

Marxist
XXXVIII, 4, October-December 2022

VENKITESH RAMAKRISHNAN

Dateline Ayodhya: The Hindutva Hegemony Project in Ayodhya Seen Through the Eyes of a Reporter

“Our Hindu Rashtra mission in Ayodhya and in Bharath as a whole is very similar to the waves in the sea. The size, the force and the intensity of the sea waves vary from time to time, but they never stop. It may look static, at times for the casual viewer, but the waves are moving and building up underneath, ready to strike big at the next opportune moment. In other words, our mission and the work related to it never stop. Kaam Jaari Hain (Work is on)”. These words were spoken to me (in Hindi) by Mahant Ramachandra Paramahans the then President of the Sri Ramajanmabhumi Nyas - a Trust set up by the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in the early 1990s - on 6 December, 1993, exactly a year after the karsevaks of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) led Sangh Parivar had demolished the Babri Masjid.

Paramahans was practically the face of the Sangh Parivar’s Ayodhya agitation in the name of the Ram Mandir in the 1990s, along with other Hindutva hard-liner leaders like Ashok Singhal of the VHP and Vinay Katiyar of the Bajrang Dal. Paramahans was also known for resorting to rhetorical speeches and figurative expressions every now and then, but the exposition in December 1993 on the sustained and relentless nature of the Hindutva campaign was made in a special and specific context. Barely two days before I met Paramahans, on December 4, 1993, a coalition of the Mulayam Singh Yadav led Samajwadi Party (SP) and Kanshi Ram led Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) had formed the ministry in Uttar Pradesh with the support of the Congress.

The ascent of this new government was preceded by the unexpected defeat of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political arm of the Sangh Parivar, in the assembly elections to the State. This was indeed a shock defeat because the expectations within the Sangh Parivar after the violent demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December, 1992 was that Hindutva communal polarisation has reached a new high, especially in North India, and it would consequently lead the BJP to easy and massive electoral wins in the region.

In other words, the belief within the Sangh Parivar was that the creation of the Pan-Hindu social and political identity for which it had worked for

decades has become a reality, at least in large parts of North India. But the social combination of Dalits, Other Backward Castes (OBC) and Muslim minorities forged by the BSP-SP alliance upset these hopes about the creation of the Pan-Hindu identity. It was in the context of this stunning electoral reverse that Paramahans spoke about the “SKaam Jaari Hain” concept to underscore that despite this setback the Sangh Parivar’s project would continue.

A couple of days later, Acharya Giriraj Kishore, yet another senior leader of the VHP, joined with Paramahans and addressed a group of reporters including myself to elaborate what they meant by the “Kaam Jaari Hain” idea. According to the two senior leaders, despite the electoral reverse in the 1993 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, the Hindutva combine had a dominant operational control over the town of Ayodhya and adjoining villages. They argued that the very act of removing the Babri Masjid, termed by both of them as “a 450- year-old blot on the face of India”, signified this control.

Paramahans and Giriraj Kishore went on to add that the Sangh Parivar was able to achieve this dominance not through an overnight manoeuvre but as a result of sustained multinational operations lasting several decades. “It was a political and ideological journey marked by ups and downs, sometimes resembling a roller coaster ride. The appearance of the idol of Ram Lalla inside the Babri Masjid in 1949 marked a major advancement. The manner in which the people of Ayodhya resisted and rejected the ‘Ram-Janaki yatra’, one of the first major exercises to propagate the liberation of Ramajanmabhumi, in 1984 was a big setback. The 1986 opening of the locks of the Babri Masjid by the then Rajiv Gandhi led Congress government at the Centre was a minor success that paved the way for future operations including karseva. But, the firing on the first karseva in Ayodhya on November 1990 by the then Mulayam Singh Yadav led government was a minor setback, which highlighted the Ramajanmabhumi issue globally, though it was thwarted locally. Similarly, the forced postponement of the July 1992 karseva was also a minor reversal while the ultimate demolition of the Babri masjid in December 1992 was a massive success.” - Giriraja Kishore explained that day.

Paramahans added that day as follows: “When the VHP first started focusing on Ayodhya as an important organisational destination, Ayodhya was projected as a twin town of Faizabad and its hallmark was so-called secularism. But we have changed that in a matter of two decades. Sometimes through the method of step-by-step functioning and sometimes employing a flurry of fast-forward movements. These included enhancing our geographical space in the town by bringing more and more religious institutions under our banner, either by buying their property or by persuading them to ally with us. There were also mobilisations, campaigns, kar sevas, and finally

the demolition. But this is work in progress. The identity and supremacy have to be strengthened further and we are working on that. In fact, before reaching this point of success, too, we have gone through several operational levels characterised by success, partial successes, partial failures and major reverses. But the net result is that the project has moved on.”

After this interaction, CK Mishra and KP Singhdeo, two senior journalists based for long in Faizabad recounted the happenings that took place in Ayodhya between 1984 and 1992, and how these developments had resulted in the control and dominance that Paramahans and Giriraja Kishore were talking about. In 1984, the flock of Hindutva leaders who led the Ram-Janaki rath yatra, including Ashok Singhal, had to beat a hasty retreat from Ayodhya as a large number of Ayodhya residents, hailing from all communities, including Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Jain, got ready to physically prevent the yatra in the approach road to the Babri Masjid. The yatra had started from Sitamarhi in Bihar, supposedly the birth place of Sita, with the proclamation that Ramajanmabhumi would be liberated.

However, after this retreat, the Sangh Parivar deputed the VHP to work in and on Ayodhya in a concentrated manner. Through many operations that involved the “Chanakya Neethi of Sama-Dhana-Bhed-Dand”, a combination of sedate entreaties, distribution of largesse, threats and physical attacks, the Sangh Parivar was able to take control of large physical tracts of Ayodhya. These included big properties and institutions owned by individuals and groups, including other Hindu religious groups, as well as the smaller temples of Ayodhya running into hundreds. Those who accepted entreaties or accepted the largesse offered by the Sangh Parivar became part of the “peaceful transition” group. Those who had to be threatened or had to be physically dealt with formed the part of the “forceful takeover” group.

Manifold political manoeuvres, marked by systematic spreading of misinformation and virulent campaigns with the objective of aggravating communal polarisation, were part of this operation. A case in point was the propaganda during the days of the 1990 November karseva. A large number of media across the Hindi heartland were flooded with stories that hundreds had been martyred on account of police firing. The stories presented such a horrific picture that they said that the water flowing in the river Sarayu at Ayodhya had turned red as the blood of the “martyred” karsevaks had merged with the river. The then Mulayam Singh Yadav government contested the claim asserting that less than 30 people were killed in the firing. In turn, the VHP challenged this, and released a “first list” of 75 “martyrs”, complete with names and addresses. I and fellow journalist Sheetal P Singh got around to checking the list of persons who belonged to Uttar Pradesh and found 4 of the 26 listed from the State alive. Even more interestingly, a person who never lived was created fictionally in an address

in Saharanpur and then killed on paper. Around five people in the Uttar Pradesh list had died on account of causes other than the Ayodhya firing, such as traffic accidents in their local towns or diseases like typhoid. The story did attract nationwide attention and caused embarrassment to the Sangh Parivar leadership. But, the masters of deceitful political manoeuvres took it in their stride and carried on with their operations in Ayodhya. Whatever the means, Mishra and Singhdeo pointed out in 1993, nearly two thirds of the town of Ayodhya was practically under the control of the Sangh Parivar by mid-1992. It was in such a context that Paramahans responded to the 1993 electoral reverse with the “Kaam Jaari Hain” remark.

And indeed, in yet another conversation with me eight years later, Paramahans would hark back to the 1993 December interaction and pose another bombastic question: “Kya Bola Thaa Maine! Kaam Jari Hain Na!” (What did I tell you, work is on, right?). This was in March 2002, a few days after Gujarat had witnessed the horrific anti-Muslim pogrom that marked the killing of hundreds of Muslims along with other dreadful acts of violence, including mass rapes and mutilation. On that occasion, Paramahans went on to explain further: “all the resistance that political adversaries put together in the name of secularism and empowerment of Dalits and OBCs or social justice and socialism would not be able hold on before the might of Hindutva. Gujarat and Ayodhya, as laboratories of Mission Hindu Rashtra have proved it and would go on proving it.”

Incidentally, Paramahans was also the head of the Digambar Akhara, which he used to term as a collection of “Warrior Mahants”, and had some reputation as a wrestler, who used to defeat much younger competitors in the wrestling pit. He would often tell those who came to listen to his periodic pravachans (expositions on religion and related matters) that as a practitioner of different martial arts and their philosophies, he saw nothing wrong in violence, subterfuge and crafty moves. Unlike many others in the Sangh Parivar, especially those who were part of the BJP, Paramahans did not hide behind pretensions of piety and adherence to social and democratic values. A large number of reporters covering events in Ayodhya for long also knew that in the scheming and duplicitous multi-speak strategies employed by the several small and big outfits of the Sangh Parivar, the seemingly pompous voice of this longstanding “Hindutva warrior” was the closest to the actual perspective held by the RSS and associate organisations.

For example, in the run up to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, a range of leaders of the Sangh Parivar such as Atal Behari Vajpayee, Lal Krishna Advani, then Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Kalyan Singh and VHP Vice President Swami Chinmayanand had adopted varied positions on the 6 December Karseva creating tremendous confusion among political observers and analysts. While Kalyan Singh and Chinmayanand stated in the

National Integration Council and the Supreme Court respectively that karseva would be confined to performing bhajans and kirtans, Advani, who led a yatra in Uttar Pradesh during the run up to the demolition skirted direct references to the possible happenings on the karseva day and repeatedly harped on the responsibility of the Indian State and its people to correct the “historical wrongs heaped on the Hindu community”.

Vajpayee, on his part was at his cryptic best stating in a public meet at Lucknow on December 5 that “no one can say for sure what would happen during the karseva”. He went on to add that “even to carry out peaceful bhajans and kirtans, the place will have to be cleaned and set up and, in the process, some bumpy mounds and protruding, piercing structures would have to be cleared”. Amidst all these pronouncements, Paramahans and Vinay Katiyar, who was considered a trusted deputy of the “warrior Mahant” at that point of time, were the two people who averred that the “structure would go this time” and that preparations for this, including the formation of suicide squads has been done by the Sangh Parivar. What Katiyar was saying was that the solemn assurance given by the then Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and a senior VHP leader, even before constitutional bodies, would be bypassed. “Is there a power and constitutional authority bigger than Lord Ram”? Katiyar had retorted when I pointed out that the implementation of the demolition plan as delineated by him would put leaders like Kalyan Singh, who have assumed office affirming allegiance to the Constitution. Indeed, the positions held by Paramahans and Katiyar were also part of the deliberate “multi-speak strategy” employed by Sangh Parivar. In its immediate context, these positions also added to the confusion among the public. But ultimately things turned out exactly as Paramahans and Katiyar had predicted.

I had observed this “streak of outspokenness” in Paramahans right from 1986, the period in which I had started covering Ayodhya and related developments. This streak remained steady with him till mid-2003, the period he fell into a relatively long illness and passed away on July 31 that year. In the very early interactions with me as a reporter he openly proclaimed he was one of the persons instrumental in surreptitiously placing the idol of Ram Lalla inside the Babri Masjid on the night of December 22-23 1949, along with other “Warrior Priests” such as Abhiram Das, Ram Sakal Das and Sudarshan Das. In the other long conversations, he had with myself and other fellow journalists, from time to time, he would recount how, as a 21-year-old in 1934, he had led a crowd of rioters to ransack the police station to assert Hindu supremacy over the twin towns of Ayodhya and Faizabad.

Throughout all these grandiloquent narrations, there was a singular theme that appeared repeatedly. It was the insistence that the demographic

dominance of the Hindu communities in India would ultimately gain political control first over Ayodhya and later over the country despite “long rooted diversionary political ideologies and practices like secularism, social justice movements including Dalit and OBC assertive politics, socialism and communism”. Many reporters, including myself, had seen him make one of the most telling statements asserting this conviction on December 9, 1992, three days after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. As a group of journalists went to see him on that afternoon at his headquarters of Digambar Akhara in Ayodhya he was playing the dice game of Bhag-Bakri with his disciples. Lifting his head from the game his first comment to the journalists was as follows: “Is Khel mein Bakri jeet Sakthi Hain. Lekin asli sansar mein Kar saktha hain kya?” (The goat can win in this game, but can it in real life?). Paramahans was clearly asserting the Hindutva hegemony angle blatantly, but figuratively.

In later years, till he passed away in 2003, Paramahans would return to this metaphor as well as the “yeh tho sirf janki hain, ab kaashi, mathura baaki hain” (This is only the trailer, now Kashi and Mathura are our targets) slogan raised by the departing karsevaks as a consummate encapsulation of Hindutva politics and its goal, the Hindu Rashtra. He would also assert often that the advancement of the larger Hindutva political plank in the country would also follow the path as practiced in the laboratory of Ayodhya. Paramahans would also periodically return to his pet theme of “correcting historical blemishes that deserved to be delivered from shame”. Of course, the list contained the targets to be removed, such as the Kashi Gyanvapi Mosque and the Mathura Jama masjid adjoining the Sri Krishna Janmasthan temple. The Taj Mahal in Agra and Qutab Minar in Delhi also figured prominently in the list. The argument was that the Taj Mahal was a Siva temple that it once went by the name of ‘Tejo Mahalya’ and that Qutab Minar was built by Muslim invaders after demolishing a Hindu-Jain religious complex consisting of 27 temples.

But this was not all. The list of “historical blemishes” contained institutions and entities like the Indian Parliament and the Indian Constitution as a whole. “The demand at present is only about addressing key issues like abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, but once we get to absolute power there are many things that would be completely uprooted” – the refrain would go thus. He would specifically refer to the Indian Parliament as one of the “institutional signs of subjugation and shame”. Starting from the architectural designs of the building to the parliamentary systems and practices, the entire package, including the legislative processes adopted by the Union and State government, was portrayed as a persisting symbol of the British domination. The Indian Constitution was seen as an extension of the parliamentary system that

violates the spirit of Bharat and its Hindu ethos. "Guru ji M.S. Golwalkar had expressed such views even as the Constitution was being formalised. The Hindu Rashtra of the Sangh Parivar will undo all this."

Significantly, this long Hindutva project, which developed over several decades and through very many ups and downs as well as political and organisational manoeuvres was facilitated decisively by the Congress, the grand old party of India, and its leadership at least thrice in a span of six years, between 1986 and 1992. In 1986, the Rajiv Gandhi government and the Congress decided to pursue a soft Hindutva line, which they thought would help them electorally, and decided to open the locks of the Babri Masjid and allow Hindu worship just outside it. This was done in response to a legal petition being accepted in a lower court. Three years later, in the run up of the 1989 Lok Sabha elections Rajiv Gandhi went one step further and sanctioned the shilanyas (foundation stone laying) ceremony for the Ram Mandir, imparting legitimacy to the Sangh Parivar claims on the issue.

Three more years later, in 1992, the Congress government led by the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao shuts its eyes to numerous inputs, including from intelligence sources including military intelligence, about the definitive possibility of the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Military intelligence sources had made it clear in their reports as early as the last week of November 1992 that the number of karsevaks was mounting day by day and the security wherewithal at the disposal of the forces would be found wanting in controlling the situation if the crowd turns aggressive. However, this concrete information from the military intelligence to the union government apparently evoked no response from the Rao government.

As the demolition progressed on 6 December, 1992 the barbarism of hardcore Sangh Parivar outfits, which had manifested in diverse forms in Ayodhya over the past couple of decades turned to physical attacks on journalists, especially camera persons. Anybody who was creating visual evidence of the demolition of the Masjid was assaulted mercilessly. Evidently, this strategy has paid off. The criminal case on the demolition of the Babri Masjid, in which Hindutva stalwarts like Lal Krishna Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi, Ashok Singhal, Vinay Katiyar and Uma Bharati formed the list of the accused, was dismissed, among other things, for the prosecution's failure to produce adequate evidence.

Women journalists such as Ruchira Gupta, Suman and Sajeda Momein were also brutally assaulted on 6 December, 1992. Ruchira would later reveal that she extricated herself from the clutches of karsevaks somehow and reached the special dais set up in the precincts for leaders like Lal Krishna Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi, Ashok Singhal and Uma Bharati with the request that Advani appeal to the karsevaks to stop the assault on the

media. Then then “Hindu Hridhay Samrat’s” reply, Ruchira reported, was that he would not be able to attend to such personal inconveniences on day when such a historic event was happening. However, around 3:15 PM, after the fall of second dome, Advani was heard exhorting the karsevaks to block all entry points to the temple town, obviously to prevent any action by the security forces.

But later events proved that Advani’s exhortation was not really necessary. The forces who were present at the site did nothing to stop the demolition of the masjid and stayed inactive not only till the last dome was brought down around 4:50 PM but even when the karsevaks were cordoning off the area with their own fences, building up a temporary structure and placing the Ram-Sita-Lakshman idols there. In fact, a substantial security movement towards the town started only next day, around the evening of the 7th.

By this time, the Rao government had come to an understanding with the Sangh Parivar that the karsevaks would be escorted out peacefully, in special trains and buses. Through the night of December 7 and the day of December 8 the karsevaks left Ayodhya shouting the “trailer slogan”. By the time this “peaceful evacuation” took place, these karsevaks had attacked and torched around 100 Muslim houses of Ayodhya, forcing the residents to take shelter in the Sri Ramajamabhum police station. The sequence of events as they had unraveled from the last week of November to the demolition and after signified not just the story of this tragic persecution and marginalization of the Muslim minorities but also the growing political, social and cultural hegemony of the Sangh Parivar led Hindutva forces.

As Paramahans pointed out in 1993, the “Kaam Jaari Hain” concept moved on not only beyond the reverses it suffered at the hands of the SP and BSP that year, but also the serial defeats it suffered in 2004 and 2009 at the hands of the larger opposition, including the Congress, the Left parties led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M), and regional forces like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (DMK) and the SP. As witnessed in Ayodhya in the 1980s and 1990s the Sangh Parivar followed multidimensional strategies and tactics marked by misinformation campaigns and widespread engineering of communal polarisation and brutal riots to overturn the defeats of 2004 and 2009 and get to massive electoral victories in 2014 and 2019. In 2014, the BJP election plank was strengthened by the multifaceted corruption charges that came up against the Congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governments that ruled in the preceding ten years. However, in both elections, deliberately orchestrated creation of a communal divide was the mainstay of the Sangh Parivar’s electoral manoeuvres.

The Narendra Modi led Sangh Parivar regime, technically run by a BJP led National Democratic Alliance government has moved on from successful or

near-successful pursuits of one Hindutva social and political agenda after another. A new parliament building has come up, which large sections of the Sangh Parivar say contains the stamp of innate Hindu ethos and architecture, Article 370 has been abrogated and there is already a sustained campaign against the Constitution as a whole. There is even chatter about having a “new father of the Nation” to replace the stature accorded to Mahatma Gandhi.

And in Ayodhya itself, the path has been cleared both in terms of legal parameters as well as in terms of practical infrastructures for the construction of a grand Ram Mandir, essentially on account of the massive majority and authority that the Sangh Parivar has over the Executive structure of the country and its unmistakable ripple effects on the judiciary. In a judgement that can be termed as a ludicrous and dangerous at the same time the Supreme Court gave a verdict on November 9, 2019 allocating the disputed property that housed the Babri Masjid to the Hindutva side in the case. This, in spite of accepting that both the smuggling of the Hindu idols into the mosque in 1949 and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 were illegal, criminal actions.

In recent times, there are reports that Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has increased the frequency of his visits to Ayodhya, essentially to oversee the construction of the Ram Mandir. Apparently, he has had four visits to the town in a matter of 40 days during the months of October and November 2022. There is little doubt that the Mandir and the communal propaganda around it would be the hallmark of the election campaigns of the BJP and its ideological fountainhead in the future. Indeed, the work on the Mandir is progressing at a fast pace.

The November 2019 Supreme Court verdict had also provided for the construction of a mosque in Ayodhya, but it is to be situated approximately 15 kilometers from where the Babri Masjid existed. For all practical purposes, far away from Ayodhya. More significantly, it is not exactly conceived as a mosque, but a community center consisting of medical and educational facilities. And, of course, no work on the mosque has started on this complex despite the passage of three years.

Looking back at the last 30 years in the context of the happenings of November - December 1992 as well as the expositions of Sangh Parivar leaders like Paramahans, it is evident that the Hindutva project has moved over the past three decades building on the sectarian milestone created by the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The political reach it has is redoubtable with power, coupled with massive majority, at the Centre and in Uttar Pradesh, the State that houses Ayodhya and Faizabad and has the highest population in the country. The aggressive Hindutva ideology it has unleashed and its effects are being felt at all levels of society.

In other words, it is a social and political hegemony reflected in the restrictions that the Sangh Parivar and its governments at the Centre and in several States are forcefully advancing in areas as diverse as freedom of expression to food habits of people, and in the creation of the climate for the lynch mob killings of persons belonging to Muslim minorities such as Muhammed Akhlaq and Hafiz Junaid as well as brutal murders of intellectuals and thinkers like Gauri Lankesh, Govind Pansare and Narendra Dabholkar. Indeed, the milestone of communal and fascist politics of 6 December, 1992 has acquired gargantuan proportions in the 30 years since it showed its frightful face.