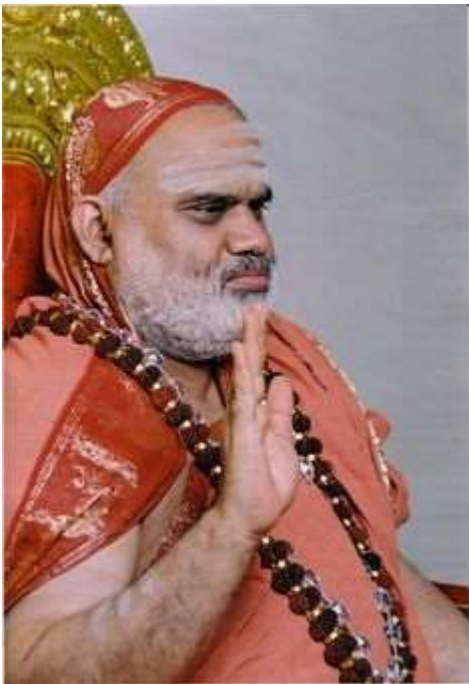


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Who is this man?

It's the Sringeri Shankaracharya, the man who the government believes holds key to the continuing Ayodhya problem



By Bhaskar Roy

The man does not watch television and hates travelling abroad. His extra flab and grey beard make him look older than his 43 years. For one so sought after and so much in the news, his insulation from the world at large that seeks his blessings is surprising. Yet, even the government seems to believe that Swami Bharati Teertha, 36th head of the 1,200-year-old Sringeri Peeth, holds the key to the kingdom of heaven: in this case, a solution to the Ayodhya problem.

The man who is hunted by celebrities seems unconscious of his status. His voice is soft and his tone measured. But the Swami, the Shankaracharya of Sringeri, the first of the four seats of Hinduism established by the Adi Shankaracharya millennia back, however, is acutely conscious of his special role. He knows and admits as well that he will have to assert himself to resolve the Ayodhya impasse. There is no arrogance – only an intense awareness of the troubled times and a very different, difficult challenge.

“The fire that leapt out of Ayodhya assumed menacing proportions; we made efforts to put it out,” says the man before whom both the Government and opposition supplicate. But he says quite confidently: “Whatever I do for the construction of the Ram temple will be in the national interest.” He is sure, he says in his Sanskritised Hindi, that the new temple will come up sooner rather than later. But is it possible that the man will be dwarfed by the task his title thrusts upon him?

Born into a pious Brahmin family at Narasaraopet in Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh, Sitarama Anjaneyulu, came to the Sringeri Peeth at the age of 15 after completing his high school studies. In no time he proved his talents in the subjects the then Acharya taught him. He learned Kannada, the local language, and went on to acquire knowledge of Sanskrit and Vedic philosophy.

At Sringeri, tradition demands that the guru anoint his successor during his lifetime. In 1989, at the age of 38, he took over as the head of the Sringeri Peeth. His close disciples talk of an austere lifestyle tied by the rigour of discipline. “Most of the time he spends in reading and meditation,” says Gauri Shankar, his secretary. This affable, smooth-talking former engineer who joined the Peeth in 1986 leaving behind a promising career, is certainly an abiding influence on the Shankaracharya.

Some would say too abiding. Many feel that it is at the prodding of this young, ambitious secretary that the Shankaracharya decided to enter the whirlpool of the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute. Yet, the history of the Sringeri Peeth as well as that of the Ayodhya conflict were irrevocably interwoven in June 1993, when the four Shankaracharyas held a meeting at the initiative of Bharati Teertha. They decided that the Ram Temple would be built at the same site perceived as the Ram Janmabhoomi and that a fresh initiative was needed. Their consensus was that politicians of all denominations must be kept away. However, there is no denying the fact that the Ayodhya cell in the PMO played an important role in bringing together the Shankaracharyas.

Since then Gauri Shankar has toured extensively meeting important religious leaders across the country and has remained in constant touch with the Ayodhya cell in the PMO. The outcome of this largely behind-the-scenes, low-key manoeuvring has been spectacular – especially in the discomfiture it has caused in the VHP camp.

The dilemma facing the VHP, in a way, is self-inflicted. Today, VHP leaders are running the risk of drawing the ire of the most reverend institutions of Hindu religion. Left with the option of either opposing the Shankaracharyas’ initiative or meekly following them, anyway the saffron arm of the Sangh Parivar stands to lose.

The VHP and its affiliates have, therefore, adopted a two-pronged strategy. VHP General Secretary Ashok Singhal has said there is no difference between the VHP and the Shankaracharyas if they recognise the sacrosanct nature of Ram’s birthplace as the specific site for the proposed temple. But it is easier said than done. The VHP dilemma has been accentuated with the Sringeri Shankaracharya recognizing the irrevocable importance of Ram’s birthplace for constructing the temple. Is it now possible for the saffron brigade, which has built up over the years an ever-growing constituency of the Hindu vote-bank for the BJP, to call it a day and follow the Shankaracharyas?

Apart from letting down the militant and rabid elements in its ranks, the VHP would forfeit its claim to the other two controversial shrines at Kashi and Mathura. If Singhal and his brigade are not perceived by the masses as builders of the Ayodhya temple, another campaign for the other two shrines will be a futile exercise. There is every possibility of the Shankaracharya presiding over such efforts in future. While pledging support to these Hindu religious leaders, the VHP has actually started a campaign against them. Swami Haridas Giri, a prominent member of the VHP’s temple trust, has warned the Shankaracharyas not to meddle in the temple affair. This Swami of the Thennangur

Ashram in Tamil Nadu is being pitted against Swami Bharati Teertha despite the gap in their hierarchy. Propelled by VHP backing, Swami Haridas Giri has questioned the role of the Shankaracharyas at Ayodhya in October 1990.

Despite confusion in the VHP camp, the temple initiative is not going to be smooth sailing for the Shankaracharyas. Though they assert that the new trust is basically an attempt to 'depoliticise' the temple-building efforts, the Shankaracharyas are admittedly close to the government. "We are in touch with the government as we have to get the land from them," explains Gauri Shankar. Such proximity to the establishment is enough to affect their credibility.

Besides, during its long Ayodhya campaign, the VHP has attracted a large number of sadhus into its fold by giving them adequate prominence. For these otherwise faceless men of god, the association with VHP has proved important. Even without Government patronage, the Shankaracharyas remain important. But without VHP backing, these lesser sadhus become anonymous again. The Shankaracharya may soon realise that the road to Ayodhya has more hurdles than those the most difficult Sanskrit treatise could offer.