Grandmother’s Syncretic Hinduism Caught in the Whirlwind of VHP’s Sectarianism

Vikas Kumar
Eyeless in Opposition

Both on the domestic and regional as well as international fronts several events of the last one week have caused serious concern. The developments in Manipur following the killing of a 30-year-old woman has engendered acute distress in that part of our country but, what is most striking, the protests against the incident, by Manipur womenfolk in particular, have perhaps for the first time attracted national attention. The hostage-drama in Iraq has not yet ended and not just the families of the three Indian truckers but also Indians in general are extremely worried over their fate and the possible fall-out of any mishap on our policy as such. External Affairs Minister K. Natwar Singh’s talk in Islamabad with his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri and the head of state Pervez Musharraf seem to have been exhaustive from the lengthy discussions he held with both but there are apprehensions of a frosty layer appearing on the entire process of official dialogue in the days ahead unless effective intervention by peace-loving peoples on both sides of the border once again changes the atmosphere and restores the thaw that has characterised India-Pakistan relations for sometime, however brief in the long-term context, in the recent past.

In the midst of all these developments the BJP-led NDA’s persistently confrontational approach to the UPA Government defies logic. No doubt the BJP and its allies in the NDA have every right to register their protests, as they have already done, against the induction of ‘fellow’ Ministers in the Manmohan Singh Government, the sack of Governors or the continuance of JMM leader Shibu Soren in the Union Cabinet despite being served with an arrest warrant, the reason for his ‘disappearance’. But to continually disrupt Parliament and now (even after Soren’s resignation) adopt a totally non-cooperative attitude by deciding to boycott all parliamentary committees is steps that threaten to take the confrontational approach of the Opposition to newer heights never witnessed earlier.

What is the BJP’s objective? Not to allow the government to function? If that is so then it would increasingly expose itself to the charge of not being able to reconcile itself to its role in the Opposition. Its inability to accept defeat at the hustings with grace has resulted in a piquant situation wherein blinded by hostility to the government of the day it is launching a frontal assault on Parliament—and thus parliamentary democracy— itself.

Of course the Nagpur bosses, to whom the BJP top brass pay obeisance, would advise such a course of action on the part of the NDA’s principal constituent. But then they are people who have always enjoyed the luxury of being devoid of responsibility outside the seat of power. But those in the party leadership—the NDA Chairman and the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha in particular—who have been in power for six years and now have come to know the intricacies as also responsibilities of running a government, and that too a coalition one, cannot unquestioningly follow their advice. If they do not assert their independence of the RSS on this issue they should as well opt out of the arena of parliamentary politics as some of the extreme Left outfits have done in all earnestness.

The BJP leaders dare not do so out of both cowardice and opportunism. About their allies like that stormy petrel of yester years, George Fernandes, the less said the better. However, the remarkable spectacle of their antics in and out of Parliament only convince one that being eyeless in Opposition they are totally clueless about what to do in the coming days. One can only sympathise with them at this juncture.

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Grandmother's Syncretic Hinduism Caught in the Whirlwind of VHP's Sectarianism

VIKAS KUMAR

For over a decade well-intentioned Indians have chosen not to respond to the increasingly vitriolic harangue of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) hoping that the fire would burn itself out. Based on the long history of tolerance in Hinduism one would rightly come to the conclusion that Hinduism with its inherently plural and tolerant character will reject any form of sectarianism. Swami Dayananda, the great nineteenth century social reformer, also preached tolerance towards other streams of Hinduism and other religions. Though his Arya Samaj boasted of great strength in the beginning, today the Arya Samaj is a non-entity, despite the invaluable contribution it made in the field of social reforms, because sectarianism is alien to our subcontinent's culture and traditions. The events of the past few months, however, suggest that far from subsiding the sectarian fire personified in the form of the VHP is spreading.

VHP's Sectarianism

The VHP has never taken a kind view of anyone 'interfering' in its solemn Ayodhya business. Last year (2003) when the Shankaracharya of Kanchi, Sri Jayendra Saraswati, attempted to bridge the gap between the Hindus and Muslims on the Ayodhya issue the VHP launched a vicious campaign against him. Acharya Giriraj Kishore, the Vice-President of the VHP, questioned the right of the Kanchi Shankaracharya to get involved with the issue because 'anyway this (the Ayodhya issue) is an issue for those who are Vaishnavas, not for those who are Shaivites.' Sri Vishvesha Tirtha Swami of Pejawar Math (Udupi), a member of the VHP's margdarshak mandal, believes that the followers of Ramanuja tradition have to be taken into confidence before arriving at any solution of the Ayodhya problem because 'the Ram Jannabhoomi belonged to the followers of Ramanuja's tradition.' Again Ashok Singhal, the Working President of the VHP, reiterated the exclusive right of Ramanandis over Ayodhya:

"The Ramananda Sampradaya (tradition) should be given the charge of the temple to perform its day-to-day management." The Kanchi Shankaracharya is not the only one who found himself in the line of fire of the VHP. In fact, the organisation has attacked almost all symbols of Indian democracy including the office of the Prime Minister. Ashok Singhal ridiculed the suggestions of the Prime Minister to build a temple away from the disputed site by equating it with asking 'Rama to find another Sita rather than fighting Ravana.' This statement speaks volumes about the VHP President's understanding of Ramayana and Indian culture.

Quite interestingly, the VHP top brass was the first to raise the battle cry (insult of Hindus and a great seer of Hindus) against the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB), when the latter unfortunately rejected the Shankaracharya's proposal outrightly. Some observers have found faults in the proposals. However, since the Shankaracharya stood for resolution of all contentious issues through dialogue, and was open to debate, there was a ray of hope even if one differed from him. Those who have been to Tamil Nadu would know that followers of all religions have great respect for the Shankaracharyas of Kanchi.

Grandmother's Syncretic Hinduism under Attack

There are two vital issues that the VHP leaders have raised. First, the Ram Jannabhoomi belongs to the Ramanuja/Ramanand tradition; and second, followers of one tradition of Hinduism are not supposed to interfere in the affairs of another. The second point presumes the existence of exclusive sects. In response to the first I will quote from R. Nagaswamy's letter to the editor of The Hindu:

"The Udupi Pejawar Swamiji has stated (June 22) that the Ram Jannabhoomi belongs to the Vaishnavites of the Ramanuja tradition. His statement is historically incorrect. Ramanuja lived in the 11th-12th centuries while the Ram Janmabhoomi proponents claim the site is several centuries older. In fact, several centuries before the birth of Ramanuja, many villages in Tamil Nadu called their shrines and places Ayodhya and Rama, the lord of Ayodhya. It is historically incorrect to reduce Rama's stature to that of a God of Vaishnavites."

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Will the VHP ask the Ramabhatkas to keep out of its Mathura project? Will it ask the non-Shaivites to keep out of its Kashi project? Who has given the VHP the authority to decide on behalf of the Hindus? On what grounds is one going to differentiate between Shaivites and Vaishnavites? What, according to the VHP, is the sectarian affiliation of Ramathanaswamy temples? of the subcontinent? What about Tulsji's Ramacharitmanas written in Kashi with Shiva's blessings? Even if the physical heritage—the syncretic literature, temple imagery and festivals—is ignored can we ignore the feelings of millions of Hindus? My grandmother reads Ramacharitmanas (Rama) and Geeta (Krishna) daily, visits a nearby Shiva linga (Shiva) and fasts during Nataratri (Shakti). To which sampradaya/tradition do these grandmothers and their children belong? While talking about Ramanandis the VHP glosses over the fact that 'Ramanand' is a very broad category and includes diverse strands ranging from Tulisidas and Meera to Malakdas and Kabirdas. Irrespective of what it claims it is very clear that when the VHP is talking about the Ramanandis it has in mind those who are ready to get along with it on Ayodhya issue.

The VHP's loose talk about 'different' traditions of pluralistic Hinduism betrays its ignorance about the same since its discourse presumes the existence of well-defined explicit categories/traditions as in the case of Islam (Shia and Sunni) and Christianity (Protestants, Orthodox and Catholics). Either the VHP is attempting to impose a strict categorisation on Hinduism, which has lot of gray areas that give it the requisite strength to adjust to changes and absorb great shocks, or it is simply opportunist and wants to somehow hegemonise the public space related to the Ayodhya issue. In either case the developments do not augur well for the Indian society as a whole.

Conclusion

On the one hand the VHP talks of its Ayodhya movement as an extempore expression of national feelings and on the other it says that Ayodhya is the sole property of Ramanandis! From the above discussion it is quite clear that the VHP's Hindu Nationalism is equidistant from both Hinduism and Nationalism. At best the VHP's 'cultural nationalism' can be described as a crafty smoke-and-mirrors arrangement to mask its sectarianism. It would be scandalous to deny the existence of misunderstanding among the major communities of India. However, there are better ways of resolving the issues at hand rather than leaving them to undemocratic and reactionary outfits.

Fortunately for us the VHP, being against the centuries old syncretic tradition of the country, still does not have a mass base and the success of its 'mass mobilisation' depends solely on the political weathering of the day. Last year (2003) the VHP's high voltage temple campaign, through which it was preparing the masses for the 'final battle', came to an abrupt end without any convincing reason. Perhaps they decided in national interest to wait patiently for yet another dharmasabha! But a closer look at the events of last year suggests that the VHP had to backtrack owing to lack of enthusiasm even in its 'bastsis' in North India. Whatever be the reason it is high time that this on-and-off pious drama of the VHP comes to an end permanently.

However, one feels sorry for the people who have grown-up with the image of the VHP as a champion of Hinduism. For such people the 'evolving' line of thinking of the VHP top brass, regarding 'cultural nationalism', would be quite embarrassing. They fail to understand the simple fact that the forces of sectarianism once unleashed in the society take their own course and sustain themselves by devouring the fabric of the society itself. And at the end of the day no community remains unaffected because fire cannot differentiate one community from the other.

NOTES

2. NDTV (2003): From an undated footage shown a number of times on NDTV in the first week of July.
7. Ramananda (14-15 Century AD) of Prayag was a devotee of the 12th century Swetambara philosopher-saint Ramanuja of Srirumuduru (Tamil Nadu).
10. Ramathanaswamy literally stands for 'the God (Swamy) who is the Lord (Nath) of Rama'. According to most of the extant Ramayami (mythological) traditions Rama worshipped Shiva in present Rameswaram both before and after attacking Lanka.