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25 Years after Babri Masjid Demolition

You can't posit Ram against Lakshmi to those without jobs: Pavan K. Varma

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Pavan K. Varma

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Pawan K. Varma, the national spokesperson of the Janata Dal (United), and until recently advisor to the Chief Minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, spoke to Vidya Subrahmaniam, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, on the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid, and issues flowing out of it, including the 2002 anti-Muslim violence. He makes two broad points: The Ram Mandir-Babri Masjid dispute cannot be resolved by force; any solution can only come via a judicial decree or by a negotiated settlement. Second: In the years following the demolition, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost power, both in Uttar Pradesh and at the centre, which showed that "Mandir or issues relating to the Masjid were less

important (to people) than secular issues such as jobs, schools, hospitals and so forth – relating to governance, relating to the dividends of secular development." Excerpts:

How do you look back at the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid?

In many senses, 1992 was a watershed, if a shocking, stunning watershed, moment because, for the first time, a mosque was demolished through mob fury and it took aback even those who were perpetrating the mass hysteria to build a Ram Mandir. The nation was shocked that things could go so far. There were those who remained unrepentant and there were those, including among the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party, who felt that in an attempt to use the construction of the Ram Mandir for electoral purposes or for politically motivated reasons, they had allowed things to go too far. But it is characteristic of the way Indians are, that while the demolition of the Babri Masjid gave a fillip to the BJP in the short-term, there was a progressive decline in the years that followed 1992 of the BJP, and in U.P. itself. From forming a government on its own majority to becoming the single largest party to losing power, all of this happened to the BJP after 1992. In fact, surveys carried out by two leading magazines, *Outlook* and *India Today*, independently showed that for a majority of the ordinary citizens, the construction of the Mandir or issues relating to the Masjid were less important than secular issues such as jobs, schools, hospitals and so on and so forth – relating to governance, relating to the dividends of secular development. And so, there was a situation when the BJP lost power in U.P. And subsequently, from 2004 to 2014 the BJP was out of power notwithstanding the 1992 the mass mobilisation by the BJP and the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) towards building the temple, and the continuous use of religion as a factor of electoral politics. Now what is the situation today?

Before that tell me something. Ten years after 1992 we had the 2002 anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat. Would you place it in the same continuum of rabid communal politics?

What happened in 2002 was again a national shock. Questions needed to have been posed on how so many kar sevaks, those who were returning from Ayodhya as BJP workers or RSS workers, were first of all burnt. Under whose watch did this happen? Under what kind of law and order situation? And the subsequent use of that incident for the mass pogrom that took place. It created a sense of shock and revulsion prompting even the leader of the BJP and the then Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, to speak of *raj dharma*, or the duty incumbent upon those who are elected to govern, to govern impartially and without partisanship. It did give an advantage to Mr. Narendra Modi in the State of Gujarat. His subsequent ascendancy

in my view had less to do with 2002 than to a transparent will to power. A person who was considered a rank outsider even by the top echelons of the BJP not only managed to become the candidate the BJP endorsed, but subsequently through an imaginative, remarkably innovative, and calibrated, well-planned campaign, became the Prime Minister of India.

Today, if you will allow me to come to the present, the situation is that I am a Hindu. And frankly, I would like for a Ram Temple to be built at the birth place of Ram. I would like it to be built because the faith of millions upon millions of people is in a sense associated with Ayodhya as the birthplace of Ram. But I am absolutely clear on two things. One is that it cannot be arbitrarily imposed. Any solution to the dispute of the Ram Mandir-Babri Masjid matter cannot be arbitrarily imposed. It has to be agreed upon that the decision or the solution would be the consequence of a judicial verdict or the result of a mutually acceptable and negotiable settlement among all relevant stakeholders.

But if it is pre-decided that this solution or the end game will be a Mandir, then what kind of a negotiation will that be?

No, the solution is open ended at the moment. There could be a judgment which says that Ram Mandir can be built there, and the stakeholders who speak for the Ram Mandir on the spot, the judgment may go in their favour. At the same time, in a negotiated settlement, there can be an influential enough segment of Muslim opinion that agrees that a relatively inconsequential mosque built very recently can be moved to another place allowing the mandir to be built. There are no limits to the potential of the Indian ethos to accommodate, to find solutions before the precipice, because people want to get on with their lives. They want to go beyond the clutches of *mullahs and mahants* towards the secular mainstream. They want to swim away from the islands of religious exclusivism to the dividends of the secular mainstream. This is my view. I believe in it. And so, people want to put the dispute behind them. And if a judicial verdict helps, or if a mutually negotiated settlement helps them to do that, so much the better. Indians do not like endemic social instability. And therefore, the sooner this dispute is settled the better. Whether the BJP will be able, nevertheless, to use the building of the Ram Mandir as an instrument to maximise its electoral advantage in the lead up to 2019 has to be seen. There is a view that in a situation of relative economic decline, at least a situation of rampant and verifiable dislocation, where people have either not got jobs or lost jobs, or if people's enterprises have closed, what you say *dhandha bandh ho gaya hai*, then to prompt them to carry bricks to build a Mandir is to actually posit Ram against Lakshmi. And Indians are very porous, contrary to the spiritual halo that they love to give to themselves, they are very porous to material well-being. In fact, in the four highest purusharth of

Hinduism, *artha* is included – *dharma, artha, kaama, moksha*. *Arth* stands for the pursuit of material well-being and there is almost no Hindu home where there will not be possibly a portrait of Lakshmi standing for all that material well-being is that is possible in mortal life. Whether it is Lakshmi or Ganesh, they stand for prosperity and well-being. And if that is under threat, it is another matter whether for politically motivated reasons any political party can once again play a card that has repeatedly been played out in the past only for short-term electoral gain, that has to be seen. But I have no doubt that it appears that the BJP may, even while the Supreme Court is hearing the matter with regard to the Ram Mandir, try to simulate a new hysteria with regard to the building of the Ram Mandir with the transparent aim of polarising votes along religious lines in order to maximise short-term electoral gain. There is no doubt in my mind that this will be attempted. Whether it will succeed will also depend on what is the assessment of their deliverables on the secular issue of governance. That has to be seen and I have great faith in the ultimate pragmatism of the Indian electorate.

But then, what explains Modi's emergence in 2014? What do you think happened? Is it as a reaction to corruption?

I think that in the last few years of UPA II, there was a perception of governance decline and also an atmosphere created where it appeared that the entire government is paralysed on the issue of rampant corruption. The country was looking for someone who could fill that void. Mr. Modi created the impression very successfully that he is the man who the country needs. It was part of an exceptionally well-planned campaign to capture the mindscape of the Indian people as a strong and decisive leader who would take a strong stand not only against corruption but would also be an effective leader in terms of delivering on the secular expectations of the people, including, as per his famous promise, jobs and economic growth, and a tougher stand against those who in our neighbourhood are hostile to India, which essentially means Pakistan, China. Now, at that time, there were a few challengers to that claimant, the campaign was exceptionally well-planned, and the UPA II on its second term was in a state of decline. And the nation reposed its faith in the BJP. That I think largely explains Mr. Modi's rise in 2014. Whether this can be repeated in 2019 in my mind is still an open question because the Indian electorate has showed time and again that whatever the seductions of the promises of leaders, they ultimately vote on their perception of the performance of the leaders, and in terms of the expectations that the leaders have generated. So that has to be seen.

But in February this year, at the mid-point of the Modi Government--we had the massive BJP win in U.P.

It is a win. It is not massive. You will see if you look back in the past that normally for Municipal elections that party wins which is also in power in the state.

I was talking about the Assembly elections.

The Assembly elections, I think, were because a) the opposition was divided—the BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) and the SP (Samajwadi Party), and the Congress, and other parties, b) the opposition was disorganised—the SP-Congress alliance came into being literally four days before the filing of nominations for the first phase of the polls which, I can say to you from our experience in Bihar, is not the way you fight elections. It is a very rigorous exercise and today increasingly it's become an exceptionally scientific exercise where, as the part of the entire campaign, you take into account a series of steps from poll booth management at the micro level to the right process for the selection of candidates based on unquestionable data and data crunching in order to understand who is the best choice. Now the BJP in U.P. had been working for a year and a half concentrating largely on the non-Yadav OBCs which constitute as much as 30 per cent of the population, the non-Jatav Dalits, and the upper castes—the Brahmins and the Thakurs. If these come together, it was a winning combination, while the opposition was at sixes and sevens. The BJP with a single-minded focus, which is incidentally because it is a relentless electoral machine, for a year and a half, had been working on these constituencies. So the win was expected. Perhaps the margin was not predictable, but it the win was expected. It was also a factor of the immediate belief among a large number of those who were relatively less privileged that the step of demonetisation would benefit the poor in some manner through the ultimate transference of money taken from the rich and given to the poor. That illusion was shattered soon after U.P. but not until the U.P. elections. So, there were a number of factors. The BJP worked well, it won.

But, in the Municipal elections, which you were talking about, we can already see a little decline, right?

A: There is a dip compared to the win in the Assembly election, then normally that party which is ruling in Lucknow has an advantage, there are blandishments, subtle influences which a ruling party can use in persuading people to vote for them in a Municipal election. In the case of the civic elections in U.P., it went to another extreme with the BJP candidates actually threatening voters that if you don't vote for us, we will annul the elections for this Municipality,

or where the minorities were concerned, openly issuing threats to them. These are all exceptionally unethical aspects of the working of Indian democracy. And all parties need to introspect about it. So therefore, again the factor was that the opposition was divided. What happens quite simply is this: unless the opposition in this country can come up with a strategy where against every BJP candidate, there is only one candidate of the opposition, you will have the same situation. What actually happens is that the opposition vote is divided by four and the BJP vote is consolidated into one. So it gives a natural advantage to the BJP.

Starting from 1992, regardless of who came to power or who was defeated, there has been a certain coarsening of language, thinking, being able to say the most violent things and the most communal things openly. You take these two channels, I won't name them, they actually play the Hindu card so openly, shockingly and in a way previously unthinkable. And that also reminds me of something that about a few years ago we used to have this very funny campaign called Mera Bharat Mahaan. Not that anyone did not like Bharat, but it was an affectionate way of having a few digs at one's country. No one said 'we will beat you up' or 'kill you' for that.

What we are seeing today is the use of a dual instrumentality. One is religion and the other is nationalism. On the issue of religion, I strongly believe that the BJP is convinced that if governance fails, the ultimate card to fall back on is to maximise electoral results, electoral dividends through the playing of the religious card. And we have seen it Bihar, we have seen it also in U.P. where not a single Muslim was given a ticket. The opposition, on the other hand, I think sometimes errs to the extreme which they need to correct. Like for instance, the BSP giving as many as 100 seats to Muslims. I think somewhere both the ruling party and the opposition need to understand that in this country there are many religions and you have got to carry all the people together and you cannot in perpetuity play a card of social divisiveness. But the use of nationalism today has also become a means to divide rather than unite. There are people going around in this country with metaphorical syringes as I said once recently, who want to take a sample of your blood in order to see how much nationalism you have and they determine the yardsticks. And they are reducing an otherwise noble, powerful, and relevant emotion to its lowest common denominator; lumpen and illiterate elements arbitrarily decide who is nationalistic and who is not. This has two further consequences. One, it is an attempt to deflect attention from real issues where there are visible failures relating to governance. The second is to use nationalism to stifle all dissent, decent debate and discussion, and use it to impose a uni-dimensional point of view which is completely and totally contrary to the entire ethos of Hinduism. I am right now finishing a major book on Adi Shankaracharya. Adi Shankaracharya established that the methodology to settle disputes,

because he had differences with the other five systems of Hindu philosophy, with Buddhism and with Jainism, but he used the methodology of *Shastrarth* or debate and discussion, not violence and not the force or the deliberate whipping up of hatred against those who disagree with you.

So, what do you think is going to happen in Gujarat?

It's not so much that the BJP will win. But I think the Congress will lose. There is obvious discontent on the ground. But one thing I have learnt through my own experience of electoral politics, including on the organisational side, that it is one thing for discontent to exist and another thing for a party to be able to harness it effectively as part of a fighting machine, which the BJP is and the Congress still has to be. And here I think the Congress and the opposition need to introspect about it. ...

(Vidya Subrahmaniam is Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy. She was until recently Associate Editor with The Hindu based in New Delhi. In a journalistic career spanning 34 years, she has written and reported extensively in a number of newspapers in Chennai, Mumbai, Lucknow and Delhi. She has also served on the national news bureaus of The Indian Express, The Indian Post, The Independent, The Statesman, and was an opinion page writer for The Times of India. She holds an M.A. degree in Geography from the Delhi School of Economics. In 2013, she won the Ramnath Goenka Award for Excellence in Journalism in the category, "Commentary and Interpretative Writing.")

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