern Indian town.

The piece of land where the temple for Rama will be built is considered by many Hindus to be his exact birthplace. But the land in question and its ownership have been long disputed. The Babri Masjid, a mosque built in 1528, stood there until Dec. 1992, when a Hindu mob demolished it. Hindu and Muslim litigants had been fighting for its ownership for decades. When the Supreme Court announced its decision, lawyers outside the court yelled, "Hail Lord Ram!"

In the mid-1980s, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a sister organization of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, started a campaign to reclaim the birthplace of Rama in Ayodhya. In 1990, Lal Krishna Advani, then the president of the B. J. P., rode through India on a truck designed like a chariot to whip up support for Rama's temple. Amid appeals to Hindu pride, Mr. Advani and other B. J. P. leaders framed the building of the temple as the way to end what they termed as thousand years of servitude to Muslim rulers.

On Dec. 6, 1992, a mob led by the leaders of the B. J. P. and its affiliates illegally demolished the mosque, sparking riots that killed more than 2,000 people.

The movement to build Rama's temple and the demolition of the Babri Masjid led to the B. J. P.'s meteoric rise in electoral politics — from two seats out of 541 in the Parliament in 1984 to forming a national government in 1998. The

campaign for Rama's temple ushered in an era of majoritarian politics in defiance of the promise of secular nationalism that has held together this multireligious country since 1947.

Saturday's verdict by the Supreme Court of India, while distilling the complicated history of the disputed site, made some important observations on the history of deceit and criminality that got us here.

The court concluded that while excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India at the site revealed the ruins of a Hindu religious structure dating back to the 12th century, there was no evidence to suggest this structure existed or was demolished when the mosque was built.

The judgment also states that the two events that have served as the basis for Hindu claims — the supposedly miraculous overnight appearance of Hindu idols in the mosque in 1949 and the demolition of the mosque in 1992 — were both criminal acts, the handiwork of Hindu fundamentalists. Yet this verdict amounts to rewarding criminality.

The Supreme Court greenlighted the building of Rama's temple, in effect asserting the primacy of the faith of those who believe that the disputed site is the birthplace of Rama. As there is no evidence for the historicity of Rama, this must surely rank as one of the more remarkable legal justifications for deciding a case about ownership and possession of a piece of land.

The court's verdict comes against the backdrop of a heightened assertion of Hindu nationalism by the government of India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, which was elected for a second term with an overwhelming majority in May.

Shortly after, in August, Mr. Modi abrogated the autonomy of Muslim-majority Kashmir. The decision was in keeping with the long-stated demands of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindu nationalist mother ship



NARINDER NANU/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Hindus in Amritsar celebrated the Indian Supreme Court's verdict on a disputed religious site in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh.

whose influence over Indian society today can be compared to the sway of the Communist Party in China.

The R.S.S. is set to celebrate its hundredth year in 2025, and the temple that is likely to be built in time is an appropriate marker of its rise from insignificance. A few years back, I traveled to Ayodhya. Since the demolition of the Babri mosque, a workshop run by an R.S.S. affiliate has been preparing for Rama's temple. A model of the temple stands at the heart of the workshop. At one end of the workshop, rows of bricks marked "Shri Ram," which were brought there by pilgrims from across the country, were piled up.

The ground where the mosque once stood was guarded by armed policemen. I walked with a crowd of Hindu pilgrims through a corridor covered with wire meshing. Several body searches later, we stopped in front of a makeshift temple to Rama, where a policeman played the part of a priest.

The pilgrims were curious to know where the mosque had stood, but there was nothing to indicate that it had ever existed. The erasure had been complete.

Back at the temple workshop, I saw a wooden model for Rama's temple, as envisioned by the R.S.S.: a two-storied structure, 268 feet 5 inches long, 140 feet wide and 128 feet high, with 106 pillars on each floor and 16 statues carved on each pillar. Behind me, the visitors raised slogans to Rama.

In the early years of Indian Independence, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, spoke of steel factories and dams as the temples of modern India that would propel the country toward prosperity. Speaking after the court's verdict, Mr. Modi said: "The Supreme Court verdict has brought a new dawn. Now the next generation will build a new India." But this temple, the symbol of Mr. Modi's India, is being born out of acts of criminality, embody-

ing the Hindu nationalist vision of the subordination of others.

On a recent visit to the northern Indian state of Punjab, I spoke to friends and family — all from the Sikh minority — and I realized that something fundamental had changed. The Sikhs are not a minority threatened by the B. J. P., which claims them as their own, a part of the Hindu fold, but their clear sense of a distinct identity has left them deeply uncomfortable with the vision of a Hindu nation.

Most of the people I spoke to had aligned themselves against the idea of a separate state demanded by armed Sikh insurgents in a violent insurrection that lasted for a decade, from 1983 to 1993. Now they were telling me this was not the country they had staked their faith in, and for the first time they spoke of working to make sure their children would become part of the large Sikh diaspora in Canada, Britain or the United States.

Already, before the R.S.S. vision takes shape, a vast majority of Muslims from Kashmir and elsewhere, the Christians of the northeast and the rest of the country as well as many in the south of India who lay claim to a different Hindu cultural identity from those in northern India, like the Sikhs I spoke to, are making it clear they want no part of it.

In a country burdened by history, the one consistent lesson is that centralized authority imposed against the wishes of the marginalized and those on the periphery never holds. Mr. Modi is overseeing the transformation of India into an exclusivist, majoritarian Hindu nation and fulfilling the dream of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, his Hindu nationalist parent body. A singular question arises: What will become of an India increasingly held together not by consent but by force?

HARTOSH SINGH BAL is the political editor of *The Caravan*, a magazine published in New Delhi.