January 23, 2024 / Modi’s temple grandstanding

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

*<NATSOUND> AP CEREMONY*

NOEL KING (host): Prime Minister Narendra Modi presided over a spectacle in northern India yesterday. Modi opened a massive Hindu temple on a the site of what used to be a mosque

SCORING <Neutral Pulse>

*<CLIP> BBC CORRESPONDENT SOUTIK BISWAS: It's controversial because it replaces a 16th-century mosque that once stood there, and it is one of India's most controversial religious sites. What happened was that in 1992, Hindu mobs tore down what was called the Babri Mosque, claiming that it was built by Muslim invaders on the ruins of a temple. Now, this incident sparked off nationwide religious rioting, which took nearly 2000 lives.*

NOEL: How a centuries-long fight over sacred land was settled and how it …. wasn’t. Coming up on *Today, Explained*.

SCORING OUT

[THEME]

*<CLIP> FORMER TEX ENGINEER EFIM SHAPIRO: This is – Today, Explained.*

NOEL: Soutik Biswas covers India for the *BBC*. He’s been spending time in the northern Indian city where Narendra Modi opened an enormous Hindu temple yesterday. It was a BIG win for Hindus, and for Hindu nationalism. Because this land is contested the event meant something very different for India’s Muslims.

It was also Modi’s way of unofficially kicking off his campaign. He’s running to be re-elected as India’s Prime Minister.

*<NATSOUND> FESTIVITIES AT RAM MANDIR, UNDER*

*<CLIP> ABC: A sea of saffron, the color sacred in the Hindu religion, has taken over the town of Ayodhya….*

SOUTIK BISWAS (*BBC* correspondent): This happened in a city called Ayodhya, which used to be a very sleepy pilgrim town, but it has been completely transformed. And today some 8,000 people, kind of turned up, were invited – including India's top business leaders, movie actors, sports people.

*<CLIP> NDTV: There you can see film actor Kangana Ranaut. She has arrived there in Ayodhya… <duck>*

SOUTIK: There were apparently dignitaries from over 50 countries there as well.

*<CLIP> NDTV: <duck up> Also, cricketing legend Anil Kumble…*

SOUTIK: The thing was televised live. It showed the prime minister performing religious rituals inside the temple.

*<NATSOUND> MODI IN CEREMONY*

SOUTIK: There was a completely festive atmosphere. Tens of thousands of Hindu devotees waved flags, beat drums. There were military helicopters on top, showering, kind of, flower petals on the temple.

<*NATSOUND> BRING BACK FESTIVAL TAPE, UNDER*

SOUTIK: It is a huge one, it stretches across more than seven acres in a 70-acre complex. It's an imposing three-story structure. It costs over $200 million to make, it's fully, kind of, made in pink sandstone. It's built on black granite. It boasts these towering pillars, and it rests upon about 70,000ft² of pristine white marble. And inside the temple, there is a 51-inch idol of Lord Ram, placed on a marble pedestal. Now, Mr. Modi today actually opened only the ground floor. When the temple will be completed, it is expected to greet a staggering 150,000 visitors a day…

NOEL: Wow!

SOUTIK: …which is roughly seven times the current rate.

*<NATSOUND> SWITCH TO CEREMONY TAPE, UNDER + OUT*

SOUTIK: Now, what happened today, quintessentially, was a ceremony called Pran Pratishta in the Hindi language, which loosely translates into “establishment of life force.” This ceremony lasted for an hour. And the Hindus believe that chanting mantras and performing rituals around the fire will infuse, kind of, sacred life in an idol or a photograph of a deity. And some even proclaimed the moment of inauguration of the temple as the start of what they call “Ram Rajya” or “the rule of Lord Ram” in India.

*<CLIP> BBC: <translation> Our dream has finally become a reality. It’s like God himself has appeared before us.*

SOUTIK: So, as I said, it was a massive, massive spectacle of the kind India hasn't seen in a while.

NOEL: Okay, so this will be an enormous attraction. I wonder what this means for the people who are living in the city of Ayodhya. How did they react to this, this huge development, number one, and what it's going to mean for them?

SOUTIK: Yeah. I mean, you know, Ayodhya has been a traditionally, overwhelmingly Hindu pilgrim city. It's a city inspired by faith and tradition. The entire city has undergone a makeover around the temple because they want to make it a spiritual and global hub of spirituality and Hindu religion.

*<CLIP> WION, INTERVIEW WITH BUILDING MANAGER: Our government of Uttar Pradesh is highly focused on doing things for devotees. They know that the pilgrims will be from all over the country and abroad. So we have to provide facilities outside the temple for people to stay.*

SOUTIK: About 3000 houses and shops were partially or fully demolished to widen the corridors leading up to the temple. So there's a certain amount of excitement among the people, saying all this will boost tourism, and also it will boost incomes for them because so far, it's been a very fragile, pilgrim-dependent economy. Now, chains like Radisson building hotels, the luxury hotels coming up, etc.

*<CLIP> INDIA TODAY: Ahead of the consecration ceremony, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will also be inaugurating the newly-built international airport. This will actually serve as a major gateway to the entire city.*

SOUTIK: But on the other side, there are also rumblings of discontent. Because, you know, all those people whose homes have been demolished and shops have been demolished – they are slightly anxious. They feel disturbed. They're not very happy with the compensation that they've received from the government.

*<CLIP> ABC AUSTRALIA: Speaking to Muslims here in the town of Ayodhya, they’ve told us that they’re hiding out – and they’ve told us that they’re actually worried about what will happen in the coming days, in the coming weeks, when Mr. Modi and his 12,000 security forces leave. They fear that it will be dangerous for them, and they feel erased by this temple opening.*

NOEL: What did Narendra Modi say as he consecrated the temple? And is there any tension between this being a religious site and the Prime Minister using it to kick off an election campaign?

*<CLIP> PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI: Siyawar Ramachandra ki Jai! Siyawar Ramachandra ki Jai! <under>*

SOUTIK: Mr. Modi said that he had a lump in his throat when he went inside the temple’s sanctum sanctorum, and he congratulated the country on this occasion. He actually said, 22nd January is, I quote, “Not a date on a calendar, but the dawn of a new era.” That people who do not understand the purity of India's social consciousness, they should understand the construction of this temple in quotes “is a symbol of the Indian society's peace, patience and mutual harmony. That this temple has not given birth to a fire, but to a certain amount of energy.” This is what essentially said today after inaugurating the temple.

MODI UP, OUT

SCORING <Cunning Cognizance>

SOUTIK: I mean, it's quite clear that this is this informal start to his election campaign. The elections are in a few months’ time. And a lot of critics have said that his party is mixing religion and politics. And it has been on the election manifesto since 1996. As I said, this has been brewing for a very long time. This dispute has been really brewing actively since 1990, when the Hindu nationalist began an agitation. Two years later, the mosque came down. So he kind of completed it on the back of a very important Supreme Court judgment. This whole ownership dispute between the Hindus and Muslims over this mosque ended only in 2019, when the Supreme Court granted the site to Hindus, despite explicitly stating that the demolition of the mosque was in quotes, “egregious violation of the rule of law.” Having said that, the court also gave Muslims another plot of land in Ayodhya. But this is the, this is the bigger plot, and this is the bigger shrine, in a sense.

NOEL: The *BBC*’s Soutik Biswas. Coming up: How a Hindu god and a Muslim mosque ended up in India’s Supreme Court.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained* I’m Noel King. The opening of the Ram Temple, yesterday, was a high-profile affair. India’s stock market closed for the day. Movie theaters screened the proceedings live. And a lotta people wondered: because of this land’s bloody history, would there also be big protests as the day unfolded? There were NOT.

I asked Hartosh Singh Bal, the executive editor of *The Caravan,* a longform culture and politics magazine, told us why it’s more complicated than just good news

HARTOSH SINGH BAL (*The Caravan* executive editor): Well, I think you have to place in context the history of the last 8 to 10 years of the Modi government because, the people who were to contest it, who have been affronted and humiliated by what has happened, are in no position to actually come out on the streets and protest. The entire establishment of the state is rigged against them. They are today, politically, second-class citizens. They have no control over power.

*<CLIP> AIMIM LEADER: Mr. Modi has proven that you can make Muslims invisible from Indian politics and still get 306 Lok Sabha seats under basis of majority community order.*

HARTOSH: Previous protests have been – they've faced clampdowns.They've faced lynchings. They've had their homes bulldozed. It doesn't leave you much space to actually protest.

*<CLIP> FRANCE24: This week, a Muslim man was once again murdered while transporting cattle in the southwest of the country.*

*<CLIP> CHANNEL 4 NEWS: <chants, BLEEPED> 1,000 miles away, another huge crowd in another Muslim area. As the police stood by, they screamed insults that are too vicious to broadcast.*

HARTOSH: It probably is more indicative of the kind of democracy we've become where – when really what should have been taken for granted is no longer possible for a huge number of citizens.

NOEL: So let’s go way back in history. Can you tell me about the origin of the dispute over this land? Where does this start?

HARTOSH: Well, uh, it's very difficult to separate myths from history in India.

NOEL: Hmmm.

HARTOSH: And in this context, Ayodhya, the city where this temple has been built, is considered the birthplace of Ram.

SCORING <Curious Pulse>

HARTOSH: Ram is the eponymous hero of the great Indian epic, the Ramayana. I mean, it is named after him in some sense, as it's the story of Ram. And, in the deities of Hinduism, [he] may be among the foremost. He's seen as a reincarnation of Vishnu, probably the most important or one of the two most important reincarnations. And the idea of a birthplace implies a certain historicity of which we have no proof at all. We have no idea whether there was ever any historical figure called Ram, but so there is faith associated with this place in Ayodhya.

SCORING BUMP

HARTOSH: In the 16th century, or 1500, something, the Mughal Emperor Babur built a mosque in Ayodhya, and the claim is that this was built over an existing temple. No proof has ever been found that a temple was demolished to construct this mosque. Through the 20th century, there have been contestations over the site to claim it back. In 1949 the idol of Ram is supposed to have manifested itself at the mosque site.

NOEL: Huh!

HARTOSH: Of course, we now know the full history of this, that it was deliberately placed there. How members of a Hindu right-wing organization clambered over the walls, took the idol, placed it there. The local administration did not take the action it should [have]. And this was the first supposed proof that this was in any way connected to a Hindu monument.

SCORING OUT

HARTOSH: And this dispute lay sort of in a stasis after the placing of the idol for maybe a good 40 years before, in the late 80s, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is ruling the country now, took it up as a cause and started what is called the Ram Janmabhoomi movement to reclaim the land where Ram was born.

*<NATSOUND> GATHERING TURNS VIOLENT, UNDER*

*<CLIP> TRANSLATION: A looter destroyed our temple 462 years ago. That’s a stain on our honor. If the Babri Mosque remains, this stain will remind us of our slavery. We won’t rest until we’ve destroyed this symbol of slavery with blood or with bullets.*

HARTOSH: In 1992, a gathering organized by Hindu right-wing organizations, most prominently the RSS, which is the parent organization of the Bharatiya Janata Party which is ruling today. Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister himself, started his public life in the RSS for a decade before he joined the BJP. He was deputed to join the BJP by the RSS. Organized by them, where the mosque was illegally demolished after commitments had been given to the central government that no such thing would happen. There has been a betrayal of every commitment by the leaders of the Hindu right, which led to the demolition of a mosque by this collection of right-wing nationalists who had spades, who had instruments, who clambered up the monument, brought it down.

*<NATSOUND UP, OUT>*

HARTOSH: And ever since then, there has been a legal dispute at the site.

NOEL: And then in 2019 this dispute goes before the Supreme Court.

HARTOSH: There were litigants basically from both people who were Muslims, and there were the Hindu right. And they were asking for possession over the land. The Muslim argument was basically that this has always been a mosque. The right to continue to worship and to rebuild the mosque and claim the land on which the mosque was built, because this was what is called waqf land – land belonging to the Muslims – is rightfully theirs.

*<CLIP> THE GUARDIAN: <translation> Everyone is carrying the grief of the mosque being demolished. Each and every one of us is saddened by it. If you take someone’s home, they would be upset, wouldn’t they?*

HARTOSH: And the argument made on behalf of the Hindu nationalist organizations was that this is a matter of faith. This is what the land should belong to. They cited both history and faith. The legal dispute consisted of two portions. One was the criminal trial of whether there were people guilty of doing an illegal act, and the second was actually who owns the site. And finally, when the verdict was pronounced: As far as the criminality of the act, the courts have ruled that it was a criminal act. The second part, which was finally settled in 2019 by India's Supreme Court, basically held that while there is no proof that this is actually the birthplace of Ram – while there is no proof that this is where a temple stood before the mosque was constructed –  since the vast majority of Hindus have such great faith in the idea that it is the birthplace of Ram, this should be handed over to the Hindus. A temple should be constructed there. Which, in some ways, is a pretty startling conclusion. “If enough people believe something, then that must be done. It seems to be the judicial basis of what has been done.”

*<CLIP> DW: Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcomed the verdict, and says it brings a new dawn.   
MODI: <translation> Every class, every community, people of every sect – the whole country has accepted the verdict with open hearts. It reflects on the ancient culture, traditions, and sense of harmony in India.*

NOEL: This ruling is handed down in 2019. How did Muslims in India react to this decision?

HARTOSH: Negatively, badly. I think the real trauma was at the time of the demolition of the mosque itself. There was religious violence at the time, clashes between Muslims and Hindus, killings of hundreds of people across the country. That violence and that targeting of Muslims in some ways is what propelled the BJP to national prominence. And I would say to power. And in some senses, Narendra Modi's own political persona was created in the aftermath of violence as this great champion of Hindus.

*<CLIP> DEMOCRACY NOW: Prime Minister Modi himself has been accused of sanctioning the massacre of more than 2000 Muslims in the state of Gujarat in 2002, when he was the chief minister there.*

*<CLIP> BBC: But no case against Modi has been successful so far. He strongly denies any wrongdoing, though he once said he regrets Muslim suffering as we would a puppy being run over by a car.*

HARTOSH: So the connection from the demolition of the Babri Masjid to the rise of the Hindu right to the building up of Narendra Modi culminates in his election as prime minister in 2014. I think his election itself was a huge setback. So this has already preceded what has happened today. It does not leave the Muslims in any state to come out in public. In fact, quite the contrary, across, the Hindi belt, which is where the BJP draws power, where the Muslims are located in the state of the Uttar Pradesh, where Ayodhya is, instructions have been given within the community by religious leaders, political leaders: ‘Stay in your homes, do not come out, do not aggravate the situation. Do not give the government or the Hindu right an excuse for violence today.’ Because if there is violence, the Hindu right again gains from that. There are elections due in India in another two, three months. The temple is also – apart from this long history that I've drawn from you – directly linked to the politics of that election.

NOEL: India, by its constitution, is a secular country, correct? There's a separation, ostensibly of religion and politics, church and state. Everything you've just said suggests that's not actually the case in India anymore. Is there anything that brings this situation back from the brink? And if Narendra Modi is elected in a few months, is there a way back from the brink here?

HARTOSH: I am very pessimistic. I – by origin, I am not a believer in any real sense – [am] from the Sikh faith. The Sikhs are a population concentrated in one state, the northern state of Punjab. Hindu nationalists see the Sikhs as allied to them. They see them – well, for them, faiths which have drawn their origins in India, faiths like Buddhism and Sikhism are part of the Hindu fold. Their real problem is with the alien intrusion of Islam and Christianity. Despite this belief of the Hindu right, there is no taker among the Sikhs for the Hindu right as well. What it means is that every minority today lies outside this majoritarian consensus that has been built by Narendra Modi. Apart from that, there are people like me, huge number who have faith – or had faith – in the idea of India because of its constitutional provisions, because of the values that hold this republic together. We were a republic which had actually agreed to come together on the basis of a constitution with a certain set of shared values of religious tolerance.

SCORING <Network Building>

HARTOSH: It is the most diverse place on earth today. There are 30 different languages. There are people of various ethnicities. Every religion is represented here that we could come to this pass here where what I would call I mean, it is the last sort of place where the sort of virus of nationalism that sprang up in the 19th century in Europe has come and taken root. And so we have a particular sort of nationalistic formation trying to impose the unity of blood, soil – which may have worked for a tiny nation state. And I, from the Indian perspective, something like Netherlands, are tiny little pockets that are smaller than most provinces of India. To apply that idea to something as large as India, so diverse, is, I think, in the long term, a potential for disaster. But is it going to be rolled back democratically with the kind of support Narendra Modi has? No. It doesn't seem that is possible today.

NOEL: That was Hartosh Singh Bal of *Caravan*. Today’s show was produced by Amanda Lewellyn and edited by Amina al-Sadi. It was fact-checked by Laura Bullard and engineered by Rob Byers. We also relied on some reporting from the *BBC*’s Yogita Limaye, and we thank Yogita.

Before we go: Remember when Defense Secretary General Lloyd Austin vanished and it turned out he’d been treated for prostate cancer? And he didn’t really anyone to know. It got us thinking about why so many men are so uncomfortable talking about prostate stuff. We’re doing a show on it and we want to know if YOU have a story you wanna tell: about getting screened for getting bad news or even just getting SHY regarding your prostate. We may use it on air! Give us a call at 844 453 4448. That’s 844 453 4448. And thank you. I’m Noel King, It’s *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]