Hindus Launch Campaign To Liberate Holy Sites
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Countless thousands of Hindus pilgrimage each year to Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh, the birthplace of their beloved Rama, the deified hero of the epic Ramayana. Hands pressed together in namaskar, they gaze through a locked wrought-iron gate at a dilapidated shrine built several hundred years ago. This is disputed land, taken by Muslim warlords in the 16th century, reportedly one of the most fought over pieces of real estate in India. The minaret of a small mosque rises above the silhouette of the Rama shrine. The compound is locked, the key held by the state government. Legislators have been "considering" the petitions of various Hindu organizations and leaders for months. Tensions are building. Only the priest, who offers puja twice daily, is allowed inside.

This June, Hindu religious leaders rekindled the fires of protest surrounding this and 2 other Hindu holy sites where Muslim mosques now stand - the Vishwanatha temple in Varanasi and the birthplace of Sri Krishna in Mathura. All are in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Centuries have passed since the mosques were built, but Hindus consider the sites so important that the passage of time, they say, is insignificant.

While moderates fear communal conflict may be stirred over the sensitive issue, a core group of orange- robed, high-level religious leaders are using that fear to try and regain the sites for Hindus. March 8, 1986, was the deadline given the Uttar Pradesh government to restore the birthplace of Rama. Otherwise, the senior religious leaders who met in Allahabad on June 30 have promised to lead a "massive defiance movement." The Hindus apparently mean business this time, though by one count some 76 separate battles have been fought for this sacred but troubled place in the past 450 years. J.S. Srivastava, writing to the Pioneer newspaper in Lucknow, states succinctly, "The place has its own sanctity for the Hindus, like Mecca for the Muslims, the Vatican for the Catholics, the Weeping Wall for the Jews and Punja Sahib for the Sikhs. Nowhere in the history of mankind have so many battles been fought and so many lives sacrificed as for the liberation of this holy place." It is ironic that Ayodhya (A-Yudh) means "no-war."

Highlighting this latest demand is Paramahansa Ramchandra Das's threat to immolate himself unless Ayodhya is returned to Hindus. Others have reportedly written the Vaishnava monk vowing to follow his example. "He has made what we consider his sankalpa, meaning his resolve," commented Mr. Ramesh Patel, Joint Secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of North America. "He says, if the government is not going to listen to us, we have to bring the government all kinds of pressure. And one of the pressures would be to immolate himself."

Ayodhya may be compared to the "Temple Mount" of Jerusalem, the ancient Jewish holy site occupied for centuries by Islam, but with one important difference. While the Muslims there have threatened a jihad, or holy war, against Israel if their control of the Mount is jeopardized, Muslims in India seem willing to let Ayodhya go. A Muslim gazette published the following pronouncement: "May we recall that two Muslim religious institutions, Dar Ull Ittah Yoban, India's largest Muslim learning center and second largest in the world, and Dar Ull Ittbah Berallah Sharif have issued a mandate ordering the Muslims to return this place to Hindus...Allah does not accept prayers performed in a mosque built on land which is forcefully and illegally occupied."

Hopeful Hindu leaders have promised that in exchange for freeing the sites, they will raise funds for the Muslims to build new mosques elsewhere. State regulations reportedly now prohibit Muslims from paying homage within 200 feet of the place, so neither Hindus nor Muslims can properly worship there.

Perhaps never before have Hindu monks raised their voices so loudly and resolutely, not only on this but dozens of other issues facing Hindu society. A summit meeting this October 31st/Nov. 1st in Udupi, Karnataka state, will bring together over a thousand Hindu monks and abbots. The liberation of Hindu holy sites will undoubtedly be discussed then.

Meanwhile, one group of stalwart devotees are keeping vigil in front of Ayodhya's gate, holding, according to a reliable source, akanda kirtan, 'endless worship,' singing devotional hymns 24-hours non-stop. In Canada, the USA and elsewhere, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad is launching its own massive campaign known as "Ram Janma Bhoomi Yagna" to free Ayodhya. Ads and press releases in dozens of newspapers will urge all Hindus to write letters of protest to Rajiv Gandhi himself. Petitions will circulate, too, accumulating thousands of names of concerned Hindus.