

Temple Turmoil



Editorial by Narayani Ganesh



We need to respect the essence of religions that promotes universal values and make the Indian Constitution our Dharma Shastra, says SWAMI AGNIVESH in an interaction with NARAYANI GANESH

Swami Agnivesh has been feted and criticised, both, for exactly the same views he espouses — that religions have got universal values which are at the core of those religions; that all religions also have, over time, acquired a large baggage of dogmas, rituals, superstitions, and miracle-mongering, promoted by the priestly class that thrives by them. He believes that these aspects that depart from core philosophies and scientific reasoning are what cloud the true essence of religion. He says, “The manner in which religions, religious practices and their custodians have been organised and institutionalised, are far removed from what religions really mean to convey as their spiritual treasures. Mostly people practise rituals which are stupefying and superstitious. This obscures the real purpose of religion, which is, to promote a way of life based on love, peace and harmony among all beings.”

True Religion

Swami Agnivesh points out that religion is meant to make us better human beings, help to live in harmony with nature, with one another and with all other forms of life “and really, that’s how we ought to commune with our Creator. That is why I say that the Sabarimala and Ayodhya issues are far removed from true religion.”

Ekam sat vipra bahuda vedanti — ‘That which exists is One; sages call it by many names.’ If all are One, then Creator, Sustainer, are One. Citing this, Swamiji says that when Guru Nanak, Kabir, and even Gandhiji spoke of Rama, they were referring to the formless God, not the king of Ayodhya. Attributes of *nirguna* and *sagun* cannot be associated with the Lord of the Universe who is *niraakaar*. He quotes from the *Yajur Veda*: “*Na tasya pratima asti* — no figure or deity can claim to represent the One, any such representation cannot be Supreme, for the Supreme Divine transcends all forms.”

What does he have to say about the demand for a new Rama Temple in Ayodhya? “In the name of the Vedas, people create gods from images and claim, ‘this is the exact spot where a god was born, this is where he lived,’ and so on. This battle cry for a Rama Temple in Ayodhya — why is this made into such an important issue? There are hundreds of Rama temples in Ayodhya alone and the priests of at least half a dozen of these temples, and the priest of each one of them claims that his temple is the spot where the original Rama Temple stood,” exclaims Swamiji.

He recollects that when L K Advani set out on his Rath Yatra, V P Singh offered him a lot of land close to the Babri Masjid to build a Rama Temple there, and to leave the disputed site alone. But L K Advani said, “*Saugandh Ram ki khate hain, mandir wahin banayenge* — I swear on Rama’s name that the temple will be built exactly there.” Swamiji says, “Everyone thought he was referring to Ayodhya, but in fact, he was referring to the four feet by four feet spot in the Babri Masjid that is claimed to be the birth spot of Rama. The site of dispute seemed more important for Advani than Rama himself.”

According to Swamiji, this is nothing but mischief created by politicians whose blind followers as ignorant armies are ready to march at their behest. Moreover, this topic is brought up only before elections, he points out. “Even when you take it from a purely religious point of view, the claims that though Rama was born lakhs of years ago, they ‘know’ the exact spot where he was born, precise to a square foot, so that the temple can be built only there. This goes against all core teachings of religion, even against common sense.”

What kind of advice would he give to the people, in this context? “Go by Truth, which is the core spiritual value of all religions. If faith is not according to truth, then it is blind faith which is based on ignorance and superstition. If faith is according to truth there has to be also reasoning, rationality and scientific temper. Faith that has no reasoning and no doubts should be considered as blind, which shuts the God-given eye of reason within us. This is signified by the third eye of Shiva. Every religion has succumbed to superstition.

“Why give so much importance to a brick and mortar building? Can destroying a place of worship destroy the religion itself? Can a destroyed Rama temple or a mosque destroy Hinduism or Islam? Why are we allowing buildings to replace core philosophy? Buildings are for people to congregate and be protected from natural elements to pray, meet, greet and listen to teachings. But if we are going to assign sanctity to a building, then what about the human body?

“God created the body. A human body has trillions of cells, it’s a miracle. ‘*Yatha pinde tatha Brahmande* — the body is a microcosm of the macrocosm, the universe.’ In the name of claiming sacredness of a mosque or temple, if that place gets polluted by a cigarette, a piece of meat or alcohol, then hundreds of people are killed by ‘believers’ to avenge the act. But when we insert all these objects of pollution into the human body, which is the true temple, and infect it with negative thoughts, violence, anger and greed, then what happens?

“The body is the Creator’s gift. It is God’s own breath that animates our body. God lives within us. Didn’t Jesus Christ say, ‘The Kingdom of God is within you?’ Then why are we discarding this lofty philosophy and fighting over material things? You create an army of mediators between God and human beings in the form of priests and they tell you what God is like and how you can keep him in good humour for your own benefit. They also decide for us what gods like to eat; such as, Ganesha liking laddoos, Krishna, dairy products and Shiva, bhang. But these are all stories spun by humans, isn’t it?”

Swamiji raises the question, “If a political party has included the mandir project in its manifesto, how come all these years it did not get built and now it is coming up on the eve of elections? Do they want us to believe that gods wake up in sync with elections? Politics is nothing but playing to the gallery; it is opportunistic.

“Neta are elected as per the provisions of the Indian Constitution and that should be the *Dharma Shastra* of all Indians. Don’t we? What kind of advice would he give the people...?” The Constitution states that we need to promote scientific inquiry. And let’s not forget that blind faith hinders progress. Leaders should not forget that public servants are meant to serve the people, not mislead them,” Swamiji reminds us.

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