

## **WHEN DOORDARSHAN'S RAM REACHED AYODHYA**

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It is more than just interesting that Narendra Modi's government has decided to telecast the two great epics of India once again after three long decades, just when it was assured a mammoth captive locked in audience. Let us delve a little deeper into the connection between these two record-breaking serials of Doordarshan and the rise of communal politics in India. This will also help those who are still struggling to understand how the Modi comet appeared in 2014 and completely blazed out all traces of 67 long years of secularism practised by the Indian republic, sometimes quite sincerely and rather patchily in others. At the same time, this little historical excursion would tell us not to apportion so much credit to a single person or his cohorts, even if their narcissism so demands.

Let us zoom without further ado to the exact year, 1989, when the latest model of Ram emerged victorious from the television screen before the freshly charged Hindu masses. 1989 is also when the infant Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP) began its first public country-wide demonstration of communal fury and aggressive Hindu politics started rocking the box office of Indian politics. We see that from this date, it took undisguised Hindu extremism, represented by Narendra Modi, exactly 25 years to capture power. It may also be worthwhile to introspect why the left liberals lost the battle so hopelessly, when they had a full quarter of a century to devise an effective response. And, what is more intriguing is that reasonably secular governments had held sway during almost the entire period. The Congress party ruled or led the ruling coalition for over 16 of these 25 years and a not-so-virulent Vajpayee for 6 years, a squeamish but secular VP Singh for a full year. In other words, the present deadly uncontrollable virus of communalism actually grew and prospered during secular rule, through recurrent riots, the post-Babri barbarity and Gujarat-type pogroms, which our colonial administration had tutored us to treat as 'law and order' problems.

But to reach 1989, we need to go over the incubation period that started in 1986, when Rajiv Gandhi's Congress that had shattered electoral records to win the Lok Sabha elections of November 1984, had already begun to display panic once the Bofors gun deal controversy appeared. This is when Rajiv passed the retrograde Muslim Women (Protection on Divorce) Act, to appease Muslim

hard liners. His Act nullified the orders of the High Court and Supreme Court in the Shah Bano case declaring that divorced Muslim women must be maintained by their ex-husbands. The 'secular' Congress's reversion of this order is among the many irritants that rankle Hindus, which the BJP soon capitalised. In late 1986, Rajiv Gandhi's minister in charge of information and broadcasting, Ajit Kumar Panja, approved the commissioning of a religious serial, Ramayan, on state-controlled television, Doordarshan. Why the age-old policy of the secular state not to glorify one religion was violated remains a mystery that I could not unravel even as the CEO of Prasar Bharati that supervises Doordarshan. Not everything is noted in the files. The Ramayan serial started telecasting from January 1987 and went on till July 1988 and we all know how wildly popular it was among the people. In playing to the gallery, the television version of this epic and the next one, Mahabharat, that followed it from October 1988 to July 1990, did not or could not reflect India's argumentative and intensely tolerant culture. As we know, popular television serials harp more on emotions and reduce everything to 'lowest common cultural denominators'.

What is more remarkable is the behavioural transformation of the common, non-communal Hindu, once the magic of this new wonder called colour TV actually brought Ram, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman to real life. The television metamorphosed distant bookish characters, whose tales were confined earlier to monotonous recitals by pundits and old people, into vibrant, real-life, close-to-touch 'deities'. My submission is that Doordarshan inadvertently helped the Sangh parivar ride the new wave of popular religious enthusiasm, as we may note from the dates we shall see soon.

Though the impact of the televised epics on the growth of Hindu politics has engaged the attention of foreign academics like Christophe Jaffrelot, Barbara Stoler Miller, James Hegarty, David Ludden, Victoria Farmer and Philip Lutgendorf, Indian scholars have hardly studied this nexus. One could locate just two exceptions who hinted at or examined the relation between this decision of the secular Congress and the outburst of communalism in India. New York based Arvind Rajagopal's *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (2001) is, indeed, welcome and comes close to the magisterial overview of Richard Hoggart's *Mass Media in a Mass Society: Myth and Reality* (2004). Fewer Indian academics, mostly left liberal, took the trouble to attempt any detailed empirical analysis to prove, or disprove, the links between the Ramayana serial and the Rama-Janambhoomi demand. The Mahabharat serial has somehow managed to draw a little more attention and we have an Indian researcher like Ananda Mitra publishing his *Television & Popular Culture in India – Study of Mahabharat*, as early as in 1993. James Hegarty of Cardiff is, however, more explicit in observing how Doordarshan's Mahabharat offered "televised darshan of deities"

and describes the atmosphere generated as “politically chilling”. As a Sanskrit scholar specialising in this epic, Hegarty feels that the TV serial offered “no room for ‘the other’ at all.... and it explicitly excludes all those who do not subscribe to its historical vision” (“The Plurality of the Sanskrit Mahabharata and of the Mahabharata Story” in DN Jha, 2013: 179).

As soon as the Ramayan serial had created a new, unprecedented bond between the god and common Hindus, as never before, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) swopped down on the small, dusty down of Ayodhya. It rode the Ramayan wave to remind all that this corporal symbol of Ram’s birth needed to be ‘rescued’ from the clutches of ‘Muslim invaders’. The Sangh strategy was to arouse all Hindus by painting them as victims, not only under Muslim and British rule, but also under the ‘pro-Muslim Congress’. But let us fast forward to the events of 1989, the landmark year, when a new nine-year old party, the BJP started utilising Ram right from January. By November, Bhagawan Ram’s instant-delivery blessings showered them with an incredible number of 85 Lok Sabha seats in that month’s elections were held — up from a paltry number of 2 seats in 1984.

The VHP opened the innings by announcing its determination to set up a Ram Mandir at the disputed site in Ayodhya, come what may. It declared that it would hold its sacred shilanyas ceremony at the venue in November that very year. The All India Babri Masjid Action Committee, in turn, started forming ‘defence squads’. But the Hindu programme was better timed as the Prayag Kumbh Mela was the perfect occasion to harvest roaring support from the millions gathered, literally soaked in religion. Even the Sant Sammelan, held alongside in February, obviously pledged complete assistance. The year-long campaign turned belligerent and secular forces were completely on their back foot, as they failed to gauge how much the masses had been mesmerised by the Ramayan serial. Having kept an antiseptic distance from Hindu epics and purans, left liberals just could not fathom how a mythical character could re-define politics and kindle so much Hindu fervour. Doordarshan, incidentally, kept running the Mahabharat serial throughout 1989 and well into 1990, infusing thereby weekly shots of holy adrenalin into Hindus. The Sangh parivar’s unique and imaginative campaign of requesting every Hindu or each group to subscribe to just one brick for the temple, worked wonders, despite the scorn it received from liberal secular forces.

Excitement and tension ran high throughout the year and the two major events of November 1989 were obviously inter-twined. The Sangh parivar organised its long-awaited Ram Shila Pujan to demonstrate its serious commitment to building the Ram Mandir, and the BJP sailed through the Lok Sabha elections that very month — bagging a whooping number of 85 seats. The party thus

emerged as the indispensable ally of Prime Minister VP Singh whose minority government (December 1989 to November 1990) depended on this large chunk of BJP seats. We will not get into greater details of how Singh was arm-twisted by the BJP for this support and how he retaliated by splitting the Hindu votes, by shrewdly accepting the Mandal Commission Report in August of 1990. He split the Hindu vote by reserving 27 percent of seats in education and jobs for 'Other Backward Castes' (OBCs).

The cornered BJP responded by riding once again the Ram-Ayodhya wave. Its President, Lal Krishna Advani, criss-crossed the country in September-October of 1990 on his war chariot, the Ram Ratha Yatra. This whipped up the desired passions and mass hysteria, leading to several police firings, communal riots and left hundreds dead. But, the BJP had finally managed to shake, quite threateningly, the monopoly of the secular-democratic narrative that had ruled for the first four decades after Independence.

Even foreign commentators realised what was coming next but the new government under Narasimha Rao, that was almost bankrupt in more than one sense, just looked the other way. In the USA, noted classicist, Barbara Stoler Miller, devoted much of her presidential address to the Association of Asian Studies in 1991, more than a year before the Babri incident, on how the serials of the two epics on Doordarshan came "with religious intensity, linked with politicized communal feelings, that has made the Ayodhya situation so compelling. The way militant Hindus have structured the narrative of Ayodhya's sacred history and bent the epic universe to their definition of Indian national identity is a striking example of how vulnerable the past is to the passions of the moment"(Miller, 1991: 790). There is little point in recalling the destruction of the masjid on 6th December 1992, which led to large scale riots and counter riots and terrorism, like the serial explosions in Mumbai. These broke down Hindu Muslim relations in secular India, beyond repair, but Rao's 'secular' Congress government shamelessly abdicated its responsibilities, while the learned publications by secular intellectuals proved to be as effective as pea-shooters. The masses had surely moved away.

We have just raced through these facts to explain that the Sangh parivar has been on the task of generating Hindu fervour since then and that communalism did not suddenly burst on the scene from 2014. We may analyse some other time how the interregnum of a quarter of a century between 1989 and 2014, was hardly be utilised by secular parties that had held power for most of the time. The bitter truth is neither they nor the left intelligentsia, that was outsourced the task of scripting what was to be taught in educational institutions, could construct any appropriate response. In fact, the deliberate distancing of the left liberal forces from religion left the field wide open to the Hindu right, and it

thrived on the secular syllabi of schools and colleges that portrayed Muslims as brutal invaders. We will close this discussion here, as our present purpose is to focus on a widely ignored area, the Doordarshan connection. We observe how the small screen poured out unending streams of piety and also how these were quickly and effectively converted into venom — for a Narendra Modi to emerge.