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Ayodhya: Rising Hindu Violent Extremism?

By Rueben Dass

SYNOPSIS

The groundbreaking ceremony or Bhumi Pujan of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya, on the grounds of the Babri Mosque, was held on 5 August 2020. It coincided with the anniversary of the abrogation of Article 370, which changed the status of Jammu & Kashmir. Both events symbolised the consolidation of Hindu nationalist supremacy. Where is India headed under Modi?

COMMENTARY

ON 5 AUGUST 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone for the construction of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya, on the grounds of the 16th century Babri Mosque which Hindu militants occupied and destroyed 28 years ago. Both Muslims and Hindus have laid claim on the land where the mosque sat, upon which the new temple is now going to be constructed. The Babri Masjid was built by Moghul emperor Babur in 1528. Hindus claim that the mosque was built on land where a Hindu temple commemorating the birthplace of Lord Ram was located.

In December 1992, members of the Hindu nationalist group, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), demolished the 492-year-old Babri Masjid complex in a deadly riot. Subsequent riots broke out across the country taking the lives of more than 2,000 people. Severe Hindu-Muslim communal tensions and legal battles ensued, culminating in a Supreme Court decision in 2019 granting the land to the Hindus and paving the way for the construction of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple.

Anniversary of Article 370 & BJP Ideology

In officiating the opening of the temple, Prime Minister Modi had chosen a date of some significance. It coincided with the first anniversary of the abrogation of Article

370 of the Indian constitution, which granted special, semi-autonomous status to the regions of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) and special privileges to the people of the state.

The revocation of the special status was seen by Kashmiris as a move to weaken the Muslim majority hold on the state by allowing Hindus to buy land and settle there. The reactions worsened when the government imposed an Internet and media lockdown in the state and a crackdown on local political leaders such as former J&K chief ministers, Mehbooba Mufti and Omar Abdullah.

The choice of the dates could not have been merely coincidental. Both events symbolised what the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government sees as its success in bringing its Hindu nationalist agenda to the centre stage of mainstream Indian politics. After the groundbreaking ceremony in Ayodhya, a BJP general secretary claimed that the date marked the 'victory of BJP ideology'.

Indian journalist Bhavna Vij-Aurora stated that both these events are landmarks that 'signify the complete transformation of national politics'.

Taken together, the Ram Bhumi Phujan and the abrogation of Article 370 signalled the consolidation of a Hindutva agenda on the national stage, which has the propensity to induce increased Hindu-Muslim tensions and a further rightward shift of mainstream Indian politics.

Hindu Terror against Minorities

The rise of the BJP government has coincided with an increase in mob violence by members of the RSS against minorities in the form of cow vigilantism or lynching. Formed in 1925 as a response to British occupation, the RSS is a paramilitary volunteer group that is ideologically Hindu nationalist-supremacist. It has more than four million members, vast networks across the country and substantial political influence, in particular, with the ruling BJP.

Cow vigilantism is an expression of religious fundamentalism as cows are viewed as sacred in the Hindu religion. The *gau rakshas*, or cow protection units consisting predominantly of RSS members, often target Muslim cow herders who transport and slaughter cows for a living. BJP politicians have often defended these vigilantes and denied their wrongdoings. The police and judiciary across the country have been accused of closing one eye to such Hindu violence.

For example, in 2017, 55-year-old dairy farmer Pehlu Khan was assaulted and killed alongside four others by a mob in Rajasthan. It was alleged that sloppy investigation by the police led to Indian courts acquitting six accused, citing lack of evidence despite Khan naming the accused in his 'dying declaration'. The Rajasthan home minister defended the attackers, stating that there was nothing wrong in them trying to stop cow trafficking which is illegal.

Apart from cow violence, the courts have also acquitted individuals involved in Hindu terrorism. In 2019, a special court acquitted four men suspected to be members of the Hindu terror group, Abhinav Bharat, for their involvement in the 2007 bomb blast on an express train connecting Delhi to Lahore.

This came after India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) found the four men to be guilty of the attacks, killing 68 people, mostly Pakistanis. Similarly in 2018, five men involved in the 2007 bombing of the Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad, which claimed nine lives, were acquitted by the court, citing lack of evidence even though initial NIA investigation found them guilty of the attacks. The men were believed to have links with Abhinav Bharat.

Cycle of Violence: Rising Terror Threat

India is in danger of suffering from a vicious cycle of violence and extremism as a result of BJP's controversial policies and RSS' continued use of violence against Muslims. This could lead to an alienation of the Muslim community, pushing some disenfranchised Muslims towards joining militant groups in retaliation.

This has already been seen in Kashmir. Whilst the increased security presence and lockdown in J&K post-Article 370 have resulted in lower terrorism-related deaths, there has been an increase in militant recruitment among locals in the region.

Groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and ISIS have sought and will continue to exploit Hindu-Muslim communal tensions in India. Both groups have used the rise of Hindu supremacism in India as a rallying call for Muslims to join the jihad against a government seen as discriminatory against them.

As part of their ideological propaganda targeting Muslims in the region, jihadi groups have highlighted persecution of Muslims in J&K, rise of Hindutva violence against Muslims and the passing of controversial legislation, such as the Citizenship Amendment Act that grants citizenship exclusively to illegal immigrants of all other religions except Islam.

The rise of this uncompromising form of Hindutva threatens a deepening of the fissures within India's social fabric which can lead to further intercommunal violence, and also extremism and terrorism. The Ram temple and Article 370 point in one direction: India needs to brace itself for further ramifications of a rising potential of Hindutva violent extremism, coinciding with the ascent to power of the BJP.

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