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ASI report says temple existed at the site of Gyanvapi mosque: 5 key takeaways

The report was submitted to the court last month in a sealed cover. It found that sculptural remains in cellars indicate there existed a large Hindu temple. Here's what else the report states.

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Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi in December 2021. (REUTERS/Pawan Kumar/File Photo)

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in its scientific survey report on the Gyanvapi mosque complex has concluded that **“there existed a Hindu temple prior to the construction of the existing structure”** at the site.

The report was submitted to the court last month in a sealed cover. Its copies were given on Thursday (January 25) by the court to Hindu and Muslim litigants in matters related to the dispute over the site. The ASI was tasked by the Varanasi district court in July 2023 to conduct a scientific survey of the mosque and ascertain if it was “constructed over a pre-existing structure of a Hindu temple”.

Here are five key takeaways from the ASI report:

1. The pre-existing structure was probably destroyed in the 17th century, during the reign of Aurangzeb

The report mentions a loose stone with an inscription engraved on it which recorded the construction of the mosque during the reign of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb between the years 1676 and 1677. The inscription also recorded that the mosque was repaired with sahan (courtyard), etc.” in the year 1792-93.

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ASI has a photograph of the loose stone which was taken in the year 1965-66. The report also noted that during the recent survey, it was found that “the lines relating to construction of the mosque and its expansion have been scratched out”.

The pre-existing structure was destroyed after Aurangzeb “issued orders to the governors of all provinces to demolish the schools and temples of the infidels”, according to Maasir-i-Alamgiri (1947) by Sir Jadunath Sarkar.



It added: “On September 2, 1669; ‘it was reported that, according to the Emperor’s command his officers had demolished the temple of Vishwanath at Kashi’ (Jadunath Sarkar (tr.) 1947 Maasir-i-Alamgiri p.55)”.

2. Inscriptions in Devanagari, Grantha, Telugu and Kannada scripts with names of deities found

During the survey, a total of 34 inscriptions were recorded, according to the report. “These are, in fact, inscriptions on the stones of the pre-existing Hindu temples, which have been re-used during the construction/ repair of the existing structure.

They include inscriptions in Devanagari, Grantha, Telugu and Kannada scripts.

Reuse of earlier inscriptions in the structure, suggest that the earlier structures were destroyed and their parts were reused in construction/ repair of the existing structure,” it said.

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The report added that names of deities like Janardhana (another name of Vishnu), Rudra (another name of Shiva), and “Umesvara” were found in the inscriptions. “Terms such as Maha-muktimandapa (while mukti means freedom, mandapa means platform) mentioned in three inscriptions are of great significance,” it stated.

3. Parts of the pre-existing temple were reused for the expansion of the mosque and construction of *sahan*

The survey included an examination of pillars and pilasters (rectangular columns) in the corridor which indicated that they were part of the pre-existing temple.

“For their reuse, in the existing structure, Vyala (a Hindu mythological creature) figures carved on either side of lotus medallion were mutilated and after removing the stone mass from the corners that space was decorated with floral design. This observation is supported by two similar pilasters still existing on the northern and southern wall of the western chamber in their original place,” the report said.

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4. The central chamber and main entrance of the pre-existing structure are part of the existing structure

According to the report, the pre-existing temple had one big central chamber and at least one chamber to the north, south, east, and west respectively.

The central chamber now forms the central hall of the existing structure. “This structure with thick and strong walls, along with all architectural components and floral decorations was utilised as the main hall of the mosque. Animal figures carved at the lower ends of decorated arches of the pre-existing structure were

mutilated, inner part of the dome is decorated with geometric designs,” the report said.

Meanwhile, the main entrance to the central chamber which was from the west is now blocked by stone masonry, the survey found. The entrance used to be decorated with carvings of animals and birds and an ornamental torana (a gateway that marks the entrance to a Buddhist shrine or stupa or to a Hindu temple).

“This large entrance arched gateway had another smaller entrance. Figure carved on the *lalatbimba* (crest figure on entrances) of this small entrance has been chopped off. A small part of it is visible as most of it is covered with bricks, stone and mortar which were used to block the entrance,” according to the report.

5. Sculptural remains in cellars indicate that there existed a large Hindu temple

Under the heading ‘Sculptural Remains in Cellars’, the report noted that pillars from the pre-existing temple were reused to make cellars in the eastern part of the platform — cellars and the platform were constructed in front of the mosque to accommodating a large number of people for prayers.

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“A pillar decorated with bells, niches for keeping lamps on all four sides, and bearing an inscription of Samvat 1669 (corresponding to 1613 CE, January 1, Friday) is reused in cellar N2,” the report stated.

Moreover, sculptures of Hindu deities and carved architectural members were found under the dumped soil in one of the cellars.

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