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INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

A Possible Response to *Ram Janmabhumi*

Mandir-Babri Masjid Issue

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The overall view of Indian society is multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic. Hindus of different traditions, Buddhists and Jains of various schools, Muslims of more than one lineage, Christians of many Churches, different groups of Sikhs and Zoroastrians and several tribal communities live in India side by side, and have done so for many centuries. Of these, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were born and developed in India. There is a strong belief that Christianity arrived in India as early as 52 AD, and that Islam was brought to India towards the end of the seventh century AD. According to the official decennial census of 2001, there were about 827.6 million Hindus (80.5%), 138.2 million Muslims

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(13.4%), 24.1 million Christians (2.3%), 19.2 million Sikhs (1.9%), 7.9 million Buddhists (0.8%), 4.2 million Jains (0.4%), 6.6 million who profess various other beliefs (0.6%) and 0.7 million who did not state any religion (0.1%).

Even though Hinduism is the religion of the overwhelming majority of Indians, and Islam is the religion of a significant minority, for centuries Hindus and Muslims have lived together in considerable peace, with only sporadic occasions of communal friction and violence. For the most part, these incidents remained at a local level. In recent years, however, inter-communal relationships have been marked by an escalation of tension and violence. The actual occasions of conflict are sparked by a wide range of issues, but the most conspicuous bone of contention between Hindus and Muslims for the past three decades has been the *Ram Janmabhumi mandir-Babri masjid* Issue, which is also called as the Ayodhya Issue or the *mandir-masjid* Issue. As a result, any sense of communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims has dropped to its lowest level since the demolition of the disputed *Babri masjid* in December 1992.

The material object of this controversy is a mosque-structure in Ayodhya; a town traditionally considered the birthplace of Ram, one of the Hindu gods. Campaigners for *Ram-mandir* or Ram-temple make the following claims: (i) Ram was actually born in the exact place where there now exists (until 1992) the *Babri-masjid*, (ii) an ancient Hindu temple formerly stood at this very place to commemorate Ram's birthplace, and (iii) the *Mughal* conqueror Babar, through his military commander Mir Baqi, had levelled the pre-existing *Ram-mandir* to construct the *Babri-masjid* on the ruins of the temple. In retribution, the *Ram-mandir* campaigners demand reconstruction of the temple at the very site in question. As far as *Ram-mandir* campaigners are concerned, no theory or proof contrary to their claims is acceptable. However, the *Babri-masjid* campaigners claim: (i) Babar did not demolish any Hindu temple in building the mosque in Ayodhya, (ii) there is no proof of pre-existence *Ram janmabhumi mandir*, and (iii) Muslims have used the *Babri-masjid* terrain unrestrictedly over four centuries and therefore it is their property. Hence, they demand the rebuilding of the demolished *Babri-masjid* at its original site. As with the conflicting perceptions surrounding the *masjid* and *mandir*, there are also conflicting accounts put forth by both Hindu and Muslim parties in their claims.

Supporters of *Ram-mandir* justify their movement as the liberation of a Hindu sacred space from the clutches of Muslims, and an attempt to unite all Hindus into one religious community. Muslims, on the

other hand, consider it an injustice and an act of aggression against them as the minority community, and against their religion, Islam. Critics call it violence against Muslims, and decry such communal movement and antagonistic mobilization of one religious community against another as an attack on Indian civil society and the Constitution.

Because the Ayodhya issue centres itself not only on the temple and the mosque, but also on Hindus and Muslims, the controversy has turned into a religious and communal issue as well. For the Hindus, who worship Ram, any evidence suggesting that Ram was not born in Ayodhya, or that Babar did not demolish a pre-existing temple, would not change their convictions in the matter. Similarly, for the Muslims, any proof that Ram was definitely born at the *Babri-masjid* site, or that Babar actually did demolish the temple in building the *Babri-masjid*, would not be justification for the demolition of the *Babri-masjid*. It is especially noteworthy that in the absence of any negotiated settlement, a long-awaited judicial verdict concerning the case is not likely to bring a remedy to the situation. Because only one side can be victorious, any judicial solution to this problem will undoubtedly result in bitterness and frustration to large segments of the Hindu or Muslim communities. Consequently, the resolution of this controversy will not guarantee an end to Hindu-Muslim communal conflict in India.

In this complex and serious situation of disagreement and antagonism, dialogue emerges as a possible solution to achieve a consensus and to establish inter-communal peace.

The *Ram janmabhumi mandir-Babri Masjid* issue is no longer merely a temple-mosque dispute limited to a few individuals in Ayodhya. Instead, it has become a Hindu-Muslim communal and religious issue that affects all of India. An analysis of the historical, archaeological, and judicial evidence and arguments related to the controversy leads to the conclusion that there is no convincing and incontestable evidence to substantiate that: (i) Ram was actually and physically born in Ayodhya where the *Babri masjid* existed, (ii) an ancient Hindu temple formerly stood at the site of the *Babri masjid* to commemorate Ram's birthplace, and (iii) the *Mughal* conqueror Babar, demolished *Ram janmabhumi mandir* while building *Babri masjid*. It is evident that politicization and a mass mobilization through a nationwide campaign for the *Ram janmabhumi mandir* were responsible for making the local property dispute a national and political issue. Regular and anonymous bomb blasts make this issue

all the more serious and complex, and prone to create further suspicion and communal alienation.

It must be recognized that the *Hindutva* and Hinduism are not the same. *Hindutva* is not based on the spirituality of Hinduism but on a political ideology. Even though *hindutva* has the appearance of being an ideology of the majority in India, it must be emphasised that the vast majority of Hindus are not *hindutva* ideologues. Therefore it cannot be projected as the ideology of Hindus in general. On the other hand, it is a gross misinterpretation to state that Muslims in India owed their loyalty to Babar and behaved like the progeny of Babar, while showing their love and regard for the mosque in Ayodhya, named after him. The *hindutva* ideology of establishing and maintaining one nation, one culture and one religion, to a certain extent, has succeeded in depicting the Muslim community as being an imminent threat to *Hinduism* and *Hindustan*. In redefining both the religion and the country, the *hindutva* ideology has succeeded in instilling fear into and inflicting strife on a significant section of the Hindu community by depicting the "Other" as a danger to the Hindu religion and the "Hindu" country.

The right to religious freedom is an essential requirement in recognizing the dignity of every person and it should apply to all religious communities, as well as to all individuals. Religious freedom means that all may freely manifest their religious beliefs, both individually and collectively. Because the freedom of individuals and of communities to profess and practice their religion is an essential element for peaceful human coexistence, every violation of religious freedom does fundamental damage to the cause of peace. The State, therefore, should effectively ensure and promote religious freedom, especially when, alongside the great majority who follow one religion, there exists one or more minority groups of another faith. Hatred, violence and killing, violate the integrity of the human person and are a dishonour to the Creator in whose image man is made. Furthermore, since violence, more often than not, leads to further violence. Therefore, violence cannot be a solution to the *mandir-masjid* problem.

The willingness of Hindus and Muslims to meet and talk is an indispensable condition for reaching an amicable solution to the controversial issue that has seriously obstructed communal peace and a healthy relationship. This study has clarified that interreligious dialogue will be instrumental in finding ways to eliminate fears and prejudices in the current Indian social and religious environment and to nurture mutual trust between the disputing parties. A Gandhian

approach to interreligious dialogue can serve as a great source of inspiration for ameliorating inter-communal relationship. Gandhi was only armed with the principle of non-violence when he prodded millions of Hindus and Muslims towards mutual acceptance. His ideal of integrating religion and politics, and his redefinition of the scope of secularism through *sarva dharma samabhava* (equal respect for all religions) have great potential for promoting communal peace. Dialogue can be instrumental in promoting respect for human life, dignity, rights and freedom, and put an end to communal antagonism. Imparting basic knowledge about all religions in the school curriculum, the formation of neighbourhood communities, as well as establishing a local and national network of religious leaders, all can be substantial in improving inter-communal relationships.

After examining the *Ram janmabhumi-Babri masjid* controversy, by analyzing the *hindutva* ideology in the *mandir-masjid* violence, and by identifying some of the moral issues involved in the controversy, we are left with the conclusion that Hindu-Muslim interreligious dialogue is the best possible response to the *Ram janmabhumi-Babri masjid* issue, to end the cycle of Hindu-Muslim communal violence and to promote peace.