



Idols of Rama and his wife Sita at a Hindu temple in Ayodhya, similar to the idols placed in Babri Masjid. By Vishwaroop2006, Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2w1nfSW>

Note on this Case Study:

No religion is inherently violent or peaceful. However, religions are powerful forces. They can inspire horrific violence. They can also inspire nearly unfathomable acts of love and peacebuilding. The Hindus described here span a wide range of values regarding the intersection of their religion and violence. Some are the perpetrators of violence, some are working to end violence and promote peace, many more are bystanders, who may build up cultural violence, cultural peace, or even both.

As always, when thinking about religion and conflict, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

Destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque

India is a religiously diverse country, home to millions of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains and more. Most of the country is Hindu (about 74%), while Muslims are the most significant minority (about 14%).¹ While many Indian Hindus live in peace with their neighbors, some have also been the perpetrators of extreme violence against minority groups, particularly Muslims. These conflicts are rooted in long standing hostilities, particularly after the violent partitioning of colonial India into the modern countries of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in 1947.

An example of this violence has centered around the city of Ayodhya in a conflict that has lasted decades. Ayodhya is a holy city of Hinduism which many Hindus believe to be the birthplace of Rama: the divine hero of the Ramayana, a Hindu holy epic. In 1992, an organized mob of at least 75,000 Hindus descended on one of Ayodhya's mosques—the Babri Masjid—and tore it to the ground using hammers, rods, and shovels, while Indian authorities watched. In the aftermath of this attack, interreligious rioting engulfed several Indian cities, and by the end of the violence, over one thousand people, most of them Muslim, were dead.² In some cities, like Mumbai, indiscriminate shooting of peaceful Muslims by police was reported.³

The destruction of the Babri Masjid and subsequent massacres were not random, but the culmination of a long campaign of directed Hindu anger towards their Muslim neighbors. Many Hindus trace the conflict back to 1528, when they claim that Mughal emperor

Babur ordered a mosque built overtop a temple to Rama, which had been built on the precise place of the god's birth. The facts of this story are disputed; rumors of the historic temple were spread by British colonizers who intended to "divide and conquer" the people of Ayodhya. In fact, while Hindus and Muslims used to worship at the site together, British authorities literally divided them in 1859, using a fence to separate Hindus from Muslims.⁴ For some, by independence in 1947, divisions between the communities had grown from distrust to rage.

¹ World Religion Database, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Brian A. Grim (Boston: Brill, 2015).

² Krishna Pokharel & Paul Beckett, "Ayodhya: the Battle for India's Soul," *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 10, 2012. <http://on.wsj.com/2w1K0ei>

³ Stanley J. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*, (Berkeley: UC Press, 1996), 254.

⁴ Sushil Srivastava, "How the British Saw the Issue," in *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi Issue*, ed. Sarvepalli Gopal (Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1991), 45-49; Vasudha Narayanan, "The Strains of Hindu-Muslim Relations: Babri Masjid, Music, and Other Areas Where the Traditions Cleave," in *Hinduism and Secularism*, ed. Arvind Sharma, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 162.

In 1949, this anger led a group of Hindu nationalists—conservative Hindus who favor a solely Hindu India—to break into the mosque and place a small idol of Rama inside. They claimed it was a miracle the next morning, and a large crowd of amazed Hindus gathered, much to the offense of many local Muslims, who authorities did not allow into their own mosque. Soon, fearing further unrest, the government permanently closed the mosque, only allowing Hindu priests to enter in order to take care of the idol. Most local sadhus—Hindu holy men—supported the new idol. However, some sadhus, such as Rama devotee Akshaya Brahmachari were angered, saying that Hindus had spread “communal poison” in Ayodhya that day.⁵

Soon, three legal cases were filed, each side claiming they were the true owners of the site: one from local Hindus, one from Muslims, and one from the god Rama himself. In Indian law, Hindu deities are recognized as “juristic persons,” and a god’s “friend” can file lawsuits on their behalf. Retired Hindu judge Deoki Nandan Agarwal did just that, claiming Rama as true owner.⁶ Hindu politicians also stepped into the debate, especially members of India’s Hindu nationalist party: the BJP. From the 1980s onward, BJP politicians advocated building a Hindu temple on the site. In 1984, the head of the BJP, L. K. Advani organized a traditional ritual procession in a chariot from Somnath temple to Ayodhya, symbolizing their commitment to constructing the temple. Clearly intending to link the BJP to Rama, the symbols and decorations used by the procession drew heavily from an extremely popular retelling of the Ramayana which was airing on state television at the time.⁷ The party’s focus on Ayodhya paid off. In 1984, the BJP had two seats in the federal legislature. Five years later, they had 85. By 1991, a year before the mosque’s destruction and subsequent killings, Ayodhya had become the biggest political issue in India.⁸

In 2002 violence erupted again when the BJP organized tens of thousands of Hindu nationalists to march to Ayodhya to build the foundation of a Rama temple. After the event, a train carrying Hindus returning from Ayodhya was bombed; the attack was blamed on Muslims, causing more rioting, centered around the BJP-controlled state of Gujarat. Nearly 2,000 people were killed, mostly Muslims.⁹ Many accused the BJP of allowing the violence. However, BJP promises to build the Rama temple continued to bear political fruit; Gujarat’s BJP leader in 2002, Narendra Modi, was elected Prime Minister of India in 2014. Still, many Hindus have been horrified by the violence, and other Hindus—particularly in south India— do not see it as a major issue.¹⁰

After decades of litigation, in 2010 the Allahabad High Court ruled that all three claimants deserved to split the site at Ayodhya into three parts of equal area, though the Hindus received the section where the mosque had stood, and had the right to build a temple. In a judgement based in Hindu theology, not secular law, judges stated that Rama had been born at the site 900,000 years ago. The decision was quickly appealed to the Supreme Court. In late 2017, the Supreme Court gave officials ten weeks to gather and translate the 90,000 pages of evidence written in eight languages that have been submitted over three generations of court battles over Ayodhya.¹¹ They will then begin hearings on this contentious and historic site.

⁵ Pokharel and Beckett, “Ayodhya: the Battle for India’s Soul,”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*, (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), 15, 193.

⁸ Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, 247.

⁹ Pokharel and Beckett, “Ayodhya: the Battle for India’s Soul,” ; “Timeline: Ayodhya holy site crisis,” *BBC News*, Dec. 6, 2012.

<http://bbc.in/1KJ80cu>

¹⁰ Pokharel and Beckett, “Ayodhya: the Battle for India’s Soul,”; Narayanan, “The Strains of Hindu-Muslim...,” 167-8.

¹¹ Harish V. Nair, “Lord Ram Makes His Case before India’s Supreme Court...” *The Daily Mail*, Aug. 11, 2017. <http://dailym.ai/2uTT0qe>

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

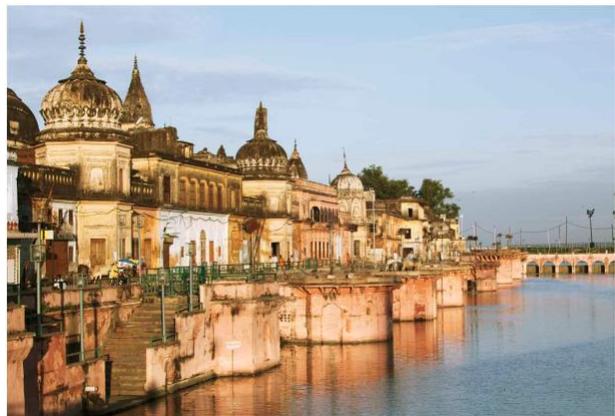
- Artistic depictions of violence from the Ramayana from different historical periods and cultures (1750/1850): <http://bit.ly/2w48aiz> ; (1801/1899): <http://bit.ly/2uE760F> ; (1980): <http://bit.ly/2wGQwiI>
- “Sita Sings the Blues” an artistic retelling of the Ramayana by Jewish-American cartoonist Nina Paley (2008): <http://bit.ly/1IvTuZN>

Secondary Sources:

- Clear timeline on political, religious, and violent events at Ayodhya: <http://bbc.in/1KJ8Qcu>
- WSJ reporting on the conflict at Ayodhya (2012): <http://on.wsj.com/2wSj2gw>
- India’s NDTV documenting the close connections between Hindu behavior in Ayodhya and Indian electoral politics (2015): <http://bit.ly/2wVkJNd8>

Discussion Questions

- How does the violence at Ayodhya show how Hinduism changes over time?
- In what ways do Hindu reactions to the situation at Ayodhya show how Hinduism is internally diverse?
- Who has significant power in India and who does not? How does this affect the situation at Ayodhya?
- Look at the artwork in the primary sources depicting scenes from the Ramayana. Many religions have violence in their scriptures. How might literary and artistic depictions of violence like those above impact movements for violence in the real world? How might they impact movements for peace?
- Watch NDTV’s reporting on connections between new building work being done near the Ayodhya site and electoral politics. Contemplating questions of violence and peace, how are Hindu religious beliefs situated within an Indian political context, and vice versa?



The city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, India in 2013.
By Ramnath Bhat. Flickr Creative Commons:
<http://bit.ly/2uT9O2b>