

## Recalling an Ayodhya that was not a fountainhead of sectarian strife

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Once again, Ayodhya was in the news during July 2013, and again, for all the wrong reasons. The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a venomous organization with equal hatred for the minorities and the nation, had tried to infiltrate Ayodhya yet again, but was stopped by the state government. It was a game well played: a communal organization attempted to regain lost ground by undertaking a Parikrama (journey of faith) that is not allowed in the inauspicious rainy season, according to the Hindu calendar. In stopping the yatra, the state government had made a badly needed cosmetic move to hide its rabidly communal character, evident by its handling of riots against minorities. The game was played at the cost of Ayodhya and all that it has stood for, for centuries.

Ayodhya no longer remains a quaint kasbah on the bank of the Sarayu river. Instead, it is the name of a fear, the mere mention of which sends shivers down minority spines. In fact, Ayodhya scares minorities across South Asia, be they Muslims in India or Hindus in Pakistan and Bangladesh. When something untoward happens here, the poor Hindus of Bangladesh are made to pay for that with their life and property. When a centuries-old building is torn down here by fanatic Hindu mobs, a thousand temples are razed in Pakistan by equally fanatic Muslim mobs.

Ayodhya was not always a fountainhead of communal violence and hatred. It still is not, perhaps. I know this because I am from there, from a village 28 kilometers to its east. I know, because it has always been a part of my growing up. I know, because my father not only went to school there, but also went on to become president of the student union of the (then) only post graduate college in town.

I know, because it was always there when I went to university or returned. I know, because it was there, when I used to visit my maternal grandmother and aunts as they all lived on the other side of the river. I know, because I have stayed with my relatives in Ayodhya a hundred times. I know, because it was always present in the conversations of my parents, friends and others of my acquaintance.

That Ayodhya is very different to the Ayodhya of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) clan. That one was a town known for its temples and Parikramas. It was an idea that lived far beyond its boundaries. It was where 'Ram Ram' was the general salutation, with no chants of 'Jai Shri Ram'. In this Ayodhya, all the Ramnamis (scarves with Ram written on them, used as offerings to Hindu gods) and the khandau (wooden slippers) necessary for performing religious rituals were made by Muslims.

This was an Ayodhya where not a single riot took place despite all the venomous attempts of the RSS clan. In fact, Ayodhya remains the same in that much at least; not a single riot has taken place here locally, barring those conducted by outsiders (read: fanatic Karsewaks).

Not that everything was fine in that Ayodhya. On the contrary, it reflected everything wrong in broader Hindu society. It was as much a hotbed of caste discrimination as any other place in India. Its khandaus, made by Muslim artisans, never adorned the feet of Dalits (I find this to be a blessing in disguise really, as who would want to wear those uncomfortable slippers.)

This was the Ayodhya that I grew up with, at least until the RSS clan came into the picture during the 1980s. It was the hinge upon which the life of people in eastern Uttar Pradesh rested. It gave them their joys and their sorrows. Its Parikramas gave people the opportunity to escape from their mundane lives, often the only opportunity they ever had. This Ayodhya reminds me of my grandfather, who kept inventing excuses to visit the town. This Ayodhya reminds me of all those sad evenings when people took the dead bodies of

their near and dear ones to be cremated at the Ghats of Ayodhya. This was the town with which I could never break off emotional and cultural ties, despite having largely turned into an atheist by then.

And then, it all started changing. The RSS clan had started spreading its venomous fangs with its Ram Janmabhoomi movement<sup>2</sup> in 1984. Unfortunately for the nation, the RSS found a silent supporter in the then invincible Congress party, the self-designated custodian of secularism in India. In 1986, Congress allowed a district court judge to order the Mosque be opened for Hindus. Having drawn the first blood, they started a 'Shilapujan' (worshipping the bricks to be used to build the Ram Temple) campaign. The Congress allowed that too.

I still have frightening memories of the 'Shilapujan', which was perhaps the first yatra of faith that insulted faith itself. I remember, with horror, the trucks that came amidst anti-Muslim chants. Communal relationships had started to change. Distrust had begun to seep in. Age-old friends had started getting uncomfortable. The jinni of hatred was out of the bottle.

The RSS clan had successfully changed the image of a peaceful, profound Ram, going to the jungle with Sita and Lakshman into one with a raised bow ready to raid the towns. What happened subsequently is well known. L. K. Advani, who has now quite unbelievably turned into a secular leader, went on a Rathayatra that left a trail of blood behind. He succeeded in dividing India once again; for those affected by the mayhem, it was the return of Partition. Babri Mosque was razed to the ground, and the criminals responsible for this were in power in Uttar Pradesh instead of being in jail for their crime. The Bhartiya Janata Party, the political arm of the RSS clan, was on its way to power in New Delhi.

Once in power, they happily forgot both Ayodhya and Ram, a telling comment on the real character of the RSS clan: they were never fighting for Lord Ram or his temple, and they knew it. They had, in fact, turned the faith into a begging bowl for votes. They had turned the Parikramas into poll planks. They had turned Ayodhya, a town we love, into a living hell.

It is just that they had done all this with a little less insult to the Hinduism that they claim to be champions of, than this time around. At that time, they had firmly stuck to the rituals and beliefs a vast majority of the country adheres to, in order to assault Islam. They had used tradition to polarize people for electoral gain.

This time however, they seem to be assaulting Hinduism itself. All the Parikramas of Ayodhya take place according to their stipulated times in the Hindu calendar. This one, 84 Kosi, takes place in Chaitra (roughly April) and begins in Makhauda, in the neighbouring Basti district and not Ayodhya. For the uninitiated, Makhauda is believed to be the place where Raja Dashrath, the father of Lord Ram had conducted Putreshti Yagya (worship for getting a son) and gave his sister as Dakshina (ritual gift) to Rishi Shringi. (Did he ask her willingness and how could a human being be gifted to someone, remain amongst the early questions leading me on my journey to disbelief, but that is besides the point.)

Makhauda is very close to my village and I have seen the yatra year after year. Like many others, I stood against the assault upon Islam. It is the turn of those who did not stand up then, allowing these perpetrators to get so emboldened, to do so now. It is time for all the faithful to save their religion from its self-appointed custodians. Otherwise, Hinduism will face further insults for their petty interests.

Do not delude yourselves that the state government is going to stop this communal charge. They are playing this game together; polarization will help the state equally in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. If you are not prepared to announce that faith is not sellable for electoral gain, then you should prepare for another round of mayhem.

An atheist calling upon the faithful to save their religion is perhaps absurd. It is less absurd however, than the insults the VHP has thrown at the faithful. Moreover, a little absurdity can be indulged if my Ayodhya can be regained from violent clutches.

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1 'Ram Ram' was a regional greeting that had transcended religion; even Muslims of eastern Uttar Pradesh used it until the 1980s, when it was replaced by 'Jai Shri Ram', an aggressive Hindu chant.

2 The movement was to build a Ram Temple at the site of an existing Mosque, as this is the alleged birthplace of Rama. From 1853 to 1949 separate areas were marked for Muslims and Hindus to worship. In December 1949, after Hindu idols were placed in the Mosque, a serious dispute arose between the two communities, which led to the locking of the Mosque by the government, on grounds of a 'disputed area'.