

'Temple is only a prelude to Ayodhya's development'

For **Prof Manoj Dixit**, the man behind the first Deepotsav in Ayodhya, the upcoming Ram temple is only a prelude to the major development of the holy city. A former vice-chancellor of the RML Avadh University, Ayodhya (from 2017-20), Prof Dixit talks to **Isha Jain** on revitalisation of Lord Ram's birthplace into a cultural, modern, emotional, and clean city. Excerpts:

What was the driving force behind the first Deepotsav?

■ I have been associated with Ayodhya for more than five decades. In 1968, as a seven-year-old boy, I used to pay obeisance to Ram Lalla where a few locals sat on a 'takhat' (wooden bed) and sang 'Ram Dhun'. In 2017, when UP saw a change of guard, I also got a chance to do something for Ayodhya. We took up a plan which was hanging in the balance for two years. Eighteen days before Diwali, we got a nod for a grand Deepotsav, followed by a 'bhavya' and 'divya' Diwali. Revitalisation of Ayodhya began with Deepotsav.

How do you recall the first Deepotsav?

■ It was exciting and challenging. It was a combination of faith and urge to give Ayodhya a new identity. The toughest job was to get 1.7 lakh diyas (earthen lamps) locally to generate employment. Potters of a village Jaisinghpur agreed to prepare 10,000 diyas per day but with the rider that it should be picked up everyday in the evening. These sacks were kept at Ramki Paidi, in the

university and almost anywhere we got some space. Our volunteers were on the job round the clock.

Is there any distinct significance of Deepotsav on Diwali eve?

■ It's exclusive to Ayodhya. On Diwali eve, Bharat was anxiously waiting for Lord Ram's homecoming when Hanuman came in disguise of an ascetic to give the message of Ram's arrival with Sita. An ecstatic Bharat planned for grand welcome. Since Hanuman was the messenger, people of Ayodhya celebrate this day as 'Hanuman Jayanti'.

What are the learnings from Ayodhya?

■ We began with preparing a heritage walk, a 'fam tour' with support of tour agents much before anyone could think of. In the process, I realised it was Lord Ram who chose Ayodhya as his birthplace and this greatness should be preserved. When the Supreme Court ordered for mediation, I was fortunate to host seers and dignitaries like Sri Sri Ravishankar, Champat Rai, and others as the meetings took place on our premises. Last month, I spent two hours with sculptor Arun Yogiraj. My engagement with Ayodhya in the last eight years has been fulfilling.

What did you discuss with Arun Yogiraj?

■ It was an enriching spiritual experience to know that sculptors like him don't make an idol. They see a picture of the deity in a particular stone. Selection of a stone is a long-drawn process. Arun rejected several stones, including the Gandaki stone. This bluish-black stone selected for the idol of Ram Lalla is from Karnataka. He spent a lot of time with children to feel their piousness. He devoted hours with kids from 'devakul' (kings) and touched their limbs before coming up with this idol which is in the form of a five-year-old child.

How do you see Ayodhya's future growth?

■ The opening of the temple is only a prelude to major overhaul for the holy city. Ayodhya needs three-pronged activity. First is its conservation. Second is to create an orbit around this 'Hindu Vatican' that will be a new and developed one. The third is to create 'New Ayodhya' as a modern town.

What is your message for the government on revival of Ayodhya's grandeur?

■ Our idea to hold activities in Ayodhya was to make it participatory. Tourism will only boost when public participation is accelerated.

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