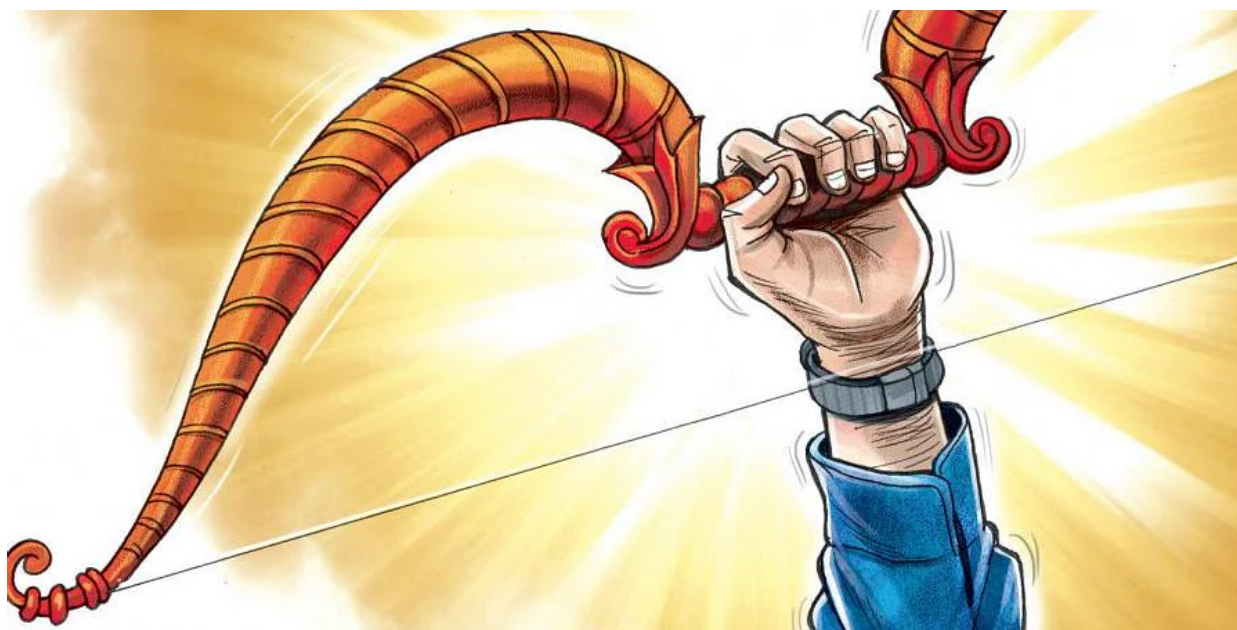


The Ramayana tradition and Indian secularism

By Jawhar Sircar



The shipping channel that was to cut through Sethusamudram was then put into limbo. (Express Illustrations)

Two recent news stories about Ram from two extremes of India, Ayodhya and Ram Setu, would have caught one's attention. Where Ayodhya is concerned, the Pandora's box had actually been opened long ago, in December 1949, when KKK Nair, the not-so-secular district magistrate of Faizabad, facilitated the sudden 'appearance' of Ram-Sita images inside Babri Masjid.

This cauldron was kept boiling on medium heat and the several non-communal governments that ruled India and Uttar Pradesh for four decades forgot to turn off the knob. This furnace was, however, stoked quite vigorously after the new BJP (born 1980) achieved a pathetic score of just two seats in the 1984 elections. The Sangh Parivar desperately scoured for an effective weapon when Bhagwan Ram appeared as a godsend. The fact that his exact janmabhoomi had been destroyed and occupied by a mosque was just the perfect agenda for the Sangh.

Inadvertently or otherwise, Rajiv Gandhi's government actually bolstered the Sangh's cause—first in 1986, by acquiescing to the opening of the mosque's locks and then, widely telecasting the Ramayan serial over Doordarshan in 1987 and 1988. Therefore, blaming Lal Krishna Advani for his rath yatra that whipped up nationwide frenzy in September-October 1990 appears inane. He was only reaping a ripe harvest. Poor secularism; it died a painful death on 6 December 1992 when the masjid was demolished. What we miss out in this oft-repeated events-bound narrative is the purport of what Ram and Ramayana really stand for. By focusing excessively on the symptoms and manifestations, rationalists and Left-liberal scholars dismiss it all as mythology.

The inescapable fact is that though the BJP surely gained a lot, it did not invent Ram or the Ramayana and the associated tradition. This party bothers little for intellectual callisthenics and is now busy consolidating its position further—by reaching out to the masses to donate towards the construction of the temple. After all, the BJP's earlier campaign in the late 1980s, getting people to sponsor simple Shri Ram-inscribed bricks for the mandir, helped galvanise millions to its cause. This was, indeed, a runaway success and the party would surely love to repeat it now.

And whether President Kovind was correct or not in publicly giving money for the temple is purely an academic concern. His predecessor, Pranab Mukherjee, invariably transformed into an orthodox Hindu priest for four days during the annual Durga pujas at his ancestral home, but he remained, nevertheless, unshakably secular all his life. An Imam's son, APJ Abdul Kalam was proud to be a devout, practising Muslim, but was equally open to Hindu culture, philosophy and swamis as well. President Kovind's benevolence did not, however, create the controversy that some on both sides wished for, and now it is over to actor Akshay Kumar to lead the campaign.

The other smaller news recently was that the government has directed the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the National Institute of Oceanography to examine the age of the Ram Setu shoal and determine the antiquity of Ram's period in history. This sent me back to 2008, when, immediately after assuming charge of the Ministry of Culture, I had to get into fire-fighting mode. The ASI's affidavit sworn before the Supreme Court that there is no historical evidence of Ram and the Ram Setu had created a turbulent storm. Two ASI officers were suspended, and even the prime minister was under considerable attack. But several in the ASI still insisted that this was the hard truth.

The shipping channel that was to cut through Sethusamudram was then put into limbo. A dozen years later, the same ASI and a reputed scientific body are all set to prove that Ram's Setu is surely historical. To hammer the Ramayana too hard on the anvil of historicity may, however, be misplaced, as much of faith is beyond reason. This is true for all religions and singling out any one for ridicule has actually antagonised numerous believers against secularism itself. This concept has two different mutations. The first is the Gandhian one that immerses itself into religious belief and idiom, but treats all faiths equally.

The other is the Western model that keeps an antiseptic distance from religion, all religions, and worships rationality. What we forget is that this ideal emerged at a late stage of history, after centuries of bloody religious warfare and long-drawn struggles against the Church for constantly stifling reason and science. The problem with my fellow secularists is that we are so steeped in Western secularism that we are unable to appreciate that India is totally submerged in religion.

Where Hinduism is concerned, its values and moral architecture are built on the lessons elaborated in the hundreds of stories embedded in the two epics and elaborated in the puranas. Collectively, they constitute not only a very federal Bible, they also represent the basic treaty that binds Hindus of different shades, regions, sects and cults. Almost every thought and expression is based on the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. In Euclidean geometry, we accept the point or the line, even when they have no dimension and cannot exist in space. We do so to gain from the consequential superstructure of knowledge. Our same West-inspired approach, however, belittles the faithful in India for drawing comfort from religion and myths.

Jawhar Sircar (Tweets @jawharsircar)

Retired civil servant. Former Culture Secretary and ex-CEO, Prasar Bharati