

Relevance and Prevalence of Ramayana Today

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In recent times there has been too much of argument between groups of people and warring communities on whether Rama existed in the past or is only a fictional character; whether saying 'Jai Shri Rama' is communal or is a way of salutation with a particular community; whether 'Ramayana' is a biography or an imaginary story. The present paper is an attempt to explore the spread and visibility of 'Ramayana' in the present times.

'Ramayana', the very mention of it brings to the mind an organic, fecund and living existence - grandma rocking gently, reading from Rama-charita-manas in a sing-a-song tone ; grandpa putting a seal on an argument supporting his opinion by quoting, as authority, a quatrain from the Manas; the statesman loudly making tall promises of establishing in India Ramarajya of the dream of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi; the contentious issue of Rama janma bhoomi though finally resolved yet alive; pictures of NASA's affirmation of the Ramsetu getting circulated in the social media; the remnants of primordial enmity between Rama and Ravana still visible in the form of a sense of animus in the psyche of the people from the Southern tip of the Indian peninsula towards the people from the Northern India and vice versa ; frequent invitations from the neighbours in a locality to join them in renderings of the Sunder-Kaand to mark the beginning of some auspicious ceremonies in their homes; an unbroken sequence of the community program of the Bhagwat-Katha going on somewhere or the other in a township; among the villages named after various gods and goddesses maximum number of such villages named after Rama; all male children born in Sanabadh a village in West Bengal named after Ram, whether 'Ram' as a prefix or as a suffix and this practice the village has been following for the last five hundred years. A large population in rural India greets and salutes one another by saying 'Ram-Ram' or 'Jai Sri Ram' or 'Jai Ram ji ki' or 'Jai Siya-Ram'. All this is a testimony of the fact that the Ramayana cannot just be considered simply a literary text or a fictional story or a Kavya. It is a part and parcel of the lives of people though one may refrain from assertions of the truthfulness of a period in the remote history when the Ramayana characters lived their illustrious lives in real flesh and blood.

Not going any further into whether Ramayana is a real life story or an imaginary one, one thing is for sure that it is the fountainhead of a whole range of subsequent literature spanning over millenniums. Ramayana is one of the most revered and exploited source literatures. Valmiki Ramayana in Sanskrit is regarded, by and large, the original text. Every later scholar contributed something of his own to the corpus of the Ramayana by way of interpolations, interpretations, stylistics or twists on account of the demands of the particular genre in which he re-visited Ramayana. Valmiki Ramayana, the primeval source, is believed to have been composed during the same time period when Rama is famed to have lived. The issue of reconstruction of the demolished temple at the site of the birth place of Lord Rama kept raking up the collective Hindu conscience right since the 16th century when Babur had ordered its demolition to erect a mosque there. The struggle to reclaim the site continued for five hundred years and the legal battle for it persisted for one hundred and fifty years, which is perhaps the longest ever legal battle in human history fought for any cause. During this process a large body of physical and tangible pieces of evidence were presented before the courts which included existence not only of places connected with myriads of incidents and anecdotes from the life story of Lord Rama but also existence of clans and families claiming lineage to Rama. Ramayana spread to distant lands and countries which, for centuries, were part of the Greater India or the Indian Subcontinent stretched out in all directions. Ramayana transcends religion as well and cannot be attributed to the Hindu religion alone. It, in fact, preceded Hinduism. It relates to the times when there existed a religion which was followed with reverence and which included the elements, the birds, the beasts, the titans, the apes & the humans all alike. Hinduism is not so much of a religion as it is a way of life based on the principles of a common destiny shared by all inhabitants and constituents of Mother Earth. It is a sacred faith based on universal brotherhood which propagates that the consequences of one's actions are to be borne by all. This religion of inclusiveness which is an all-pervasive religion was called Sanatan Dharma i.e. the perennial code of human conduct.

According to the theory of Karma, our actions revisit us. Time does not move in a linear motion indicating that our deeds with passage of time shall slip farther and farther away beyond reach, rather there is a constant winding, unwinding, churning, rotating and recoiling of time in which our past, individual as well as collective, keeps visiting us; so does Ramayana. The diversity in the way the Ramayana is retold is quite interesting. The range is wide and comprehensive. One comes across the epic in the form of puppetry, masked dances, paintings, painted scrolls, mimes, cartoon serials, animation movies, TV serials, street play adaptations, theatre plays, murals, sculptures, bhajans, Ram Katha troupes, songs, films, oral narratives, narrative for classical dances, plastic art, toys, embroidery, besides, Rama-charita-manas sankeertan, routine reading of the Ramayana or the Rama-charita-manas and individual or community chanting of the text. In Sanskrit itself there are scores of dramas like 'Pratima Natakam' by Bhasa or 'Uttara-rama-charita' by Bhavbhuti based on the lives and acts of characters from Ramayana. In short, there is an epic spread of this epic over 'Greater India', including Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Nepal, Srilanka, Malaysia, Laos, Vietnam, Mauritius, Myanmar as well as in the global market. The Angkor Wat 'Hindu-Buddhist' temple in Cambodia has murals from the battle between Rama and Ravana on its outer walls.

The Ramayana transcended the linguistic borders as well. Sanskrit, the language of the original Ramayana and of the many subsequent Ramkathas in epic forms like Adhyatma Ramayana, Vasishtha Ramayana or Kalidas's 'Raghuvansham' is widely regarded as the mother of many Indian languages, forming the core of the Indo-European pantheon of languages. Among the major versions of the Ramayana in other languages we have Kamban's Ramayana in Tamil, Rangnath's in Telugu, Kritvasa's Ramayana in Bengali, Jagmohan's in Oriya, Madhav Kandali's in Assamese, Eknath's and Madgulkar's in Marathi besides Tulasidas's Rama-charita-manas in Awadhi. There are at least three hundred versions of Ramayana besides its many adaptations and translations. With the passage of time fascination for Ramayana has not diminished and exquisite literary works like Saket and Panchvati by Maithili Sharan Gupt in Hindi in the twentieth century or Sita (A Poem) by Nandini Sahu in English in the current decade of the twenty first century are being written.

The age of Ramayana has generally been regarded as an aeon of righteousness and Rama, the Maryada Purushotam has been hailed as righteousness incarnate yet certain societies which claim affinity to Ravana regard Rama as a treacherous invader who defeated Ravana by deceit, killed Meghnaad by cunning and destroyed a prosperous culture. The acrimony arising out of such complexity and difference of perception resulted in a complete shift in centrality and a swap in hero worship.

It is interesting to note that the Thai monarchies consider themselves as continuation of the Rama dynasties while the Mev muslims of the Mevaat region in Haryana call themselves as descendants of either the moon i.e. Krishna lineage or the sun i.e., Rama lineage. Ramayana is thus a unifying common factor and a constant point of reference among cultures, ethnicities, nationalities and even the species. The Ramayana has triggered variegated branches of scholarly studies like folklore, regional studies, popular culture studies, post - colonial studies, gender studies, ecological studies and racial & caste studies. The Ramayana provides occasions of regular social celebrations such as Ram Leela, a depiction of the life and deeds of Rama staged over a period of ten days and Tolpavakuthu, a puppet show of the Palghat region showing the life of Rama annually over a period of twenty one days. Kutiyattam, a tradition of dance drama in Kerala depicts different episodes from Ramayana through performances like the Abhishek Act, Maya-Sita Act, Shurpankha Act etc. It is interesting to note that in Indonesia Rama Katha is adapted into the Islamic fabric of the society, transcending religious boundaries. Ramayana is thus the core of the cultural and moral idiom which shapes personal and social values.

Despite the fact that science is progressing by leaps and bounds and the human temper is getting increasingly scientific, it cannot be denied that religion and tradition have been able to retain their stronghold in the society and the Ramayana has played quite a decisive role by influencing the lives of people. The paradigm has albeit shifted from unquestioning devotion to relevant application of the epic. The text is continuously evolving as more and more people and groups of people are finding it as a guiding force and a convenient support to fall back upon.

Thus Ramayana has been told, retold, deconstructed and reconstructed in many ways and in different genres by people all through the ages. Ramayana pervades through the entire length and breadth of India and the countries surrounding it. Ramayana has attained a global stature. Rama is relevant today and will always be relevant.

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