

The Majority Of India's Minority

Ayodhya is a good context to point out ordinary Muslims must wrest power back from the community's stubborn leaders

Ashwin Sanghi



Inauguration of Ram Mandir will conclude a tale that began in 1528 – when a Babur general Mir Baqi ostensibly pulled down a temple that marked Ram's birthplace to build Babri Masjid.

In 1858, a group of Nihang Sikhs wrote 'Ram' at a point inside the mosque. A chabutra (platform) was also constructed in the courtyard. In 1885, a civil suit filed in Faizabad sought permission to build a temple. In 1949, Ram Lalla's idols were left beneath the mosque's central dome. A receiver was appointed, gates were locked. Multiple suits languished until 1986, when it was unlocked. The mosque was brought down by a rampaging mob in 1991. The dispute wound its way through multiple courts until a five-judge Supreme Court bench delivered the final verdict in 2019.

It cannot be argued that rulers who were followers of Islam did not destroy Hindu temples. Historian Sita Ram Goel estimated around 3,000 temples were destroyed. He added the number could be many times more. One need not go till Somnath, Ayodhya, Kashi, or Mathura. Visit Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque next to Qutb Minar. Outside a plaque says it was built using parts recovered from 27 Hindu and Jain temples.

Of course, one cannot attempt to right every wrong of history. Nor must one expect a wounded civilisation to ignore all its open wounds. Any solution must lie somewhere in-between. It baffles me that our Muslim leaders cannot negotiate a reasonable settlement regarding a few key places significant to Hindus. It's almost as if the silent and sober Muslim community has meekly surrendered to antiquated leaders.

Hindus are accused by some of something similar. That is forgetting that Hindu consolidation is reaction

to Muslims' en-bloc tendencies. Countries that once welcomed migration from Muslim regions are finding ways to shut their doors. Rise of right-leaning parties in Europe and groundswell of support for Trump in US should be eye-openers. Bharat, in its clumsy and messy way, has welcomed and assimilated all faiths through centuries.

Sanatan Dharm, with all its alleged faults, has been instrumental in establishing a plural ethos. There is now opportunity for Muslims of India to lead the way in



establishing a gentler, more flexible, updated, permissive, tolerant, and kinder version of Islam. It took 14 centuries after Christianity was born for its reformation. Islam is at that same inflexion point. The starting point must be the ordinary Muslim wresting back power from an obsolete leadership.

By adopting a rigid posture on Babri issue, Indian Muslim leaders painted themselves into a corner. But disputes in Varanasi and Mathura are no less contentious. The original Kashi Vishwanath temple was destroyed several times. Aurangzeb built Gyanvapi

Mosque in its place. Similarly, Mathura's Keshavnath temple was replaced by Shahi Idgah mosque. Anticipating several disputes regarding hundreds of spots, Parliament passed the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act of 1991. The idea was to freeze religious character of places of worship using 1947 as a cutoff year. It is stubbornness of Muslim leadership regarding a few key spots that has triggered talk about judicial review or legislative reversal of the law.

Must Indian Muslims fight for recognition of madrassas, control over a handful of mosques, right to wear hijab in school, preserve personal laws, or sustain Waqf board? Or should their fight be for greater opportunities, gender equality, and economic progress?

Indian Muslims play a key role in shaping geopolitics. Persian mathematician Al-Khwarizmi's textbook on Indian arithmetic introduced India's decimal-based positional number system to West. Al-Biruni authored an analysis of Indian astronomy. Under Caliph Harun al-Rashid, Sushruta Samhita was translated and offered to the world. Indian crucible steel was the key element in crafting Damascus swords. Panchatantra was an indispensable text in training Persian bureaucracy. Why shouldn't modern India's Muslims rightfully spark a global Islamic transformation? If Saudi Arabia and UAE can find ways to modernise, what holds back Indian Muslims?

Mahabharat describes Krishn's message to Kauravs: give up five villages to Pandavs and avoid extending the family feud. Duryodhan's refusal of a negotiated settlement did no one any good. In Valmiki Ramayan, Ram says, "Every action should be pondered upon carefully. A well-considered action is always more effective." The moment in Ayodhya is opportunity for mainstream Muslims to ask: which battles are worth fighting?

The writer is author of several works of fiction

The image is for representational purposes