

Sri Aravindhan Neelakandan

(Senior editor Swarajya, Governing Board Member of Auroville Foundation,
Co-author of Breaking India, Author of renowned research books like Hindutva & A Dharmic Social
History of India)

The gradual conquest of India by the East India Company and its subsequent takeover directly by the British in India happened over the period of almost three centuries. This colonial Raj on India precipitated a multifaceted crisis, characterised by ten interconnected and deeply damaging consequences. These were not isolated features, but a systemic and fundamental assaults on Indian people, their culture and religion and their economy – each reinforcing the other.

What are these ten Asuric faces of British colonialism?

- 1) *Systematic Deindustrialisation and Economic Exploitation*: The deliberate dismantling of indigenous industries, coupled with the systematic draining of copious wealth, formed the bedrock of colonial economic policy.
- 2) *Bureaucratic Suppression of National Economic Development*: The systematic stifling nascent Indian economic initiatives by a rigid colonial bureaucracy hampered the growth of a self-reliant economy and suppressed the spirit of *Swadesi* entrepreneurship.
- 3) *Disruption and Distortion of Agrarian Systems*: The natural evolution of India's agricultural networks was disrupted, leading to the destabilisation of rural economies. Its indigenous infrastructure for irrigation and related human resource allocation became increasingly dysfunctional under colonial administration which was obsessively tax-centric.
- 4) *Amplification of Agrarian Inequalities and Creation of Collaborating Vested Interests*: Existing inequalities within agrarian relationships were intensified, fostering localised power structures that served colonial interests.
- 5) *Sustained Food Insecurity and Recurrent Famines*: Colonial economic policies contributed to a significant increase in food insecurity, resulting in devastating and recurrent famines.
- 6) *Intensive Social Stagnation with Exacerbation of Social Hierarchies*, whose most malignant form being Untouchability: Colonial policies often reinforced and amplified the negative elements in the existing social divisions, most notably the oppressive practice of untouchability, thereby deepening societal stratification.
- 7) *Alienation of Indigenous communities from Natural Resources*: Forest-dwelling populations, the Vanvasis and Janjaatis, deemed obstacles to British resource control, were unjustly criminalized. This brutal designation facilitated the egregious violation of their fundamental human rights. Furthermore, the imposition of taxes on essential commodities, such as salt, bred pervasive networks of systemic corruption, further eroding the social fabric.
- 8) *Erosion of Indigenous Educational Institutions*: The systematic undermining of traditional Indian educational systems impeded the transmission of knowledge and cultural heritage. Centralised and capital intensive educational system strangulated the indigenous system and resulted in what Mahatma Gandhi termed the 'felling of the beautiful tree.'

9) *Disruption of Religious and Cultural Diversity*: Colonial policies, including those associated with aggressive proselytisation, challenged the existing theo-cultural diversity of the Hindu nation.

10) *Ruthless Imposition of Political Imperialism*: The subjugation of Indian political autonomy under colonial rule denied the nation self-determination. This also resulted in the curtailment of basic human rights, including freedom of expression and assembly, was a hallmark of colonial administration.

I

Even in its nascent stages, the corrosive nature of colonialism was keenly perceived by the Indian national consciousness. In 1809, amidst the burgeoning British East India Company's protectorate over Travancore, Iyya Vaikundar was born. While local Nair officials managed direct tax collection, the East India Company, acting as a proxy for British interests, reaped the lion's share of the increased revenue, with a portion redirected towards missionary activities. The marginalized, burdened by oppressive taxation and the arbitrary power of collectors, also suffered from pre-existing social restrictions. This confluence of economic exploitation, political subjugation, and theo-colonialism created a fertile ground for dissent.

Iyya Vaikundar, proclaiming himself a divine emanation of Vishnu, challenged both colonial exploitation and aggressive proselytization. Employing the rich symbolism of Puranic narratives, he articulated a potent critique of the encroaching colonial stranglehold. He strategically utilized the Ramayana as a framework for indigenous Dharmic resistance.

His narrative, as presented in the *Akila Thirattu*, reimagines the epic's core elements. Sri Rama's mission against Ravana, the embodiment of tyranny, serves as an allegory for the struggle against colonial oppression. Ravana, even in defeat, attributes his downfall to Vibhishana's alliance with Rama, prompting a further cycle of destruction. In the *Kali Yuga*, Ravana reincarnates as 'white-imperialism' (Ven-Neech) and internal social stagnation (Kali-Neech). This white-Asura, devastating continents and communities, cannot be defeated by physical force, but through knowledge and virtue – by upholding Dharma.

This Puranic allegory, though deeply rooted in indigenous symbolism, clearly conveys Vaikundar's critique of colonialism. The oral tradition of reciting the *Akila Thirattu* ensures that the narrative's intended message resonates with its audience, preserving its potent social commentary. Perhaps this is the first use of Ramayana imagery to specifically build an anti-colonial discourse.

விருச்சமுள்ள நீசன் வேசை நசுநாணியவன்
வையகங்களெல்லாம் வரம்பளித்த மாநீசன்
நெய்யதியச் சான்றோரின் நெறியெல்லாந் தான் குலைத்துப்
பேரழித்துத் தானம் பூப்பியமுந் தானழித்து
...
தானமழித்து சான்றோரின் கட்டழித்தான்

Contemporaneously, in the Andhra Pradesh region, Ranjana Anantayya led a tribal uprising against British authority, naming his followers the 'Rama Dandu,' or Army of Rama. He sought support from the Maharaja of Jaipur, articulating a vision that extended beyond immediate Indian concerns. Anantayya possessed a nuanced understanding of the global political landscape and proposed leveraging international circumstances to advance Indian Swaraj, envisioning himself as a modern-day Sri Rama in this endeavour.:

'Is it good, if the English be in our country? ... We ... should wage war with the English. The Russians are also troubling the English. If the assistance of men and arms are supplied to me, I will play Rama's part.'

In the rugged heartlands of tribal resistance, Bhagwan Birsa Munda ignited a conflagration of defiance, casting the British and their collaborators as the malevolent Ravana. He further imbued his rebellion with potent symbolism, portraying the British queen as Mandodari, their effigies consigned to the flames of righteous indignation. This uprising, unfolding in the twilight of the 19th century, resonated with the timeless echoes of epic struggle. Birsa Munda, adorned with the sacred thread, wielding the bow and arrow, and surrounded by the venerated presence of the Tulsi plant associated with Vishnu, unmistakably embodied the archetype of Sri Rama Bhakta, a warrior-saint rising to vanquish tyranny. In his speeches Bhagwan Munda spoke of his own coming back as coming back of Hanuman. His was a passionate invocation of ancient dharma, a fiery testament to the enduring spirit of resistance against colonial oppression.

From the sun-drenched shores of India's southernmost tip, where Iyya Vaikundar proclaimed his divine lineage, to the rugged terrains of Andhra where *Ranjana Anantayya* rallied his Rama Dandu, and thence to the verdant depths of the northern-central forests where Birsa Munda's rebellion blazed—a profound and unifying narrative unfolded. And this is only a representative sample.

Each, in their distinct milieu, claimed divine emanation from Vishnu, anchoring themselves in the hallowed lineage of Sri Rama, while casting the British as the embodiment of Ravana's oppressive might. This remarkable convergence, spanning vast distances and diverse cultural landscapes, reveals the indomitable strength of the Rama tradition as one of the vital cores of the collective national psyche. Sri Rama personifies a spiritual unity that transcends the barriers of language, habitation, ethnic identity, and clan affiliation. Rama Bhakti transforms during national necessities into Rashtra Bhakti.

II

Swami Vivekananda, the cyclonic Hindu monk not only inspired generations to serve India and her downtrodden millions as the highest Karma Yoga, but also provided the spiritual blueprint for the liberation of India. He received the sacred Sri Rama Mantra from his Guru, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. This mantra, a profound inheritance of Guru Deva himself, ignited in Vivekananda a surge of ecstatic devotion, prompting him to circumambulate the house, chanting the divine name of Rama. Later in soul-stirring words Swami Vivekananda would exhort the youth to embody the fearless and selfless dedication of Hanuman as their ideal when serving the nation and presented Sita as the embodiment of ideal Indian womanhood.

Bharatiya resistance that was the swirling flames in the *Yajna Kunda* of cultural and spiritual fervour, found its most potent expression in the veneration of the Goddess. *Vande Mataram*, invoking the Motherland, alongside the formidable figures of Maha Kali and Bhavani Durga, became rallying cries, embodying the fierce spirit of defiance. Yet, as the struggle for independence broadened, a subtle, profound shift occurred—a transition from the fiery *Shaktam* to the serene *Vaishnavism*. The impassioned cry of *Vande Mataram* harmonised itself with the contemplative hymn, *Vaishnav Janto*.

The emotional surge ignited by the Bengal Partition, coupled with the deepening agrarian crisis and British-deepened social fissures, increasingly permeated the national movement. Amidst this confluence of forces, the ideal of *Rama Rajya* gradually emerged as a powerful emotional anchor. This ascendancy was not solely attributable to Mahatma Gandhi's advocacy. Rather, it arose from the crucible of suffering endured by Indians under the worst forms of exploitation they suffered

right from the tribal forest lands in the interior India to the indentured populations toiling in the distant strange lands.

III

The British, through engineered famines and economic duress, forced countless Indians into indentured labour—a form of quasi-slavery marked by dehumanizing conditions. In the face of this abject subjugation, Indians, men and women alike, clung to their spiritual fortitude as a bulwark against despair.

Accounts from Fiji's Indian diaspora bear witness to this resilience. Colonial machinations often resulted in a deeply exploitative gender ratio within the indentured workforce, with women subjected to horrific abuses. Faced with such degradation, many chose the path of self-annihilation rather than surrender their dignity. The hardships endured by Indians in Fiji were a testament to the depths of colonial cruelty.

Yet, they preserved their familial bonds and upheld their moral integrity. This unwavering fortitude stemmed largely from the sustaining power of *Bhakti*, most notably expressed through the recitation of Gowami Tulsidas's *Sri Ramcharitmanas* and the enactment of Ramlila. These sacred traditions provided a vital source of spiritual nourishment, enabling them to withstand the crushing weight of oppression.

John D Kelley is an anthropologist studying Indian population in Fiji. He primarily does this within the Western framework, including Western postcolonial studies, the Gramscian school, and the study of the evolution of capitalism. Yet in his seminal work, *A politics of virtue: Hinduism, sexuality, and countercolonial discourse in Fiji* (University of Chicago Press, 1991, p.43) he writes:

(Hindus and Muslims) also participated in Ram Lilas, dramatic reenactments of the Ramayan narrative, which in indenture days was told as a tale of Ram's exile, climaxing with the burning of a giant effigy of Ravan symbolizing destruction of the evil in the world. In these rituals the Indians found their social identity in relations to God outside of, and in tension with, the colonial racist and economic definitions of the "coolies." The reading and hearing of texts became a noncoercive basis for an open community; within that framework, the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsi Das rose in social prominence through salient readings of its teachings. In the example of Ram, this version of the Ramayan epic provided a paradigm for the struggle of the good in an evil world; in the example of his wife Sita, a model of devoted chastity under pressure; and in the example of their enemy Ravan, a model of the delusions of powerful evil. All the rituals of the indenture period provided a basis for self-respect in antagonism with colonial moral measures. The Tulsi Das text became more: it became a weapon against indenture itself.

A Ramanandi Sadhu made himself an indentured labourer and lived with the suffering Indians. He learnt first hand their hardship and gave a political voice of emancipation to these suffering Indians. He was Baba Ramchandra. He had concealed his Brahmin identity in order to come as indentured labourer to Fiji. He wrote extensively on the suffering of Indian women in Fiji islands. They were sexually abused. Pregnant women also had to work. While catering to the spiritual strength of the people by organising *Ram Lila* in Fiji, he made the world become aware of their suffering through

political channels. Baba Ramachandra thus verily became the Hanuman who communicated the suffering of the Hindu women in exile to the outside world.

For the Fiji indentured Indians, the rules of pollution which had become strong because of social stagnation, could not rob their dignity. They were in exile like Ram himself. They were denied freedom like Sita herself. They are hence as pure as Sita and the British and their henchmen were nothing but Ravan and his mighty forces. But they believed that deliverance would come through Bhakti. It held them together. It held them with dignity and finally the colonial shackles did break down and freedom did come.

IV

Within India's heartland, the imagery of Sri Rama, the aspiration for Swaraj as the establishment of Rama Rajya, and the depiction of the British as Ravana, began to stir a potent national awakening. British intelligence, acutely aware of this undercurrent, meticulously observed the Ramlila festivals—the dramatic re-enactments of Sri Rama's triumph over Ravana. At times, the heroic figures of the 1857 uprising would subtly, yet powerfully, manifest within these performances. In 1908, at Rampayali, a town steeped in Maharashtrian history, a young orator, during the 'burning of Ravana' celebration, boldly equated British rule with the demonic king, demanding its destruction. Accused of sedition and restricted he, Dr. Hedgewar, the future founder of the RSS, remained undeterred.

Baba Ramachandra returned from Fiji and he also worked in Central and Northern Indian regions awakening people through the imagery of Ramrajya. He emphasised equality and egalitarian relations in the agrarian production systems. 'Jai Ramji' and 'Siya Ram' became salutations of egalitarian spirituality. They replaced Salaam – a greeting an inferior used to make to a superior.

When Mahatma Gandhi made the vision of *Ram Rajya* and the singing of *Ram Bhajans* part of his arsenal against the imperial might of the British, he was not innovating, but rather, drawing from the deep, inexhaustible wellspring of the grand spiritual tradition of India. Throughout the Non-Cooperation movement, his speeches vibrated with the conviction that Satyagraha was nothing less than a Dharmic battle, a righteous struggle against the British Ravana for the liberation of Mother India. Mother India under British became the Sita in Asokavana. Every Satyagrahi became the soldier of Ram Sena. Mahatma Gandhi was the great Hanuman. Sri Rama the very primordial source of absolute liberation – Para Brahman Itself. On April 13, 1919 the massacre of Jallianwallabagh happened. The sequence of the events started with *Sri Ram Navami* that year which was on April 9th. That day was celebrated together by Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in a show of national solidarity. This was followed by attacks of the police and arrests of national leaders. This in turn led to a peaceful meeting at Jallianwallabagh subsequently.

Rama Bhakti became the guiding light of the freedom movement. Gandhi while not pressurising his Muslim followers to join in the Rama Nama recitation, always pointed out that they should not have any real objection to taking the name of Sri Rama as the name of the Divine Oneness. His Rama was at once the impersonal all pervading Truth. But Gandhi would not allow such abstraction and philosophising, rob the personal spiritual charm and power of transformation that Saghuna Brahma Rama has. So he also simultaneously emphasised that his Rama was also the very Sri Rama of Sri Ramcharita Manas of Tulsidas.

Thus Sri Rama is the enduring every living Shakti of the Nation while also the primal archetype for every son, every husband and every ruler. He is all this and more. He is the very Source. As the Source of the Universe He is Truth and Liberty, Justice and Universal Empathy. He is the very personification of Dharma. Naturally Sri Rama Bhakti is the undying spirit of Mother India.