Ramayana : A Plural Text

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It is not enough to describe the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as epics, they are history too. This history is not mere description of events ... It is the immortal history of India's sādhanā ... Whether Rama's character was high or low, whether I like Lakshmana or not, that is not enough. We have to stay quiet and judge how the whole of India has assimilated these two great books.

Rabindranath Tagore, in his Foreword to Dinesh Chandra Sen's *Ramayani Katha* (Translation mine).

Prologue

One of the most popular and revered Indian epics is the *Ramayana*. But at the same time both Rama and his Ayodhya have been subjected to archaeological, historical and anthropological investigations by specialists from their own ideological positions. Eminent archaeologist and anthropologist H.D. Sankalia observes that there was at no time 'an attempt to question the historicity of Rama or his times or the various incidents in the *Ramayana* or to regard Rama as less than a god.'[1] In a significant article published in 1977-78 in the *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Sankalia holds that Ayodhya began to grow from a village or a small town in 800 BC-1000 BC, dependent on livestock-breeding, hunting and paddy cultivation. It continued to grow in the times of Buddha and Ashoka, and stupas and monasteries were built. Ayodhya was for many years a Buddhist town and it got its first Deva temples under the Gupta kings. Sankalia states emphatically:

> It must have been apparent that if this was the likely development of Ayodhya, then the present *Ramayana*, even the Critical Edition, gives a one-sided picture of the city ... There is no reference to the Buddhists and Jains, who, we know from their literature, as well as from Chinese travellers, did live in the city, as early as the 5th century BC.[2]

Hence, the *Ramayana* has its bias and should be viewed from a critical angle and the researchers had been trying to perform this task by using all the modern tools and techniques of research.

Historical and anthropological researches on the *Ramayana*

In a small but significant book in Bengali entitled *Ramkathar Prak Itihas* (1977) (literally meaning the prehistory of Rama-katha), the renowned scholar Sukumar Sen set out to trace the evolution of the *Ramayana* and its many versions across space and time often crossing the boundaries of India. In categorical terms, he characterized his work as that of a historian rather than a religious believer. He wrote that his historical method relied on hard evidence and logic while a religious believer went by faith, not evidence and logic. Sen, however, did not see any quarrel between the two groups. He wrote that both beliefs in history, and religion, were true in their own domains but may not be in agreement simultaneously.[3] In the Preface, Sen even sought an apology from the believers, and

quite interestingly, wished that they might not read the book.[4] Sen started with the *Rig Veda* and traced the journey of the Rama-katha through Buddhist Jataka and Jain stories. The most interesting aspect of these Jataka stories was that Rama and Sita were described as uterine siblings. Secondly, one of these stories did not feature the kidnapping of Sita by Ravana.[5] The Jain texts of Rama-katha were no less interesting. For example, in the Jain Rama-katha, Rama's mother was Aparajita and it was Lakshmana who killed Ravana and became famous as 'Ashtam' Basudeva. In the Buddhist Jataka story, Rama was the central character while in the Jain text Lakshmana was the central figure.[6] In the Buddhist and Jain stories Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were vegetarians. According to another scholar of ancient Indian history, culture and literature, Kshiti Mohan Sen, the major characters of the *Ramayana*—Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Bharata—have become archetypes of moral code of conduct for Indians for many generations.[7] Irawati Karve explained lucidly in her classic book *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*:

> The entire *Ramayana* ... is in praise of an ideal man. Whatever was good in the world was embodied in Rama, and it was to present this ideal to the world that Valmiki wrote the *Ramayana*. As Rama is the ideal man, so is Sita the ideal woman. In fact, the whole *Ramayana* is filled with idealized characters – the ideal brother, the ideal servant, ideal subjects, even ideal villains.[8]

Before Kshiti Mohan Sen (1880-1960), one forgotten Marxist anthropologist Bhupendranath Datta (1880-1961), the younger brother of Swami Vivekananda, viewed the *Ramayana* as a Brahaminical version of the class struggle between the Kshatriyas and the Brahmins in ancient India and he noted that Jain scriptures describe Lakshmana, not Rama, killing Ravana.[9]

Famous Bengali litterateur Rajshekhar Basu carried out one of the most authentic translations of the original *Ramayana* from Sanskrit to Bengali in the year 1946. Basu's Preface to the translation has many interesting details, which may surprise the present generation. For example, Rama and Lakshmana, during their exile in the forest, used to hunt animals for meat just like the Europeans,[10] which is a far cry from their supposed vegetarianism. Rama himself also killed a saint named Sambuka, on being advised by the Brahmin, Narada, because despite being a Shudra, Sambuka had dared to meditate, and this, according to Narada, had led to the death of a Brahmin child. Rama beheaded saint Sambuka without any provocation.[11] One may recall here that Rama received immense help from a Nishad (one of the most backward castes) named Guhak during his stay in the forest.[12] The whole of Rama's monkey army led by Sugriva and Hanumana (now the monkey god) belonged to forest-dwelling communities. Without them, Rama could not have won the war against his enemy Ravana. Rama also killed his ally Sugriva's elder brother Bali, keeping himself concealed and shooting an arrow at his back, while the two brothers were engaged in a duel and Bali seemed to be winning.[13] When Bali accused Rama of violating the basic rules of a duel, Rama justified his act saying that Bali was punished for marrying Sugriva's wife. Rama even compared killing Bali with the slaughtering of a hunted animal. Anthropologist and historian K.S. Singh, in his article entitled 'Tribal Versions of Rama-katha: An Anthropological Perspective', aptly observes:

> In killing Bali surreptitiously Rama cited among various reasons, his keeping of his younger brother's wife as a sinful act. Rama did not object to Sugriva keeping

> Bali's wife Tara, who was also his wife's elder sister, after his elder brother's death.[14]

K.S. Singh, in the Introduction to the book *Rama-katha in Tribal and Folk Traditions of India* published in 1993, says that the epics are not only religious texts but also historical documents, anthropological treatises. The popularity of the *Ramayana* serial on television was due, not to its appeal to fundamentalism, but to the fact that the epic enabled most of the Indians to relive their childhood. Also, the *Ramayana*, being basically a love story preserved orally through the centuries, had an appeal not only among the higher castes but also among the various tribal communities of India.[15] Without going into the details of the Adivasi versions of the *Ramayana*, historian Romila Thapar wrote:

> The *Ramayana* does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places, even within its own history in the Indian subcontinent … The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations that changed the conceptualisation of character, event, and meaning.[16]

Anthropologist T.B. Naik, in his paper 'Rama-katha among the Tribes of India', describes vividly the stories of the *Ramayana* among the various tribes of India from the west to the east. The Bhils in the Panch Mahal district of eastern Gujarat have a very popular version of the *Ramayana* called the *Bhilodi Ramayana* and according to the local tradition, Rishi Valmiki himself was also a Bhil named Valio. This version begins with the search for Sita by Rama, Lakshmana and Hanumana. Ravana's men employ some Birhors to catch Hanumana since the Birhors are expert monkey trappers but they fail to do so. Then Hanumana himself suggests they make a net with holes thrice the breadth of a human finger to catch him. Hanumana is caught with that net but Hanumana pleads with the Birhors not to kill him and that he will kill himself. The narration of Hanumana setting Lanka on fire follows and finally he goes to Rama and asks him about the disposal of his body after his death. Rama says that those who trapped you, the Birhors, will eat you and your kind. Since then, it is believed, the Birhors have been killing and eating monkeys.[17]

One of the remarkable versions of the *Ramayana* comes from the Gonds of central India. Molly Kaushal, a professor at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), describes in detail the Gond *Ramayani*, which according to her can be seen as 'Ramayan in inverse' or 'Ramayan inverted' in which Lakshmana, not Rama, is the main hero and Lakshmana, not Sita, undergoes a trial by fire to prove his honesty and chastity. Kaushal writes:

> Despite obvious similarities with the *Ramayan* storyline, though inverted ones, the Gondi text is not about the *Ramayan.* It is a text, which encodes the Gond discourse on human body, sexuality, life and death, social and sexual anxieties and has strong philosophical and psychosocial undercurrents running throughout the text.[18]

In an article, N.N. Vyas has noted the distinctive interpretation of the *Ramayana* by the tribals of India and added that this interpretation was derived from their experiences of living in the hilly and forested regions. Vyas collected his ethnographic evidence mainly from the tribes of Rajasthan

and Madhya Pradesh. In these tribal tales the king, Dasharatha, is depicted as a deceitful person and the birth of Sita coincides with extreme drought, due to which the parents are forced to dump her in a field. She is discovered by Janaka while ploughing the field.

Furthermore, Dasharatha reveals his autocratic nature when he announces out of the blue that Rama and Lakshmana will go to the forest and Bharata and Shatrughna will rule his kingdom. The tribal version has a different interpretation of Rama and Lakshmana chasing the golden deer on the request of Sita in the forest. According to it, it was Sita's desire to eat the flesh of the animal that led the two brothers to kill the deer. They were not collecting and eating wild fruits when they spotted the deer, as the other versions have it. The rest of the story matches the *Valmiki Ramayana*.[19] According to K.S. Singh, in a Munda version of the *Ramayana*, Rama is not the embodiment of righteousness or an ideal person or an avatāra as projected by Goswami Tulsidas, but an ordinary person with human weaknesses and strengths. Ravana, on the other hand, is described as a noble hero who belonged to one of the clans of the Munda tribe, Timling.[20]

The tribes of the Northeast also have their own interesting versions of the *Ramayana*. The Mech (one of the oldest indigenous groups of Assam and North Bengal) traced the Hindu-Muslim conflict to their version of Rama-katha, according to which Lakshmana ate beef, became a Muslim and begot two sons, Hasan and Hussain, who were killed by Lava and Kusha.[21] More recently, famous litterateur and a former professor of Comparative Literature Nabaneeta Dev Sen, in her Chandan Kumar Bhattacharyya Memorial Lecture, showed that there existed a distinct tradition of the *Ramayana* cherished and preserved orally by the women in India in four languages, namely Bengali, Marathi, Maithili and Telugu. In all these versions of the *Ramayana*, Rama is almost absent. In fact, he is portrayed as an irresponsible person who caused immense suffering to his honest wife Sita.[22] Ajay K. Rao writes in a recent book entitled *Re-figuring the Ramayana as Theology*:

> What we see in the parallel project of the political use of the epic and the inauguration of a royal Rama cult in sixteenth-century Vijayanagara is that, in the pre-colonial period, the othering of Muslims does not appear to have been a factor in the development of Rama devotional and liturgical traditions, despite the fact that the epic provided conceptual resources for such a usage, with narratives of othering occurring in other regions and in literary and inscriptional genres.[23]

It is held by pious Hindus that Rama was an ideal king who maintained justice and looked after his subjects well, in love and with extreme devotion. Rama's 'uprightness' is demonstrated thus: he made his devoted wife Sita pass through fire to test her chastity after he defeated Ravana in Lanka. Sita passed the fire-test. But Rama was not satisfied—he organized a public hearing, which pained Sita so much that she disappeared into the Earth. What does this show? (1) Rama's mistrust of Sita and (2) his populist approach and his readiness to go to any length to stay in power. Rajshekhar Basu in his brilliant Introduction raised this question quite succinctly. He wrote:

> Lakhs of people in India did not care to notice the inconsistencies in the character of Rama and accepted whatever was narrated by the storyteller with devotion. But the *Valmiki Ramayana* is mainly a collection of poems. It is neither an ancient story nor a devotional text and for this reason we could not fully suppress our

> logic and rationality. This gave rise to a question in our minds. It was good that Valmiki wanted to depict Rama as very dutiful but was it necessary to harass Sita twice?[24] (Translation mine)

However, Basu exonerated Valmiki by saying that the 'Uttara Kānda' of *Ramayana* was later incorporated by other unnamed authors; so Valmiki should not be blamed for the punishment of Sita by Rama after the war.

Basu emphasized how difficult it was for him to judge from a modern and 'neutral standpoint' the various inconsistencies depicted in the *Ramayana*. Basu cited examples like the cowardly killing of Bali by Rama and the harsh language in which he refused to accept Sita after the killing of Ravana and finally the killing of the Shudra saint Sambuka to protect and preserve the rules of the Varna hierarchical system in which the Shudras were not allowed to spend time in meditation.

Another scholar of *Ramayana* Dr Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866-1939) in his Bengali book *Ramayani Katha* (1904) also questioned the killing of Bali by Rama from his hideout while he was engaged in a fight with his younger brother Sugriva, who was also Rama's ally. Sen wrote: 'On his deathbed Bali said many harsh words to Rama. Bali told Rama: "You carry the flag of Dharma but … you are a cheat. You are not worthy of being the son of Dasharatha."' According to Dinesh Chandra Sen, the spotless character in *Ramayana* was Bharata, who ironically was the son of the mischievous personality Kaikeyi, one of the wives of King Dasharatha. In *Valmiki Ramayana*, Kaikeyi was instrumental in sending Rama, Sita and Lakshmana to live in the forest for 14 years, after which she put her own son Bharata on the throne with the consent of Dasharatha. During these 14 years, Bharat lived an ascetic life and successfully governed the kingdom of Ajodhya (Ayodhya) from a nearby village named Nandigram.[25] Even at the start of the 14 years in exile, when Rama was on his way to the forest, along with Sita and Lakshmana, Bharata overtook them with his army and sought to take Rama back to Ajodhya. Lakshmana doubted Bharata's intent and went to the extent of saying that he wanted to kill Bharata. Rama, however, was sure that Bharata would not betray him and he would be proven right, although Rama also expressed his displeasure about Bharata to Sita, when Sita praised Bharata.[26] During his rule, the revenue of the government increased significantly, the kingdom prospered, and the people had no complaints. But no one except Guhak, the Shudra friend of Rama, praised Bharata in unequivocal terms: 'You were willing to return your throne [to Rama], you are blessed, I could not find anyone like you.'[27]

Another interesting research-based book in Bengali on *Ramayana* has recently been written by Swami Suparnananda. The name of the book is *SriRamkatha*. In his Introduction (*Kathamukh*), Swami Suparnananda has categorically stated:

> The character of Rama has been portrayed in many languages and in many forms throughout India and abroad. The stories depicted in the Valmiki Ramayana have not been accepted by all the people of all the provinces of India. Almost each region has its own *Ramayana* written in its own regional language.[28] (Translation mine)

The book by Suparnananda contains a vivid analysis of the epic, not only from a religious perspective but also from an anthropological angle, because, it views the characters of *Ramayana* in their moral and ideological contexts, without ignoring the locations from a modern geographical perspective.

In lieu of a conclusion

By and large, research on the *Ramayana* by Dinesh Chandra Sen (1925), Rajshekhar Basu (1946), K.S. Singh (1993), Nabaneeta Dev Sen (2002) and finally, by Swami Suparnananda (2023) brought out the portraits of Rama, Sita, Hanuman, Bharat and even Ravana not simply as devotional figures but also as human beings, with all their follies, faults and moral qualities.[29] ■

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Māyā or something which is relative. The followers of Ramanuja as well as the adherents of the Sāmkhya philosophy ultimately admit that this world is true relatively, and is not permanent. Our *sanātana dharma* takes us to the Reality through diverse paths. It says there is only one Reality—you may call It God, or Brahman, or whatever you like. But that is the Reality. One might ask, why different paths? It is in order to suit different minds.

Swami Vivekananda was once walking through a desert. He saw a mirage. He saw trees, plants, and then water. He walked towards that. Then suddenly he realized, O, I have read so much about mirage! The next day he also saw the lake, the trees and so on. But he knew what it was. Similarly when we know that we are that Absolute Reality, the worldly temporary things will not affect us anymore. ■

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of non-violence, truth, *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (complete abstinence from sexual and temporal pleasures) and *aparigraha* (not to accept anything more than what is necessary) have been highly appreciated in the Jain philosophy too. The Jains, even though they do not accept the *kshanikatvavāda* of the Buddhists, they have their concept of *syādvāda*. That is, nothing is complete in all respects; every matter, subject, or statement is partial; something is there, something is not there. Looking at this state of affairs (transience), there is a thirst for knowledge about the intransient or the perpetual, in the satisfaction of which lurks a wish to attain *moksha*. As far as Jain religion is concerned, *moksha* is the acme of spiritual development and the highest or final knowledge, to be attained with the required efforts. Right understanding, Right knowledge and Right conduct (observance of scriptural rules) are the *ratnatraya* or triple gem that together builds the *moksha-mārga* or the way to *mukti*. For this reason, Jain religion is known as *moksha-mārga*. The Jains believe both in karma and rebirth. After the attainment of *moksha*, there will be no rebirth. ■

(To be continued)

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