

Ayodhya

The Battle for India's Soul



The British Library Board

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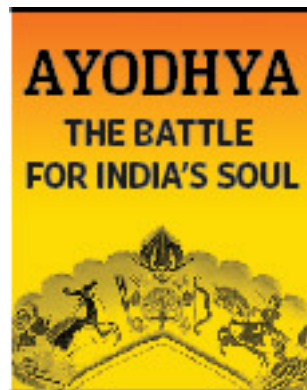
Our story begins in 1949, two years after India became an independent nation following centuries of rule by Mughal emperors and then the British.

What happened back then in the dead of night in a mosque in a northern Indian town came to define the new nation, and continues to shape the world's largest democracy today.

The legal and political drama that ensued, spanning six decades, has loomed large in the terms of five prime ministers. It has made and broken political careers, exposed the limits of the law in grappling with matters of faith, and led to violence that killed thousands. And, 20 years ago this week, Ayodhya was the scene of one of the worst incidents of inter-religious brutality in India's history.

On a spiritual level, it is a tale of efforts to define the divine in human terms.

Ultimately, it poses for every Indian a question that still lingers as the country aspires to a new role as an international economic power: Are we a Hindu nation, or a nation of many equal religions?



CHAPTER ONE:



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Details of an 18th century painting of Ayodhya.

The Sarayu river winds its way from the Nepalese border across the plains of north India. Not long before its churning gray waters meet the mighty Ganga, it flows past the town of Ayodhya.

In 1949, as it is today, Ayodhya was a quiet town of temples, narrow byways, wandering cows and the ancient, mossy walls of ashrams and shrines.

The town's residents included both Muslims and Hindus. But most noticeable were the Hindu holy men known as sadhus, with painted foreheads, long beards and loose robes. They flocked there, as they do today.

Hindu scriptures say Ayodhya is the birthplace of Lord Ram, making it one of the religion's holiest places. (Ayodhya means "unconquerable" in Sanskrit.)

Among the sadhus, back then, was Abhiram Das, a muscular priest with a strong voice, a severe visage and a quick temper, according to two of his surviving disciples. In his mid-40s, he had arrived in the town 15 years before from the countryside of Bihar, to the east, they say.

He revered Ram. And, his disciples say, he made it his mission to restore Ram to the exact place he believed the god had been born: a site then occupied by a mosque called the Babri Masjid.

The mosque was named after the Mughal ruler, Babar, whose troops had built it more than 400 years before. Inside, the mosque had space for about 90 people to pray, according to two elderly Muslims in Ayodhya. Verses of the Koran were written on the walls inside. On the minbar, or pulpit, under the central dome was inscribed in Persian: "Place for the angels to descend."

The complex had two courtyards, ringed by a perimeter wall and separated by a wall with a railing. In the outer courtyard was a small wooden platform with an idol of Ram where Hindus worshipped.

Abhiram Das wanted to establish Ram inside the building itself. He was not alone in his quest: a movement of sadhus dedicated to that goal was gathering momentum.

They claimed the mosque had been built from the ruins of an ancient temple to the Hindu god, which Muslims disputed. The site had been an occasional flashpoint for violence between the two communities in the past.

Abhiram Das told his disciples that he had a recurring dream that Ram made an appearance under the building's central dome, the two disciples said.

One day in mid-1949, the sadhu repeated his vision to the city magistrate in neighboring Faizabad, the city which oversees the administration of Ayodhya.

His words immediately struck a chord with the magistrate, Guru Dutt Singh, according to an account given by Mr. Singh's son, Guru Basant Singh. Mr. Singh's reply, his son said: "Brother, this is my old dream. You are having it now; I am having it for a long time."

The two men started to talk about how a statue of a young Ram might be surreptitiously put in a Muslim place of worship, Mr. Singh's son said.

The use of idols marks one of the great differences between Hinduism and Islam. Islam strictly prohibits idol worship because God, to its followers, is an invisible and indivisible entity. Hinduism holds that God can exist in many forms and devotees worship idols as mediums to God. So a statue of Ram *itself* would be a deity.

There are various versions of what transpired a few weeks later. Many Hindus have come to believe that it was a miracle. Mr. Singh's son, speaking in detail for the first time about those events, said it was, rather, a carefully-planned plot to return Ram, in the view of his father and Abhiram Das, to the deity's place of birth.

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At the time, India as a country was only two years old, its promise as a fledgling democracy challenged by the fact that it was rent in two – geographically, demographically, socially, emotionally — by the Partition that created the Muslim nation of Pakistan in the territory's northwest and northeast.

The migration of many Muslims to Pakistan consolidated the Hindu majority in the new India. Muslims comprised 24.4% of India's population in 1941; they were down to 10% of post-Partition India a decade later, according to census data.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, was striving to stabilize the new country. He was determined to establish India as a secular nation that respected the religious beliefs, or lack of them, of all its citizens.

"All of us, to whatever religion we may belong are equally the children of India with equal rights, privileges and obligations," he said in a message to the nation when India became independent on Aug. 15, 1947.

Still, many Hindus felt aggrieved about Pakistan's creation and the choice given to Muslims to move or stay. They used a term that would be repeated countless times over the following decades: Muslim "appeasement."

Even within Nehru's Indian National Congress party, there were many who supported the drive to make India a Hindu-dominated country. Some in Congress were actively involved in

the formation of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, a conservative Hindu political party, several years before.

The party opposed the creation of Pakistan and blamed Congress for it. The man who killed Mahatma Gandhi in early 1948, Nathuram Godse, was an activist of the Hindu Mahasabha. He was hanged in November 1949.

Partition had little effect in Ayodhya, though. Many Muslims stayed, maintaining a cultural mix that had existed for hundreds of years.

Muslim artisans made many of the idols that Hindu devotees worshipped in the temples. Hindu priests bought clothes and flowers for temple statues from Muslim vendors. One temple in Ayodhya even had a Muslim manager.

“Why would we leave our country?” said Mohammad Hashim Ansari, a local tailor, who was then in his late 20s. “We belong to this land.”

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Guru Dutt Singh, the Faizabad city magistrate, was tall and obstinate, with a neatly-trimmed moustache. He graduated from Allahabad University in what was then the United Provinces; today, it is in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

He joined the Provincial Civil Services but, his son said, refused to kowtow to his colonial masters. He insisted on wearing a self-fashioned turban in contrast to the hats favored by the British.

During a posting to Bareilly, when he first met one of his superiors, Michael Nethersole, the British man asked him: “Why don’t you wear a hat?”

“Why don’t you wear Indian headgear?” Mr. Singh retorted, according to his son.

Yet Mr. Singh also demanded respect for rank: He scolded his son for cheekily referring to Mr. Nethersole, as “Leather Sole” because “He is, after all, a district magistrate,” his son recalled being told. Mr. Nethersole’s descendants couldn’t be traced.

In his duties, which included preventing riots, Mr. Singh sought to be even-handed about religion, his son said. At times, he told Hindus that he would lock them up if they created trouble.

At other times, he called Muslims for consultation and said, "I consider you as my younger brothers; I'm your elder brother and we both belong to Mother India," his son said.

What Mr. Singh considered his neutrality at work, however, fueled his resentment at what he saw as "the appeasement of minorities" – Muslims, in other words — his son said.

His father was not in favor of the creation of Pakistan. But once it existed, he believed, "If a country has been made for you, you should all go there," his son said.

Mr. Singh was a devout Hindu, eschewing alcohol and maintaining a vegetarian diet. He visited Ayodhya at least annually, staying in a guest house at a temple. Since college days, Ram had been his religious focal point.

Ram is one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu, who is part of Hinduism's holy trinity: Vishnu is the protector; Brahma is the creator; Shiva is the destroyer.

According to Hindu scriptures, Ram was born in Ayodhya tens of thousands of years ago. He was the eldest son of the Hindu King Dasharath of the Solar Dynasty, so-called because the monarchs were believed to be descendants of the sun. Ram is revered as "maryada purushottam," an excellent man of honor.

It was to Ayodhya that Ram returned from exile after rescuing his wife, Sita, from the demon god Ravan in Sri Lanka, according to an ancient Sanskrit version of the Ramayan, the Hindu text about Ram's life.

Benevolently, Ram ruled over his kingdom from Ayodhya, becoming the epitome of good governance, the Ramayan says. And, in the twilight of his life, he was said to walk through a door in Ayodhya directly to heaven.

As Mr. Singh aged, his conviction grew that he wanted to put Ram back where he believed he belonged, his son said. He thought Muslims should yield the Babri Masjid.

"He used to have this tussle in him that 'While I so much respect their religion, why don't they reciprocate?'" his son said.

In the mid-1940s, Mr. Singh met K.K. Nayar, an administrator in the national Indian Civil Service, Mr. Singh's son said. The service was a precursor to today's Indian Administrative Service and the two men were stationed in the same city.

Mr. Nayar was from Kerala in the south. He was erudite and more soft-spoken than Mr. Singh. The two men found common cause in their reverence of Ram and their desire to take action, Mr. Singh's son said. Both men were also sympathetic to the Hindu Mahasabha, the conservative Hindu political party, but refrained from actively supporting it because of their government jobs, he said.

Together, the men asked the official in charge of appointments in the United Provinces to post them at the same time to Faizabad, which administered Ayodhya, according to Mr. Singh's son.

Mr. Singh moved there in 1948 as city magistrate. Around the same time, Mr. Nayar moved there as district magistrate, the most senior administrative post in the district. Both men are now deceased. Mr. Nayar's son declined to be interviewed.

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The Singhs moved into Lorpur House, a yellow, British-era mansion. Starting in mid-1949, Mr. Singh, Mr. Nayar, Abhiram Das and other local officials met there to plan how to install Ram in the Babri Masjid, according to Mr. Singh's son.

As the family's only child, Guru Basant Singh was then about 15 years old. He said he was in charge of serving tea and water at the meetings and at times hid behind the door to listen in on the planning.

The meetings were held in secret after sunset, he said. A Hindu servant was posted at the door with instructions to tell any visitors that his father was resting.

His version of events is confirmed by Mahant Satyendra Das, one of Abhiram Das's surviving disciples, who is now the government-appointed head priest at the site of the mosque.

He joined Abhiram Das in 1958. That year, the sadhu gave him a detailed account of events, said Mr. Das, who recalled their discussion in an interview. (The two men share a surname but were not related.)

“Top district officials” including K.K. Nayar and Guru Dutt Singh, worked with Abhiram Das on how the idol might be put in the Babri Masjid, which was locked and guarded, Mr. Das said the sadhu told him.

One guard, a Hindu, took the afternoon and evening shift. Another guard, a Muslim, took night watch, Mr. Das said he was told.

The Hindu guard agreed to let Abhiram Das and a small group of sadhus sneak into the mosque with an idol of Ram during his watch, Abhiram Das told his disciple, adding: “We took the Hindu guard into confidence by telling him about the virtues he will earn by being part of this extremely holy work.”

The Hindu guard would then hand over the keys to the Muslim guard at midnight, as usual, Mr. Das said the sadhu told him.

On the other hand, the Muslim guard was “briefed” by Guru Dutt Singh and K.K. Nayar “what he had to do,” according to Guru Dutt Singh’s son. He was threatened with his life if he did not cooperate, Mr. Singh’s son said. The guards and their descendants couldn’t be traced.

The statue of Ram would be about seven inches tall, made of eight metals, and would depict an infant – a “Ram Lalla” – befitting the place of his birth.

Both Mr. Singh, the city magistrate, and Mr. Nayar, the district magistrate, knew how furious Nehru and the government in New Delhi would be if the mosque was infringed upon, said Mr. Singh’s son. They both decided that they would resign rather than obey any order to remove the statue, he said.

Other details fell into place and the meetings ended around October 1949, according to Mr. Singh’s son. Now, the planners had to await their moment.

In late November 1949, religious friction in Ayodhya was on the rise. Sadhus and devotees of Ram lit sacred fires outside the mosque and read from the Ramayan as they listened to speeches about how Ram should be returned to his birthplace. Members of the crowd scuffled with local Muslims.

The planners, said Mr. Singh’s son, set their date for soon after: The night of Dec. 22, 1949, a Thursday.

“We decided that since the country has now got political liberation, we should also liberate the birthplace of Lord Ram,” Abhiram Das told Mr. Das, the latter said.

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In the chill of the north Indian winter, the Hindu guard ended his shift that night. But before he left, as planned, Abhiram Das and two other sadhus gained access, Abhiram Das told his disciple.

When the Muslim guard came for his round of duty, the Hindu guard handed over the keys. Around 3 a.m., an auspicious time in Hinduism, Abhiram Das and the other sadhus started ringing small bells inside the mosque. They lit a lamp and sang to the tiny idol that was placed on the pulpit under the central dome: “God appeared, compassionate and benevolent,” the sadhu told his disciple.

The Muslim guard made a statement to local authorities soon after that at around 3 a.m. he saw the area under the central dome bathed in a golden light, according to Mr. Singh’s son and others. He said the light illuminated a tiny figure of Ram that seemed to have appeared by itself.

The Muslim guard’s “revelation” and the statement had been planned in advance to appear to bear witness to a religious miracle, said Mr. Singh’s son.

Bindeshwari Prasad, a sadhu living in Ayodhya, was there that night, the youngest of a group of sadhus camped outside, he said in an interview at the red-brick ashram where he now lives. He described the events in mystical terms.

“I and other people sleeping there that night saw Ram Lalla in our dreams; we all woke up at 3 in the morning,” Mr. Prasad said, his voice a whisper and his skin stretched like bark on his aged body. He claimed they could see the idol on the floor through the railings.

Abhiram Das was there, he recalled. The lock to the mosque was broken and the group of sadhus entered. “We went near the Lord and sang religious hymns and worshipped him,” said Mr. Prasad.

Armed constables, alerted to what was happening, shot a few rounds in the air, Mr. Prasad said. A bullet grazed his abdomen, he said, pointing to the spot. He said another sadhu took a bullet in the toe.

Mr. Singh's son said the police had instructions only to fire in the air, as part of the planning his father and the others had done.

Back at Lorpur House, Guru Dutt Singh was kept informed of what was happening by two messengers who worked in a bicycle relay from Ayodhya to Faizabad to convey the latest news, his son said.

Mr. Singh, in turn, entrusted a Hindu employee in the household to take hand-written messages to K.K. Nayar with a special order to give the missives only to him. "That was how they communicated," said Mr. Singh's son.

When the officials realized the statue had been successfully installed, and the mosque was filled with sadhus, Mr. Singh and Mr. Nayar took a car to the site, according to Mr. Singh's son and Mr. Prasad.

Later that morning, Mr. Singh offered prayers, or puja, in Lorpur House, his son said: "I don't know what he said but it is my understanding that he was telling God, 'Let happen what has been happening.'"

Then Mr. Singh imposed an order that prohibited the gathering of large groups of people in Ayodhya. But he made it clear to police that they were not to obstruct Hindus, his son said.

After, Mr. Singh left his Faizabad home for nearby government accommodation where visiting officials stayed. He gave instructions that if anyone inquired about his whereabouts, they were to be told he was "out of station," his son said.

Word spread quickly to neighboring communities. Thousands of Hindu devotees came to see the idol in the mosque.

Abhiram Das helped whip up enthusiasm. That day, Dec. 23, he visited a local school. Rajendra Singh, the son of a local officer of the Hindu Mahasabha, the conservative Hindu party, was a pupil then.

"Lord Ram has appeared! Lord Ram has appeared!" he recalled Abhiram Das saying.

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There was a dissident voice among the local sadhus. Akshaya Brahmachari was about 35 years old at the time and a devotee of Ram.

He also was a local Congress party officer who defended the rights of Muslims to remain in India “as equal citizens” rather than move to Pakistan, according to a disciple, Meera Behen, who was then a high school student.

There was rising friction in town that day as loudspeakers announced “the appearance of God, exhorting all Hindus to come for audience,” Mr. Brahmachari wrote in a memorandum a few months later. But local officials, including K.K. Nayar, showed no interest in removing the idol or defusing the situation, he wrote.

He added: “Communal poison was spread in an organized manner and the attitude of the officials gave the idea to the people that either the Government wanted all that to happen, or they had completely given in to the communalists.”

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CHAPTER TWO:



Paul Beckett/The Wall Street Journal
A replica of the idol of Ram placed in the Babri Masjid on Dec. 22, 1949.

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's prime minister, was greatly perturbed by an idol of Lord Ram being placed in a mosque.

Polished, intellectual and skeptical of religion, Nehru was trying to propel the nation into an era of modern socialism and scientific thinking. But the events in Ayodhya forced him to grapple anew with the centuries-long friction between Hindus and Muslims – and to try to counter the spreading belief that a deity had materialized in the dead of night.

“I am disturbed at developments at Ayodhya,” Nehru said in a telegram on Dec. 26, 1949, to Govind Ballabh Pant, chief minister of United Provinces, which roughly included what is now the state of Uttar Pradesh. “Earnestly hope you will personally interest yourself in this matter. Dangerous example being set there which will have bad consequences.”

The provincial government wanted the statue removed. K.K. Nayar, the district magistrate in Faizabad, who also oversaw Ayodhya, refused. He wrote to a provincial official that removing

the idol was “fraught with the gravest danger to public peace” and would lead to a “conflagration of horror,” according to a copy of his correspondence.

Around that time, Guru Dutt Singh, the city magistrate, resigned. His son, Guru Basant Singh, said his father quit because “his work was done” and the idol’s installation, which Mr. Singh helped plan, had succeeded.

Local Hindus added religious items to the mosque: more idols; six black ammonite stones; a small silver throne; brass utensils for worship; and clothes for the deity, according to an official list compiled later.

Muslims weren’t welcome. Mohammad Hashim Ansari, a local tailor, headed to the Babri Masjid with a few others the morning after the idol of Ram was installed, said Mr. Ansari and another local Muslim who was there. The police stopped them at the gate. The Muslims returned home, they said.

Nehru kept pushing. In early January, he wrote again to Mr. Pant. The chief minister called him soon after.

Mr. Pant “intended taking action, but he wanted to get some well-known Hindus to explain the situation to people in Ayodhya first,” Nehru wrote in a separate letter to the governor-general of India dated Jan. 7, 1950.

Weeks passed. The idol stayed.

The discord in Ayodhya threatened Nehru’s desire for India to be a democracy in which all beliefs were equally respected. He also feared that it would have repercussions “on all-India affairs and more especially Kashmir,” the disputed territory between India and the newly-created Pakistan, he wrote to Mr. Pant on Feb. 5, 1950.

Nehru added that he would be willing to make the 600-kilometer trip from Delhi to Ayodhya himself. But, he also noted, “I am terribly busy.”

Nehru didn’t make the trip. By March, he was sounding defeated as local officials continued to balk at removing the idol.

“This event occurred two or three months ago and I have been very gravely perturbed over it,” he wrote in a letter to K.G. Mashruwala, an associate of Mahatma Gandhi.

Nehru lamented that many in his Congress party had become “communal” toward Pakistan and India’s Muslims. “I just do not know what we can do to create a better atmosphere in the country,” he wrote.

In 1952, Nehru visited Uttar Pradesh to campaign for Mr. Pant in an election, according to a person who heard him speak. He told the crowd, in Hindi, “The Ayodhya event has put me to shame,” this person said.

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In January 1950, a decades-long legal battle began between Ayodhya’s Hindus and Muslims over the site of the Babri Masjid. The first case was filed by a Hindu , Gopal Singh Visharad, in the Victorian Gothic district court building in neighboring Faizabad.

Mr. Singh Visharad – “Visharad” denotes expertise in Hindu scripture — was a lawyer who had moved to Ayodhya because he wanted to live in a Hindu holy place, according to his son, Rajendra. Rajendra was the schoolboy who witnessed Abhiram Das, the sadhu, spreading the word on the morning of Dec. 23, 1949, that Ram had appeared in the mosque.

A stern-looking man with a broad nose and a thick moustache, Mr. Singh Visharad, then 42 years old, was the Ayodhya secretary of the Hindu Mahasabha, a conservative Hindu political party that opposed Nehru’s Congress. He was close to Mr. Nayar, the district magistrate, and Guru Dutt Singh, the city magistrate, according to Rajendra Singh.

Mr. Singh Visharad had celebrated the appearance of the Ram Lalla idol and worshipped at the site for a few days, his son said. But when he went there on Jan.14, 1950, the police stopped him at the gate.

By then, another local magistrate had already issued an order seizing the building. A receiver was named and the place was locked for devotees. As an interim arrangement, the receiver appointed a small team of priests to attend daily to the statue of Ram Lalla at the site because it was, after all, a deity that needed feeding, bathing, and clothing, according to Hindu ritual.

In his lawsuit, Mr. Singh claimed the right to worship the deity in the building “without any obstruction whatever” and asked for a “temporary injunction” to prevent government officials from removing the idols.

The judge granted the injunction but didn’t rule on the question of his right to worship. The next day, Anisur Rahman, a Muslim about 30 years old, filed a court petition of his own — the first

Muslim legal volley in the dispute. Mr. Rahman made tin boxes that he sold from a shop in the local market in Ayodhya. He lived with his family close to the Babri Masjid.

Weeks before the idol was installed, he had sent messages to district officials that he saw “imminent danger” to the mosque from the sadhus gathered around it, according to the official records of Mr. Nayar, the district magistrate.

Mr. Nayar had dismissed Mr. Rahman as an “exception” among Muslims in Ayodhya whom, he wrote, “are far from agitated,” according to the records.

Petitioning the High Court in Allahabad, a major city in the state, Mr. Rahman sought to have any cases claiming title to the site of the Babri Masjid heard by a court outside Ayodhya and Faizabad.

He claimed that “in view of the highly strained relations between the two communities and also district authorities not being free from communal bias,” there was no prospect of a fair hearing around Ayodhya.

He also noted in an affidavit that district authorities had done nothing to help Muslims take back their mosque after the idol was installed. Instead, they had seized the building.

Mr. Rahman’s effort was countered by about 20 Muslims from Ayodhya, who signed identical affidavits in a local courtroom.

They said they had no objection if the Hindus continued to possess the Babri Masjid. “Babri Masjid has been built by demolishing Ram birthplace temple,” they said. “It’s against the Islamic law to pray there,” the affidavits said.

Mr. Rahman’s petition was dismissed. Muslim lawyers today doubt the authenticity of the Muslims’ affidavits.

Mr. Rahman sold his shop. Sometime in the early 1950s, he migrated with his family to Pakistan, according to several local Muslims. His descendants could not be traced.

A Muslim shopkeeper in Ayodhya recalled Mr. Rahman telling him, before leaving: “We don’t get any justice here. Nobody helps us.”

In late 1950, a mercurial sadhu filed a similar court case to Gopal Singh Visharad’s. He was a member of Ayodhya’s famous Digambar Akhara, a group of Hindu holy men devoted to Ram.

Both Hindu suits named five local Muslim men as defendants, alleging they had put pressure on local government officials to remove the idols by making “baseless and dishonest assertions.”

The most prominent among the defendants was Haji Phenku, one of Ayodhya’s biggest property owners at the time.

At court, Mr. Phenku, then 65 years old, and the other Muslims refuted the allegations, according to legal papers. They also claimed that the Babri Masjid had been used by the Muslims as a mosque ever since it was built in 1528. They said no Hindu temple existed at the site before the construction of the mosque.

Mr. Phenku boarded a horse cart at his residence at least once a month to travel from Ayodhya to the courthouse, about 10 kilometers away, said his son, Haji Mahboob Ahmad, in an interview.

When Mr. Phenku returned home, he recounted his experience, often with frustration. “The judge again adjourned the hearing and asked us to appear on the next date,” Mr. Phenku said repeatedly, according to his son.

Gopal Singh Visharad, the lead Hindu petitioner, regularly cycled to court. He was resigned to the fact that it would be a prolonged dispute because he believed the government didn’t want to deal with the implications of a verdict, according to his son.

The hearings dragged on, with little progress, for nine years. Then, in 1959, another suit was filed by a sect of sadhus known as the Nirmohi Akhara.

The name means “Group Without Attachment,” a reference to the fact that the 12,000 sadhus it claims as members have abandoned the material world for the company of their deity, Ram. The sect had tried, in the late 19th century, to build a temple near the mosque but had been prevented by the court.

Bhaskar Das is the head of the sect. Now in his mid-80s, he is a thin man and an imposing sight. His wrinkled head is shaved close with a longer outcropping of hair knotted in a tail at the back. A Y-shaped pattern of white paint, accentuated with vermillion stripes, starts at the bridge of his nose and runs in two lines up his forehead.

Mr. Das came to Ayodhya in 1946 to learn Sanskrit at the age of 18. Soon after, he visited an idol of Ram located on the wooden platform where Hindus worshipped in the outer courtyard of the Babri Masjid. The Nirmohi Akhara maintained the platform.

“I felt belongingness with Lord Ram” and decided to lead the life of a sadhu, Mr. Das said in an interview at the sect’s ashram in Faizabad, a collection of four-story white buildings off a street clogged with traffic.

In its 1959 petition, the group claimed that Ram’s birthplace “has been existing before the living memory of man.”

It also claimed that the Babri Masjid building had never been a mosque but had been a temple since ancient times and was rightfully the possession of the Nirmohi Akhara. The suit was added to the others.

Two years later, in December 1961, representatives of the local Muslim community responded.

Leading the case was the Uttar Pradesh Sunni Central Board of Waqfs, a body created by Indian law to be responsible for the protection and preservation of “waqfs,” or Muslim religious and cultural sites.

It listed Mohammad Hashim Ansari, the tailor, and other Ayodhya Muslims as co-petitioners.

The board, based in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, claimed that the Babri Masjid was registered with it as a public mosque and is “vested in the Almighty.”

In 1964, the court consolidated all four suits – of Gopal Singh Visharad; the sadhu from the Digambar Akhara; the Nirmohi Akhara, and the waqf board.

The litigants became used to the delays that plague India’s court system today. It took 17 years to settle on the appointment of a new receiver at the Babri Masjid site after the death of the first receiver.

In court, the judge would listen for about 15 minutes, set a date for the next hearing, and adjourn, according to two people involved in the case.

“Many judges came and went but the case was not decided,” said Haji Mahboob Ahmad, 74 years old. He replaced his father, Haji Phenku, as the defendant in one of the Hindu suits after his father died in 1960.

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Guru Dutt Singh and K.K. Nayar – the administrators who were instrumental in the idol's placement — turned to politics. They played no further direct role in the Ayodhya dispute.

Mr. Singh joined the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, a Hindu nationalist party, within six months of resigning his administrative post. The party was founded by a former president of the Hindu Mahasabha, the first conservative Hindu party in India.

In the 1951 national election, the Jana Sangh won three seats in Parliament, compared with 364 seats won by Nehru's Congress party. Mr. Singh became the Jana Sangh's district chief in Faizabad, said his son.

A photo from the late 1960s in the reception room of the family's Faizabad residence shows Guru Dutt Singh with a young Atal Bihari Vajpayee, then national president of the Jana Sangh and later prime minister of India.

Mr. Nayar was transferred to another post in early 1950. He took voluntary retirement in 1952. He settled in Faizabad and joined the Jana Sangh with his wife. In 1967, he was elected to the national Parliament from a constituency near Ayodhya.

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Among the sadhus of Ayodhya, the idol's installation was overwhelmingly supported.

Akshaya Brahmachari, the young sadhu who had opposed the move, argued with others that "all Ayodhya is Ram's birthplace," according to his disciple, Meera Behen, and others who knew him. He asked: "Why do you diminish His glory by putting him in a mosque?"

He was assaulted and banished from the sadhus' fraternity. He went to Lucknow and sat on a series of fasts from Jan. 30, 1950, in a bid to press the government to remove the idol. But a state government minister responded that, "Ayodhya's situation is better now and the case is pending in a court of law at the moment. The final decision can be taken only after a judgment from the court."

Abhiram Das, the sadhu who championed installing Ram in the mosque, organized festivals to commemorate the event.

One pamphlet printed by him in December 1953 exhorted Ayodhya's residents to participate in a reading of the Ramayan, the Hindu holy text, at the site. Another pamphlet mentions him as the "savior" of Ram's birthplace.

Hindu control of the site and the lack of action by the courts frustrated Ayodhya's Muslims. Mohammad Hashim Ansari, the tailor, said that in 1954 he and about 100 local Muslim men sought permission to offer prayers at the site. It was denied.

When they tried to force themselves into the mosque, they were arrested and spent two months in jail, Mr. Ansari later testified in court.

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CHAPTER THREE:



Paul Beckett/The Wall Street Journal

A painting on a Muslim house in Meenakshipuram, Tamil Nadu.

In the 1980s, the Ayodhya dispute escalated from a local issue to a national one. It fed, and was fed by, other points of tension in Indian politics and society that set Hindus and Muslims on a collision course over the span of the decade.

Each side came to feel that its religion and status in India was under threat – and both sides responded with political pressure and shows of force.

It started in 1981 in Meenakshipuram, an unremarkable village deep in the countryside of the southern state of Tamil Nadu, more than 2,000 kilometers from Ayodhya.

The village hit the national news when its low-caste Hindus – about 400 families, villagers say — converted, en masse, to Islam.

“We became Muslims to become equal,” said 65-year-old N. Hidayathullah, one of the converts, in an interview on the porch of his modest home, as a herd of goats wandered by.

The families had felt ill-treated by local upper-caste Hindus, he said. “Nobody told us to convert; it was our desire to be treated with respect,” he added.

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At stake was more than belief: In India, how you worship defines your community, most likely your marriage and whom you vote for, your approach to life, and your identity.

In 1984, Hindu leaders responded to what they viewed as the threat of Islam emanating from the Meenakshipuram conversion.

About 500 sadhus — Hindu holy men — from across India gathered at Vigyan Bhavan, a government-owned conference center in New Delhi. They comprised a “dharma sansad,” or religious parliament.

The meeting was put together by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a conservative Hindu organization founded in the 1960s. The chief organizer was Ashok Singhal, then the VHP’s joint general secretary.

The son of a government official in Agra, home of the Taj Mahal, Mr. Singhal graduated with a degree in metallurgical engineering from Banaras Hindu University in 1950. Now 86 years old, he has worked to promote Hindu causes ever since. “Our culture is under siege,” he said in an interview at the VHP’s offices in New Delhi.

The religious parliament began with a song by a group of musicians. “This country’s soil is sacred,” they sang, according to a later account of the event published by the VHP. “Every girl is an image of a goddess, every boy is Ram.”

After a sadhu blew a conch shell, speeches began. Among the speakers was Karan Singh, a former minister in Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s cabinet. At the time, he was an independent member of Parliament. Courtly and soft-spoken, he is the son of the last Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.

Mr. Singh was the founder of an organization to espouse the values of universal brotherhood and human welfare contained in the Vedas and Upanishads, Hindu sacred texts. He formed it in direct response to the events of Meenakshipuram, he said in an interview in the book-lined study of his Delhi mansion.

The mass conversion to Islam “was, first of all, a clear statement that the way Hinduism was functioning is not acceptable to a large number of people,” Mr. Singh said. At the time, the message was: “People are leaving because we are not following our principles.”

At the religious conference, Mr. Singh spoke about the need to reconnect individual life and politics with the tenets of Hinduism, and to rid society of the dowry system and the stigma of “untouchability” that relegated lower-caste Hindus to an underclass, according to the VHP’s account of the event. He also rued the fact that Hindu holy sites had been neglected.

“We cannot even light a holy lamp” at Ram’s birthplace in Ayodhya, he told the sadhus. “How shameful a matter is it for 80% of this country’s residents who call themselves Hindus?”

The gathering issued a code of conduct for individuals, families and society. Its code for the country’s statesmen included the demand that three important holy sites be “given back to Hindu society.”

The Babri Masjid, the mosque in Ayodhya that many Hindus claimed was Lord Ram’s birthplace – “Ram Janmabhoomi” in Hindi — was top of the list.

Ram appealed to Hindus of all castes: one story recounted in the Ramayan, the text about his life, has him happily eating berries given to him by a lower-caste woman.

A few months after the religious parliament, the VHP followed up with a rally for devotees led by a motorized chariot. Hindu scripture says Ram rode a chariot into battle.

The rally started at Sitamarhi in Bihar in late September 1984. The district is believed by Hindus to be the place where Sita, Ram’s wife, emerged from the earth.

Thousands of the faithful joined the procession, which reached Ayodhya 12 days later. There, they descended to the banks of the Sarayu river, cupped its water in their palms and, according to several participants, took an oath.

The crowd totaled about 50,000 that day, according to Mr. Singhal of the VHP, who was among them. Similar oath-taking ceremonies were held at major rivers around the country.

The Hindus at the Sarayu that day wanted to go further than keeping a tiny statue of Ram inside the Babri Masjid. They wanted to build a house of worship where Ram sat: “We will give up everything to build Lord Ram’s temple at his birthplace,” they swore, according to several people who took part.

The organizers say they were surprised by the number of supporters. "People found that this is an agitation which will be successful," Mr. Singhal said. "Such a large number of people came from small villages to witness and join the movement."

A day later, the chariot started rolling again. But its journey was interrupted when, on Oct. 31, 1984, Mrs. Gandhi, the prime minister and Jawaharlal Nehru's daughter, was shot dead at her New Delhi home by two Sikh bodyguards.

Soon, Ayodhya would become a defining issue for the country's new leader: Mrs. Gandhi's 40-year-old son, Rajiv.

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Rajiv Gandhi was a political beginner. Eschewing politics, he worked as a pilot for Indian Airlines and married an Italian, Sonia Maino.

He was elected as a member of Parliament in 1981, following the death of his younger brother, Sanjay, in a plane crash. Soon after Mr. Gandhi succeeded his mother, he called for national elections. His Congress party won the biggest Parliamentary majority in India's electoral history.

Mr. Gandhi brought the promise of a new kind of Indian leader. He was young and interested in promoting technology. Within months, however, he was deeply embroiled in the historical tussle between Muslims and Hindus and the sense of victimhood that both sides felt.

The catalyst was a case brought by a Muslim woman called Shah Bano. She had been divorced by her husband several years before and was left destitute. She asked the Supreme Court to force her ex-husband to pay maintenance.

In the spring of 1985, the Supreme Court ruled in her favor, citing the provisions against destitution in Indian criminal law that applied to all Indians.

Prominent members of the Muslim clergy viewed the ruling as a threat to Islamic law, which had long governed their personal matters. It does not require the equivalent of alimony. But the justices had ordered a divorced man to pay maintenance.

At first, Rajiv Gandhi backed the verdict. Arif Mohammed Khan, a Muslim and minister in Mr. Gandhi's government, made a long speech in Parliament in praise of the ruling.

In an interview, Mr. Khan said he did so at the prime minister's request. Afterward, he received a note from Mr. Gandhi, he said, which congratulated him on a "wonderful performance" and a "great speech."

But the Muslim clergy protested, heaping pressure on the prime minister. They demanded he counter the verdict through an act of Parliament. "The Muslim clergy found this as an opportunity to mobilize the Muslims and project themselves," said Mr. Khan.

Mr. Gandhi succumbed and started preparations for a law that would effectively overturn the Supreme Court ruling.

But he also wanted to find a way to mollify Hindu outrage over the Muslim protests and to counter anticipated Hindu claims that Muslims were being appeased by the government, said Mr. Khan.

The prime minister, he said, found his answer in a court case in Faizabad, the city next to Ayodhya.

The case sought to have the lock removed on the main gate of the Babri Masjid, granting greater public access to the idol that had been sitting in seclusion under the central dome for almost four decades.

Mr. Gandhi's calculation, Mr. Khan said, was that the Hindu focus on the Shah Bano case "will be redirected to Ayodhya."

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Umesh Chandra Pandey filed the petition to open the lock in late January 1986. He was a 30-year-old lawyer and occasional journalist who then lived in Faizabad.

His interest in the issue had begun three years earlier, when the editor of a local Hindi newspaper asked him to write a feature on the festival commemorating Ram's birthday, Mr. Pandey and the editor said in interviews.

Mr. Pandey said he also heard leaders from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad claiming that there never had been an official order to lock the Babri Masjid gate.

"I thought, 'If this is so, then how has this lock been put there?'" he said.

Adding drama and urgency, a prominent sadhu had threatened to set himself ablaze if the lock was not removed, according to Mr. Pandey and other accounts. Other sadhus threatened to get themselves arrested by trying to unlock the gate themselves, according to the VHP's Mr. Singhal.

Mr. Pandey, a short man who speaks in emphatic phrases, said he spent a couple of weeks examining court papers. He came to the conclusion that there had never been a formal order putting the lock in place, he said. (Priests who cared for the idols in the building entered through a side gate.)

Soon after Mr. Pandey filed his petition, he found out that a copy had been sent to the state agency in charge of internal security, he said.

The petition also attracted the interest of Rajiv Gandhi and Arun Nehru, a cousin of Mr. Gandhi's and a powerful adviser to the prime minister, according to Arif Mohammed Khan, the government minister at the time.

Mr. Gandhi and Mr. Nehru wanted to ensure that the petition succeeded so Hindus would feel assuaged, Mr. Khan said. The prime minister asked Mr. Nehru to coordinate the government's participation in the case, including dealing with the state government of Uttar Pradesh, Mr. Khan said.

Other officials from the time say Mr. Nehru, the adviser, was the more influential in seizing on the issue and the prime minister acquiesced. Yet others say Mr. Gandhi was unaware of what was happening.

Either way, said Mr. Khan: "The buck stops at the door of the prime minister" as the head of the government.

When asked about the episode in a brief telephone conversation, Mr. Nehru responded: "That's none of your damn business."

The government ensured that two senior local officials appeared – unusually — before the judge, rather than submitting affidavits, Mr. Khan said. They testified that law and order could be maintained if the lock was removed, a key consideration in the judge's deliberations.

Mushtaq Ahmad Siddiqui, one of the lawyers representing Muslims in their legal claims to the Babri Masjid site, said he also asked to be heard before the judge.

“You may, there is no hurry,” he said the judge responded. “The matter is continuing for 36 years – you will be allowed sufficient time.” He was referring to the fact that litigation over the site had begun in 1950.

On the afternoon of Feb. 1, 1986, the judge ruled there had been no official order that placed the lock on the mosque’s gate. He ordered the lock opened “forthwith,” according to witnesses. The judge is now deceased.

Within 30 minutes, a senior police officer in Ayodhya broke the lock. A camera crew from Doordarshan, the government-run television channel, was there. The event was broadcast to the nation.

Mr. Pandey, the man who filed the petition, said he couldn’t sleep that night. The next morning, he went to the site.

“I was without words,” he said. “But I was thankful to God that I was able to look and to offer my prayer.”

The gate opening was the first that millions of Hindus had heard of Ayodhya and the battle over Ram’s birthplace. It energized them en masse because Ram was a role model. Grandmothers told their grandsons to aspire to be like him: obedient to their parents, faithful to their family, honest in their dealings.

Rajiv Gandhi received the news during a visit to the Maldives, according to Mani Shankar Aiyar, his speechwriter at the time.

In the hours before a state banquet, the prime minister was putting the finishing touches on his formal dress and on his speech when he received a telephone call, Mr. Aiyar said in an interview. Mr. Gandhi was told the lock was opened, Mr. Aiyar said.

The lock opening quickly took on a mystical aspect. Mr. Pandey claimed that on the afternoon of the decision, a monkey sat on the roof of the Faizabad court house. A monkey was symbolic because Hanuman, the Hindu monkey god, was a loyal friend of Ram.

The animal, unusually for a monkey, sat still for more than 30 minutes, Mr. Pandey said. Then, when the judge issued his order, the monkey walked to the flagpole on the courthouse roof and touched the Indian flag, according to Mr. Pandey. “I don’t think this can happen without the Almighty’s permission,” he added.

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The lock opening shocked Muslim elders and lawyers who had been following the Ayodhya dispute because they saw in it a threat to their mosque and to their religion. They gathered the next day in an orphanage in Delhi.

“Today, it appears we have become second-class citizens,” said one elder, close to tears, according to two people who were there.

The leaders worried that the next step would be the Babri Masjid’s destruction.

On Feb. 3, 1986, two days after the lock was opened, a small group of Muslim lawyers petitioned the high court in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, to order that nothing more happen to the site, according to two of the lawyers.

The judge issued a notice that the “status quo” be maintained.

Zafaryab Jilani, one of the lawyers, was then just shy of his 36th birthday. The lock opening would vault him to the forefront of the Muslim movement seeking to retain the Babri Masjid site for Islam.

Born in a town close to Lucknow, Mr. Jilani pursued his legal studies at Aligarh Muslim University.

There, he gained his first experience in organizing protests. He said he was part of a small group that, in 1970, led students in opposing government plans to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the school’s incorporation by an act of Parliament.

The students were angry about previous government measures that stopped Muslims from being the sole administrators of the university. Faced with the protests, the government scrapped the golden jubilee festivities and, ultimately, undid the administrative changes.

After the Babri Masjid lock opening, Mr. Jilani started organizing protests again.

He and a handful of associates called meetings of prominent local Muslims; it included one gathering of about 200 in a hall in Lucknow, Mr. Jilani said in an interview.

They created the Babri Masjid Action Committee to organize public strikes and demonstrations— and to push back against what the leaders viewed as Hindu aggression.

On Feb. 7, 1986, Mr. Jilani said he and about eight others met the then-chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Vir Bahadur Singh. The chief minister denied any involvement in the lock opening, Mr. Jilani said.

“I haven’t done it. Whatever has been done, it is at the behest of some other leaders, top leaders,” Mr. Jilani said the chief minister told them. Mr. Singh died a few years later.

A week after that meeting, the new committee held its first event: a “Black Day,” or state-wide public strike, Mr. Jilani said. Later, tens of thousands protested in Lucknow and other cities.

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In May 1986, the government used its huge majority in Parliament to push through a law that effectively reversed the Shah Bano ruling and made it clear Muslim personal law would prevail.

Mr. Gandhi’s supporters say the prime minister was only trying to clarify that matters of Muslim personal law would be governed by Islam, as they had been for decades.

The law’s passage cemented the idea among many Hindus that the government was kowtowing to Muslims. Muslim leaders, on the other hand, were angry about the lock opening. The prime minister’s plan to do something to mollify both sides had gone awry.

Arif Mohammed Khan, the minister who had supported the Shah Bano ruling, resigned from the government. He recalled that Mr. Gandhi said to him at the time: “The situation is such that I am feeling very helpless.”

And, as Mr. Gandhi’s grandfather, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, had feared in 1950, the new prominence of the Babri Masjid dispute complicated the delicate political equation in the late 1980s in Kashmir, the Himalayan region fought over by India and Pakistan.

Militants who favored a separate country of Kashmir used the opening of the lock on the mosque to rebuke Indian Muslims who favored embracing India’s secularism and democracy.

The militants said, according to Mr. Jilani: “Your government is not sincere with you, how do you expect that government to be sincere with us?”

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CHAPTER FOUR:



Mahendra Tripathi/The Wall Street Journal
Hindu activists atop the Babri Masjid on Dec. 6, 1992.

By the summer of 1989, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was in a bind. The euphoria that marked the start of his term had given way to controversy: opposition parties alleged that he benefitted from bribes paid in India's purchase of howitzer guns from a Swedish company, AB Bofors.

Mr. Gandhi denied wrongdoing. But as the end of his first term approached, he needed an issue that would change the dynamics of the upcoming election.

The Bharatiya Janata Party, which had just two seats in Parliament, already had seized on Ayodhya as its chief campaign issue.

The party was formed in 1980 from the remnants of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the Hindu party that both Guru Dutt Singh and K.K. Nayar, the administrators in Faizabad in 1949, joined when they entered politics.

The BJP had close links to the largest conservative Hindu organizations: the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which for years had been calling for the construction of a temple to Lord Ram in Ayodhya; and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a hard-line Hindu group that was formed in 1925.

At a meeting in Palampur in the foothills of the Himalayas, in June 1989, the BJP's national executive endorsed the demand to build a Ram temple, calling it by its Hindu name, "Ram Janmabhoomi."

The statement declared that the dispute over the Babri Masjid "highlighted the callous unconcern" which Mr. Gandhi's Congress and other parties "betray towards the sentiments of the overwhelming majority in this country – the Hindus."

The prime minister's advisers encouraged him to co-opt the same issue for his own re-election effort. He "had been advised by various intelligence agencies and politicians that 'You launch your campaign from Ayodhya,'" said R.K. Dhawan, then Mr. Gandhi's private secretary, in an interview.

The BJP, at the time, was not viewed as the main opposition: Mr. Gandhi faced a greater threat from an alliance of former ministers who had split from Congress: Arif Mohammed Khan, the minister who resigned from Mr. Gandhi's government in 1986; Arun Nehru, Mr. Gandhi's cousin and former political adviser; and Vishwanath Pratap Singh, Mr. Gandhi's former finance minister.

They were hammering on the Bofors allegations. So Mr. Gandhi seized on Ayodhya. He launched his campaign from the neighboring city of Faizabad in the autumn of 1989.

On a large field, before a crowd of thousands, he gave a speech from notes that had been prepared by Mani Shankar Aiyar, his special assistant and speechwriter. But, said Mr. Aiyar, the prime minister slipped in an unscripted reference to "Ram Rajya."

The phrase connoted the ideal governance that Lord Ram had practiced when, Hindu scripture says, he ruled Ayodhya thousands of years before. It had been a term used by Mahatma Gandhi during India's independence struggle. But it also was used by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad to promote the movement to construct a Ram temple. When Rajiv Gandhi used the phrase, his opponents accused him of pandering to divisive Hindu sentiment.

Still, Mr. Gandhi further embraced the Ayodhya issue soon after. In early November 1989, just weeks before the general election, the prime minister sent Buta Singh, the home minister, to the town to participate in a “shilanyas,” or symbolic temple foundation-laying ceremony.

The event was organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which had been collecting bricks from all over India and bringing them to Ayodhya to symbolize the desire to build a Ram temple. As many as 275,000 villages and 60 million people participated, according to a VHP spokesman. Bricks were also sent from the U.S., the U.K. and other foreign locales.

Mr. Gandhi figured no Muslims would object if a Ram temple was built *near* the Babri Masjid but outside the area that was being disputed by Hindus and Muslims, Mr. Aiyar said.

To ensure the land where the ceremony took place was uncontroversial, a court registrar verified the plot with pencil markings on a map, Buta Singh said in an interview at his New Delhi home.

But afterward, Muslim leaders claimed the site of the ceremony had impinged on a graveyard around the mosque and was part of the property being fought over in court.

They publicly vowed revenge at the ballot box against Mr. Gandhi’s Congress party, said Zafaryab Jilani, convener of the All India Babri Masjid Action Committee and the lead lawyer representing Muslims in the court dispute.

Mr. Gandhi’s strategy of using Ayodhya to boost his re-election prospects had backfired. Muslims saw in the performance of the shilanyas a direct threat to the mosque. Hindus who wanted a temple on the site of the Babri Masjid, which they viewed as Ram’s birthplace, weren’t satisfied with a temple near the mosque.

“We fought on somebody else’s territory and the tactics we used blew back on us,” said Mr. Aiyar. It was a “horrendous decision,” added Mr. Dhawan.

It spelled electoral disaster. No single party won a majority in Parliament and Congress remained the largest party. But it lost so many seats that Mr. Gandhi opted not to try to form a government.

Instead, his opponents did. The new coalition government was headed by Vishwanath Pratap Singh, the former finance minister in Mr. Gandhi’s government, who had switched from Congress to the Janata Dal party.

The BJP saw its seats in Parliament jump to 85 from two, according to election commission results. It used its new power to support the new government and give it a working majority in Parliament. That gave the BJP huge leverage which it would exercise, over Ayodhya, in the following months.

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The BJP's sudden prominence thrust Lal Krishna Advani, one of the party's senior leaders, to the forefront of New Delhi politics.

Almost a year later, he gained national attention when, on Sept. 25, 1990, he began a cross-country journey in an air-conditioned mini-bus made to look like a chariot and decorated with marigold flowers, according to Mr. Advani's autobiography. Ram rode a chariot into battle, according to Hindu scriptures.

Mr. Advani began the trip from Somnath, in the western state of Gujarat. Somnath is, like Ayodhya, one of Hinduism's holiest sites. A temple there dedicated to the god Shiva, the destroyer, had been repeatedly razed by Muslim invaders over centuries. But construction of a new temple in Somnath had begun in 1947 with the blessing of the government in New Delhi, making it a symbolic starting point for his journey.

Mr. Advani planned to reach Ayodhya by Oct. 30. That was the day that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Hindu organization, set for "karseva" — religious work — to begin in Ayodhya. The religious work envisaged was the construction of a Ram temple on the site in dispute between Hindus and Muslims.

Mr. Advani, now 85 years old, declined to be interviewed. "I don't want to talk about it," he said through an aide.

Slender, with dark-rimmed glasses, a neatly-trimmed moustache and a circle of white hair below his bald pate, Mr. Advani grew up in a devout Hindu household in pre-Partition Karachi, now Pakistan's largest city. At the age of 14, he joined the RSS, the hard-line Hindu group.

He moved to Rajasthan as an RSS organizer before becoming a journalist and political apparatchik. He was a co-founder of the BJP in 1980.

Along the chariot's route, Mr. Advani encountered dramatic scenes of devotion: the chariot itself was worshipped as divine, he wrote. In short speeches — he made 20 a day — from a

platform on the chariot, he spoke about how the “power of devotion towards Ram can unleash people’s power,” he wrote.

In his autobiography, Mr. Advani claimed the route the chariot took was peaceful. Government officials and published accounts from that time said his journey sparked widespread violence elsewhere between Hindus and Muslims.

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As Mr. Advani rode across India and the deadline approached for the start of temple construction on Oct. 30, 1990, the nation was on edge.

State officials in Uttar Pradesh, where Ayodhya is located, worried about the potential for large-scale violence. In early October that year, false rumors had spread in one area that Muslims had killed hundreds of Hindus, including butchering women and children. Riots erupted, leaving 80 people dead, all but one of them Muslim, according to a later published account.

In mid-October, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, the new prime minister, sought a compromise on Ayodhya that would reduce the tension.

He summoned Swaminathan Gurumurthy from Chennai to New Delhi. Mr. Gurumurthy — a wiry, spry man and chartered accountant by training — was an adviser to the powerful then-publisher of the Indian Express newspaper, Ramnath Goenka, and an interlocutor for the RSS. The organization’s approval was viewed as key to Hindu support for a deal.

In a series of meetings at the prime minister’s residence, Mr. Singh, his advisers, and Mr. Gurumurthy discussed the idea of a presidential ordinance, effectively an executive order.

The idea was for the central government to acquire all the land around the Babri Masjid. Most of the land would be handed over to a trust run by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Hindu organization, Mr. Gurumurthy said in an interview. But the Babri Masjid and another small parcel would be kept by the government and referred for deliberations to the Supreme Court.

The court would be asked to decide whether there had previously been a Ram temple on that site, said Mr. Gurumurthy. If so, the assumption was that the site would be given to Hindus. BJP leaders, including Mr. Advani, supported the initiative.

Muslim leaders found out that an ordinance was being considered but they had not been consulted, said Zafaryab Jilani, the lawyer and convener of the All India Babri Masjid Action Committee.

A delegation of Muslim leaders went to question the prime minister at his residence, Mr. Jilani said. Mr. Singh denied there was any plan for an ordinance: "No, no. When I have, I will discuss with you," Mr. Jilani said the prime minister told them.

But on the night of Oct. 18, the prime minister agreed to pass the ordinance and it was issued the following day.

When the Muslim leaders heard what had happened, they felt deceived, Mr. Jilani said. And they opposed the ordinance because they felt the site of the mosque was sacred land that could not be owned by the government.

They met again the following day with the prime minister. "You are very much annoyed," Mr. Singh told them, according to Mr. Jilani. "I cannot afford to have you people annoyed." It was clear Mr. Singh was having second thoughts.

Mr. Gurumurthy said that the prime minister and his advisers had always appeared "tentative" about the ordinance. Mr. Singh "never looked confident in this entire period," he added. But once the ordinance had been issued, Mr. Gurumurthy figured the prime minister and his advisers "would stick by it."

Instead, soon after, the government issued a second ordinance that simply canceled the first ordinance, leaving the Ayodhya issue unresolved.

Mr. Gurumurthy said he confronted the prime minister. "You have done greatest harm to the country," he said he told him. The prime minister was silent, he said. They never met again; Mr. Singh is now deceased.

The flip-flop on the ordinance set up a confrontation between the BJP and the government it supported.

Soon after, Mr. Advani was apprehended in the state of Bihar by local authorities and prevented from reaching Ayodhya. He was later released but the chariot drive stopped. The BJP withdrew its support from Mr. Singh's government, leaving it short of a majority in Parliament.

Heavy security was placed in Ayodhya to deter Hindu activists, known as “karsevaks,” from arriving for the Oct. 30 start date of construction, or karseva.

But many slipped in. Some climbed the domes of the Babri Masjid and damaged the building. Police fought the crowd and later opened fire. The death toll was 16, according to an official government account. The BJP claims more than 50 were killed.

Soon after, Mr. Singh’s government faced a no-confidence vote in Parliament. It lost.

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A fresh government was installed in November 1990 with a new prime minister, Chandra Shekhar Singh. He was a blunt-spoken socialist. This time, the government was supported by the Congress party, led by Rajiv Gandhi.

The new prime minister tried, again, to find a solution to the Ayodhya dispute.

He asked Subodh Kant Sahai, then minister of state in the home ministry, to lead discussions with Hindu and Muslim representatives, eight from each side. Three chief ministers – of Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh – participated to smooth tensions.

Facing each other across a long table, the two sides brought historians and materials to support their claims: photographs; papers and court judgments from British colonial times; and copies of inscriptions dating back to Emperor Babar’s rule in the sixteenth century.

The meetings were “very cordial,” said Mr. Sahai in an interview, noting it was a period of relative calm in the long-running confrontation. “I was sure we will succeed.”

But in March 1991, before the initiative could bear fruit, the Congress party alleged that government agents had been spying on Mr. Gandhi. The accusations were never proven but Congress withdrew its support from the government. Another general election ensued.

Then, on May 21, 1991, on the campaign trail in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, Mr. Gandhi, age 46, was killed by a suicide bomber from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The Tamil terror group opposed India’s military support for the Sri Lankan government in the nation’s long-running civil war.

**

Congress won the election, returning to power in June 1991. But its standard bearer, Mr. Gandhi, was gone. The new prime minister was P.V. Narasimha Rao. A lawyer by training, he was reserved and judicious with words — and India's fourth leader in two years.

At the same election, the Bharatiya Janata Party won its first-ever state poll, coming to power in Uttar Pradesh, the state where Ayodhya is located. That gave it huge influence over what happened in the town. Not long after, the state government acquired 2.77 acres of land in front of the Babri Masjid.

A new call was made for volunteers to amass in Ayodhya in July 1992, again to try to start construction of a temple. Mr. Rao scrambled to defuse the situation. That month, he met a group of sadhus in New Delhi who agreed to a three-month delay, pushing the start date back to late October.

Mr. Rao declared in Parliament on July 27 that he saw a way forward for “an agreed solution to the problem.” Instead, it only delayed a crisis.

In October, the prime minister asked Subodh Kant Sahai to re-open the negotiations that had showed promise during the previous administration.

Both sides agreed to maintain peace during the talks. But toward the end of October, there were newspaper reports that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Hindu organization, would call for volunteers to amass when the three-month delay agreed by the sadhus expired. The news angered Muslims who claimed the Hindus had been negotiating in bad faith.

“You all have already announced the date for karseva,” or religious work, one of the Muslim representatives said in anger at the next session, according to two people present. “Why is this meeting going on?”

The negotiations fizzled soon after. Another chance at a settlement was lost. The All India Babri Masjid Action Committee said in a statement at the time that the declaration of karseva “challenged the very foundation of our democratic and constitutional system and secular fabric of the country.”

But a new date was set: Dec. 6, 1992, 20 years ago today.

Mr. Rao was concerned that the mass gathering could lead to disaster. In November, he met at his residence with Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani, the two most senior BJP leaders in

New Delhi. Kalyan Singh, the BJP chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, also was there, according to two persons who attended.

The Hindu side, at various times until then, had given different versions of what they wanted the volunteer work to involve.

At one point, representatives suggested that the Babri Masjid should be relocated so a temple could be built. At others, they proposed that a temple could be built without interfering with the mosque. Sometimes, they said karseva would involve only symbolic manual labor, such as sweeping. The mosque's destruction – though called for by many radicals in slogans and speeches – was not formally proposed.

During the hour-long meeting with Mr. Rao, the BJP leaders assured the prime minister that nothing would happen to the Babri Masjid, said P.V.R.K. Prasad, an adviser to Mr. Rao. Kalyan Singh, the Uttar Pradesh chief minister at the time, confirmed that the meeting took place; the other two BJP leaders declined comment. (Mr. Rao is deceased.)

Meanwhile, a rumor was circulating in New Delhi that the prime minister might try to take control of the situation by pushing for president's rule in Uttar Pradesh. That allows the central government to commandeer the administration of a state where law and order has broken down. The BJP leaders assured Mr. Rao that it wouldn't be necessary, Mr. Prasad said.

The prime minister was noncommittal in his response: "Alright, definitely we'll see," he said, according to Mr. Prasad. "We'll examine."

Mr. Rao decided to dispatch more than 20,000 paramilitary personnel to Ayodhya's surroundings just in case there was trouble.

He told Kalyan Singh, the chief minister: "As we are expecting a lot of people and all that, whether you want them or not we are sending forces," according to Mr. Prasad.

Still, Mr. Rao felt he could not go further and impose president's rule, said Mr. Prasad, because he had no evidence that the Hindus planned violence and he had received assurances from the BJP leaders that order would be maintained. Also, most of the intelligence reports that Mr. Rao received said nothing was likely to happen, said Mr. Prasad.

In a meeting the same month with members of the All India Babri Masjid Action Committee, Mr. Rao was upbeat, according to Mr. Jilani and Mr. Prasad, who both attended.

“What will you do if they damage the mosque?” the group asked the prime minister.

“You are talking with the prime minister of India. India is such a big nation that its forces can reach the neighboring countries in 24 hours,” responded Mr. Rao, according to Mr. Jilani. “Do you think we cannot reach Ayodhya?”

But the prime minister’s confidence soon gave way to anxiety. As Dec. 6 approached, thousands of Hindu activists poured into Ayodhya, raising alarm bells in New Delhi that they would run rampant.

Around 5 a.m. one morning in early December, the phone rang in the home of Mani Shankar Aiyar, Rajiv Gandhi’s former special assistant. A secretary told him Mr. Rao wanted to speak, Mr. Aiyar said in an interview.

The prime minister, he said, came on the line and started talking as if in mid-sentence: “But I did everything for them Mani, I trusted them. And look at the way they are letting me down,” Mr. Aiyar said Mr. Rao told him.

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The morning of Dec. 6 was quiet.

Leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad surveyed the scene in Ayodhya from a rooftop as the volunteers amassed.

Mr. Rao, the prime minister, watched on television at his residence in New Delhi. He was “slightly apprehensive because he was getting the impression that not much forces were there,” according to Mr. Prasad, his adviser, who visited him that morning.

Then, around noon, a group of karsevaks broke through the light security around the Babri Masjid. Some climbed onto the central dome.

Hajari Lal, 55 years old, was among them, he said in an interview. He was a volunteer member of the RSS, the hard-line Hindu organization. He had tried, with others, to destroy the mosque in 1990. But they had failed and, seething with anger, were determined to finish the job, he said.

Mr. Lal said he started chipping away at the domes with a small shovel he carried in his bag. Others used hammers, iron rods and spades.

Mahant Satyendra Das, the chief government-appointed priest at the site, was standing not far away with his assistants, he said in an interview.

The priests raced into the building to rescue the idol of Ram and other statues added since, he said. They took them to the shelter of a nearby tree.

In New Delhi, watching events with increasing concern, Mr. Rao asked senior officials to push the state government to deploy the forces stationed outside of town, said Mr. Prasad. States are responsible for law and order so the federal government couldn't order the troops to move.

A state official requisitioned 30 paramilitary companies – about 4,000 personnel — at 12:45 p.m. But they were under strict orders not to use force even though the throng totaled at least 75,000 activists.

Just before 2 p.m., one of the domes collapsed, pulled down by ropes inserted in holes high in the mosque's walls. Later, the other two were demolished. After more than 450 years, the mosque was gone.

The collapse of a building closely associated with the Mughal invasion of India was a stark declaration of Hindu might and electrified the volunteers.

Ashok Singhal, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad official who led the temple movement, said in an interview that, from his perspective, the building wasn't destroyed at all. Rather, he said, what happened that day was part of a "renovation program." The VHP has long claimed that a Hindu temple was destroyed in the 1500s for the mosque to be built.

The activists rampaged, targeting local Muslims. Houses were set afire.

Mr. Das, the priest at the site, said he was appalled by the events that day. He considered the building a temple since Ram had been cared for and worshipped there for more than four decades.

"I felt like I was witnessing terrorists attacking a village," he said.

Mohammad Hashim Ansari, the 92-year-old Muslim tailor who was involved in the court case over the site, said he fled with his family to relatives in Faizabad. More than a dozen Muslims were killed in the violence, according to local Muslims.

“I should have died instead of having to see the destruction of Babri Masjid that day,” Mr. Ansari said in an interview. He and his family returned to Ayodhya but he said many Muslims left for good.

More federal security forces were deployed. But they were pelted with stones and turned back, according to the government’s official version of events.

As late as 5:40 p.m., most of the security forces remained stalled, in part because local officials said they couldn’t provide the magistrates needed to accompany the forces into town.

A makeshift temple was erected on the rubble where the Babri Masjid once stood. Mr. Das, the priest, said he installed the idols there, placing Ram on a wooden throne.

The prime minister summoned his cabinet in the afternoon and decided to impose president’s rule, according to Mr. Prasad. But only by late evening was the process complete.

Federal security forces finally secured the site, without incident, on the night of Dec. 7.

Several Congress leaders have since criticized Mr. Rao for not moving more swiftly or decisively to prevent the mosque’s destruction. Mr. Prasad, his adviser, contended that the prime minister “took all the actions that were available at his disposal.”

As the day unfolded, Mr. Rao’s spirits sank, said Mr. Prasad: “First he was worried, then he was angry, then he said he felt very sad.”

The prime minister felt betrayed by Kalyan Singh, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, who had given Mr. Rao reassurances that law and order would be maintained, said Mr. Prasad.

In an interview, Kalyan Singh said, “What was said and what wasn’t said to Prime Minister Rao is irrelevant.” Of the Babri Masjid, he said: “It was the symbol of slavery, so it had to go. That’s it.”

Many Hindus were disgusted with what transpired in Ayodhya that day. Subodh Kant Sahai, the leader of two rounds of settlement negotiations, said he was disconsolate. He said his mother, who had supported building a temple, told him: “This is too much. They have crossed the limits.”

The destruction tested Muslims’ faith in India’s governing institutions – the government, courts, and law enforcement.

“First reaction was of disappointment,” said Mr. Jilani, the lawyer. “But soon thereafter we got courage. We said, ‘We have to live here, we will face it.’”

The demolition sparked violence that ricocheted around India over the next several months. By Dec. 9, 16 states saw inter-religious unrest, according to a government report. In December and January 1993, Hindu-Muslim riots racked Mumbai, India’s largest city, leaving about 900, mostly Muslims, dead. In March 1993, a series of bomb blasts across Mumbai killed more than 250.

In 1996, the Congress party government was replaced by a coalition led by the BJP. The new government lasted only 13 days. But the BJP could boast of its first prime minister: Atal Bihari Vajpayee. He returned to the office in 1998, where he remained until 2004.

Ayodhya, meanwhile, continued to polarize the country and inspire bloodshed. In 2002, almost 60 karsevaks, returning from Ayodhya, were burned to death in a train carriage in Godhra in the western state of Gujarat. More than 1,000 people died in the riots that ensued. Most were Muslim.

Six years later, in November 2008, Pakistani terrorists attacked south Mumbai. On the 20th floor of the Trident hotel, facing a group of guests at gunpoint, one attacker shouted “Remember Babri Masjid?” according to a witness. Then he started firing.

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CHAPTER FIVE:



The Wall Street Journal/Court Files
Excavation work at the Babri Masjid site in 2003.

In the months following the demolition of the Babri Masjid on Dec.6, 1992, the government of India enacted a new law to acquire a large area of land in Ayodhya that included the site where the mosque stood.

After the mosque's demolition, Hindu activists had hastily built a makeshift temple to Ram Lalla, the statue of an infant Lord Ram that had been placed in the mosque in 1949. The new law set aside all the suits that claimed title to the site but allowed Hindu worship there to continue.

Simultaneously, through a process known as a presidential reference, the government put a question to the Supreme Court: Did a "Hindu temple or any Hindu religious structure" exist where the mosque had been built in 1528?

Muslim representatives challenged the legality of the new law and the presidential reference, saying that the government could not acquire a holy site. They also claimed no temple that was being used for worship was torn down to make the mosque, as Hindus contended. The Nirmohi Akhara, the sect of sadhus in Ayodhya that was part of the title litigation, also challenged the government's acquisition of the land, which it claimed for itself.

A bench of five justices started deliberations in September 1993.

The solicitor general told the court that the government was committed to "the construction of a Ram temple and a mosque," but needed the Supreme Court to decide their location.

After a year, the court declined to answer the question in the presidential reference, saying it was "superfluous and unnecessary," even though it was a major bone of contention between the two sides.

The court, by a majority decision, upheld the law acquiring the land. But it said the government should hand over the small plot of about a quarter-acre, where the mosque and its two courtyards had stood, once the suits claiming title to the site were decided. The justices also reinstated those lawsuits, which had been transferred to the high court in Lucknow from Faizabad.

In its judgment, the Supreme Court couldn't resist a commentary on what happened on the day of the Babri Masjid's demolition. The Hindu community must, it said, "bear the cross on its chest for the misdeed of the miscreants reasonably suspected to belong to their religious fold."

In early 1995, the frontlines of the dispute shifted back to the Lucknow Bench of the Allahabad High Court. The suits claiming title to the site were bundled together to be part of the same case.

On the Muslim side, there was the Uttar Pradesh Sunni Central Board of Waqfs, which was responsible for maintaining Muslim holy sites, and six individual co-plaintiffs from Ayodhya and neighboring areas.

On the Hindu side, there were three suits. One filed by Gopal Singh Visharad, an Ayodhya local, in 1950. Another, filed in 1959, by the Nirmohi Akhara, the sect of sadhus dedicated to serving Ram. And another, filed in 1989, that added a new dimension to the proceedings. (A fourth suit, filed in 1950 by another sadhu in Ayodhya had been withdrawn.)

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The 1989 suit, the most recent to be filed, was the work of Deoki Nandan Agarwal, a retired Hindu judge who lived in Allahabad, a city in Uttar Pradesh. where Ayodhya is located.

He worked late into the night for years on the filing and told his daughter, Minu, that he was typing up “the most important case in India,” she said in an interview.

Justice Agarwal was frustrated by how slowly the litigation over the site was proceeding. He believed the evidence was clear that the site belonged to Ram, his daughter said.

In his suit, he made the lead plaintiff Bhagwan Sri Ram Virajman – Ram *himself*.

Indian law recognizes religious figures as “juristic persons.” Justice Agarwal is named in the suit as a supplementary plaintiff, Ram’s “next friend.”

The defendants were all the other parties who had previously laid claim to the site, from the Nirmohi Akhara to the waqf board.

Ram was “extremely unhappy” with the length of time the litigation was taking as well and with the deteriorating management of the site, Mr. Agarwal’s suit said. It called for the plaintiffs to be given title to the entire premises since it was Ram’s birthplace.

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The recording of oral evidence started in the summer of 1996.

The Lucknow court is a collection of tall red-brick buildings, a blend of British and Mughal architecture. It has spacious arched corridors painted yellow and light blue that lead visitors around the roughly 30 court rooms in the complex.

In most, a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi, shown in contemplative pose, hangs on the wall behind the elevated bench where the judges sit.

In the courtroom hearing the Babri Masjid case, two court typists and two stenographers recorded witness statements. Three judges presided. The judges and the lawyers identified more than 80 issues for the court to decide, based on the claims made by the four parties— one Muslim and three Hindu.

The key issues were about the construction and nature of the disputed building and the land around it: Was it the birthplace of Ram, which Hindus claimed but Muslims disputed? And was the building that stood there a mosque as defined by Islamic law, as Muslims claimed but Hindus disputed?

The Muslims produced their witnesses first – a total of 33 in all. Experts in Islam testified that the Babri Masjid was a proper mosque even though the building had some unusual architectural touches like images on the pillars and no minarets.

Historians and archaeologists for the Muslim side testified that there was no historical or religious evidence to show that the disputed site was the birthplace of Lord Ram.

Eight of those expert witnesses were Hindus. They volunteered to testify, saying they wanted to stand for “facts” and defend secularism, according to the lawyers for the Muslim side.

Mohammad Hashim Ansari, the tailor who was living in Ayodhya when the legal dispute began in 1950, stood in the witness box in 1996, 46 years later.

A co-plaintiff in the waqf board suit, he was then 75 years old, his hair gray and his face laced with wrinkles.

He started each day’s testimony with an oath, “In the name of Allah,” that he would speak only the truth.

Mr. Ansari’s memory was occasionally hazy. When he testified that he had offered his first prayer at the Babri Masjid in 1938, one Hindu lawyer during cross-examination asked: “Which month of 1938?”

Mr. Ansari shot back, “Had I known that there would be this dispute on the Babri Masjid, I would have noted and remembered it,” according to a copy of his testimony.

He remained firm on issues of faith. A Hindu lawyer read a verse from the Koran and asked him to define the word “kafir.” Mr. Ansari said the term meant “people who don’t consider God as one and don’t follow the Book,” according to his testimony.

When the lawyer asked him whether Hindus are “kafir” by this definition, he said: “Those who don’t believe in the formless God are ‘kafir.’”

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On the Hindu side, Deoki Nandan Agarwal, the retired judge whose case made Ram a plaintiff, testified despite a heart problem. A special provision was made for recording his statement at his residence in Allahabad.

At the age of about 80, Mr. Agarwal spoke with gusto when describing the basis of his claim, according to lawyers on both sides. He testified both on behalf of Ram and himself, as Ram's "next friend" in the suit.

He said that according to Hinduism, an idol is not important for worshipping but many devotees worship a statue of their deity to gain access to the divine.

His claim hinged on his contention that the site was the "birthplace of Lord Ram" and that when the Babri Masjid was built, "Ram was its owner." He said Muslims who had offered prayers at the site in the past did so without the "permission of the owner of the land."

When the Muslims' lawyers asked the basis of his claim, Mr. Agarwal answered that it was the tradition of Hindu belief, which was at least 2,000 years old and was passed down through generations.

He died at his home before his cross-examination could be completed.

When Rajendra Singh, the son of Gopal Singh Visharad, took the stand, his father – who was the first to file a legal claim in the dispute — was dead. Rajendra Singh was a retired employee of a state bank, aged in his late-60s.

He acknowledged in an interview that he didn't know much about his father's suit. His statement is one of the shortest of the 54 witnesses on the Hindu side.

During cross-examination, Mr. Singh said he believed Ram's birth had taken place hundreds of thousands of years ago. "This I have heard from my ancestors and I have also read about it," he said.

Bhaskar Das, the head of the Nirmohi Akhara sect, the third Hindu plaintiff, took a different line from the other Hindus.

Contradicting their testimony, he claimed that "no incident took place in the disputed building" on the night of Dec. 22, 1949, the date the idol of Ram appeared in the Babri Masjid.

In an interview, Mr. Das maintained that nothing happened then. He added that the building had at no time been a mosque, either: “That place was always a temple owned by Nirmohi Akhara.”

During the cross-examination by a lawyer for the Muslims, Mr. Das said his knowledge about Lord Ram’s life was based on the “story” he had heard from Hindu sages.

The lawyer asked him whether that story had any description of a temple at Ram’s birthplace. Mr. Das quoted a verse from a colloquial version of the Ramayan, the sacred text of Ram’s life, written by a 16th-century poet, Tulsidas.

Citing a quote from Ram, Mr. Das chanted: “My birthplace is this beautiful city, to the north of it flows the sacred Sarayu,” the river by Ayodhya.

Just funding the case took a toll on the Nirmohi Akhara, said another senior sadhu in the sect. The sect sold a plot of land near Ayodhya to buy a jeep to ferry witnesses to the court. “We lost a lot of money in litigation,” the sadhu said in an interview.

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It took the court 11 years to hear all the witnesses.

To support their claims, lawyers for each side produced volumes of documentary evidence: more than 1,000 reference books in Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, Turkish, Persian and French; travelers’ historic accounts; copies of the memoir of Babar, the Mughal ruler whose troops had constructed the mosque in 1528; and religious texts, including the Ramayan.

The Muslim plaintiffs also produced inspection reports, land records, and other documents dating back to the mid-19th century.

In all, the documents occupied 21 steel cupboards, measuring about seven feet by four feet each. Witness statements alone comprised 14,000 pages. The records were kept in a dedicated court room and were regularly treated with special insecticide powder to prevent bookworms. A staff of five looks after them, said a court official.

At the start of the trial, in 1996, a large crowd of Hindus and Muslims from Lucknow thronged the courtroom. Over time, the numbers fizzled to a handful.

In breaks, Zafaryab Jilani, the lead Muslim attorney, ordered tea and biscuits for all the lawyers, who sipped in the corridor outside the courtroom as they gossiped and sometimes cracked jokes.

Several lawyers involved in the case say they are either unpaid or paid meagerly by their clients. But they say they took the case because of their own religious beliefs and the importance of the issue to their communities.

The atmosphere inside the courtroom was somber but occasionally leavened with humor. Once a judge told a lawyer, in Hindi, “Tum bahut kam aate ho,” which means, “you are coming less frequently.”

The lawyer mistook the phrase for what could sound, in Hindi, like, “you earn a lot.”

“No your lordship, I don’t earn much,” he replied as the court erupted in laughter.

There were also moments of tension. One expert witness, a Hindu, visited the court to testify on behalf of the Muslims. A crowd of Hindus assaulted him and accused him of being a “traitor,” according to lawyers and court staff present at the time.

Overall, starting from 1989, 18 judges hearing the case either retired or were transferred, according to the lawyers involved.

It wasn’t just the judges who changed. Over time, the legal team representing the Nirmohi Akhara included three generations of the same family of lawyers.

Ranjeet Lal Verma, the lawyer for the Nirmohi Akhara today, was a law student at Allahabad University when the sect filed its case in 1959. His father was the sect’s lawyer. After graduation, Mr. Verma joined the case. After his father’s death in 1994, Mr. Verma’s son, Tarun Jeet Verma, joined him.

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With the Muslims claiming that the mosque had been constructed on vacant land and the Hindus claiming it was built after demolishing a temple, the judges decided “to have a scientific investigation at the disputed site.”

The idea was to see if there was empirical evidence to settle the question of what lay beneath the ruined mosque – nothing, or a ruined Hindu temple.

In late 2002, the court called into service the country's top archaeological research agency, the Archaeological Survey of India. Headquartered in New Delhi, the ASI was formed by the British in 1861 and today is charged with excavating and preserving ancient monuments.

The ASI was reluctant to get involved. But after the court appointed a New Delhi-based geophysical investigation company to do the survey work, the ASI agreed to supervise it.

The company surveyed the area using earth-sensing equipment with high-powered antennas that transmitted electromagnetic waves into the ground and recorded the variations in their travel speeds after hitting different objects. The returning waves were fed into a special computer that generated maps that could show "anomalies" – perhaps structures and artifacts – beneath the soil.

In its report to the court, the company said it found "a variety of anomalies ranging from 0.5 to 5.5 meters in depth that could be associated with ancient and contemporaneous structures such as pillars, foundation walls, slab flooring, extending over a large portion of the site."

To confirm, the site needed to be excavated, the survey report said.

The court asked the ASI to excavate about 10,000 square feet of the main disputed area, except under the makeshift temple containing the idol of Ram. The excavation should not disturb the worshipping of Ram Lalla—the infant god—and the visits of devotees, the court added.

The excavation team comprised of 14 senior ASI archaeologists, photographers and draftsman and 80 local laborers. It began in March 2003.

The court allowed the parties who were fighting in court to have observers present. The excavation team dug 90 trenches, most up to five meters deep.

They unearthed and recorded structures such as brick and stone pillar bases, masonry walls, and floors of lime. They found glazed tiles, human and animal figurines, inscribed copper coins, bone and iron objects, ear-studs and bangles of terracotta.

The ASI submitted a 272-page report with separate volumes of photos. The report's summary said the sum of the discoveries was "indicative of remains which are distinctive features found associated with the temples of north India."

The report also said that radio-carbon dating showed that people using “northern black polished ware” were the first people to “occupy the disputed site at Ayodhya.”

The finding pushed evidence of habitation in the area to the middle of the 13th century B.C, about 3,300 years ago from today.

The archaeologists involved in the excavation declined comment, citing restrictions placed on them by the court.

In the court in Lucknow, the Hindu parties and their expert witnesses broadly welcomed the ASI report and said it vindicated their claims that a Hindu temple was torn down to build the mosque.

But the waqf board, Hashim Ansari and other Muslim plaintiffs objected. They called the report “one-sided” and produced eight expert witnesses, six of them Hindu.

They assailed the report for its alleged “omissions,” such as the discovery of animal bones with cut marks found in different layers of the trenches that would be unlikely to come from a Hindu shrine.

The survey didn’t conclusively settle the question it was designed to address.

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By July 2010, the lawyers had completed their arguments. The court set a date — Sept. 30, 2010 – to deliver the first verdict in a case that had begun 60 years before.

In the days before the verdict, the national and state governments dispatched tens of thousands of security personnel to deal with any post-verdict violence. Just in Uttar Pradesh, about 190,000 police and paramilitary forces were deployed.

The situation was sensitive. Violence had accompanied the dispute in the past and India at the time was on display to the world: The Commonwealth Games, a major athletic event, was to begin in New Delhi a few days later.

The verdict was a test of whether India had moved beyond the old wounds and divisions that had split its two largest constituencies, Hindus and Muslims.

“I think that India has moved on. Young people have moved on,” Palaniappan Chidambaram, then federal home minister, said at a press conference before the verdict. “Particularly people born after 1992 have a different world view.”

Judgment day was a Thursday. News channels offered live coverage as lawyers at the court awaited the ruling. The national government blocked the sending of mass text messages to deter any organized agitation. In the southern state of Karnataka, the government closed schools and colleges for two days.

The streets of Ayodhya were empty of civilians, according to several residents.

In the courtroom in Lucknow, there were about 25 lawyers. News crews with television cameras camped outside the court complex as paramilitary troops patrolled.

The court ruled that the quarter-acre site of the mosque and its immediate surroundings should be divided into three parts—two for the Hindu side and one for Muslims. It was a majority decision, approved by the Muslim judge and one of the two Hindus.

The location of the mosque’s central dome, where the idol of Ram Lalla sat, was given to Ram himself and his “next friend.” That was originally Deoki Nandan Agarwal. Since his death in 2002, the position had been assumed by a representative of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the organization that had championed the construction of a Ram temple.

The site of the wooden platform in the mosque’s outer courtyard where Ram had been worshipped for centuries, was given to the Nirmohi Akhara.

The ruling also said that the entire area of the former mosque and its inner and outer courtyards should be divided in such a way that Muslims also get no less than one third.

The judges then read summaries of their opinions. On the question of what predated the Babri Masjid, the Muslim judge observed that the mosque “was constructed over the ruins of temples which were lying in utter ruins since a very long time before the construction of [the] mosque.”

On the issue of whether the site was the birthplace of Ram, one of the Hindu judges observed: “It is held that the place of birth, as believed and worshipped by Hindus, is the area covered under the central dome of the three domed structure.”

The other Hindu judge, who was retiring the next day, went deep into the terrain of faith and spirituality: “Spirit of divine ever remains present everywhere at all times for anyone to invoke at any shape or form in accordance with his own aspirations and it can be shapeless and formless also.”

This judge, in a dissenting opinion, said the entire area belongs to Ram Lalla.

The judges’ statements lasted about one hour. Then Tarun Jeet Verma, son of the main lawyer for the Nirmohi Akhara, emerged from the courtroom flashing a victory sign.

All four parties said the “trifurcation” of the site was not what they had sought from the court. They all appealed to the Supreme Court in New Delhi, which stayed the Lucknow high court’s ruling and agreed to take the appeals.

Mohammad Hashim Ansari, the Ayodhya tailor, was surrounded by television cameras outside his home. He appealed to Muslims to remain calm even though he was not happy with the result.

Lal Krishna Advani, senior leader in the Bharatiya Janata Party, which championed the Ram temple cause, told the media that the verdict was “the judiciary’s reconciliation formula.” Still, he maintained, “The judgment has paved way for the construction of the temple.”

On the nation’s prime-time new shows that evening, several commentators criticized the judgment for being too heavily grounded in faith rather than in law, while some hailed it as politically astute because neither side was granted a clear win.

The nation remained calm. Its attention returned to the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi.

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CHAPTER SIX:



Paul Beckett/The Wall Street Journal
A view of the temples of Ayodhya today.

The road from Faizabad to Ayodhya is thick with bikes, cars, horses, rickshaws, and vegetable stalls. Goats graze in the roadside mud.

Ayodhya itself bears few of the hallmarks of the economic expansion that has transformed other Indian towns and cities. The streets are wide, lined with two- or three-story houses of green, blue and yellow. Narrow lanes lead to ashrams: compounds behind walls where the faithful congregate.

There is no noticeable business development or new construction because, locals say, of the Babri Masjid controversy and the heavy security presence in town. Rather, there is an air of history and decrepit permanence. The tops of temples form the skyline.

“We want schools, hospitals, factories and mills so that the unemployed people get jobs,” said Mohammad Aminullah Khan, 22 years old, who drives a small van for a living. “We want a peaceful resolution to this dispute.”

As they have for centuries, bearded sadhus wander in small groups through town. So do pilgrims, who arrive in throngs for festivals. At the bus depot, sheets of saffron – a color considered holy in Hinduism — hang from buses packed with the aged.

Women in saris visit street-side stalls full of the paraphernalia of devotion: small food for offering and sacred threads, bells, and lamps. Cows lope and monkeys scamper through the crowds.

At the main intersections, there are barriers and armed police in brown uniforms, part of an extensive security plan throughout the town.

Down one street there is a large compound of trees, lawns and low buildings. A sign at the entrance reads: “Karsevakpuram,” place of the “karsevaks,” or volunteers. It is run by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the organization that mobilized support for a temple to Lord Ram at the place where many Hindus believe he was born.

Inside the compound, in a small building, is a model of the temple that the VHP wants to build where the Babri Masjid stood before it was demolished on Dec. 6, 1992. Acting as custodian and tour guide is Hajari Lal, the activist who said he climbed on a dome of the mosque before it collapsed that day.

He leads visitors around the model of “Sri Ram Janma Bhumi Mandir,” the Birthplace Temple. The temple, said Mr. Lal, will have 212 pillars of sandstone and 51,000 electric lights. He added: “We will build a grand temple on the entire land.”

The pillars for the temple lie on the ground at a nearby park, which has become an Ayodhya tourist attraction. Stonemasons chip away at the sandstone, brought from Rajasthan. Some pillars have been lying there for two decades.

Behind an information desk hangs a large poster. It shows a portrait of Guru Dutt Singh. He was the city magistrate of Faizabad who played a major role in installing a statue of Ram in the Babri Masjid on Dec. 22, 1949, according to his son. It is the same picture that hangs in his family’s living room today.

Under the portrait, it reads, in Hindi: “The one who on Dec. 23, 1949, showed his determination and courage when Lord Ram appeared in Ramjanmabhoomi,” the Hindu name for the site. It notes that when Mr. Singh was ordered to remove the idol by “the Delhi government that trod on the fatal path of Muslim appeasement,” he resigned instead. “He lives with his immortal legacy among countless Hindus as a result of this courageous work,” it adds. It says Mr. Singh lived from 1894 till 1971.

Not far away, Mohammad Hashim Ansari, the Muslim tailor who has been involved in the legal dispute over the site since 1950, spends his days in a small blue house across from an open piece of land where there is a 24-hour armed police guard assigned for his protection.

Mr. Ansari, now 92 years old, speaks in angry tones. He points and pokes, staring intently. There is a painting of the Babri Masjid on the wall of his home.

“We have had very dirty politics in our country in the name of mosque and temple,” he said.

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The central government today controls the site of the ruins of the Babri Masjid and its surroundings. It is protected by a high, yellow, steel fence. On an average day, a few thousand Hindu devotees visit the makeshift temple that was established after the mosque’s destruction in 1992. (There has been no provision for Muslim worship at the site since late 1949.)

To reach the temple, you walk into a small portico with a security checkpoint. Scattered around the police there are confiscated wares: pens, notebooks, cameras, lighters. A passageway then runs for about 50 yards beside the yellow perimeter fence. Above is a watchtower and a CCTV camera on a lamppost.

Security personnel, part of a contingent of more than 2,000, are posted behind sandbags and concrete barriers. After another security check, you enter a green metal caged walkway, about 10 feet high and four feet wide, with a concrete floor. It is perhaps 200 yards long. After a slight rise, you make a final left turn and a sign announces: “For View of the Diety.”

Up a flight of 10 steps, about 15 yards away, behind the flaps of a white tent, you can make out a small, gold-covered object surrounded by lavish curtains. It is the idol of Ram Lalla, the infant god. The tent’s canvas is water-proof, fire-proof and bullet-proof, according to the temple’s head priest. The faithful – women in saris, children, some men, sadhus in saffron –

create a small bottleneck as they strain for a glimpse of the statue. Then the walkway leads you away and out.

One woman, as she left the site one recent day, asked a policeman: "Where is the temple?"

"What's important," he said philosophically, "is not what is seen but what is unseen."

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In the political arena, there has been no decisive winner from the dispute.

The Bharatiya Janata Party, which championed the construction of a Ram temple in 1989, came to power in New Delhi in successive coalition governments in the late-1990s.

But its coalition partners, uninterested or opposed to the BJP's position on Ayodhya, made it clear that building a temple was not to be on the agenda. And the party lost the last two general elections, in 2004 and 2009, to the Congress party, headed by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia.

The canvas temple standing at the site today, hastily erected on Dec. 6, 1992, is testament to the fact that the cause of construction hasn't advanced in two decades.

Neither the BJP nor Congress, which also sought to use the temple movement for electoral gain in the 1980s, has been able to muster a simple majority in Parliament since Ayodhya became a political issue.

In part that's because the dispute fragmented the electorate, fueling the rise of powerful political alternatives such as the Samajwadi party in Uttar Pradesh and the party of Nitish Kumar, chief minister in the neighboring state of Bihar.

Both have wide support among Muslims, who have become an influential voting bloc, especially in northern India. As a result, the nation will be governed by diverse coalitions in New Delhi for the foreseeable future.

Lal Krishna Advani and several other leaders of the BJP and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad are facing trial in a special criminal court on a range of charges brought by the Central Bureau of Investigation, the national investigative agency. The charges include inciting communal violence on the day the mosque was demolished.

Several Hindu activists are also separately facing trial in a criminal court for their alleged involvement in the demolition. A lawyer representing the leaders and the activists says all deny the charges; the cases continue.

Kalyan Singh, the BJP chief minister of Uttar Pradesh — the state where Ayodhya is located — at the time the Babri Masjid was demolished, resigned when the mosque fell. He became the state's chief minister again for two years in the late 1990s, heading a coalition government.

But the BJP's overall performance in Uttar Pradesh has declined consistently in the five state elections since the demolition. Today, Mr. Singh is an independent member in the national Parliament. He says he accepts responsibility for the demolition of the mosque.

Nor has a mosque been rebuilt on the site where the Babri Masjid stood. That has angered many Muslims, who blame the Congress party for what they view as ambivalence over the issue stretching back all the way to 1949 when the idol was first installed in the mosque.

Today, as they have since 1949, Hindus remain in control of a place that Muslims have considered sacred for almost 500 years, though many Hindus argue it was sacred to them for thousands of years before that.

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The 2010 verdict by the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court which divided the site of the mosque and the surrounding land into three parts left all litigants dissatisfied.

The Supreme Court in New Delhi admitted their appeals and has ordered the digitization of tens of thousands of documents. The papers, many of which are in Hindi, Sanskrit, Urdu and Persian, will have to be translated, the court said. There is no indication when hearings may start; a verdict may yet be years away.

Aside from Mohammad Hashim Ansari, the Muslim tailor, all the individual litigants involved in the original filings are dead.

Bhaskar Das remains the legal representative of the Nirmohi Akhara, the sadhus who say they have traditionally protected Ram. He is the third head of the order to represent the sect in the suit. Now 85 years old, he is suffering from an assortment of medical ailments. He spends his days chanting Ram's name.

Otherwise, a new generation is taking up the fight.

After the death in 2002 of Deoki Nandan Agarwal, who served as Ram's "next friend" in one of the Hindu suits, Triloki Nath Pandey, a Vishwa Hindu Parishad activist, became Ram's new "next friend."

"If Muslims have to stay in this country, they have to respect the feelings of Hindus," Mr. Pandey, 67 years old, said in an interview.

Neelendra Singh, 40 years old, is the son of Rajendra Singh and the grandson of Gopal Singh Visharad, the man who filed the first suit in the legal battle in 1950.

"I plan to represent my father in this case after him but hope the case is decided within my father's lifetime," Neelendra Singh said. He works as an insurance agent in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh.

Mohammed Waqar, 35 years old, is the son of Haji Mahboob Ahmad and grandson of Haji Phenku, one of the original Muslim defendants.

Mr. Waqar recently returned to Ayodhya from Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, where he worked for a multinational company. He says he will take up the court case when the time comes.

"As a Muslim, I know what masjid means to me," he said in an interview.

Meanwhile, Shakti Singh, the grandson of Guru Dutt Singh, the Faizabad city magistrate in 1949, said he hopes to be a Bharatiya Janata Party candidate for Parliament at the next elections, scheduled for 2014.

If Mr. Singh, 52 years old, runs for office, he said he will campaign to build a Ram temple at the site: "It's a responsibility for me to complete the task that my grandfather started."

As the battle is picked up by a new generation, we asked Swaminathan Gurusurthy, the chartered accountant who was involved in a 1990 effort to negotiate a solution, what he thought Lord Ram would make of the dispute's seemingly endless spiral.

"It is very simple: Ram will think, 'This is the way of the world,'" Mr. Gurusurthy said. "He couldn't do much about it. He can't correct human nature."

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Can Ayodhya again ignite the nation?

Until it is solved one way or the other, the dispute will retain some potency.

Ashok Singhal of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad said in an interview that Hindus could be mobilized to the cause in an instant – then he snapped his fingers on both hands.

Around Ayodhya, communal tensions still flare from time to time. In October in neighboring Faizabad, Hindus and Muslims clashed during the annual Hindu ritual of Dussehra. Two people died, according to the Faizabad district magistrate. One was Hindu, one was Muslim.

Still, India is a very different country today than it was 20 years ago. It is living an era of rapid economic expansion, focusing younger Indians in particular on the pursuit of prosperity rather than historical divisions. Culturally, the country is less hidebound by its past, too.

“We are all in a hurry, particularly the younger generation,” said Arif Mohammed Khan, the minister who resigned from Rajiv Gandhi’s government in 1986. “They want India to transform into America at the earliest.”

And in a nation of 1.2 billion that is about 80% Hindu, the majority has not consistently run roughshod over Islam or any of India’s other religions – as it could potentially have done given the country’s feeble law-enforcement apparatus and Ayodhya’s appeal to Hindu nationalists.

In 1991, the government enacted a law that made it illegal to change the character of a place of worship to another religion. The act exempted only the Babri Masjid.

The law was a victory for Akshaya Brahmachari, the sadhu who had opposed the installation of the Ram idol in the mosque in 1949. He was instrumental in persuading politicians in New Delhi to bring the legislation. Mr. Brahmachari died in 2010.

That’s not to say that all India’s citizens have equal access to economic, educational or political opportunities. But the movement that at one time aggressively asserted its dominance over a minority community has lost much of its popular appeal and momentum.

“The country has learned so much, it has gone so beyond these emotions that there will be nothing very serious” whenever the Supreme Court’s verdict over the site comes, said Zafaryab Jilani, the lead lawyer for Muslims in the court case. “It will be the country which will win; it will be the country which will lose, if at all.”

In that, India's secular nature has, for now, prevailed. That required many Hindus to reject the inflammatory and divisive nature of the Ayodhya dispute, either out of fatigue, disillusionment with politicians, or a sense — set deep in the religion's spiritual traditions — that it is wrong to destroy another's house of worship.

"The soul of India was retrieved by the Hindus who refused to go along with the desecration of this place of worship that was not in their own community," said Mani Shankar Aiyar, Rajiv Gandhi's special assistant. "For Hindus, all places of worship are divine."

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Every day, a small team of priests at the makeshift temple cares for the idol of Ram Lalla and other statues that have been added since 1949.

The first priest arrives at around 5:30 a.m. He opens the temple curtain then chants, "Gods, wake up, wake up!" He rings a small bell and puts the idols in a sitting position.

He changes their overnight clothes, bathes them with flower perfume, water and sandalwood, and dresses them. There is clothing of different colors for each day. He places a tilak, or holy mark, on their foreheads then a silver crown on their heads before offering them sacred smoke from burning incense sticks. After, he presents them with a breakfast of "peda," a sweet made of milk. Lamps are lit. Hymns are sung.

A few hours later, Mahant Satyendra Das, the chief priest, leaves his house and is driven in an SUV to the site. He bows at the temple's entrance and gently touches the floor of the wooden platform where the idols sit. He takes some sandalwood, adds a dab of water, and puts a mark on his own forehead.

He lights incense and waves the stick in a circular motion around the idols, singing: "From the heart of God is the moon, the sun is from His eyes, the wind and the life are from His ears and the fire is from His mouth."

He chants silently until more food is brought for the deities. Then the idols have a 90-minute nap.

Shortly after sunset, another priest offers evening food and puts the deities to sleep. He places them horizontally and removes their crowns. He gives them cotton pillows to rest on and tucks them in under small blankets. Then the priest draws the curtain closed.

—The End—



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