

Critical Study of Various Versions of Ramayana

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Abstract: For unknown times, the story of Ramayana is a part and parcel of Indian culture. Its popularity crossed the Indian boundaries and reached other south Asia countries. Critical study of Ramayana shows that although Ramayana is one epic but its versions different from place to place due to their local culture, environment and traditions. Ramayana is neither an “Itihasa” nor “Purana” but is an “Adikavya” – the first poem – a poet’s fancy. Ramayana got its popularity as poem, folk theater, folk songs, folk stories, dance and paintings. Ramayana has been acclaimed very widely as a wondrous creation of literary endeavor which reflects human behaviors, ways of thinking, ideals, attitudes and imagination of extensive comprehensions revealed through poetry of a highly elevated style. For Historians it has lots of debatable points.

Key Words: Ramayana, Itihasa, Purana, Adikavya, folk theater, folk songs

1. Introduction:

For hundreds of years, the story of Ramayana has held in minds of people throughout the length and breath of our country. People from all classes, rich and poor, urban and ruler, common masses as well as intellectuals have been swayed by the rich dramatic epic. This epic is a part and parcel of Indian culture. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari, Gujrat to Assam, Ramayana is enacted in different versions and styles. Its popularity crosses the Indian boundaries and reaches China, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, Java etc. The most amazing fact is that although the Ramayana is one epic but its versions different from place to place. This difference is due to their local culture, environment and traditions.

Though the Ramayana is acknowledged to be a poem, a creation of a poet, still there will be few persons in India who think or regard the stories woven around Rama, Sita, Hanumana, Ravana could be a figment of imagination [1]. Almost every one believes that what ever is narrated or enacted in Ramayana is a fact, an incident which had taken place some time

in the past. It is easy to say since Ramayana is an Adikavya – the first poem, and not history (itihasa) or even Purana (traditional history), it is nothing but poets fancy and hence nothing of Rama or his time can be found. It reflects human behaviors, ways of thinking, ideals, attitudes and imagination of extensive comprehensions revealed through poetry of a highly elevated style.

2. Critical study of Valmiki

Ramayana: In Valmiki Ramayana, Rama is imbued with all human qualities, strength, wisdom, respect of superiors, adherence of truth, and affection for dear ones. Compassion and beatitude for people under his care and courage and fortitude of the highest order, qualities which Valmiki made his hero – a human entity of perfect, complete and fully self contained stature. No definite dates of incidents on which work was based, the data when it was composed and the date of poet who composed it, can be ascertained. Even existence of characters may be poets own creation based upon episodes current during his time.

The epic can be studied in relation to man, in relation to society and in relation to divinity. It does not relate merely the story of a prince banished by his father, searching for his beloved, lost by chance and winning her back punishing the wrong-doers, but it tells the story of some personalities, who are the embodiments of courage and patience, pride and arrogance, chastity and generosity. This is to say that Rama, which is universal and impersonal and is not therefore confined to any particular time or region. It has become epitome of all ages. There is in the epic a galaxy of characters, each having its own individuality, own importance, but at the same time, is purged from narrow binding and has become a type. Although two characters, Rama & Ravana, belong to two opposite groups or tribes, there are many things common to both. It might be that the poet at the time of describing the strife between two opposite forces, had knowingly or unknowingly, and weighted both of them on equal scale of parity. Thus he finds the spirit of devotion in Hanumana of Vanra tribe, the excellence of learning in Ramayana, the demon king of Lanka, the sense of justice in Vibhisana of Raksasa tribe, the essence of virtue in Guhaka, Sabari and Sugriva all belonging to Non – Aryans tribes. While speaking about the super culture of the Aryans, the poet has indirectly expressed admiration for the high quality of the non Aryan culture [2].

2.1 The epic in relation to man: The epic in relation to man presents all type of characters. There are husbands, who are weak to submit to passion and are obedient to wives; there are kings who only know to feed their own grudges; there are brothers, who are ready to help their elders at the cost of their own happiness; there are servants, who risked their own life for the sake of their masters; there are wives, who are not merely angles, but the souls of their husbands. It cannot be said with certainty that what ever was presented by Valmiki is concerned with his period; on the contrary, there are many things in epic, which are already sown in the tradition of the

country and these are only borrowed by the poet.

As we know there are not only men and women in epic, but also monkeys, rakasas and demons. These abnormal creatures are presented more often by the poet as normal human beings in attitude and behavior. Whatever, un-human has been imposed in them is to just warrant the episode dramatically.

The depiction of women in Valmiki Ramayana is so graphic that it tends to turn the epic into the story of women (stri – prasanga)[3].

2.2 The epic in relation to society: For such a relation, the poet, in the epic presents three cultures – the culture of the Raksasas, the culture of Vanras and the culture of Aryans. In composing the poem, Valmiki is possibly led to describe the spread of Aryan culture represented by Rama group towards the south, beyond the Vindhya region, which was known to epic, infested by different pre-aryan tribes, among whom the most predominant were Rakasas, who were familiar to urban culture. Quite naturally, the poet has to make the Aryans fight against most powerful tribal group, the Raksasas. There is however, no evidence that Rama, the prince of Ikshvaku lineage, has had to really encounter the rakasas. This may be a pure invention of Valmiki himself. The names of characters of tribes of the southern India, as depicted in epic are quite unfamiliar and these are, therefore coined by the poet to justify the situation as presented in the long drawn poem [4]. The spread of Aryan culture in the south was a clear result of hearty cooperation of the Brahmanas and the Ksatriyas in carrying the banner of Aryanisation. The key point is that Rishis mix with the aborigines and civilized them.

Rama's expedition, as described in Ramayana, did not put the non-Aryans of south under the political subjugation of Aryans, but it brought the southern territories of the vanaras and the rakasas as protectors under the sphere of Aryan influence [5].

2.3 The epic in relation to divinity: In respect to the Ramayana's relation to divinity, it will be interesting to note that Valmiki did not try to transform his hero, Rama, into any divine being. His story is a story of an ideal man who exhibits his idealism in every aspect of man's life. Due to this he could easily claim his position as a Godly incarnation in later period, that is in books I and VII (6th-5th BC), which are latter editions of Valmiki's composition or in other works on the Rama episode like Ramayana of Tulasidas, Kamban, Pampa, Krittivasa and others.

2.4 Critical review: Critical examination of Valmiki Ramayana suggests that it had passed through many stages of development, had interpretations and the addition of books I and VII. Moreover, the passage representing Rama as an avatar of Vishnu must also be regarded as additional, hardly consistent with the very human terms in which he is generally portrayed by Valmiki in original poem. Thus in the present form it is a combination of loosely related elements, considering romantic and allegorical legends and stories, half-mythical, half-historical, and some scanty description of aboriginal inhabitants in south India [6].

In the story of Ramayana, as told in the original book, two parts can be clearly distinguished. The first is an ordinary narrative of human life without any admixture of mythological elements. Beginning with the intrigues of a queen at the court of Ayodhya to ensure the succession of her son to the throne, it describes the results that followed. Had the poem ended with the return of Rama's brother to Ayodhya after the death of their father, King Dasaratha, it might have passed for an epic based on historical events.

On the other hand, the second part, being founded on myths is full of marvelous and fantastic adventures. The story was formally held by Lassen and Weber [8] that the narrative is an allegorical representation of the spread of Aryan culture to the south India and Ceylon. This view is however, not brown out by statements of epic itself. The poet is eventually unfamiliar to the south, so he fills story with the fabulous beings that might be

easily imagined to haunt an unknown country. There is much more probability in Jacobi's theory [9] that the second part of original Ramayana represents a narrative of terrestrial events based on mythological elements traceable to earliest Vedas.

3. Races of Ramayana in

Vedas: The name of heroic Sita appears in the **Rig-Veda** as the personified furrow invoked as an agricultural Goddess. In ritual work of latest Vedic period she appears as a divinity of the ploughed field, a being radiant beauty, blacked eyed, adored with lotuses, the wife of rain God. In the Ramayana itself Sita is said to have arisen from the earth when her adoptive father Janaka was ploughing, in the last book, she finally disappears underground, received in the arms of Mother Earth. Her husband Rama would then represent Indra, and his fight with demon Ravana, a modification of the Vedic conflict of Indra with Vrtra, the demon of drought. It is here probably significant that Ravana's son is called Indrajit, "foe of Infra", which is epithet of Vryra in the Rig-Veda. The rape of Sita by Ravana is parallel to the abduction by the demons of cows; latter recovered by Indra [10]. Again, Hanumana, the chief of the monkeys, who aids Rama in flying hundred of leagues, to recover Sita from the island of Lanka, is the son of the God of Wind and bears the patronymic Maruti, "Son of Marut". This suggest a reminiscence of Indra association with Maruts[11] or Strom – Gods, in his fight with Vrtra. The name of dog Sarama, who for Indra crosses the river Rasa in search of captured cows, reappears as that of a demones who consoles Sita when imprisoned in the inland of Lanka.

3.1 Rama & Upnishads: Rama also does not appear in old *Upnishads*. Whether the king Janka of Vidheta who is frequently mentioned in Upnishada is same as the father of Sita remains an open question. Weber [12] has pointed out few slight connections between the Ramayana and *Yajurveda*. Sita, the heroine of the epic probably belongs to the

oldest elements of the earth and Mother Earth receives her again. Although the later feature of the legends occurs only in the late book VII yet it may be very old. The *Grhyasutra* have preserved for us prayer formula in which Sita is personified in an extremely life like manner – lotus crowned radiant in limb, black eyed and so on.

4. Various versions of Ramayana in INDIA:

4.1 Ramayana in Dasaratha Jataka: The earliest literary of the Rama story of its component is recorded in the B.Pali Verses (Gathas) of Dasaratha Jataka (Number 461) which perhaps form the nucleus of the Ramayana[13]. There are number of noticeable points of difference in respect to name and theme. For example Dasaratha was a king of Banaras and not of Ayodhya. The reason might be that king of Banaras has a special learning to the Kashi city. According to this , Rama , Lakshmana and Sita are children of king Dasaratha from the eldest queen. Bharata is a son from second wife (after the death of queen). The twelve years exile period is give by king himself on fearing a mischief from second wife. Rama marrying Sita may be because none else was willing to take her to be wife on account her pollution by the touch of demons. In this work, there is no mention of the abduction of Sita by Ravana and all subsequent events. It is believed to be based on much older version of Rama story.

4.2 Influence of Ramayana in Buddhism: It appears that the author of ancient Buddhist texts in the 4th and 3rd century B.C. has yet no knowledge of the Ramayana, but knew ballads utilized by Valmiki for Rama epic. The idea of explaining the exceeding mildness, gentleness and tranquility, which are ascribed to Rama corroborates Buddhist under current. *From this we can conclude that the Ramayana came into being at a time when Buddhism has already spread in the eastern India.* Another interesting point is that period of Valmiki's life and inculcation of Buddhism is almost same. The Hindu

community was shaken by the growing popularity of monasteries, which could affect the family concept. Valmiki gave the first empathic reply to this much dreaded call from monasteries, by preaching through this epic that there can be no sanctuary as scared as one's home [15]. In 9th century AD Khotanese Lok Ramayana was composed, with almost 750 shokas. It is assumed that it must be composed by Buddhist because in the beginning and end, it has Buddhist element. The story starts with Mahadeva boom and ends with Dasgriva becoming a Buddhist.

4.3 Influence of Ramayana in Jainism: As early as 1st century of A.D, the Jain monk Vimla Seri recast the Rama legend in his Praprit poem **Panmacariya** bringing it into line with the religion and philosophy of the Jains [14]. Here Ravana is not a monster but a great sage and ascetic and is a father of Sita. Here Rama is peaceful, patient, wise and mendicant, i.e., he imbibed all qualities so very vital for a Bodhisattva. Lakshmana is a real brave hero. *It was obviously Vimal's intension to offer his co-religionists a substitute for the Valmiki's poem which was already famous at that time.*

4.4 Oldest Ramayana - "Ramayana Kamban": In Dravidin language, the oldest Ramayana is that of Kambau known as Tamil Ramayana, written in somewhat 9th century AD. The basic story line is same, with minor changes in accordance to their own traditions. Here, emphasis on Kamban devotion is more that an argument. God is a part as well as a whole. Part is his incarnation, whole is absolutism. He has compared the dryness of desert in two persons – those who search for God and those who are prostitutes. A person in search of divinity frees himself from all passions and desires & prostitutes who sell their body are also above passions. To Kamban life has a meaning signifying something.

4.5 Lok Ramayana in other Indian States: *The Oriya Ramayana*, tingled with local colors, is a unique expression of sublime devotion, complete surrender and self

forgetting love of an essentially pious soul who sometimes challenges his beloved lord and takes him to the task in the most daring terms, which clearly brings out the real bhakta in him. **Bengali Ramayana, Krittivasa**, is a first rate folk literature, in which all characters represented as Bengali men and women in general. **Himachali Ramayana** is also composed as folk songs in different local languages with local flavors. Since upper Himachal has borders with Tibet, it has an influence of Buddhism in it. As middle belt of Himachal is greatly influenced by Mahabharata, so somewhere in their Ramayana Pandva's are also fighting against Ravana. In some folk stories, there is mention of Muslim and Pathans invasions to their areas. This might happen due to the fact that Ramayana reaches Himachal Pradesh by the Rajputs, who were uprooted from their territories by Muslims they started shifting towards Himalayas. Local traditions, rituals, food habits, plants, animals, tribes and places have become part and parcel of their Ramayana. These folk tales not only make Ramayana more popular but also increases the credibility of the characters among common people. **In Punjab, Ramayana** has such an influence on the day to day life that Ramayana's characters are common household names. Even All the Sikh Gurus belong to the race of Rama. **Ramlila** is the most famous folk theater for Ramayana in India, although its costumes, makeup & style differ from state to state. Till date, Ramayana scenes are major theme for any kind of painting in India.

5. Lok Ramayana in other countries:

Ramayana even had a deep impact on countries beyond India like in Chinese language **Ananajatkam** and **Dasaratha Kathanam**, Tibiti Ramayana composed in the 8th century AD. There are two forms of Ramayana in Java. One is **Kakavin**, based on bhaktikavya, composed in 12th century AD. The other is **Hikayat** Seri Rama which is more popular, written in the 15th century. It has photo-type of Malay texts[16]. **Sarat Rama** belongs to Macca, with characters

matching the Muslim traditions. But with the birth of Visnu and Vasuki, the Muslim figures disappear. All these Ramayana's had their traditional flavors. *Now the question arises how far these versions are local in origin or whether they can be traced to different versions of Rama traditions of India itself? Next question is in what relation do these variations stand to Valmiki epic?*

6. Vestige of Ramayana:

6.1 Evidence of Ramayana: There is evidence indicating that the Ramayana was composed in the area of this country of which the capital was Ayodhya, the royal residence of the race of Ikshvaku [7]. This had been mentioned in book I of Valmiki Ramayana. The hermitage of Valmiki is described in book VII as situated on the south bank of Ganges; and the poet must have been connected with Ayodhya, for Sita, Rama's wife, sought refuge in his forest retreat, where her twins were born, brought up and taught to recite the epic by the poet.

6.2 Present landmarks of Ramayana: The Palace of "Guram", situated near Patiala, Punjab, has some antiquities of Ramayana period. Sugriva's Cave is a well known cave amongst the ruins of the Vijayanagara empire near Hampi. The place holds its similarity to the descriptions of 'kishkinda' in Sundarakanda. Rama is said to have met Hanuman here. The place is also home to the famous Hazararama temple (Temple of a thousand Ramas). Ayodhya Temple (Birth Place of Rama), in Uttar Pradesh, is by itself a very sanctified but controversial place.

7. Conclusion:

We can proudly say that the theme of Ramayana enthralled, influenced and inspired people of various castes and creeds not only in India but also in South Asian countries. Ramayana became a common cultural heritage reflecting the local conditions, the joys and sorrows of people, standards of values and relation between the different sections of society. This great epic became a

truly religious scripture and a harbinger of comfort to millions of people, holding up high standards of morality.

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