

# THE QUESTION OF SECULARISM

**S**AHMAT is an Indian socio-cultural group committed to the "defence of our secular tradition". Its ultimate objective is the removal of the feelings of communal ill-will that have torn Indian society apart.

An exhibition basically centered on the corpus of the Rama legends as they exist in India, was organised by Sahmat in August at Ayodhya. As A.S. Ramanujam has said, India has over 300 *Ramayanas*. The exhibition was "researched, designed and assembled by a team of distinguished historians including K.N.Panikkar, Irfan Habib, Sushil Srivastave, Ravinder Kumar, V.N. Jha, Athar Ali, Suvira Jaiswal and P.K. Shukla".

The exhibition was funded by a grant of Rs. 250,000 from the Human Resources Development Ministry in Delhi.

It included one panel describing the version of the Rama story as it appears in the Buddhist *Dasaratha Jatakaya*. The panel had the following text:

In this version, Sita is not the wife but the sister of Ram. At the end of the exile when Ram returns to Ayodhya, Sita is made the queen consort of Ram and they rule jointly for sixteen thousand years.

This panel created a storm of opposition from the Hindutva forces. The Union government recalled its assistance and the organisers themselves withdrew from the exhibition the offending panel.

This whole episode throws into question a number of issues including the right to free expression. But what is of importance for us is that an effort to draw out from Indian tradition itself notions of plurality and tolerance have ended in abject failure, with the organisers of the effort in disarray, and, in what has been called "strategic intellectual retreat".

We reproduce below two comments that touch on some aspects of this incident.

## SAHMAT AND SECULARISM

N.V.K. Murthy

**T**he debate initiated by *Mainstream* on the recent Sahmat exhibition is a welcome and necessary one. Some genuine secularists have felt that it was inopportune and not too prudent, considering the present volatile situation, to include the Jataka version of Ramakatha in the panel. One recalls a similar sentiment that was expressed when the Government of India banned Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

But let us consider the problem calmly. It is exactly when vested interests create a climate of hysterical unreason, based on myths, be they racial or religious, that it becomes necessary to speak up and expose the hollowness of these myths.

It is no one's case that mythology should not be valued. Indeed, mythological epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are part of our valuable cultural heritage. But mythology, it must be remembered, is an amalgam of fact and fiction, man's dreams and despairs, hopes and frustrations. The trouble starts when demagogues try to off mythology as history. The return of Ram and Sita to Ayodhya after their long exile in Pushpaka Vimana is a fine example of man's age-old dream of flying. But to

accept this as proof that our ancient forefathers had mastered the technology of aviation is fraught with grave consequences. Likewise, it is necessary to point out that Valmiki's *Ramayana* is but one version of the *katha*. This is again proof that all this is mythology and not history.

It should not be forgotten that Hitler built up Nazism on the myth of the superiority of the Aryan German and identified the Communist-Jew as the enemy. Again, anyone opposed to this concept of *Hindutva* has been equated with the enemy. This campaign of myth-building and hatred has to be opposed here and now before it is too late. In this context one cannot help remembering the tragic lament of Martin Niemoller:

In Germany the Nazis came first for the Communists, and

I did not speak up because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the trade Unions, and I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist.



Then they came for the Catholics,  
And I was a Protestant and so  
I did not speak up.  
Then they came for me and by that

time there was no one left to speak  
for anyone

I feel that the time to speak up has come; to stand up  
and be counted.

## BJP HOAX EXPOSED

S. Ramakrishnan

**T**he controversy over Sahmat has shown to what dismal depths of desperate falsification the BJP can sink.

For one living in far-off Madras, the alarm bell was rung by J.P. Mathur, a B.J.P. MP. In his August 18 speech he referred to an attack on the Sahmat exhibition and virtually justified it by stating that they had been provoked by one of the exhibition posters which depicted Ram and Sita as brother and sister instead of as husband and wife. Of course, students of the Ram story are aware of the *Dasaratha Jataka* as providing the oldest piece of literary evidence for the said story. Those who have studied the prose style of the Jataka tale rightly conclude that it must have been written after the rise of the Valmiki epic. But it is impermissible to see in the Jataka's blatant distortion of the epic's Kosala story. The *Jataka* must have had an immense oral vogue for centuries before Valmiki. The marriage of siblings—Ram and Sita—is narrated as a normal, natural habitual occurrence. This makes it clear that this story came into being ages ago, when such weddings were not taboo.

The fanatics would say that it isn't surprising that the Buddha in a former birth had been married to his own sister, thereby insinuating that the heterodox faith promoted incestuous relations. But they need only to be reminded of the *Rigveda*, the most revered scripture of Hinduism. In the tenth *mandala* of *Rigveda* we have the famous dialogue between Yami and her brother Yama wherein she invites him to have sex with her. The innocent girl's appeals are irresistible. But Yama, representing the new ethic, cannot oblige her. Unfortunately, the dialogue, as we have it, is incomplete; so we do not know who wins in the end.

The seers who compiled the Rigvedic hymns were great souls. Hence they do not gush forth with any sentimental drivel. No wonder, they have left us a unique legacy.

The organisers of the Sahmat exhibition were rightly interested in educating the visitors in the multiplicity of history, tradition, and religion. Hence several versions of the Ram legend were highlighted. When they included the Jain version, in which Ram, Lakshaman and their father renounce the world and Sita becomes a nun, and the Javanese version that has a role for Adam, the

Islamic prophet, how could the Buddhist version be ignored? Progressive Hindus through the ages have held the Buddha as the tenth avatar of the Almighty. So it is all the more appropriate that the myth of the Buddha's former birth as Ram is given its due exhibition.

The BJP-VHP-RSS combine's Hindu fundamentalism could not tolerate the plurality of beliefs that the exhibition broadcasted, and so it took to a campaign of misinformation. While the organisers had with their commendable caution given in the poster the vital elements of the Jataka story, the BJP propaganda virtually accused them of having drawn the figures of the married siblings. L.K. Advani, the President-elect of the BJP, speaking like an Elder Statesman, suggested the removal of the poster from the exhibition. To A.B. Vajpayee, Leader of the Opposition, it was obvious that the poster was intended to hurt the sentiments of the majority community. The secular MPs could have easily pricked the bubble by a reference to the real poster. But though the exhibition had been transferred from Ayodhya to Teen Murti Bhavan in the Capital, none of them cared to visit the place.

Perhaps their touching faith in the integrity of the BJP MPs would not allow them to question the veracity of their statements. The Speaker of the Lok Sabha asked the organisers to take note of their comments. Arjun Singh, the Human Resources Minister, told the CWC that he had already disowned the poster in Parliament. Not to be left behind, the CWC also condemned the poster unanimously.

Meanwhile, the poster disappeared from the exhibition. Otherwise it is difficult to understand Nikhil Chakravarty's article in *Mainstream* (September 4, 1993). Assuming that the BJP's attack on the poster was true, Nikhil Chakravarty has made a criticism, a job which Arjun Singh should have done. Nikhil Chakravarty made one feel immensely proud.

It was then that I read Ratna Kapur's article "Mythical Inventions of the Hindu Right" in *The Hindu* of September 19. Ratna Kapur exposed the fact that the poster did not carry any pictorial representation. All glory to Ratna Kapur for calling off the bluff of the BJP.

(Courtsey, *Mainstream*, 6 November 1993)