



Debating the identity crisis facing Indian Muslim community (With the thanks to The News/Daily Jang London)

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Growing up in the India of 1970s and '80s, I often found myself debating the identity crisis facing the community with my father. I would often quiz him if Partition was such a good idea and if the Muslims of the subcontinent had achieved anything with Pakistan. And he, only five at the time of Partition, would argue we could never truly understand the extraordinary circumstances that forced the Muslims, mostly from the north of India, to seek a separate homeland.

Although I still believe that the Indian Muslims have been the biggest losers in the whole bargain, throughout the cataclysmic years of the Babri Masjid-Ram temple conflict that belief was increasingly shaken. I would tell myself perhaps the Hindus and Muslims were after all two different 'nations' and couldn't co-exist in peace.

In fact, the whole mosque-temple tangle seemed to define and shape my generation of Muslims and Hindus in India. As a friend recently wrote, the Ayodhya agitation was to us what the Partition was to our parents' generation. We were all scarred and shaped -- and so was India -- by it in ways that we may never totally understand entirely.

It appears now that even the Allahabad High Court judges did not remain unaffected by the radioactive years of the 1990s, the peak of the Ayodhya agitation that ripped apart the socio-political fabric of the world's largest secular democracy. Else how could a court of law in the 21st century, swearing allegiance to the secular constitution of a secular democracy, determine the ownership of the 'disputed' piece of land on the basis of faith and conclude that a Hindu deity was born at the precise spot where the 16th century mosque stood in Ayodhya until 1992?

It is totally bizarre. The court was mandated to decide on the ownership of the property and determine if the mosque was built after demolishing a temple, as the Hindu zealots claim, on the basis of legally admissible facts, not on mythological fiction.

While the two Hindu judges base their conclusions on Lord Ram's origins on the "evidence" provided by the Archeological Survey of India, the lone Muslim judge, Justice Khan says he has no interest in archeology or history. Nonetheless, all three conclude that the site of the demolished mosque belongs to the Hindus, not because facts on the ground say so, but because of "[the] faith and belief of the Hindus". But, as historian D N Jha argues, if it is a case of 'belief,' shouldn't it become an issue of theology, not archaeology? Since when has the judiciary started deciding cases on the basis of theology?

The honourable judges conveniently ignore the fact that the same ASI had twice in the past failed to back the claim about Ram's birthplace. It was under the BJP government in 2003 that the state-run ASI came up with the "fresh evidence."

All this wouldn't be so serious if the whole issue had been merely about the ownership of the land or even the fair or unfair three-way split – two parts for Hindus, one for Muslims – of the land where the mosque stood before it was vandalised and torn down. It's the direct and indirect inferences, insinuations and conclusions drawn of the verdict that are the real problem here.

In fact, the implications of the verdict are so catastrophic in their sweep and potential that they are far more damaging than the demolition of the mosque in December 1992. Indeed, as Nivedita Menon of Jawaharlal Nehru University puts it in her spirited blog, it is like a second demolition in Ayodhya. It's like adding insult to injury.

Do the learned judges even realize the seriousness and dangerous implications of their conclusions? By blindly accepting the claim that Ram was born at the Babri site and that the 500-year-old mosque was built after the demolition of a Ram temple, the court has not only done grave injustice to the original owners of the property, it has legitimised and justified the wanton destruction of a place of worship in secular India in full view of the world.

For nearly a decade, the Hindutva zealots ran a reign of terror against India's Muslims, killing thousands of them before eventually destroying the historical monument in Ayodhya in 1992. Now the court has put its stamp of approval on those crimes against the country's biggest minority and humanity.

More ominously, it has opened the door to thousands of more such Ayodhyas. After all, the RSS-VHP-BJP combine have nearly 150,000 mosques on their hit list. Ayodhya was just the beginning.

If this is what we wanted, a compromise formula, then why did we have to wait all these years? Once again, as Nivedita Menon says, why not just have a 'settlement' in village council? "The woman has been raped, she is pregnant, she has nowhere to go, the council meets, the rapist is willing to marry her, all sorted out. The baby will be born legitimate, the woman has a husband!"

The Muslims, who have patiently waited for justice for half a century believing in the judiciary and the rule of law despite what happened in Ayodhya 18 years ago, have been betrayed all over again. Yet they have demonstrated extraordinary restraint and dignity so far, largely thanks to repeated appeals by the community leaders in the run up to the verdict.

But the rest of India has to wake up to the serious implications of this jungle justice ("monkey justice" in the words of Justice M S Lieberhan who probed the demolition of the mosque!) for our shared future. For this is not justice. It's a political compromise to appease the powerful, and a shoddy, terribly one-sided at that. It sets dangerous precedents and may very well have opened a Pandora's box.

It is a fact of history that Muslim and Hindu rulers fought for power in India but it was never a religious conflict or jihad, as our Hindutva comrades insist. Some like Mahmud of Ghazni might have targeted temples for their riches as all booty-hunting invaders do. But to suggest all Muslims did was to destroy temples and forcibly convert Hindus to Islam is not only dangerous, it is downright silly. If that had been the case, the entire South Asia would be Muslim today and there'd no temples left anywhere.

As has been the practice for thousands of years in Asia, it's possible that abandoned temples -- or remnants of them -- were converted into mosques by Muslims, just as Hindus took over the Buddhist and Jain temples to turn them into their own. If we go on digging the past, we'll end up digging our own collective grave.

I would have loved to tell my fellow Indians to ignore this shocking verdict and move on. God knows enough innocent blood has been spilt over this piece of land. But accepting this judgment and the statement it makes means embracing the jaundiced worldview of the Hindutva and rejecting the plural and democratic India that belongs to us all. The ghosts of Ayodhya are awake and are not going to sleep for a long, long time to come.

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