

RELIGION IN VĀLMĪKIRĀMĀYAṆA

Religion has always played a prominent part in ancient cultures and this all the more so in the case of India. On the thorough investigation of the objects that have been discovered in the Indus Valley, Marshal in his book *Mohenjodaro and Indus Civilisation* (p.76) has come to the conclusion that the religion of that period was a composite one and that many cults existed side by side and continued to flourish without hindrance to one another. Of these religious cults, the mother cult, Śiva cult and Viṣṇu cult must have been widely prevalent, a fact which is attested by the abundance of relevant materials unearthed in the Indus Valley. In the later religious history, other minor cults such as tree worship, worship of inanimate objects, serpent worship, worship of rivers, and worship of minor deities like Gaṇeśa, Skanda, Sūrya were also developed. All this religious worship is detailed in the texts called *āgama*-s which texts were also coming down from teacher to disciples. Thus we have in India two kinds of religious cults – one is the Vedic Cult and the other is the Temple Cult. Both existed in India from ancient times and continue to flourish till today. People followed both the cults. When we observe the present day practice in the living religions, we can see that each school has borrowed many practices from one another and both the cults have become almost one – and every one considers that there is only one religion – namely the vedic religion.

Normally in the texts of *Veda*-s or the supplementary texts such as *Śrauta-Sūtras* which deal with sacrificial rituals, and *Gṛhya-Sūtras*

which deal with domestic rituals we do not find any trace of Temple worship. But in Epics such as *Mahābhārata* and *Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa* we find traces of existence of Temples and that people were practicing the Temple cult. But we are not able to find full details of the practice of worship in Temples. But in *Purāṇa*-s one is able to find practices of both Vedic cult and Temple cult.

Prayers to Gods was a part of daily life of people. They prayed to Gods for fulfilment of their desired objects. Worship of Gods was a common feature of religious life of people. When the people of the kingdom heard about the coronation of Rāma, men and women, young and old prayed to Gods for the welfare of Rāma:

*āśaṃsante janāḥ sarve rāṣṭre puravare tathā /
 ābhyaṃtaraś ca bāhyaś ca paurajānapado janaḥ //
 striyo vṛddhās taruṇyaś ca sāyaṃ prātaḥ samāhitāḥ /
 sarvān devān namasyanti rāmasyārthe manasvināḥ /
 teṣāṃ tad yācitāṃ deva tvatprasādāt samṛdhyatām //* (VRā. II, 2, 51-53)

There are frequent references to Temples dedicated to Gods. The citizens adorned the bright and fair domes of the Temples with banners to celebrate Rāma's coronation (VRā. II, 6,11-13). Foods with *dakṣiṇā*-s were offered in Temples. There were Temples inside palaces also. Kausalyā, Rāma's mother, prayed to Lord Viṣṇu for the welfare of Rāma. Rāma slept fasting in the Temple of Viṣṇu before coronation (VRā. II,6,4). Kausalyā blesses Rāma when he started for stay in the forest telling that the Gods whom he worshipped everyday may protect him in the forest. Rāma circumambulated the Temples on his way when he went to meet his father (VRā. II,17,16). Rāma enquires, Bharata, when he meets him in the forest from if Temples were properly maintained (VRā. II,100,43). When the princes with their brides entered Ayodhyā from Mithilā, they worshipped at Temples of Ayodhyā (VRā. I, 77,13). In *Sundarakāṇḍa* (13,51) Hanumān says that he will take Rāvaṇa and offer him to Rāma as one offers an animal to God Paśupati (Śiva). While crossing the river Gaṅgā in the boat, Sītā prays to Gaṅgā telling that, if all of them return safely after completion of exile, she will offer cows, garments and food to Brahmins and will offer to goddess Gaṅgā thousand pots full of wine,

food mixed with mutton. She will also worship all the deities residing on her bank (in Temples, VRā. II,52,87-90). Tree worship is also indicated in *Sundarakāṇḍa* 22, 29 where Rāvaṇa is compared to a Kalpavṛkṣa:

sa kalpavṛkṣapratīmo bhūṣito 'pi bhayaṅkaraḥ /

Sītā offered her prayers to the Banian tree to protect her husband during exile (VRā. II,24,25):

*nyagrodhaṃ tam upāgāmya vaidehī vākyam abravīt /
namas te 'stu mahāvṛkṣa pārayen me patir vratam //*

In *Uttarakāṇḍa* (VRā. VII,31,42-44) Rāvaṇa worshipped Śivaliṅga or Śiva's symbol:

*yatra yatra sa yāti sma rāvaṇo rākṣaseśvaraḥ /
jāmbūnadamayaṇi liṅgaṇi tatra tatra sma mīyate //
vālukāvedimadhye tu talliṅgaṇi sthāpya rāvaṇaḥ /
arcayām āsa gandhaiś ca puṣpaiś cāmṛtagandhibhiḥ //
tataḥ satām ārtiharaṇaṃ paraṇaṃ varaṇaṃ varapradaṃ
cāndramayūkhabhūṣaṇam /
samarcayitvā ca niśācāro jagau prasārya hastān prananarta cāgrataḥ //*

This is the only place where the practice of Liṅga worship in detail is found, but in other places, only references or homage to Temples are mentioned. Anyway it is certain that the Temple cult was in practice during its period, though we do not find full details of rituals performed in Temples. This is natural, because *Rāmāyaṇa* being an Epic (*Itihāsa*) is considered to elaborate the Vedic cult, and as such details of Vedic rituals are found here.

In *Bālakāṇḍa* 5,23 drawing description of the city of Ayodhyā it is mentioned that the city was full of Brahmins who were well versed in *Veda*-s and their six *aṅga*-s (namely *Śikṣā*, *Vyākaraṇa*, *Chandas*, *Nirukta*, *Jyotiṣa* and *Kalpa*).

In VRā. 6,19 it is mentioned that the four caste system was well established and all the four castes were working in harmony.

In *sargas* 8-14 detailed description of the Aśvamedha sacrifice

performed by king Daśaratha is given. In *sargas* 15 and 16 the detailed description of the sacrifice called *Putrakāmeṣṭi* (a sacrifice to be done by one who desires children) performed by King Daśaratha is found. Sacrifices were important rituals, and apart from *Aśvamedha*, *Agniṣṭoma* (VRā. IV,4,8), and others were performed by Kings. Sages also performed sacrifices regularly. See Viśvāmitra's Sacrifice (VRā. I,47), Hermitage of Bharadvāja (VRā. II,90), Hermitage of Sage Agastya (VRā. III,II). The domestic ritual called *nāmakaraṇa* (giving names to the children) for Rāma, Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna is performed (VRā. I,18.19-20).

The Svastyana ceremony wishing good is performed for Rāma when he leaves with Sage Viśvāmitra, by Daśaratha, his mother and Sage Vasiṣṭha (VRā. I.22.2).

The main Sandhyā ceremony is properly performed by all twice borns, including women. The well known verse recited by all even today:

*kausalyāsuprajā rāma pūrvā saṁdhyā pravartate /
uttiṣṭha naraśārdūla kartavyaṁ daivam āhnikam /* (VRā. I, 23, 2)

which was recited by Sage Viśvāmitra to wake up Rāma asking to perform the morning Sandhyā. In *Sundarakāṇḍa* 14,50-52 Hanumān states that Sītā will certainly come to the flowing water to perform her Sandhyā ceremony.

The rites such as bath, offering of water to Sun god, recitation of the *gāyatrī mantra*, *tarpaṇa* and *mārjana* or offering of libations to the Sun god and the Manes, *prāṇāyāma* or the practice of breath control, *homa* or fireworship and *devatārcā* worship of gods which include the morning rites performed regularly by all the twice born.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa having taken bath, offering water oblations, recited the supreme *mantra* (*gāyatrī*) and completed other morning rites:

*snātvā kṛtodakau vīrau jepatuh paramaṁ japam /
kṛtāhnikau mahāvīryau //*

Viśvāmitra tells Rāma that they will stay for the night in the place where River Sarayū was joining River Gaṅgā after taking bath,

performing the recitation of *mantras* and performing the rite of fire rituals (VRā. I,23,17). These are the evening rites:

snātās ca kṛtajapyās ca hutahavyā narottama /

The Sages having taken bath in the Gaṅgā as per rules, offering water oblations to the Manes, performing fire ritual Agnihotra and after eating the remains of offerings of fire ritual stayed in the bank of Gaṅgā river (VRā. I,25,8-9):

*tatra snātvā yathānyāyaṇi saṃtarpya pītṛdevatāḥ /
hutvā caivāgnihotrāṇi prāśya cānuttamaṇi haviḥ //*

In *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* 6,1 – it is stated that Rāma having taken bath, with controlled mind worshipped God Nārāyaṇa together with his wife. Carrying the fire oblations on his head he offered ghee to the great God in the blazing fire. After eating the remains of fire oblation (*Havis*) he slept in the Temple of Viṣṇu meditating on Nārāyaṇa sitting on the seat of *kuśa* grass. After getting up next morning, having performed the rites of morning *Sadhyā* he recited the *mantra*. Then bowing before the God Madhusūdana (Viṣṇu) he praised him.

In *Aranyakāṇḍa* 8,2-3 Rāma together with Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa performed the morning rites in the hermitage of Sage Sūtikṣṇa and worshipped the fire and gods and completed the morning rites as prescribed in Texts.

In *Aranyakāṇḍa* 17,1-2 it is stated that Rāma together with his brother took bath in the River Godāvarī, went to his hermitage in Pāñcavaṭī and performed morning rites.

These are few examples. Throughout *Rāmāyaṇa* one can find that the morning and evening rites, fire rituals, oblations to Manes were performed by all the twice borns (*dvija*) which is called daily rites in the Vedic Texts.

The rite called *Vāstuśānti* before dwelling in a newly constructed building or hut in which presiding deities of the place are pleased by offering oblations in the fire ritual, offering of *bali* (cooked food) to Viśvedevas. Rudra and Viṣṇu were also performed. The deities of the dwelling site were pleased by offerings of flowers, fruits, roots and

cooked mutton, water oblations, recitation of Vedic *mantras*, offering of *darbha* and *kuśa* grass. See *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* 56,30-35 which describes the hermitage at Citrakūṭa and *Aranyakāṇḍa sarga* 15 which describes the hermitage built by Rāma at Pañcavaṭī near River Godāvarī.

Thus this ceremony of *Vāstuśānti* makes it a home for the people to dwell and also it will be dwelling of Gods, Manes and spirits and there will be place for fire ritual in which by offerings all these deities are pleased to protect the dwellers.

Another important ritual called *Āgrayaṇeṣṭi* offering of the first fruits of harvest to propitiate Gods and Manes. (See VRā. III, 16.6):

navāgrāyaṇapūjābhir abhyarcya pitṛdevatāḥ ।

This was a *śrauta* Sacrifice, but it has become a domestic rite in the present religious practice.

Cows had an important and holy place in Vedic times which continues up to day. Its killing is sinful and is condemned like killing of a Brahmin (VRā. IV,17,36). They were a mark of auspiciousness and were placed in fore front of processions (VRā. VI,128, 38). The cows formed an item in the making of charitable gifts; and it was considered as an act of religious merit (VRā. I,18, 20).

There was worship of numerous gods in the hermitage of Agastya (VRā. III,12,18-21). There were selected places of worship for the Gods such as Brahmā, Agni, Viṣṇu, Indra, Vivasvān, Soma, Bhaga, Kubera, Dhātā, Vidhātā, Vāyu, Nāgarāja, Gāyatrī, Vasu, Varuṇa and Kārttikeya.

But the trinity Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva were holding an important place, as they were considered as creator, protector and destructor of the Universe. There was no conflict between Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism. People worshipped both in the same household. Rāma worshipped Viṣṇu in Ayodhyā (VRā. II,6,1-4) and offered oblations to Śiva at Citrakūṭa (VRā. II, 56,31). While returning from Laṅkā in Puṣpaka Vimāna, Rāma informs Sītā at the point of Setubandha (Rāmeśvara) that here Śiva conferred favour on him (VRā. VI,126,15):

atra pūrvaṇ mahādevaḥ prasādām akarot prabhuh /

It may perhaps indicate that by Śiva's grace the Nalasetu, the bridge between Rameswaram and Laṅkā was built and the well known legend of Rāma consecrating the Śivaliṅga at there.

Kubera, Yama, Indra, Varuṇa and the great god with three eyes, Śiva, and the Creator Brahmā appeared before Rāma and praised him (VRā. VI,120).

In *Bālakāṇḍa* I,75 there is a story of conflict created by Brahmā between Śiva and Viṣṇu to decide who is the greater and then during the fight Viṣṇu was considered as superior to Śiva. But this does not indicate any discord between Śiva and Viṣṇu, because throughout *Rāmāyaṇa* it is stated that both were worshipped by all equally.

Sage Kardama praises Śiva (VRā. VII,90,12) as a great god to bless:

nānyaṇ paśyāmi bhaiṣajyam antarā vṛṣabhadhvajam /

Rāmāyaṇa depicts gods and men as intimately associated with one another. Gods were considered as saviours of mankind. Indra comes to help Rāma in the battle at Laṅkā by giving him his own chariot and charioteer. Gods in turn were sometimes helped by men. For instance Daśaratha helped Indra in his war against Śambara, the Asura (VRā. II,9,11).

When Sītā was asked to enter fire to establish her purity, Sītā entered fire and the fire-god brought her up and handed over her to Rāma. Then all the gods appeared before Rāma and praised him (VRā. VI,120). Then Śiva praised Rāma and told him that his father Daśaratha, now residing in heaven has come to see him. Accordingly Daśaratha came and blessed Rāma (VRā. VI,122).

Dharma or standard of morality is praised throughout *Rāmāyaṇa*. Rāma was praised by the people (VRā. II,2) as the one who is the protector of Dharma. All the people in Ayodhyā were righteous, truthful, learned and happy. No person who was untruthful, cruel, illiterate or atheistic was there. All were pure and were engaged in discharge of their religious duties. They were abiding by duty and truth (VRā. I,6). Charitable acts were always praised (VRā. I,28). Self control of mind

was necessary for spiritual Salvation. Who have no self control are incapable of attaining higher regions (VRā. III,5,8). Ungratfulness was considered as a greatest sin and no atonement was possible. Atonement has been prescribed for the slayer of a cow, for a drunkard, for a thief and for a violater of a vow, but no expiation is prescribed for an ungrateful person (VRā. IV,34,10-12).

Cremation was the usual method for the disposal of the dead body. Normally it is to be done by the eldest son. But in the case of Daśaratha's cremation (VRā. II,76,17-18) it had to be done by Bharata, as the eldest son was in exile. Rāvaṇa's cremation (VRā. VI,III) was done by his brother Vibhīṣaṇa as all his sons were killed in battle before he died. Vāli was fortunate as he was cremated by his son Aṅgada (VRā. IV,25,49-50). The pomp and the splendour of the funeral rites of these three kings is detailed in *Rāmāyaṇa*. These funeral rites were performed much in the same way as we see them today. Śrāddha ceremony on anniversary day was performed by sons of the departed soul every year. Every son was expected to go to Gayā at least once and perform the Śrāddha ceremony there (VRā. II,107,13). It is interesting to note that Rāma performed the cremation of the bird-king Jaṭāyu who died while fighting with Rāvaṇa to protect Sītā. He considered him like his father Daśaratha and cremated him with all the usual rites (VRā. III,68).

All the rites and rituals were performed by reciting Vedic *mantras* and as prescribed in the texts of Domestic rituals namely *Gṛhyasūtra*-s. Vedic Sacrifices were performed as prescribed in the *Śrauta Sūtra*-s. *Veda*-s occupied a highly sacred position in the period of *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The doctrine of Karma and transmigration is stressed every where in *Rāmāyaṇa*. Karma was regarded as the cause of all the happiness or misery. Karma and Dharma go together. Hanumān tells Rāvaṇa that fruits of Dharma and *adharmā* are to be enjoyed separately. Rāvaṇa so far had enjoyed happiness due the dharma performed by him, but now because of stealing Sītā, another's wife, he has to suffer due to the fruit of *adharmā*:

prāptaṃ dharmaphalaṃ tāvad bhavatā nātra saṃśayaḥ /
phalaṃ asyāpy adharmasya kṣipram eva prapatsyase // (VRā. V,29-30)

Normally the fruits of Karma good or bad done in past birth are expected to reap in the present birth. Rāma attributes his misfortunes including loss of Sītā to his past sins (VRā. III,63,4-6). Sītā considers that her captivity is the result of evil deeds in her previous birth (VRā. V,25,18). Daśaratha considers that his separation from Rāma is due to his evil deeds in his past birth (VRā. II,12,19). Kausalyā lamented that her separation from her son is due to her past sins (VRā. II,43,17).

Rāma was considered as an embodiment of Dharma:

rāmo vigrahavān dharmah... /

(VRā. III,27,13) and he always wanted to be truthful, faithful and kept up his words. He made a vow to have only one wife and to protect those who resort to him, who ever he may be. In all his misfortunes he never moved an inch from the right path. The impression of teachings of *Upaniṣads* stating that life is just a bondage and when one realises his true state he will obtain salvation, is not found anywhere in *Rāmāyaṇa*, but the theory of Karma and Dharma is well established.

In *Rāmāyaṇa* apart from the ordinary people the religious life of Hermits, who are leading Vānaprastha Āśrama is also detailed Siddhāśrama of Sage Viśvāmitra I,47, Āśrama of Sage Bharadvāja (VRā. II,90-92), Āśrama of Sage Atri (VRā. II,117-118), Āśrama of different Sages (VRā. III,1), Āśrama of Sage Śarabhaṅga (VRā. III,5), of Sutikṣṇa (VRā. III,7-8) and of Agastya (VRā. III,11-13). Here in these Āśramas they strictly followed the religious practices prescribed for them in Vedic texts, namely the daily rituals, fire rituals, teaching disciples, receiving and honouring guests etc. and performing penance (*Tapas*). A special feature is that Sage Śarabhaṅga entered fire, burnt his mortal body, came out as a young boy blazing fire and went up to the world of Brahmā.

Then there are the religious practices of the monkey race. The Monkey King Vāli was performing daily Sandhyā. He was coronated as a King of Monkeys with proper rites and rituals. It seems monkeys also studied *Veda*-s etc. In *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa* (VRā. IV,3,28-35) Rāma describes Hanumān who comes and speaks to him as one who has studied all *Veda*-s, grammar, method of speech etc. So the Monkeys also

seem to have practiced Vedic religion. Rāma makes friendship with Sugrīva in front of fire as witness (VRā. IV,5,14-16). After killing Vālī, Sugrīva was coronated as King of Monkeys with the usual rites (VRā. IV,26). All this shows that they were treated like men. But there are no details about their daily practice of rituals and rites.

Then there are the Rākṣasa-s. They were brahmins, who were reciting *Veda*-s, performing sacrifices and fire rituals and practicing Tapas. But they did not seem to follow the Dharma prescribed for mankind. Because Rāvaṇa says that usurping others wives is the Dharma of Rākṣasa-s (VRā. V,20-5). Though this is his statement, the others in his city do not consider this bringing Sītā by force to Laṅkā as proper and advise him to return her back. Rāvaṇa was very well versed with Dharma (VRā. V,22). So his statement that it was Rākṣasa *dharma* may be correct for his race. Even in battle Rāma and his army were fighting a straight battle, but the Rākṣasa-s were fighting in different ways using their magical powers obtained through their penances. This is very clear in the battle of Indrajit.

Thus we can see that there were different kinds of religious practices, all practised with Vedic *mantras*. So Vedic religion is prominent in *Vālmīkirāmāyaṇa*. But this epic does not ignore the Temple cult which existed throughout the religious practices of people from ancient times till today. *Rāmāyaṇa* being an epic which is considered as elaborating what is told in *Veda*-s gives details found in *Veda*-s and connected literature and finds no necessity to give details of Temple worship. But all the while it does mention the existence of Temples and that kings and people were worshipping in the Temples day and night.