SĪTĀ'S KITCHEN

A Testimony of Faith and Inquiry

RAMCHANDRA GANDHI
For my former students and colleagues at the California Institute of Integral Studies
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by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God; i.e. that we are adequately nourished by nothing less than the full range of truth's manifestation.

A non-dualist Church of Ātman-Brahman Mary — Godhead, no mere saint — would be a generous kitchen offering without exclusivist denial of the full range of truth's cuisine to spiritually hungry humanity, in accordance with Christ's own nutritional manifesto.

The words "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" were uttered by Christ in response to Satan's demand that he prove his divinity by turning stones into bread through the exercise of some manipulatively miraculous causal agency. Words that proceed from the mouth of God are all words that attain to communication through a disavowal of causal agency, revealing the non-duality of speakers and hearers, self and apparent not-self: thus inviting us to live ethically and ecologically sensitively by loving one another and the world as ourselves. We don't, of course, cussedly. We have ears but do not hear the non-dualist good news broadcast by every spoken word in communication.

Svāmī Vivekānanda was in Kashmir towards the end of his life, but his heart was heavy even in that paradise on earth. Large-hearted though he was, he felt tormented by the fact that successive invaders had desecrated and destroyed countless sacred images of Hinduism's Gods and Goddesses and pulled down Hindu temples and built mosques over their ruins. Unable to bear the burden of this humiliating testimony of history, Vivekānanda poured out his anguish at the feet of the Divine Mother in a Kāli temple. "How could you let this happen, Mother; why did you permit this desecration?" he asked despairingly. Svāmījī has himself recorded all this, and reports that Kāli whispered in his heart the following reply to his question:

"What is it to you, Vivekānanda, if the invader breaks my images. Do you protect me, or do I protect you?" Only the revelatory authority of that chastisement and consolation can heal the wounds of history from which Hinduism suffers.

A testing time has come.
Hindus to Islam. And all this at a commanding height in one of the holiest of Hindu shrines, the capital city of God-incarnate Rama's kingdom on earth.

Conquered, cannibalized, converted. This is the message of humiliation which the Hindu psyche is being forced to regard the Babrī mosque as broadcasting ceaselessly from the summit of Ayodhya across more than four centuries.

"Relocate the mosque somewhere else, although it deserves to be destroyed. And reconstruct at the liberated site the original temple, or build a new one, commemorating the birth and birthplace of Rama." This is the vindictive demand of Hindu assertiveness today in Ayodhya, unworthy of Hinduism and unnecessary for piety, which has plunged India into a major political crisis and a communal convulsion which has already taken hundreds of lives.

But it is not only Hindu pride that is hurt.

It is claimed by Hindu organizations agitating for the relocation of the Babrī mosque that on the night of December 22, or during the early hours of December 23, 1949, images of Śrī Rāma and Śrī Śiṭā miraculously manifested inside the mosque. All evidence available points to the contrary; not to a miracle but to trespass, to the fact that the images were placed inside the mosque surreptitiously by zealots who broke into it at night for the purpose. Fearing the outbreak of violence in the communally surcharged atmosphere of the time (barely two years after the holocaust of India's partition), district authorities put a lock on the mosque, forbidding Muslim prayers in it.

Thirty-seven years later, in 1986, an avowedly secular Congress government anxious to woo Hindu voters caused a pliant judge to order the breaking open of the lock on the mosque, but not the removal of the images: opening the floodgates of fundamentalism.

This forcible conversion of a mosque into a temple, not in the years immediately following the trauma of partition, but decades later, and with the apparent connivance of government, has deeply wounded Muslim sensibility in India. Politically and communicatively powerful Muslim organizations have not lagged behind their Hindu counterparts in working up the faithful into a state of frenzy over this fait accompli. It is true that no court of law has as yet validated the Hindu claim to the site, but the mosque is a functioning Hindu temple, and the symbolism of this has not been lost on Indian Muslims: that Hindu hegemonism is capable of converting India into a Hindu State in which non-Hindu minorities will be less equal than the Hindu majority.

Ayodhya today presents an aspect of otherness to Muslims which is as stark as the aspect of otherness under which Hindus see the Babrī mosque towering over the city of Rāma.

Hindus are not allowed by fundamentalist rhetoric to recall that it was precisely during the sixteenth century, when the Babrī mosque was built, that devotion to Rāma found a tidal expression all over northern India which has never ebbed; that they have been well protected by Śiṭā and have no cause to grieve inconsolably over Islamic iconoclasm's destructive denial of the truth of image worship, for this truth flourishes all over India.

Likewise, Indian Muslims are not allowed by fundamentalist Islamic rhetoric to engage in insightful interpretation of their relationship not only to the Ayodhya mosque, but to the reality of post-partition India as a whole, which has so far vehemently refused to declare itself a Hindu State, its demographic status as a massive Hindu-majority area notwithstanding; and despite the provocation of Pakistan and Bangladesh—Muslim-majority areas which seceded from India in 1947—being Islamic theocracies.

The sheer and un-self-restrained causality of bigotry's oratory preempts any dialogue with it. And in the absence of dialogue, its spiritual superficiality remains unexposed, making it difficult for argument—spiritual or secular—to make much headway with the faithful. Thoughtful Hindus and Muslims are marginalized as bombs of hatred manifest in the sky and terrorfing fledge­ling Indian democracy as they move towards its ancestral home of spiritual catholicity and wisdom, threatening to destroy both progeny and ancestry.

I had to go to Ayodhya.

In the temple town of Ayodhya in the Faizabad district of Uttar Pradesh, high above the eastern bank of the Sarayu river, the three-domed and three-arched Babrī mosque stands conspicu-
ously on the north-eastern corner of the Ramkot mound (taking its name after a fortress called Ramkot which once commanded the height).

I stood in front of the main arch of the mosque and noticed the carved lotuses and pitchers on the small pillars supporting it at the bottom, and the hexagonal tantric motifs on the walls above the arches and other unmistakably Hindu features of the structure. There could be little doubt 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).

Perhaps an existing temple had been destroyed to construct the mosque at its site, using some of its materials. Perhaps the mosque was built over the ruins of a temple destroyed by Islamic iconoclasm long before Babur's time. Perhaps the materials were brought from some other site to the Ramkot area and the Babari mosque built with their aid on vacant land. Whatever be the precise historical truth of this matter, the fact remains that the mosque owes its existence to the despoliation of structures sacred to Indian spirituality and does not hide this fact; adding insult to injury, says my wounded Hindu pride.

The child in me grieved bitterly as I stood in front of the mosque thinking these thoughts.

Soon, however, the adult in me awakened to the reality of the images of Rama and Sita and other deities in the sanctum sanctorum of the house of Allah; to the fact of stealthy trespass with intent which converted the Babari mosque into a Rama temple more than forty years ago; to the fact that the chanting of the names of Rama and Sita — essential nourishment for my Hindu soul — had been used to silence nearly half a millennium's call to Islamic prayer; to the fact that Muslims were not allowed to come anywhere near the mosque under siege, which no doubt was an addition of insult to the injury caused to their pride by the forcible conversion of a mosque into a temple in secular India.

Religious exclusivism had converted a medieval building into a terrorist time-bomb which was likely to explode at any moment in the face of secular morality and spiritual catholicity, grievously injuring India's distinctive identity in the modern world as a civ-
any manifest form, avatāric or ordinary. And the Sitā whose kitchen is also the birthplace of Rāma is only in manifestation his consort; in reality she is Mahālakṣmī, Godhead, Self; and Sitā’s Kitchen is the entire field of her self-imaging Sakti, powerfully represented by the earth.

It is on earth, in the embrace of the Divine Mother, that all are born, all creatures great and small; all forms manifest, noble or ‘evil; and all are nourished. I have no doubt at all that at least the northern portion of the Ramkot mound in Ayodhyā must have been in antiquity a sacred fertility grove, an aboriginal shrine of the Divine Mother which acquired the name “Sitā’s Kitchen” during the Ramāyana age without the slightest loss of significance.

The Ramkot zone sheltering the Bābār Mosque is as a whole Sitā’s Kitchen, and also every part and portion of it. Any number of kitchen shrines can be established there. One such is a platform outside the mosque’s northern wall, whose deities are a rolling board and a rolling pin, powerful symbols of generativeness and humble apparatus of bread-making, decidedly of aboriginal authenticity in conception.

Likewise, the zone as a whole is Rāma’s birthplace; and every part and portion of it and every point on its surface. Any number of birthplace shrines can be established there. One such is a platform—the Rām Chabootra—near the mosque’s main entrance.

And the Bābār mosque could also be regarded as a birthplace shrine; it could always have been so regarded, even before the images of Rāma and Sitā were stealthily installed inside it, and without the necessity of that act of trespass and appropriation. Because the mosque falls within the sacred birthplace and kitchen area, and every structure situated within that area is simultaneously a birthplace shrine of Rāma and a kitchen shrine of Sitā; with or without the benefit of the installation and consecration and worship of sacred images inside the structure.

The insistence that the sanctum sanctorum of the mosque is the precise and exclusive place of Rāma’s birth is blasphemy, not faith; and of course it is not theology or archeology or history. It is not blasphemous to hold a zone, a finite surface, to be the birthplace area, every part and portion of it; because such a zone, so understood, would be a lucid image of omnipresence; Rāma’s, Godhead’s, Self’s omnipresence. What is blasphemous is the denial of omnipresence by imposing the task of imaging it exclusively on any one spot in the zone area. This is what Hindu nar-
especially Rāma and Krṣṇa bhakti flourished under their rule. It should be possible for Muslims, and not only Muslims, to see the images implanted in the Bābari mosque as representing the hospitaleness of Islamic rule in Avadh to Hindu spirituality; and as reflecting the lodgment of Rāma and Sitā, Krṣṇa and Rādhā, in many a Śūfi heart; and of their names in the singing voice of great Muslim masters of classical Hindustānī music.

The Bābari edifice is a testifying tree which bears the flowers of nearly five hundred years of Islamic piety, and of nearly fifty years of Hindu bhakti. It could have grown only in the sacred soil of Sitā’s Kitchen, and cannot be transplanted anywhere else. Certainly the tree bears thorns too, thorns of medieval and modern vandalism. But it can give shade to pilgrims weary of hatred in the name of the sacred for at least another half a millennium. Cutting it down would be ominous for life and civilization on earth.

Hindus and Muslims must forgive each other’s trespasses in Ayodhya, if they wish their trespasses against each other all over India to be forgiven.

That Christian thought takes my mind to Oxford and St Mary’s church and the Gandhi mural’s double-voting upraised arms. With one raised arm Gandhi votes for the status quo to be preserved in relation to the Bābari mosque in Ayodhya; and with the other he votes for a sacred grove to be established in front of the mosque by the adivāsīs and harijans of India as a kitchen shrine of Sitā, within which could be accommodated a separate birthplace shrine of Rāma.

Or could it be that Gandhi’s upraised arms in the mural are a despairing gesture, an anticipation of annihilation?

Annihilationism (the readiness to destroy all life and civilization on earth) is the highest stage of development of dualism, if one may be permitted thus to update Lenin’s epigram regarding imperialism and capitalism. Dualism is the conviction that self and not-self are everywhere pitted against one another. Individual human beings against one another and against human collectivities. Human collectivities against one another and against individual human beings, living species against one another. The human species against all other living species. All life against matter, all existence against nothingness. Sooner rather than later, the flickering light of existence is going to be snuffed out by nothingness. So why not advance the hour of annihilation? This is the temptation of annihilation, dualism’s despairing destructiveness now unfurling in all societies on an unprecedented scale.11

In India’s inner life, however, dualism has been deeply rebutted in a variety of ways by aboriginal spirituality, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Ayodhya’s heritage of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina traditions is well known. And if my faith in the aboriginality—and, therefore, timeless antiquity—of Sitā’s Kitchen is not delusion, dualism’s annihilationist darkness cannot prevail against Ayodhya’s comprehensive arsenal of light.

Hindus and Muslims must not allow this light to be dimmed by failing to resolve the Bābari crisis non-dualistically, i.e. without either side experiencing a sense of humiliation at the hands of the “other.”

My faith in the aboriginality of Sitā’s Kitchen in Ayodhya is not only supported by the undeniable connotations of generativity carried by the name of the place. It is strengthened by the Rāmāyana itself.

In a profoundly revelatory episode,12 adivāsī — aboriginal — king Guha and Rāma embrace each other in a gesture of perfect equality, letting us into the secret that the truth of Guha and the truth of Rāma are one.

What is the truth of Guha, of aboriginality? The truth of Guha is the truth of the earth as the Divine Mother’s kitchen, the truth of her nourishing care of all her creatures who are forms of manifestation of herself, of primal energy. At least this.

And what is the truth of Rāma? Invoking the authority of the Adhyātma Rāmāyana and the Yoga Vāsiṣṭha and the authority of Sri Ramana Maharshi, and in the light of my own reading of the epic, I submit that the truth of Rāma is the truth of advaita, non-
duality; the truth of singular self-consciousness and its cinematic field of self-imaging sakti which is samsāra. At least this.

The truth of aboriginality and the truth of advaita are one. To banish all doubts in regard to this sacred identity, let us remind ourselves that it is Guha who instructs a fellow-aboriginal to row Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmanā across the waters of a river from one shore to another:\textsuperscript{15}: a function which in its deepest meaning is attributable only to divinity. The episode, no doubt, also encodes aboriginality's dateless trusteeship and transportation of the Rāmāyaṇa story across the river of time.

Rāma and Sītā being one in selfhood, the identity of the truth of aboriginality and advaita could not in antiquity have been more pointedly expressed than by the establishment of a grove of generativity bearing the name "Sītā's Kitchen." I maintain in faith that the mound of controversy in contemporary Ayodhyā was this grove of hope, and still can be.

It is the firm conviction of the Śrī Rāmānuja tradition of Vaiṣṇava bhakti, into which my mother and her ancestors were born, that the episode of Sītā's banishment is an undevout kaliyuga interpolation in the Rāmāyaṇa; that the original story ended with the coronation of Rāma and Sītā in Ayodhyā after their victorious return from Lāṅkā. I remember trying to defend the authenticity of the banishment episode in an argument with my mother. "I am impressed by your bhakti, Ramu, not your arguments," is what she said by way of demanding deeper thought from me on the matter; and not dismissively, I am sure. I think I can defend my position better now; not unaided by bhakti, though, nor without restorative presumptuousness. The following readings of Rāmāyaṇa episodes are dedicated with gratitude to my mother and her paurāṇika father, Chakravarti Rājagopālāchari.

The Rāmāyaṇa begins with a narration of ecological violation.\textsuperscript{16} One of a pair of kraunca birds in love-play on the branch of a tree is felled by a hunter's arrow, in clear violation of the code of ecologically honorable hunting. The horrified observer of this scene is the author of the Rāmāyaṇa himself, sage Vālmīki. He curses the hunter angrily, harshly condemning him to a life of ceaseless, restless, wandering. The sage, however, is soon filled with remorse for his un-sage-like act of cursing, and for the harshness of his curse; but he is equally fascinated by the metrical music of his cursing words. Creator Brahmā himself materializes to allay the sage's anxiety, and asks him to set the Rāmāyaṇa story to verse in the haunting meter of his curse.

I suggest that this opening episode of the epic legislates that ecological violation cannot be too harshly condemned, and is a narrative determinant which drives the epic on remorselessly to the eventual separation of Rāma and Sītā as the price which even the divine couple have to pay for the ecological violation implicit in the killing of the demon deer Mārica by Rāma at Sītā's instigation. It was necessary to kill Mārica, but not for food or clothing, as Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmanā were not in need of these at the time Mārica appeared in their hermitage. But such need is the only justification for hunting! Although unavoidable, the killing of Mārica is also unavoidably unecological. Mārica is separated from a possible deer mate at the level of manifestation. And so, again at the level of manifestation, Rāma and Sītā have to separate soon after reuniting, like the kraunca birds.

In its passage through time, the aboriginal trusteeship of the Rāmāyaṇa seems to have passed into the hands of chauvinists and courtiers of exploitative city states. The ecologically educative separation of Rāma and Sītā by mutual consent became distorted into the sexist banishment of Sītā by Rāma for suspected infidelity in Lāṅkā. This ancient distortion encourages today's chauvinist and ecologically insensitive politicians of little faith to see in the Bābārī Masjid the violation of Sītā and to seek its banishment from Ayodhyā, and the construction in its place of a dualistically divided temple dedicated to Rāma without Sītā.

I hold fast to my belief in faith that after Sītā's recourse to the forests across the Sarayū, Rāma and Guha established an aboriginal grove of generativity in the heart of Ayodhyā, which was undoubtedly both a birthplace shrine of Rāma and a kitchen shrine of Sītā: the indivisibility sanctified by the deity forms of a rolling board and a rolling pin.

It is said that the Buddha was born on a night of the full moon, and that his enlightenment and death also occurred on nights of the full moon. It is also said that Mahāvīra was born on a moonless night, and that his enlightenment and death also occurred on moonless nights. The symbolism of these beliefs is powerfully instructive.
The sun of upaniṣadic advaita was no doubt deeply obscured by clouds of ignorance and inequity in the age of the Buddha and Mahāvīra. And the trusteeship of the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata must have begun to pass from aboriginal and enlightened hands to careerists and charlatans. Nihilist teachers of awesome ascetic eminence like the Ājivikas17 Ajita Kesakambalin and Makkhali Gosāla, of whose contemporaneity with Mahāvīra and the Buddha we know, must have dominated the intellectual life of an age whose self-confidence and even self-consciousness must have begun to atrophy in the absence of a living contact with advaita.

The full moon represents the power of illumined mind which, in the form of the Buddha, came to the aid of that sunless age: teaching advaita through compassion and in the light of reason drawing attention to emptiness which held all existence in its embrace without itself being a competing entity among entities, identifiable also as all-upholding dhamma and nirvāṇa's non-entitative reality beyond relativity.

The Buddha could have identified emptiness or nirvāṇa or dhamma with atman or self, but did not do so because the atrophying self-consciousness of that age would have taken self to mean ego or body or mind, with disastrous consequences for his mission of compassion.

The Buddha's teaching of the inter-relatedness of all evanescent items and orders of not-self-hood, and their situatedness within non-entitative emptiness or nirvāṇa or dhamma, is also wholly consonant with aboriginality's vision of the vibrant interdependence of all forms of life and their location within the nourishing embrace of Mother Earth.

Nights of the full moon awaken the forest of life to a celebration of interdependence, to a middle ground between the burdensomeness of toil and the inertia of sleep. The truth of eros is not absent in Kṛṣṇa's incarnation as the Buddha, it merely becomes translated as the irresistibility of enlightenment.

And 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. Ahimsā is born, Mahāvīra is born. Ecology, the implicit self-restraint of non-human forms of life in their adventure of survival, becomes self-conscious ahimsā and those who practice ahimsā in all spheres of living are "Mahāvīra": great heroes.

Each vulnerable living being, frightened in the moonless darkness of the night of ignorance and cynicism, can attain to self-sufficiency — kaivalya — through the practice of ahimsā: implicit or self-conscious and ceaselessly vigilant. Even a moonless night manifests distant stars, themselves suns, self-luminous, alone and autonomous. The humblest organism can hope to realize the self-luminosity of those stars. There is plurality and diversity in that realization of kaivalya, no duality.

In its celebration of self-restraint, Jainahimsā pays a profound tribute to aboriginal humanity's moral and metaphysical continuity with other orders of life, and with the processes of materiality whose lawfulness is witness to the causal self-restraint of these processes.

Vegetarianism is Jainism's unique contribution to civilization, and a future universal life-style of humanity. It is a kitchen of ahimsā within aboriginality's, Sītā's, larger kitchen of advaita: and promised steady expansion by it, but not prematurely or self-righteously.

Here is the Vinaya-piṭaka text, the 'Bhaddavaggyavatthu',18 the canonical record of an occurrence in the life of the Buddha which is speculatively explored and expanded in the dialogical narrative of this book along the lines of the preceding meditations.

(1) And the Blessed One, after having dwelt at Benares as long as He thought fit, went forth to Uruvela. And the Blessed One left the road and went to a certain grove; having gone there, and having entered it, He sat down at the foot of a tree. At that time there was a party of thirty friends, rich young men, who were sporting in that same grove together with their wives. One of them had no wife; for him they had provided a harlot. Now while they did not pay attention and were indulging in their sports, that harlot took up the articles belonging to them, and ran away.

(2) Then those companions, doing service to their friend, went in search of that woman; and roaming about that grove, they saw the Blessed One sitting at the foot of a tree. Seeing Him they went to the place where the Blessed One was; having approached Him, they said to the Blessed One: "Pray, Lord, has the Blessed One seen a woman passing by?"
"What have you to do, young men, with the woman?"

"We were sporting, Lord, in the grove, thirty friends, rich young men, together with our wives. One of us had no wife; for him we had provided a harlot. Now Lord, while we did not pay attention, and were indulging in our sports, that harlot has taken up the articles belonging to us, and has run away. Therefore, Lord, we companions doing service to our friend, go in search of that woman and roam about this grove."

(3) "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?"

"That, Lord, would be better for us, that we should go in search of ourselves."

"If so, young men, sit down, I will preach to you the truth, (Dharma)"

The rich young companions replied: "Yes, Lord," and respectfully saluted the Blessed One, and sat down near him.

(4) Then the Blessed One preached to them...

(5) And having seen the truth... the venerable persons received the Upasampadā Ordination.

There is in the above text a two and a half thousand years old and yet quite contemporary-sounding cheekiness to the young men's conversation with the Buddha which makes their apparent sudden conversion to the Dhamma seem quite implausible. I would like to think the cheekiness springs not only from youthful irreverence and aristocratic arrogance, but also from exposure to the thought and influence of the likes of such nihilist masters of the age as Makkhali Gośāla and Ajita Kesakambalin.

I know of no historical grounds for supposing that these wizards of id might have known each other and jointly dared moral and metaphysical self-confidence to justify itself in public debate.

Nor is there any basis in extant historical evidence to suggest that the Buddha and Mahāvīra ever met, or that there was any occasion for them jointly to confront nihilist defiance.

However, in the speculative narrative which follows, the nihilists and the sages are brought together by a symposium to which the former summon the latter and also the whole 'Bhad-davaggiya' gang of outraged rank, Brāhmanical philosophers and paurānikas and a crowd of high and low born citizens of the land, friends and foes.
Means are as important as ends. He is holding a supporting walking stick in his hand which is bigger than himself. A yardstick of self and emptiness and love, not ego and despair and vengeance. With Gandhi as his model, Giacometti should have sculpted a 'Walking Man' figure to complete his 'Standing Man' and 'Falling Man' set of sculptures.

A final consolation, beyond anxiety and responsibility, another Rāmāyaṇa beginning. As Ramaṇa Mahārṣi lay dying of cancer in his hut in Tiruvannāmalai more than forty years ago, his favourite white peacock perched himself on the roof of the sage's hut and screamed through the night. Among Ramaṇa's last words is believed to have been the query: "Have you given that bird his dinner?".

By the grace of Sītā we have been nourished by truth even in these diminishing times.

NOTES

1. Pīṭh, Guru, and Deva ma; traditional debts of Hindu piety.
3. While leaving self utterly unharmed, the impact nevertheless destroys the illusion of a separatist self-image ('I am this, as opposed to that'). Non-violence is not impotence. Self-realization, however temporary, is impossible without suffering the shock of a radical disillusionment.

   We suffer this shock, and are ripe for self-realization, each time somebody addresses us. In addressing me you don't refer to me; you mean me, not that I am this, as opposed to that. And addressing is not an act by which you try to cause me to attend to you, but an act of disavowal of attention-attracting causal efficaciousness which constitutes an invitation to me to attend to you of my own free accord. At its deepest level, this invitation is an invitation to me to see you as myself, to regard being conscious of you as self-consciousness.

   Addressing is a recurrent sacrament of everyday life which our recalcitrant 'dehatmabuddhi' (Our 'I am this, as opposed to that' orientation of mind) refuses to receive.

4. A clarification is in order here. Our thoughts, feelings and actions are profoundly and undeniably causally affected by the associative and suggestive power of words, be they words of edifying poetry or manipulative propaganda. But the exercise of this power presupposes the trustworthiness of ordinary communication, which is vouched by the manifest 'non-starter' status of linguistic utterances regarded as instruments inherently capable of causing audiences to believe or do what is propositionally encoded in them. Non-violence is at the heart of human communication, and non-duality is the heart of non-violence.

5. *The Life of Śvāmī Vivekananda*, by his Eastern and Western disciples, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1974, 'At Kshir-Bhavani,' p. 598. I have described the event dialogically.


7. Or cognate Buddhist or Jaina features. There is evidence of a Buddhist and Jaina connection with Ayodhya, which was also known as Sāketa, from the time of the Buddha and Mahāvīra. Jainism claims an even older connection.
8. A fairly comprehensive account of the Ayodhya controversy from a variety of contending perspectives can be obtained from the following recent publications:


(iii) Ram Janmabhoomi Vs Babri Masjid, A Case Study in Hindu-Muslim Conflict, Koenraad Elst, Voice of India, New Delhi, 1990.


Reproduced, along with the caption, from Anatomy of a Confrontation, ‘Legal Aspects to the Issue,’ p 94, with the permission of S. Gopal and A. G. Noorani.

“Sītā-ki-rasoi” finds frequent mention in Koenraad Elst’s study.

Elst refers to a shrine further north of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya (away from the zone of contention) which is also called “Janmasthan Sītā Rasoi” and is regarded by some disputants as marking the real site of Sri Rama’s birth, as opposed to the site occupied by the mosque. Elst is dismissive of this shrine’s claim to birth-place status because his is a strongly relocationist position regarding the mosque. It doesn’t occur to him that more than one spot could theologically properly be regarded as marking Rama’s birthplace.

He goes further. He is not even willing or able to allow that more than one site could mark the location of Sītā’s Kitchen without any offense to theology or even to royalty. Elst would like to believe that the rival shrine marks the actual site of Sītā’s Kitchen, although not of Rama’s birth; and he gives a new identity to the well-known “platform” instantiation of Sītā’s Kitchen adjacent to the Babri mosque (see diagram above). He calls it “Kausalyā’s Kitchen.” This is humorous.

Kausalyā was Rama’s mother. Presumably Elst thinks that the proximity of a Kausalyā Kitchen to the Babri mosque site would strengthen the claim that that site marks the place where Kausalyā’s palace stood; where Rama was born; where else? Thus all the way to relocation.

Unfortunately for this argument and aspiration, Hindu domestic life does not distinguish between the kitchens of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The mother-in-law in fact hands her kitchen over to her daughter-in-law, to the nourisher of future generations. And Sītā is no ordinary daughter-in-law. She is the Divine Mother. Not Kausalyā, not in the sacred Ramayana tradition.

I am not suggesting that the Zone Shrine cannot also be called “Kausalyā’s Kitchen.” But Kausalyā’s Kitchen must in epic time metamorphose into Sītā’s Kitchen, in deference to rules of domesticity and the demands of divinity. Koenraad Elst is welcome to his relocationist zeal regarding the Babri mosque. But he should not encourage the reduction of India’s spiritual imagination to literalist aridity, just as he is anxious not to encourage the reduction of articles of faith to historical hypotheses.

9. Fueled as it is by fundamentalism, the demand for the Babri mosque’s relocation is likely to become more strident and unyielding with the passage of time, and the Indian state may be forced to choose between brutal repression of the relocationists and abject surrender to them. Miracles do occur, however, and a deep-going and extended debate in the country on the moral and spiritual dimensions of the Ayodhya controversy could win more support for the status quo and the demand for the mosque’s relocation may weaken significantly, enabling the state to protect the structure more or less non-coercively.

But what if this miracle fails to occur? It would then become imperative to defuse the situation without unworthy compromise. I have some
thoughts regarding how this could be done, prompted by the idea and reality of Śītā’s Kitchen; but the situation in Ayodhya is still fluid and it might be premature and even counterproductive to spell out these thoughts without consultation with all concerned parties.

Theocratic secessionism in Kashmir and Punjab is also a demand for “relocation”: the relocation of Islam in Kashmir and Sikhism in Punjab outside the matrix of Indian sovereignty and civilization, and the concomitant “relocation” of Hindu refugees outside the Kashmir Valley and Punjab, cruel euphemism for the forcible exodus of age-old inhabitants and custodians of the culture of these regions.

Here again, brutal repression of relocationism and abject surrender to it threaten to become the only available, and equally unacceptable, options for the state.

What is needed in Kashmir and Punjab and in the Indian subcontinent as a whole, as elsewhere in the world, is the miracle of a relocation of consciousness 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.

Like the empty tomb of Christ, which suggests “where” he is continuously reborn: in virgin self-consciousness unviolated by ego’s shadow. The Christ of the empty tomb is indeed a gardener with a green manifesto for existence. Mary Magdalene had not misidentified him, my Hindu Christology insists.

This impulse to annihilation is starkly revealed in Andrei Tarkovsky’s film “The Stalker.” A stalker of the sacred in a world of fear and greed leads a scientist and a writer (“who want to be paid for every breath they take”) to “the zone,” a mysterious area like Śītā’s Kitchen which has survived nuclear (fundamentalist) devastation. In the small booth at the heart of the zone there is really nothing, except a telephone which could be taken to be the link between bounded and boundless emptiness, self-image and self-realization. The stalker barely succeeds in preventing the scientist and writer (religious bigot and manipulative politician) from destroying the zone with a portable nuclear device (microphone, video cassette).

Fear and hatred of emptiness and self dominate our age: fear and hatred of space and time, life and environment.

10. The empty tomb of Christ, which suggests “where” he is continuously reborn: in virgin self-consciousness unviolated by ego’s shadow. The Christ of the empty tomb is indeed a gardener with a green manifesto for existence.

11. The impulse to annihilation is starkly revealed in Andrei Tarkovsky’s film “The Stalker.” A stalker of the sacred in a world of fear and greed leads a scientist and a writer (“who want to be paid for every breath they take”) to “the zone,” a mysterious area like Śītā’s Kitchen which has survived nuclear (fundamentalist) devastation.

12. The stalker barely succeeds in preventing the scientist and writer (religious bigot and manipulative politician) from destroying the zone with a portable nuclear device (microphone, video cassette).

13. The Adiṣṭhaṭṭha Ramayana is a fifteenth century work of unknown authorship which seeks systematically to unravel the non-dualist symbolism and significance of the epic, and which accords the status of Self to Śītā, around whom through her māyā-śakti is woven all the drama of the epic.

14. The Adiṣṭhaṭṭha Ramayana is a mass of instruction in advaita purported to have been given by the sage Vasiṣṭha to the young prince Rāma. Śri Ramana referred to it frequently.

to make good a non-existent loss. What they have lost is not status but self, self-realizing self-consciousness; which is what the Tathāgata compassionately asks them to seek.

20. It was a sannyāsin in Vṛndāvana who reminded me that “Bhārata,” India’s ancient name preserved in its constitution, literally means “obsessed with light” or, quite simply, “enlightened.” Not only distinctively Indian traditions of spiritual enlightenment or realization—ādīvāsi, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and other, e.g. Sikh—are “Bhāratiya” in this sense, but all mystical traditions of spirituality—Abrahamic and Chinese and African and other; and also all secular traditions of independent inquiry that do not unexaminedly and dualistically align themselves with “reason” against “religion.”

Thus in a constitutive sense, although not by explicit constitutional commitment, India is a Bhāratiya state: a state of enlightenment beyond the dualism of secularism and religion, a trustee consciousness of spiritual and secular traditions of illumination.

The idea of India as a Hindu state is a distorting diminution of Bhāratiya as understood above, as is the idea of Kashmir as an Islamic state or Punjab as a Sikh state. Ideological secularism of the European kind, liberal or Marxist, is equally incongruent with Indian civilization’s dateless obsession with the indivisible light of consciousness, even in the midst of darkness. Indian politics must rethink its colonially inherited and communally distorted vocabulary.

21. Reproduced in the Preface. Instead of the harlot I speak of an ādīvāsi girl who is alone and not a wife-substitute for the text’s lone bachelor.

22. A contribution of modern Indian politics to the art of intimidation, the physical encirclement of a figure of authority by agitators until their demands are conceded.


25. op. cit., Book III, Aranya Kānda, Chapters 42–45.


27. op. cit., Book VII, Uttara Kānda, Chapter 110.


30. Srimad Bhāgavatam: the authorship of this central scripture of Vaiṣṇava bhakti is attributed to Vyāsa, author of the Mahābhārata. The forest groves of Vṛndāvana are the heart of the Bhāgavatam, not the battle-fields of Kuṇḍuka; harmony, not strife.

31. Mahābhārata, condensed by Kamala Subramaniam, Sābha Parva; Chapters 11, 12, 13, 14.


33. I realize this passage is influenced by the Bob Dylan song “Blowin’ in the wind,” and how influenced even I was as an oldish Indian student in England in the sixties by “the sixties.”

In the present context, two lines from that song are especially worthy of recall: (i) “How many times must a man look up, before he can see the sky?” This line demands to be heard as registering exasperation at those who cussedly refuse to acknowledge pervasive emptiness, i.e. essential Buddhism.

And (ii) “How many times can a man turn his head, and pretend that he just doesn’t see?” This line can be heard as registering exasperation at those who stubbornly deny the self-evidence of self-consciousness, essential advaita.

34. The name also of the sage transmitter of the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, literally “The Frog’s Secret,” a canonical scripture of advaita. The Upaniṣad reveals the secret of “AUM”: that its three utterance-parts, A, U, and M, represent wakefulness, dream, and sleep; and are traversed and comprehended and transcended by self. AUM is self, its breathless breathing, Śābari’s authoritative in her ādīvāsi incarnation in this narrative.

This message of Māṇḍūka rescues from pejorativeness the expressions “frog-hopping” and “frog-in-the-well.” Frog-hopping, self refuses the fixity of definition, while remaining contentedly sunk in the well-spring of self-consciousness. See Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad, translated by Svāmī Gambhirānanda, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1979.

35. The heart of compassion cannot be other than the heart on the right side of our chest of which Śrī Rāma spoke, an area of emptiness corresponding anatomically exactly to the fickle pump, the seat of all our anxieties, on the left. This empty heart is where self is situated in the body. Rāma used to emphasize, both playfully (because self is all-pervasive and not in any one place in the body or anywhere else) and seriously (because given the stubbornness of ‘dehātmabhava,’ the ‘I am this body’ orientation of our minds, an area within the body demands to be indicated).

But the heart on the right side of our chest is not only a finite zone of emptiness, like the inner space of the Bābāri mosque or the wider zone of Śītā’s kitchen in Ayodhya; it is continuous with boundless emptiness, as those zones are.

It is the experience of many practitioners of the ‘Who am I?’ form of meditation taught by Rāma that it is on the right side of the chest, palpably in the area of emptiness which is our spiritual heart, that a current of self-awareness manifests and fructifies as self-realization: in the area as a whole and at every point in it and in every portion of it, not at any one fixed point alone. Rather like the birthplace of Rāma being the kitchen zone as a whole and every portion of it and every point in it, not any one fixed place alone in the zone.

Interestingly, one of the sources of authority cited by Rāma for his doctrine of the empty heart of self-realization (bridge of metaphor and mutuality between advaita and Buddhism) is the Śītā Upaniṣad of the Aṭhārva Veda which affirms the reality of Śītā as Brahman, Ground of Being, source of all manifestation. Some scholars regard this upaniṣad as an interpolation. No matter. It must have been illumination which thus waylaid ignorance.

I have inserted this note at this point because, had he been aware of self’s heart of emptiness, the paurānika would have been stirred to a med-