Weaponising “Jai Shri Rama”

It militates against Rama’s benevolent image which inspires millions of Hindus

Perhaps Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal, need not have reacted with so much hostility to those who greeted her in Kolkata by saying ‘Jai Shri Rama’. Ordinarily, this is a recognised form of greeting, particularly in north India. Her reasons for suspecting the bona fides of those who did so may have other causes, but her reaction only reinforced the belief of her political opponents that she is less than tolerant to the Hindu samaj.

But this apart, there is no doubt that ‘Jai Shri Rama’ is increasingly being used with a new aggression that is no longer restricted to a benign greeting. Incidents have been reported from Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Assam, UP and Kolkata, where Muslims have been beaten up and made to forcibly chant ‘Jai Shri Rama’. What we are witnessing is an incipient appropriation of Rama by illiterate mobs who know nothing about his benevolent form as Maryada Purushottam, the very epitome of correct behaviour and rectitude.

Valmiki’s portrayal of Rama in the Ramayana (circa 500 BCE), is that of a heroic figure, righteous, fighting against injustice, a friend of the weak, chivalrous and valorous. In Tulsidas’s Ramacharitmanas (16th century CE), which is veritably the Bible of the Hindu masses especially in north India, Rama is profiled for his gentle behaviour, his commitment to public duty, his compassion towards the weak and the oppressed, and his generous behaviour towards the enemy even as he fights for what is right. As George Grierson, an authority on the Ramacharitmanas, writes, Tulsidas “was the great preacher of one’s duty towards one’s neighbour”, and was portrayed as such.

In fact, far from the distorted misrepresentation of Rama as the ‘angry God’, he is profiled in the great epics as the great reconciler. In Tulasi’s writings, Rama bridges the gap between the Vaishnavas and Shaivites; he espouses bhakti, or devotional surrender, but is willing to accept the importance of the paths of karma and jnana, action and knowledge; and, he brings about a harmonious adjustment between ascetism and domestic life. This quality of conscious agreeableness, is vouched for by Shiva himself. As the battle with Ravana is in progress, Shiva tells Parvati in the Ramacharitmanas: ‘O Uma, Rama is tender hearted and kind ... tell me Bhavani who can be as compassionate as He?’ Countless incidents from the life of Rama can be recounted to illustrate this image, but one will do. Kaikeyi, one of the queens of Dashratha, takes advantage of the boon granted by her husband, to banish Rama to the forests for 14 years. It was a blatantly unfair action, but when Rama meets Kaikeyi he is the symbol of equanimity, above anger, dutiful, affectionate, polite, completely in emotional equilibrium. His answer to his stepmother, as narrated by Tulasi, is precisely why the Maryada Purushottam is venerated by millions of people as the role model of impeccable conduct. Rama says to Kaikeyi:
‘Suna Janani soi suta badbhagi, jo pitu maat bachan anuragi (Listen mother, that son is blessed who has an opportunity to lovingly obey his father and mother)’.

Those who misuse the name of Rama to resort to unwarranted violence, should read Tulasi’s description of Ram Rajya, that social utopia that every bhakt of the Lord cherishes, and which also inspired Mahatma Gandhi. Describing Ram Rajya, Tulasi says that it is a place where: ‘Daihik, daivik, bhautik tapa, Ram Rajya nahin kahuhi byapa, sab nar karahin paraspar priti, chalahin svadharma nirat Shruti niti (None suffers from physical, spiritual or material disability, everyone lives with love and harmony, and each follows their religion peacefully)’. Tulasi also sums up the essence of Hindu religion: ‘Parahita saris dharam nahi bhai, parpida sam nahin athmai (The welfare of others is the greatest dharma, and injury to others the greatest sin)’.

Quite clearly, therefore, the gratuitous militarisation of ‘Jai Shri Rama’ militates directly against the image of Rama that has and continues to inspire millions of Hindus. It reduces the elevated ethical dimension of Rama worship to the gutter of mobocracy, and thereby does a great disservice to Hindus and Hinduism. For a God who grants redemption even to his enemies, and who himself bears no anger even against his opponents, and is the incarnation of the saumya rasa, harmonious equilibrium, this is a terrible distortion.

It is important, therefore, to condemn such actions, not only for a violation of the law, but because they would horrify Lord Rama himself. This should be borne in mind even by MPs, some of whom shouted out ‘Jai Shri Rama’ during the solemn swearing-in ceremony of new members in Parliament. Their action was in violation of the established protocol of the House, and thus a direct insult to that God who values correct behaviour to the exclusion of all other factors.

There is, to my point of view, nothing wrong if a suitable temple is built in Ayodhya for Rama, provided it is done in accordance with law and while preserving social harmony, as the Lord would have desired. However, there is everything wrong in distorting the venerable image of Rama. Ultimately, Hindus themselves will have to fight against those who are doing this kind of disservice to their religion.

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