

India: Recasting Ram: The Ram Temple At Ayodhya Is A Vehicle To Promote Brahminical Supremacy

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On 25 November 2023, Rambhadracharya, the high priest at a temple in the pilgrim town of Chitrakoot, in Madhya Pradesh, told a news channel that the Hindu god Ram had granted him a divine visitation one morning. He had woken up to relieve himself, he said, when Ram appeared before him in the form of a toddler, walked him to the bathroom and then back to his bedroom.

Rambhadracharya is blind and claims to have divine vision. Sudhir Choudhary, a Savarna journalist notorious for running shows against affirmative action, was hosting him on the channel Aaj Tak. Not only did Choudhary refuse to question Rambhadracharya on what could be considered near blasphemy about a much-revered god, he also referred to the priest as “guruji.”

Choudhary instead asked the priest what his divine vision said about the Ram temple, slated to be inaugurated on 22 January. Rambhadracharya said that Ram told him that he, too, should “come and celebrate amrit mahotsav with me.” Amrit Mahotsav is a government term referring to the celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of India’s Independence but, in effect, it is more a propaganda vehicle for Brahminical culture.

During a public event a few weeks before the Madhya Pradesh assembly election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had declared Rambhadracharya a “national heritage,” for his knowledge of the Vedas and other Brahminical literature. Modi also took pride in the fact that his government had honoured Rambhadracharya with the Padma Vibhushan, the country’s second-highest civilian honour, in 2015. Thanking Modi that day, Rambhadracharya said that he had told Ram that he did not want eyes for himself but to be born again in India—and that too “only in a Brahmin ancestry.”

Rambhadracharya is not the only priest whose irrational speeches are being publicly honoured and platformed by Savarna journalists and Bharatiya Janata Party leaders, all in the name of Ram. Over the last few weeks, as the temple inauguration drew near, the mainstream media and BJP leaders have been promoting Brahmin supremacy, and the Brahminical version of Ram, while labelling any rational voices as political, controversial and against Hindu beliefs.

In the first week of January, Nischalanand Saraswati, who holds one of the four highest Hindu ecclesiastical titles—Shankaracharya—told journalists that he would not attend the Ram temple’s inauguration, because it was beneath his station to watch Modi install the statue. He believed the installation could only be done by a dharmacharya—a Brahmin man who is an authority on Hindu dogma. In 2019, Modi had publicly claimed that he belonged to the Extremely Backward Classes. A piqued Saraswati asked what he was supposed to do. “Clap, while Modi will touch the statue at the ceremony?” The shankaracharya has remained a steadfast supporter of the caste system. Projecting a divine persona of himself before the journalists, Saraswati said that, “I used to consider Bhagwati

Sita”—Ram’s wife—“as my elder sister but once, while I was in meditation, Sita asked me to consider her my younger sister.”

Like Choudhary, journalists addressed Saraswati as gurudev and did not counter his statements, which could be considered patronising to the gods. Soon after, Saraswati was invited to a show on CNN News 18, where he explained how only a Brahmin could be a teacher and was qualified to preach, among many other things. Anand Narasimhan, a managing editor and a Tamil Brahmin, interviewed Saraswati, who sat on a couch, while Narasimhan sat on the floor and addressed him as gurudev. Narasimhan also posed leading questions to Saraswati, prompting him to say that the temple would awaken Indians’ religious consciousness. The same week, Dharendra Krishna Shastri, a popular Brahmin preacher, told a pro-government television channel that the Manusmriti, which provides scriptural support to the caste system and codifies its hierarchies, “spoke of humanity” and that those who say otherwise suffer from “mental illness.”

Not just religious leaders, Savarna BJP leaders have also been using Ram to propagate superstitions. On 5 January, Sudhanshu Trivedi, a party spokesperson and a Brahmin, argued on a television show that temples were needed more than hospitals, because hospitals treated only a person’s health while temples built character. Trivedi was countering Tejashwi Yadav, Bihar’s deputy chief minister, who had earlier said that people needed hospitals more than temples. Yadav belongs to the Other Backward Classes.

In December 2023, Trivedi had suggested, in parliament, that India’s economic growth and its decline were linked with the rise and fall, respectively, of the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign. In January 2023, when Chandra Shekhar, a Rashtriya Janata Dal leader from the Shudra community, criticised the sixteenth-century Brahmin writer Tulsidas, for denigrating Shudras in his epic Ramcharitmanas, Trivedi justified the offensive verse by saying that those criticising it did not understand its true meaning.

Recently, Jitendra Awhad, a Nationalist Congress Party leader from a nomadic tribe, said, “Ram belongs to Bahujans. The Ram who hunts and eats meat is ours.” Referring to Valmiki’s Ramayana, Awhad suggested that Ram ate meat since he lived in a forest for fourteen years. In his extensive writings on Hinduism, BR Ambedkar noted that Ram and Krishna were not Vedic gods but cults that originated among local communities before being appropriated by Brahmins.

While Awhad claimed Ram as the god of his community and took pride in its meat-eating culture, the mainstream media immediately distorted his statement as controversial. Rambhadracharya refused to accept Awhad’s reference of Valmiki. He said the chapter which Awhad had referred to was “prakshipt” —a later addition and that “it can’t be accepted as evidence.” Trivedi suggested something similar, saying that only those who graduated from Vedic schools, with Sanskrit as their language, were qualified for commenting on religious books. These arguments, that non-Brahmin interpretations of religious books are invalid, reek of caste superiority and reinforce the idea that only Brahmins are qualified to read and preach about religious books.

The same week, Champat Rai Bansal, the general secretary of the Ram Janmabhoomi Teertha Kshetra—the trust responsible for constructing the temple complex at Ayodhya—went one step further in promoting the Sangh Parivar’s narrative of Ram. In response to a woman’s question, at a gathering of his followers, over whether Sita would reside in the temple, Bansal said that since Ram was being depicted as a five-year-old child, his wife’s idol would not be installed next to him. Instead, she would be placed on the first floor of the temple, with Ram’s three other brothers, while the Ram idol would be alone on the ground floor. Bansal was not just being a guardian to the god but also deciding Ram’s age.

The “perpetual minority” of Ram was debated at length before the Supreme Court. Ram was accepted as a juristic personality with rights like humans, but his perpetual minority status was subjected to limitation. It meant that Ram could not forever be a minor. It was only because of Ram’s minor status that the Hindu litigants were able to institute the case on the god’s behalf. “The legal fiction of a deity as a minor has been evolved to obviate the inability of the deity to institute legal proceedings on its own,” the bench wrote in its judgement. “A human agent must institute legal proceedings on behalf of the deity to overcome the disability. However, the fiction has not been extended to exempt the deity from the applicability of the law of limitation.” Nevertheless, the trust has given Ram an age. The real question, though, is if the trust will transfer the seventy acres, given by the union government to it, and an equal amount of additional land it bought in Ram’s name, back to the god when Ram becomes an adult or if it will continue to be his custodian. Also, who will decide when Ram will become an adult is something never publicly talked about. None of this has been discussed by the media.

In February 2022, during the assembly election campaign in Uttar Pradesh, Bansal said that the BJP had the “full right to take credit for the construction of Ram temple” and that citizens should vote for such people. It was a purely political statement from a trust that has claimed in court that it is a private body. Yet, no media outlet ever called Bansal’s statement political or controversial. In December 2023, Bansal appeared on a television show, sat next to the Ram ki Paidi, and almost flexed his political clout when he said, “It will be good for opposition leaders if they stayed quiet. If you stay quiet, your name may figure in the invitation.”

The trust also enjoys a tax exemption on the contributions it receives, which stood at over Rs3,000 crore as of March 2023. The way the trust controls the temple and takes decisions on the god’s behalf is now very obvious. In January 2023, Jagdanand Singh, a Rashtriya Janata Dal leader from the Rajput community, insinuated that, as a devout follower of Ram, it pained him to see how the god had been appropriated for political mileage. “Ram has been prisoned in a splendid building,” he said. “He used to live in every element of this nation before. India will no more belong to Ram but only a temple will belong to Ram.” The media, again, branded the statement as controversial, even though it was nothing but a warning for Hindus to avoid capitulating to political propaganda that limits Ram to one place.

Similarly, in November 2023, Swami Prasad Maurya, a Backward Classes leader from the Samajwadi Party, questioned the ritual being organised by the trust on 22 January to install Ram’s statue. The trust has called the installation of Ram’s statue as “Pran Pratishtha”—which literally means pumping life into something. Maurya said, “How can you breathe life into someone who has been worshipped for thousands of years? Is this because you want to show you are above god?” One would assume that it was a genuine question that any loyal devotee to Ram was liable to ask. Maurya, too, was branded controversial by the media.

The media and BJP leaders are dumbing down the intellect of Hindus by propagating Brahmin supremacy, superstitions, political Hinduism and a dogmatic version of Ram. In their attempt to preserve caste privileges, they are creating a pliable population that will be unable to strive for an equal and healthy society.

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