

Ram Mandir and a complicated history

The magnificent new temple in Ayodhya, which will attract excitement and crowds, will have to find ways of liberating itself from its tumultuous past

Ram, Krishna, and Shiv are not just the three most popular names for Almighty God in India. They remain, even in these postmodern times, some of the most common names parents give to a son. Often Ram and Krishna are combined into a single name. Occasionally, and especially in southern India, a baby boy is called Sivaramakrishnan, greatly reducing the ground for the Almighty's displeasure, assuming that he is interested, the way most humans are, in how one is addressed.

Shiv is probably India's most worshipped deity. Yet he does not seem to elicit the warm love drawn by Krishna and Ram. Since Krishna knows he is God, whereas Ram does not, Ram draws greater admiration. He is one like us and yet performs wonders. The naughtiness that Krishna puts on is his incomparable feature, whereas Ram, because of his encounter south of our borders with

Ravan, can evoke in our minds the map of India.

It's a given, therefore, that a magnificent new temple for Ram, especially one raised in Ayodhya, the town where he was said to be born, would attract excitement and immense crowds. For many, the political fights witnessed in the decades in the wake of Lal Krishna Advani's *rath yatra* of 1990 (which followed the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's Ram Janmabhoomi campaign launched a few years earlier) have added to the new *mandir's* appeal.

For others, however, this politicisation of Ram has hurt the temple's innocence. They are troubled, too, that the *mandir's* consecration and inauguration were set when it is still incomplete but the general elections are imminent.

The grand temple houses a deity loved and venerated for centuries by crores of Indians. Additional warmth will be induced by the adorable figure of the infant Ram. Yet, love for Ram was not the *mandir* project's central driver. Nor was love for human beings. The fuels of anger and revenge were stronger. Unfortunately, also embedded into this history is deception (the smuggling in of idols in 1949, followed by propaganda that the idols materialised on

their own) and coercion (the demolition in 1992 of the Babri mosque despite promises that it would not be harmed).

In Tulsidas's famous verse, "*Ravan rathi, virath Raghubira*", which is about Ravan in his strong chariot and the chariot-less Ram, the latter spells out his moral standards: "Listen, friend, the chariot that leads to victory is of another kind. Valour and fortitude are its wheels; truthfulness and virtuous conduct are its banner; strength, discretion, self-restraint and benevolence are its four horses, harnessed

with the cords of forgiveness, compassion and equanimity." (Lanka Kand, *Ramcharitmanas*, Chaupai 182-6-79-1-6.)

These precisely were the standards flouted in 1949 and 1992. The *mandir* will have to find ways of liberating itself from its messy history.

Perhaps someday a Hindu will prostrate herself or himself before the idol in the new temple of the child Ram, close her or his eyes, think of everyone's Almighty God, and beg forgiveness for the offences of 1949 and 1992. Some Hindus, who knows, may have already sought this forgiveness privately, outside the *mandir*.

Isn't it also likely that persons seeking the Almighty's pardon for



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the offences of 1949 and 1992 would be directed by their conscience to ask first for their neighbours' forgiveness? After all, the demolition and replacement project has taken a large number of Muslim lives and destroyed a larger number of Muslim livelihoods in the decades following Advani's *rath yatra* of 1990.

Ayodhya's renovated railway station, the new airport, and the refurbished roads to the town will bustle with pilgrims and visitors. Some from outside India too will want to visit the grand new temple. Whether Indian or not, future visitors will want to know the temple's history. They will certainly be told of India's love for Ram, and the even greater love for the child Ram. They will be informed that artisans and stonemasons from all parts of India have made the temple.

However, they will also get to know what happened in 1949 and 1992. In fact, some will proudly recite

that history to visitors. For the troubled, explanations will be offered. Yet, no matter how sophisticated these explanations, uncomfortable questions will not be easily answered.

Man proposes but God disposes. The insistence that the temple is rising on the precise spot of Ram's birth will trigger other questions in the minds of Indian and international visitors. Such as, when was Ram born? In which century? Who were Ram's Indian and global contemporaries? What were their interactions?

Is Ram a historical person who came and went? Or is Ram a name for the Eternal God who was, is, and always will be, a name by which crores of Indians try to invoke the Supreme Being, even as others cry out to Shiv, Krishna, Allah, Khuda, Jehovah, Waheguru, or God?

Rajmohan Gandhi's last book was *India After 1947: Reflections & Recollections*. The views expressed are personal.