



NARRATIVE ASPECTS OF THE RĀMĀYANA

A study Based on Narratology

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ABSTRACT

This study has been undertaken to investigate the narrative aspects of Ramayana in the light of some concepts of modern Narratology. Sanskrit has a very rich tradition of storytelling. The Vedas Itihasas Puranas and Kathas of various type are full of various stories. But unfortunately, apart from some observations on the construction of the plot and characters concerned the ancient Indian rhetoricians did not show concern over the theoretical aspects of story telling.

Rāyamāyaṇa of Vālmīki is believed to be the first work written in a pure Kāvya style. Hence this is called as ādikāvya, and its author as ādikavi. The story of Rāma is narrated by Vālmiki in seven kāndas. The narrative style of *Rāmāyana* is rather different from was the Mahābhārata. Vaisampāyana and Sūta narrate the story of *Mahābhārata* to an assembly of sages partaking in a long sacrifice. For the narration of *Rāmāyaṇa* also such a context of ritual has been selected. Lava and Kuśa recite *Rāmāyaṇa* in the assembly of people attending Rāma's aśvamedha sacrifice. The narration of Lava and Kuśa might be a form of narration adopted by Sūta style of narration, seen in the Mahābhārata and the Purānas. Different from the *Mahabharata*

most of the narrators who appear in *Ramayana* are the characters of the story which they narrate. In this view we can say that the first person narrative situations are abundant in *Rāmāyana* which are very rare in Mahābhārata.

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Rāyamāyana of Vālmīki is believed to be the first work written in a pure Kāvya style. Hence this is called as ādikāvya, and its author as ādikavi. This is also considered as an Itihasa as it contains elements of ancient history.

According to the legend, Vālmīki, the author of *Rāmāyana* and Rāma the hero of the work, were contemporaries. Rāma visited the hermitage of Vālmīki during his life in the forest. The heroine Sīta also sought refuge in the hermitage of Vālmīki when Rāma abandoned her. Thus in many ways the life of Vālmīki is directly related to the story of Rāma.

One day, when Vālmīki was taking his bath in the river Tamasa he witnessed a कौञ्च bird, being killed by a hunter. On seeing the sorrow of its mate, the mind of Vālmīki was filled with intense emotion which found immediate expression in the form of an eight syllable verse as follows

मा निषाद प्रतिष्ठां त्वमगमः शाश्वतीः समाः।

यत्कौञ्चमिथुनादेकमवधीः काममोहितम्।।

(वाल्मीकिरामायणम्, बालकाण्डम् 1-2)

Then Lord Brahma appeared before Vālmīki and directed him to write the story of Rāma in this verse form. Brahma revealed Vālmīki the past and future of Rama. At that time Sīta was living in the hermitage of Vālmīki with her sons Laya and Kuśa. Hence these matters were known to him. On this background Vālmīki wrote the story

of Rāma in 24,000 verses. This is the story of the origin of the *Rāmāyana* seen in *Rāmāyana* itselfⁱ.

The story of Rāma is narrated by Vālmiki in seven kāndas called बालकाण्डः, अयोध्याकाण्डः, अरण्यकाण्डः, किष्किन्धाकाण्डः, सुन्दरकाण्डः, युद्धकाण्डः and उत्तरकाण्डः.

After the composition of *Rāmāyana* Vālmiki taught the same to Rāma's twin sons Lava and Kuśa. They sang *Rāmāyana* before Rāma and others during the Aśvamedha sacrifice of Ramaⁱⁱ.

The narrative style of *Rāmāyana* is rather different from was the Mahābhārata. In the prelude Vālmiki asks Nārada that who is the perfect man in the world.

को न्वस्मिन्साम्प्रतं लोके गुणवान् कश्च वीर्यवान्।
धर्मज्ञश्च कृतज्ञश्च सत्यवाक्यो दृढव्रतः॥

(Vālmikirāmāyana, Balakānda, Canto I, V-2).

Narada briefly narrates the story of Rāma to Vālmiki as reply. Then Vālmiki contemplates on the story of Rāma narrated by Nārada and develops it into a described *Rāmāyana*. Vālmiki teaches it to Lava and Kuśa. They sing Rāmāyana in the assembly of citizens during Rāma's aśvamedha sacrifice. The world recognises the greatness of Rāma and the chastity of the innocent Sīta who was abandoned on the basis of false allegations. The later development of *Rāmāyana* is in this manner.

Vaisampāyana and Sūta narrate the story of *Mahābhārata* to an assembly of sages partaking in a long sacrifice. For the narration of *Rāmāyana* also such a context of ritual has been selected. Lava and Kuśa recite *Rāmāyana* in the assembly of people attending Rāma's aśvamedha sacrifice. The narration of Lava and Kuśa might be a form of narration adopted by Sūta style of narration, seen in the Mahābhārata and the Purānas. But the dramatized statements like 'thus said Rama' and 'thus said Vasistha' do not appear before the speeches quoted in *Rāmāyana*. Unlike in the *Rāmāyana* they are included in the poetic narration without affecting the drama and the realistic colour.

If we analyse the narrative structure of *Ramayana* we can identify a number of narrative situations as conceived by the theory of modern Narratology. The narrative situations vary according to the position of the narrators. Thus according to F.K.Stanzel the narrative situations are divided into three main heads namely - First person narrative situation, Authorial narrative situation and Figural narrative situationⁱⁱⁱ. In the first person narrative situation the narrator belongs to totally to the fictional realm of the characters of the novel just as other characters are there. The world of characters is completely identical to the world of the narrator. In the authorial narrative situation the narrator is outside the world of characters. The narrators world exists on a different level of being from that of the characters. In the figural narrative situation, the narrator is replaced by a reflector, a character in the novel, who thinks, feels and perceives, but does not speak to the reader like a narrator. The reader looks at the other characters of the narrative through the eyes of this reflector character. Since nobody narrates in this case. The presentation seems to be direct^{iv}.

Different from the *Mahabharata* most of the narrators who appear in *Ramayana* are the characters of the story which they narrate. In this view we can say that the first person narrative situations are abundant in *Rāmāyana* which are very rare in Mahābhārata. In addition to Lava and Kuśa the characters like Rāma, Viśvāmitra, Vasistha, Vālmiki, Bharadvaja, Dasaratha, Jatayu, Sampati, Sugriva, Kabandha, Hanūmân, Rāvaṇa, Surpanākhâ, Anasuya etc. appear as narrators.

PLOT AND SUBPLOT

The main body of story of *Rāmāyana* is the description of events from the hero's birth to death.

A vast number of upākhyānas (substories) are also conjoined properly with the main plot. The stories of Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣana, Bālî and Sugrîva, Jatâyû and Sampātî and the episodes of Anasuya, Sabari, Ahalya, Sarabhanga, Virâdha, Kabandha and the story of the churning of the milk ocean etc. are some of the important upākhyānas of *Rāmāyana*. Among these some like Bālî and Sugrîva are directly

related to the development of the plot while some stories like that of Sagara and the churning of Milk Ocean are of a supplementary nature.

While telling the story the author Vālmîki cleverly withdraws and his characters and their functions take the lead. But, as Vyâsa in the Mahâbhârata he is also a character of Râmâyana. In this view he is a character participating in the fictional world. The realms of existence of the narrator and the characters are one. The person, the constitutive element of narrative situation, may be defined as close to the pole of identity and the element of perspective as close to internal. But the narrators internal perspective and identity is shattered by the alternate adoption of the third person non-identity and external perspective.

All these points to the fact that the process of narration in the Itihâsa tradition is much more complex and does not yield to any simple description and readymade analysis. Unlike the later kâvyas, the conscious attempt for the systematization of narration is also lacking in the Itihâsas. Using the fabula/suzhet distinction in this context, may put Itihâsas and Purânas in the former and the kâvyas in the second category.

ⁱ Vālmîkirâmâyana, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 1992, Balakanda, Cantos 1-3

ⁱⁱ Ibid, Uttarakanda, Canto 93,94

ⁱⁱⁱ Stanzel F K, A Theory of Narrative, Trans. Charlotte Goedsche, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1984, 4

^{iv} Ibid.