**India’s transformation**

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January 22 is past us. For India, it was a big day. Its prime minister, Narendra Modi, said it was “not just a date on the calendar” but “the dawn of a new era”. It marked the beginning of “the expansion of consciousness – from the divine to the nation, from Ram to the entire nation” he said. On that day, he claimed, the foundation for India’s “next 1,000 years has been laid”.

Modi’s words welcoming the advent of ‘Ram Rajya’ (divine rule) in India blatantly contradicted the secular principles enshrined in the country’s constitution. And yet, they were endorsed and repeated excitedly by most of the national media.

Following the prime minister’s lead, one respected national daily said January 22 heralded “the awakening of the collective consciousness of the nation”, while another announced that it was a moment for India to “define itself afresh”. Hindu divinity is central to the very India, the argument went, so all Muslims, Christians and other minorities should simply accept its supremacy, and live their lives accordingly.

What led to January 22 being hailed as the dawn of a ‘divine’ India was the consecration of an idol of Ram, one of the most revered Hindu gods, at a newly built temple in Ayodhya. Hindus believe Ram was born in this small town in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, and thus consider it sacred.

There have long been hundreds of temples dedicated to Ram in Ayodhya. The Ram temple consecrated on January 22, however, is like no other shrine. It has been built on grounds where a Mughal-era mosque, called Babri Masjid, stood for centuries before it was torn down in 1992 by a mob mobilised by organisations linked to Modi’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The demolition of the 16th-century mosque triggered some of the worst religious riots since independence – killing more than 2,000 people, most of them Muslims – and shook the foundations of India’s officially secular political order.

In a 2019 ruling, India’s Supreme Court called the demolition of the mosque an “egregious violation of the rule of law” but still allowed for a Ram temple to be built where it once stood. It was a strange judgement that appeared to defy all legal logic. The only justification offered for it was that the building of a temple there would pacify the Hindu majority and bring peace and tranquillity to the country. Still, it was widely criticised by jurists, in India and abroad, for turning justice on its head. The judgement was seen as a reward for the crime committed in 1992.

Regardless of the questions surrounding the legality and morality of its construction, the symbolism of the new Ram temple in Ayodhya has been impossible to ignore – both for the Hindus and Muslims of India.

For Modi and his Hindu hardliner backers, it is a symbol of national pride and perseverance. It represents, as Home Minister Amit Shah said at the consecration ceremony, “stitching of a deep wound” that they believe was inflicted on them by Muslim “invaders” some 500 years ago. For them, it is a symbol of victory.

For Muslims, however, it is a symbol of India’s transformation into a Hindu nation – a symbol that has anti-Muslim hatred and discrimination at its very foundation. They remember, for example, how from the very beginning “Muslamanon ka ek sthan, Pakistan ya kabristan” (Only two places for Muslims: Pakistan or the graveyard) and “Babur ki auladon ko joote maro” (hit the progeny of Babur with shoes) have been the primary slogans raised by the movement to replace the historic mosque in Ayodhya with a Ram temple.

Muslims also remember all those who have been killed, maimed or lost their livelihoods in the violence that followed the illegal destruction of the Babri mosque. This is why they are pained and worried to see nearly all political parties support the opening of the temple, and the elite of the country – people who actually have power over their lives – openly celebrate it.

Indeed, January 22 saw countrywide celebrations to mark the consecration of the controversial temple. At many localities across India, anti-Muslim slogans were raised, mosques and churches targeted, and violence against Muslims was reported.

At the consecration ceremony, however, Modi denied that the move would lead to an increase in communal tensions. “There were some who used to fear-monger and say that if Ram temple is built in Ayodhya there will be fire,” he said, “I urge them to visit Ayodhya and feel the energy here.

“Lord Ram is not fire, but energy. Ram is not the problem, but the solution.”

Of course, the claim that the opening of the temple represents an end to all past disputes did not convince many, especially coming from a politician who routinely talks about crimes by Muslim or Mughal rulers against Hindus and promises his supporters he will avenge them.

The consecration of the Ram temple also emboldened those who took part in the destruction of the Babri Mosque. Many of them publicly admitted to the role they played in this “egregious” crime, and proudly gave interviews to the press about it. Many retired justices, army officers and civil servants revealed that they have always been for the destruction of the mosque and openly celebrated the consecration of the new temple.

Thus the January 22 ceremony, during which Indian military jets were used to shower the crowds with flower petals, was a revelatory moment for India’s Muslims and other minorities. During the extravagant celebration, it became clear to all that majoritarianism is now at the very core of the Indian state structure.

While the Ram temple in Ayodhya is undoubtedly a symbol of the power of Hindutva, the Hindu majoritarian ideology of the BJP and its partners, it is also a symbol of Modi’s own political prowess. By consecrating the temple, the prime minister successfully established himself, with the support of a willing media, as the chief deliverer of the dream of Hindu supremacy in the country.

Excerpted: ‘Why the new Ram temple in Ayodhya is a turning point for India’. Courtesy: Aljazeera.com