

'Has Allah told them to fight all the time?'

(Interview with Kanchi Shankaracharya Jayendra Saraswati - Part I of III)

Author:

Publication: Rediff

Date: July 16, 2003

URL: <http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/jul/16inter.htm>

The Shankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam, Sri Jayendra Saraswati's negotiations with the All India Muslim Personal Law Board over the Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya, have run into rough water. In an exclusive interview with Managing Editor Saisuresh Sivaswamy at his Mutt in Kanchipuram, in Tamil Nadu, on Tuesday, the seer explains what went wrong, and how the talks could get back on track.

Q.: What is the extent of your, your Mutt's involvement in Ayodhya? Is it only the temple?

A.: In Ayodhya the Kanchi Mutt has set up a trust, the Kanchi Ayodhya Nagara Development Trust. On it we have our Mutt officials, and locals, including a Muslim. The people of that area, whether Hindu or Muslim, are very poor; the mahants and such people are also there, living in big bungalows, they are happy. So we thought of doing something for the people, to do some social service, for the poor to prosper. We teach them tailoring, and buy readymade clothes from them which is sold in Hyderabad, so they have a steady livelihood. We have also started embroidery classes recently, and both Hindus and Muslims are part of this project. That is one endeavour of ours that is on in Ayodhya.

Apart from that we have also set up a small information technology project in Ayodhya, in which both Hindus and Muslims, men and women, participate. We have taken on rent a small place there, hired two teachers to teach them IT, and help them set up on their own by giving them whatever help they may need. One batch is over and the second batch commenced on the 6th of this month.

We want to see the people of Ayodhya happy. There is no point in fighting over Ram, Krishna, this god or that, in Ayodhya. Feed the stomach, Swamigal, they say. They are now able to look after themselves, their family, with dignity. Both communities are living with dignity, which is important.

Q.: But what about the main problem in Ayodhya?

A.: As far as Ayodhya is concerned there is no problem at all. Not through the Mutts there, or through the poor people. **If any problem is there it is coming through outside forces.** If these forces were to keep away the problem you are referring to will automatically solve itself.

I am talking about the specific problem over the Ram temple. You and the All India Muslim Personal Law Board had this exchange of letters, which raised a lot of hope all around, and then came your letter dated July 1, in which you raised Kashi and Mathura over which the Board expressed its dismay.

Why? Leave their feelings alone. OK, I agree, maybe I need not have mentioned Kashi and Mathura, I don't want them either, but what about the other points in my letter? **They have used this as a pretext to ignore the other points mentioned by me.**

Q.: What else did you say?

A.: We had said, in the first letter, to give us the undisputed area, and to build a wall in the middle if they feel that we will extend the temple, if they don't trust us. We will in the meantime talk, look to the court judgment etc. No one else should interfere in this matter, it should be sorted out by the two sides. Then they asked for some clarifications. You had mentioned the court judgment, they said, so can you tell us where the Ramalayam's garba griha will be located? Show the same on the map, they said.

We wrote to them that the undisputed and disputed areas, which were separate earlier, have become one, is not in existence anymore. They were separate, which is why we had asked for it, but now there is no separation of disputed and undisputed areas. In the last developments of the last few months the two parts have become one.

Q.: What are these developments you referred to?

A.: The matter went to the Supreme Court for vacating the stay on the undisputed land given during the Bhoomi Pujan, which ruled that the stay will be vacated only when the status of the disputed land is sorted out. After that there is no point talking about disputed and undisputed areas, they have become one. There is no sense in them saying they won't give the undisputed area, both are now disputed. Given that, if we want the talks to go anywhere, we have to start discussing the disputed area since the court has made even the undisputed area into a disputed one.

Q.: On what basis did you ask for the disputed land?

A.: We gave them reasons for saying so. One, for the sake of communal harmony. This issue has led to a lot of violence, and will lead to more violence in which poor people will get killed. You must develop a spirit of give-and-take. It is the vishwas-bhoomi [land of faith] for Hindus. **For you, it is of a man who you call great today [Babar], we don't know what he was then.** We don't also know if there was a temple there. Hindus have the faith that he was born there, so keeping in mind this faith if you give up the area it will lead to communal harmony, we told them.

Two, today, Lord Ram is already seated there, although in a small jhopdi, it is the reality. As of today if you think anyone can move him from there, it is impossible. Just as the undisputed and disputed areas have become one, it is also evident that Lord Ram has occupied the site. If he is moved, there will be mass protests, so he cannot

be moved. Even a human being, over twelve years, acquires property, family etc. Also, whether occupied land or unoccupied, if someone has resided in a place for twelve years the law recognizes him as the owner. But we told them, we are not here to claim ownership. It may be yours but we are asking you to give it up in our favour. We can also go the law's way but we are asking you.

Next, there are already many mosques in that town, some 20. **But only eight have prayers offered there still, the others are in a state of disrepair.** No one's come forward to repair them, nor has the government given permission for it. In this situation if you erect another mosque who do you expect to come and pray there? You build a temple or mosque when there are people around. Like, when you build a colony you build a Vinayak temple. **But you don't erect a temple just because the land is yours, you build where there is scope for public worship.** Similarly there is no need for public worship in a mosque there, where will the people come from? For this reason also you must give in to us, we said.

More, we all accept Allah as great, the supreme power. We pray to such a god, in a mosque worthy of him, or in a holy place, or even when you find the time and place. **But here is a mosque named after Babar, who came here, fought and won, so you decide, is he of importance, or is Allah of importance?** Allah is supreme, but do we rate Babar who came here and fought as equally important? This fact of his war, whenever it was fought in history, will be remembered forever. If you want the ill will to go, remove Babar. Otherwise, his memory will keep coming up, and the problem will keep recurring.

Lastly, we all agree that communal harmony is needed. The Wakf Board has given up so much land in so many places, for schools, colleges, etc. It is nothing new. Given that, if you give up this site for the sake of communal harmony, you will come to occupy an exalted position. Because, although only a handful of Muslims may be terrorists they have given the entire community a bad name. **Because of them the general perception is that a Muslim is someone who will only fight.** But, if you were to think in a spirit of accommodation, you will enhance the reputation of Indian Muslims across the world, as a people who are willing to give in for communal harmony.

I had written all this to them, in my last letter.

Q.: Which led to the Board digging its heels in. But why Kashi and Mathura?

A.: That was extra, yes. I don't need it, it is not needed now, but I said one day Hindus may ask for them so be prepared mentally for it, that's all. But it was unnecessary, yes, though we had said it.

Q.: But it is that which apparently created all the problems.

A.: You are wrong, that did not create any problems at all. **I have a copy of their resolution, and do you know, there is not a word in it about that point.** They

have not said anything about it. On the contrary, they have mentioned there is a difference between my first and second letters.

Q.: Yes, there seems to be a hint of a threat in your second letter.

A.: What threat? Isn't there a difference between saying 'prepare yourself mentally' and 'get ready to fight'? If your office says your performance is not good, is that a threat? **It means to change your behaviour, to perform better, and cannot be considered a threat, but sound advice.** If someone mistakes advice for a threat, what can I do! The two are different.

When you say, 'if you don't do this I will kill you, harm you' that is a threat, but we are not doing it. To consider well-meaning advice as a threat is the wrong approach. Anyway, let it be, we have no such desire in our minds.

In all fairness, their reply should have been to question why I am asking for the disputed area instead of the undisputed area. But they never wanted to know! If they had asked me I would have told them that the two have become one now, both are a problem today. Since the whole land has now become disputed, where do we start from if not the disputed area so that the non-disputed area also comes out? This has to be faced, but no one wants to face it.

Q.: So what is the next stage in the negotiations?

A.: Unless they are willing to face all this we will not talk about the next phase.

Q.: But what do you expect to see from them?

A.: The news must come out, that they realize we changed our view was that since the disputed and non-disputed have become one, we broached the disputed land. This has to happen.

Second, they have announced that no one has the right to give away Allah's land. Even during the various Muslim empires they have given grants to various temples and Mutts, including land. Grants were given to the Sringeri Mutt, our [Kanchi] Mutt, to the Srirangam temple and many others. One of them even built a temple! That proves there's nothing that says Allah's property cannot be given away.

Apart from what the Wakf Board owns everything else belongs to Allah. If the world is Allah's property how can they be different with just one piece of land? They have not answered that properly. They had clarifications of my first letter, but no doubts over the second letter. Why? So how did they decide Allah's property cannot be given, how did they decide that we are threatening them? Did I ask anything for myself?

Since I mentioned Kashi and Mathura they should have wanted to know what will happen later, who will ask, when, how, shall we talk about it now. **Instead of that they decide that Allah's property cannot be given away, so how do they want to solve the problem?** The way we say everything is Bhagwan's they believe Allah's property is all over, fine, but how can they say they cannot give only that portion?

What, they don't buy and sell shops and houses? Whose property is that, Allah's or theirs?

According to the Quran, the world belongs to Allah, not one bit of land here or there. In countries like Pakistan mosques have been razed, only recently one was pulled down, but did you see any protest over it? In Afghanistan and Iraq many were ruined in the war. Such questions should be debated upon and done with. Instead, they say it is Allah's property and get stuck on one point: you raised Kashi and Mathura which we don't like.

Finally they say looking at their image, honour, respect, dignity, their consensus, the consensus of all Indians they will consider [my proposal]. They have taken a minority status, and now talk about Indian consensus? Let them then give up the minority status.

Q.: The counterpoint to what you say is, why can't Hindus show their large heart, the oft-repeated line that all faiths are equal, by giving away the site to Muslims? Why are you stuck on it?

A.: Yes, Hindus have a large heart, all faiths are equal. If it were not, such a senior religious leader like the Shankaracharya will not be talking to them. I have gone to Lucknow to talk to them, no saint has done that, no Hindu has gone there. Why did I go to Lucknow when they called me? For peace and communal harmony. Did they show me similar respect? I did not go there to see their architecture and such stuff.

We were discussing this problem, so I went to an Arabic school there to talk to them, putting my prestige aside so that something positive may come about. Communal harmony can come about if both are in agreement. Has Allah told them to fight all the time, don't they have a spirit of give and take? Where can they go apart from India? We all have to live together right here.

Q.: Don't you agree Muslims harbour a sense of grievance over December 6, 1992, when the Babri Masjid was pulled down by Hindus?

A.: What has happened has happened. They may feel that way but how long will they grieve over December 6? Our temples have also been demolished, people killed. In Kashmir many temples were destroyed, our people are still being killed there. Shouldn't we also harbour similar feelings? Both sides should forget. In day to day life there will be many grievances, they should not be nursed.

December 6 cannot last forever. How many people must be upset over Babar's mosque in that sacred site? **You have been grieving for 10 years, many people have grouses going back hundreds of years.** After all he defeated us and built that structure, didn't he? Both sides have grievances, and both sides should get over them, one can't live that way.

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Show me another Janmabhoomi and we will go there

(Interview with Kanchi Shankaracharya Jayendra Saraswati - Part II of III)

Author:

Publication: Rediff

Date: July 17, 2003

URL: <http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/jul/17inter.htm>

In this, the second part of an exclusive interview with rediff.com Managing Editor Saisuresh Sivaswamy, the Shankaracharya of Kanchi, Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal explains how the Ayodhya issue could be resolved.

Q.: Archaeological excavations have been going on at the Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya, but indications so far are that a temple was not pulled down to build the mosque. Doesn't it puncture Hindu claims that Ram's temple was razed to erect the mosque?

A.: Listen, Lord Ram was born hundreds, thousands of years ago. In matters of faith you cannot consider such stuff as proof. To give you an example, if your father died after you were born who is to say you were born to your mother and no one else? Because people around say she is your mother you believe she is. Or your dad has gone away, and returns after 10 years. Your mother knows him but you don't. Yet you believe her when she tells you he is your father, don't you? Isn't that faith?

To give you another example, you believe that you will get paid after working for 30 days -- isn't that also faith? Setting out to prove faith is an impossible task.

Faith is faith, proof is proof. Can you prove there's god? That is faith. Can we prove Allah exists? That is faith. Can we prove Ram exists? That is faith. Because we believe in the Quran we believe in Allah; we believe in the Ramayan, so we believe in Ram. Faith is not to be tested and proved.

Q.: My question remains. For long the case was built up that a Ram temple was demolished to build the mosque. Now it may so happen that it wasn't the case.

A.: The question is not whether a temple existed there or not. The question is of the site's sacredness. We have faith that he was born there. What gives us that faith? We could claim many other sites in Ayodhya, but why are we saying this is the site?

Q.: Exactly. There are other such sites too in Ayodhya.

A.: Where? Nowhere. The sites you are talking about are like 'the place where Ram played, Ram's kitchen, the place where he slept' etc. No other place claims to be the Janambhoomi, our faith is this particular site is where he was born.

Second, it was the custom to build a mosque on our holy sites. In that sense they seem to be the cause behind our faith (laughs). We know that they had built their mosques on sites important to us. They thus indirectly contributed to our faith growing.

Q.: You had said there are enough mosques in Ayodhya, so there is no need for another. Conversely, isn't it true that there are enough temples in India and there is no need for another one?

A.: Of course, there are many temples, including in Ayodhya itself. But is there a temple on the spot where Ram was born? We say there are many mosques so we don't need another one. You say there are enough temples so we don't need another one. But we are not building a temple for the sake of building it. This is janambhoomi! Show me another one and we will go there (laughs heartily).

Q.: My earlier question remains. Are further talks possible?

A.: If one can abandon ego, not think of a prestige issue, and think instead of communal harmony, talks are possible. Otherwise, no chance.

Q.: Will there ever be a solution to the Ayodhya problem?

A.: If it is solved, the country can prosper. Otherwise everyone will die. There will be violence, war, many people will be killed. It will be the poor who will suffer. The ones with brains will get away.

Q.: What is your impression of AIMPLB President Maulana Rabey Hasan Nadvi, with whom you have been interacting?

A.: You won't find another good human being like him. He is very spiritual (satvik) in nature. He is the nephew of Ali Miyan [Maulana Abul Hasan Ali Hasani Nadvi, a respected Muslim leader and rector of the Nadwatul Ulama], who had come here twice and thrice when Periyavar [the late Kanchi Parmacharya Chandrasekharendra Saraswati] was around. Nadvi is just like his uncle, and possesses all the qualities essential for a tapaswi. The others around him are different, poor fellow, what can he do by himself!

There are many people like him among Muslims, they must come together and overcome the negative forces. Such people are not there among Muslims alone. They need to be overcome. The good people must stand up and do it, for the sake of communal harmony, nation, unity, for the good of everyone.

There is no point being adamant on a point and calibrating your replies on that basis. If you want to, then better to do it face to face. Let's talk about it, and not through the media.

Q.: But why have you been communicating through letters, why not face to face?

A.: They asked for a letter, we gave it. They said we need to place it before their committee, so we gave them the first letter. They had clarifications, we gave explanations. If they didn't ask why would we give? We had been talking all along.

They could have formed a subcommittee, decided on a face to face, done that, and then asked for a letter. They could have done that also, but did not. Or, they could have said on receiving the second letter that some points have been raised, let us seek

clarifications, talk face to face. If their intention was above board they would have done that.

Q.: What about reports that the next round of negotiations have begun?

A.: The effort is always underway. My doors are always open. Just as their doors are open. Someone has to do the talking.

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'We erect memorials for Nehru and Indira, and we can't have one for Ram?'

(Interview with Kanchi Shankaracharya Jayendra Saraswati - Part III of III)

Author:

Publication: Rediff

Date: July 18, 2003

URL: <http://www.rediff.com/news/2003/jul/18inter.htm>

Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal, the Kanchi Shankaracharya, spoke to rediff.com Managing Editor Saisuresh Sivaswamy for an hour, explaining his stand on the Ayodhya issue, and how it can be resolved. An interview like none other he has granted in recent times. Read on for the concluding segment of an exclusive and informative interview:

Q.: Out of the five Sankara Matts (the other four being in Badrinath, Dwarka, Puri and Sringeri), you have taken the lead in trying to solve the problem. Are the other four Shankaracharyas with you in your initiative?

A.: No one has opposed it. No one has any objection. No one is concerned so long as something good comes out, doesn't matter whether it is a Shankaracharya or anyone else doing it. **I am not doing it to hog the credit; if I did, the other Mutts could get upset.** National integration, communal harmony, the country's well-being, and a Ram temple comes up, where is my name in it? If I had the ego to take credit for it, others could get angry and oppose me but that's not my intention at all. If everything goes well Ayodhya will benefit, the nation will benefit! How will I benefit personally? I will still be sitting here in Kanchipuram. I am merely doing my duty, so there is no way for anyone to become angry at me.

Except, of course, the politician (laughs).

Q.: There is also doubt over the status of the Kanchi Mutt itself. Adi Sankara, goes one belief, founded only four Mutts, and the Kanchi Mutt is self-proclaimed.

A.: Those who say so will say so. It is like the dog barking at the sun, does the sun care? If a cloud blocks the sun, has the sun disappeared? Similarly, such statements won't rob the Kanchi Mutt of anything. I know who is spreading such talk, he had in fact been a friend of mine once, he had then given in writing that Kanchi was also a Sankara Mutt (laughs). We still have that letter. Today there is not a squeak out of

him, there is no publicity for him, the world today knows only one Shankaracharya, he is unable to handle this obscurity and gives vent to his feelings to the press. That's all.

Q.: One thing has always puzzled people. What is your interest in Ayodhya? Why are you involved in the negotiations?

A.: Shouldn't I do at least one good thing in my lifetime? There is so much strife over Ayodhya. Do you know what the name means? A-yodham, meaning a place without war. Can there be another adarsh-purush [ideal] like him! If not a memorial for him then who else! We erect memorials for our fathers, grandfathers, Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Kamaraj, and we can't have one for Ram? It has been facing problems for so many years. We are willing to do that for politicians, but not for god?

Q.: But hasn't the issue been politicized?

A.: We are involved just so that it won't be politicized, to keep the politicians out. I have said they should not be involved, even [Prime Minister A B] Vajpayee has said it. Many people have the same opinion, but still politicians make hay. The latest is [former prime minister] Chandra Shekhar and [former minister] Ram Vilas Paswan have said I should not be involved.

In fact, when Chandra Shekhar was prime minister he had brought a delegation that included Ali Miyan here for discussions, the Periyavar [the late senior Shankaracharya Chandrasekharendra Saraswati] was alive then, and I was also around. In this town, in this Mutt! He was the man who started the whole thing. But today he suddenly finds me political. **Then he needed the Shankaracharya, today when he is out of power he has no need!**

Q.: Does such criticism hurt you? The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, for instance, said you, a Saivite guru, was interfering in the Ram temple issue.

A.: If I get hurt I can't be a Swamigal. Don't they know Ram was a Shiv-bhakt? He worshipped Shiva in Rameswaram after slaying Ravan, to remove the curse. They don't know this, and are saying these things.

Let me go a step ahead. Many of those on the Ram Janambhoomi Nyas are from Ayodhya. There are members of the Ramnandiya group on the Trust, who are the only ones authorized to do Ram-puja. But they won't look at either Krishna or Narayan, aspects of the same god, such severe Vaishnavites they are. With such people on board how have they asked for Kashi and Mathura? I am asking this for argument's sake, of course. These people talk without knowing the facts well.

Q.: How does the prime minister look at the breakdown in talks, would you know? Is he upset?

A.: He is not involved in this. He has kept himself aloof. If it moves forward, he helps. If it doesn't, he lets go. That's all.

Q.: Is he in touch with you through representatives?

A.: That's not the case. No one has come here so far. [Finance Minister] Jaswant

Singh came here recently, but his appointment was made a month ago. [Defence Minister] George Fernandes has been coming here for years, since Chandra Shekhar's time. At that he came about the Janambhoomi, this time it was a general visit but we briefed him.

Q.: Are you in touch at all with the government?

A.: We don't need it. We are spiritual, religious leaders, why do we need to be in touch with the government?

Q.: There is this perception that you are trying to solve this issue ahead of the election so that the Bharatiya Janata Party can go to the people with a favourable report card. Are you playing the BJP's game?

A.: Did they win the last election on my say-so? Was I responsible for them winning so many seats in the last election? If I was, I am happy. I had not said a word about the BJP before the last election nor am I going to say anything this time. **How does it matter to me which party wins the election?** I am not doing anything for the sake of any political party. I am doing out of a heart-felt need. **Ram's abhimaan is important to me, not the BJP or any political party.** It doesn't matter to us who forms the government, who becomes PM.

Q.: Is it true you won't be too pleased if the BJP were to lose the election and the Congress party wins?

A.: This is a very, very wrong thing to say. Let me say it again: It doesn't matter whether the BJP or the Congress wins. We have no need for the government. We have been with the Congress since the days of Indira Gandhi. She has come here so many times, as have Rajiv Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi. How many Congressmen have come here! We are not going to get anything new. Why only Congressmen, even other partymen come here. The Samata Party also comes here. We are apart from parties, we have no connection with them. **So we are not concerned whether the BJP or Congress wins elections.**

Q.: It sounds like you support the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's demand for making India a Hindu Rashtra.

A.: It is their demand, it is a democracy. If they can do it, let them do it. I have no views on it. Like someone says there is no god, they say make India a Hindu Rashtra.

Q.: You have completed 50 years of your initiation as Shankaracharya. Looking back, do you have a sense of something not accomplished?

A.: There is nothing like that. I have been doing my duty, for the rest it is up to god. There is no sense of having done, not having done, having left anything incomplete.