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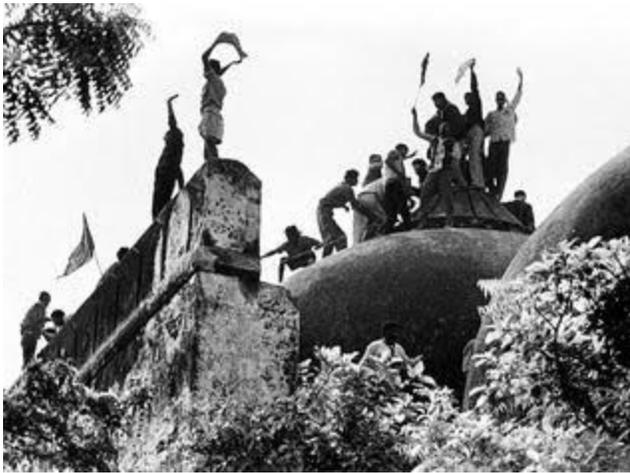
TODAY'S PAPER » OPINION

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The demolition that rebuilt a community

The destruction of Babri Masjid bridged the class divide among Muslims, giving them a unitary identity and new political awareness

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Defining moment: Demolition of Babri Masjid in progress on December 6, 1992.— Photo: AFP

Rarely has the destruction of a single building impacted history as much as the demolition of Babri Masjid. Apart from becoming a watershed in the history of Indian politics, it has emerged as the defining moment for the Indian Muslim community — as significant as the partition of India, but while partition impacted and continues to impact Indian Muslims negatively, the Babri demolition gave new life and direction to the community.

Intra-community linkages

At partition, most of the Muslim middle class migrated to Pakistan, leaving a few rich and many poor Muslims behind with little or no social, educational or cultural interaction between them. The vast majority of poor Muslims felt orphaned. Coupled with this was the structural exclusion of the Muslim community from the general domain of development by the establishment and society at large, restricting access to educational, economic and development opportunities that reduced the community's circumstances to a level below that of Dalits, according to available data. Even the Constitution of India excludes Muslims from the domain of entitlements by extending reservations on religious lines — available only to caste Hindus and not to Muslims or Christians.

But around the phenomenon of demolition of Babri Masjid and the agitations and violence that preceded, accompanied and followed it, a sense of commonality, belonging and empathy developed within the Muslim community due to the shared sense of insecurity and increased profiling irrespective of their class or location. This resulted in the emergence of a connect between the elite, the emerging middle class and poor Muslims, leading to increased and sustained intra-community interaction and collaboration in the social, educational, economic and political spheres. This in turn led to the establishment of organisations and institutions at different levels to further the educational, economic and social development of Muslims in general and of poor Muslims in particular. So many and so varied avenues for development were never available to poor Muslims before and most of these were being provided by rich and middle-class Muslims. Even if this did not greatly improve the situation of the community, it at least arrested the slide into greater impoverishment.

A new Muslim identity

In the phase before the Babri demolition, most elite and educated Muslims did not fully identify with the community. The general perception about a Muslim was that s/he was a poor, illiterate and orthodox person. Educated and elite Muslims often heard a comment that “you don’t look like a Muslim, you don’t act like a Muslim” and they felt happy at not being bracketed with a community perceived as backward. With the dissociation of the educated and elite Muslims from the community identity, its image suffered even more, making Muslims easy targets for ridicule and hate, and exclusion from the spheres of development, entitlements and even claims of equal citizenship.

The Rath Yatra and the accompanying communal frenzy that gripped the country, leading to riots and culminating in the demolition of Babri Masjid, succeeded in creating a common Muslim stereotype that encompassed all sections and classes. Further, while derision was initially restricted to poverty and backwardness of the community, in the communally surcharged atmosphere of the 70s to the 90s the culture, practices, traditions and even the religion of Muslims became targets for hate.

Every Muslim — including the elite — started to feel insecure and realised the injustice of it all. Educated, middle class and elite Muslims revolted against such profiling and began asserting that yes, they are indeed Muslims and proud to be so. Atheist Muslims too started accepting their socio-political Muslim identity even as they rejected faith. Thanks to Hindutva forces that destroyed the mosque, all Muslims were united as one community with a single identity. (Post 9/11 and with Islamophobia, this process has started acquiring international dimensions). The irony was that the Hindutva slogan of those times “*Garv se kaho hum Hindu hai*” (say with pride I am a Hindu) remained a slogan, but got Muslims to accept their “Muslimness” and assert it openly.

This broad, all-encompassing “Muslim” identity became the trigger for numerous initiatives for the development of the community funded generously by and, and in some cases, with active and sustained participation of educated and rich Muslims. Not just that, it also resulted in the initiation of new political processes in the community and the country with far reaching implications.

Political transformation

With Babri Masjid went too the traditional Muslim leadership that had made the Babri issue the primary Muslim agenda for almost a decade and had kept the community confined within the concerns of security. Muslims started searching for new leaders and new agendas — this time, of justice, equality

and development. As a result, they accepted even non-Muslims like Mulayam Singh Yadav, Lalu Prasad Yadav and N.T. Rama Rao as leaders.

The Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid movement and the resultant formation of the BJP government at the Centre made Muslims realise the importance of who rules and its impact on the security, identity, culture and economy of the community. This led to greater political awakening and participation of Muslims in political processes, ending their earlier indifference to politics. For all Muslims, politics became a matter of life and death.

With the community's greater participation in the electoral processes, the political influence of Muslims is slightly more than their numbers because of the increased turn-out and tactical use of the vote. The Muslim vote has emerged as an important political factor with two objectives: keeping BJP out and securing rights and entitlements that are due to them as citizens.

For the first time after independence Muslim concerns entered the domain of rights and entitlements. It is this awakening of the Muslim community to their rights as citizens and growing demands for a politics of entitlement that compelled the Congress government to constitute the Sachar Committee and that led to the recommendations of the Ranganath Mishra Commission.

Given all these developments, it would be no exaggeration to say that demolition of Babri Masjid initiated the reconstruction of a community that constitutes over 14 per cent of the population and the reorientation of the political direction of a country.

Tailpiece

Had the domes of Babri remained intact, BJP could have been still setting the political agenda of the country and ruling the roost while the Muslim community would have continued to be mired in issues of protection and security.

Hindutva forces were able to use the domes of Babri Masjid as images of revulsion to mobilise masses for political gains. But with the domes destroyed, they seem unable to project the vision of the Grand Ram Temple to energise enough numbers to propel them to power once again.

Twenty years down the line, it seems moot to ask if the act of vandalism December 6, 1992 just brought down a Masjid, or has it also frustrated forever the desire of the Hindutva forces to rule the country.

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