

5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT INDIA'S MOSQUE DISPUTE

NEW DELHI: India's Supreme Court said yesterday three senior members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) should face trial over the demolition of a mosque a quarter of a century ago. Here are five things to know about the long-running dispute.

What is the dispute about?

Hindus and Muslims have for decades been bitterly divided over the 16th-century Babri mosque in Ayodhya, a city in India's northern Uttar Pradesh state. Hindus believe the mosque was built on the ruins of an ancient temple dedicated to their god Ram. Tensions boiled over in 1992 when a Hindu mob tore the mosque to the ground, sparking religious violence that left about 2,000 dead across India.

How long has it been a flashpoint?

Hindus believe a Muslim conqueror razed the Ram temple in the 1500s to make way for the mosque. The British erected a fence in the 19th century to separate places of worship so that

Muslims could worship in the inner court and Hindus the outer. But in 1949, idols of Lord Ram appeared inside the mosque, allegedly placed by Hindus. Muslims objected and both parties went to court, beginning a decades-long legal fight over the right to worship at the site.

Who was behind its destruction?

In 1984, a group of Hindus formed a committee to "liberate" the birthplace of Ram and build a temple-or mandir-at the disputed site. The movement was headed by L K Advani, a senior figure in the ruling BJP, now headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Its supporters began travelling to the site to demand a temple be built, and even today the cause remains a rally cry for Hindu nationalists.

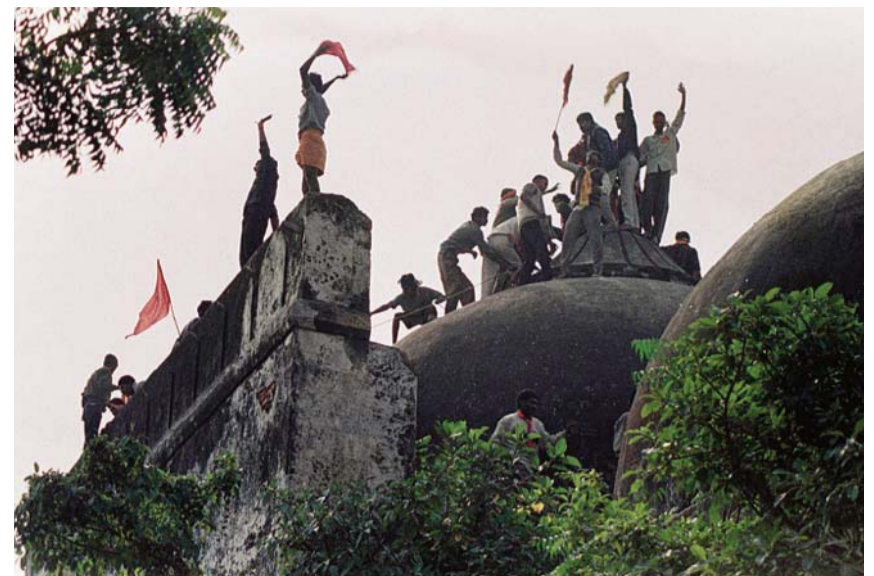
When did tensions escalate?

On December 6, 1992 a huge Hindu crowd converged on the mosque site to symbolically and provocatively lay the first stone of the new temple. The 200,000-strong mob broke through police cordons, first smashing three

domes to rubble before reducing the rest of the historic mosque to ruins. The destruction triggered some of the worst religious riots since India's bloody partition in 1947. The violence culminated in 2002 when a trainload of Hindu activists were burned alive as they returned from Ayodhya, sparking retaliatory riots in Gujarat state that left upwards of 1,000 mostly Muslims dead.

Where does it stand legally?

In 2002, three High Court judges began hearings to determine who could lay claim to the contested site. An important ruling came in 2010 when a High Court ruled that Muslims and Hindus should split the site-albeit unevenly, with Hindus granted the lion's share. A Muslim group appealed and the Supreme Court in 2011 overturned the lower court's ruling, leaving the issue unresolved. In March, the Supreme Court said charges against Advani and other top BJP leaders could not be dropped, indicating the case could be revived. —AFP



AYODHYA: This file photo taken on December 6, 1992 shows Hindu fundamentalists shouting and waving banners as they stand on top of a stone wall and celebrate the destruction of the 16th century Babri Mosque. —AFP



SHIMLA: Indian rescue personnel and volunteers stand amidst wreckage and victims after a bus accident, at the bottom of a ravine near the River Tons at Chopal, some 115kms north of Shimla. —AFP

BUS CRASH KILLS 44 IN NORTHERN INDIA

NEW DELHI: A bus has swerved off a mountain road and plunged into a deep ravine in a Himalayan region of northern India, killing 44 people, an official said yesterday. Only two of the 46 people on board the bus survived when it flew off a cliff and into a river in northern Himachal Pradesh state, around 115 kilometers from the capital Shimla. Ten others earlier believed to be aboard the bus had in fact lighted before the accident, said Rohan Chand Thakur, deputy commissioner of Shimla.

"Unfortunately there are only two survivors, including the conductor of the bus who managed to jump out in time. 44 others have died," Thakur told AFP. "We are now bringing the last four bodies out." Officials at the accident site near Nerwa village were trying to identify the dead, he added. Images of the scene showed luggage strewn around the mangled chassis of the bus on the ravine floor, as volunteers and local residents scoured the site.

DW Negi, senior police superintendent of Shimla, said 11 women and three chil-

dren were among the dead. Local television networks reported that the driver informed passengers shortly before the accident that the bus suspension was damaged. Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered his condolences to the families who had lost loved ones, and said he was "extremely anguished by the accident."

Compensation of 200,000 rupees (\$3,100) would be awarded to the families of those killed, and 50,000 (\$770) for the injured, Modi added. India has some of the world's deadliest roads with more than 150,000 fatalities annually due to poor roads, badly maintained vehicles and reckless driving. In February, 16 people were killed and more than 50 injured when a truck carrying churchgoers overturned in a hilly region of northeast India. Survivors said the driver was maneuvering recklessly and lost control of the vehicle in the rugged terrain. A month earlier 13 people—mostly children aged between seven and 14—were killed when a school bus collided with a truck in northern India. —AFP

INDIAN POLITICIANS TO FINALLY FACE TRIAL OVER MOSQUE DEMOLITION

THREE ARE ACCUSED OF INCITING HINDU ZEALOTS

NEW DELHI: Three senior members of India's ruling Hindu nationalist party including a cabinet minister should face trial over the demolition of a mosque a quarter of a century ago, the Supreme Court ruled yesterday. The three are accused of inciting Hindu zealots to pull down the 16th century Babri mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, igniting one of India's most explosive religious disputes in which thousands died.

India's top court said government minister Uma Bharti, former deputy prime minister L K Advani, and M M Joshi—all senior members of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—should face criminal conspiracy charges. The ruling came after a lower court dropped the charges brought against them by India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), kicking off a series of appeals and counter-appeals. "We have allowed the CBI appeal against the Allahabad High Court judgment with certain directions," the Press Trust of India news agency quoted the Supreme Court judges as saying.

The demolition of the mosque in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh sparked nationwide riots in which thousands were killed, most of them Muslims. It marked the culmination of a virulent campaign led by the BJP, which recently won elections in the state, India's largest. Many Hindus believe the Babri mosque was only built after the destruction of a temple that marks the birthplace of their god Ram and the issue remains hugely divisive.

'Ready to hang'

Some BJP leaders including Bharti want a temple to Ram to be built on the ruins of the razed mosque—an idea that horrifies Uttar Pradesh's significant Muslim minori-

ty. Bharti, India's water resources minister, said after the ruling she was "ready to hang" for the temple cause and would travel to Ayodhya later yesterday. "There was no conspiracy. Everything was out in the open for everyone to see," she told reporters.

"I am absolutely clear about one thing—I have always been very proud of my participation in the Ram temple movement. I am ready to hang, to go to jail for this," Advani, now 89, has consistently denied a criminal conspiracy to destroy the mosque. The former leader of the BJP was in Ayodhya on the day of the demolition and his campaign for the temple came to define his political career.

But in a later interview with the

BBC, Advani said it should never have happened and described it as the saddest day of his life. He has been tipped to be India's president when the role becomes vacant later this year, but local media said the charges could scupper his chances. The Supreme Court ordered that the case, which has dragged on since charges were first filed in 1993, should be completed within two years.

However some legal experts expressed fears it would drag on longer. "There are hundreds of witnesses in the case and now all of them will have to be re-examined," said IB Singh, a senior lawyer who cross-examined Advani for the official enquiry into the Babri demolition. "I doubt if this will anyway get

over within the lifetime of Mr. Advani." The opposition Congress said the ruling party had "tried every trick in the book" to ensure that Advani, Bharti and Joshi did not face charges.

"What they (the Supreme Court) have said today means there's clinching evidence that needs to be now argued out in the court," said party spokesman Sanjay Jha.

The court also ruled that a fourth senior BJP politician, Kalyan Singh, who was leader of Uttar Pradesh at the time of the incident, should face criminal conspiracy charges. His trial, however, will be delayed until his stint as governor of Rajasthan state is over because the position of governor gives him immunity from prosecution. —AFP



UTTAR PRADESH: In this July 28, 2005 file photo, Indian opposition leader and President of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) LK Advani, second right, senior BJP leaders Uma Bharati, right, Kalyan Singh, second left, and Murli Manohar Joshi wave to people during a public rally in Rae Bareilly, in the northern Indian state. —AP

PAKISTAN SET FOR SUPREME COURT DECISION THAT COULD REMOVE PM

ISLAMABAD/KARACHI: A looming Supreme Court decision that could disqualify Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif over corruption allegations had the country on edge yesterday, as a drawn-out investigation related to the "Panama Papers" leaks neared a conclusion. Disqualifying Sharif would leave his party in power, but it would cause intense turmoil at a time when Pakistan is experiencing modest growth and improved security after years of violence, and the civilian government and powerful military have appeared to come to uneasy terms.

Sharif has denied any wrongdoing, but the Supreme Court agreed to investigate his family's offshore wealth late last year after opposition leader Imran Khan threatened street protests. The Supreme Court could take a range of steps. It could clear the prime minister, or order a further judicial commission of inquiry or even declare him ineligible to hold office, as it did in 2012 with then-Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani over a contempt of court case. Pakistani stocks fell 1.5 percent in early trade after the news overnight that a decision would be announced today. The benchmark KSE 100 later rebounded and closed up 1.6 percent.

Both the government and opposition expressed confidence yesterday. "There is no chance that decision will come against our leadership. Our government and entire leadership are performing their duties as per routine," Talal Chaudhry a prominent leader of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz told Geo Television. Naem ul Haque,

a spokesman for Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) said he expected a verdict against Sharif, but he made clear the opposition would not launch a new street movement if they were disappointed.

"Imran Khan has clearly stated that we will accept the decision of the Supreme Court, but we believe that enough evidence has been presented to remove the prime minister and that a verdict should be reached that is based on the evidence," he said. In 2014, Khan led a months-long protest that paralysed the government quarter in the capital, Islamabad, after rejecting Sharif's decisive election win a year earlier.

The case stems from documents leaked from the Panama-based Mossack Fonseca law firm appeared to show that Sharif's daughter and two sons owned offshore holding companies registered in the British Virgin Islands and used them to buy properties in London. Sharif told parliament last year that his family wealth was acquired legally in the decades before he entered politics and that no money was siphoned off-shore. Khan, however, has argued that the prime minister's lawyers have changed stories on the source of the offshore money several times and that it is up to Sharif to prove the offshore companies were not used for money laundering. Corruption is endemic in Pakistan, which ranks a dismal 116th out of 176 in Transparency International's annual index of the world's most graft-ridden countries. —Reuters

DELHI BANS RED CAR BEACONS TO END ELITIST CULTURE



NEW DELHI: This file photo taken on May 8, 2015 shows an Indian politician's car with a red beacon on it outside Parliament House. —AFP

NEW DELHI: India said yesterday it will ban ministers and senior officials from using red beacons on their cars to cut through traffic, a longstanding privilege that has caused resentment and accusations of elitism. From May 1 only emergency services will be allowed to use the flashing beacons to move swiftly through India's notoriously congested streets. "We are removing the rule which allows state and central government to specify who can use the red lights," finance minister Arun Jaitley said at a news conference in New Delhi. "From May 1, no vehicle will have a red light. There will be no exceptions." The red beacon, perceived as a symbol of privilege and arrogance, is used by ministers and top bureaucrats to cut through traffic while on official business. But often even lower-level politicians and officials misuse the beacons to show off their importance, especially in smaller towns.

It is also common for policemen to put up barricades and block routes to allow free passage to dignitaries while the rest have to wait for the roads to open. "It's a huge democratic decision," said road transport minister Nitin Gadkari. Delhi's Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal took the lead in 2015 by asserting he would not have the red beacon on his car. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the son of a tea-seller who takes pride in his humble beginnings, often breaks protocol to shake hands and pose for photos with the public. —AFP

COURT THROWS OUT CASE, NO ONE COULD UNDERSTAND

NEW DELHI: Anyone dealing with India's overburdened legal system knows that the wheels of justice move slowly. But in one case, they have ground to a halt completely after Supreme Court judges said they were throwing out a lawsuit that used so much jargon it was incomprehensible. "We will have to set it aside because one cannot understand this," the Hindustan

Times daily quoted MB Lokur and Deepak Gupta as saying yesterday.

Even the lawyers representing the two sides in the row between a landlord and his tenant said they were unable to understand the original order issued by a lower court. "We normally prepare an appeal in two days' time. However, in this case I took more than a week because the facts of the case were

unclear," the landlord's lawyer, EC Agrawala, told the Hindustan Times. The property dispute dates back to 1999 when the landlord filed a petition to evict his tenant for not paying rent.

In a nearly two-decade struggle, the landlord finally took his matter to the country's top court after the Himachal Pradesh High Court favored the tenant. But even that much would be hard to

glean from the original order. "(The)...tenant in the demised premises stands aggrieved by the pronouncement made by the learned Executing Court upon his objections constituted theretofore... wherewithin the apposite unfoldments qua his resistance to the execution of the decree stood discounted by the learned Executing Court," it read. —AFP