



# THE HINDU CENTRE

for

Politics and Public Policy

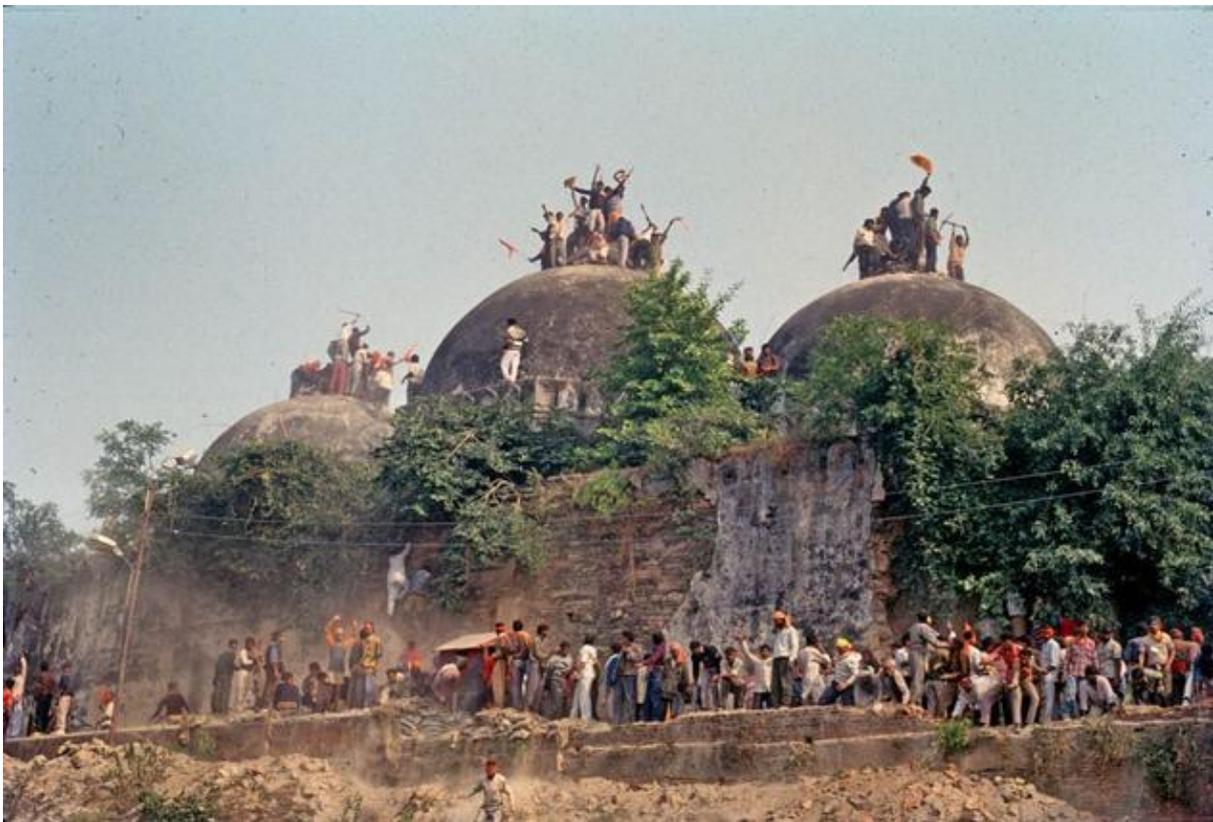


Essay

## Demolishing History; Constructing an Imagined Past

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Babri Masjid demolition on December 6, 1992. Photo: Indiapix Network

*The demolition of Babri Masjid 25 years ago, was the culmination of a long process of Hinduisation which had its roots in the revivalist–reformist movements in the 19th century. In their quest to invoke the indigenous cultural capital to resist the colonial hegemonisation, the early intelligentsia were inevitably led to invoke, even romanticise, some features of traditional cultural practices. While there was a modern component to this project, the later mobilisation by the proponents of Hindutva drew upon this legacy without imbibing its ‘modern’ part, and transformed its character to one that is wholly anti-Muslim, writes **K. N. Panikkar, historian, and retired Professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.** "Any attempt to construct the temple is likely to result in unprecedented strife. It is likely to lead the nation to a*

*civil war which even the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would like to prevent. If such a contingency has to be avoided, the dispute has to be taken out of its religious character. In fact, the issue before the judiciary is not the construction of the temple but the question of the title to the land. All that is required is to surrender the land to the secular authority, which is the state."*

**T**he demolition of the Babri Masjid on the December 6, 1992, by a group of activists of Hindu communal organisations, was a watershed in the history of contemporary India. It signified a departure from the tradition of accommodation and mutual respect which marked inter-community relations. Not that conflict between communities or attack and destruction of each other's places of worship had not taken place in the past. They certainly did, but they were qualitatively different; most of them occurring in a medieval, feudal context, linked with invasion and warfare or, in modern times, in situations of communal conflagrations. At the time of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, however, a democratic order was in place which afforded enough space for peaceful resolution of disputes. Still, without fully exhausting the possibilities of a peaceful resolution, a frenzied crowd, assembled from all over the country obliterated the Masjid.

That the demolition was a traumatic experience for Muslims was apparent because of its political and religious affiliations. But the impact of demolition was felt much beyond the confines of the Muslim community. It engulfed the entire country as it was perceived as an assault on Indian democracy. The foundation of Indian democracy, like all democracies in the world, has been the social and political consensus carefully constructed during the early years of independence, as revealed in the prolonged discussions in the Constituent Assembly. What was most unfortunate about the demolition was that it undermined this consensus to such an extent that the minorities became apprehensive about the relevance and fairness of democracy. Even 25 years after the demolition, the Indian state has not succeeded in allaying this apprehension. In fact, the recent developments in Indian polity have only succeeded in intensifying it. None other than Hamid Ansari, when he was Vice-President of India, found it necessary to sound a serious note of caution that the minorities are living in fear.

### **An act of 'retribution'**

The demolition was not an end. It was intended as a precursor to the construction of a temple which gave to the demolition a distinctly religious ambience. Yet, the demolition and temple construction sprang from different rationales and purposes. While the demolition was 'retribution', the construction of the temple was an attempt to 'redeem the self-esteem of the

Hindus'. However, both were a part of a larger project of defining India as a Hindu nation. According to this construct, if India is to be genuinely Hindu, it should eliminate — or marginalise — the non-Hindus: a foundational idea of Hindutva. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, who conceived and propagated the idea of Hindutva, had argued that minorities were not part of the nation: it belonged to Hindus.

In pursuit of this idea, the Hindu tradition was conflated with the Indian tradition and the entire history of India was sought to be rewritten with a Hindu-centric view. The on-going efforts to retrieve and document the Hindu character of the past, ranging from the Hinduisation of the Indus valley civilisation to attributing Hindu origins to Taj Mahal are part of this project. Such claims might sound preposterous, but over a period of time a large section of the population has come to believe in their veracity. As a result, the Hindu communal discourse succeeded in generating a distinction between 'Indian' and 'alien' on the basis of religion. The demolition of the Babri Masjid was a part of the larger project of Hinduising India by forging an identity with a selectively appropriated past. Such a motivated approach to the past can be discerned in the propaganda unleashed by the Hindutva organisations prior to the demolition and thereafter.

The linkage between the demolition of the mosque and the construction of the temple served the purpose of providing legitimacy to the former. If it was established that the Babri Masjid was built after demolishing an existing temple, the mosque became an illegitimate structure, at least in the eyes of the Hindus. Any attempt to undo the present status of the mosque and restore its past was, hence, justifiable. More so because the construction of the mosque was nothing short of a 'deliberate act' by the Muslim invaders to 'deny' the cultural rights of Hindus. The demolition was, hence, an act of 'retribution' for the injury deliberately inflicted upon Hindus by the Muslim invaders. Even if it had occurred centuries earlier, it was imperative that the present generation should atone for the 'sins' of their forefathers. The Babri Masjid was depicted as one of the examples of the injury inflicted on the psyche of the Hindus by the foreign invaders. The Hindutva ideologues unearthed evidence to prove that a temple existed at the location of the mosque. In fact, eventually, it was made out that every mosque was built on the site of a demolished temple! The demand for the demolition of all mosques followed.

### **Demolition and Hinduisation**

The demolition was the culmination of a long process of Hinduisation which had its roots in the revivalist–reformist movements in the nineteenth century. In their quest to invoke indigenous cultural capital to resist colonial hegemonisation, the early intelligentsia were

inevitably led to evoke, even romanticise, some features of traditional cultural practices. Though it gave birth to the modern Hindu, it also created neo-Hinduism which, at its core, reinforced religious identity. The cultural-religious mobilisation of Hindus witnessed during the post-colonial India drew upon this legacy without, however, imbibing adequately the 'modern' part of it. The modern Hindu is ensconced in a web of religious obscurantism and colonial-capitalist modernity, which has created a deep cultural crisis. What the Hindutva forces tried to do was to provide a solution for this dilemma by invoking religious tradition.

“ *The chief characteristic of the solution offered by Hindutva was the retrieval of traditional culture, the purity and richness of which, it was argued, was lost during the Muslim and Christian rule. This loss, the fallacies went, was due to the discrimination of Hindus by successive governments, beginning with the Muslim rulers during the medieval times to the secular rulers of contemporary India. The existence of the Babri Masjid was portrayed as a living example of this discrimination.* ”

The chief characteristic of the solution offered by Hindutva was the retrieval of traditional culture, the purity and richness of which, it was argued, was lost during the Muslim and Christian rule. This loss, the fallacies went, was due to the discrimination of Hindus by successive governments, beginning with the Muslim rulers during the medieval times to the secular rulers of contemporary India. The existence of the Babri Masjid was portrayed as a living example of this discrimination. Neither the colonial government nor the government of independent India had heeded the demand of the Hindu community to hand over the *janmasthan* to them. Therefore, the Hindus were left with no other option but to take to the path of agitation. This rationale appeared to carry conviction to a large section of middle-class Hindus. They perceived the demolition of the Masjid as the logical outcome of this indifference and the first step towards its rectification.

The demolition was not an accident, as made out by some, but a deliberate act in which the leaders of the Hindu organisations had wilfully participated. Not only was the demolition conducted in their presence, but also some of them were reported to have expressed their approval in no uncertain terms. It was the culmination of an aggressive campaign directed against the minorities and a series of symbolic acts, including Ram Shila Puja and Rath Yatra. The implicit meaning and aim of all these symbolic acts was the demolition of the mosque, which was not lost on the followers of Hindutva. In fact, for a long time, the Hindu militant

organisations were preparing for the demolition. It was reported that camps were organised in different parts of the country to rehearse the actual operation of the demolition.

### **Role of the state**

The state was expected to take sufficient steps to protect the mosque which, apart from being a place of worship, was also a historical monument of about five hundred years of history behind it. The only step in this direction was taken by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1948 when he ordered the removal of the idol of Ramlala, surreptitiously installed by a pro-Hindutva district official. His grandson, Rajiv Gandhi, opened the gates of the Babri Masjid for Hindu worshippers for reasons which were crassly political. His successor in the government from his party, Narasimha Rao, followed a more aggressive appeasement policy and did everything to win over the Hindus, except actually participating in the demolition of the mosque. The policy of the Congress government was such that it emboldened the Hindu communal forces to attempt the demolition. It turned out that the government had not taken sufficient steps to protect the monument from the marauding mob. The government took refuge in the alleged assurances given by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Chief Minister that preparations were in place to protect the monument.

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The demolition led to confirmation of the notion propagated for long that India is a country of the Hindus. The colonial rulers had given credence to this idea by dividing Indians into native Hindus and descendants of those who had invaded India. Elaborating this idea, the Hindu ideologues argued that Hindus were deprived of their ancestral home, not by the colonial rule, but by the Muslim invaders. The precondition for the freedom of India, therefore, consisted of rooting out the Muslims and all the vestiges of their domination from Indian soil. Over a period of time, this became part of the common sense of the ordinary Hindu. It was so because the religion-centric view was not only confined to the writings of leaders like Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar, but was extensively propagated through the *Shakhas* of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other Hindu ‘cultural’ organisations. The popular literature this school of thought has produced is so extensive that it has found its way into every nook

and corner of the country. The state and secular intelligentsia were aware of this dangerous advance of communal consciousness, but failed to take corrective steps.

### **History and communal consciousness**

The main strategy of Hindutva for religious consolidation was the construction of the Muslims as the 'other'. History was effectively used to achieve this objective. The view of history of post-independence India was, to a large extent, moulded by the colonial interpretation which was based on a communitarian view of Indian society. Its long-term implications were disastrous for the nation as it adversely affected inter-community relations.

The lived experience of community relations slowly gave way to communal hostility. Several stereotypes were invented and propagated. Among them the notion of 'aggressive Muslim' was quite striking. The medieval monuments were all cited as the examples of Muslim aggression. The Hindus, it was said, have been hospitable, verging on meekness in the past and it is time not only to call a halt to this but also to assert themselves. One way of assertion was to do away with all the symbols of Muslim aggression. This interpretation of the past received unprecedented popularity during the Ramjanmabhumi agitation. The medieval period was characterised as the dark age of Indian history, when the Hindus lost their independence not because they were weak but because the Muslims were crafty and deceitful. In fact, history was rewritten, invented, if you like, to depict the heroism and bravery of the Hindus.

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History is a major factor in defining the identity of a nation and the historical project of Hindutva was intended to create a new identity. The political success of Hindutva in recent times can be attributed to this this new-found identity. The narrative that came into vogue drew upon the sentiments generated by the demolition. The Hindutva organisations extended this narrative to cover the quotidian practices of the people. The sentiments which informed the demolition thus became the backbone of the political construction of Hindu Rashtra.

Although the purpose for which Babri Masjid was demolished remains unfulfilled — the ownership of the disputed land is still under the consideration of the Supreme Court — the demolition of the mosque has yielded the expected advantages to the Hindutva camp. It was from the demolition that Hindu fundamentalism launched its hate campaign which continues to be the plank of its political success.

### **Changing Narrative of Nationalism**

The demolition privileged a narrative of nationalism which is not only Hindu-centric but quite openly anti-minorities. Just as the Masjid was demolished in favour of the temple, the voice of the minorities is being submerged in the cacophony of aggressive nationalism which is essentially Hindu. The members of the minority community have become vulnerable to a variety of suspicions. They could be lynched for carrying beef, manhandled for alleged disrespect to the national anthem or the national flag, and for being critical of Hindu nationalist icons. Even cheering a cricketer from Pakistan is considered anti-national. In fact, the minorities find themselves in such a desperate situation that they have to prove their patriotism by constantly demonstrating their loyalty.

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The Hindu nationalist narrative which has captured the imagination of the people has been built over a period through a series of well-orchestrated social and political interventions. The demolition of the Babri Masjid was one of the many links in the chain which furthered the cause of Hindu consolidation and aggression. It continued to fulfil such a role in the promotion of Hindu nationalism.

The Hindutva forces have tried to perpetuate the memory of the demolition so that the dream of a Ram temple could be kept alive. Yet, the temple is nowhere near realisation, despite the political success of Hindutva. And it is unlikely to be realised. The enthusiasm of even its ardent votaries seems to have waned. Barring a few Hindutva fringe groups, no one believes that the construction of a temple is feasible or desirable, as any attempt to construct the temple is likely to result in unprecedented strife. It is likely to lead the nation to a civil war which even the BJP would like to prevent.

If such a contingency has to be avoided, the dispute has to be taken out of its religious character. In fact, the issue before the judiciary is not the construction of the temple but the question of the title to the land. All that is required is to surrender the land to the secular authority, which is the state. The state can then use it for the creation of an international institution to deliberate upon issues pertinent to all religions and their believers.

*(K. N. Panikkar, historian, served as the Professor of Modern Indian History at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). Prior to joining JNU, he taught at University of Delhi. A former Vice Chancellor of Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kerala, a former Chairman of the Kerala Council for Historical Research, and Founding Executive Vice-Chairman, Higher Education Council of Kerala, he is well known for his work on intellectual and cultural history of colonial India.)*

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