

Trumped by a Religious Myth

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India's United Progressive Alliance came to power in 2004 on a secular platform. But it has now beaten an ignominious retreat on the Ram Setu (Adam's Bridge) issue pertaining to the proposed Sethusamudram ship-canal project in the Palk Straits by caving in to the Sangh Parivar.

Having told the Supreme Court through an affidavit filed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) that there is no clinching evidence that the shoal/sandbar structure in the Gulf of Mannar was built by Lord Rama's followers, it executed a U-turn as soon as it sensed that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bharatiya Janata Party might exploit it by misconstruing it as "anti-Hindu."

The Sangh Parivar contends that the affidavit denies Ram's existence and constitutes "blasphemy" and an "insult to the Hindus." As L K Advani claimed, "the government has sought to negate all that the Hindus consider sacred ... and wounded the very idea of India."

Following media spin, some secular liberals too wrongly described the affidavit as overreaching or tactless because it callously "denies Ram's existence, goes beyond saying that the Setu is a natural formation, and comments on the historicity of sacred texts like the Ramayana and Tulasidas's Ramacharitamanas.

However, a close look shows that the affidavit merely rejects the view that such texts are an incontrovertible historical record which proves that the Setu is a man-made structure. The ASI had to say this because the communal petitioners moving the court relied primarily on the Ramayana and Ramacharitamanas as clinching evidence that the Setu was man-made.

Leaving that contention unrefuted would have meant giving in to the idea that faith must always trump history, archaeology, even geology — which explains the existence of natural

formations like Adam's Bridge — and accepting that the project must be scrapped because of myths and scriptures, not fact.

Yet, the affidavit is extremely deferential to the scriptures: "The ASI is aware of and duly respects the deep religious import bestowed upon these texts by the Hindu community across the globe..." Yet, it argues that no material evidence, such as human remains or other artefacts, has been discovered at the site, which would corroborate the mythological account.

It also quotes studies by the Space Applications Centre, Ahmedabad, which "conclusively" show that the Setu formation is purely natural, and says that the imagery collected by the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) cannot be interpreted as "proof" of a man-made structure. NASA itself has clarified that remote visual images cannot prove or disprove this.

Historians also concur that the Setu cannot be considered a man-made entity because no material evidence to authenticate this has been found. That's not all. A Geological Survey of India study around Adam's Bridge, based on drilling holes into submerged rocks, also found "no evidence" of man-made structures. It revealed three cycles of sedimentation of clay, limestone and sandstone — a natural phenomenon which occurred thousands of years before humans settled in peninsular India.

The ASI succinctly summarised all this. It could have been more diplomatic in wording its affidavit. But it's doubtful if that would have satisfied those opposing the project on grounds not amenable to reason or scientific debate.

Yet, the mere threat of an agitation by the Sangh Parivar against disturbing the Setu through the canal project so unnerved the government that it abjectly apologised for the affidavit. Law Minister H R Bhardwaj said: "Lord Rama is an integral part of Indian culture and ethos ... and cannot be a matter of debate ... His existence can't be put to the test... The whole world exists because of Rama." Bhardwaj got melodramatically poetic: "Just as the Himalayas are the Himalayas, the Ganga is the Ganga, Rama is Rama... It's a question of faith. There is no requirement of proof" for such faith.

The same Bhardwaj was minister of state for law in the mid-1980s, and advised Rajiv Gandhi to commit two acts of “appeasement” within one month: first, open the gates of the Babri Masjid and trigger a communal mobilisation, and second, amend laws to annul the Shah Bano verdict. These disastrous moves alienated the Congress from both communities, and ensured the BJP’s meteoric rise from a mere two Lok Sabha seats in 1984 to 89 in 1989. The rest is history.

Last week too, the UPA cravenly capitulated to the VHP-BJP’s bullying, without making even token criticism of their gross distortion of the ASI affidavit. Instead, it started looking for scapegoats within — the ASI’s senior directors and Culture Minister Ambika Soni. All that made the UPA change its mind was a few VHP marches in one day!

The UPA’s disgraceful U-turn buoyed up the Sangh Parivar, which has been in ideological and organisational disarray, as evidenced by new power struggles within the BJP, and growing tensions between it and the VHP/RSS.

It’s a sign of the relative acceptance that soft-Hindutva continues to enjoy among the Indian elite that the UPA’s appeasement of the Parivar has attracted very little criticism from the mainstream media. Perhaps many liberals felt relieved that the UPA quickly defused the crisis by withdrawing the ASI affidavit, thus preventing another hysterical mobilisation on a religious-political issue.

Whatever the reason, such passivity doesn’t bode well for Indian society.

Three conclusions follow. First, this episode demonstrates the UPA’s weak-kneed response to majoritarian communalism rather than the strength of the popular sentiment on the Ram Setu issue, which is, if anything, diffuse. The UPA simply didn’t have the stomach to assert the relevant scientific-historical arguments in self-defence. By caving in to the Parivar, it legitimised the communal claim that there’s an overwhelming “Hindu sentiment” on the Ram Setu.

In reality, the Hindus are an extraordinarily complex, large and diverse community. Hindu myths and legends about Rama and Ravana differ widely

not just between the North and the South, but within the regions too. Any view that artificially homogenises this diversity distorts reality.

Indeed, it's doubtful if many devout Hindus even know about the Setu — just as most of them probably hadn't even heard of Ram Janmabhoomi until the Sangh Parivar launched its agitation after the Babri Masjid's gates had been unlocked. In any case, one doesn't have to believe in the Setu's historicity to be a good Hindu.

Second, it's simply false to argue that to be "authentic," Indian secularism must be rooted in the culture of the religious majority, and that such culture must include myths and scriptures, while excluding archaeology, history and science.

Secularism involves the basic separation of religion and politics. In the Indian case, secularism derives as much from universal citizenship cutting across religious lines, as from the imperative of tolerance and inter-communal harmony.

Finally, by capitulating to the Parivar, the UPA has violated the Constitutional mandate to uphold secular values and not to privilege a particular religion or belief system. This mandate is part of the Basic Structure of the Indian Constitution. It dictates that decisions about development projects should be taken on social, environmental and economic grounds, not mythological ones.

Each time the Indian state bends to fundamentalist pressure, it compromises itself, and allows public reason to be trumped by religious belief or private prejudice. This isn't the mark of a society that aspires to modernity, tolerance and pluralism.

P.S.

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