

BJP Retreat from Ayodhya

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Part I

Four years after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Bharatiya Janata Party hardly dares to mention Ayodhya anymore. "You cannot cash on a cheque twice," explains the party's spokesperson.

At the outset, the BJP never had its heart in the Ayodhya question. When circumstances and the VHP brought the issue to the fore in the 1980s, BJP leaders overcame their reluctance only with the roaring success of the VHP's *Ram shila pujas*. Even then, BJP leader L. K. Advani's fabled 'Rath Yatra' would not have been taken out but for some prodding from former Prime Minister V. P. Singh who needed Hindu pressure as an excuse to renege on his foolhardy promise to Imam Bukhari of awarding the disputed site to the Muslims.

Contrary to claims made by self-described secularists, the BJP was not at all keen on a confrontation between Hinduism and Islam. Thus, its statements kept a studied distance from the fundamental critique of Islamic iconoclasm, which was developed by historians like late Harsh Narain and Sita Ram Goel.

Far from criticising Islam for having exhorted Babar and others to destroy Hindu temples, the BJP tried to redefine the terms of the Ayodhya debate away from a Hindu-Muslim polarity - Ram was called a 'national' hero. Babar a 'foreign' Invader. In reality, the question of foreign vs national had nothing to do with it — a native convert Malik Kafur had destroyed numerous temples, while the British took up the conservation of temples. Yet, BJP spokesmen pleaded that "a mosque built on a destroyed temple is not a valid mosque."

That was the BJP's typical shopkeeper approach -- rather than facing the ideological conflict inherent in the Ayodhya demands of both parties, it tried to trick the other party into an unequal deal by presenting it as equal. ("Islam condemns the imposition of a mosque on a temple site as much as Hinduism does.") But no one was fooled.

The BJP disliked the Ayodhya controversy because it competed with the other parties in wooing the Muslims and flattering Islam. Thus, it will never talk of Islam's responsibility in India's communal conflict, but rather blame the British and the vote-bank politics of the other parties. It criticised V. P. Singh's gift of Rs. 50 lakh to the Jama Masjid as 'appeasement', but its own Rajasthan government gave a far larger sum to the Ajmer Dargah, which was built with debris of Hindu temples.

After the electoral victories in Gujarat and Maharashtra, Mr. Advani thanked his Muslim voters and promised to look after their interests, but his own cadres asked: “Has he ever thanked the Hindu voters? Why should the party have a ‘minority cell’, and why should its flag be one-third green?”

As disappointed BJP workers tell me, the party leadership had no higher aspiration than to be the Congress B-team. With the recent defection and corruption scandals, it seems close to realising this ambition. But there remains one difference — while the Congress has a long history of quid pro quo compromises, the BJP’s concessions to the Muslims and secularist opinion are entirely unilateral.

When the 12-day BJP government pledged not to touch Article 370 (a kick in the groin to its Kashmiri refugee constituents), it did not get the promise of support from even a single MP in return. No matter how sincerely Atal Behari Vajpayee and Mr. Advani disown the Ayodhya demolition, no matter how deep they crawl in the dust begging for certificates of good secular conduct from their enemies, they are treated with contempt all the same.

At any rate, such attitudes made it impossible for the BJP to take a consistent stand on the Ayodhya question, which inherently implied criticism of the Islamic doctrine and of Prophet Mohammed himself (who set the standard of Islamic iconoclasm by breaking the idols in the Kaaba).

A consistent Hindu position would have presented the Ayodhya controversy as an occasion for the Indian Muslims to reconsider Islam. Rather than liberating sacred sites from mosques wrongfully imposed on them, it would work for the liberation of fellow Indians from their Islamic indoctrination.

As Muslim-born secular humanist Ibn Warraq says in his brilliant book *Why I am not a Muslim* (Prometheus, New York, 1995) - “The best thing we can do for Muslims is to free them from Islam.” Sounds radical? But that was, for example, the stand taken by the Arya Samaj, a progressive movement which had its martyrs but never indulged in rioting.

Frank debate is inversely proportional with street violence, and those secularists who suppress such debate are among the culprits of India’s communal problem. Unfortunately, the BJP chose to join in this ‘secular’ (in Europe we would call it anti-secular) shielding of medieval belief systems from rational investigation and informed debate.

This half-heartedness made it impossible for the party to argue its case on Ayodhya convincingly. Next to the well-known media bias, this was the main reason why world opinion turned massively against the Hindus. It is entirely obvious that a Hindu sacred site belongs to the Hindus, and no Westerner would want his own sacred sites to be desecrated; yet every single commentator in the West has strongly condemned the Hindu attempt to end the Islamic occupation of a Hindu sacred site.

While in most controversies, there will be some support somewhere for both the sides, in this case, there was no voice of support or even of understanding for the Hindu position. Without exaggeration, the BJP’s Ayodhya campaign was the single biggest public relations disaster in world history.

The BJP never did any introspection about this harvest of hostility, but it certainly disliked the experience. After riding the 'Ram wave' to an electoral breakthrough in 1991, the BJP immediately started distancing itself from the issue. By December 6, 1992, Hindutva activists had lost patience with Mr. Advani. When they stormed the structure, he shed tears over the damage done to the BJP's self-image, as did many BJP men in the party office when they heard the news.

Even VHP leader Ashok Singhal tried to stop the activists, until they threatened to pull off his dhoti. Anti-Hindutva spokesmen want us to believe that this was all theatre, but it was genuine (as was Murli Manohar Joshi's jubilation). A small Hindutva faction had prepared the demolition, deliberately keeping the leadership in the dark about it.

If the Indian media had meant business, they would have found out and told you within a few days just who engineered the 'Kar Seva'. Instead, they chose to spurn the scoop of the year and stuck to the politically more useful version that the BJP did it, somewhat like late Jawaharlal Nehru's attempt to implicate Veer Savakar in Nathuram Godse's murder of the Mahatma.

Most BJP leaders (Kalyan Singh being the chief exception) dealt with the event in a confused and insincere manner. The gradual BJP retreat from Ayodhya was completed overnight, and the party was reduced to waging its subsequent election campaign with colourless slogans like 'good government'.

This purely secular posturing worked well in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, but it may prove to be yet another "cheque which can be cashed only once," especially considering the BJP's recent loss of credibility regarding governance.

The party's best chance of a meaningful survival now lies in the adoption of a better-considered Hindu agenda, not focused on dead buildings but on consequential political reforms.