

Ram Navami: How to Plan a Season of Riots - The Wire

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It is often believed that the whole business of setting off riots-at-will began after the arrival of a single individual, who is well versed in such matters. But then, to be fair to him and to history, we can trace this phenomenon back by a decade before, to the fateful day when the Babri Masjid was razed to the ground.

Even more nitpicking historians go even further back to L.K. Advani's Rath Yatra of September-October 1990, demanding a Ram temple at the very site occupied by the Babri Masjid. Communal tensions multiplied exponentially in the wake of this Rath Yatra, and widespread local-level and retail-scale riots reached a peak in post-Independence India.

We could, in fact, go further back and claim that had Rajiv Gandhi's government's not accorded ridiculously unprecedented popularity to the cult of Ram by telecasting Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* on state-owned Doordarshan (January 1987 to July 1988), we may never have gone through the present phenomenon of state-backed outsourced communal violence, as we have at present.

What we miss out in this hunt to link religious aggression to the mandir-masjid dispute is that it is Ram rather than his mandir that is more critical to this debate. And, also that it is Ram Navami that has been quite a regular trigger point from 1967. In fact, we may ponder as to why, of all the 33 crore gods available to Hindus, Purushottam Ram should be dragged out to justify the maximum record of violence and communal riots. We hardly hear or Shiva-centric riots or Lakshmi-inspired ones, though we do get a few cases of affray during the immersion of Durga Puja images and very rarely over Ganesh Chaturthi. These numbers are really insignificant compared to those during Ram Navami, the day on which Ram is believed to have been born.



An illuminated Poddarshwar Ram Temple ahead of Ram Navami festival celebration, in Nagpur, Friday, April 4, 2025. Photo: PTI

To begin with, one has to appreciate how central Ram is to the very existence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the core Hindu nationalist the parent organisation, and the entire Sangh Parivar, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Ram is so deeply and inseparably embedded in its existence that it is, indeed, the very pulsating political soul of the Hindu Right. It was on the day of Ram's great victory, Vijaya Dashami day (September 27) of 1925 that Dr Keshav Baliram Hedgewar set up the 'Sangh' of Hindu nationalists and it was on Ram Navami (April 17) the

next year that he christened the organisation as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The first public task he assigned to the RSS was at Ramtek temple, associated with Ram. The RSS's saffron flag is believed to have been Ram's and it was popularised by Shivaji.

A large section of the Hindus of the Hindi belt and its neighbourhood has always celebrated the two Navaratri (nine days), one in spring (Chaitra) and the other in autumn, with a lot of fervour. Surprisingly, it is the first one in spring that ends with Ram Navami, that has a longer history of communal tension and riot. This is mainly because of a relatively recent tradition of displaying 'Hindu might' through Ram Navami processions, often taken deliberately through Muslim areas. The autumn Navaratri ends on Dussera with firecrackers and the burning of effigies of Ravan and his associates – which is/was harmless fun. But, many of the processions that are taken out in Ram's name on Ram Navami have led to enough bloodshed already and threaten to spill much more.

The first mention of a riot over a Ram Navami procession we get is in 1871, in Bareilly, where a Muslim mob carried out a premeditated assault and killed a Hindu priest. They had no idea what was to come a century later. The first mention of a modern-day Ram Navami *Shobha Yatra* – with numerous vehicles and people brandishing arms – we get is from *The Hitavada*. It was in April 1967 in Nagpur, the headquarters of the RSS. Then, in 1979, the RSS chief, Balasaheb Deoras gave an incendiary speech at Jamshedpur after which his organisation started mobilising Hindus for a major show of strength on Ram Navami. The desired riot flared up – shocking the nation – and 108 people died, among which, 79 Muslims and 25 Hindus could be identified. The Jitendra Narain Commission of enquiry found the RSS and the RSS-affiliated local, MLA, Dinanath Pandey squarely responsible.



A Lord Ram flag at a Ram Navami procession. Credit: Shome BAu

Since India does not hang rioters and lynchers — it promotes them as ministers and even much higher— and Ram Navami provides the religious alibi for provocative processions with arms, the stage had been set.

Throughout the 1980s, the RSS outsourced the task of whipping up passions and stirring riots to the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) in order to polarise and create a 'Hindu vote'. The VHP held numerous conferences (Dharma Sansads) demanding that Janmabhoomi (Rama's birthplace) at Ayodhya be released from its occupation by the Babri Masjid. Aggression continued unabated and communal flare-ups became the new normal from 1983 till 1993 — till the Babri Masjid was demolished and the accompanying riots singed the body and soul of India. Ram, especially his Navami and Janambhoomi, were at the vanguard of the mayhem, flashing fire and sword. There are just too many spots and incidents to mention. The terrible Bombay blasts of 1993, that left 257 innocents dead and injured over 700 halted the tsunami of hate, for some time.

Ram Navami, however, continues to provoke and alarm. After the BJP's juggernaut was halted in Bengal in the parliament elections in 2014 and the party roundly thrashed at the 2016 assembly polls, Bengal was targeted as a special for creating a communal divide at every given opportunity. Interestingly, though Bengal does not observe the

Chaitra Navaratri, the state has its own traditional celebration, through its Ashoka Sasthi, Basanti Durga and Annapurna puja during this period. But there is no mention of Ram – which was seen as sacrilege to the BJP. From 2017, the party brought out *shobha-jatras* – with hundreds of roaring motorcycles, adorned with saffron flags, and aggressive riders flashing open swords and *trishuls*. Despite its enviable history of political violence, Bengal had not seen such organised public display of belligerence and arms by common people, not just goons. But then, religious belief is a matter of history and tradition— Ram just cannot be forced by the Hindi-centric party on an unwilling people. In fact, it alienates the voter even more.

Also read: [The Wrath Yatras of Ram Navami](#)

Every Ram Navami is now a period of utter tension in West Bengal and in those states that are targeted for creating or reinforcing religious schisms and battles. From 2017, it is clear that instances of violent clashes during this festival have increased. In 2018, 17 clashes or riots were reported across the nation and moving on to 2022, we find six states reported violence – Jharkhand, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Goa and Delhi. Then, in 2023, Ram Navami celebrations turned violent in at least six states – West Bengal, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Gujarat. Last year's Ram Navami celebrations were also marred by several incidents of violence across India, particularly in West Bengal, Bihar, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat.

This year, Ram Navami is on April 6 and there is palpable tension in many parts of India. The amendment made to the Waqf Act has also heated the atmosphere, as a section is very very hurt and angry. In states, police forces are on extra alert. To add to this, we have Bengal's top BJP leader, [Suvendu Adhikari boasting of bringing out 2,000 rallies in West Bengal](#) – with belligerent motorbike riders, carrying threatening arms. His latest statement today is “No fewer than 1.5 crore Hindus will hit the roads on the holy day of Ram Navami. Please don't sit idle at home. Show your might.”

In today's India, riots don't happen because of hotheads, but with cool careful planning, funding, ruthlessness and an impunity that plural India could never dream of, just a few years ago.

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