



By AMITA KANEKAR

How Ancient are Ancient Temples?

Hindu temples in the news means that election season is upon us. First there was the violence at Sabarimala in Kerala, following the Supreme Court judgement lifting the temple's ban on the entry of women of menstruating age. In what Kerala's BJP chief reportedly called a 'golden opportunity' for his party, women trying to enter the shrine were violently stopped by rampaging mobs. Meanwhile in the north, we see the sudden reiteration of the old Sangh Parivar demand for a Ram temple on the site of the demolished Babri Masjid. The demand was not surprisingly accompanied by the declaration that only Modi would build the temple, which is why he must be voted in again.

The justification offered is ancientness. The Sabarimala ban on menstruating women is an ancient one, we are told. And the claim that there was an ancient Ram temple on the site in Ayodhya, which destroyed by Babur and replaced by a mosque, is well-known. Reputed historians and archaeologists might argue themselves hoarse about how there is no proof for either claim, but India is not convinced. This is not just because these ideas are backed by the BJP-RSS, but also because of our understanding of the Indian past. Indian history, as taught in Indian schools, is full of Hindus and their (Brahmanical) traditions being ill-treated, by those of other faiths. This ill-treatment, which especially included the widespread destruction of their shrines, was supposedly at the hands of Muslim rulers in British India, and in Goa by the Catholic Portuguese.

There are many problems with this understanding. One is that the story is wildly exaggerated. For example, Muslim kings are all supposed to be temple-breakers. But even Aurangzeb, with perhaps the worst reputation in India, did not break every temple he found, but only those belonging to those who rebelled against him. His three-decade-long campaign in the Deccan hardly saw any temple destruction.[1] And he was very generous to some temples, including some at Ujjain, Kashi and Guwahati. But he remains a temple-breaker in the popular imagination.

Second, Hindu temples were not the only shrines destroyed in the subcontinent. In Goa, for example, it is 'common knowledge' that the Portuguese destroyed temples, but few

remember that the first shrines to be destroyed were actually mosques. The Sé of Old Goa, the most important institution of the Catholic faith in the entire Estado da Índia, is believed to stand near the site of the destroyed Jama Masjid (Rossa, 2011).

Almost all Goans today believe that Catholic churches were built over destroyed Hindu temples. But, as architectural historian Paulo Varela Gomes said, in his pathbreaking book *Whitewash, Red Stone: A History of Goan Church Architecture* (2011), since temples always belonged to specific castes and thus would stand within specific caste vadem (neighbourhoods), churches tried to avoid such sites since they wanted to appear universal. Thus many churches are located on the outskirts of village settlements, at the edge of the fields or on riverbanks, or overlooking the village from hills.

But it is also true that the destroyed temples were usually replaced by new shrines, normally chapels. This can be seen in the village of Benaulim, Salcete, according to a B.Arch. research dissertation by Filanda D'costa.[2] It would thus appear that the destruction of a shrine was usually followed by the creation of a new shrine, to a different deity. Shrines, in short, were replaced by shrines, and the religiosity of the site was respected and preserved.

But this process did not start with the Portuguese or Muslims. Many Brahmanical shrines are themselves said to have been built on earlier sites of worship, either belonging to the indigenous peoples, or to the 'Shamana' or non-Brahmanical cults, especially the Buddhists and the Jains. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) reported finding Buddha statues, often headless or with their noses cut off, i.e. deliberately mutilated, near or actually below Hindu temples. At times they have been incorporated into Hindu worship, with Buddhist pillars worshipped at Shiva lingas. The famous seventh-century traveller, Hsuan Tsang, mentions finding this during his travel through Dharanikota and Venginadu in today's AP, that Buddhist temples there had been occupied or converted into Hindu temples. Well-known Brahmanical sites, like that of Tirupati in AP, Odisha's Jagannath temple, and the Sringeri matha in Karnataka, have all been linked to former Buddhist or Jain worship.

Some Buddhist sites might themselves have a similar history. The great rock-cut monastery at Karle, near Bombay, was built at a site of worship of the tribal goddess Yamai, for the

ostensible purpose of stopping blood sacrifice there, according to D. D. Kosambi.[3] The ancient monastery has itself now been superseded by a modern Hindu temple dedicated to the goddess Ekvira, said to be an avtar of Parvati. Today, most visitors to the site come for this temple; clueless children even play cricket inside the magnificent two-thousand-year-old chaitya hall just behind. Yamai appears forgotten.

The region of today's Goa was also a site of the non-Brahmanic sects, including Buddhists and Jains, some of which are known to have been converted into Brahmanical shrines. But many of Goa's Brahmanical temples appear to be built on sites of indigenous worship; there are in fact active Bahujan claims of how their old shrines were taken over by migrant Brahmin communities, as at Marcaim and Mangueshi. A sign of this might be the sacred 'roen' or anthills, which are locally believed to represent the Bahujan diety Sateri but are now a part of Brahmanical worship connected to big temples where Bahujans are outsiders.

Sabarimala seems to have a similar history. While some say it is a former Buddhist shrine, Kerala's Mala Araya tribal community claims to be the original worshippers of the site, from where they were evicted in the 1800s. They are now demanding that the State Government overturn the injustice done to them, and give them back the temple. They also say that they have never discriminated against women; the 'tradition' at the site is thus new.

Every sacred site thus seems to have a story of changing traditions and suppressed worship, and it is worth noting that most of these are connected to the suppression of the Bahujans by the dominant castes, whether Hindu, Muslim, or Christian. But this history is itself being suppressed today, not just for the purpose of election-mongering, but also for continued Brahminical hegemony; it is high time we reject this false discourse.

[1] Richard Eaton and Phillip Wagoner; Power, Memory and Architecture: Contested Sites on India's Deccan Plateau, 2017.

[2] Filanda D'Costa, Chapels of Goa: Nodes of Community Life, GCA Working Papers 2014-15, 2015

[3] D D Kosambi, Myth and Reality, 1962.



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