

India: Statement on the Inauguration of the Ayodhya Ram Temple

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Radical Socialist strongly condemns the politically appalling spectacle that is the inauguration of the Ram Temple on the site of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.

The ceremony of pranpratishthan on 22nd January 2024 marks another great symbolic setback to efforts since independence to sustain a secular democratic polity. The event represents the apotheosis of the highly divisive sectarian communal agenda of the hydra-headed Sangh Parivar towards establishing a Hindu Rashtra, and their mission of instilling the belligerent Hindutva ideology as the dominant commonsense of the country. The inauguration of the Ram Temple comes in the background of the decade long authoritarian emergency-like rule unleashed by the BJP ever since it came to power in 2014. Defined by the naked demagoguery of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, BJP rule is marked by the systematic erosion of democratic principles and civil liberties through engineered riots targeting impoverished Muslim communities, misuse of state agencies and draconian laws to flatten any and all forms of dissent, the capitulation of the judiciary and mass media, as well as through anti-Muslim discriminatory laws such as the CAA/NRC. The clamour surrounding the temple inauguration, which includes arbitrary enforcement of a state holiday, hospital closures, shutting down of schools and educational institutions, hoisting of saffron flags in public spaces, grassroots campaigns mobilizing resident welfare organizations and so on, is also unprecedented. The exceedingly provocative displays of support for the Ram temple manufactured by the Sangh Parivar only serve to remind us that the 'new' communally- polarized India, rebranded as vishwaguru, is no longer a hospitable country for religious and ethnic minorities, as well as for those who choose to defy the diktats of the Hindutva brigade.

Nonetheless, as we witness the concerted efforts at erasure and re-writing of history through the manipulation of the very architecture of the country by the Sangh Parivar, it is crucial to remind ourselves of the bloody history of the Babri Masjid demolition on 6th December 1992 and its aftermath. The persistence of a Hindu tinge even in early secular independent India was attested in a number of ways, of which one was the surreptitious installation of a Ram idol in the Babri Masjid, followed by governmental decision to retain the status quo after installation so that both sides went to court, instead of treating it as a communal provocation which should have been removed immediately. The issue, simmering for a long time, was reopened when the Rajiv Gandhi led Congress government stoked it up. It was then that the Sangh Combine saw a great opportunity and began its Ram Janmabhoomi campaign in earnest. By embarking on the L.K. Advani-led ultra-theatrical Ram Rath Yatra, a chilling trail of communal violence occurred across the country that left approximately 1800 people dead. The agitation reached a flashpoint when hundreds of self-styled karsevaks led by prominent BJP leaders demolished the Babri Masjid. It also proved that the Ram Temple agitation was a political issue and had little to do with Hindu religion per se. The spate of communal riots that followed the Babri Masjid demolitions were unambiguously incited by Hindutva forces in a bid to secure political power as witnessed by the electoral victories of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra in 1995 and the BJP-led NDA coalition victory in 1998.

The post-Godhra riots of 2002 were yet another brutal instance of Sangh Parivar sowing communal tensions to pursue their narrow political agenda. The riots targeting vulnerable Muslim populations were considered by various investigating civil liberties groups to have been engineered at the highest levels of the Gujarat state government led by Modi and Shah. The carnage that ensued during the riots, which lasted for days, marked one of the darkest moments in Indian history with around 2000, overwhelmingly Muslim killed, many more injured, tens of thousands displaced for prolonged periods in makeshift camps, and the mass-scale ravaging and destruction of Muslim owned homes, offices and shops. The consequent ghettoization of Muslims formed a major part of what was grotesquely touted as the 'Gujarat Model' that catapulted Modi and Shah to the national political stage as well as marked the rise of a key corporate donor, Gautam Adani. The shameful judgement of the Supreme Court on the Babri Masjid case in 2019 that legitimized the construction of the Ram temple is a glaring example of how the judiciary, to put it mildly, is unwilling to seriously restrain the Sangh Parivar's ongoing saffron agenda.

It is manifestly clear that the construction of the Ram temple is not going to benefit the ordinary working people of India, whether Muslim, Hindu or others. In fact, it has already encroached into the lives of thousands whose lands have been acquired for the construction of highways meant for expected pilgrims. Moreover, the current spectacle with Modi centre-stage as the yajman of the temple ceremonies is clearly aimed at promoting a sense of Hindu supremacy that will be a central message that the BJP will project during its campaigning for the forthcoming general elections. Just as they instrumentalized the Pulwama attacks for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the Modi-Shah duo are now singularly focussed on derailing conversations on any meaningful and/or substantive issues related to the lives of the working poor. They are devoted to maintaining the shell of democracy intact while hollowing it out from the inside through legal and extra-legal means. If on one hand the independence of bodies like the Election Commission, Supreme Court, Central and state government bureaucracies is being seriously eroded, on the other hand state agencies like the Enforcement Directorate, CBI and NIA are being selectively used to unjustifiably harass and punish its opponents and dissidents be these individuals, or progressive organisations of various kinds. An allegiance to the external electoral form gains them political legitimacy which can then be used or misused to push through the most extreme forms of neoliberalism on the economic front while reshaping the polity to resemble an ethno-national Hindu state.

This latest episode of elaborate ceremonies surrounding the inauguration of the Ram Temple (whose construction is far from complete) and the official holidays declared by the Central government and universities across the country is a grotesque reminder that the very existence of an India from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari remaining a secular democratic entity is under threat as never before.

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