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Jaffrelot, Christophe (2008) 'Hindu Nationalism and the (Not So Easy) Art of Being Outraged: The Ram Setu Controversy', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, Special Issue - Nb. 2, 'Outraged Communities': Comparative Perspectives on the Politicization of Emotions in South Asia. URL: <http://samaj.revues.org/document1372.html> To quote a passage, use paragraph (§).

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## Hindu Nationalism and the (Not So Easy) Art of Being Outraged: The *Ram Setu* Controversy

Christophe Jaffrelot

**Abstract.** Hindu nationalists have become experts in the art of being outraged after the crystallization of the *Hindutva* ideology in the 1920s. Articulating a deep rooted inferiority complex, they have tried hard to denounce the disrespectful behaviour of the minorities they feared most – especially the Muslims – in order to mobilize new followers. Such a process was likely to trigger riots and to polarise society along communal lines – and eventually to translate into votes. However, a purely instrumentalist interpretation of the Hindu nationalist use of outrage would be too simplistic. The use of sacred symbols is not that easy, as evident from the case of the *Ram Setu* movement. It shows that the *Sangh Parivar* finds it more difficult to mobilize followers when the culprits are not Muslims. It also shows that the exploitation of the outrage is more complicated when its instigators are born Hindus. In any case, the holy character of the outraged symbol is not enough: it has to be historical; and it has to be useful too.

[1] Religious outrage has triggered collective violence in pre-modern India, as C. Bayly has shown in its seminal work on the 'pre-history of communalism' (Bayly 1985) : heads of pigs were found in mosques, followers of Islam offered cows in sacrifice during Id, Hindu processions passed by mosques while playing music during the prayer time... The meaning of such 'rituals of provocation' – to use Marc Gaborieau's expression (Gaborieau 1985) - changed with the crystallization of communal ideologies. Then, these stratagems acquired a political dimension. They were still used to provoke riots but the polarization of society they were intended to create was often supposed to translate into votes, for instance. In this paper I shall address this issue not from the point of view of violence, but from that of mobilization by asking one (twofold) question: how can the *Hindutva* movement shape or manipulate religious forms of outrage in order to attract supporters and is the sacred dimension of the outrage the most critical one?

[2] Hindu nationalists cultivate the art of being outraged when elements of their religion are affected. They promptly denounce 'attacks' against sacred symbols of Hinduism: any disrespect can be portrayed as blasphemy and lay itself to popular mobilizations – which may translate into votes. Hindu nationalist politicians have always been eager to instrumentalise so-called outrageous situation at the time of elections. Agitations against cow slaughter in 1967 and for (re)building the Ram temple in Ayodhya in 1989, a few months before general elections in both occurrences, are cases in point. In 1967, the *Sangh Parivar* – through the newly created Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and its party, the Jana Sangh – mobilized thousands of demonstrators in New Delhi to protest against the outrage to Hinduism that cow-slaughter represented– a practice still legal in a few states and which the *Sangh Parivar* accused the Muslims to indulge in at the time of Bakr Id (Graham 1990: 147-155). In 1989, the same groups orchestrated a similar campaign in defence of Ram, the Hindu god perceived to have been humiliated by the construction of the Babri Masjid of Ayodhya, his allegedly historical capital where the temple built on his birthplace had been replaced by the Moghols with this mosque.

[3] A purely instrumentalist interpretation, however, is not sufficient. The Hindu nationalist culture of outrage cannot be understood irrespective of its psychological context. It is part of a discourse of victimization which is the very matrix of Hindu nationalism (Jaffrelot: 1996). This ideology was shaped in the late nineteenth century as a reaction to a strong feeling of vulnerability. Hindus, though in a majority, were seen by its proponents as weak, compared to the

Muslims, because of their inner divisions along caste and sectarian lines. This majoritarian complex of inferiority made Hindu nationalist leaders prompt to outcry as soon as some of their sacred identity symbols were 'under attack' because of religious minorities, be they Muslim or Christian.

[4] The controversy about the *Ram Setu*, the last 'outrage' to date affecting Hinduism (from the point of view of the *Sangh Parivar*) exemplifies this pattern. But it complexifies it since the *Hindutva* leaders appear to be less concerned by the sacred character of this identity symbol than by its historical quality. It also shows that the enemy responsible for the victimization of the Hindus may not be Muslims or Christians, but the State and the lower castes – then, fighting the so-called outrage may be more complicated. Last but not least, it is revealing of the Hindu nationalists' quest for non-religious (and even non-historical) reasons for defending an object of outrage: the *Ram Setu* also had to be defended for economic and strategic reasons.

### **The *Ram Setu* controversy: Outraging the sacred, popular agitation and the victimization discourse**

[5] *Ram Setu* is the name of the bridge that is supposed to link South India to Sri Lanka since the *Ramayana*. According to this epic, it was built by Hanuman, the chief of Ram's army, in order to cross over the ocean and rescue Sita who had been abducted by Ravana. As early as the nineteenth century, the British made plans to dredge this channel in order to enable big ships to navigate along the Indian coast or to travel between the Eastern side of India towards the Arabian Sea to use it. In 1838 efforts were made to this end for the first time, but they did not succeed in making the passage navigable for big ships. Another plan was made in 1860 but it was never implemented<sup>1</sup>.

[6] Almost one century later, in 1955, independent India constituted the Sethusamudram Project Committee to examine the feasibility of dredging the canal connecting the Gulf of Mannar with the Palk Bay. The Committee recommended that the canal project be linked with the Tuticorin Harbour Project and that both projects be undertaken simultaneously. In 1963, the

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<sup>1</sup> See 'History', <http://sethusamudram.info/content/view/18/26>

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government of India sanctioned the Tuticorin Harbour Project in order to transform this deep sea port into a major maritime hub. But the Sethusamudram Project was not taken further.

[7] Tuticorin became a big harbour, but nothing compared to Colombo which developed into a major container port. Colombo reached its full handling capacity in 1992 because it could receive big international cargos and be used as a transshipment port<sup>2</sup>. Tuticorin could not replicate this success story because it could not be approached by big ships, though it experienced a 17% per annum growth rate in the early 2000s<sup>3</sup>. And the smaller ones which reached it from the East coast of India had to go around Sri Lanka, travelling 500 extra kilometres and spending large amounts in fuel and crew charges. This state of things also raised a security problem since India was one of the few sovereign countries which did not have a continuous navigable route for big ships in its own territorial water.

[8] The supporters of the Sethusamudram Project also argued that it would help developing backward districts of Tamil Nadu such as Tirunelveli and Ramanathapuram. The Project was revived in 1983 – to no avail – and again in 1994 when the government of Tamil Nadu updated the project and detailed it. The government of A.B. Vajpayee, which was formed in 1999 with the support of the National Democratic Alliance, a coalition led by the BJP, took it up under pressure of its local ally, the All India Anna Dravida Khazagam (AIADMK). In the 2000-2001 budget, Yashwant Sinha, the then Union Finance Minister, allocated 4.8 crore rupees for a feasibility study of the Sethusamudram project. The Project then begun in 2004, under the NDA regime, when the Vajpayee government approved a Rs 3,500 crore budget to create a shipping channel. The first concrete step, though, was taken after the NDA lost the 2004 elections to the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who inaugurated the project on June 2, 2005. Dredging started in July 2006. Six dredgers worked between the mouth of the channel in Palk Straits: Dredger XVI owned by Dredging Corp. Of India Ltd., Pacificque, owned by Belgium based Dredging International, Banwari Prem and Triloki Prem owned by Mumbai-based Vector Shipping Services Pvt. Ltd., Darya Manthan owned by Hong Kong-based Chellaram Shipping Ltd., and Prof. Gurjanov owned by the Russia-based Baltdraga Ltd. (Narain 2008). By July 2007, 17.57% of the Setusamudram Project had been achieved according

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<sup>2</sup> 'Tuticorin Port vs Colombo Port', <http://sethusamudram.info/content/view/26/30>

<sup>3</sup> 'Tuticorin port has potential to be global container hub – PricewaterhouseCoopers', <http://sethusamudram.info/content/view/25/30>

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to the official Setusamudram Project government website. The completion rate reached 24,76% in September 2007.

[9] Hindu nationalists immediately denounced an attack against a sacred site<sup>4</sup>. One of them, Subramanian Swamy, went to the Supreme Court with a written petition. The government then filed a counter affidavit questioning the very existence of the *Ram Setu* which, according to them, was purely mythical and legendary:

Contents of the Valmiki Ramayana, the Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas and other mythological texts, which admittedly formed an important part of ancient Indian literature [...] cannot be said to be historical record to incontrovertibly prove the existence of the characters, or the occurrence of events depicted therein (*The Indian Express* 2008).

[10] This argument prepared the ground of a stronger reaction. Hindu nationalists built a whole campaign of agitation based on the usual feelings of being outraged and their old discourse of victimization.

### **'Ram under attack'**

[11] The weekly mouthpiece of the *Sangh Parivar*, *The Organiser*, devoted its Deepavali special issue to the *Ram Setu* controversy late in 2007. The 21 articles it contained perfectly illustrate the Hindu nationalist rhetoric that was articulated at that time. Gautam Sen, one of the *Sangh Parivar* leaders in England, set the tone:

The dredging of the *Ram Setu* channel on the grounds that there was neither Ram nor any historic bridge is simply outrageous. It is the equivalent of orphaning an entire civilisation by denying the well-springs of its foundation (Sen 2007: 17).

[12] What was at stake, of course, was the religious identity of Hindus. This point was made at length by Sunita Vakil few pages afterwards:

It is quite saddening that the ruling party, by casting aspersions on the name of Ram, a strong symbol of Hindu faith, is trying to destruct

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<sup>4</sup> They were not the first one to mobilize. Swami Avimuktेश्वaranand Saraswati, one of the main disciples of the Shankaracharya of Dwarka and Jyotirpith, launched a campaign with his own, limited means. (Personal communication of an unpublished letter sent on the 29<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2007 to *India Today* and *Outlook* by Alvara Enterría, Publications Director of Indica Books, Varanasi).

India's rich cultural heritage and all [what] it stands for. By denying the existence of Lord Ram armed with a non descript affidavit in the apex court, the Congress leaders have dealt a heavy blow to the collective Hindu psyche besides reducing a sacred epic that defined Hindu identity and nationhood for ages, to a mere work of fiction (Vakil 2007: 52).

[13] The words used to denounce the government's disregard for such sacred symbols as Ram and the *Ram Setu* were always the same: outrage, insult, humiliation, blasphemy etc. And these attacks against Ram and the *Ram Setu* were equated with attacks against Hindus at large, and even against their country. Among the contributors to the special issue of the Deepavali issue of *The Organiser*, a Sanskrit scholar, Dr. Indulata Das writes: 'Insult of Ram is an insult to India' (Das 2007: 36).

[14] Naturally, the religious figures who had been invited to contribute to this special issue emphasised the sacred dimension of the *Ram Setu* even more. Swami Nischalanda Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of Puri wrote for instance:

We are really shocked that the existence of Sri Ram and the *Ramayan* is being disputed on this sacred land where this great hero took birth. It is not only meant for the demolition of the *Ram Setu* but also backed by a ploy to outrage the reputation, honour and self-pride of Hindu society (Saraswati 2007: 55).

[15] Swami Dayananda Saraswati, another saffron-clad 'saintly' figure, was even more explicit about the implications of the sacredness of the *Ram Setu* in his fascinating speech as chief-guest of the function organized for the release of Subramanian Swamy's book, *Ram Setu, a Symbol of National Unity*, on April 20, 2008:

Any destruction to the sacred Sethu would hurt the sentiments of crores of Hindus. Any sentiment is sacred. No sentiments needs any logic, and sentiment is above all. Therefore, we don't need to give any reason for our attitude, that has been inherited since generations (Rath 2008: 9).

[16] The sacredness of the *Ram Setu* was reason enough to denounce the outrageous attitude of the government.

[17] Those who insisted most on the sacredness of the *Ram Setu*, though, were activists specialising in popular mobilizations – be they religious figures or politicians. Ravi Shankar

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Prasad, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) National spokesperson, regarded the government's affidavit as an 'humiliating insult to Lord Ram' (Prasad 2007: 76) and Sadhvi Rithambara, one of the most vocal VHP saffron-clad leaders, denounced its 'blatant disregard toward the religious sentiments of [the] majority community' (Rithambara 2007: 62).

### **In search of a popular mobilization**

[18] The protest against so-called sacrilegious attacks against symbols of Hinduism generally translates into calls to agitate. Indeed, the VHP leaders launched a mobilization campaign under the aegis of Sadhvi Rithambara and Satymitranand Giri. The former considered that 'the campaign to save *Ram Setu* should be of vital importance to any cultured person, without any connection to political identity or ideological stand' (Rithambara 2007: 63). The latter launched his 'most ardent appeal to the Indian society to embark once again upon the path of satyagraha in order to protect the very existence of the Hindu culture which is under serious threats. Let us all be prepared to lay down our lives if the need arises to achieve this most sacred cause' (Giri 2007: 65).

[19] The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) created a new organization only devoted to the defence of the *Ram Setu*, the Rameshwaram *Ram Setu* Raksha Manch (The Rameshwaram Association for the Defence of *Ram Setu*). This organization initiated an agitation campaign in Tamil Nadu. In September 2007, for instance, it resulted in the arrest of activists of belonging to this movement and to the arrest of other activists belonging to another offshoot of the RSS, the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (Committee for the Hindu Renaissance)<sup>5</sup>. The agitation reached its culmination point in late December 2007 when the Rameshwaram *Ram Setu* Raksha Manch organized a huge rally in Rohini (Delhi) on the Swarna Jayanti Udyan grounds. It was attended by VHP leaders – including Ashok Singhal (International President) and Pravin Togadia (International General Secretary) as well as saffron-clad saintly figures -, BJP leaders – including the entire top brass of the party as well as the Chief Ministers of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh – and RSS leaders, amongst whom K. Sudarshan, the Sarsanghchalak (supreme chief) (The Economic Times 2007).

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<sup>5</sup> On the protests orchestrated by the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, see <http://www.hindujagruti.org/activities/campaigns/religious/ramsetu/>

### **The psychological context: a vulnerability syndrome**

[20] Outrage to the sacred is usually instrumentalised by ethno-political entrepreneurs from the BJP and the VHP who attempt to mobilize – and gain followers – for a crucial cause. But this particular mobilization and the motivations of its initiators have to be analysed in the context of a general feeling of vulnerability. Traditionally, those who suffered from this syndrome considered that it was Muslims who posed the greatest threat to Hinduism; in the case of the *Ram Setu*, the Congress-led government was their first target because it was accused of always appeasing the minorities at the expense of Hindus.

#### ***Hindus 'under threat'***

[21] Sadhvi Rithambara, in the afore-mentioned article about the 'attack' against the *Ram Setu* writes: 'The current assault on our Hindu dharma is nothing new but an extension of centuries of unprovoked assaults. Hindu history is replete with accounts of the most atrocious attacks perpetrated on the peace loving Hindus in India' (Rithambara 2007: 62). For the *Sangh Parivar*, Hindus are – and have always been - victims of external assailants. Over the years, this reading of history percolated and now finds some echo among ordinary citizens who become thus sympathisers of the *Hindutva* forces. One of the letters reproduced in the 'readers' forum' of *The Organiser* illustrates this very well and deserves to be quoted at length:

Tolerance is a great quality but not at the cost of wiping out the great religion [that is Hinduism]. *Ram Setu* is just another episode in this vilified and dangerous campaign. It is high time that some permanent solution is put up to mitigate the sufferings of Hindus. Delhi Metro's route alignment was changed so that Qutub Minar is not harmed; the Taj industrial corridor project is under legal stay so as to preserve Taj Mahal and there are several other typical cases where minority card is being played. But when it comes to a Hindu thought, psyche, religion or anything associated with Hindu, there is a lot of demeaning, defamation, hurting the religious sentiments etc. (*The Organiser* 2007: 80)

[22] Another reader wrote: 'The Hindu in India is faced with a unique situation. While he is theoretically part of a majority, he is so fractured into various ideological groups that he is virtually powerless to influence the politics of the country' (*The Organiser* 2007: 80).

[23] In contrast, according to Hindu nationalists, minorities form blocks which the political parties are always keen on 'pampering'. The *Hindutva* leaders traditionally argue that the Congress plays vote bank politics and is especially keen to make concessions to Muslims in order to get their support at the time of elections. But in the case of the *Ram Setu*, Muslims were not involved and so their discourse had to be different.

### ***Hindus against low caste Dravidians?***

[24] Subramanian Swamy argued that 'the UPA is an anti-Hindu government. Because Karunanidhi is an atheist, and UPA's puppeteer Ms. Sonia Gandhi is a Christian fundamentalist, they together thought that they can demoralise the ordinary Hindu by demolishing the *Ram Setu*' (Swamy 2007: 69).

[25] Sonia Gandhi's rise to power, since she became president of the Congress party in 1997, has been followed with great suspicion by the Hindu nationalists who predicted that she would betray the Indian nation, not only because of her foreign origin, but also because of her Catholic background. The myth of an anti-Hindu conspiracy of the minorities has crystallised in this context and has been reactivated during the *Ram Setu* movement. Referring to the government's affidavit, Gautam Sen considered for instance that:

The subjection of their beliefs and history to some allegedly superior investigative forensic science is merely an Islamo-Christian conspiracy signifying complete bad faith [...] It is a diabolical intrigue that threatens to subjugate Hindus politically as the prelude to a final solution that will impale them on the beliefs of their imperialist conquerors (Sen 2007: 17).

[26] In the case of Karunanidhi, the accusation of being anti-Hindu is more complicated. He is certainly 'anti-Brahmin'! This Dravidian leader is the heir of a long Tamil tradition of Brahmin-bashing harking back to Periyar, the author of a corrosive book entitled *The Ramayana. A True Reading* in 1959. In this book, that was banned in some parts of India, Periyar made statements which were much more provocative than those of Karunanidhi's, especially when the former referred to Ram's morality. But his anti-Ram stances were in tune with the South Indian version of the *Ramayana*. In the Dravidian states, Ram has never been such a popular deity. In fact, he has always been seen there as a North Indian import and a symbol of the Aryan invasions. The Brahmins, who brought Hinduism to the South, were accused of subjugating

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indigenous people and subjecting them to a foreign civilization. In contrast, in Tamil Nadu at least, Ravana is a heroic son of the soil, a Vedic scholar and an epitome of morality. Unlike who Ram questioned Sita's chastity, Ravana is presented in the Dravidian movement as a refined man – a connoisseur of music – who abstained from manhandling Sita. Besides his deliberately anti-Brahmin tirades, Periyar fought for *Pahutu arivu*, that is rationalism against *Mooda nambikai*, superstitions. This is why Swamy accuses him of being an atheist.

[27] During the *Ram Setu* controversy, Karunanidhi followed a purely Dravidian vein and argued that Ram could not be an historic person and that the *Ram Setu* could not be an ancient man-made bridge. During the celebration of Periyar's 99<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary, he declared at a public meeting at Erode: 'Some say there was a person over 17 lakh years ago – his name, Ram. And we should not touch the bridge (*Ram Setu*) he built. Who is this Ram? From which engineering college did he graduate? Is there any proof of this?'<sup>6</sup>. A few days later, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, he said that 'Ram is a big lie' and then that, according to Valmiki himself he was a drunkard<sup>7</sup>.

[28] The *Sangh Parivar* could not put up with such a discourse. On the other hand, its leaders could not react to it in the way they had reacted to a minority leader like Sonia Gandhi. In fact, the *Ram Setu* controversy shows how difficult it is for the *Sangh Parivar* to identify and cash in on pan-Hindu symbols. While Ram is a popular symbol in the North among almost all caste groups it is not that prestigious in the Dravidian South, especially among the lower castes. By activating this identity symbol, the *Sangh Parivar* risks alienating other Hindus instead of unifying the majority community. Incidentally, this is why the notion of a 'Hindu race' was never used by the ideologues of the *Hindutva* movement as it would have introduced a line of cleavage between 'Aryans' and 'Dravidians' (Jaffrelot 1995: 327-354).

[29] However the *Sangh Parivar* is certainly not shy of alienating some Hindus. It has been fighting physically against communists in Kerala for decades, the RSS/CPI(M) violence leaving dozens of dead people every year. The Bajrang Dal is also implementing a form of

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<sup>6</sup> 'Tamils celebrate Ravana as a hero and Rama as the villain', *Outlook*, cited in <http://sethusamudram.info/content/view/42/26>

<sup>7</sup> To quote Karunanidhi fully, in response to L.K.Advani, the BJP leader, who asked him to apologize after his initial statements, the DMK chief said: 'I have not said anything more than Valmiki, who authored the Ramayana. Valmiki has even stated that Ram was drunkard. Have I said so?' (Cited in 'Cong chants 'Ram, Ram' on Sethu row', *The Economic Times*, 22 September 2007).

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cultural policing directed against Hindu artists. In February 2004, activists from the movement filed a complaint against canvasses painted by a Hindu artist, Shail Choyal, for an information campaign of the NGO 'CARE' devoted to providing care for newborns. They particularly criticised the painter's depiction of Hindu divinities such as Ganesh and Krishna. On February 10, their complaint was registered by the police who, in the company of some 50 Bajrang Dal militants, searched the offices of the director of the Udaipur Lok Kala Mandal, the art centre where the canvasses were stored, seized the paintings and put the director and the painter behind bars. They were later released on bail, but the Bajrang Dal organized a protest march during which their effigies were burned.<sup>8</sup>

[30] This cultural police's wrath is not merely brought down on famous painters: it even hunts down amateur artists at the local level. For instance, in Gwalior (Madhya Pradesh), the Bajrang Dal and the Durga Vahini – the youth wing and the women wing of the VHP - accused an employee of the Indian Institute of Tourism and Travel Management of having staged a play, 'Kal, Aaj aur Kal', that showed disrespect for Sita, Ram and Laxman. On March 14, 2004, members of these two organizations burst into the employee's home to blacken her face in public as punishment. Her father as well as her brothers and sisters stepped in. They were beaten and thrown out of their house, while their home was ransacked, all under the passive gaze of police officers (Tripathi 2004: 41).

[31] The depiction of the role of women in society by Hindu film makers has also resulted in strong-arm tactics by the Bajrang Dal. In 2000, Canada-based director Deepa Mehta chose to make a film entitled *Water* on the life of Hindu widows in Varanasi in the 1930s. At that time - and even now to a lesser extent - these women were condemned to celibacy and begging. Usually they gathered together in 'homes' where they lived on public charity and eked out a living by making fuel out of cow dung. The screenplay showed an 'illicit' relationship between a Brahmin widow and an untouchable and the rape of a child widow. The VHP president immediately declared that the film insulted 'ancient Indian culture and traditions' (*The Hindu* 2000) and threatened 'more violent protest' if Deepa Mehta tried to shoot in India. She nevertheless, did after having secured all the necessary authorizations from the central government and the authorities of Uttar Pradesh. The set that was built on the banks of the Ganges was totally

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<sup>8</sup> PUCL, Cultural policing by Bajrang Dal and the Rajasthan police', <http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Religion-communalism>

ransacked by Bajrang Dal militants and the damage added to the delays accumulated on the shooting led to colossal losses (65,000 US dollars) for the producer.

[32] Deepa Mehta then decided to continue shooting in Madhya Pradesh where she could not have been more warmly welcomed by the head of government at that time, Digvijay Singh. But here again, the Bajrang Dal resorted to force to prevent the shooting from taking place. Deepa Mehta's previous film, *Fire*, had already ignited the anger of Hindu nationalists, as it picturized two women falling in love. The same theme was taken up in *Girlfriend*, a Bollywood film, which sparked an even more violent Bajrang Dal campaign in 2004: posters were torn down and screenings were prevented in most of Mumbai's theatres, a sign that this organization saw itself as a vice squad allegedly protecting Hindu values.

[33] Obviously, the *Sangh Parivar* has targeted Hindus outraging Hinduism before. But the *Ram Setu* controversy is different. For the first time, *Sangh Parivar* leaders seem to have identified an outraged symbol whose defence could divide Hindus in a big way. What is at stake is not a handful of artists but sections of the Dravidian movement. Certainly, the BJP is not too concerned by the feelings of the DMK voters given its weak electoral basis in Tamil Nadu, but attacking the Dravidian tradition might have repercussions throughout India among the Dalit and Other Backward Classes (OBC) leaders who regard Periyar as one of their heroes – especially since Mayawati and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) tried to establish a pan-Indian presence by touring South India over the last 2-3 years. This is probably one of the main reasons why, eventually, the *Sangh Parivar* put the *Ram Setu* issue on the back burner after a couple of demonstrations, one of them resulting in the infamous ransacking of the flat of Karunanidhi's daughter by Hindu nationalist activists in Bangalore. Interestingly, instead of entrusting the VHP with the task of exploiting the *Ram Setu* controversy, the RSS created a new body, the Rameshwaram *Ram Setu* Raksha Manch, whose very name downplays the whole exercise: it has to be a local issue rooted in the concerns of the local people.

[34] The fact that sections of the Dravidian movement did not recognise Ram as a sacred figure also explains why the *Sangh Parivar* looked for other good reasons to be outraged: what was at stake, for the organization, had to be the historical quality of the *Ram Setu*. This attempt at historicising myths was part of the Hindu nationalist ideology anyway.

## The historicization of myth: searching for the root-cause of outrage

[35] While BJP and VHP leaders insist on the sacred character of the *Ram Setu* in order to mobilize people on the street, for the *Sangh Parivar* dignitaries who really matter – the RSS leaders -, this 'bridge' needs to be preserved for other, more nationalist reasons.

[36] One contributor to *The Organiser* Deepavali special issue downplays the question of historicity and of its corollary, the scientific proof of the existence of Ram and the *Ram Setu*: 'True, when one is writing human history, tangible evidence is important. But when one is dealing with the divine, faith is overriding. And faith has been overwhelming when it came to Lord Ram' (Goralia 2007: 40). In other words: there is no need to prove the existence of Ram (and the *Ram Setu*) with scientific tools since every followers of Hinduism believe in him as a sacred figure of their religion. This argument is not put forward by any RSS leader. Even when they emphasise the sacred nature of Ram and the *Ram Setu*, they make a point to stress their historical quality too.

### History as a key element of ethno-nationalism

[37] RSS leaders have not been outraged by the government's treatment of the *Ram Setu* as a religious symbol, but as a *historical* symbol. For these *pro-Hindutva* ethno-nationalists the main pillar of the Hindu identity lays in the Vedic golden age, an historical foundation phase which is well described in the *Ramayana*. Since Golwalkar, the RSS doctrine has been distinguishing Hinduism as a religion from Hinduism as a *national* way of life. The former is considered as an element of the latter, which matters much more, in spite of its worldly character. That is why the historical features of ancient India are so important. Ram Madhav, the former spokesman of the RSS and a member of its executive committee, made it clear about the *Ram Setu* controversy: its historicity had to be demonstrated because what was at stake was the very historicity of Ram, a fundamental elements of the Hindu nationalist identity:

Denial of historicity of Ram is denying the very identity of this nation. That may not do any harm to our religion because as a religion we Hindus are not much bothered about this historicity question. [...] Hindus are not a people driven by history. Hinduism will survive any onslaught [regarding the historicity of its gods]. But as a nation we will pay a very heavy price for questioning the existence of Ram, the Imam-e-Hind [sic] (Madhav 2007: 45).

[38] For the RSS leaders the preservation of Hinduism is not enough and the real objective is the building of the Hindu nation, the *Hindu rashtra*. To achieve this goal, they rely on the Vedic golden age, a civilizational founding moment that simply has to be revived. RSS leaders are keen to cite Swami Dayananda, one of the key ideologues in the making of this myth of a Vedic golden age, and some of his epigones, like Benjamin Khan who wrote:

We find that Valmiki depicts a society where women are held in honour, a society which is free from the horrors of the Sati system, a society in which child-marriage is unknown and maidens are free to chose their husbands. It was a society with political and economical freedom where men had their proper occupations [...] The caste system had not assumed the rigidity it acquired later; it was only an economic device and not a birth-principle. [...] Valmiki did not hesitate to condemn the doctrine of Fate, which was rendering the nation impotent. He ridiculed all those who pinned their faith to destiny and lowered the value of human efforts. For him, it is human will which is the spring of all human action and even if there is anything like destiny, it can be made to change its course by man's prowess (Khan 1983, Balanshankar 2007: 9).

[39] This reading of the Vedic period is a clear invention of the past emulating the mainstays of the West: the underlying values which are referred to in this excerpt are those of Western individualism.

### **Ram, as the alter ego of Jesus and Mohammed**

[40] Suffering from a deep sense of vulnerability, the *Hindutva* leaders have always tried to imitate the cultural features of Others – including the West - which would confer prestige and/or a reputation of effectiveness on them. While child-marriage and the caste system suffered from an unanimous opprobrium, individual freedom was universally revered and therefore the Vedic golden age had to incorporate this quality. This reasoning is a core element of the Hindu nationalist strategy of stigmatising and emulating strong Others, including those who represent a threat to Hindus. Ram Madhav's plea in favour of the historicity of Ram must be seen in this very perspective: Ram has to be revered as a historical figure because the religions displaying the greatest dynamism today, *i.e.* Christianity and Islam according to him, are based on the teachings of historical men, Jesus Christ and Mohammed: 'Remove historicity from Jesus's life or remove

Bethlehem and Jerusalem from his history, Christianity will collapse. Remove historicity from Prophet Mohammed, Islam will collapse' (Madhav 2007: 45).

[41] In fact, all the semitic religions are seen as role models, including Judaism, a creed rooted in history and supporting a committed nation-state. Visiting Israel during the *Ram Setu* controversy, Madhav was struck by the emotional and political weight given by the government placed to the historical religious sites. He contrasted this with the attitude of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) rulers: 'Here is a nation that I am visiting – proud of its Millenia old history and heritage; and here is the nation to which I belong – writhing in self-denial and self-hate' (Madhav 2007: 44). Here/there, us/them... the strategy of stigmatization and emulation of Others relies on repetitive, even obsessive, comparisons. Though Jews have become role models for the proponents of *Hindutva*, given their remarkable resilience in the midst of an Islamic hostile milieu, emulating Christians and Muslims remains more relevant since they are seen as a direct threat to Hindus who thus need to borrow from them in order to counter them. Now, these two religions cash in on the historicity not only of religious figures but also of sacred sites like Bethlehem, the Vatican, Medina and Mecca. For the RSS leaders, Hinduism must similarly recognise the historicity of sacred places such as the *Ram Setu*.

### **Looking for scientific proofs**

[42] The first set of proofs mobilized by the Hindu nationalists are 'the archaeological findings [... which] substantiate historicity of Lord Ram' (Gupta 2007: 12). O. P. Gupta enlists XVIth century coins embossed with figures of Lord Ram, Egyptian tablets depicting 'stories similar to those in the *Ramayana*' (Gupta 2007: 12) and Maya tablets of the same kind – as if that was enough to establish the historicity of Ram.

[43] The second set of proofs comes from the British writings. Dinesh Chandra Tyagi, the General secretary of the Hindu Mahasabha, another Hindu nationalist party – the oldest one in fact – bluntly writes:

As far as the historicity of *Ram Setu* is concerned, it is proved in *Madras Presidency Glossary* edited by C.D. Maclean and Survey of India (1767). *Ram Setu's* name was changed to Adam Bridge but the documentary proof given by the British Library and Glossary claim that this bridge connects Ceylon to Peninsula of India and it really joined the two countries until 1480, when a breach was made through the rocks

during a storm. Length of the Sethu about 30 miles, breadth 1.25 miles, direction South-West South-East to North-West is depicted in the document, partly above and partly below water, but usually 4 feet above the sea level was visible mostly. Thus the proof is visible and uncontroversial but politically-closed eyes of the UPA leaders could not see it (Tyagi 2007: 79).

[44] Dr. S. Kalyana Raman, the Director of the Saraswati Research Centre and the President of the Rameshwaram *Ram Setu* Raksha Manch, refers to the travelogue of Alexander Hamilton, entitled *A New Account of the West Indies* which, in 1744 describes on page 338 his visit to Ceylon by crossing the bridge. Raman also refers to another edition of Maclean's book – C.D. Maclean, *Manual of the Administration of the Madras Presidency*, New Delhi, AES, 3 vols., 1903, 2440 p. – where he read that the bridge 'really joined Ceylon to India until 1480, when a breach was made through rocks during a storm. A subsequent storm enlarged this and foot traffic then ceased' (Raman 2007: 22). The importance somewhat naively attached to Western sources – that I noticed in my essay on the emulation of the Western criteria of 'what is a nation' by the Hindu nationalists – is confirmed here. His Holiness Swami Chidanand Saraswati even writes: 'The bridge clearly exists and has earned even a place in the Encyclopaedia Britannica' (Saraswati 2007: 58)

[45] The third set of proofs derives from satellite photographs. The (re)discovery of the *Ram Setu* by Hindu nationalists seems to have taken place in 1997 when one old timer of the RSS, Chamanlal, saw a picture of a current NASA's photo exhibition in Delhi that showed 'the picture of *Ram Setu*'. He then contacted Uma Bharti, the then Union Minister of Coal and Mines who sent a team of scientists from her administration. They went to Rameshwaram and 'confirmed the underwater formation of rocks attached to each others and described those rocks as old as one lakh years' (Bharti 2007: 74). These 'two scientific sources' – to use the words of Subramanian Swamy – have been quoted *ad nauseam* afterwards: the NASA's photographs have been repeatedly presented as establishing 'the Sethu's existence as a chain of shoal stones' and the Department of Earth Science of the Government of India stated that these stones had been 'deliberately placed there' (Swamy 2007: 70). Of the two, the NASA photographs, have been referred more often. For instance, the web site of Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, an offshoot of the *Sangh Parivar* explains:

Pictures taken by NASA (USA) from space show the remains of what appears to be an age old man-made bridge between Rameshwaram

and Sri Lanka. According to Hindu scriptures and belief, Lord Ram and his *vanaar sena* had built a bridge from Rameshwaram to Sri Lanka about 17 lacs [sic] 25 thousands years ago. The discovery of Shri *Ram Setu* by NASA confirms that Hindu scriptures and belief are correct in this matter and that Ramayana is history and not 'mythology' as is often construed<sup>9</sup>.

[46] The NASA had to clarify repeatedly that these photographs had been misinterpreted by the *Sangh Parivar*. The NASA spokesman, Michael Braukus declared: 'Some people have taken pictures by our astronauts to make their claim. No position can be taken on the basis of these photographs in any way'. In 2002, Mark Hess, a NASA official, had already stated that 'the mysterious bridge was nothing more than a 30 km long, naturally-occurring chain of sandbanks called 'Adam's bridge'. NASA had been taking pictures of these shoals for years. Its images of these shoals had never resulted in any scientific discovery in the area'<sup>10</sup>.

[47] But Hindu nationalists do not care. Mixing Sanskrit and 'scientific' sources, Subramanian Swamy concludes: 'The *Ram Setu* formation is as if it was constructed in the manner described in the *Ramayana* authored by Valmiki, Kamban and Tulsidas. The bridge formation by placing these stones one by one, according to the Earth Science Department of the government is not less than 9000 years'<sup>11</sup>.

[48] In short, the main outrage felt by the Hindu nationalists in the *Ram Setu* controversy is not due to the sacred nature of this 'bridge', but to its historicity. For them, the denial of a prestigious past is more problematic because it questions the chief foundation of their political project: the revival of the *Hindu rashtra* of the Vedic Golden Age. Such an attitude is not new. During the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, which focused on the 'liberation' of Ram in Ayodhya from the mid-1980s till 1992, the *Sangh Parivar* had tried hard to prove that a Ram temple had existed in place of the Babri Masjid, by looking for archaeological vestiges below its foundations.

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<sup>9</sup> 'What is Setu (Sethu) Samudram Project', <http://www.hindujagruiti.org/activities/campaigns/religious/ramsethu/>

<sup>10</sup> 'Space photo no proof of Ram Sethu: NASA', <http://sethusamudram.info/content/view/66/26>

<sup>11</sup> 'Space photo no proof of Ram Sethu: NASA', <http://sethusamudram.info/content/view/66/26>

## The efficiency argument

### On the utility of Ram Setu

[49] According to the Hindu nationalist leaders, the *Ram Setu* had to be preserved for practical reasons too. None of these leaders mention its sacred and historical nature as a sufficient reason for preserving it. For O. P. Gupta, 'it is common sense that a breach in the *Ram Setu* will allow tsunamis to make direct hits at the Kerala and Southern Tamil coasts with full force inflicting more casualties and more loss of lives than without the breach' (Gupta 2007: 11).

[50] Gautam Sen refers to the 'unknown and potentially huge environmental costs that the project might impose on future generations' (Sen 2007: 17). 'His Holiness Swami Chidanand Saraswati' argues along the same lines that 'even from a strictly environmental perspective, to destroy the bridge and open the area for sea traffic is paving the way for environmental disaster' (Saraswati 2007: 59).

[51] 'His Holiness' Sadhvi Rithambara gives the longest lists of reasons why the *Ram Setu* needs to be saved:

Apart from its spiritual significance, *Ram Setu's* other attributes are more scientific and have a significant security value for the nation as it contains rich reserve of thorium, which is used as a nuclear fuel. Over the centuries, *Ram Setu* has served as a natural barrier against tsunamis. When the waves of the last tsunami were swallowing up the residents of the islands and India's coastal areas, it was this *Ram Setu*, which stopped the dangerous waves from reaching Tamil Nadu and beyond. By far the greatest feature of *Ram Setu* has to be its strategic location, which has provided a natural security cordon against enemy ships as it prevents anti-Indian terrorists from entering Indian ports undetected (Rithambara 2007: 63).

[52] Uma Bharti – who shared the VHP dais so often during the Ramjanmabhoomi movement – cashes in on similar arguments but adds an economic one:

The destruction of *Ram Setu* is not only an insult to Indian culture, but it will also deprive lakhs of fishermen of their livelihood and will also present a grave threat to our national security. Most of the cadres of LTTE, who cross over to Tamil Nadu from Sri Lanka posing as refugees, reside in the nearby areas of Rameswaram. They indulge in the smuggling and sell their weapons to Islamic terrorists (Bharti 2007: 74).

[53] The economic argument remains unconvincing since the correlation between the dredging of the *Ram Setu* and the decline of the fishing activities is not clear at all, but such an argument is nonetheless common in the Hindu nationalist rhetoric.

### **The anti cow-slaughter movement revisited**

[54] Hindu nationalists have usually found it important to substantiate their claim regarding a sacred symbol by underlying its practical – and especially its economic – utility. For instance, the cow protection movement relied on sacred elements *and* a strong plea in favour of the economic assets of this animal, as if its sacredness was not a sufficient reason for protecting it. This ambivalence is evident from the attitude of the Jana Sangh during the 1966-67 anti cow-slaughter campaign.

[55] In 1966, VHP leaders created the Sarvadaliya Goraksha Maha-Abhiyan Samiti (SGMS, All-Party Cow-Protection Great-Campaign Committee) in order to mobilize Hindus in the street and force the Congress-led government to reform the Constitution by making cow-slaughter illegal. Saffron-clad leaders gathered with a huge crowd of 100 000 people in front of Parliament in order to put pressure on the MPs. Once again, the VHP demonstrated its skill for tapping popular sentiments.

[56] The Jana Sangh adopted a more complex strategy. On the one hand, it supported the VHP's argument that allowing cow-slaughter was an insult to Hinduism. But it underlined the economic dimension of the issue. That remained its standard attitude for years. In 1954 already, its election manifesto read:

Cow is our point of honour, and the eternal symbol of our culture. Since immemorial times it has been protected and worshipped. Our economy too, is based on the cow. Cow-protection therefore, is not only a pious duty but an indispensable need. It is impossible to protect and improve cattle so long as its slaughter continues (Bharatiya Jana Sangh 1973: 68).

[57] The 1951 manifesto already said: 'The party stands pledged to the prohibition of cow-slaughter. Special steps will be taken to improve the breeds of cow to make it an economic unit in our agricultural life'(Bharatiya Jana Sangh 1973: 52). In the 1957 manifesto, the relevant paragraph starts with the same ambivalent wording: 'Respecting the sentiments of the people of

Bharat, and taking into consideration the economic importance of the cow, Jana Sangh will try to get Central legislation enacted to ban cow-slaughter throughout the country' (Bharatiya Jana Sangh 1973: 119). In the 1962 manifesto, the first 21 lines of the paragraph entitled 'Cow-protection and animal husbandry' are devoted to cattle breeding, milk production and marketing of dairy products. The only mention of the need to legally forbid cow-slaughter came in the last 2 lines, and almost as a matter of fact. (Bharatiya Jana Sangh 1973: 135-136). Naturally, the 1967 manifesto returns to a more balanced approach by stating: 'The cow is our national point of honour. It is also the basis of India's agriculture. Bharatiya Jana Sangh will amend the Constitution and impose a legal ban on the slaughter of the cow and its progeny' (Bharatiya Jana Sangh 1973: 163).

[58] The constant oscillation of the Jana Sangh between the argument of sacredness and others pertaining to the economic repertoire is very revealing of the fact that, even for the holy cow, the religious motivations were not enough: to be complete, the Hindu nationalist response to an outrage needs to address practical dimensions too. This is even more remarkable in this case since the economic rational would in fact have led to the slaughter of the old and sick cows which had become useless<sup>12</sup>.

## Conclusion

[59] Hindu nationalists have become experts in the art of being outraged. In pre-modern India, blasphemous attitude of Muslims and Christians provoked violent reactions by the majority community (and *vice-versa*). After the crystallization of ethno-nationalist ideologies during the British Raj, Hindu nationalists, who articulated a deep rooted inferiority complex, have tried hard to catch minorities out while insulting the sacred symbols of their religions. To denounce a disrespectful behaviour or to give some substance to one's complaints on the basis of rumours enabled the *Sangh Parivar* members to polarise society along communal lines and to mobilize new followers. Such a process was likely to trigger riots and to translate into votes for the Hindu Mahasabha, the Shiv Sena, the Jana Sangh and then the BJP, the main Hindu nationalist parties. This standard scenario worked rather well in the case of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement when

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<sup>12</sup> This is exactly the reason why the Supreme Court had considered that it would be unreasonable to ban cow-slaughter in the Constitution if India in its 1958 decision.

the Hindu nationalist leaders denounced the way the birth place of Ram had supposedly been colonised by Muslim invaders who were also accused of having destroyed the temple built there before and of keeping Ram prisoner of the Mosque that replaced it. During the first phase of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, in 1984, VHP activists started a procession from Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh to Sitarmahi in Bihar with a lorry bearing large statues of Ram and Sita behind bars (Van der Veer 1987). Five years later, the *Sangh Parivar* orchestrated dozens of communal riots during the *Ram Shila Pujas* – ceremonial consecrations of bricks named after Ram; and in the 1990s, the BJP surfed on the 'saffron wave', to use Thomas Blom Hansen's metaphor.

[60] However, a purely instrumentalist interpretation of the Hindu nationalist use of outrage would be too simplistic. First, the sentiment of vulnerability is such among Hindu nationalists that they sometimes really feel victimised. Second, and more importantly, the use of sacred symbols is not that easy, as this case study reveals. The *Ram Setu* movement shows that the *Sangh Parivar* finds it more difficult to mobilize followers when the culprits are not Muslims – then, they must at least be Christians as the attack against Sonia Gandhi mentioned above suggested. It also shows that the exploitation of the outrage is more complicated when its instigators are born Hindus. *Sangh Parivar* members have already attacked other Hindus – be they communists or 'deviant' artists – but in the case under study, they had to face sections of the Dravidian movement associated with Dalits whom the Hindu nationalists cannot afford to alienate. This social caveat harks back to a geographical one: not only is it difficult to mobilize against Hindus but it is also difficult to mobilize Hindus who do not regard the identity symbol that the *Sangh Parivar* was manipulating as sacred: in Tamil Nadu, Ram is not as popular as in the North and there are indeed very few pan-Hindu symbols.

[61] In any case, sacredness is not the only source of the outrage 'felt' by the Hindu nationalists. This is the second series of conclusions I would draw from the *Ram Setu* story. Ideologues of the RSS are prompt to highlight the historical dimension of Ram and its *Setu*: they do not care so much for their sacredness. Their historicity matters more because it is the foundation-stone of Hindu nationalism – which, like any ethno-nationalism, needs real heroes – and it is the only way to be on a par with competing civilization whose key figures – Jesus and Mohammad – are located in human history.

[62] The holy character of the outraged symbol is not enough: it has to be historical; and it has to be useful too. The *Ram Setu*, therefore, is also defended for economic and strategic

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Jaffrelot, Christophe (2008) 'Hindu Nationalism and the (Not So Easy) Art of Being Outraged: The Ram Setu Controversy', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, Special Issue - Nb. 2, 'Outraged Communities': Comparative Perspectives on the Politicization of Emotions in South Asia. URL: <http://samaj.revues.org/document1372.html> To quote a passage, use paragraph (§).

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reasons, even by saffron-clad leaders who may have found it sufficient to consider that it was a sacred cause. Such a *modus operandi* was also observed during the anti cow-slaughter movement in the 1960s. It suggests that the Hindu attitude vis-à-vis sacredness is not the same as the one we see in other cultures where nobody feels the need to invoke non-religious arguments. In Islam, for instance, the sacredness of Mecca is self-sufficient and its defence does not need to be supported by additional arguments.

[63] Epilogue: the Congress-led government withdrew the affidavit it had filed with the Supreme Court after the start of the *Sangh Parivar* agitation in order to defuse any such mobilization in a sensitive election year. Instead, it has left it up to the Court to validate or not the Sethusamudram Project (July 2008).

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