

## The worries about gas

*New, energetic steps needed to turn a corner*

SOME very real worries assail us where the matter is one of gas in the country. With reports of a marginal increase in the supply of gas in the face of growing demands, our attention has long been riveted on the exploration issue. As a report in this newspaper yesterday makes it clear, not much of a headway has been made in gas exploration in order to ensure a smooth, uninterrupted supply of gas well into the near future. Uncontrast that with the praiseworthy initiatives the government has taken in recent times to augment the supply of electricity. Moves are on to generate 2,500 megawatts of electricity. Such moves are yet to be seen in the gas sector. That is where our concerns come in.

Obviously, steps such as shutting down CNG stations for six hours a day as a way of conserving gas as well as electricity have had at best a negligible impact, leaving out core issues to be addressed. The bigger idea, though, should now be on an acceleration of steps towards increasing the production and supply of gas. That, however, is not quite what organisations like Petrobangla appear to be doing. In these past 22 months, Petrobangla has made only a single move and that too through initiating a bid for tenders. The tender process remains to be completed, which itself could be seen as a sign of the snail's pace at which programmes for an augmentation of gas by Petrobangla and Bapex are moving. Indeed, there are good reasons to think that the prospects of a solution to the gas crisis by 2014 do not at this stage look feasible, unless of course, a dramatic major discovery is made in Netrakona-Sunamganj area early next year. A wholesale slicing away at bureaucratic sloth is the need of the hour. The country has been informed that the supply of gas now stands at 2,000 million cubic feet per day (mcf), that indeed where earlier the supply was 1,800 mcf, it rose by 200 mcf in the last 20 months. That is a somewhat comforting thought. But it still is not enough to remove our worries.

In the circumstances, the plans that have already been undertaken, notably the move for import of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Qatar must be expedited towards implementation. As we understand it, the government means to import 500 mcf per day from Qatar which, together with the cheap gas available in Bangladesh at this point, could go a good way towards meeting consumer needs. But for such results to be arrived at, speedy negotiations for a satisfactory conclusion of the deal as well as steps to build a terminal would have to be expeditiously undertaken.

There is little question that electricity and gas are two major priorities for the government. It is on how it performs in these sectors, in how it caters to public needs during the remainder of its term in office, that it will be judged by the electorate. Need one say more?

## Blatant disregard for worker and public safety

*How long will the administration remain blind to it?*

IF pictures are supposed to speak a thousand words then the two photographs front-paged in this newspaper yesterday speak more than a thousand words. They depict a manifest malady, but which, regrettably, remains outside the radar screen of the agencies concerned to be attended to and remedied. The pictures are fairly representative of the state of safety of workers in almost all kinds of work places, from high-rise buildings to construction sights to garment factories to road construction to ship-breaking yards, you name it.

One picture is of construction workers working on tall structures dangling by only a piece of rope around their waist as an apology for safety harness. Even more disconcerting is the picture of a worker gas-welding, perched atop another high structure while traffic flow by beneath him. These are pictures of accidents waiting to happen. And accident occurs very often.

These sights are very common in Bangladesh but hardly to be seen in countries where employers take the life of their workers seriously and where the state ensures that the employers provide all the necessary measures needed to ensure workers' safety at the work place, more so when it involves the safety of the public too. Not so in Bangladesh. Money and profit gets the better of the need for safety. If putting one's life at risk was not enough the poor workers have to part with a part of their daily wage to keep their job.

Such is the way that our workers perform highly dangerous tasks as a normal and routine matter; and it is demonstrative of complete lack of attention to the issue of workers' safety on the part of the employers as well as the government. No wonder that there is news of workers losing their lives due to either outbreak of fire in garment factories, or workers falling off the scaffold every other day, or toxic fumes emanating from a ship in a ship-breaking yard. These accidents could have been avoided if a little bit of attention was paid to the matter.

We suggest that it is for the government to take the lead in this regard. It being the largest employer, the government must ensure the safety of the workers employed by it and provide the necessary equipment to make that happen. The government must also make it mandatory for private companies that employ people on risky and dangerous jobs to provide safety measures and safe environment for their workers. But this cannot be possible without strict oversight of the implementation of the safety measures and harsh punishments for the defaulters.

## Tragedies on roads: Looking for a way out

The government has to do something to reduce the frequency and number of road tragedies, which are among the highest in the world. And that calls for attacking the problem in its totality, and not in a piecemeal fashion.

SYED FATAHUL ALIM

THE road tragedy at the Salehpur bridge near Aminbazar in Savar on October 10 (Sunday) is another harsh reminder of the dismal safety standards of our roads and the public transport system. After the accident, as usual, the first reaction of those who witnessed or reported on it was that it was the driver who was primarily to blame. And such a general notion about bus mishaps in the public mind is not unfounded.

Generally, the bus drivers are not trained in the safety aspects of their job, neither have they gone through any rigorous training on driving, or on the rules, regulations and disciplinary aspects of road and its traffic system. And it is pervasive corruption in the office that issues driving licences that lies behind the fake driving licences the drivers carry.

It is again corruption in the traffic department that emboldens the drivers to defy the rules of the road with gay abandon. And that gives the license for anyone to become a driver, and one should not be shocked to see reckless juveniles -- mostly assistants standing at the bus doors controlling getting in and getting off of passengers as well as informing the driver about when to stop or move for the purpose -- at the driving seat.

In the case of the bus plunge at Salehpur Bridge, the reports have it that the driver of the ill-starred bus was overtaking another bus when the fatal mishap occurred. This illegal practice by the drivers is also another evidence of their disrespect for the rules of the road, which has to do, again, with lack of training and the arrogance born of their power to buy the implementers of traffic rules. So, no end of road tragedies in the city as else-

where in the country is rather a normal experience on our roads, not an exception.

However, it would be somewhat simplistic to conclude that it is the driver who is solely responsible for every road accident. A closer scrutiny will reveal that an array of factors are at work in every road mishap including, of course, the driver's fault.

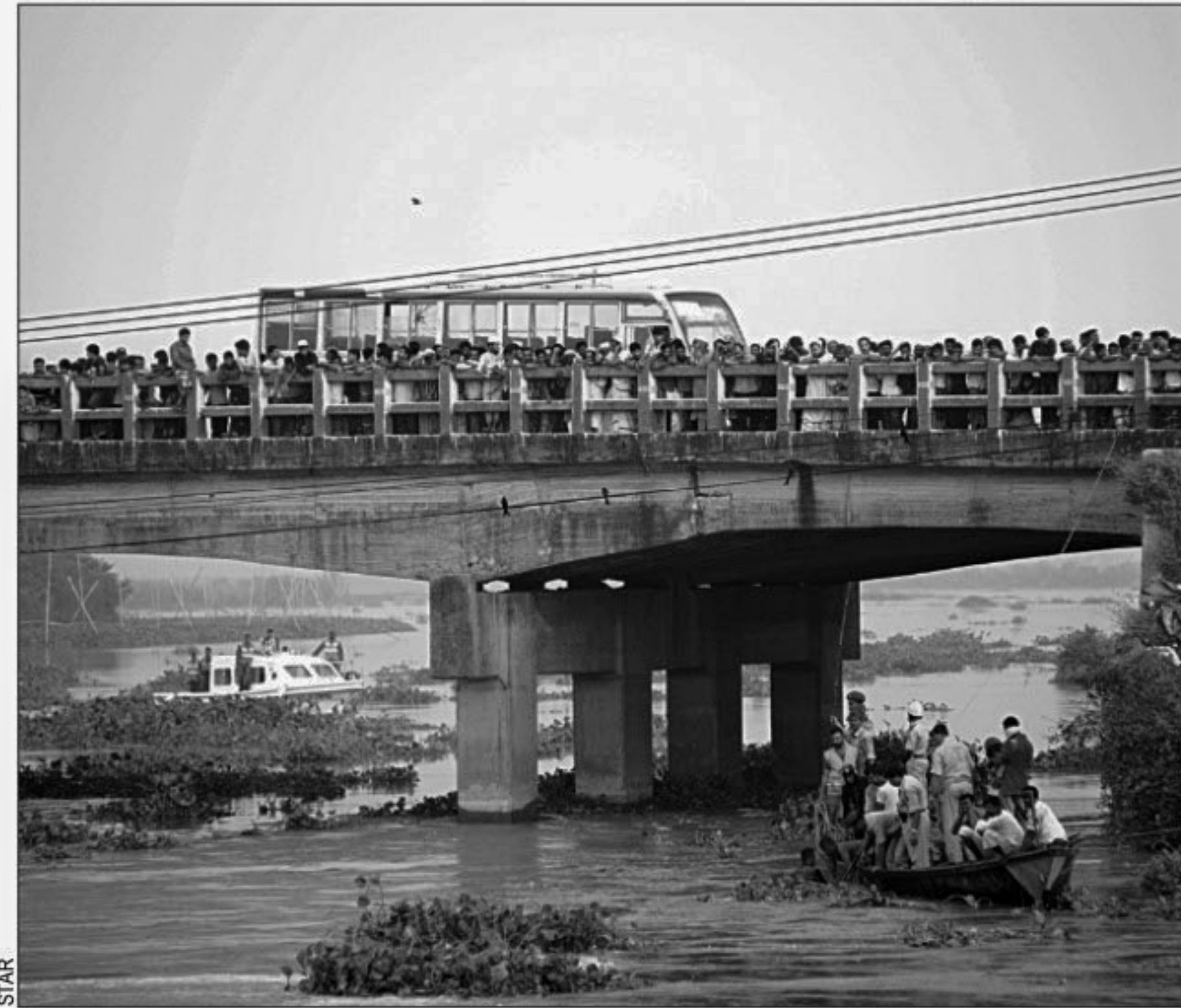
In the mishap in question at the Salehpur Bridge, other than the reported rashness on the part of the driver, we have now another angle to look at the case as reported in the Saturday's issue of this paper. In the lead news titled, "A death trap over Turag," experts have pointed at the design and structural defects of the bridge.

What the researchers of the Accident Research Institute (ARI) of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) found out in connection with the accident is worth noting. The approach of the Salehpur Bridge, they said, has no crash barrier. That, in other words, means that had there been a crash barrier at the bridge approach, it would have deflected the speeding bus away from the river back to the right course.

Another engineering fault of the bridge detected by the ARI researchers is that it does not have any raised walkways on either side of the approach road. Such walkways also act as crash barriers. So, in consequence of this dual fault, the bridge was in double jeopardy, thus claiming the lives of so many people.

The design faults apart, the materials used in most bridges, culverts and roads across the country are not up to the mark. Small wonder, the hallmark of our physical infrastructures is fragility and porosity.

The tragedy that was enacted in real



The ill-fated bridge.

life on Sunday last week was not the only one that took place at Salehpur Bridge. In a similar accident, 13 people died five years back. Looking at the casualty figures, this is a strange coincidence, indeed.

We know from the statements of the survivors that there were around 50 passengers in the bus. So, with the casualty figure at 13 and the number of survivors at seven, as we could trace thus far, the fate of the rest of the passengers is anybody's guess.

What has happened to the rest? Had all of them somehow been able to escape from the sunken bus to safety? Then how could they do so unnoticed by the rescue party or the local people who gathered at the scene of the accident? This is still an unresolved part of the accident.

Returning to the design and structural flaws of the bridge, they could not awaken the people concerned in the Roads and Highways (R&H) department to take necessary corrective measures at the bridge's approach road and the

raised walkways even during the last five years! Why?

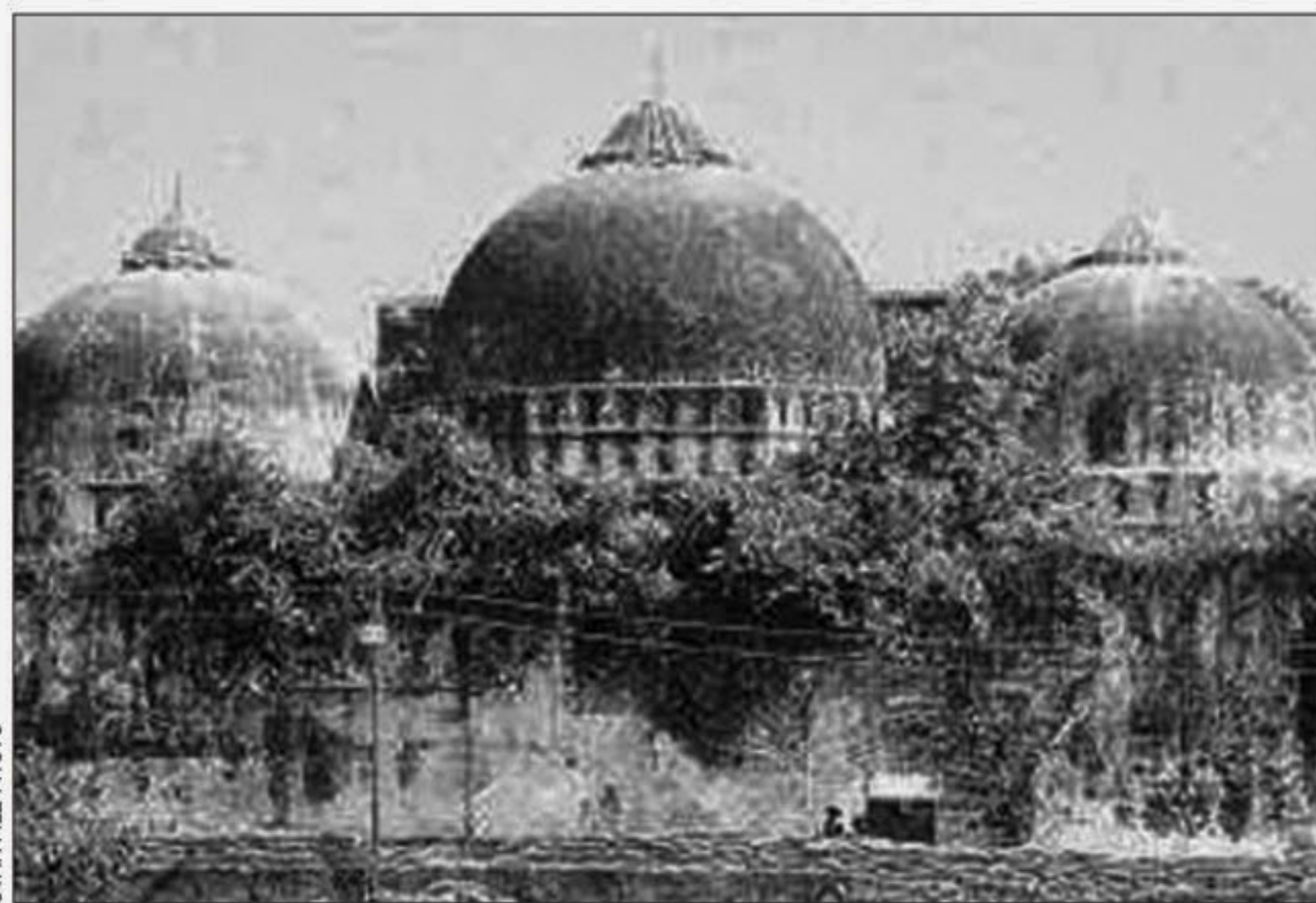
It has been learnt that the safety unit of the R&H department lacks expertise and manpower to perform the job, though a decade has in the meantime passed since creation of the unit. The safety unit has been active for the last one year! Simply put, so far such a huge department like the R&H had been running without an effective safety unit. It is really unbelievable!

The government has to do something to reduce the frequency and number of road tragedies, which are among the highest in the world. And that calls for attacking the problem in its totality, and not in a piecemeal fashion.

On the one hand, the traffic laws have to be strictly enforced, while on the other hand, under no circumstances, quality of the physical infrastructures can be compromised. If these two aspects of the roads are strictly maintained, the number of mishaps is bound to come down drastically.

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## Justice in Ayodhya



Babri Mosque

The Supreme Court must follow the most rigorous Constitutional-jurisprudential discipline in overturning the judgment and spelling out that the rights of Muslims cannot be allowed to be gutted by equating faith with fact, and privileging one religion.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

HOW should India's Supreme Court treat the appeals certain to be filed before it against the Allahabad High Court judgment on the Babri Masjid issue, which dismisses the Sunni Central Waqf Board's title suit and says the site was the birthplace of Lord Ram? Should the Court strive to reconcile the Vishwa Hindu Parishad with the Waqf Board? Or should it overturn the judgment?

Legality and constitutional principles clearly favour the second option, because Muslims were in undisputed possession of the site until 1992. That will also satisfy the one-eighth of India's people who are Muslim and the many secular Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and others unhappy with the verdict. The crucial distinction here is reason, democracy and legality, central to modern citizenship.

The judgment privileges a particular faith, elevates it to law, and baselessly declares that Ram's birthplace lay beneath the mosque's central dome.

It deprives Muslims of their title to the mosque and surrounding land, which

they possessed for centuries. It trifurcates the 2.77-acre plot between Ram Lalla (the infant Ram), Nirmohi Akhara, and the Waqf Board. This may appear even-handed. But, as we see below, it only adds to the verdict's injustice.

While some Muslims feel relieved that the VHP hasn't unleashed celebratory violence, most feel reduced to second-class citizens. Many are worried at the BJP's triumphalist description of the verdict as "a new phase in national integration" (read, forced assimilation of minorities into a majoritarian culture) and Mr L.K. Advani's claim that "the situation no longer is faith versus law, it is faith upheld by law."

The VHP wants the Waqf Board to renounce its portion of the land, so that a grand Ram temple can be built, in return for land elsewhere.

This anti-secular premise assumes that the two communities cannot co-exist or worship close to each other. Such one-sided "reconciliation" will compel Muslims into giving up what's rightfully theirs.

Many Muslims apprehend that the VHP will demand the possession of

hundreds of other mosques, like those in Kashi and Mathura, on similar grounds.

The Supreme Court must address this by reaffirming the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, which prohibits any change in the status of religious places.

However, the Court must go further and unravel the judgment's core. The judgment conflates faith and fact. All three judges regard Ram Lalla a juristic person with the right to property. This should be wholly inadmissible in a modern judicial system.

Two judges (Agarwal and Sharma) are certain a temple existed before the masjid, although not when it was constructed or by whom. Justice Sharma asserts Ram is "everywhere" and his birthplace too is a "juristic person."

Justice Agarwal quotes the Rig-Veda to plead indeterminacy of the facticity of Ram and of Divine Creation -- only to affirm that Ram was born at the Babri site.

While asserting that Ram has existed since time immemorial, the judges ignore a 1988 report of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which found no sign of human habitation in Ayodhya before 2000 BC. They hold that Ram is a historical person -- because Hindus believe so. In fact, they admit and decide a suit filed by Ram, "represented" by a "close friend" and former judge.

All this even goes beyond the BJP's laughably irrational position that whether Ram was born at the site or not is irrelevant; what matters is people's faith that he was.

Justice Sighbatullah Khan takes the December 1949 smuggling in of Hindu idols to the mosque as evidence of Hindu-Muslim "joint possession" and the basis of dividing the property in the crude way typical of village panchayats. He thus legalises a patently illegal act.

The judgment ignores the parties' rights and apports land based on their relative strength or power. But the law and a modern judiciary must treat all citizens -- irrespective of their strength -- as equal.

The judgment relies on a BJP-commissioned 2003 ASI report, based on excavation at the site -- itself a questionable exercise. Archaeological excavation is done by layers, to identify different periods by the discovery of

pottery, etc.

This cannot produce reliable results if the mounds under examination have been dug up -- as happened at the Babri site after 1992.

The 2003 excavation finds were animal bones, burnt-brick powder and lime mortar typical of medieval Islamic construction, and pillars belonging to a much earlier period than 1528.

The judgment accepts the Babri demolition as an accomplished fact, and legitimises it and the following violence. This cannot be excused on the plea that the Court was only deciding a title suit and not the demolition's legality; if the mosque were still standing, the case wouldn't have taken this form. Yet, the judges were deciding petitions filed before the demolition.

This violates all logic and rationality. Former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Kalyan Singh was dismissed for colluding in the demolition and thus violating the Constitutional tenet of secularism.

The Supreme Court upheld his dismissal in 1994, thus treating the demolition as illegal and unconstitutional. The judgment also violates this principle established by the Court.

The judgment follows the "PN Oak School of History," fashioned by a semi-literate bigot, who believed that India's great Islamic monuments were all Hindu temples -- including the Taj Mahal!

These charlatans believe that Indians in the Vedic Ages had manufactured airplanes and nuclear weapons. This shows how intellectually corrupted and communally compromised India's higher judiciary has become.

The Supreme Court must follow the most rigorous Constitutional-jurisprudential discipline in overturning the judgment and spelling out that the rights of Muslims cannot be allowed to be gutted by equating faith with fact, and privileging one religion.

The Allahabad judgment disempowers India's largest religious minority. This will cause strife and discontent rooted in rightful anger at its illegality and irrationality. India can afford neither communal biases in the judiciary and terrible abuse of law nor large-scale popular disaffection if it is to survive as a democracy.

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