

Political implications of Ayodhya verdict



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sure. Unless and until the VHP can put a “holy” veneer by re-activating the sadhus and mahants and painting the next stage of its agitation in saffron, its effort to revive memories of the eighties and nineties will be futile. Till the court spoke out its mind, the VHP was reduced to being a citizens’ club working on issues like edifying Delhi’s citizens on traffic protocol.

To start with, the clergy is going its separate way. It has convened a “dharma-desh” convention in Delhi’s Talkatora Stadium on November 3 and 4 with a political objective. The congregation of dharmacharya, mahamandaleshwar, peethadeesh and mahants from all over India, with a chunk from Uttar Pradesh, is expected to pay homage to those who were “martyred” in police firings in Ayodhya in 1990 and in Delhi in 1966 during protests to demand a ban on cow slaughter.

Mulayam Singh Yadav, the Samajwadi Party patriarch, was the UP Chief Minister in the first instance while Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister when the sadhus besieged Parliament. Therefore, a full-blown tirade, framed in the secular-versus-communal paradigm, would be launched. As Rajesh Pradhan, who authored a book, *“When the Saints Go Marching In: The Curious Ambivalence of Religious Sadhus in Recent Politics in India”*, and quoted, among numerous others, Mahant Avaidyanth, a leading light of the temple “movement”, said for the sadhus, political activism was the product of decades of discontent, for which the Ramjanmabhoomi was a “catalyst, a crucible out of which such unity emerged”.

After delivering homilies on tempering the use of language in public speeches, making place for the minorities in a “Hindu rashtra” and granting political



REACTIVATED: The SC verdict on Ayodhya has goaded the VHP into reconnecting with the clergy.

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space to all parties by rejecting the BJP's notion of a Congress-mukht Bharat, the RSS sarsanghachalak, Mohanrao Bhagwat, capped his recent three-day discourse for the non-partisan in the national capital with a call to construct a Ram temple exactly where the Babri mosque stood, on Rama's birthplace. Bhagwat conveyed impatience with the judicial hearings, stressing that the “truth” about the temple-mosque issue must be “accepted”, however “bitter” it was. Were his assertions meant to assuage the cadre that might have got confused with his earlier statements, instantly lapped up by some liberals as evidence of a “change of heart” in the RSS? Whatever the inference, to the Sangh fraternity's faithful, including those in the BJP, a Ram temple still remained Hindutva's

most potent symbol. “It might not bring to the BJP a bounty of votes, but ignoring Rama's call will damage us grievously,” a BJP functionary explained.

Decoupling faith, title suit

The legal verdict, that effectively decoupled matters of faith from the main title suit and will begin hearing by a regular Bench of the Supreme Court, abounds with significance for the BJP, the Congress and UP's principal players, the SP and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). In power, the BJP's responses to the temple were diluted with the realisation that in a coalition, it cannot force religious and communal extremism on its allies and if in a majority, as it is at present, it must walk the middle path, abiding by the Constitution and the rule of law, both of

which it transgressed in the past.

Pitch for 2019

So, the temple was mentioned in an anodyne manner in the election manifestos of the recent past. The pitch for 2019 will be determined by the BJP's assessment of the temple's electoral utility, the impact on its cadre and those of the RSS if the articulation was not sufficiently strong and the course that the court's hearings will take.

Although the BJP won the Ayodhya Assembly and Faizabad Lok Sabha (that includes Ayodhya) constituencies several times since 1991, the victory margins were mostly narrow. In the 1991 Assembly election, BJP's candidate Sant Shri Ram Dwivedi trounced his opponent Nishad Sita Ram of the Congress by just 3,557 votes. In the next election in 1993, perceived as a “referendum” on the mosque's demolition, the BJP's victory margin improved to 9,238 votes. The BJP pulled off its best showing in the 2017 Assembly poll when its candidate Ved Prakash Gupta beat Samajwadi's incumbent MLA Tej Narayan Pandey by 50,440 votes. The issues for Ayodhya's voters were not the temple but Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the surgical strikes carried out on the western border.

Interesting too will be the Congress' response after its president Rahul Gandhi consciously embraced the path of “soft Hindutva”, hoping to best the BJP at its game. As for the SP and BSP, stung and scorched by the BJP's incessant accusation of being “too soft” on Muslims, a hands-off Ayodhya approach seemed the most practicable. UP's Muslims have already advised the non-BJP parties to go easy on faith-related subjects and focus on the inclusive ones such as health, education and agriculture in the 2019 election.

VHP's 'holy' veneer

The VHP, that has shrunk to a shadow of its feisty self in the BJP's present regime, will meet on October 5 in Delhi to assess the implications of the verdict before drawing up an agenda and discussing ways of re-connecting with the clergy that has become indifferent to the crusade for raising a Ram temple because of the BJP's reluctance to enact a law in Parliament and the interminable judicial delays in seeking a clo-