

Rebuilding a Nation Through Open Letters



Edited by
Shruti Nirukurti

50th Anniversary Edition

Introduction

India is a great country that represents its many cultures and patriotism through symbols. These symbols are constantly changing in post- independence India. From the maternal figure known as Bharat Mata (who is seen on the cover of this edition) to the globally known Taj Mahal; these symbols bring pride to a country that still deals with the legacy of colonialism. The flag of the country also becomes a reminder of the values that are prioritized within the country. The vibrant orange often represents the courage and strength of the country. The white band indicates the peace that the country strives for. Green symbolizes the growth and fertility that the land itself provides. Finally. The blue chakra in the middle represents the many things from justice to self-sacrifice to the ever-progressing cycle of time. These colors give citizens a sense of home and community.

In the past few decades, a new monument has gained significance because of what it represents for the culture. This structure is known as the Ram Mandir. However, instead of being a symbol for the country, many see it as a key religious site for the Hindu religion. For many years, the prospective land for the temple has been disputed amongst many communities. This is due to an event that occurred on December 6, 1992. On this day the Babri Masjid was demolished by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The Masjid was destroyed because it was built on the land that some believe the religious deity Rama was born. This event has caused many tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities both nationally and globally. This division has caused some to go to opposite sides of the political spectrum. However, the fears that most of the citizens hold are not just political ones but personal ones.

With the rise of Hindutva in many regions of the country, the ideas of nationalism and patriotism get lost. Similarly, secularists also contribute to the increased division within the country. These two groups get reduced to their political impact and resist the complexity of the person/ communities themselves. Many have taken to public platforms to express their opinion in the ongoing discourse. Some make videos while others make Instagram posts. One genre that has gotten popular is the use of open letters. Open letters allow the writer to address one person as well as a whole group of people through one public letter.

These letters explore a range of views. At times, these letters take a strong stance, and other letters may argue the complete opposite. However, with these series of open letters, we can see how many individuals aim to fulfill the values that are presented through the flag. It may also reveal much of the common ground that often gets looked over. Like monuments, these letters work together to rebuild what might have been missing from this binary presenting discourse.

The bright saffron has been associated with Hindutva groups such as the RSS and the BJP. Although some letters reinforce the message spread by Hindu-nationalist groups they also reinforce the original values set by the colors of the flag. An anonymous open letter titled, “An open letter to the leftists ahead of Ram Mandir Pran Pratishtha” reveals a lot about the supporters of the Ram Mandir. This is a passionately written letter that is dedicated to the liberal groups who are opposed to the building of the mandir. The writer characterizes the opposing side as the villains which allows them to position themselves as a possible hero. The orange of the flag represents strength and courage; by creating a public letter, they are in some ways fighting for what they believe the country should value. Publishing public letters takes some level of courage. This is not to say that this letter does not reinforce harmful characterizations of non-Hindus, but it does reveal what some Hindu may value as courageous and strong. As you will see in this letter, they use strong language against liberals who are against the building of the Ram Mandir. It is easy to write off these comments as purely evil but to go beyond that, it reveals something about the writer themselves. Religion is something that is deeply personal to this person, it seems. Therefore, anyone going against them or mis-characterizing their religion can leave the writer in a defensive position. This letter tries to reveal how the opposing side is “oppressing” the religion so that they feel like they have something to fight for.

These underlying fears of having a culture erased are one of the many lasting effects of colonialism. How do other communities navigate these sensitivities? Is someone who is against the building of the Ram Mandir anti-nationalist or anti-Hindu? The open letter written by Shamsul Islam reorients the idea of strength and courage that is denoted within the Indian flag. In the letter titled, “An Open Letter to Chief Justice”, Islam explains the effects that Hindutva organizations have had on Muslim communities as a result of the Ram Mandir. Similar to the anonymous writer, this writer is passionate for their advocacy against the Ram Mandir.

However, this letter extends to request that the Chief justice, "... that treating this case as a fight between and Muslims, the highest court of justice of India is insulting vast majority of Indian Hindus, who did not subscribe to the Hindutva brand of politics and did not join the demolition campaign". This letter courageously resists the binary characterization of either side. Additionally, he resists characterizing all Hindu's as Hindu-nationalist extremists. Many citizens are your average day-to-day people that have a typical reverence for a particular religion. This letter builds on the anonymous letter to highlight how strength can come from the resistance of religious division.

It is hard to navigate these sensitive topics while also not leaving the opposing person in a defensive position. However, these letters take on the white band of the flag to present a proposal for peace. Sri Ravi Shankar's letter to Muslim Personal Law Board explores how all communities may be negatively affected by the building of the Ram Mandir. He explores how many of the solutions that are possibly proposed by the court could result in intensifying tensions between communities. Instead, he reveals a solution that is rooted in peace and benefits for both communities. He speaks about how a peaceful solution can be created through collaboration between both communities. When reconstructing a nation that is divided, offering solutions that allow collaboration should be prioritized. Shankar shows that peace can come from communities collaborating and seeking empathy.

This sense of peace through collaboration is further explored by the open letter titled, "Here's how we can save India from strife over Ram Temple- Babri Masjid issue" written by Ameen Sayani. This letter also re-characterizes all Hindus as evil nationalists. Sayani explains through concepts of Hinduism how Muslims should be also valued as a community in India. These letters are working together to reveal the power of unity and community. They start to reconstruct the possibilities of how communities can come together in the future. Sayani requests that the Masjid be relocated rather than demolished. What they are highlighting here is the importance of preserving all the sites that are important to different communities. Additionally, how these sites can also reflect the same values of the "opposing" religion.

These new possibilities of community and acceptance can lead to a future that is painted with the green color that represents growth. Sayani and Islam's letters speak brings a level of sensitivity regarding the discussion surrounding the land itself. Sayani reveals the preservation of the Masjid is important for the local community while also acknowledging the complex history that the Ram Mandir has had. Islam also speaks about how practicing Hindus are not the issue but that the issue is Hindutva organizations such as the RSS and the BJP. Both letters refocus on the values set within the flag. They look forward to a future that prioritizes unity and growth. They ask the reader to consider the opposing side's position. Why do people act in extreme ways when it comes to religious sites? The letters also ask if these disputes are truly about religion and culture preservation.

These issues are ongoing with some individuals like the anonymous writer who speaks in extremes. However, as it is revealed through the other letters, people like this are placed in a position where they feel like their religious identity is under attack. However, with the building of the Ram Mandir, some Muslim communities also feel that their religion is attacked. Through the introduction of new solutions from open letter writers like Shankar, Islam and Sayani, a more just future is closer than the nation may expect. This is an ongoing process like the blue chakra symbol that is weaved into each flag of India. These letters work together to demolish the division amongst communities and instead reconstruct a nation that reflects courage, peace, growth and progress.

Newark Times Bestseller

The conversations of the Ram Mandir has continued on for decades. Many still strongly hold a certain position regarding this dispute, but many others seek to find a solution. Open letters become a space where an individual can propose unity and collaboration in a world that constantly faces division and marginalization. They also work to reveal the complexity that is hidden within each testimony.

" a compelling book about open letters"

- Newark Times

" A book everyone needs to read"

- the Harrington Post



Shruti Nirukurti is an English Major at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs. She spends most of her time learning about Indian history and having discussions with her peers. In her work, she tries to reveal the complexities that often go overlooked. She looks forward to all the future conversations she will have from the classroom and beyond.