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The question of faith: UPA's capitulation to the Sangh Parivar on Ram Sethu

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The UPA's capitulation to the Sangh Parivar on Ram Sethu violates its obligation to defend secularism and hands a victory to majoritarian politics.

CONTRARY to what much of the corporate media claim, it is not the Left, with its 59 members in the Lok Sabha, which wields an effective veto over important policies and decisions of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). That privilege belongs to two "cultural" organisations that are not even officially represented in Parliament: the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP).

It is they who decided that the UPA's original prime ministerial nominee (Sonia Gandhi) would not occupy that office in 2004. It is they who push the UPA "anti-terrorism" agenda in an Islamophobic direction and threaten to sabotage the peace process with Pakistan. Again, they alone can ensure that the government goes slow on implementing the Sachar Committee's or the Srikrishna Commission's recommendations.

Recently, the VHP laid down the line on what would happen to the Sethusamudram Ship Channel Project if it interfered with Ram Sethu. All it took was a few rowdy VHP demonstrations on September 12 for the UPA to execute a U-turn by withdrawing an affidavit, filed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) before the Supreme Court, which holds that the sandbar structure is a geological, not man-made, formation.

At the political level, the VHP-RSS position was articulated, as always, by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), their parliamentary face, alter ego, and ventriloquist. L.K. Advani registered a protest with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during a dinner for a visiting dignitary. And that was the end of any rational discussion on the subject. Out came attack upon venomous attack on the ASI affidavit: Its denial of Rama's existence constitutes "blasphemy" and an "insult to the Hindus". As Advani claimed, "the government has sought to negate all that the Hindus consider sacred... and wounded the very idea of India".

Since September 13, there has not been a squeak from the Congress or the UPA, barring the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), in defence of the affidavit or by way of a counter-attack on the BJP under whose leadership the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) originally approved the Sethusamudram project. Instead, UPA Ministers have been vying with one another to sing paeans to Rama and to the myth surrounding Ram Sethu.

The worst offender is Union Law Minister H.R. Bharadwaj, who abjectly apologised and said: "Lord Rama is an integral part of Indian culture and ethos... and cannot be a matter of debate or litigation... His existence can't be put to the test... The whole world exists because of Rama." He melodramatically added: "Just as the Himalayas are the Himalayas, the Ganga is the Ganga, Rama is

Rama... It's a question of faith. There is no requirement of proof to establish something based on faith."

Now, Bharadwaj is none other than the Minister of State for Law in the mid-1980s who advised Rajiv Gandhi to commit two acts of "appeasement" in rapid succession: Open the gates of the Babri Masjid, and amend laws to neutralise the effect of the Shah Bano judgment. These were calculated to please, respectively, communally minded Hindus and Muslims, but alienated both communities, gave a massive boost to Hindutva, and ensured the BJP's rise from a mere two Lok Sabha seats to 89 seats. But let that pass. The ministerial statements' primary thrust was that if someone believes in the description of the Sethu and its provenance offered in the Ramayana or Tulasidas' Ramacharitamanas, that belief must be respected as the basis on which to make decisions about development projects.

However, the ASI's affidavit - actually, there are two - limits itself to rejecting the claim that scriptures or mythological texts like the Ramayana constitute historical proof that Ram Sethu is a man-made structure. As historians go, the texts do not establish the existence of the "characters" they refer to. The ASI had no other way of countering the contentions of the pro-Hindutva petitioners based primarily on the Ramayana and Ramacharitamanas, especially their claim that these offer clinching evidence that the Sethu was built by Rama's followers. The ASI could not have left that contention unrefuted. Yet, nowhere does it show disrespect to these texts.

As the historian D.N. Jha argues, paragraphs 4-6 and 20-23 of the document, "which have been construed to belittle the importance of Ram in Indian culture and to question his existence/historicity, contain, in fact, the most sensible view based on the available evidence". In a nutshell, they hold that mythological texts "cannot be said to be a historical record to incontrovertibly prove the existence of the characters or the occurrence of the events depicted therein." Contrary to the spin put on it by the media, the affidavit is deferential to the texts: "The ASI is aware of and duly respects the deep religious import bestowed upon these texts by the Hindu community across the globe...." Yet, "the study of human history, which is the primary object of the ASI... must be carried out in a scientific manner, using available technological aids, and... tangible material evidence."

The ASI then painstakingly shows that such evidence (for example, human remains, "whether... bones... or other artefacts") and other corroborative material, is lacking. It also quotes studies by the Space Applications Centre, Ahmedabad, which "conclusively" show that the Sethu formation is purely natural, and says that those who interpret the imagery collected by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) as "proof" of a man-made structure misread it. NASA has clarified that remote visual images cannot prove or disprove the existence of man-made structures.

According to the Geological Survey of India (GSI), which recently investigated the area around Adam's Bridge by drilling holes into submerged rocks, there is "no evidence" of man-made structures. It found three distinct cycles of sedimentation of clay, limestone and sandstone, which occurred thousands of years before any human settlement in peninsular India.

Jha specifically argues that it would not have been enough for the ASI to say the Sethu "is not man-made" - full stop. That, he says, "would have been only a half-truth, and there is a very thin line between a half-truth and falsehood". Jha holds that through its affidavit, the ASI partially retrieved the credibility it lost because of its past partisanship of Hindutva.

Even if the ASI had been more guarded and diplomatic in wording the affidavit, it is unlikely that that would have muted the strident objections raised by Hindutva fanatics. They chose to take offence not only because they have a purely literalist interpretation of mythological texts and little

respect for the complexity and diversity of the Hindu tradition, but also because they believe that “Hindu sensibilities”, “concerns” and “sentiments” must be accorded special respect in India because Hindus form a majority of its population. This proposition flagrantly violates the constitutional imperative of secularism, which requires that we attempt a basic separation of religion from politics, and more narrowly, that we do not favour or privilege one religion over any other. Yet, the UPA and a host of media commentators have granted legitimacy to this obnoxious proposition, which is profoundly undemocratic, being founded on the doctrine of majoritarianism.

Democracy in some sense is the opposite of majoritarianism because it recognises and respects minority rights and defends numerically small ethnic and religious groups against the tyranny of the majority. That is why democracies codify fundamental rights, systems of legal protection, and conventions and norms – and not just accept political representation decided by majority vote.

The likes of Advani advance yet another offensive proposition. This is the charge that through the ASI affidavit, the UPA has “wounded the very idea of India”. This is based on the view that the true and authentic idea of India must be a Hindu one. Real secularism, as opposed to “pseudo-secularism”, cannot be irreligious, or apathetic or hostile to Hinduism – because India is quintessentially Hindu.

This blatantly denies India’s pluralism and richness as a diverse, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious society. It negates not just India’s present, but its past. Different religions and faiths, as well as non-religious belief systems, have flourished in India for 2,000 years. Hinduism as we know it today is only one of them.

Besides, no secular democracy can exclude or marginalise faiths other than the majority’s. By handing over an easy victory to Hindu majoritarianism without even putting up a fight, the UPA has done just that. Meanwhile, the compelling arguments against Sethusamudram – economic, ecological and logistical – have all fallen by the wayside.

P.S.

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