

Gandhi's Ram is not in the Ram mandir

Gandhiji breathed his last in 1948 with 'Hey Ram' on his lips. Lord Ram was an influence on Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi since his childhood. As the Mahatma noted in his autobiography, that being of the Vaishnava faith since birth, visiting the temples of Rama and Krishna was his habit. But the temples did not instil faith in the boy Gandhi. He noted, "But what I failed to get there, I obtained from my nurse, an old servant...Rambha, that was her name, suggested as a remedy for this fear, the repetition of Rama-nama (the name, Rama)." It became an infallible remedy for him for the rest of his life. However, the Rama-nama which he refers to is no longer the idol to be found in a temple, nor a recitation as a ritual. Instead, it was something deep within the heart.

Rooted in spirituality

Gandhi brought religion into politics. But his religion had its roots in spirituality. Gandhian scholar Raghavan Iyer notes in his book, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, that Gandhi sought to make politics religious and religion practical. In this effort, he built upon a neglected strand of Indian tradition – the path of karma yoga or spiritual realisation through social action. This was action of the kind associated with classical heroes such as Rama and Janaka, and reaffirmed in modern India by Vivekananda and Aurobindo.

Gandhi aimed to work for the purification of politics and reform formal religion. He gave new meaning to Rama, Rama-nama and Ramarajya in his discourse. His own journey of continuous self-purification was by chanting Rama-nama from the depth of his heart in the form of prayer.

In the *Harijan*, issue dated March 18, 1933, Gandhiji referred to three questions raised by an 'iconoclast schoolmaster' and answered them.

The first was: "Is it necessary for a Hindu, following the life of Shri Ramachandra, also to go and see his image in the temple? Is *darshan* better than action?"

The second: "If we bow our head or join our hands before a living person, he replies in return, but the image does not. Then what is the use of doing it? What is the use of writing letters to one who never replies?"

The third: "The person, whose image a Hindu adores, might have committed some wrongs in his lifetime. Will not the adorer be harmed by



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copying those wrongs, which he is likely to copy if he worships his image?" [*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 54, pp.111-112, Art.125-Posers]

Gandhi held it unfortunate that Rama who should be inside the self is sought in the image. Yet, Gandhi would not disturb the "simple faith" that saw Ram only in the temple. Gandhi's response was as follows: "It is not necessary for any Hindu to go to a temple to worship (the image of) Ramachandra. But it is for him who cannot contemplate his Rama without looking at his image in a temple. It may be unfortunate, but it is true that his Rama resides in that temple as nowhere else. I would not disturb that simple faith."

But deed, or action, was more important than the *darshan*. Mute worship constitutes the letter to god. God is not only in the temple. Gandhi wrote that he did not make any distinction between temple, mosque and church.

On the third question, he wrote, "Though my reason and heart long ago realised the highest attribute and name of God as Truth, I recognise Truth by the name of Rama. In the darkest hour of my trial, that one name has saved me and is still saving me" [*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 54, p.112].

In all of Gandhi's speeches, articles and letters, Rama, Rama-nama and Tulsi's *Ramcharitmanas* (Ramayana) have been mentioned, commented on and invoked hundreds of times.

Gandhi's Rama

Who is Gandhi's Rama? Is he a Hindu god? He has clarified this several times. In his prayer meeting on April 4, 1946, at Birla House, Delhi, Gandhi said the following. "I laugh within myself when someone says that Rama or the chanting of Rama-nama is for the Hindus only, and that how can Mussalmans (Muslims), therefore, take part in it? Is there one God for the Mussalmans and another for the Hindus, Parsis or Christians? No, there is only one omnipotent and omnipresent God. He is named variously, and we remember Him by the name which is most familiar to us. My Rama, the Rama of our prayers, is not the historical Rama, the son of Dasaratha, the King of Ayodhya. He is the eternal, the unborn, the one without a second. Him alone I worship, His aid alone I seek, and so should you. He belongs equally to all. I, therefore, see no reason why a

Musalman or anybody should object to taking His name. But he is in no way bound to recognise God as Ramanama. He may utter to himself Allah or Khuda so as not to mar the harmony of the sound" [*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 83, p.364].

Gandhi knew the deep and serious implications of upholding Rama as a role model and Rama-nama as a cure for all ills in India where people from many religions live and where the Hindu-Muslim conflict is more than a century-old and the schism was deepened by the British with intent. Hence, he was always careful not to visit temples, mosques and churches. But he used the symbols from Hindu traditions and the religion to which he was born.

In 1929, at a public meeting in Bhopal, he said, "I warn my Musalman friends against misunderstanding me in my use of the word *Ramarajya*. By *Ramarajya*, I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by *Ramarajya*, a divine raj, the Kingdom of God. For me, Rama and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of Truth and righteousness." This was Gandhi's religion in politics and public life.

Gandhi further wrote: "Whether the Rama of my imagination ever lived or not on this earth, the ancient ideal of *Ramarajya* is undoubtedly one of true democracy in which the meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure. Even the dog is described by the poet to have received justice under *Ramarajya*."

The present day

It is important to record Gandhi's Rama, Rama-nama and Rama-rajya in today's context. The politicisation of religion is the reverse of what Gandhi stood for. It does not augur well for the country. The Prime Minister of a country, which by its Constitution is a secular state, should have sent enormous good wishes on the occasion of the consecration of the Ram Temple built on the basis of a judgment of the Supreme Court. India claims to be a multi-religious and multicultural society and a Prime Minister appearing partisan to one religion, notwithstanding his religion, faith and dedication, has not sent out healthy signals. This is a celebration in a place where Gandhi's Rama is not likely to be found.

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A global alliance to bridge the gender equity gap

Equality and inclusion are the cornerstones of India's development journey. The New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, which was adopted at the G-20 under India's presidency, is testament to this commitment. By prioritising inclusion at the centre of focus areas such as socio-economic empowerment, bridging the digital divide, driving climate action, ensuring food security, nutrition, health, and well-being, among others, the declaration underlines the need for advocating a growth agenda that is driven by women-led development.

At the World Economic Forum in January this year, India took the mission for gender equity several steps ahead with the launch of the 'Alliance for Global Good - Gender Equity and Equality'. This multi-stakeholder initiative has placed India centre stage for accelerating the socio-economic cause as it will have a sustained global impact. With the Alliance, India has managed to transition the two buzzwords, equity and equality, to the working agendas of stakeholders around the world.

Bolstering governance

Mainstreaming gender equality and equity has been a key development area for the Government of India for over a decade now. The passage of the Women's Reservation Bill last year, ensuring reservation of a third of seats for women in Parliament and the State Assemblies, is a revolutionary tool for women's empowerment and is expected to contribute extensively to improving the processes of India's governance. Allocations of nearly \$27 billion under the gender budget in 2023-24 are a manifestation of the commitment of the government to advancing women-led development.

There has been an increase in India's female labour force participation rate, from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 37% in 2022-23 (data from the annual



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Periodic Labour Force Surveys). Female enrolment in higher education has gone up by 28% in the last 10 years. In terms of enrolment in science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) courses, the share of women is a significant 43%, which is one of the highest enrolment rates in the world. Even within rural India, there is a participation of over nine crore women in 83 lakh self-help groups, improving the socio-economic conditions in rural areas. All these provide a glimpse of women-led development that India is witnessing.

An Indian contribution at Davos

I am happy to observe that global leaders are now acknowledging the success of these initiatives and learning from our success stories, be it in space exploration, sports, entrepreneurship or even in United Nations peacekeeping operations around the world. The changes are there for all to see.

The enthusiasm around the We-Lead Lounge set up by the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Confederation of Indian Industry at Davos, saw global interest and curiosity. It served as a platform to have many meaningful deliberations around how the world can contribute, join, and drive inclusive development. The Alliance for Global Good - Gender Equity and Equality now serves as a platform to channelise the resultant enthusiasm and intent into action at the global level.

The Alliance, anchored by the CII Centre for Women Leadership, guided by the Minister of Women and Child Development, Government of India and supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, will have a global network of experts, think-tanks, industry and country leadership that will drive collective actions to augment women empowerment. The partnership of the World Economic Forum as a network partner in this initiative, is testament to the global

relevance and the global resolve to drive growth that is inclusive and equitable.

With an overarching goal to share and develop scalable and practical solutions for advancing women-led development in the areas of ed-tech, medical capacity building, and delivery of health interventions for women, learning and skill development, agrotech, women enterprise development and unlocking capital to enable stronger gender outcomes, the Alliance brings together stakeholders on this critical global development agenda. India's leadership in these areas is proven, gaining the label of "pharmacy of the world". India's digital prowess is also well known. The alliance is yet another example of leadership, as India accepts responsibility to provide shared direction to stakeholders globally.

An opportunity

For industry across the globe, this is an opportunity: to share some of the practices that we have developed to advance the entry and growth of women in the workspace; to invest in proven programmes and initiatives and enable them reach scale, and to work collectively to make inclusion a business conversation. It is also an opportunity to learn and develop solutions with the global community consisting of industry, think tanks and investors to advance our commitment to increased engagement and leadership of women within the economy, through increased access to health care, education opportunities and economic opportunities.

Given India's abiding commitment to 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam - One Earth, One Family, One Future' and its continued efforts towards *Sabka Saath, Sabka Prayaas, Sabka Vikas*, this Alliance for Global Good - Gender Equity and Equality is poised to be a force to reckon with on all gender-related issues.

India's launch of the Alliance for Global Good - Gender Equity and Equality is a step towards enabling 'equity' and 'equality'

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