Holy Sites Governance and Religious Conflict | Samyukt Kumar | SFS'20

Research Background

- Competing religious claims to land and holy sites have significant implications for people living in these contested areas: two notable examples are Temple Mount, Israel and Ayodhya, India.
- Proper evaluation of the issue requires exploring theological-religious motivations, establishing a historical timeline, and assessing how the historical arc has culminated in current governance.
- Key sources include: theological perspectives, academic political science analyses, scholarly frameworks of justice, legal rulings, and status quo agreements.

Research Question: Using the cases of Temple Mount and Ayodhya, India, how can competing religious claims to holy sites be resolved in a manner that is just and minimizes conflict?

Temple Mount in Jerusalem, Israel

- Considered the holiest site in Judaism, and the third holiest site in Islam – also remains an important site for Christians.
- Composed of the remains of the second Jewish Temple and Al Aqsa mosque.
- Political control of the site left Jewish hands after 70 AD Roman conquest of Jerusalem.
- Roman period was followed by Muslim rule until establishment of the state of Israel.
- Current status quo gives local Muslim authorities governance over the mosque while Jews can pray at the Western Wall.

Babri Masjid / Ram Janmabhumi Site in Ayodhya, India

- Sacred site for Hindus since it is believed to be the birthplace of the god Rama.
- Mosque was built on the site in the 16th century after Mughal conquest of India.
- Recent history of political unrest with rise of Hindutva ideology in modern India.
- Seminal moment in 1992 when Hindu group destroyed the 16th century mosque.
- Supreme Court of India ruling in 2019 cleared the way for Hindus to build new Ram Janmabhumi temple while allocating a separate plot of land for local Muslim waqf.

The long history and present status of these two cases reveal how the ideals of justice and peace can become directly opposed in religious conflicts. Therefore, this paper argues that governments must take a unique forward-looking approach to adjudicating religious disputes and avoid futile attempts to address past religious-based historical grievances.