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WAS BHAVABHŪTI IRREVERENT  
IN THE *UTTARARĀMACARITA*?

Among those of us who are dedicated to the study of Hinduism, Sanskrit culture and its products, it often happens that either due to philological or linguistic concerns or due to contact with *paṇḍits* through their texts, we forget about important nuances and concepts which frequently mark fundamental changes from one period to another, particularly in the works of authors and intellectuals of ancient India.

The differences between many characters and stories of Sanskrit literature and the rules laid down in the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* are evident. Thus, although the *Śūdras* have no rights, not even the right to hear the *Veda* or to perform penitence, Vidura, the celebrated sage of the *Mahābhārata*, is the son of a *Śūdra* woman, that is, technically an untouchable, a *Caṇḍāla*. Yet it is said of him that he is the incarnation of *dharma* (*Ādi Parva* 63, 95) and that *dharma* has become Vidura (*Āśrama Parva* 28, 21). And when king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, a *Kṣatriya* no less, wants religious instruction, he calls on Vidura (*Udyoga Parva* 33-41).

This type of appreciation of a human being over and above the *varṇas* and the *jatis* is frequent: no less than the great *ṛṣi* Vasiṣṭha was the son of a prostitute, a fact which did not diminish either his holiness nor his religious authority due to his vast knowledge, nor the great respect shown him by all the characters. Furthermore, Parāśara, the posthumous son of Śaktri and therefore the grandson of Vasiṣṭha, one

of the twenty traditional authors of the *smṛti* and author of the *Parāśara-smṛti*, and according to some the same as the one mentioned in the *Ṛg Veda* (VIII.18.21) and in the *Mahābhārata* (I.177) was the son of a *Caṇḍāla* woman.

We must not forget such well-known cases as that of Yudhiṣṭhira, an incarnation of *dharma*, when he defines the *Brāhmaṇas* through their behaviour and not by their birth, and expresses that one must not consider a man a *Brāhmaṇa* only because he was born into a *Brāhmaṇa* family or a *Śūdra* because his parents were *Śūdras* (*Mahābhārata*, *Vāna Parva* 180).

And in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* there is the well-known case of Satyakāma, son of Jabalā, and the reply Hāridrumata Gautama gives him when his pupil confesses he does not know to which caste he belongs.

In those cases and in others which you know about and which we will not discuss at this time to avoid being too protracted, what happens to the unbending rules of the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra*?

It would be worthwhile to work on a history of ideas and their evolution in ancient Indian literature, and my brief paper pretends to call attention to this. Of course in many cases we deal with mythical authors, but the ideas are not mythical. Someone put them in writing. Moreover, we have enough authors that are known and whose existence is historically proved to be able to carry out the same analysis. Let us examine the concrete case I put forward as an example:

In the specific case of the personality of Rāma, it is evident that the current Rāma, mainly forged by the Hindu faithful on the basis of the text by Tulsi Das, is not the same as the Rāma described by Vālmiki.

Indeed, in spite of parts of the *Bālakāṇḍa* and the *Uttarakāṇḍa* which transform Rāma into an incarnation of Viṣṇu (and which some believe were interpolated after Vālmiki), what the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa* wrote about was the life of a human king, with defects and virtues like any man, and not the life of the Creator God incarnate. This last is the *Rāmacaritamānasa* by Tulsi Das, but not the work on which it was inspired, the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*.

And, among other facts which back up this statement, we might

mention that the text by Vālmiki shows that the customs of his time were very different from those of today. For this reason, it is a mistake to want to judge the work of Vālmiki by the standards of contemporary Hinduism and especially by the views some *paṇḍits* have of it. Unfortunately, this mistake is made quite often. Suffice it to point out, as proof, the many times that in the *Rāmāyaṇa* meat-eating is spoken of and that Rāma himself eats it, in the form of gazelles, goats, wild boar or mutton (which is also eaten by Agastya) and fowl. There are some translations from Sanskrit into English, for example, in which things which do not please the translators are altered and references to meat-eating are eliminated.<sup>1</sup>

It is within ancient Hinduism, in that India so far in time from Tulsi Das, that Vālmiki deals in his epic with many things. In it, for instance, Rāma heard «words that were flattering for his pride», (*Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, XVII, 12); Sītā calls Rāma «woman disguised as a man», (*Ibidem*, XXX, 3); Sītā calls Lakṣmaṇa «a dishonour» to his race, «perfidious», «wicked» and other similar things (*Ibidem*, XLV, 21-27). Vālmiki also presents Rāma ordering the extermination of the *Gandharvas* just to be able to take over their lands and their wealth, and when the complete extermination of the *Gandharvas* and the occupation of their territory is related to him, «the account pleased Rāghava» (*Uttarakāṇḍa*, C and CI).

All of this is sufficient to prove that Vālmiki is speaking of a man king, but there are three even more important details which are the following:

- I) The fact that, against all the norms of the *Kṣatriyas* (the punishment in the *śāstras* is the loss of *varṇa*), Rāma kills a woman, Tātakā (*Bālakāṇḍa*, XXVI, 26).
- II) Rāma falls back two or three steps, something inconceivable in a *Kṣatriya*, in his fight against Khara (*Āraṇyakāṇḍa* XXX, 23).
- III) Rāma kills Vālin by treachery, while the latter fights against Sugrīva (*Kiṣkindhakāṇḍa* XVI, 27 and ff.).

It is in the 8<sup>th</sup> century when Bhavabhūti writes his *Uttarakāma-*

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1. *Śrīmad Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* (with Sanskrit text and English translation), 3 vols., Gita-Press, Gorakhpur, India. 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1995.

*carita*, inspired in the *Uttarakāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmiki. Bhavabhūti, a very devoted *Brāhmaṇa*, born in the Taittirīya *sākhā* of the Black *Yajur Veda* and in the Kaśyapa *gotra*, is famous as a great poet, and his play is an excellent poetic and dramatic work. In it the author refers to Rāma as a man, a great man if you will, but with the weaknesses and faults which would be inconceivable in God. And not only, as we will now see, does he refer directly to those faults but he also radically modifies one of the scenes in Vālmiki in a very profound man-ner, thus confronting the prejudice of his time.

In *sarga* LXXVI of the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, Vālmiki describes how Rāma kills a *Śūdra*, Śambūka, who because he devoted himself to penitence caused the death of the son of a *Brāhmaṇa*. And when the *Śūdra* tells him what he is...

- 1) On this the descendant of Raghu, taking out stainless sword from its sheath, chopped off the head of the *Śūdra*, while he was speaking thus.
- 2) On the *Śūdra* being killed, the gods headed by Agni altogether with Indra repeatedly praised the scion of the Kakutsthas saying: «(It has been) well done».
- 3) A shower of very fragrant divine flowers carried by the wind fell on all his sides.
- 4) The gods highly pleased said to Śrī Rāma of true valour: «O king, O wise one, this (pious deed) to be performed for the Suras (gods) has been well performed by you.
- 5) Take whatever boon you desire, O Subjugator of foes, this *Śūdra* will not attain heaven due to you, O descendant of Raghu». <sup>2</sup>

Let us now see how this same scene is presented by Bhavabhūti in Act II of the *Uttararāmacarita*. Rāma says:

Oh! Right hand, let fall the sword on the *Śūdra* ascetic, that it may revive the dead *Brāhmaṇa* boy. Thou art a limb of Rāma, able to banish Sītā exhausted by her heavy foetus; whence canst thou then have pity?

And the annotation is definitive to clarify the intentions of

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2. *Op. Cit.*

Bhavabhūti in this scene: *Kathaṃ cit prahr̥tya*, which I have translated as «striking with repugnance». *Kathaṃ cit*. leaves no doubt regarding the absolute lack of will with which Rāma acts. And immediately after the annotation mentioned, Rāma says: «*Kṛtaṃ Rāmasadr̥śaṃ karma*», that is, «A deed has been done worthy of Rāma», which after the *śloka* quoted before clearly means that it is befitting a cruel man «who knows nothing of pity». But this is only the beginning: Bhavabhūti immediately has the spirit of the *Śūdra* Śambūka go on stage saying the boy has joyously revived and that he, Śambūka, accumulates supernatural power. And as though this were not enough, the spirit of the *Śūdra* speaks in Sanskrit. To whom Rāma replies, among other things: «Therefore, enjoy the fruit of your hard penance».

All of this is precisely the contrary of what Vālmiki puts forward. And after a long conversation in which Śambūka recites beautiful *ślokas* in an impeccable Sanskrit, Rāma bids him farewell saying, «Friend, may the path called *Devayāna* be prosperous to you! Mayest thou vanish towards the holy worlds!» While in Vālmiki the gods state that thanks to the sword of Rāma, the *Śūdra* will not gain heaven.

Furthermore, those cases in which Rāma is mistaken and which are dealt with by Vālmiki with a certain descretion, are made to stand out by Bhavabhūti. So the latter takes these cases, points them out and, even more notable, he makes no less than Lava, the son of Rāma, use them as a reproach against his father, although when Lava does so, he does not know that Rāma is his father.

In Act V, at the end thereof, Lava says, referring to Rāma:

For, they whose glory is undiminished even by the slaughter of the wife of Sunda are the great ones of the world. And those three steps which were taken in the battle with Khara though not quite in retreat and the skill of Rāma in subduing the son of Indra - on that head also people are well informed.

There is no doubt, examining the text with care, that Bhavabhūti in his time dealt with Rāma as a king and never as God himself, that is, as did Tulsī Das, the great Avadhī poet, seven or eight centuries later. In the evolution of Indian life, the latter has covered the former,

later concepts have led many to think that at the time of Bhavabhūti and Kālidāsa all was as it is today, and people have not examined in depth the great differences between one period and the other.

The text of Bhavabhūti clearly indicates that in the India of his times the beliefs about Rāma were in no way those of today. Were this not so, Bhavabhūti would have committed an irreverence so grave that there would necessarily have been references to it in the texts of his contemporaries, which does not occur. Also, and this is evident, Bhavabhūti did not participate of the inflexibility of the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* regarding caste. The case of Śambūka, the *Śūdra*, is proof of this.

My conclusion is that there was no irreverence on the part of the playwright. It is just that the Hinduism of those times was more open and generous than that of the period of Vālmiki (as is proved by the Śambūka episode), and more so than the Hinduism of today for certain *paṇḍits*.

It is very interesting to observe and analyse the ideas and rebelliousness of those ancient Indian authors who besides cultivating the *kāvya* and following the teachings of Pāṇini, were human beings with the capacity to disagree with the single-thought system which some (as much today as yesterday) wanted to impose.