

A bridge for Ravana

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Former Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev once described politicians as people who will promise to build a bridge even where no river exists! Our politicians have gone one better. They are claiming the existence of a bridge where none exists. The bridge of course is the Ram Setu, supposedly built by Rama, the exiled prince of Ayodhya, in his quest to defeat Ravana the king of Lanka. The scientific evidence available does not support this. The Geological Survey of India, after an in-depth study, concluded that far from being a manmade structure, the Ram Setu is a natural formation that is over 175,000 years old. Ironically, the 2002 study was commissioned by Uma Bharati, then Union minister for coal and mines in the BJP-led NDA regime.

Now not even Murli Manohar Joshi, the sometime physics professor and the BJP's in-house expert on all science matters — be it Ganesha sipping milk or the original thermonuclear weapon, the Brahmastra — would claim that Rama existed well before the advent of the ice age which in turn preceded the migration of homosapiens from Africa. Realising that scientific evidence and reason do not support them, politicians seem to be saying that while that may be the reality, and the truth is what we believe. This is as irrational and steeped in unreason as 'Immaculate Conception' or walking on water. From the drift of the government's panicky and knee-jerk reaction, it seems that believers have won the day.

Actually, there are two kinds of believers. One is the true believer suckered by faith. The world is full of them and their tribe keeps increasing. The showman PT Barnum famously opined that there is one born every minute — meaning suckers. The second kind of believers and this is the more dangerous of the species, are the rational ones who believe that the masses are stupid and gullible and can be swayed by emotion into voting for them. LK Advani leads this pack in the BJP and considering the alacrity with which the government disowned its affidavit in the court, Manmohan Singh heads the pack in the Congress. Singh's contribution to this theological debate was the comment that since the Guru Granth Sahib also referred to Rama, everything else attributed to him must also be true. Good God!

The real question at the hub of this matter is whether the Ram Setu or Adams Bridge, be it the 175,000 plus years old natural geological formation or a bridge built by Rama, can be cut through to facilitate a project that has immense economic promise. The Ram Setu is over 30 km long and the Sethusamudram canal only envisages a cut 300m wide. Ironically, the BJP seems to be saying that since it is manmade it must be respected as archeologically significant and hence not to be altered in any way. This is rich coming from a bunch of fellows who had few qualms over bringing down the ASI protected Babri Masjid.

The UPA government's original affidavit stated it to be what it actually is, a natural formation and not a creation of blind belief. Now the government has retracted that and has joined the 'it-is-god-created' bandwagon. One can be sure that its articulate minister for science and technology will come up with a suitable explanation for what is so clearly based on unscientific belief. This is just a repeat of Rajiv Gandhi laying the shilanyas for a Ram janmabhoomi temple at Ayodhya in 1989 on the advice of the likes of Buta Singh. Now this government is acting on the advice of the likes of HD Bhardwaj.

Under any other dispensation, people like Buta Singh and Bhardwaj will be treated as jokes, but in the intellectually arid Congress only weeds thrive. So we have a situation where one lot is saying that it should be deemed an ASI protected monument and the other is saying it is actually much more than that. In either case we are now among the believers.

Our problems stem from our misunderstanding the notion of secularism. To be secular one has to be a skeptic and therefore rational and reasonable. If not in full measure then imbued with a great deal of it. A secular person is one who disregards all forms of organised religion which are invariably based on implicit faith and belief, buttressed by a suitably created mythology replete with improbabilities. It is unfortunate that we have arrived at a truly dubious consensus on what has come to be called secularism. Merely to be silent on the unreason wrapped in ritual and ceremony that passes off as religion, or even to be fearful of criticising these lest we provoke irrational rage and violence, is not secularism.

It is the silence of the truly secular and rational that has allowed religious fanatics of all hues to seize the high ground from which the battle for our minds is being directed. This distorted notion on what is secularism makes even the

maddest mullah cry stridently for it. To start with, to be a maulana, a shankaracharya or a bishop is proof of one's lack of secularism. To be secular is to consider organised religion little more than humbug and based on primitive premises.

Psychologist James E Alcock wrote, “We are magical beings in a scientific age. Notwithstanding all remarkable achievements of our species in terms of understanding and harnessing nature, we are born to magical thoughts and not to reason.” This relative absence of reason in religion clearly gives us cause for a debate. The liberty of thought and conscience and the right to profess and practise one's religion is not the issue. What can be the issue is our reticence to criticise religions, and subject their basic premises to scrutiny.

Perhaps our bloodied history and particularly the conflicts of the recent past have made us want to seek accommodation by mutual tolerance. This is understandable and perhaps even commendable. Nonetheless, given the propensity of militant religionists like the VHP and the Jamaits to apply their doctrines to the political process and their constant endeavor to impose their views on others, not to challenge orthodox religiosity and fundamentalism would be a gross dereliction of our responsibilities. The original affidavit seemed to be doing just this.

Whether she saw the file or not, Ambika Soni did the right thing by permitting that affidavit and put the government's imprimatur on what should be the true and rational position on the legend of Rama. I agree with Jairam Ramesh that she should have resigned, but not for allowing the affidavit to go through but as a protest against its withdrawal by a spooked Manmohan Singh. Jawaharlal Nehru or even Indira Gandhi would have never sacrificed core beliefs for such small and unprincipled political gains.

This fear of taking on religionists head on costs us much more than we allow. Already, the Sethusamudram project is overshooting earlier estimates, causing the lead banker to question its economic viability. Further delay will only add to the costs. This could have two implications. Obviously, usage charges will have to go up. The other alternative is to dredge a deeper channel to allow passage of bigger ships to bolster future revenues.

The nation faces thousands of such impediments to progress. The use of religion to threaten and intimidate has become a common practice. Opposite my home in Secunderabad, the St John's Church has placed a large cross on the boundary of its compound wall to preclude any road widening. Just a few yards down, a Hare Krishna temple has installed garishly painted idols on its outer walls to prevent the same road from being widened. Further down that same road a dargah and another Hindu temple are together creating traffic hazards in the middle of the road. Who says religions can't work together?

I would like to leave those who implicitly believe in the legend of Rama as to whether they really believe that Hanuman was a monkey or an android, perhaps, as the Ramayana depicts him? Or is the vanar sena a reality or just poetic license to describe non-Aryans? And is the Ramayana just the victor's version of history? If Rama was real it is high time the Ramayana underwent some rewriting. Both logic and political correctness demand it.

Social reformer EV Ramaswamy Naicker used to celebrate 'dusserah' as a day of mourning and used to take out a procession of Rama with a garland of discarded footwear. That too at a time when C Rajagopalachari was the chief minister of Madras. Rajagopalachari is better known as the person who translated the Ramayana into English. Of course, he believed in Rama, but he believed even more in Naicker's right to disbelieve. It's in keeping with the shallow times we live in that Karunanidhi's mocking of Rama must elicit an off-with-his-head response from a BJP leader. Now a group of Sinhallas have announced a plan to mourn the killing of Ravana by Rama. The politicians are once again busy building bridges. And as usual, they lead to nowhere.

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