

The Ayodhya Conflict: Exploring Intra-Faith Diversity As A Source For Inter-Faith Unity

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History of the Conflict

Ayodhya is a town in North India which used to contain a monument known as the Babri Masjid: a mosque built and dedicated to the Moghul emperor Babur soon after he invaded India in the early sixteenth century. Many Hindus believe the mosque displaced a temple marking *Ram Janmabhoomi* (the sacred birthplace of Rama, the seventh avatar of Vishnu,¹ and hero of the epic *Ramayana*); and a set of right wing Hindu organizations known as the *Sangh Parivar* (family of organizations) had articulated a long-standing demand that a temple dedicated to Rama replace the mosque. These organizations are driven by an ideology known as *Hindutva*, which is premised on redefining India as a Hindu nation.

In the early 1980's the movement for the Rama temple surged to a level where the increased heat of the conflict became front-page news. This surge was driven by a number of factors, but a significant one was the decision taken by the Bharatiya Janata Party (a political party that was a part of the Sangh Parivar, more popularly known by the acronym BJP) to use the issue as a strategy to mobilize votes. The strategy initially benefited the BJP, and it rose from holding only two seats in parliament in 1984 to being the principal opposition party with a hundred and twenty seats in 1991.

Conflict over the site escalated into a riot in 1992 when a mob of Hindu fundamentalists demolished the mosque: an event that provoked waves of communal violence all over the country. The Allahabad High Court attempted a settlement of the legal battle that had been ongoing, passing a judgment in 2010 that bifurcated the site into three equal parcels: allocating the first two to different Hindu organizations, and the third to a Muslim organization. This judgment is currently pending appeal in the Supreme Court of India.

Anatomy of the Conflict

The Ayodhya conflict is symptomatic of a deeper problem found in many parts of the world where a dispute has persisted for a very long period of time. The Temple Mount in Jerusalem (and many other sites in that city) reflects the same set of issues:

- a) A conflict is created many years ago in an earlier era of oligarchic power sought and sustained through military power.
- b) The conflict is kept alive over the years by a combination of cultural memory and political circumstance.
- c) The power equation between both sides in the conflict is not necessarily equal but is at a level that neither side can be quelled into submission.
- d) The conflict must now be resolved within a space of democratic governance that must abide by the rule of law.

In other words, the ethic that created the conflict bears little resemblance to the ethic that seeks to resolve the conflict. This difference between the two ethics creates a fundamental

¹ The supreme Hindu trinity consists of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer. While all three are also believed to be dimensions of Brahman – the unitary source and nature of the universe – Vishnu's role as a creator involves assuming an *avatar* or incarnation to descend to earth whenever the ethical balance is under threat and restore the balance. Vishnu is believed to have a total of ten avatars each with specific form and qualities, out of which nine have already occurred.

impasse for modern democracy avoids conflict with faith by distancing it through the principle of secularism, insisting on a rigid dividing line separating public governance and religious faith. Secularism is not equipped to handle conflicts such as Ayodhya. It has no means by which it can cope with traditions that are founded on memories whose history predate the ideal of secularism. Moreover, the implementation of secularism requires that religious faith either remain within the private realm, or when it does enter the public realm the prevailing context should be relatively free from political conflict. These are impractical ideals for when a religion is practiced by a community it is inevitable that not only will community identity be linked to religion, but also that sacred sites that reflect that identity will exist within the public realm. So when there is conflict in a region that also involves conflict over specific sacred sites, these conflicted sites tend to become the lens through which the wider conflict is perceived.

Faced with this impasse, secularism is left with only two choices. The first is to state that it will treat all parties to the conflict equally, which implies a division of the sacred site in terms of either space or time (and in the case of Ayodhya the Allahabad High Court opted to divide the site spatially). Such a solution leaves all parties dissatisfied for the notion of a sacred site is predicated on an inherent indivisibility (Hassner, 2009). The second option is to decide in favor of one side and exclude the others, in which case the excluded other feels aggrieved and the conflict lives on. Such conflicts appear to be both unavoidable and unresolvable.

Hassner goes on to argue that there is hope in resolving conflict over sacred sites only by involving religious leaders in the politics of resolution, as without them not only will the dimensions of the conflict not be understood, but the politics of resolution will hold no legitimacy to the protagonists in the conflict. It becomes necessary at times of religious conflict to blur the dividing line of secularism. While this may be a necessary condition, is it also sufficient? Critical examination of the issue has been largely from the perspective of the axioms, methods and protocols of the secular state. To complete the critique, it is necessary to gain a perspective from the other side.

The Hindutva Critique of Secularism

The Sangh Parivar has criticized secularism as a concept mistakenly imported from the West that is neither appropriate nor relevant to India. They argue that the nation is an entity whose integrity and strength rests on the clarity of its identity, and therefore the foundations of national governance should rest on this identity. This identity exists on both material and spiritual planes, and secularism drives a rift between the two. While India has one of the oldest and richest spiritual traditions, the disjunction between the spiritual and material planes has emasculated both religion and identity. The resultant loss of confidence is the reason why India has been weak enough to surrender easily to external invasion, first by the Muslims, subsequently by European colonizers, and currently to dominance by other countries and communities. India should claim her rightful place among the major nations of the world by asserting her identity, and given that India is primarily a Hindu nation, this assertion should be based on Hindu nationalism. The huge diversity in Hindu beliefs and customs is explained away by clarifying that Hindu nationalism is not based on a specific set of beliefs or customs, but on an allegiance to an Indian motherland at the material as well as spiritual level. Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs are seen as falling within this definition, but Muslims and Christians who place their primary sacred sites outside India are asked to either redefine their primary allegiance or accept that they are foreigners in India.

The wings of the Sangh Parivar who engage with political propaganda and mobilization have found it difficult to remain within the confines of this broad Hindutva critique of secularism. The notion of allegiance to an Indian motherland which is to be based on Hindu culture and ways of life has evaded specific definition; and in an attempt to give it specificity for the sake of political effectiveness, the rhetoric tends to ratchet up to a level where Hindu identity is perceived as being threatened by a dangerous and interfering other. While the proselytizing of Christian missionaries has been identified as one target, the bulk of the attention has been

given to the claim that the Muslim presence in India has involved the erasure of Hindu identity; and the movement for a Rama temple at Ayodhya has been one that is firmly anchored in this latter claim. The initial assertion that Hindutva was more about India and Indianness than about Hinduism is no longer tenable after the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

Critique of the claims of Hindutva has so far been firmly within the modernist tradition of secularism. Many who have made this critique are also Hindus, and clearly hold secular and Hindu identities at the same time. But the critique has remained confined to secular principles, and there has been no critique from the viewpoint of religion. This is significant because a majority of Hindus are not supporters of Hindutva: a fact borne out by the need recognized by the BJP – the only political party of national significance in the Sangh Parivar – to realign their strategy in the mid-1990's and move Hindutva from the foreground to the background (Adeney and Saez, 2007). While a Hindutva ideology was effective in moving the BJP from being a small player to a significant player, it began to yield diminishing returns in mobilizing votes well before the BJP had reached a level where it could win an electoral majority.

This majority of Hindus who do not support Hindutva have made electoral choices demanding that a party prioritize issues of development and economic equity rather than religion; but have not been so uncomfortable with Hindutva to the level of articulating a critique of it. The secular critique, when articulated by Hindus, has largely been confined to a small urban and highly educated elite; and there is a silent majority who are not necessarily concerned about secularism, are not committed to Hindutva, but remain silent because as members of the majority community of Hindus they do not feel threatened by Hindutva and therefore do not feel the need to cast a critical gaze upon it. To form a critique of Hindutva from the viewpoint of religion requires identification of the relationship between this silent majority and the Hindutva ideologues; and for this it is necessary to examine the Ayodhya conflict and understand what can be fought for on behalf of all Hindus. This involves understanding what the name of Rama stands for.

Rama in the Hindu Spiritual Tradition

In 2003 the Shankaracharya of Kanchi sought to use his position as an established spiritual figure to act as a mediator who could propose and moderate a peaceful resolution of the Ayodhya conflict. In response, a senior member of the Sangh Parivar questioned the authority of the Shankaracharya to intervene, saying that he is a *Shaivite* (believer in Shiva as the supreme deity) whereas the temple at Ayodhya was dedicated to an avatar of Vishnu: a statement that throws into doubt the claim of the Sangh Parivar to speak on behalf of all the Hindus.

Even if one accepts this statement as it is, that given Hinduism's bewildering level of diversity of beliefs and practices any single religious movement can only speak to a narrow segment of the Hindu community, one would have to assume that the Rama temple movement would represent a widespread and common cause that could be fought for in the name of Rama. The evidence does not support such an easy assumption, and even in textual forms of the *Ramayana* (Journey of Rama) that are considered widely known and authoritative there are substantive differences to be found between them.² While there are many textual tellings,³ four of the major ones are examined here:

² There are Jain and Buddhist tellings of the Ramayana, and the Ramayana tradition is also found in many countries of South Asia such as Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia. Given that this conflict involves the Hindus of India, the analysis here does not attempt to take on this complexity, and is confined to Hindu tellings that are found in India.

³ A.K. Ramanujan notes that it is preferable to use the word "tellings" as the word "versions" implies a single invariant source. See A.K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012)

1. *Valmiki Ramayana*: This is written in Sanskrit and its writing is credited to the sage Valmiki who also appears in parts of the story. It is dated to the 2nd BCE or earlier, and is popularly believed to be the source for all Ramayanas.
2. *Iramavataram* (The Manifestation of Rama): Written in Tamil by the 12th CE poet Kampan.
3. *Adhyatma Ramayana* (Spiritual Ramayana): Written in Sanskrit, there is controversy over its authorship and date. While some believe it was authored by the sage Ved Vyasa, which would make a manuscript written closer in time to the Valmiki Ramayana, given that it was unknown till the 14th to 15th CE, most scholars place it as a more recent text.
4. *Ramcharitmanas* (The Lake of the Deeds of Rama): Written in Awadhi⁴ by the 16th century poet-saint Tulsidas.

Within these tellings variations can be found that reveal substantive differences in the way Rama is perceived (Richman, 2012). The demon Ravana, the villain of the epic whose acts necessitates Vishnu's avatar as Rama, has won a boon from the gods that he is invincible to divine beings as well as demons. For this reason, the avatar that Vishnu takes is that of an ordinary human being, and Valmiki does not seek to gloss over this fact. Valmiki's Rama is a parable for all of us: a human being who tends to forget his divine origins, and once reminded of them is able to act in accordance with *dharma* (cosmic law). Kampan's Rama is clearly a god, but one who having entered the world has to come to terms with the cognitive pain of being human. The *Adhyatma Ramayana* and *Ramcharitmanas* complete the deification that Kampan began, and set Rama apart as a divine being, pure and perfect.

If the textual tellings reveal a wide range, the variation pales against the diversity of the Ramayana in oral tradition (Richman, 2012). The presentation will put forward details of the diversity in these textual and oral tellings: a diversity that clearly shows the Sangh Parivar's quest in the Ayodhya conflict to fight a battle in the name of Rama while claiming to represent all Hindus as far from alignment with the powerful and varied nuances of the Ramayana tradition.

Implications of Religious Diversity

The range of variation within the Ramayana tradition is just the tip of the iceberg of diversity within Hinduism. There are multiple variants of Vaishnava tradition, some focusing on Krishna or other avatars of Vishnu. Then there are the Shaiva and Shakti traditions, with variants within these as well. There is the Smarta tradition, and beyond these there are multiple regional traditions, many of which exhibit syncretic combinations of traditional Hindu beliefs with animism and ancestor worship.

On the other side of the Ayodhya conflict, Islam within India also has great diversity. There is the division between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Within the Sunni majority, the range includes the orthodoxy of Deobandi Islam that is influenced by Wahhabi doctrine, the more centrist Barelvi Islam, and the mysticism of the Sufi Islamic tradition. Beyond this one finds smaller sects such as Dawoodi Bohra, Ahmadiyya and Ismaili Muslims.

Diversity seems an intrinsic characteristic within all major religions. Buddhism incorporates the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. Christianity includes Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox adherents. Judaism includes Orthodox, Conservative and Reform schools of belief. All of the above are broad well-known categories, not necessarily complete descriptions; and these broad categories break up further into innumerable sub-groups and regional variations.

⁴ While Awadhi today is considered a dialect of Hindi, in the time of Tulsidas it was one of two major forms of the literary tradition in Hindi, with the other being *Braj Bhasha*.

This inherent dimension of intra-faith diversity is not usually found within the discourse over religious conflict. Such conflicts revolve around fundamentalist unitary descriptions of religion: with such claims often escalated to the point where violence breaks out between sects of the same religion. It is unlikely that a fundamentalist will give due consideration to religious diversity, for it is the innate nature of fundamentalism to refuse to look beyond its own perceived boundaries. It would be more productive to critique the context that allows fundamentalism the space to operate and grow. It has been argued earlier in this paper that a majority of Hindus are not committed to Hindutva as a primary means of nationalism, but do not feel the need to cast a critical gaze at it because they do not have secular concerns and as members of the majority community of Hindus believe that Hindutva poses no existential threat to them. It is the silence of this majority that provides Hindutva fundamentalism the space to function, and it is this silence that must be critiqued, and for this critique the following two dimensions of the problem demand consideration:

1. The Ramifications of Fundamentalism: Can this silent majority afford to remain silent? Is their position secure? Does fundamentalism have no negative impacts on the religion whose cause it pleads?
2. The Innate Value of Intra-Faith Religious Diversity: Given the ubiquity of intra-faith diversity, does this diversity strengthen or weaken religious tradition? What does it mean when you have many people around you who share some of your beliefs, but diverge on others?

The Ramifications of Fundamentalism

Swami Vivekananda, an internationally known Hindu spiritual leader, had often argued for the cause of Hindu nationalism. In October 1898, he was traveling in Kashmir and halted at a temple dedicated to the goddess Kshir Bhavani. Feeling pained on seeing the traces of the temple having been vandalized by Muslim invaders, he thought that if he had been there at the time he would have laid down his life resisting this desecration. On thinking this, he had a vision where he heard the voice of the divine mother goddess speaking to him, and wrote in his diary (Swamy Bodhasarananada, 2013):

“All my patriotism is gone. Now it is only ‘Mother! Mother!’ I have been very wrong. Mother said to me, ‘What if unbelievers should enter My temples, and defile My images! What is that to you? Do you protect Me? Or do I protect you?’ So there is no more patriotism. I am only a little child.”

This epiphany revealed to Vivekananda that he was an infinitesimal being always under the protection of god, and he had mistakenly inflated his ego to the delusionary level of thinking he could protect god. He realized he had to drop his project of religious nationalism for that would be tantamount to a human claim to manage god’s earthly presence: a claim that would contradict any sense of faith for it implicates a perception of a god who is so weak as to require human intervention.

In today’s age we would not permit the erasure or desecration of sacred sites for that would contradict secular doctrines that we hold dear: of human rights and freedom of worship. But when such erasure or desecration dates back to an era when such doctrines were unknown, those who wish to fight for the restoration of the site must explain why the god to whom the site is dedicated permitted this erasure. A failure to adequately explain this implies either an assumption of a god who is impotent in the face of human attack or an insecure community of believers. The fundamentalist claim of serving religion will in the long run undermine the earthly foundations of human faith. And to understand these foundations it is necessary to appreciate the value of religious diversity.

The Innate Value of Intra-Faith Religious Diversity

Understanding religion requires appreciating the fact that we are really dealing with is the process by which humans realize god, and for that we have to look at the dimensions of human experience. Every human has three dimensions of experience: first person

experience where one is directly aware of the world as perceived from the perspective of one's body; second person experience where one connects with other people and things; and third person experience where one is able to concretize descriptions or understandings of the world. Third person experience is a capability that is unique to humans, and introduces a degree of reflexive openness to human society, for in constructing a third person experience one simultaneously and subtly reshapes first and second person experience, which in turn can lead to a shift of third person experience.

Karl Popper's definition of the open society (Popper, 2013) could be connected to these levels of experience. Closed societies stay confined to first and second person experience. Third person experience is rendered unnecessary, as there is no differentiation between natural law and social custom; and the society stays within tribal collectivist beliefs. But once third person experience becomes an accepted part of society, the possibility of knowing experience beyond personal horizons of individuals and community is now available. The emphasis shifts from conformance with tradition to individual choice, and the society becomes open. The yearning for asymmetrical power often seeks to close society again, and this cannot be done by reverting to a closed society and denying third person experience: that is a genie who cannot be put back into the bottle. It is done by denying the potential of choice at the first person level to emphasize a specificity of third person knowledge whose certainty is so absolute as to form the reference frame for all first and second person experience. As Michel Foucault has argued, power is not necessarily exercised through force, but is often through defining a form of knowledge that all consider as inevitable (Foucault, 1980).

Once a form of third person experience is concretized and popularized, it attracts people because it offers a short cut to security during uncertain times. But what must be taken into account is that first person experience provides an authenticity that is not found in the other levels. Not only does it form the primary gateway to all levels of experience, it also embodies valuable forms of tacit knowledge as well as the full range of emotions that are sanitized by third person descriptions.⁵ Michael Polanyi argues that transcendence is meaningful primarily at the intangible level of tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1970). The level of first person experience is what differentiates the experience of transcendence from merely recognizing it.

A full life requires the free play of all the three levels of experience. The connection between these levels are not logical, and to understand how they can be integrated it is necessary to recognize that all of these levels are inserted into social networks (Varela and Shear, 2002). Connections are made under varying circumstances and at different points of time within the social context, and perspectives of truth build upon the constancies that resonate across shifts of reference frames of experience. For example, when I begin a relationship with another person, I shift between my own first person perspective and the second person perspective gained by listening to and acknowledging the other person. As I continue to do this over time, I discover resonances between my own perspective and the other's perspective, and I notice that the other person is also discovering the same resonances. These resonances form the foundations of love, friendship and respect that constitute the 'truth' that sustains the relationship.

We must thus seek the structures of mediation that enable these shifts in experience. A shift in the unmediated spontaneity of personal experience can be achieved within the boundaries of first person awareness through introspection, bodily discipline, and contemplative practices. Shifts that combine first and second person experiences are conversation, love, friendship, family and community. And shifts that work across the range of first, second and third person experience are critical inquiry and art (in all its forms).

One could envision the levels of experience as being nested within each other, with the encircling domain representing a broadening of awareness to the domain it contains. To stay within the level of first person experience is to confine oneself to narcissism. To extend our

⁵ Imagine the difference between feeling love and describing love.

life to the level of second person experience is to enrich our personal existence with love, friendship, family and community; but to yet remain as a closed society. To extend it to the level of third person experience is to liberate personal choice and create the open society. Transcendence is experienced when all levels are connected, and the realm of authenticity extends beyond the first person level to blur the boundaries between the three levels of experience establishing a single reality that extends to an awareness of the infinite.

While there may be some liberated souls who are born with this extended realm of authenticity, they are few and far between. For most of us it is a rigorous process of using structures of mediation to shift our experience to gradually discover resonances. It is a journey, and given the fact each one of us is a unique person the probability is that we each start at a different point, and at any given moment of time will be at different stages of this journey. If we find that each of us is at one of an infinite number of positions whose common ground cannot be perceived, then no spiritual tradition has emerged. If it is claimed that we have all coalesced at the same point of the journey, this either involves the ludicrous claim of a robotic society of identical beings where personal diversity does not exist, or implies that an external force of power is at play which has coerced or brainwashed us into submission. In either case the journey has ended. But if we find that there is a range of positions whose overlap is perceptible, it is an indicator that the journey is ongoing: the diversity indicates the presence of all levels of experience, and the overlap indicates that the discovery of resonances has begun. Intra-faith diversity is a litmus test that establishes the presence of a spiritual tradition that is active and alive.

The False Security of the Silent Majority

The silent majority, who through their silence give space to the fundamentalism of the minority, possesses a false sense of security for it is wrong to so easily conclude that members of one's own religious community cannot pose any threat to one's spiritual practice and belief. The fundamentalist's actions taken in the name of defending faith actually undermines it, not only through the implied depiction of a god who needs human defense, but also in the insecurity and fear that it spreads through the community. And the fundamentalist's inherent tendency toward narrow and intolerant conceptualizations will be an obstacle to the diversity needed for a deep and vibrant spiritual tradition.

If this majority does not critique the fundamentalist from within their own faith, they are likely to find, that while the short term target may be the minorities of other faiths, eventually they will also be affected. There is a popular saying that if you drop a pebble in a still pond you notice its presence and impact whereas a boulder dropped in a churning rapid will disappear without a trace. Spiritual development requires communion with presences that are subtle yet profound and powerful, and will be hampered by the churn that is generated by conflict. And in the authoritative interpretations of religion that the fundamentalist preaches, the space that the individual seeker needs to discover authenticity gets reduced.

If one needs a spiritual tradition that is marked by equanimity rather than fear, it is necessary to awaken this silent majority and empower them to speak to resist the fundamentalist so that there is space for the intra-faith diversity that empowers their own religious tradition. And in that valorization of intra-faith diversity lie the first steps towards tolerance of other faiths.

Conclusion: Rethinking the Conceptualization of Sacred Space

Spaces made for religion are usually thought of as spaces for worship, and worship often conceived as marked by liturgical certainty. The liturgy, and its prescriptions, forms the first principle for ordering the space. The dangers of a dominant focus on liturgy are twofold: firstly the power granted to earthly religious authority to conduct liturgy degenerates into fundamentalism; but a more widespread problem is that liturgy degenerates into habit. How can we transcend liturgy?

A clue lies in the novel *The Color Purple* where one of the characters says (Walker, 1982):
“...tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to *share* God, not find God.”

In this notion of sharing is implied a communion with a reality that is greater than oneself: a communion that is crucial to authentic spiritual practice that would cover all the levels of experience. Walker only mentions a communion with other people, at a level of second person experience, but this is possibly only the first step. To incorporate the third person level of experience, the space must gather light, air, earth, material and sensation in a manner that evokes a deep and underlying cosmic order.

The great sacred buildings of the world evoke this communion and transcend any liturgy they may contain. And in doing so they resonate with an authentic spiritual tradition that covers the full range of experience. To sustain such a tradition, when we conceive spaces for religion we must accept that the standard we must match is perhaps higher than that required when we conceive secular typologies.

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