

YES, NO, IT'S COMPLICATED

Will Ayodhya be an issue in the 2019 elections?

YES



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Elections will be fought on a polarised agenda, but it will not be easy for the BJP

Whether Ayodhya matters to the electorate or not, it will be made to matter by the BJP-RSS combine and the Vishva Hindu Parishad in the run-up to the 2019 general election. The question is this: what will be the modality of foregrounding the Ayodhya issue in a context that is vastly different from 1992?

Ayodhya has been less about faith and more about a muscular Hindu majority that wishes to rule by bringing the Muslims into near-complete submission and denying them their legitimate claim of being equal citizens. The problem, however, for the Hindu Right is that

Muslims no longer fit into that imagination of an aggressive or militant opponent; instead, they are a vanquished lot looking for physical safety and basic survival.

In search of an enemy

Militant Hindutva mobilisation today is based on the search for an enemy. Muslims have steadily become economically marginalised, socially ghettoised and politically less influential. In fact, in much of the north, Partition witnessed the migration of social elites among the Muslims, leaving behind the economically weaker sections amongst

them. Today their plight is far worse than the Dalits and even the Adivasis.

In the context of a virulent mobilisation without a palpable enemy, the discourse around the construction of the temple raises the question of the viability of political instrumentality in stoking the issue before every general election and the demand that Hindus prove their faith. It is now about the 'good Hindu' and the 'bad Hindu'. While Muslims face the threat of physical violence, Hindus have to prove their faith in a political arena that is far removed, and in deep tension, with Hinduism's everyday spiritual and reli-



gious dimensions. The heat, therefore, has also turned on the BJP to prove its commitment to the issue outside of its political calculation, and the campaign by Shiv Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray is symptomatic of this. For the BJP and the RSS, if the issue is settled early, it becomes a non-issue for the election, and if they drag it for too long without efforts to actually begin the construction of the temple, there is the danger of the electorate seeing through their game.

The reality and the narrative
This is where the BJP and the RSS have to make the issue matter; the

issue no longer has the kind of natural velocity that it carried earlier. This time around, high-pitched emotions have to be constructed; they are perhaps not readily available. It is here that the ability of the BJP and the RSS to construct a reality that matches their narrative will be tested. The 'reality' is constructed to suit the narrative through rumours, fake videos, street violence, the use of social media and by engineering riots. The ground for this has been prepared for quite some time and we cannot make sense of it unless we read the issue of Ayodhya, unlike in previous times of the Rath Yatra, not as a standalone issue but one that has the capacity to condense the various elements and narratives floating around. The

turn towards a more militant Hindu mobilisation came with the ascendance of the RSS and the paranoid social imaginaries initiated by M.S. Golwalkar. Today that anxiety has been quelled after the massive violence following the Rath Yatra in 1991 and the Gujarat riots of 2002.

Whether the Hindu majority cutting across castes will perceive the links between the narratives that are far more complex than a simple-minded narrative of a Muslim adversary is a difficult issue to assess right now. But surely the elections are going to be fought on a polarised agenda. This will be an uphill task for the Hindu Right, however, given that the economy has been sluggish and there are shrinking job opportunities.

NO



MANISHA PRIYAM is an academic and political analyst

The Ram Mandir issue is not a political agenda that is meaningful to poor voters

It sounds out of place that nearly two years after Prime Minister Narendra Modi opened the BJP's campaign for the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections in favour of *vikas* (development), he will change course. Mr. Modi had lashed out at the Samajwadi Party and the then Chief Minister, Akhilesh Yadav, and had urged voters to end "*vikas ka vanvas*" (development's exile)". Mayawati and the Bahujan Samaj Party were blamed for having derailed development on account of a fetish for personal aggrandisement

and corruption. Even prior to that, when Mr. Modi campaigned as Gujarat Chief Minister in 2012, he showcased his Gujarat development model. Mr. Modi continued to speak of development in the 500-plus rallies that he addressed in the run-up to the 2014 Lok Sabha election.

Minimalist electoral strategy

What has changed so dramatically in the past year or more that we need to even ask the question whether the Ram temple issue will

displace *vikas* as the central theme for the 2019 election? It is being speculated that with Yogi Adityanath as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and with Mr. Modi as the Prime Minister, and with the large majority that they command on the floor of the House, pressure could be brought to bear on erecting the temple on the disputed site in Ayodhya. While the Supreme Court is only hearing a review and challenge petition on the Allahabad High Court's judgment on the title suit, there is a misconception that this judicial pronouncement is what is needed to



build a temple. Notwithstanding the partisan political posturing on this issue, I see this as a minimalist electoral strategy – one that seeks to mobilise a 'militant' core and pitch it against an enemy 'other'. More importantly, it masks the deep deliberations on the ground amongst poor voters on issues that matter to them.

Development is the concern

I argue on the basis of voter expectations, electoral deliberations among the poor and the offerings of political parties that it will be difficult to displace the centrality of de-

velopment in voter aspirations and deliberations about how they will act politically. While religious belief, or *aastha*, has a role in the lives of the poor, attempting to garner votes primarily on the basis of this is a thing of the past. After reaping the dividends of the Rath Yatra in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP did not do so in 1993 following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. But even the 'secular' opponents of the Rath Yatra and Babri Masjid demolition – former Chief Ministers Lalu Prasad and Mulayam Singh Yadav in Bihar and U.P., respectively – lost their elections largely because they were perceived as not having done enough development in their

States. In the same time that these Chief Ministers put their faith in caste combines and in the backward castes, Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu was writing a different script in Andhra Pradesh. He was referred to as a "CEO" in the arena of democracy.

Nitish Kumar and Akhilesh Yadav later came to power in Bihar and U.P., respectively, in the name of development. And Mr. Kumar retained power despite not having a solid caste-based vote block of his own. Poor voters are more likely to opt for change if the political agendas are meaningful to them. Unfortunately, Ram Mandir is not one of their priorities.

IT'S COMPLICATED



KUMAR KETKAR is a journalist and a Congress MP in the Rajya Sabha

Southern States and the Northeast are not caught up in the Mandir frenzy

The frenzy in the media appears to have created the impression that the survival of the Indian depends on building the Ram temple. A similar frenzy was generated in 1992, prior to the conspiratorial destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6 that year. But there is a difference. There was not such a large media network and certainly no social media. The communal poison was spread by the organisational outfits of the Sangh Parivar.

the BJP will electorally benefit from this. Suddenly, the controversy of the civil war in the Central Bureau of Investigation and the internecine warfare between the Reserve Bank of India and the government has receded to the background. Can or should the government issue an ordinance and let the temple be built or should it wait for the Supreme Court to give its opinion? Is the temple issue essentially a matter of faith or law? Can the Hindutva groups terrorise the courts or should they be booked for law and order disturbances? These are

some of the questions being debated.

If one looks at the political map, it is obvious that the southern States are not enveloped by the Mandir frenzy. There is no mass mobilisation in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Puducherry, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, or Karnataka. Despite Shiv Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray's provocative appeal, the Shiv Sainiks have not yet been inspired to come on the streets for the Ayodhya cause. By and large, Maharashtra has been quiet despite Nagpur being the RSS's headquarters. The Marathas are more concerned about their reservation quota and the State is



worried about the drought situation and the condition of its farmers. Even Gujarat, the bastion of the BJP and the Modi-Shah duo, has not joined the *kar sevaks'* march.

West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and the whole of the Northeast appear quiet. The temple issue has not raised the political temperature in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland or Mizoram, notwithstanding the fact that the Sangh has spread its tentacles in that region. There are 21 States in the "command" of the BJP; yet, except Uttar Pradesh, there is no heat anywhere else.

If this is the reality, will it generate electoral hype and heat for the

benefit of the BJP? Indeed, the whole effort of the BJP is aimed at keeping the Hindi belt as a Hindu belt. Moreover, the issue has been kept burning just as the election process is on in the Hindi belt, in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, where the ruling BJP looks vulnerable. This last-minute Hindu invasion is expected to tilt the voting in their favour, or so they feel.

The BJP is seeking a very simple, even thin, majority, not a landslide victory. If it gets those runs in the last over, it can save the match.

Politics has often defied logic
But there is also a statistical approach to politics. And that is about

the electoral battle in 2019. Some of the 80 seats in Uttar Pradesh, 40 in Bihar, 29 in Madhya Pradesh, 25 in Rajasthan, 10 in Haryana and seven in Delhi could be swung by the lava that will flow from the Ayodhya issue. If the BJP wins 125 out of these seats, it will come close to forming a government at the Centre, even if it does not get its own majority. Its new aim is not to be the single largest party; it is the number that can win it new friends.

But politics has often defied statistical logic. One should not be surprised if the BJP's Ram will have to go into "*vanvas*" yet again. It is that spectre of being thrown into the political wilderness again that haunts the BJP.

SINGLE FILE

Sabarimala politics

How a religious incantation has been transformed by the BJP into a political slogan in Kerala

A.S. JAYANTH



A new political slogan has come up since mobs took to the streets of Kerala opposing the Supreme Court verdict that allows women of all ages to offer prayers at the Sabarimala temple: "Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa." This metamorphosis of a religious incantation of devotees on the arduous trek to the hill shrine hints at the Hindu Right's game plan to build a movement in Kerala akin to the one seeking a Ram temple in Ayodhya. Perhaps they hope it will spread across south India ahead of the Lok Sabha election.

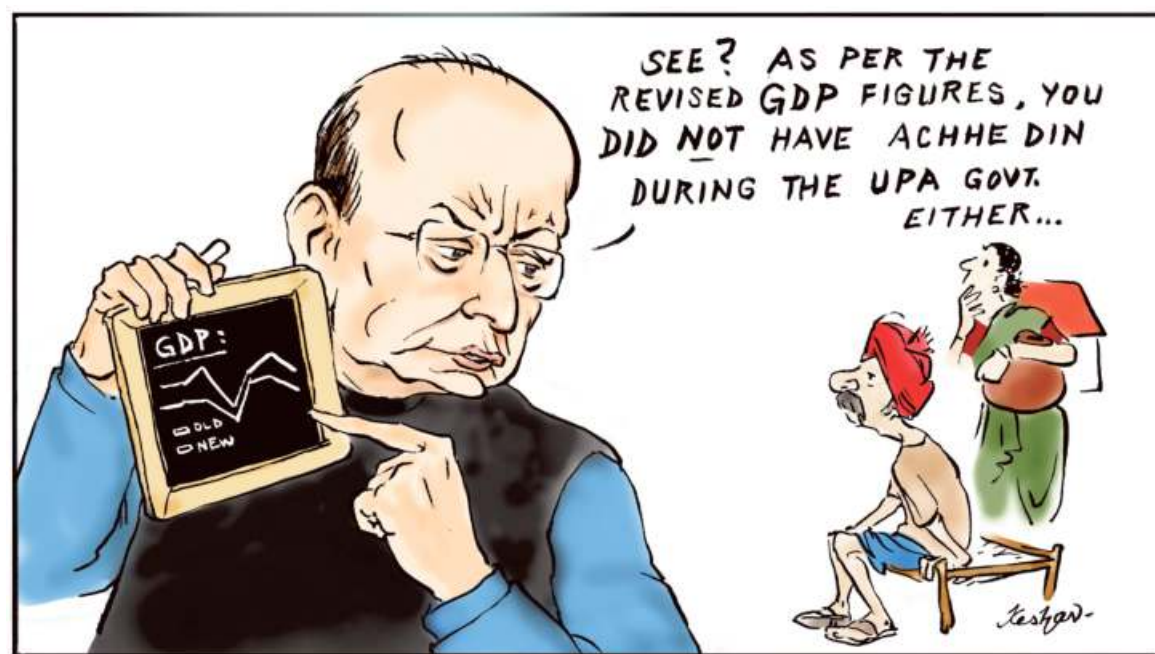
Sections of the Sangh Parivar believe that if the Ram Janmabhoomi movement helped the BJP gain a foothold in the Hindi heartland, the Ayyappa temple agitation will increase their influence in the south. The party's Kerala unit president, P.S. Sreedharan Pillai, has already stated that the BJP is hopeful of increasing its tally in the Assembly "from one to 71" – the number of seats required for a majority. The strategy could have been devised considering the popularity of Ayyappa across southern States.

The transformation of the Ayyappa incantation is strikingly similar to how the traditional, yet non-communal, greeting of "Ram Ram" in north India became the rabble rousing "Jai Shri Ram." As historian K.N. Panikkar writes in *Before the Night Falls: The Forebodings of Fascism in India*, the "image of an angry Ram was implanted in the popular mind" through sustained ideological propaganda. "In contrast to his traditional tranquil, compassionate and benevolent image, Ram was depicted in posters and books circulated by the Sangh Parivar as riding a rath and pulling his bow string, the arrow poised to annihilate. In some pictures, he was carrying a trishul, a sword, and an axe." The implication is that Ram is out for a fight to recover his place of birth.

Similarly, the image of Ayyappa, popular in the devotees' minds either as a brahmachari reposed in yogamudra or as a composed youth riding a tiger, holding a bow and with arrows slung over his shoulder, has been changed into one of an angry youth galloping on a tiger out to question the alleged "breach of customs" at his abode. Similar to how BJP leader L.K. Advani undertook a Rath Yatra, Mr. Pillai launched one from Maddur on the Kerala-Karnataka border up north to Pathanamthitta, the entry point to Sabarimala.

According to observers of national politics, the BJP is not expecting a repeat of the 2014 performance in northern States in the 2019 elections. So, the plan could be to try to compensate for this loss from the south. Mr. Pillai has already made it clear that "the agitation will be expanded to other States." However, with the ruling CPI(M) firmly supporting the Supreme Court verdict and the Congress indirectly echoing the BJP's views, how this strategy will pan out is another question.

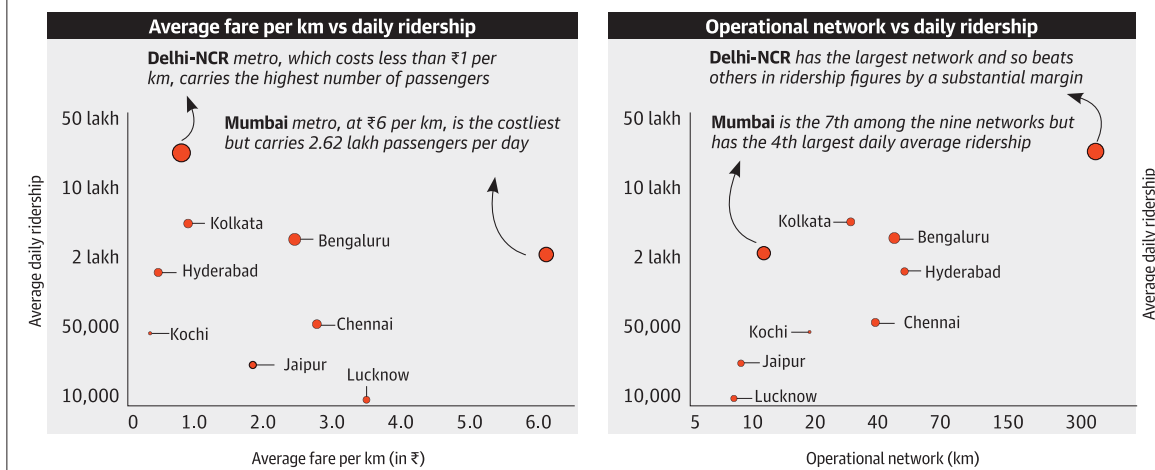
The writer is a Principal Correspondent with The Hindu's Kozhikode bureau



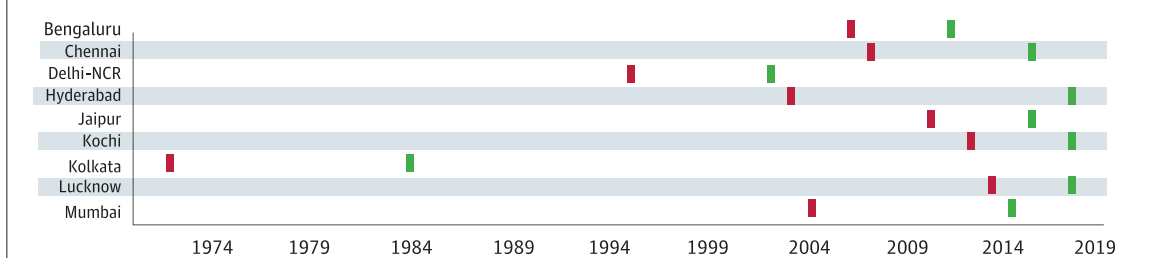
DATA POINT

Life in a metro

A comparison of metro rail networks across various cities in India shows that there are wide variations in the average fare charged. While a metro ride in Mumbai costs the most, it is the least in Kochi. The Hindu data team plots the ridership data, average fare and operational network across metros. Circle sizes correspond to population



Ride history | Graph depicts the years when metro rail networks were sanctioned (■) and when operations began (■). Kolkata – the oldest metro in India – opened to commuters in 1984. The year 2017 saw three metro systems open to the public



Data compiled by Ajeet Mahale, Shiv Sahay Singh, Omar Rashid, Anjali Thomas, Shriniji Ghosh, Sunitha Sekar, V. Geethanath and Mohammad Iqbal

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 30, 1968

Helicopters to track naxalites

The police are planning to use helicopters to locate the hide-outs of the extremists in inaccessible places amidst the dense Wynaad forests. This is intended to save the time and labour involved in tracking the lawless elements over widely dispersed areas. Official sources here [Trivandrum] said that the Navy was being approached for sparing their helicopters. They said that special police teams have been deputed to Malabar to investigate the cases of attack on police stations and houses in that area. The Kattikulam and Korom police outposts in North Wynaad were reopened to-day [November 29] as their temporary closure added to the panic created by terrorist activity in those remote areas. Police reinforcements have been rushed to the two outposts, which were earlier closed for lack of hands and for fear that they might become easy targets for the marauders.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO NOVEMBER 30, 1918.

Distress in Bombay.

H.E. the Governor presided this evening [November 29] at a huge meeting held in the Town Hall [in Bombay] to draw attention to the need for co-operation in the measures for the relief of distress through famine conditions in the presidency and made an important speech on the subject. He began by expressing his thanks for the help which the citizens of Bombay had constantly given him during His Governorship and proceeded to appeal for voluntary help to assist the Government in protecting the lives and health of poorer citizen in the crisis now to be faced through the failure of rains. He then read extracts from a statement prepared for him showing in detail the state of affairs throughout the presidency and the measures taken to meet the conditions so far as they have already developed.

CONCEPTUAL Marshall-Lerner condition

ECONOMICS
This refers to the proposition that the devaluation of a country's currency will lead to an improvement in its balance of trade with the rest of the world only if the sum of the price elasticities of its exports and imports is greater than one. For instance, if total export revenue falls due to inelastic demand for a country's exports and total import expense rises due to inelastic demand for its imports, this will lead to a further worsening of the country's trade deficit. So devaluing its currency may not always be the best way forward for a country looking to reduce its trade deficit. The Marshall-Lerner condition is named after British economist Alfred Marshall and Russian economist Abba P. Lerner.

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<http://bit.ly/MithaliRajTTHred>