

## The Many Shades of Ayodhya's Ram Temple

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### Summary

*The opening of the Ram temple in Ayodhya in India on 22 January 2024 was a landmark event. Welcomed by many and decried by some, it takes the Indian republic into unfamiliar territory.*

The spectacular opening of the Ram temple in the north Indian town of Ayodhya on 22 January 2024 was a watershed event. The temple was built on a site, believed to be the birth place of Lord Ram and where a 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque once stood. The political and legal battles over the temple site in independent India began in 1949, when an idol of Lord Ram was placed inside the existing Babri Masjid, which was demolished in 1992. Eventually, a [2019 Supreme Court ruling](#) paved the way for the construction of the Ram temple. After having played a central role in the consecration ceremony of the temple, [India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared](#), "January 22, 2024 is not a date on a calendar. This is the origin of a new time cycle. A nation rising up after breaking the mentality of slavery, a nation taking courage from every bit of the past, creates history in this way."

Putting aside the rhetoric, there are many layers to the opening of the temple, which was as much a political event as it was religious. For the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), this was a fulfilment of one of the core items on its agenda and one that has figured prominently in its election manifestoes over the past three decades. This was also the issue that propelled the rise of the BJP in the 1990s from a marginal entity to its current dominant status. The temple opening and the intense mass mobilisation around it was one more step in the long-time goal of the BJP and the Sangh Parivar (Saffron Brotherhood) of uniting a significant number of Hindus, cutting across region, class and caste. The ceremony was also a marriage of politics and religion in a way not seen before in independent India.

Second, the role of the courts was critical to the opening of the Ram temple and drew praise from Modi at the opening of the temple. Indeed, the 2019 Supreme Court ruling on the disputed site in Ayodhya gave the opening of the temple a legitimacy that a popular movement would never have been able to achieve. Over the years, the court has constructed its own version of an all-encompassing Hinduism, which has helped the Hindu nationalist project on occasion. The tendency to erase the differences within Hinduism was very much in evidence in the 2019 Ayodhya ruling. In the voluminous judgment, the court stated that the "Hindu community" claims the disputed site as the "birth-place of Lord Ram", ignoring that there are many Hindus who either do not worship Ram or are ambivalent about the disputed site. Much of the judgment revolved around evaluating the faith and reverence of Hindus for a mythological site, which is tricky at the best of times. Despite admitting that the existing mosque on the site had been first "desecrated" in 1949 and destroyed in 1992, the bench unanimously ruled that the claim of the Hindus to the entire disputed property to be on a better footing than the Muslims. The court

compensated the Muslims by awarding a plot of land elsewhere in Ayodhya to build a mosque. For India's Muslim minority, the manner in which the temple was sanctioned and built is bound to be disquieting.

Third, the dispute over Ayodhya has represented one of the most potent challenges to Indian secularism. In India, one of the planks of a liberal conception of secularism – the wall of separation between state and religion – is constitutionally absent. Though Articles 25 and 26 of the Indian Constitution guarantee the right to individual and collective freedom of religion, they, along with other articles, also empower the state to intervene in Hindu religious institutions and practices. A historical parallel to the opening of the Ram temple can be found in 1951 when the rebuilt Somnath temple was inaugurated. [Then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru did not attend the function](#) and was unhappy with President Rajendra Prasad for “associating” himself with and attending the “spectacular opening”. When Modi, in the company of other government functionaries and backed by the entire government apparatus, starred in the ceremonies around the temple consecration, the line between the state and the majority religion was blurred more than ever before.

Fourth, given the timing of the temple opening, the issue is likely to play a crucial role in the upcoming general election. Following the opening, the Union cabinet [passed a resolution](#) on 24 January 2024, hailing the prime minister. There has already been a nationwide outreach by the BJP and other constituents of the Sangh Parivar around the temple opening and this is sure to continue in the weeks ahead. The opposition parties, which largely boycotted the temple opening, will find it difficult to counter such an emotive issue.

There are many, including members of the government, who believe that the Ram temple represents a [“civilisational reawakening”](#) of India. There are others who believe that the event was a [“terrifying spectacle”](#) and represented the [“death” of the republic](#). What is certainly true is that the opening of the temple with full state sanction and involvement takes the Indian republic into uncharted territory.

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