

Why Sita matters for an Ayodhya solution

Author - Rajni Bakshi, Published on - 13.5.2019



The idea behind 'Sita ki Rasoi', which was part of Babri Masjid, gives us an ecological antidote to sectarian conflict

The three-decade-old Ayodhya dispute bypasses the significance of 'Sita ki Rasoi' a shrine that was part of the Babri Masjid compound long before it was demolished in 1992

For at least 30 years now the dispute in **Ayodhya** has been seen as a uniquely Indian problem—Hindu versus Muslim sentiment, secular India versus Hindu **rajshtra** (nation). But there is a subsurface, much neglected, ecological narrative which reveals the global and civilizational implications of the dispute in Ayodhya. It transforms the conflict from identity politics to a reflection on what sensibility might enable humankind to thrive beyond the 21st century. In the midst of a frenzied election campaign, this narrative may seem incongruous but, in fact, promises to free us from false binaries of faith versus reason, tradition versus modern, and, above all, "us" versus "them".

In the *Ramcharitmanas*, Goswami Tulsidas vividly describes how Sri Ram, the epitome of balance and self-restraint, experienced a moment of violent anger. The incident happens at the close of "Sunderkand", as Ram and his army are poised to go to Lanka where Sita is being held captive by Ravan. For three days Ram waits for the sea to respond to his request for cooperation so that the army can somehow cross over to Lanka. When all appeals to the ocean fail, Ram becomes enraged and shoots a fire arrow into the sea which begins to boil—causing enormous suffering to all aquatic creatures.

This scene was depicted on a commonly deployed poster of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The image of a muscular Ram aiming his arrow at the sea was accompanied by the following lines about this episode in the *Ramcharitmanas*: "*Bole Ram skob tab, bhay binu hoi na preet*". Roughly translated that means "Then Ram said, without fear there can be no friendship/love".



The quotation was accurate but the message of the poster, and the extensive narrative promoted by it, was grievously misleading. Ram's moment of anger actually leads to a revelation about the futility of rampaging aggression particularly when driven by a desire to control nature.

In the verses that follow, the ocean appears in the form of Samudradev and begs Ram to recognize that it, the ocean, is only following the rules of nature. If I dry up and break the rules, says Samudradev, it will belittle the rules and disrespect their creator—who is Ram himself as an avatar of Vishnu, the Lord of all creation. Are you telling me to break your own rules? asks Samudradev.

Tulsidas depicts Ram smiling when faced with this humble truth about the laws of nature. The fire arrow is withdrawn, the ocean returns to its balanced state and an innovative solution, harmonious with nature, gets the army across to Lanka.

It would be absurdly reductionist to dismiss this parable because it is a prelude to a war. On the contrary it derives its significance by bringing alive the complex challenges of conflict among humans, and between humans and nature. Ram's moment of rage and its resolution is made all the more poignant because at the heart of it all is the need to secure the well-being and liberation of Sita—the daughter of mother Earth.

[SITA KI RASOI](#)

This is why the 21st century dispute at Ayodhya is tragically ironic—for Sita both as consort of Ram and as a symbol of *dharti mata*, mother Earth, is ignored. All the legal wrangling and political manipulation bypasses the significance of "Sita ki Rasoi" a shrine that was part of the Babri Masjid compound long before it was demolished in 1992.



Philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi said the best way to honour the spirit of Sita ki Rasoi is to turn Ayodhya into an atonement venue not only between Hindus and Muslims, but also between humans and the nature. (above) A tattoo pattern popular among some tribes. The pattern in the middle depicts Sita ki Rasoi. Photo: Akhilesh Shukla

In his book **Sita's Kitchen: A Testimony of Faith and Inquiry** the late philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi described why he was struck by this shrine outside the northern wall of the mosque. The shrine consisted of nothing more than a rolling board and a rolling pin which Gandhi identified as symbols of nurturing love and regeneration. Above the shrine was a sign which said: "Janmasthan Sita ki Rasoi". Gandhi was moved by the fact that though Ram, as an avatar of Vishnu, is the preserver of all creation, his birth or birthplace could not fully be honoured without also revering Sita as Sakti, as mother Earth, the essence of plenitude.

In case this sounds too esoteric consider the following. At the same time that Gandhi's book was published, hundreds of thousands of people in the Narmada river valley were struggling to save their homes and fields from being drowned by the Sardar Sarovar Dam. In many of those threatened tribal villages there were similar Sita ki Rasoi shrines and the space around them was sacred just as the river Narmada has been sacred to countless generations of tribals and non-tribals.

Sita ki Rasoi is also one of the most frequently applied tattoo patterns among tribals of central India. It represents plenitude and abundance. Thus the presence of Sita ki Rasoi at Ayodhya, was a reminder that despite the turmoil and upheavals over centuries—across caste and religious denominations—the people of this subcontinent have worshiped nature itself as omnipresent divinity.

Sita ki Rasoi can also be seen as a symbol of the deep roots of Advaita, the rejection of dualism, not just by aboriginal spirituality but also more formal traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism. Therefore, Ramchandra Gandhi proposed that the best way to honour the spirit of Sita ki Rasoi was to turn Ayodhya into the venue for a subcontinental congregation of atonement not merely between Hindus and Muslims but more importantly between humans and the rest of nature.

QUEST FOR 'ONEMENT'

However, atonement in this case would not mean redress or penance but "onement"—unity of human beings with nature as divinity. Then the environment cannot be seen merely as a resource or an externality which requires better management. Neither does environment then become something that must be left utterly undisturbed or untouched. Instead, the quest for onement brings questions about the meaning and purpose of life out of the far margins and onto centre stage of public life—possibly displacing caste, religious identity, nationalism and the money bottom line from the position of primacy they now occupy.

Quixotically, such a perspective would put both the secular and communal combatants of the Ayodhya dispute on one side—for both are profoundly anthropocentric, as in they give primacy to humankind. Modern industrialization and a "secularization" of nature have gone hand-in-hand for over 200 years. Secularization means that denying any notion of the sacred or divine in relation to nature is equated with "progress" and therefore with "development". This is why the villagers who revere the Narmada river as sacred came to be dismissed by policymakers as being backward, ignorant and anti-national because they opposed the dam.

The communal protagonists at Ayodhya are anthropocentric because of their obsessive preoccupation with sectarian religious identity. It is partly because the larger linkage with the rest of creation is broken that both the Hindu and Muslim protagonists at Ayodhya are unable to see the apparent "other" as a variant of themselves. However, it is only when we think of non-human life and non-living matter also as varying images of ourselves that we are fully alive. This widening self-awareness is also an antidote to sectarian conflict.

BANYAN, NEEM, AND PIPAL

Since tribal society tends to be misrepresented as oddly uninterested in surplus accumulation, here is an illustration from within the farming caste-Hindu communities along the Narmada river in Madhya Pradesh. It is common in those parts to find three trees, in fledgling form, growing close to each other—the banyan, the neem and the pipal. This is because the local people commonly plant these three trees—neither of which has a marketable fruit. But each of these tree species plays a crucial role in the larger ecosystem and provides indispensable materials for the healthcare of humans, cattle and the soil.

For some planting these trees is a good deed, a *punya*, done by rote. But for many the act of planting and nurturing these trees is a manifestation of the metaphysics which gives meaning to their life. As one such planter said: "We believe that if a person has planted one each of these three trees and brought them to maturity, he or she has fulfilled their reason for being—everything else we do or achieve in life is a bonus."

Till recently varied forms of this ethos were manifest, in different forms, across India. In the sphere of water and forests this gave rise to physical structures and community norms that enabled people to thrive across countless generations. Today even sacred groves are fast dwindling, including many that are part of temples. One reason for this is that in many locations the temple congregations tend to be more focussed on the grandeur of the temple buildings, including larger parking lots, rather than the ecological sanctity of the sacred grove.

Twenty years ago when the concept of triple bottom line emerged in the realm of business globally, it was expected to radically transform how human production systems intersect with nature's ecosystems. Despite many corporations claiming to adopt the triple bottom line, the actual implementation of this approach remains superficial and is far from adequate. This is because nature remains an "other" we are trying to manage rather than cooperate with.

IN CONCLUSION

It could be argued that in a country with an exponentially rising population density, 445 humans per square kilometre in 2016, human-nature conflict is inevitable. What, in this context, is the point of invoking Sita ki Rasoi as a sensibility? One, such a sensibility is an antidote to the obsessively short-term focus on human needs and wants which neglects how this affects the rest of nature and our long-term survival. This aspect is well acknowledged even by the modern, global environmental movement.

Two, Sita ki Rasoi is a reminder that only those societies have survived which focused on "oikonomia"—the Greek word for good housekeeping with a long-term perspective—and, kept in check "chrematistic", namely the manipulation of nature and surplus accumulation for short-term monetary gains.

Three, Sita ki Rasoi enables us to celebrate abundance instead of endless growth and surplus. If abundance is the goal then sufficiency and self-restraint become values that enrich life. Perpetual growth is the objective today because sufficiency is denigrated and economics as a discipline claims that only when needs and wants are endless that we have a dynamic economy and society.

Above all, Sita ki Rasoi is a metaphor for freedom from false binaries. Perhaps this is why, for Swami Vivekananda, Sita was the ideal of India, because she never returned injury. For Mahatma Gandhi, Sita was the epitome of quiet, true strength and endurance—opposite of the weakness and self-doubt which cause people to be obsessed with some "other" who can be blamed for all their unhappiness.

The ultimate outcome of the quarrel in Ayodhya depends on choices each one of us makes in daily life. Will we see ourselves as embattled beings whose survival depends on taming the "other" be it people of another community or the rest of the natural world? Or will we cultivate a widening self-awareness that enables us to embrace the "otherness"—of those who are different and of nature.

When in doubt about the viability of such an exhortation in "real" life consider this story which the sociologist Ashis Nandy often shares, of a Yakshagana performance he saw recently. This takes us back to the episode of Ram and his army by the seashore. The bridge to Lanka has been built but it cannot be trod upon without first being consecrated—a task that could not be undertaken without a Brahmin. The only Brahmin in the vicinity is Ravan. A request is sent and Ravan is duty-bound to accept. So Ravan arrives and consecrates the bridge knowing fully well that it will be used by Ram's army to cross over to Lanka and challenge him.

At the root of a popular culture that crafts this story is a clarity that the "other" is not my opposite nor my enemy even if at a given moment there is disagreement and conflict. This is why Sita ki Rasoi, as an idea, a symbol and as shrine, was cherished across generations and will remain alive regardless of political wrangling.

First published by [Live Mint](#) on 6 May 2019