

India: Ram Mandir: The Unholy Union Of God And Greed (Insaf Editorial)

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Caught up in the incessant drumbeat of publicity created by the godi (lapdog) media that masquerades as Hindu religiosity, the goal of the consecration (pran pratishthan) ceremony on January 22 at the partially-constructed Ram Mandir in Ayodhya was always nakedly political - to manufacture the one Nation, One Leader image with Modi cast as the mythical Ram in preparation for the forthcoming national elections. The fact that this political goal was sought to be concealed under layers of religious myth pointedly illustrates the distance a supposedly secular state has drifted from its constitutional mooring.

A large contributor to this drift has been, ironically, the very institution charged with protecting adherence to the provisions of the constitution, the Supreme Court. Its flawed and illogical Ram Janmabhoomi judgement of 2019 following the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992 opened the floodgates to the communal madness and hysteria that pervaded the nation in January; the elected leader of a secular, democratic nation being reincarnated publicly as a mythical god as he presided over an overtly religious ceremony where he usurped the role customarily assigned to the priestly order.

It is notable that several Hindu religious leaders, notably the four Jagatguru Shankaracharyas, declined to participate in the ceremony on various doctrinal grounds and all of them pointed to the opportunistic politics underlying the event. One Swami, Nischalananda Saraswati of Purvaamnaya Govardhanmath Puri peeth, claimed that the government was not constructing a sacred temple but a tomb as the mandir lacked the sanctity and reverence associated with the tradition of temple construction. The refusal of other Swamis to participate was also perceived as a principled stand against the manipulative politics of certain leaders, notably the designation of Prime Minister Modi as the "chief host" of the program. Of course, none of these concerns were highlighted or given due attention in the mainstream media that has essentially become a propaganda arm of the Modi regime.

Journalist Nalin Verma writes in *The Wire* about the failures of the mainstream media: "the visuals and narratives in the mass media are largely creating the perception that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has resurrected Lord Ram from the shackles of medieval ghulami (slavery) and restored him in the new temple being built on the site of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. While Lord Ram and Ayodhya have acquired all the newsworthiness, the myriad scams - Pegasus, the Rafale deals, the cloud over the PM-CARES fund, the disastrous consequences of demonetization, and education and ration scams reported in Madhya Pradesh over the last decade - besides the unabating violence in Manipur and the selective bulldozing of minorities in Uttar Pradesh, appear to be topics of the distant past."

The Ram Mandir is being constructed at the very site where the Babri mosque was violently destroyed on December 6, 1992 by fanatics belonging to various Hindutva organizations. At the time

this happened, which is well within the memory of all people middle-aged and older, this event was regarded as a national shame. Even those who directly caused this to happen, like L.K. Advani of the BJP whose 1990 rathayatra instigated the Hindutva hordes, wished to distance themselves from this shameful act afterward. However, like all fascist movements that glorify acts of violence by turning them into miraculous events the violent basis of the creation of the Ram temple has been conveniently airbrushed into an epochal Hindu event, a manifestation of Ram Lalla, the infant god Ram. The Supreme Court judgment acknowledged the destruction of the mosque as a criminal act but in a stunning reversal of legal logic it awarded the site to the perpetrators of the crime. Not only that, the judgement mandated that the government of a secular state construct a temple dedicated to a god of the majority religion of a multi-religious society. The five judges who crafted the unsigned, anonymous judgement, contrary to usual practice, benefited handsomely. One is now the current Chief Justice and the others received ample post-retirement plums like Rajya Sabha membership or appointment as a Governor.

Some liberals have contended that the Supreme Court judgement that mandated the award of land to the Muslim community to construct a new mosque to replace the destroyed one preserves the Indian version of secularism which calls for equal respect for all religions rather than the French concept of secularism known as laicite, religion as private belief having no role in public life, or even the American version of secularism embodied in the separation of church and state. This is a delusion. Indian secularism as enshrined in the constitution is a byproduct of the national freedom movement under the leadership of icons like Gandhi whose famous prayer hymn had the line "Ishwar Allah tero naam" (Ishwar and Allah are your, i.e. God's, names). This secularism emerged through the centuries-old shared cultural space exemplified by the Ganga-Jumna Tehzeeb (culture) and its equivalents in other regions where people of different faiths would participate in each other's religious and cultural festivals. The two-nation theory that proclaimed Hindus and Muslims as separate nations had its protagonists among both the Hindus, such as Savarkar, whose descendants are now ruling India, as well as the Muslims, such as Jinnah who sought successfully for the creation of Pakistan. The ideologues of the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha thoroughly oppose and denigrate Indian secularism calling it "sickularism" or other epithets and ever since they captured state power a decade ago, they have put their philosophy into practice by various legal, e.g. the Citizenship Amendment Act, and extra-legal means to make especially Muslims second-class citizens; in some areas, minority Christians are suffering a similar fate. Their effort is to destroy and eradicate the shared cultural space as much as they can and ghettoize Muslims. The proposed mosque, for which land has been allotted 25 kilometers from its original location in Ayodhya, will accomplish that separation and ghettoization in practice. If and when the mosque ever gets constructed that will be done with purely private funds unlike the Ram Mandir.

Meanwhile, what is often forgotten in the media hoopla is the moneymaking greed that underlies and undergirds so-called traditional religions in the modern neo-liberal era. To a lesser or greater extent this is a feature of all religions. The holiest site of Islam, the Kaaba in Mecca, is surrounded by and enclosed by high-rise 5-star hotels and shopping malls from where one can look down on the Kaaba. The megachurches of evangelical Christianity are nothing but shrines to huckstering and money collection. In an era dominated by consumerism and marketing, the famous saying in the Gospels of St. Luke and St. Mark that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God has little relevance.

This feature of the Ram Mandir that highlights greed and money as its true determinants is naturally glossed over in the media although glossy websites promoting high grade tourism in the new Ayodhya are now beginning to appear. The non-mainstream media has begun to document some of these stories of graft, corruption and money-making in Ayodhya that have followed the construction of the Ram Mandir. One news feature says that "behind the glitz of the Ram temple in Ayodhya,

reports essay a story of massive land grab by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh combine and it is common knowledge that this has meant colossal profits for the BJP." A report in the news portal Scroll with a headline "Did Ram say kick out the poor: the discontent of the displaced in new Ayodhya" indicates that 4000 shops and homes have been demolished for road-widening projects and the "beautification" of Ayodhya and that people were forced to part with their land due to either fear of the government or the fear of being labelled anti-Hindu.

Other stories mention that vast tracts of land in Ayodhya are under the hold of the VHP-RSS, who have allegedly often occupied it forcibly or through a degree of coercion and that large sections of Ayodhya have been sold at profit to businesses. More revealing is a report in The Wire that an investigation about land dealings between local BJP leaders and the Adani group has come to light. The firm linked to BJP leaders sold ecologically sensitive land near the Saryu River that flows through Ayodhya to Adani for a big profit. While the name of Ram is invoked to justify the public face of the entire Mandir movement, the real beneficiaries, Adani, Ambani, and other cronies who have a long-standing symbiotic relationship with Modi are waiting in the wings to reap the profits.

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