

### BJP'S POLITICIZATION OF RAM TEMPLE IN AYODHYA

By  
**Muhammad Ahmad Khan**  
Research Associate  
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by  
**Dr Khurram Abbas**

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



On 22 January 2024, the inauguration of the *Ram Temple* in Ayodhya at the very place where the historic 'Babri Masjid' was demolished three decades ago, is significant in its religious and socio-political aspects for the Indian society. The incumbent BJP regime optimally used the state apparatus to build national discourse favoring its campaign for the upcoming *Lok Sabha* elections based on Mr. Modi's self-projection as 'chosen by god'. The BJP has long been manipulating religion for political gains. Among other political parties, the Indian National Congress (INC), boldly refused to attend the inauguration of the temple due to inter-mingling of religion and politics by the BJP. However, the BJP government has been applauded widely by various segments of Indian society, which further enhances BJP's prospects for the third consecutive win in the *Lok Sabha* polls.

Last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had announced that the *Ram Temple* construction will be completed in January 2024 and that the government will inaugurate it on 22 January and open it for the devotees. Considering it one of the most remarkable events, the BJP leadership sent invitations to the political elite as well as major names in the country to attend the '*Pran Pratishtha*'.<sup>1</sup> The INC leadership, including Malikaarjun Kharge, Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, and Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury,

<sup>1</sup> Pran Pratishtha is a consecration ceremony in which the spirit of the deity is called to come and reside in the idol. This is to give a life to the idol.

refused to attend the consecration.<sup>2</sup> Leaders from other parties including Mamata Banerjee of Trinamool Congress; Arvind Kejriwal of Aam Aadmi Party; Uddhav Thackeray from Shiv Sena UBT; and Sharad Pawar of Nationalist Congress Party also skipped the consecration.<sup>3</sup>

The BJP has widely projected itself as the 'chosen' one for the consecration of the 'divine' project. Mr. Modi has been portraying himself as the ordained instrument of god for '*Pran Pratishtha*'.<sup>4</sup> About 75 years ago, Abhiram Das, a Sadhu from Hanumangarhi in Ayodhya, had also claimed to be god-chosen when he along with his accomplices surreptitiously placed a *Ram* idol in Babri Masjid in 1949.<sup>5</sup> Till his death in 1981, and even after that, he is remembered as '*Ramjanambhoomi Uddharak*' – savior of the birthplace of Lord Rama. After the idol placement, the Mosque was termed as disputed land, and in 1992 under the RSS-BJP campaign, the Mosque was demolished by ultra-nationalist Hindus. With the support of RSS's campaign, the BJP was able to increase its vote bank from 2 seats in 1984 to 85 in 1989. The table below shows how the BJP has been constantly using religion as an instrument for political communication and for the promotion of its long-term agenda of turning the Republic of India into a '*Hindu Rashtra*'. L.K. Advani's '*Rath Yatra*' in the 1990s mobilized Hindus on the goal of reconstructing *Ram Temple*, which accrued huge political dividend for the BJP.<sup>6</sup>

#### BJP's Seat Share in Lok Sabha

Year	1984	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
BJP's Seats	2	85	119	160	182	182	138	116	282	303

In 2019, then Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi designated Justices Sharad Arvind Bodbe, Ashok Bhushan, S. Abdul Nazeer, and Dhananjaya Y Chandrachud, to hear the case relating to the Ayodhya

<sup>2</sup> Arvind Gunasekar and Anndita Sanyal, "Religion is Personal Matter:" Congress Rejects Ram Temple Event Invite," *NDTV*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/clearly-rss-bjp-event-congress-wont-attend-ram-temple-event-in-ayodhya-4835647>.

<sup>3</sup> "Ayodhya Ram Mandir Pran Pratishtha ceremony: Who will skip consecration?" *Hindustan Times*, January 21, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ayodhya-ram-mandir-pran-pratishtha-ceremony-list-of-politicians-who-will-skip-consecration-101705806628874.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "PM Modi's Claims on him being the chosen instrument of God for Ram Temple Consecration," *The Telegraph Online*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/new-right-editorial-on-pm-modis-claims-on-him-being-chosen-instrument-of-god-for-ram-temple-consecration/cid/1994040>.

<sup>5</sup> Karishna Jha and Dharendra K. Jha, "The Untold Story of How the Rama Idol Surfaced inside Babri Masjid," *The Wire*, December 6, 2021, <https://thewire.in/communalism/untold-story-rama-idol-surfaced-inside-babri-masjid>.

<sup>6</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, "Hindu Nationalism," in *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

issue.<sup>7</sup> In just 23 days, the Supreme Court bench produced a 929-page report giving the Hindus all rights over the Mosque land. Justice Chandrachud is currently the Chief Justice of India and has recently visited temples wearing Saffron robes, betraying his biases. Ramachandra Guha, a leading historian and public intellectual in India, commented: “A serving Chief Justice making his temple visits at this particular juncture in our nation’s history raises disturbing questions about his judgment.”<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, after the judgment was passed in 2019, the BJP government established the *Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust* in 2020 to construct the *Ram Temple* at the site.<sup>9</sup> On 22 January 2024, the BJP enthusiastically inaugurated the *Ram Temple* whose very existence is based on faithlessness, injustice, treachery, discrimination, hyper-nationalism, and abuse of state machinery against Muslims that ultimately debunk India as a secular state. In their speeches at the inauguration, both PM Modi and UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath touted the BJP’s ‘hard work’ in returning the temple to Hindus. Mr. Modi said, “The legal battle over the existence of Lord Ram went on for decades. Ram’s existence was questioned.” He added that “Indian society must learn from its mistakes in history and seek the energy from the event.”<sup>10</sup>

Almost 32 years passed since the Babri Mosque tragedy when the BJP used the episode for electoral politics. Now, as the Lok Sabha elections in India loom ahead, the BJP appeared to be in a hurry to inaugurate the Temple in the runup to the elections. Nrependra Mishra, Chairman of the Ram Mandir Trust Construction Committee, had said before the inauguration that the Temple is not yet completed. He said that it would take almost 2 years to fully complete the construction of the temple.<sup>11</sup> Then why Mr. Modi was so quick to announce the inaugural, when four *Shankaracharyas*, the flag bearers of *Santana Dharma* had decided not to attend because the *Pran Prathishta* cannot be done in an incomplete home for the deity.<sup>12</sup> The other reason for the *Shankaracharyas* not attending the *Pran Prathishta* was the politicizing of religious matters by the BJP, said *Shankaracharya* of the Jyotish Peeth in an interview with Karan Thapar. He said that the one man,

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<sup>7</sup> “Why Supreme Court ruled in favour of Ram mandir Construction in Ayodhya,” Time of India, January 15, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/why-supreme-court-ruled-in-favour-of-ram-mandir-construction-in-ayodhya/articleshow/106871900.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>8</sup> Karan Thapar, “Is the CJI wrong about Mahatma Gandhi and to visit Hindu Temples in Saffron Robes,” *The Wire*, January 10, 2024, <https://thewire.in/law/karan-thapar-cji-dy-chandrachud-ramachandra-guha>.

<sup>9</sup> Shri Ram Janambhoomi Teerth Kshetra, <https://srjbtkskheta.org/trust-members/>.

<sup>10</sup> “Lord Ram is not a problem,” Mint, January 22, 2024, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/ayodhya-ram-mandir-pran-prathishta-ceremony-pm-modi-said-lord-ram-not-a-problem-but-10-top-quotes-from-speech-11705917547618.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Shalabh, “Ayodhya Ram Temple Phase 1 work set to be completed within a week,” *Times of India*, January 08, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/ayodhya-ram-temple-phase-1-work-set-to-be-completed-within-a-week-nripendra-mishra/articleshow/106624329.cms>.

<sup>12</sup> Ravi Joshi, “Bolo Jai Sri Ram and Press the BJP Button,” *Deccan Herald*, January 17, 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/bolo-jai-sri-ram-and-press-the-bjp-button-2851835>.

referring to PM Modi, is running the whole show. Politicians have nothing to do with religious matters. They must leave it to those expert in this area. Moreover, he revealed that the BJP had forced the *Pandit* to choose one date in January which was the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Otherwise, across India, the date was rejected by religious figures including *Shankaracharyas*.

The reason is very clear behind this urgency. The BJP is using the old tactics that it used 30 years ago. After inaugurating the temple on 22 January, the BJP has ample time to launch a multi-pronged campaign based on *Ram Bhakti*. In December 2023, PM Modi in an in-house meeting with the party cadres, instructed them to strive to secure more than 50 percent of seats in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.<sup>13</sup> Since the 1990s, the BJP has articulated a specific agenda before the elections on which it bases its whole election campaign. In the 1990s, it was the Ayodhya issue injecting hyper-nationalism; in 2014 'Hindutva' card dominated all other aspects; and in 2019, the post-Pulwama anti-Pakistan rhetoric served the BJP to secure a thumping majority. For the upcoming elections, the BJP is basing all its political campaign on the *Ram Temple's* inauguration.

Politically, the INC looks walking on a tightrope that evidently leads to a dead-end. The party itself lacks a central, unified, and nationalistic agenda that offers a credible alternative to the BJP's 'Hindutva-based' narratives. In the recent state-assembly elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chattisgarh, INC used soft 'Hindutva' in its campaigning, which means the party lacks both conviction and is bereft of its own ideas to attract popular support. The INC's refusal to attend the event and highlighting of the BJP's abuse of state machinery in the current situation was ostensibly because prior to the general elections, it did not want to submit to the agenda being set by the BJP. So, INC had the compulsion to resist. However, the BJP looks comfortably placed to score another *Lok Sabha* win.

The BJP has always used hyper-nationalism, deceit, aggression, marginalization of minorities especially Muslims, 'otherization' of minorities, anti-Pakistan narrative, nativism, and 'Hindutva' tactics for its electoral campaigns. The *Ram Temple* issue clearly illustrates that neither the sane elements in Hindu *Dharma* nor those projecting secularism in Indian politics view BJP's recent move as motivated by pure religious consideration. It has clear political objectives intended to serve the BJP well in the upcoming elections.

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<sup>13</sup> Himanshu Mishra, "Aim for over 50% votes in Lok Sabha Polls: PM Modi's advice to BJP leaders," *India Today*, December 23, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-polls-2024/story/bjp-national-meeting-lok-sabha-election-parliament-prime-minister-narendra-modi-2479662-2023-12-23>.