Unbriddled loot, plunder and corruption in Ayodhya Ram Mandir unmasked

"I will not myself indulge in corruption nor will I allow others to do so," PM Modi had repeatedly asserted. The foundation stone of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on the site of demolished historic monument like the Babri Masjid was officially laid by PM Modi on 5 August 2020, through a formal *Bhoomi Pujan* ceremony. Ayodhya was projected by the Sangh Parivar as the civilizational triumph of so called Hindu nationalism. Ayodhya Temple was evidently not conceived simply as a pilgrimage centre. It was projected as a high-fashioned religious tourism destination with overnight modernization of the railway station and construction of an international airport. Thus, the temple project anchored a larger ecosystem of infrastructure investment, urban redevelopment, land valuation, and inflow of private capital. Religious devotion, electoral legitimacy, and economic development increasingly reinforced one another. In fact, Ram Mandir has been lying at the heart of the BJP's expansive and expanding election project.

Formation of 'Ram Janmabhoomi Teertha Kshetra Trust'

In February 2020, PM Modi also announced in parliament creation of an "autonomous" Trust named 'Ram Janmabhoomi Teertha Kshetra Trust'. The Trust had 15members of which six were religious figures directly connected with PM Modi and the RSS-BJP-Sangh Parivar. Others are also nominated by the Hindutva brigade only. For example, Nripendra Mishra, who was principal secretary of PM Modi. The entire construction was supervised by Gyanesh Kumar who is now the Chief Election Commissioner and alleged of functioning as an agent of the ruling BJP. The Trust oversaw the temple's construction and took over its subsequent management. From the very outset, the Trust was established as a bureaucratic edifice, not just tightly aligned with the Prime Minister's Office but also mirroring it structurally with no democratic oversight. Champat Rai, who once was connected with the RSS and is now vice-president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad was elected General Secretary of the Trust. He has so far been considered to be the most powerful person of the Trust. He began to recruit his close confidantes in the functioning of the Trust and the temple. Once his driver, Ram Shankar Yadav, alias Tinnu Yadav was in command of all activities with the blessings of Champat Rai. So, it can be easily understood that the Trust has not been an independent body but a *de facto* organization of the Sangh Parivar with direct involvement of the BJP government. The choreographed consecration of the Ram temple on 22 January 2024, was described by PM Modi as *"not just a date on the calendar*" but *"the dawn of a new era"*.

But within years, it has come to the fore that the Trust's structure, in which power is shared by nominees of the Union government with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh combine (VHP-RSS), paved the way for opaque financial irregularities. Quite clearly, the cohort of top ruling party figures and self-styled religious administrators eroded traditional boundaries and created a religio-political nexus. For decades, the BJP and the RSS had successfully insulated the Ram Janmabhoomi movement from institutional criticism by framing scrutiny as an attack on

Hindu religious faith. Now, the pretended spiritual idealism of the decades-long Ram Mandir movement has been overtaken by real estate speculation, large-scale mismanagement of capital and embezzlement of public donations. Exposure of large scale misappropriation of cash and valuables contributed by devotees at the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and rampant corruption suggest that the hitherto followed political strategy of the RSS-BJP-Sangh Parivar could no more be sustained. Public concern today is directed less toward theology and more towards misdeeds of its protagonists.

Within months of the formation of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, an audit firm had found that *"(The) Layer of management at the execution level is not defined and highly unprofessional… systematic record (of donations) for financial reporting is not available… No second and third check is available at any point of transaction and data entry… Accountability needs to be fixed in a structured organization tree. Coordination in between the related work flow of a transaction is a must for data integrity and effective management."*

Six years later, the recommendation of the private audit firm that a "Systematic Operating Process (SOP)" be drafted for efficient management is yet to be implemented, even as the temple committee is now facing allegations of misappropriation of donations.

What triggered the exposure

The theft came to light in February last following a whistleblower Mahipal Singh's internal warnings and a sharp post-probe spike in daily bank deposits. Mahipal Singh, who supervised the accounts team, first detected the theft and reported it to Trust officials in December 2021. But instead of paying heed to his words, the Trust authorities abruptly removed him from his role, forcing the issue into the shadows until it resurfaced of late. Public scrutiny came alive in June last when Samajwadi Party supremo Akhilesh Yadav alleged that crores of rupees from the offerings to the temple were missing. Akhilesh Yadav took up the issue, which the mainstream media had simply hushed up so far. Akhilesh, the chief rival of the ruling BJP in the race for power in UP, has found that this issue could well be exploited in the ensuing assembly election. Though Yogi Adityanath, the saffron-clad BJP chief minister of UP initially sought to brush aside the allegation as baseless and a conspiracy to malign Hinduism, he was compelled, on seeing the public uproar, to constitute a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to investigate the matter. Notably, one Pinki Chowdhury, leader of Hindu Raksha Dal, a Sangh affiliate, advanced an impeccable logic—if Hindus have stolen money of Hindus, why are others having problems? What would you call them, muddle-headed or unscrupulous?

How the plunder was going on

Before we have a look at the SIT's preliminary report, let us briefly be acquainted with the methodology followed by the culprits. There are 36 boxes in the temple area in which devotees put their contributions, both cash and jewellery. Average daily cash collection is stated to be ranging from Rs 15 lakhs to as high as Rs 60 lakhs. These boxes were then opened and the entire collections placed in steel trunks. Then the locked steel trunks were transported in carts to nearby Pilgrim Facilitation Centre. The basement of that Centre houses the dedicated counting hall where cash, coins, and jewellery are sorted and processed. There were two shifts of counting. A private agency was hired to count the donations. Around 50 people counted the cash, whereas Trust authorized persons supervised the process. The counting Centre has been under CCTV surveillance. The counted notes were then bundled in packets of 10. Thereafter the packets were placed in the boxes of nearby State Bank of India branch and transported there for being deposited in the Trust's account. The process involved private agency staff, Trust employees, and audit teams from SBI and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS). Only cash was counted. Jewellery was not counted.

On 5 June, some cash was discovered by security people in the pockets of some temple employees during a routine check. A video statement then appeared, featuring Mahipal Singh who worked at the temple as Chief Accounts Officer between 2021 and 2023. The counting staff would insert extra notes into each cash bundle. While tallying, they checked the number of bundles but not how many notes each bundle had and generated a voucher. Later, while moving the cash to the bank, the extra notes were reportedly removed from the bundles. Some employees deliberately recorded lower donation amounts than what was actually counted, allowing large sums of money to disappear. While a single donation box typically contained between Rs 6-7 lakh, a shortfall was found in the bundles of Rs 500 notes over a few weeks. It is alleged that after the theft, the stolen cash was initially hidden in bathrooms or almirahs of select employees within the temple complex. Later, finding a suitable opportunity, the accused smuggled the cash out of the temple premises. Subsequently, the stolen money was divided among the participants at a different location. Mahipal said that he was witness to the fact that the staff of State Bank of India—where donations were finally being deposited—were in cahoots with the counting staff.

Mahipal also alleged that surveillance footage of everything that happened in the temple, particularly the counting process, had been deleted for a long period. As per revelations so far, one employee engaged in the counting process would stand in front of the CCTV camera to cover it. At the same time, an accomplice would steal cash from the bundles and conceal it in their clothing. He claimed he informed General Secretary Champat Rai, but no action was taken. Soon after, Mahipal was removed from his post. As per reports, the total amount plundered ranges from a few lakhs to as much as Rs 1,400 crore. Another report says that since the temple opened in January 2024, it received around Rs 3,500 crore in cash donations, along with gold, silver and other valuables. But whether the actual amount siphoned out would ever come out is anybody's guess. The counting employees were not searched when they left the temple every day after finishing duty, accounting for negligence by officials. Emboldened by this, they started stealing from temple offerings right where the donation boxes were opened, and the cash was sorted and bundled. It has also been found that those involved in the counting process were acquaintances of various individuals and had secured their jobs through recommendations, sources said.

Also, there is allegation that apart from cash, gold, silver and diamond ornaments donated by devotees have been stealthily replaced with fake items. The Indian Bullion and Jewellers Association's Anurag Rastogi claimed that there is no trace of bricks and other items in silver he had donated to the temple, and another businessman has complained of never getting a receipt for his donations in silver. This was how crores in cash was allegedly siphoned off from donation boxes at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya.

Beneficiaries' wealth shows phenomenal rise

Within 6 months, many of the swindlers became crorepatis. Anukalp Mishra had recently built a farmhouse on the village's outskirts. It has also emerged that he had bought a house in Ayodhya last year, now valued at about Rs 65 lakh. His neighbours added that while he already owned a vehicle, he was in the process of booking a Scorpio SUV. Mishra, who worked in a bank's outsourcing team, joined the temple's donation counting team about three years ago. He soon got his brother-in-law, Lavkush Mishra, deployed in the same team through the bank's outsourcing agency. Lavkush, earning around Rs18,000 per month, was allegedly found with Rs 10 lakh in cash. KD Tiwari, who handled donated jewellery, is accused of owning assets worth nearly Rs 5 crore. He denies any wrongdoing. Manish Yadav was reportedly found with Rs 36 lakh in cash. Ramshankar "Tinnu" Yadav, once an auto-rickshaw driver, is suspected of owning assets worth nearly Rs 50 crore, including hostels, restaurants, property and luxury vehicles. Chandan Rai, nephew of Champat, used to stay in a rented house. But within months he built a house and a hotel in Hardwar.

Based on the SIT's preliminary investigation report and an examination of available oral, documentary, and electronic evidence, it has become prima facie evident that some personnel engaged in the counting process committed theft, embezzlement, and criminal misappropriation of the gifts/offerings of money in a well-planned, recurring, and criminal manner," says the FIR launched subsequently. Facts detailed in the SIT's preliminary report and the available oral, documentary, and electronic evidence as well as financial records, a case was lodged against Avinash Shukla, Anukulp Mishra, Lavkush Mishra, Manish Kumar Yadav, Karunesh Pandey, and Ramashankar Mishra for offences including theft of gifts/offered money, embezzlement, criminal misappropriation, criminal breach of trust, possession/receipt of stolen property, common intention, criminal conspiracy, abetment, and other relevant offences. All those named in the FIR have been employed by the Trust and are reportedly close to Champat Rai. The FIR also says that *prima facie* the roles of Subhash Srivastava, the concerned Trust and bank supervisory personnel present in the counting room, Ramshankar Yadav alias Tinnu, and other concerned individuals have also come up.

On 26 June, all eight accused named in the FIR were arrested, while Champat Rai, and trustee Anil Mishra, both in the eye of the storm regarding donations, tendered resignation. But resignation does not imply impunity.

With the 'trail leading right to the top', one wonders how many skeletons would come out of the cupboard. Clearly those claiming themselves as devote Hindus are now exposed as either frauds, plunderers or being in league with those accused, if not as masterminds. It warrants mentioning that over the decades, the VHP and its affiliates faced multiple challenges and reviews by the Income Tax Department regarding their charitable status and tax exemptions. But then strings were pulled from the top and all cases were put under the carpet. In this case also, if a fair probe is ever conducted, there is no knowing the heights to which the 'trail' will go and eventually exposed as a sinister, well-thought-out plan drawn up by in the upper echelons of the ruling dispensation.

Corruption before construction of the temple

Since the Ram Mandir became a lucrative commercial proposition enveloped in a mission of exhibiting devotion to Rama, or, for that, Hindu religion, the project from the very beginning was marked by profitable business transactions as well as marred by innumerable frauds and swindling. For example, in a case, a piece of land was purchased for Rs 2 crores by one person. And within 10 minutes, it was sold to the Trust at Rs 18.5 crores. Chandan Rai was the main culprit. Relatives of Trustees bought land at 17 times the cost, demanded 40% construction material commission.

A good number of people from the Sindhi community from Pimpri, Pune sought to know the whereabouts of their 200 silver bricks worth over Rs 2 crore. The community had donated the silver bricks on 26 January 2021 but was not given any receipt. Shiv Sena (Uddhav) also donated Rs 1 crore and 25 kg of silver bricks. It also was not given any receipt. The probe finds that most of these bricks were melted or sent for minting and then stolen.

Religious shrines—hubs of loot and plunder

In the wake of the Ayodhya loot, social media is agog with a flood of viral videos and photos of similar donation scams. One of these shows a Rs 100 crore cheque donation at the Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha temple in Andhra Pradesh even as this account had a balance of just Rs 1. There came similar allegations against the Sree Krishna Janmasthan temple at Mathura. Dinesh Phalahari Maharaj has sent a letter about the fund embezzlement to chief minister Adityanath. He has sought a high-level probe. He alleged that on many occasions, the CCTV installed in the counting room was found mysteriously switched off. This, the Baba alleged, was to facilitate the 'loot'. *"Those who have been moving on scooters are now owners of palatial buildings,"* he said.

It is now found that the Ayodhya Ram temple has joined the other top rich ones in India. On top of the list of the richest temples is the Padmanabhaswami temple in Thiruvananthapuram. Then come Tirupati, Guruvayur, Vaishnodevi, the Saibaba mandir in Shirdi, the Madurai Meenakshi temple and the Jagannath temple Puri in that order. Incidentally, each of them has been embroiled in some kind of fund and property controversy.

BJP government is conspicuously silent

The central BJP government, who has been indiscriminately sending ED and CBI to probe corruption of the opposition leaders remain conspicuously silent. Even hon'ble Prime Minister who has been intimately involved with Ayodhya project starting from Bhumi Pujan, formation of management Trust, projecting himself as the guardian who escorted boy Ram (Ram Lala) to his birthplace, using the project as a tool in stirring up Hindu communal passion to reap benefits in the election, and showing his devoutness to the deity through salutation by lying prostrate on the floor of the temple during inauguration, is tightlipped. So is Amit Shah, the number two in the cabinet and other important ministers and leaders.

Concluding remarks

Thus, it can be seen that religion has increasingly been endowed with a corporate structure, evolving into a highly profitable industry. This modern "faith economy" monetizes spirituality through lavish ceremonies, celebrity gurus, spiritual-tech platforms, and merchandise, that overshadows the core ethical teachings of traditional faiths. On a global scale, the sheer financial footprint of congregations and faith-based businesses runs into billions of rupees. The rise of Hindutva, a euphemism for arch Hindu communalism, is increasingly tied to globalized economy, characterized by corporate deregulation, privatization, and an alliance between the state and oligarchic conglomerates. This intersection, often termed "authoritarian Hindutva capitalism," fuses market-driven economic growth with frenzied eulogy of religious fanaticism, where the capitalist state and its servitors play the role of catalysts as well as operators. In our country this is a peculiar feature of imperialism-capitalism in its dying state, which has become utterly corrupt. In order to provide extra lease of life to its decadent moribund existence, it is fomenting religious blindness and bigotry to exploit people's blind religious faith, not only to shroud their mind in darkness and regiment their thought process, but also to make fortunes. Needless to say that the self-proclaimed votaries of Hinduism, priests and religious gurus as well as political figures aligned with them for pelf and power are nothing but deceptors of the highest degree. To hide this murky face, they exhibit excessive penchant for religion. This Ayodhya episode and the maintenance of eerie silence by the BJP top brass is to be viewed in this perspective. It bears recall that in the days of its advent, capitalism as a progressive force, ushered in parliamentary democracy, democratic norms and values, delinked religion from state affairs, and rapidly progressed. But today when capitalism has become a totally obsolete, utterly corrupt and reactionary, the Ayodhya episode shows how the state interlinked with Hindu religious affairs and rampant corruption has become the hallmark of decadent moribund capitalism.