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A Mosque, A Temple, An Idea

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Another mosque, another time, another argumentative democracy. In the United States, a dispute erupted recently over building a mosque in lower Manhattan. Last week in India a major court ruling addressed the destruction of a mosque eighteen years ago. Despite differences in the two cases, common fundamental debates include: Which central idea forms the essence of any multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation? Must its society uphold a particular culture that defines the core values of the nation? Or, must it not merely tolerate various cultures but actually celebrate diversity?

Gautam Adhikari, FICCI-EWC
Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington and formerly Executive Editor of *The Times of India*, argues that while the responses to the recent Indian court ruling on the Babri Masjid have been muted, questions about the “idea of India” remain. “Must its society uphold a particular culture that defines the core values of the nation? Or, must it not merely tolerate various cultures but actually celebrate diversity?”

In India, the argument continues. Under the Allahabad High Court’s ruling last week, two-thirds of the disputed site would go to Hindu groups while the remaining third to Muslims. Presumably, the portion granted to the Hindus will be a site for a temple to Ram, and the mosque (rebuilt) can remain in the other section. Muslim groups, dissatisfied with the decision of the court to divide the property between Muslim and Hindu claimants, have said they would appeal the verdict with the Supreme Court. Some Hindu groups want to do the same, but Hindu nationalists are mostly happy with the decision. The court, by accepting in part the Hindu claim on the land, has implicitly acknowledged the Hindus’ assertion that Ram, a mythological figure, had been born on that exact site a few thousand years ago.

The recent Indian court ruling, to everyone’s relief, provoked no violence. It seems the bulk of Indian citizens, especially the younger generation, have moved on, and further stoking of the mosque-temple controversy is unlikely to stir electoral emotions. Muslim as well as Hindu leaders have urged their followers to stay calm. It is not clear, however, whether the decision might not provide ammunition to some Islamist groups to rally a section of Muslim opinion, in India and abroad, towards radical action. Nor is it known whether Hindu extremists might not feel encouraged to make similar claims on other mosque sites in India. For the moment, however, peace has prevailed with most people hoping that the story has ended.

The larger dispute let loose by the demolition of the mosque, however, is not quite resolved. The nations of India and Pakistan were born in August 1947 in a storm of violence. Possibly up to a million people died in the slaughter that erupted following the partition of British India. The apparent cause might have been the severe hurt that people had felt on being forced to leave home, but a deeper cause was a smoldering resentment of the “other” born out of years of inflaming hatred through identity politics and religious nationalism by Muslim and Hindu ideologues.

That India should be a democratic republic was not in dispute when the Constituent Assembly met after independence. But whether it should be secular state or whether



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it should be a nation primarily for Hindus—the majority community—was in contention. Secularists, led by Jawaharlal Nehru, won the argument and India officially became a secular democratic republic in 1950. That still remains the idea of India, but the question of identity was never fully resolved.

It is a complex debate, not least because the idea of a diverse, multi-religious democracy is a modern concept incorporated legally, and in writing for the first time, in the American Constitution as updated in 1791 by a Bill of Rights. The framers of India’s Constitution studied the US Constitution closely and inserted similar fundamental rights in their document. Those rights have ensured for every citizen the right to be different from every other citizen and in what they can say or do in pursuit of religion.

But, as in the United States, constitutional secularism has to be guarded diligently in a deeply religious nation without curbing the rights of citizens to pursue diverse faiths. Just as affairs of the state have to be secured against the intrusion of religious preferences, various religious belief systems in any nation of a multi-cultural character have to be given their separate spaces to ensure for citizens the freedom to worship. The difficulties of nation-building multiply when a particular faith commands the following of an overwhelming majority, many of whom see national identity primarily through a sectarian glass. It is these core issues that form in the backdrop to the events leading up to the recent ruling.

In December 1992, a band of Hindu militants, supported by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), destroyed an old mosque in Ayodhya called the Babri Masjid. Bloody riots broke out between the Hindu and the Muslim communities in several towns; chaos engulfed the nation for days and a fierce argument ensued over what Indians should understand by the idea of India.

There were those who argued that with the partition of India in 1947 and the establishment of the Islamic nation of Pakistan, specifically created as a homeland for the subcontinent’s Muslims, the republic of India was free to become a nation primarily for Hindus, with its core values—including tolerance and secularism—embedded in ancient tradition. In this view, the demolition of the mosque had been a symbolic act to re-establish Hindu primacy in a nation long misled by “pseudo-secularists.”

And there were those who countered by pointing out that India was imagined by its founding fathers to be a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, democratic republic, in which a carefully crafted Constitution would guarantee freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

That is why the idea of India and America, as envisaged in the Constitutions, is important to defend for those who want the modern world to reflect a tolerant diversity that humanity has not savored through most of its history. Not allowing a place of worship to be built or destroying one devalues a great idea.