



A new temple is announced. Thanks to the recently-delivered Supreme Court verdict in the Babri Masjid land dispute case, it looks like we – in a land short of many things, but definitely not new Hindu temples – are going to get a new temple, the grandest of them all, on the site of the demolished Babri Masjid. The judgement has seen strong reactions, with some raising the legal issue of how the same judgement which declares the demolition of Babri Masjid by a mob in 1993 as illegal could reward the perpetrators (or their instigators) with the land, instead of trying to undo their crime; and others criticising the historical argument in the judgement that the site has always been believed to be the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram, for using very questionable sources.

There are also those who have welcomed the judgement in the name of peace and harmony, even though, as anyone in India should be able to see, peace and harmony is rarely justice but, more often than not, the dominance of the powerful. But surely this is a worthy price to pay, so the argument goes, for avoiding further violence? Except that it may not work, for other who have welcomed the judgement are already talking of Mathura and Kashi, and the Taj Mahal as well.

But let us return to the imminent temple. It is noteworthy that the judgement was announced at almost the same time as news about a temple in Tamil Nadu where attempts were made to stop a marriage from being held on the premises. The reason? The couple to be married were Dalit. The marriage finally did take place, but only after the police intervened, to break the locks on the temple gates and stand guard through the wedding ceremony.

The leaders of the RSS-BJP-VHP claim that their Hinduism is casteless and thus also their temple. Others might believe them, for, after all, temples in most of India – not Goa – are public institutions, governed by government authorities. But that doesn't make them any less casteist. The atrocities described above are the norm – those considered 'low' are regularly humiliated, abused, beaten, maimed, or even killed for trying to enter temples. Among those humiliated have been Presidents, Prime Minister and Chief Ministers of the nation.

Governments in Kerala and Tamil Nadu have made efforts to train and appoint nonBrahmin priests, but without much success. There are even a few examples of new temples that tried to ignore caste, only to get boycotted by dominant and middle castes. Because that's not what a temple is expected to be. Hindu temples are expected to be the embodiment of Brahmanism, i.e. of caste and untouchability, even today, when ill-treatment on the basis of caste is legally proscribed. From my ongoing survey of pre-1961 temples in Goa, it is clear that every single job and position connected to them is based upon caste. And these jobs and positions are not equal – far from it. They are arranged in a rigid hierarchy of *maan* (honour) 1

and untouchability, with the priests (almost always Bhats) and the *mahazan* (almost always from various dominant castes, and usually including Saraswats) getting the maximum *maan* and access to the deity, and the drummers (from the Mahar community) treated as untouchables. Even where the priests are not Bhats by tradition, new rituals (like Satyanarayan pujas) see Bhats increasingly taking over. Not one temple has been found that allows all worshippers to worship equally. Leave aside access to the the *gabharo* (sanctum), which is permitted only to *mahazans*, few temples allow everyone to enter even the hall in front of the sanctum. And many - via their priests - readily admit that persons of the Mahar community are not allowed inside at all, or not beyond some point.

These rules are not displayed in public - not surprisingly, for they are against the Constitution - with the result that strangers of any caste might possibly enter most temples freely today (though not the sanctum). But the rules are in force with respect to the local community where everyone knows everyone else. Thus the local Mahar community is not allowed to enter the local temple, even today, in many big shrines across Pernem, Bicholim, Sattari, Ponda, Quepem and Sanguem talukas, and probably elsewhere too, even though their drumming is vital to many temple rituals. The Maharwaddo of the village, where many still live, is still considered temple-owned land, where they need the permission of the temple committee to improve their houses, including the building of personal toilets (as at Ibrampur, Pernem), and from where, if they leave, they leave with nothing, despite living there for generations and beating the temple drums for free. So the relationship to the temples is one of not just untouchability, but also slavery.

How different will the BJP-VHP-RSS temple be? The RSS likes to blame everything ugly in India on Muslim rulers and British (and Portuguese) Raj, including caste. Surely, then, it's time to get rid of it? The Hindutva leaders did, in fact, try to demonstrate inclusiveness at the start of their Ayodhya campaign, by having members of former untouchable communities carrying out important rituals for the proposed temple. But that was then, when the campaign need to attract everyone and win votes. Now the BJP is in power - a power that promises Hindu Rashtra to everyone from the NRIs who want India to be 'pure', to the lynch mobs doing the job on the ground. What would this support base - and indeed all patrons of Hindu temples - expect but a traditional Brahmanical shrine? And what else does this mean but the continued institutionalisation of caste apartheid?

This is a question before Goa too. Today's Goa is witness to struggles to free temples from the control of Brahmins. Which is great, but will this free them from caste? Some of the non-Brahmins involved in these struggles have made it a point to take over some of the ritual jobs formerly the preserve of the Brahmin *mahazan*, like the honour of carrying the *palki* (palanquin) of the deity in procession. How long will it take for these jobs to be offered to the

drummers, while they take over the drums instead?



(A shorter version of this essay was first published in *O Herald*, on 17 November, 2019)

What's new in a new Temple?

Share this...



Facebook



Whatsapp



Print



Email



Twitter



Reddit