

ISAS Brief

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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isasijie@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Trouble with the Gods: Religion and Public Policy in India

Dhiraj Nayyar*

The Hindu God *Rama* made a dramatic comeback to the centre stage of Indian politics last week. The Indian government, in a submission to the Supreme Court, denied the existence of *Rama*, arguing that there is no historical or archaeological evidence to prove his existence, much to the consternation and protest of the believers.

The government was responding to a query posed by the Supreme Court which was hearing a public interest litigation case against a major infrastructure project off India's southern shore. The project involves the dredging of limestone, sand and sandstone shoals of the coast of Rameshwaram in Tamil Nadu in order to create a navigable stretch of sea for ships between India and Sri Lanka. At the moment, all ships traveling to eastern India from the west have to navigate around Sri Lanka, which costs them at least 30 hours in time.

The problem involves a 48 kilometre-long portion of the shoal known commonly as 'Adam's Bridge' but also as *Ram Sethu* (Rama's bridge). According to the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, this was the bridge used by *Rama* to cross into Sri Lanka with his army of monkeys (*Vanaar Sena*) to destroy the evil King *Ravana*, who had abducted *Rama's* wife, *Sita*. What is more, it is claimed that this bridge was built under the guidance of *Rama* himself. Thus, any destruction of the bridge, even if for the secular purpose of modern infrastructure is sacrilege for the faithful. The bridge, incidentally, is part of the mythical folklore of Islam as well – it is claimed that Adam crossed this bridge on his way to Adam's peak (now in Sri Lanka) where he stood on one foot for one thousand years as penance for his sins.

The public interest litigation, mischievously motivated, sought to stop the dredging of Adam's Bridge because of its "holy" history. The government's chief agency for dealing with matters of history, science and proof, The Archaeological Survey of India, stated quite clearly that there was no scientific evidence to show that the structure is man-made. That should have been enough for the Court to over rule any objections. However, the Survey went on to add that there is no 'historical' or 'archaeological' evidence to support either the occurrence of events or existence of the characters in the *Ramayana*. This second statement, critics

* Mr Dhiraj Nayyar is a research scholar in the political economy of India at Trinity College, Cambridge, and Research Fellow-designate at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be reached at dn234@cam.ac.uk.

claim, amounts to the State over-stepping its authority on commenting on matters of religious faith and belief. Has it?

The question delves right into the heart of the Indian concept of secularism. India's secularism is quite unique, different from that practiced in France or Turkey, where the State frowns upon overt religious symbolism, especially in public life, public institutions and public policy. In India, the 'State' is indeed separate from the 'Church' but the State respects the right of all citizens to practice and propagate their own religion. And, yes, it is perfectly acceptable to sport religious symbols in public institutions and in public life. The State has no religion, yet cannot deny the existence of God or the basis of a religion – in that sense, it is agnostic. Still, the formulation and execution of public policy ought to be free from any religious consideration.

Returning to the government's submission, I see no real difference between the two contentions: religion is made by man, relying on myths and hearsay, and Adam's bridge is made not by man but by nature. The fact is that both the statements are correct in fact even if they are irreligious, agnostic or atheist, depending on semantic usage. Any contrary opinion or even belief is plainly 'irrational' and not supported by any scientific or historical evidence. The State can, of course, respect irrational belief so long as it is not harmful to society or its citizens.

Thus, the Congress Party's strategy to withdraw the government's original submission flies in the face of logical and progressive thinking and amounts to submitting science and rationality to unsubstantiated belief, a sad state of affairs for a Centre-Left government.

Perhaps what makes it difficult for the Congress Party to do otherwise is rooted in its historical tendency to pander to the religious sentiments of other non-Hindu communities. There is some truth to this. India was the first country in the world to ban 'The Satanic Verses'. Yet, the Congress government refuses to ban M.F. Hussein's paintings of nude Hindu Goddesses. Rajiv Gandhi's Congress government infamously over-turned a progressive Supreme Court judgment in the 1980s which sought to provide better protection to divorced Muslim women than that granted by Muslim Personal Law. India, led by the philosophy of the Congress Party in 1947, allows its religious communities to follow their own personal law. There is no uniform civil code, surely a fundamental requirement of secular state. Why? Because when a civil matter goes to court in India, a 'secular' judge is expected to interpret 'religious' law. And then the state-religion divide begins to get erased.

There is, thus, quite clearly a strong case for a political consensus on two issues – first, the need to have a secular uniform civil code; and second, the need to respect the fundamental right of individual citizens to blaspheme. There is no reason why any religion should be above criticism in a secular democracy. Even if India isn't ready to accept the government criticising religion, it should allow its individual citizens to do so. Let Hussein paint, let Rushdie be read, let Kiran Nagarkar satire the Mahabharata and let me blaspheme on the front pages of national newspapers.

At any rate, the State must protect the physical safety of those who criticise religion. Like the now under attack, Tamil Dravidian leader, M. Karunanidhi, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, who has argued that the *Ramayana* and *Rama* are all about North Indian Aryan supremacy against the native Dravidians of South India. He sees no reason why the *Ram Sethu* should not be dredged off the shores of the State where he is the democratically elected leader of the mostly

'Hindu' Tamil people. *Rama* is an evil figure to most in that part of India. The violent campaign launched by Hindu fundamentalists against Karunanidhi, his family and his people in recent days must be stopped and condemned.

Given the myriad religions in India, and given the diverseness of views and beliefs within the majority Hindu religion itself, any definitive statement on a particular religious issue or belief coming from the State becomes controversial. The best route in the long-run (other than the one being dredged through Adam's bridge) is for the State to become truly agnostic or even atheist. Religion must, however, be treated with respect in a country whose people are deeply religious even if it is irrational. Public policy and law (even personal law) in the 21st century, though, are too important to be mortgaged to the mythical fascinations of the mortals. Perhaps even God would agree.

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