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HOW DOES THE WORLD VIEW THE *RĀMĀYAṆA*?

If one wants to know how the world views the *Rāmāyaṇa* one will have to start with the Indian frame of reference vis-à-vis the *Rāmāyaṇa*. There are two very important Indian views on the *Rāmāyaṇa*: one, it is an epic symbolising the victory of good over evil; two, it emphasises that by right action one can attain the state of divinity. Both these views are comprehensible through the character of Rāma, the locus of this great epic.

With these two views in mind one may move from India to different places in South and South-East Asia to understand how people there view the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

In all humility I would, however, like to submit that both the Indian views are problematic. How can a country which can develop the concept of complementariness of opposites accept a naïve formula of victory of good over evil, thereby rejecting one aspect of life in favour of another and not accepting complementary dualism? Again, is Rāma the prototype of a man indicating how he should journey from "humaneness" to "divinehood". Is he really a man, or a superman devoid of passions natural to a mortal man?

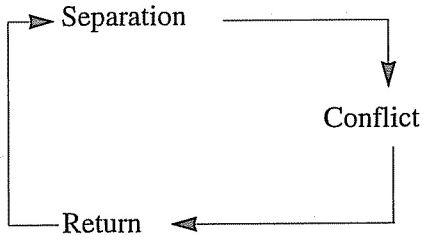
The *Rāmāyaṇa* is a *kāvya* – mythical *kāvya*. It has its origin in archetypal myths and has become a part of the collective unconscious of the people. As such it reflects the ethos and psyche of a people, not only in a given temporal frame but in its larger universal span. This, in fact, accounts for its world-wide appeal as a book of enduring significance.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa* the archetypal myth is depicted in the form of a war on a cosmic level between light and dark. The two terms "Divine" and "Demonic" do not necessarily mean good and bad; they are two conflicting life philosophies. What enhances the value of the epic is that there is no character, including Rāma, totally good or totally evil. The characters look true to life since they tend to show their human weaknesses from time to time. In regard to Rāma it is said that his character tells us how a man by his action can reach divinehood. Rāma is depicted not simply as a man but as a superman far above the run of a common man, unique in the achievement of *karma* and the fulfilment of *dharma* – such is the Rāma of Vālmīki. But then this Rāma is very remote from us and somewhat too overbearing with much difficulty we see the focus of his existence. I shall take up this aspect later.

The archetypal myth, as I have said, is of two conflicting life philosophies. It is the struggle between the body and the beyond – between, what Albert Schweitzer says, world – assertion and world-negation. In the Hindu way of life the concept of hero is developed on the basis of this theory: those who renounce, enjoy. So the Indian mind is simultaneously attracted and intrigued by wild nature and the lush beauty of the evergreen forest and the eternal snow on the Hīmālaya. Rāma goes to the forest at the moment of his glory of coronation. It is not predeterministic fatalism but an eternal quest for truth. The Pāṇḍavas vanish ultimately in the Hīmālaya, after the great war. Buddha and Mahāvīra renounce the joys of the world and go to the forest. Aśoka at the height of his victory in the Kaliṅga war renounces fighting. The same myth envelopes Gandhi walking down the streets of Calcutta bringing solace to people ruined during communal riots and ignoring celebrations of freedom at midnight.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is concerned vitally with human experience. It is not "*Guru Saṃhitā*", i.e. it is not a scripture – it is both "*Sakhi Saṃhitā*" and "*Kanta Saṃhitā*", i.e. it has an ethical purpose as an epic, but the lesson is not stated – rather, it is to be inferred. It is because of this quality that the *Rāmāyaṇa* has retained the multiple-meaningfulness of a great piece of literature of enduring quality. Because of multiple meaningfulness, the human experience embedded in this epic has the potential to come to terms with new encounters

and new contexts. This experience rolls across South and South-East Asia adapting itself to each new medium, though maintaining its central vital power. We encounter an experience within whatever frame of reference we live. The basic narrative proceeds in a circle:



The return indicates the establishment of "Rāmarājaya", restoration of the divine order, but then again comes separation, to fulfil the poetic obligation. The story attained its popularity because it does reflect a value structure.

The popular appeal of the work in Sri Lanka as in Indonesia has been due to the ideal of the *Rāmayāṇa* in general, the virtues of Sītā in particular. The folk version of the Sri Lankan story is related during the performance of Kaṅkariya, started in the reign of Panduvasadeva, 5th c. B.C. (C.E. Godakumbura). It is Kang-seng-hui who rendered the *Jātaka* form of the *Rāmāyaṇa* into the Chinese in A.D. 251. In the Chinese, the motif of Hanumat in quest of Sītā is very strong and it has enriched the Chinese popular culture and folklore. In Cambodia, the Khmer citations confirm that the *Rāmāyaṇa* had become a major and favourite epic. Here the Khmer King is shown as a new Rāma who crushes the King of Chams. The text is closer to that of Java than to that of Vālmīki. The Indonesian epic, *Kakawin*, exploits the episodes of Hanumat and his simian army. It magnifies the didactic element of the epic and says that one who recites the *Rāmāyaṇa* will get divine guidance in his life. In Cambodia, as in other South-East Asian versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the history or the narrative is the attraction of the common people, but ultimately the story tells the listener about the glory of Rāma. The Khmer *Rāmakīrti* or Thai *Rāmakien* seems to have grown to glorify Rāma. In the Cambodian version the spiritual meaning of the epic – Rāma as *chit*, Lakṣmaṇa as the mind-force,

Hanumat as the vital force, and Sītā as the eternal soul – strongly indicates that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is taken as a piece of literature which gives entertainment as well as philosophical illumination. In Laos the narration is used extensively for the performing arts. The convention is to choose very young boys and girls to portray Rāma and Sītā so as to establish them as symbols of life and its struggle which is ageless and which transcends time.

A tree metaphor is often used to distinguish between the various parts of the tales of Rāma performed in the Malay version of the shadow play, the *Wayang Siam*. The main part concerning the roots, trunk and branches of the tree extends from before the birth of Rāvaṇa up to his death. I wonder if the ancient motif of the tree, the inverse tree of the *Upaniṣads* or the *Manyu* and *Dharma* trees of the *Mahābhārata* have anything to do with this. Here Rāma is a fairy-tale hero. It only explains that the narrative is the main attraction, integrated with the ethical high seriousness. As in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Kakawin Rāma teaches "Astabrata" to Vibhīṣaṇa to give him divine knowledge, paving way for liberation. The Dalango (the Malayan repertoire) is, on the contrary history which entertains. The major motifs are the same – love, kidnap, search, rescue. On the philosophical level, Rāma is Agung, the supreme one; Lakṣmaṇa, Halam, the world; Sītā Cahaya-ke-indera, realm of the gods or the light of heaven. In Thai *Rāmakien*, the strong motifs are Sītā wading through the fire, Hanumat the volunteer and his love affairs, Rāma's journey in the forest and ruling over Ayodhyā. The didactic element is also very much visible here which introduces the local or the Buddhistic beliefs to give a deeper meaning to life. The cross-cultural fertilisation of the Rāma theme indicates that great literature transcends doctrinal approaches and appeals to humanity as a whole.

To come back to the locus of the *Rāmāyaṇa* i.e. Rāma, one may conclude that with the two-fold purpose of the theme, diversion and illumination, the character of Rāma is developed as a man of magnetic attraction who is an epitome of heroic glory and transcendental idealization. But do we not notice something else here? Does not the character of Rāma impel us, living as we do in our own frame of reference, to think that he is much too a superman, living at a distance from us? Do we not feel like echoing the words of Lakṣmaṇa spoken

to his brother when he agreed to fulfil his father's vows, «Rāma, you may be wise, but your judgement has been perverted by your *Dharma*; I detest such a *dharma* (*Ayodhyā* 21:23)». I am sure had Śrī Kṛṣṇa been there at that time, he would have explained the Dharma-Vibhāga to Rāma as he did to Arjuna, when he was ready to kill Yudhiṣṭira to fulfil his vow, and Rāma might have abandoned the idea of going to the forest.

Rāma's *dharma* is planted far above love and hatred, even above justice and unfairness; to abide by it he must allow injustice and if necessary the killing of Bali and Shambhuka, though Rāma thinks that both of them had violated the *Śāstras* and he follows the kingly *dharma* by punishing the guilty. Also, Rāma thinks that he must not hesitate to hurt even those nearest to them. The reference is to the unkind statement made by Rāma to Sītā at their first meeting after the war. He tells her: «O daughter of Janaka, I have no desire for you now. You may depart in any of the ten directions. Go to Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata or Satrughna, live happily even with Sugriva or Bibhiṣaṇa. You are beautiful and pleasing, Sītā. With you there in his house, Rāvaṇa could not have controlled himself». I admire Sītā when she replies back that Rāma's words are fit only for a base person:

kiṃ māmasadṛśaṃ vākyam īdṛśaṃ śrotradāruṇam /
rukṣam śrāvayase vīra prākṛtaḥ prākṛtām iva[1] //

Rāma does all these things just for the sake of his family prestige and accords to public opinion a higher place than to the feelings of his own heart («My innermost self knows Sītā as pure, of nature and justly renowned for virtue», *Yuddha*, 118.20). But Rāma went to the forest against the wishes of his subjects, and ultimately he banished Sītā to please his subjects. These two actions seem contradictory but they are not really so. At the heart of both is the desire for protection against calumny about himself, about his father and about his noble ancestry. He is a man who mechanically performs his duty, and hence his voice does not tremble, his eyes do not go moist when he issues

1. VRā. *Yuddha*, 116.5 (ed. by Sh. Sh. Kaṭṭi Mudholakara, Delhi, Parimal Publ., 1984).

the terrible order of banishment for Sītā. He does not even realise that by punishing the virtuous woman he would by implication be confirming the false charge against her. This is his *hamartia*, the Aristotelian term for human weakness which many will consider dutyfulness. Rāma abandoned Sītā, Agamemnon cut the throat of his own daughter, Aeneas caused the suicide of his beloved Dido – all on account of Dharma, in order to discharge their full responsibility as King, Commander, Empire-founder. They had to leap over all hurdles at any cost and without any remorse. We may find the single-minded steadfastness in the world's religious leaders as well. Professor Buddhadev Bose in his *Mahabharter Katha* gives a list of such people. Buddha turned down thrice the request of Gautami to assume *sanyas*. When he at last grants her permission it is not out of pity for his tear-stained nurse but at the request of Anand. We see this again in the life of Jesus Christ; when two persons sought to become his disciples, he allows them not a moment's time, not even time to bury a dead father. Chaitanya does not excuse the younger Haridas because he had once begged alms of a woman, and Haridas ultimately takes his own life. And in this century Mahatma Gandhi threatened to abandon his wife when she hesitated to clean the tub of excrement of another person, and on another occasion he made her weep over a gold ornament. Returning to Rāma, we wonder what would have happened had he respected the *public opinion* and not gone to the forest. Would there have been a tarnishing of the Buddha-attainment if he had said a few kind words to his nurse? The glory of Jesus had not dimmed if he had allowed his follower time to attend his father's last rites. Nor would there be any diminishing in Chaitanya's glory if he had forgiven Haridas. And Gandhiji would have hardly lapsed in his principles if he had allowed his wife to retain the ornament gifted to her as a momento in South Africa, to be given away later as a wedding present to their future daughter-in-law. But those who raise such questions are weak-minded like us, while those to whom such questions are addressed are either heroic or saintly or saviours of mankind. They have appeared in order to fulfil a destiny and they cannot tolerate any compromise with duty.

Rāma can be so mechanical, almost out of proportion, when after Sītā's banishment his heart breaks not out of pain for her but because

for four days he has not been able to attend to his kingly duties at the court (*Uttara* 53:4). It is true that after Sītā's final disappearance Rāma's grief grows irrepressible but he quickly controls it. Thereafter, he "happily" spends very many years performing his *dharma* as becoming his lineage, his *dharma* as king, and his *Svadharma*. Is the term "happily" used here by the poet with some irony to indicate Rāma's *hamartia*?

We may recollect two other heroes in similar situations – Titus, the Roman Emperor abandoning Berenice (though they were not married), and Aeneas abandoning Dido for the sake of the Kingdom. Both betray their mental dilemma. However, in the European tradition there is a long practice of abandoning the beloved, but in the entire Indian puranic literature, the rejection of Sītā by Rāma is the only event of its kind.

Because love is a universal feeling while *dharma* is difficult to practise, we feel happy when we find Kālidāsa, Bhavabhūti, Kṛthibāsa, and many others transforming Vālmīki's Rāma, that flawless embodiment of all human qualities, into a lover afflicted by separation. So in course of time we find two images of Rāma emerging though contradictory to each other. One, a superman, unbending, single-minded performer of duty; the other, a tear-sodden, separation-struck lover created by later poets. We go on making our own Rāma by breaking and compounding these two images, and in fact we habitually go on doing so, and in the process a third image emerges out of those two opposites – an image beyond our comprehension as said by Bhavabhūti:

cetāṃsi ko nu vijñātum arhati.