

BJP Retreat from Ayodhya and Two Campaign Themes for Future

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Part II

THE BJP is denounced as a Hindu party by its enemies and is assumed to be a Hindu party by its voters though it never calls itself a Hindu party. When at all caught in the act of using the term 'Hindutva', the BJP hastens to explain that this term did not mean "Hindu religion," but "secular Indian nationalism" (proof: in Arabia, even Imam Bukhari is called a 'Hindu'!). These cheap semantic manipulations are too transparent to trick any opponent into accepting the BJP's claim of being secular, but they do succeed in spreading either confusion or anger among the party cadres.

In Europe, in spite of our long struggle against Church hegemony, nobody minds that Germany is ruled by a "Christian-Democratic Union". Democracy leaves it to the citizens to choose on what basis they form political opinion and parties, so they are free to vote an avowedly Christian party into power. And of course, the CDU is quick to point out that its Christian Democratic values are no longer a matter of Church dogma, but a common European heritage.

Likewise, India could live with a ruling party committed to Hindu values, all the more so when 'Hindu' is defined in a very broad sense, as is common in Hindu revivalist literature from Swami Vivekananda to Ram Swarup.

In the immediate future, the BJP could serve Hindu society by taking up a few specifically Hindu concerns (without neglecting issues like "good government"). In the BJP statements of the last few years the most prominent 'communal' item is the Common Civil Code demand; but pushing that one would be a grave mistake. True, this is an impeccably secular concern, amounting to no more than the implementation of the existing Article 44 of the Constitution.

But precisely for these reasons, this initiative should be left to the secularists, whose inaction on this point is a permanent measure of their dishonesty. There are excellent arguments against polygamy and unilateral *talaq*, but nobody will believe the BJP if it says that it was concerned about the plight of Muslim women.

On the contrary, a move towards the Common Civil Code will cause an anti-BJP uproar, which the party cannot handle. When the purely artificial Ayodhya controversy could cause so much violence, imagine the effect of a reform which affects every single Muslim in his private life, and which cuts deep into the power position of the Mullah class. Remember that the Shah of Iran turned simmering discontent into a full-scale revolution when he cut into the privileges of the Mullahs.

The experience of December 6 and 7, 1992, suggests that the secularist media will counter the BJP initiative with hysterical shrieks, whipping up communal passions and de facto inciting riots. Back then, commentators trumpeted that along with the Masjid, the secular state itself had been demolished, so was democracy and even the Indian 'Muslims' very right to live. Who would not have taken to the streets if it was made so clear that the heavens themselves had fallen?

Next time, they will call the implementation of Article 44 similar names — say, “a perversion of our secular Constitution,” or rabid attack on the most intimate dimensions of the Islamic component of our composite culture.” Hindus will again be blackened worldwide as intolerant, there will be murder and destruction, the BJP will burn its fingers again, and I just don't think that a Common Civil Code is worth all that misery.

Instead, the BJP ought first of all to take up an issue which really matters for Hindu communal life — abolishing the legal and constitutional discriminations against the Hindu majority, most urgently those in education and temple management. The constitutional bedrock of these discriminations is Article 30, which accords to the minorities the right to set up and administer their own schools and colleges, preserving their communal identity (through the course contents and by selectively recruiting teachers and students), all while receiving state subsidies. That right is not guaranteed to the majority, but should be.

The problem was highlighted when the Ramakrishna Mission went to court to seek recognition as a non-Hindu minority in order to protect its schools from a take-over by the West Bengal government. It says a lot about the sorry state of the Hindu intellect that the debate focused entirely on the RKM's ridiculous claim, and not on the constitutional injustice underlying this tragi-comedy.

The BJP, too, failed to rise to the occasion. In fact, the longest sitting parliamentarian in India, Atal Behari Vajpayee, never moved a finger to remove this thorn from the side of the Hindu society. When foreign newsmen ask BJP leaders about the notion of “pseudo-secularism” the answer usually mentions Article 30, but the record shows that the BJP does not mean business.

An analogous problem exists for the Hindu temples. Mosques and churches are exclusively managed by the respective communities, but Hindu temples are routinely taken over by the secular authorities. This results in misappropriation of the temple's income and its redirection to non-Hindu purposes. It is also a major factor in the grinding poverty afflicting most Hindu temple priests and their families.

Recently, the authorities moved court (unsuccessfully) to get the Shirdi Sai Baba temple in Hyderabad registered as a Hindu temple, all for wresting control of the institution and its funds. The BJP does not deserve to get a single Hindu vote if it doesn't address to this injustice.

The BJP can at once take an initiative in Parliament to remove these discriminations. This will force the other parties to take a stand. Either they support secular equality, ensuring a majority for the BJP's proposed amendment. The party can then claim that at long last, it had really achieved something for the Hindus. Alternately, the other parties may defend discrimination and religious inequality, defeating the BJP's amendment. In

that case, the proposed amendment comes centrestage in the next election campaign, not as a marginal item on page 64 of the BJP election manifesto (as in 1996), but as the central theme.

Such a campaign will be better for the BJP and for India than a controversy over temple sites or the Common Civil Code. Abolition of the said discriminations is far more consequential for Hindu culture. It is impeccably secular, even to the extent that it will be difficult to fool world opinion into believing that this is "Hindu fundamentalism" again. It does not directly affect the minorities and is far less likely to antagonise them. So, it is far easier to handle. Even the BJP could do it.

(Concluded)

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