

SC STRIKES THE RIGHT NOTE IN ITS AYODHYA VERDICT

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On Saturday, a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi delivered a unanimous verdict resolving a religious dispute between Hindus and Muslims stretching over centuries. To summarize the verdict, the Court accepted the claim of Ram Janmabhoomi, the birthplace of Lord Ram, and thereby allowed the building of a temple in the hitherto disputed 2.7 acre complex. At the same time, the apex court acknowledged the Muslim claim to the site in decreeing that the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 was illegal and directing the government to allot them a five acre piece of land separately.

The arguments the Supreme Court chose to arrive at this verdict is as important as their final decision. Not only has it struck the right notes by drawing from the Constitution provisions which holds the right of all faiths as equal, for the first time it held that "the deity of Lord Ram" was a "juristic person" in according the site for the construction of the temple. It has thereby acknowledged the sacredness of the site for Hindus. Undoubtedly, it is a benchmark judgement, which will, as the ramifications play out, fundamentally redefine the idea of India. Coincidentally, the judgement came on the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall which went on to redefine the idea of Germany—a country that had been partitioned after the culmination of World War II.

Writing in the *Hindustan Times* on Sunday, Abhinav Prakash, assistant professor at Shri Ram College of Commerce in New Delhi, succinctly summed up the verdict: "It is unprecedented in world history that a religious community of one billion people waited for over five centuries and then left the fate of one of their most sacred sites to the wisdom of five judges. It is unprecedented that the religious community of 200 million accepted the verdict peacefully even if some among the community believe their claim was legitimate. With this, one more brick has been laid in the foundation of modern India."

A lot however will depend on how the political leadership of India takes it from here. In an address to the nation, later in the evening on Sunday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his inimitable style, set out the new paradigm for the country. Making it clear that the verdict should not be viewed as a victory or defeat for any community, he said, the stage is set for delineating a 'New India'. "There is no place for fear, negativity and bitterness in New India," he said in a brief and to the point address.

The subdued nature in which the impact of the verdict has been absorbed seems to suggest that India's polity is demonstrating the desired maturity. For long, the national conversation has drawn on binaries, resulting in a rapid shrinking of the trust quotient in its polity. By resolving the Ayodhya dispute in a legal arena, the politics of the verdict have been contained; at least for now—a good beginning.

The Supreme Court has also in its dramatic verdict underlined the importance of the rule of law. A 'New India' can't but be built on this principle. So far, we have leaned towards an exceptions-based regime and borne the outcome—in the form of rampant crony capitalism and inability to build processes which could streamline the country.

The Ayodhya verdict has provided an excellent opportunity for India to hit the reset. It is for the country to seize the moment and realise the potential that the rest of the world sees in it.

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