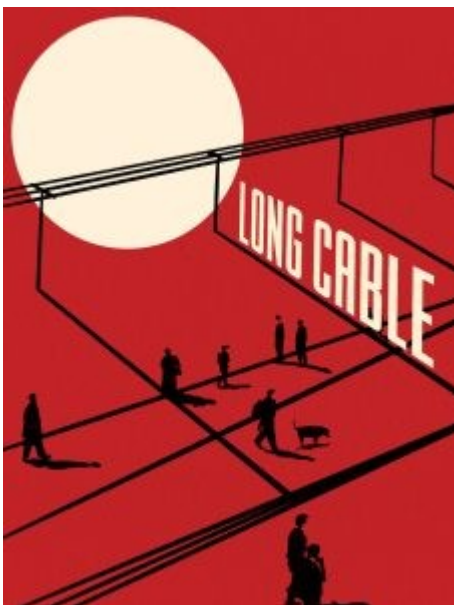


# How Ram Navmi Processions Have Changed the Secular Character of West Bengal - The Wire

*Jawhar Sircar*

Though Mamata Banerjee has issued a high alert to make sure communal troubles do not break out in a tense and highly polarised state in election mode, it is well known that several electoral participants do not hide their community-centric wrath. Communal violence benefits those who live off religious hatred as the consequential polarisation provokes even normally secular people to rage, moving them towards hardliners. And this festival of Ram Navami has a long, provocative and bloodstained history in many parts of India – going back to the riots of Jamshedpur and Rourkela in 1964, when some 2000 people died.

Ram Navami did not see much action in West Bengal in the past. But ever since a party imported aggression during this festival by taking out threatening motorcades and displaying open swords in Muslim areas – everything has changed. This includes the public posturing by the ruling Trinamool Congress. The state that was reputed for zero tolerance for communal riots, irrespective of who was in power, is not the same. Until recently, Mamata Banerjee was so aggressively secular that she advertised it through thousands of billboards showing her head covered in true Islamic garb and her palms stretched out, seeking ‘dua’. The right wing dubbed her as Mumtaz Begum, but they never missed a chance to utilise Ram Navami piety for unscrupulous violence.



*Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty.*

In 2018, there were 17 clashes or riots across India, while in 2022, six states reported violence. The 2023 Ram Navami celebrations turned violent in at least six states – West Bengal, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Gujarat and in 2024, incidents of violence took place in West Bengal, Bihar, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat. 2025 was spared of riots, as someone had

decided that the delirious enjoyment of bulldozing Muslims through the Waqf legislation should not be lost on petty riots.

Despite palpable tension and rage, Ram Navami passed peacefully in West Bengal on April 6, 2025, largely because the biggest religious processions were brought out by — lo and behold — the Trinamool Congress. Several overshadowed the Bharatiya Janata Party-led processions in many areas. But the same Bengal encouraged Muslims to protest vociferously against the Waqf Act. While these protests were generally peaceful in 779 of 780 districts in India, the Muslim-majority district of Murshidabad in West Bengal exploded.

The mayhem in Murshidabad began as angst against the Waqf Act, but an irresponsible Muslim leader (who appeared to be close to powers that be) directed the fury at local Hindus, more than at the Union government. An inept administration just watched the rampage, looting and arson of central and state property for five days between 8-12th April, awaiting “orders” from the top.

The media was outraged at the one-sided vandalism in Murshidabad and reported that mobs were threatening and killing Hindu villagers in some pockets. A Hindu father and son duo were hacked to death and some 400 Hindus were compelled to flee to adjacent Malda for refuge.

The chief minister, who usually leads from the front, had vanished — as did her top police chiefs. She was camping near the Odisha border, overseeing the construction of a Jagannath temple at Digha, at considerable public expense and fanfare.

A fact finding team of five civil society organisations — the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights, Feminists in Resistance, Nari Chetna, Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners, and Gono Songram Moncho (Peoples’ Resistance Forum) — toured the affected areas.

Its report was released on April 29, a day before Banerjee inaugurated the temple. The report said that this was not just a communal clash but a ‘deeply organised’ riot. It was a “politically driven situation, where religious polarisation, state inaction, and police repression have combined to disturb years of peaceful coexistence.” It also mentioned the belated and excessive use of force by the BSF that “targeted only Muslim villages” and “police atrocities created an atmosphere of fear in Muslim villages”, concluding that “people from both communities are terrified and there is deep mistrust”.

The plot gets confusing as West Bengal was traditionally not excited by either the Ram temple at Ayodhya or by Ram Navami. The latter will reach its crescendo on March 26-27 this year and one is still unsure whether the TMC will oppose Hindu jingoism, as it used to in the past, or try to outdo the BJP.

But in West Bengal, there are no signs of the strict dietary rigour of Ram Navami that north and west India observes during the nine days. Actually, during this period West Bengal has its own Basanti Durga puja, when Annapurna is also worshipped as a form of Durga or Parvati. Most other parts of India worship this ‘goddess of food’ in winter. This puja coincides with Ram Navami, but is

celebrated with no reference at all to Ram. This insistence on Durga over Ram is also seen in her major festival that coincides with Ram's Navaratri in September-October.

It is clear that Bengalis have always chosen to differ, not only in installing regimes that are so diametrically opposed to the major north Indian trend. Its distinctiveness is evident in most aspects of religion and culture as well. The extreme example is Shiva, who is regarded by most Indians as the mercurial king who rules from Kailash. Bengalis differed again and accepted Shiva only when he came here as a poor peasant in a tattered loincloth. He is portrayed as a merry farmer dancing around the village with his ganas, who is chased and reprimanded by an exasperated Parvati or Durga — the dominant goddess.

West Bengal assumes that the two nine-night festivals of spring and autumn are for the goddess and never refer to Ram, who actually sweeps all hearts in the Ganga-Yamuna region. This is the contribution of Tulsidas's Ramcharitamanas of the 16th century, which, incidentally, is in sweet lyrical Awadhi, not more guttural Khari Boli Hindi. Ram is surely respected by many in West Bengal, but worshipped with orthodoxy by very few (migrant) families and by those who adopted his worship.

It is also worth noting that several regional languages had crafted their own Ramayans long before Tulsidas enthralled north India. We have the 12th century Tamil Kambaramayanam, the 14th century Telugu Sri Ranganatha Ramayanam and Assamese Kotha Ramayana, the 15th century Bengali epic by Krittivas Ojha and so many others. These regional Ramayans are excellent examples of our 'unity in diversity' that had skilfully combined local cultural preferences and legends within a broad national framework.

But there is a vast difference between reverence for Ram and weaponising him. If the ruling secular party in West Bengal decides to celebrate Ram Navami this year on a grand scale, as it did in 2025, it will lend itself to several interpretations – from running with the hare and hunting with the hounds – or signify its total unpredictability and opportunism. Whether this is correct is for the voters in the state to decide.

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