

Foreign Policy implications of Ramayana Trail in Sri Lanka

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A Chief Minister of an Indian State performing “Bhumi Puja” in Sri Lanka to build a Sita Maha Temple may look a quite innocent affair particularly when arms of the Sri Lankan Government are supporting the Ramayana Trail programme and the actions of these agencies reflect government policy. But that is not the way they look at things in New Delhi. President R.Premadasa directing Minister Sirisena Cooray to build some houses for the homeless at Buddha Gaya did not receive such warm response. J.N.Dixit thought it was an uncalled for intrusion.

But the action of the Indian Chief Minister took place in a country which has over two millennia rejected Valmiki’s Ramayana epic as ‘*Samprappralapa*’ (falsehood). That is since the famous Indian (Cola)? Buddhist scholar wrote the commentaries to Buddhist texts in the 5th century A.D. calling Ramayana as such.

By trying to interpret folk etymology of place names in the island as historical truths, (One Kiriella supported by Tourism Ministry) one could recognize a move to subvert traditional history and major belief systems. What causes concern is that what is at stake is the very basis on which the island’s historical identity as an independent nation is based. These are ideas of cohesion and unity which lead to the notion of a sovereign country. If these very fundamental ideas are allowed to be eroded all claims for nationhood is lost and it becomes a free for all place for divisive forces like separatism to rise and be exploited at will by outsiders.

This is how a confrontational situation is created by the Ramayana Trail project. They will not be ordinary tourist who will visit but Hindu tourists obsessed with the idea of the supremacy of Rama and Sita. Such pilgrimage to another land can cause violent situations as the annual Haj pilgrimage by Shia Muslims from Iran creates or of Sunni Muslims visiting Meshad in Shiaite Iran.

Building a new Sita Maha Temple here with Indian sponsorship would be worse than Sri Lanka or any other Buddhist country seeking the right to Buddhist sites in India on the ground that these are places of greater importance to them than to India.

BJP’s endeavour to raise the Sri Lankan Tamil issue as an India-wide Hindu issue portends a dangerous trend in Indo-Lanka relations. BJP’s involvement in the Sita Maha Temple is suspect. It constitutes a challenge to established historical tradition, Buddhist beliefs, and a serious pressure point on the island for hegemonic influences. Already, Sri Lanka is reaping the results of ethnic chauvinism created in Tamil Nadu over the Tamil issue. A Hinduised intervention would have far more serious ramifications for the country.