

## ADVAITA'S WATERLOO

a review by Vinay Lal

Ramchandra Gandhi. *Sita's Kitchen: A Testimony of Faith and Inquiry*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992. 127 pp. Rs. 85/-.

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In the long history of India as a civilization, the honor of her traditions of spirituality and cultural accommodation has many times been put to the test. The history of any civilization can be written as a history of how it has marked the 'other', confronted the alien or the invader, treated the stranger, and defined the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion. Although the genius of Indian civilization, and her exemplary contribution to the narrative of humankind, may well be *advaita* (non-dualism), an ethic of inclusiveness, a philosophy opposed to the annihilationist destructiveness of the dualism of 'self' and 'other', 'me' and 'you', one moment when India's honor was surely compromised befell the country on 6 December 1992 when a large crowd constituted predominantly of Hindus tore down, in rude and militant defiance not merely of the law but of norms of civility, moral conduct, and cultural pluralism, a sixteenth century mosque -- otherwise known as the Babri Masjid -- described by certain Hindu organizations and their supporters as having been built on the very spot where a Hindu temple which once stood to commemorate the birthplace of Lord Rama was then demolished to make way for the religious edifice representing the faith of India's new conquerors. As the proponents of the 'temple theory' were keen to argue, such a monument to the enslavement of Hindus, and a perpetual reminder of their subjugation in the land of their birth, could not be allowed to stand; and in place of the mosque, they have insisted, a temple must be installed in resplendent homage to Lord Rama, glorious scion of the Suryavamsi kings and a principal deity of Hinduism. Their ambition has already cost several thousand lives, as the carnage in the wake of the destruction of the mosque indubitably and painfully testifies; moreover, as this ambition has not seen its fruition yet, and a resolution to the problem seems far from being achieved, we can expect the strife, in however attenuated a form, to continue.

The conflict over the "disputed structure", as the Government of India characterizes it, has spawned an enormous literature. The contours of the debate have predictably been

determined by proponents and antagonists of the 'temple theory': one side is of the view that the archaeological and historical 'evidence' furnishes irrefutable proof of the existence of a temple at the Rama Janmasthan (birthplace of Rama) before it was brought down and a mosque built partly with its debris; the other side is just as certain that the evidence cannot sustain the aforementioned hypothesis. Beyond the narrow confines of the particular question of whether a temple stood at the site where the Babri Masjid was later erected, the debate has revolved around a series of political, legal, and constitutional considerations. How could the law have been flaunted so easily? Why did the state, which had positioned nearly 20,000 troops in the vicinity of the mosque and around it, remain woefully negligent in the performance of its duty to protect the mosque? To whom should culpability be assigned? For those, inside and outside India, to whom the Indian political scenario represents an unending series of crises, a country once again seemingly on the verge of collapse, the query is easily framed: Will India survive? Or is the country, devoid of 'law and order', bereft (if we are to believe Nirad Chaudhari and his ilk) of the principled and firm hand of India's former guardian class, bound to putrefy in the stink of its (as some believe) 'ageless' hatreds? A somewhat more idealist or philosophical tone has been injected into the literature by those who, confronted by the demise of 'secularism', find in the events leading to, and following, the destruction of the mosque a betrayal of the ideals for which Indian nationalists waged a war of independence against British rule. The future of India as a 'secular' state, where Muslims and other minorities can enjoy the same rights and security as Hindus, appears very much endangered. What is it to be an 'Indian' any more?

Ramchandra Gandhi, an Indian philosopher and independent scholar of considerable repute, has wisely refused to step inside this debate, pitched partially as the confrontation of "fundamentalism" with "secularism", or even partake of its terms. That is suggested by the very title of his work, "Sita's Kitchen", a translation of the more mellifluous and poignant "Sita-ki-Rasoi", a largely ignored structure which, standing apart from the now-demolished Babri Masjid, nonetheless constitutes a part of the entire complex. It is not that the "honor" of India is of no concern to Gandhi; rather, he locates it not in a secularism which has little room for faith, but in the overwhelmingly rich and complex traditions of Indian spirituality and religious tolerance. Unlike the secularist antagonists of the 'temple theory', Gandhi had no difficulty, as he stood in front of the mosque and noticed "the carved lotuses and pillars" supporting the mosque at the bottom, "and the hexagonal tantric motifs on the walls above the arches and other unmistakably Hindu features of the structure", in admitting that "sacred components of a Hindu temple (or a cognate Buddhist or Jaina shrine) had been used in the construction of the mosque in the

sixteenth century (1528/29)." But that admission, and the feeling of a hurt Hindu pride, scarcely allies him with the "fundamentalists", for he records the "stealthy trespass" with which Hindus placed idols in the sanctum sanctorum and so forcibly converted the mosque into a temple forty years ago, and laments the fact that the "chanting of the names of Rama and Sita" was used to silence "nearly half a millennium's call" to the faithful to Islamic prayer (p. 14). To gauge Ramchandra Gandhi's sentiments on the 'Ayodhya question', and more precisely on the question of whether a perceived injury to Hinduism in the sixteenth century is to be corrected by a heinous blow to Muslim faith and culture in the late twentieth century, we have only to consider his wonderful invocation of a story from the life of Swami Vivekananda. The famous Indian monk had gone to Kashmir towards the end of his life; anguished over the invader's desecration and destruction of countless images of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, and filled with rage at "this humiliating testimony of history", he approached the Divine Mother in a Kali temple, and falling at her feet, asked: "How could you let this happen, Mother, why did you permit this desecration?" On the swami's own testimony, Kali is reported to have said: "What is it to you, Vivekananda, if the invader breaks my images. Do you protect me, or do I protect you?" (p. 10) How could have, in the name of Rama, in the cause of perpetuating his glory, the proponents of the Rama Janmabhoomi movement committed such mayhem?

For Gandhi, an understanding of what Ayodhya portends for the future of Indian civilization and traditions of Indian spirituality may be gained by turning our gaze to Sita's Kitchen, which may be conceived as a grove of "aboriginal spirituality" and "sacred fertility" The attention lavished upon the Rama Janmasthan has obfuscated the critical significance of Sita-ki-Rasoi, which Hindu devotees revere just as much as Rama's birthplace. The fact that both are contained within one complex underscores the absurdity not to mention the offensiveness of the claim that the Rama Janmasthan has a transcendent importance: "what is blasphemous", argues Gandhi, "is the denial of omnipresence by imposing the task of imaging it exclusively on any one spot in the zone area" (p. 16). "*Neti, neti*", "not this, not this", say the sages of the *Upanishads* when asked to define the Godhead: to say that it is this or that, here or there, is to place limits around the Godhead. Sita-ki-Rasoi is in other respects too emblematic of the generosity of Indian spiritual traditions, a living monument to the catholicity of "aboriginal spirituality". As Gandhi imagines Sita-ki-Rasoi, it was not only an actual kitchen from which Sita fed the Raghava clan with "delicious and nutritious food", a place with an ambience of domesticity and divinity conjoined, but is also evocative of "the archetypal

notion of the earth as the Divine Mother's laboratory of manifestation and field of nourishment for all self-images of self" (p. 15).

What might Gandhi mean by describing Sita-ki-Rasoi as the "Divine Mother's laboratory of manifestation", a "field of nourishment for all self-images of self"? To pursue this line of inquiry, and to open up a liberating space for the interpretation of the events at Ayodhya that would take us away from the restrictive if not emasculating framework of "fundamentalism" and "secularism", he offers us -- and that takes up the greater part of the book -- an extended and magnificently creative interpretation of a Buddhist story. If we are to ask how a narrative drawn from Buddhism illuminates the significance of Sita-ki-Rasoi, we might consider first that Ayodhya has had a long association with Buddhism as well.<sup>1</sup> The motifs on the now-demolished Babri Masjid are common to Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism in all its variety; and the location of the mosque in the "sacred kitchen zone" suggests the "kinship of these traditions with aboriginal spirituality" (p. 17). More illuminating still is the story itself. Thirty young men with their wives were once enjoying themselves in a grove; one of them, who was unmarried, was provided with a harlot by the name of Ananya. While this party was amusing itself, the whore decamped with all their belongings. The young men went in search of the woman; while they were roaming around, they ran into the Buddha, sitting at the foot of a tree. Upon approaching him, they asked: "Pray, Lord, has the Blessed One seen a woman passing by?" The Buddha replied, "What have you to do, young men, with the woman?" An account of Ananya's mischief is given to the Buddha; he then pointedly asks them, "Now what think you, young men? Which would be better for you, that you should go in search of a woman, or that you should go in search of yourselves?" The men agree that they should go in search of themselves and to this end they humble themselves before the Buddha as suppliants desirous of instruction in Dharma, the truth (pp. 23-24).

If advaita today has its critics, the Buddha was not without his adversaries either, and they appear in the form of the Ajivika philosophers Ajita Kesakambalin and Makkhali Gosala. Ascetics of great eminence, Gandhi characterizes them as "nihilists", and has them engage the Buddha and his contemporary Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, in a debate on the nature of right action, the unpredictability of human existence, the fate of advaita, and the future of civilization. It is, not coincidentally, under the ample shade of the banyan tree that the debate takes place: the banyan, like India herself, is all-

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<sup>1</sup>Thailand, I might note parenthetically, has an important ancient Buddhist city by the name of Ayuthaya, also known as Ayuthea or Ayudhya, undoubtedly by way of homage to Buddhist Ayodhya in India. The present-day Ayodhya in India, however, may not be the Ayodhya of the Valmiki *Ramayana* or of the Buddhist texts, a matter too complicated to be considered here.

encompassing, and under this tree all shades of opinion can be entertained, hospitality is denied no one -- for the sun shines alike on the thief, the saint, the whore, the woodcutter --, and a wholeness which knows no dualism can become a real possibility. The banyan tree is a perpetual reminder of the reality of advaita. Kesakambalin doesn't occupy the central position under the tree, least of all because he wishes to defer to the two great sages before him, supremely confident as he is of the rightness of his vision and his intellectual prowess, but rather "to make the point that he did not believe that there was any centre to anything at all; to drive home the deeper aspect of his eccentricity, i.e. off-centeredness." His companion, Makkhali Gosala, swings upside down, bat-like, from one of the branches of the tree "so as to underscore the upside-downness, topsy-turvyness, of being and becoming, the indignity and irrationality of reality" (p. 31). In a topsy-turvy world, war can masquerade as peace, and ecological annihilationism can be camouflaged as development.

Launching upon a monologue, Kesakambalin mocks the Buddha's advice to the young men. Why should they deny themselves the pleasures of life, forgo what is rightfully theirs (i.e., the goods stolen by the whore), and squander their youth in search of something as elusive and meaningless as the self? Moreover, neither Makkhali nor he has any time for metaphysics and religion, "Vedic or Vedantic or contemporary": their "uncompromisingly negative views" on these subjects are well known, and in any case it is rather more interesting to indulge in prophecy. Two and a half to three thousand years from now, says Kesakambalin, the world will be hopelessly divided along socio-economic, ideological, racial, religious, and territorial lines, thus precipitating "an unprecedented crisis of survival and self-confidence" (p. 34). The failure of non-violence is axiomatic, and though violence may not triumph much either, the "ecologically degrading life-style" that the majority of human beings will come to adopt assures the destruction of the earth (p. 36). All "social systems are untruthful", argues Kesakambalin, for "they present to their constituents a false benign microcosmic picture of the universe which is in reality the steady devouring march of nothingness against all existence, human or non-human, individual or collective" (p. 39). The ego is ineradicable and draws everything into its net of nothingness. Where then is the autonomy of the self? And how can the lessons that one imbibes from the epics be deemed salutary, considering that Rama abandons his faithful and pure wife Sita, "such indeed is ego's secret hatred of life itself, for Sita represents the energy of life", and that in the *Mahabharata* Krishna, overcome by the "violent selectivity of egoistic love", is not above the manipulation of the moral law and the code of ethical conduct, with the result that the Kauravas are totally destroyed and the Pandavas emerge triumphant (pp. 42-43)? When, with every breath

that a human being or an animal takes, "millions of microbes are consigned to nothingness", what can be the sanctity of life given that nature herself is relentlessly committed to destruction?

The Buddha is agreed that the human species has not abided by "life's deeply embedded code of ecological honor", but in this violation it stands in sinister and singular isolation. Non-human life exemplifies admirable ecological restraint and discipline, and though that may be largely instinctual, "this fact only highlights the 'naturalness' of such discipline and does not undermine its reality or wisdom" (p. 41). There is no inherent flaw in "the nature and process of life as such", for the "ecological evil" that man commits is rooted in "individual and collective ego", and originates largely in his unhealthy and unreflective modes of living. More pointedly, acclaims the Buddha, let us celebrate not denigrate nothingness, for nothingness exemplifies most dramatically and magnanimously the nature of self-limitation. In a remarkable passage, Gandhi has the Buddha say: "Look at the vastness of space within which are manifest all worlds everywhere, including our sun and moon and earth and this blessed forest and all of us inquirers assembled here. That any manifestation at all is permitted within it by the limitless vastness of space is a miracle of self-restraint, the austerest ecological discipline conceivable, the purest ahimsa [non-violence]" (p. 44). Nothingness competes with no other things, it knows no duality; it is thus fulness, not the annihilatory and devouring malevolence represented by the nihilists.

Though the Buddha is well capable of conducting the defence of advaita and of Indian spiritual traditions, other inquirers and debaters shoulder that task too. There remains, in particular, the problem of the abandonment of the chaste Sita by Rama after his victory at arms over Ravana on the grounds that she may well have been defiled by her long captivity in Lanka. What kind of example can Rama set to others if he -- the exemplar hero, the ideal husband, the just king -- who is cast in the very image of God can behave with such apparent ignobility towards Sita (literally, "furrow") who is not only his wife but his energy, the embodiment of sacred aboriginal spirituality? Here Gandhi steps in with a remarkable interpretation put in the mouth of a traditional storyteller. Let us recall that the Ramayana begins with an account of "ecological violation": one of a pair of curlew birds in love-play is shot dead by a hunter's arrow, and thus the other is separated from its mate for no justifiable reason. Later, when Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana live out their exile in the forest, and Sita sights the golden deer Marica, Rama takes its life to gift the deer to her, and again the code of "ecologically honorable hunting" has been violated. The killing is no doubt unavoidable, even desirable, for Marica is none other than a demon in disguise, and its killing sets in chain the series of events that must lead to the

inexorable end; nonetheless, "Marica is separated from a possible deer mate at the level of manifestation" (p. 21). If the human violation of ecological restraint that nature exercises is only at the level of appearance, that is in order to sustain life and civilization, then the atonement by Rama and Sita, which can only be satisfied by their separation, is likewise at the phenomenological level only. Victory and reunion, argues the storyteller, had not made Rama and Sita forget that they had to pay a price for their disruption of the ecological order, a disruption that entailed "grief and privation and isolation for dependent creatures", and by so doing strengthen the ecological discipline of their subjects (p. 51). As Gandhi further notes, when the Ramayana story passed into the hands of chauvinists and patriarches, the interpretation of Sita's abandonment by Rama became warped. "The ecologically educative separation of Rama and Sita by mutual consent", he suggests, "became distorted into the sexist banishment of Sita by Rama for suspected infidelity in Lanka" (p. 21).

But what of Ananya and the relationship of her story to Sita-ki-Rasoi? Gandhi's imaginative reconstruction makes Ananya, as the original account and other re-tellings most emphatically do not, the subject: "Sita's Kitchen" is the true subalternist history. When Ananya speaks, it is the voice of advaita, for Ananya is literally the Self, without the Other, undivided. It is as a harlot that she is brought to the gathering of young people in the forest; put "outside the circle of love", she feels besides "the wretchedness of being a watchkeeper, merely, and not the wearer of jewelry" (p. 70). The circle represents "the increasingly closed world of dominant contemporary humanity" from which are excluded outcastes like herself and non-human life. That gathering of revelers in the forest is unlike the Rasa Lila of Krishna every night of the full moon,<sup>2</sup> from which no gopi (cowherdess) feels excluded, for each gopi has Krishna as her partner. Continuing her narrative, Ananya relates how she had been told by her mother of a "sacred site known as Sita's Kitchen which is where the nourishing power of the Divine Mother is concentrated"; it is here that, "into the bowels of the earth, that Sita had descended", and where she remains. "In the language of non-duality", the language of advaita and equally of Buddha's nothingness, "we would say that the earth is Sita, vibrant self-realization, set

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<sup>2</sup>That the lila is under the full moon is not insignificant, for such a lila is "under the sponsorship of enlightenment" (p. 57). *Sita's Kitchen* is replete with these extraordinary insights. The Buddha, Gandhi adds instructively, was born on a night of the full moon, and his death and enlightenment also occurred on nights of the full moon; Mahavira's birth, enlightenment, and death, on the other hand, all took place on moonless nights. "The full moon represents the power of illumined mind which, in the form of the Buddha, came to the aid of that sunless age"; by way of contrast, on a moonless night, "when, symbolically, neither the sun of self-realization nor the full moon of enlightenment is at hand, we have to walk on the earth very gently, lest we hurt fellow living beings. Ahimsa [non-violence] is born, Mahavira is born" (pp. 22-23).

in the endlessly unfurling sky of emptiness which is Rama" (p. 70). To Sita-ki-Rasoi, then, Ananya repairs with the ornaments which she believes have been entrusted to her care, and these are offered in atonement for "humanity's escalating sin of exclusion" (p. 71).

Thus, with the story of Ananya, Gandhi returns us to the powerful presence of Sita-ki-Rasoi. Gandhi's welding together of advaita and the teachings of the Buddha is a bold move, and though professional philosophers may find his readings problematic, there is a great deal to recommend in Gandhi's hermeneutics. In any case, this is too large a question to entertain here, and it is to the central symbolic significance of Sita-ki-Rasoi that we must return. As Sita's Kitchen once fed the clan of Raghu, so Gandhi invites our attention to it in order that it may nourish the soul of India today. We live not by food alone, but by spiritual leavings. The insistent demand for the "relocation" of the Babri Masjid is now, when it is no longer in existence, without meaning, but perhaps we may still learn that it is really our consciousness that we need to relocate "within areas of ecological responsibility and imagination, because secessionism and hegemonism in the contemporary world are not political improprieties, merely, but violations of cultural and spiritual ecology" (p. 110). If we may extend Gandhi's reading somewhat: In a country where the Babri Masjid -- or, as some would call it, the Rama Janmasthan -- and Sita-ki-Rasoi stood together, cheek by jowl, for nearly five hundred years, the two are now severed; and once again, pressured by ungrateful citizens and ignorant pupils, Sita is consigned to a lonely existence. We can only hope that the banishment of the Babri Masjid from our midst is, like the banishment of Sita by Rama from the kingdom of Ayodhya, at the level of appearance alone; or else, if that 'otherness' acquires an ontological reality, the fall of the Babri Masjid will surely and most unfortunately be remembered as, in Gandhi's wonderfully evocative phrase, "advaita's waterloo". In this little gem of a book, Ramchandra Gandhi gives us a great deal to hope for, and shows that he is in every respect worthy of those great traditions of Indian spirituality which he has so masterfully and yet with utter humility brought before us for our introspection.



