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QUESTIONING THE “QUESTIONING OF RAMAYANAS”  
IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are two great epics of India and their influence on the life of Indians has been great and immeasurable. Regarding the greatness of these two epics, Tagore says: it is not enough merely to say that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are two great epics. They are also a history, though not of a particular time or period. They are the eternal history of India. Other histories have changed on the march of time but this history has not. These two epics embody what India cherishes as its ideals.<sup>1</sup> Of these two epics, again, the appeal of the *Ramayana* has been deeper and larger than that of the *Mahabharata*, the main reason being that the *Ramayana* is a homogeneous text, with a simple and straightforward story.

The *Ramayana* is a living tradition not only in India but also in several countries and continents world over. Since ancient times it has been in limelight and the source of ethical and moral values to Indian society. But at the same time it has been questioned and is being questioned every time whenever there is any tension or crisis not only in India but also in the international arena. Whether it is a social, political, cultural or religious issue, debate starts among scholars on the *Ramayana* tradition. The conflict between good and bad even today is equated with Rama-Ravana conflict. Interestingly, American action against *Taliban* regime and Osama Bin-Laden in Afghanistan is seen

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1. Banerjee, P. *Rama in Indian Literature, Art and thought*, Delhi, Vol. I, p. 1.

by a few scholars of Indology in the same context and attempts were made to glorify President Bush as Rama and vilify Osama-bin-Laden as Ravana.<sup>2</sup>

The *Ramayana* tradition has been questioned by western and, of course, later on by Indian scholars from various angles. Questions are asked on Rama's ideals and deeds, and his morality is being challenged on different grounds.<sup>3</sup> But prior to questioning the *Ramayana*, one must try to go back to the original story of the *Ramayana* tradition and then raise questions. Otherwise questions based on interpolations and insufficient probing is very much susceptible to further questioning. Thus comes the idea of questioning the "Questioning of *Ramayanans*".

The Ramayana Tradition: Historical perspective:

For centuries *Ramayana* – the story of Rama and Sita, Ravana and Hanuman and several other characters – has held the minds of the people, educated as well as uneducated, rich or poor. Everyone knows that its composer was Valmiki. And there is a current tradition among the scholars as well as laymen that the *Ramayana* is an 'Adikavya'. It is the first poem composed in Sanskrit (or in the world, according to one way of thinking). Indeed in India, the name *Ramayana* has come to be used as a sort of genre name for all texts of the tradition and even as a colloquial label for any long narrative (as in the Hindi expression, "to narrate a *Ramayana*" – i.e. to go on at great length about some matter). Traditionally attributed to the poet Valmiki, this Sanskrit epic of 24,000 verses is thought to have been composed within the first few centuries before the beginning of the Christian era. Internal evidence suggests that a considerable portion of it may indeed have been the work of a single author, but nothing is known of Valmiki as a historical figure. Popular legend depicts him as a low-born robber<sup>4</sup> who was transformed into a sage by the grace of Ram and who wrote his narrative during his hero's own life time, in the *Treta Yuga* or second aion of the current cosmic cycle which can be

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2. Discussion came into notice during the International Ramayana Conference at Northern Illinois University, USA, held from 21-23 September 2001.

3. Richman, Paula, 2001. *Questioning Ramayana; A South Asian Tradition*, University of California Press, Berkley.

4. Lutgendorf, Philip, 1994. *The Life of a text Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas*, OUP, Delhi, p. 3

placed in the remote past – “nine lakh years ago.” Valmiki is thus hailed by later tradition as adikavi-the first poet, the inventor of the influential sloka meter and the mentor of all later poets, especially those of the Rama narrative tradition.

Historically speaking, the date for the *Valmiki Ramayana* has been given differently by different scholars and it has not still been satisfactorily decided so far. The study of the *Ramayana* shows that during the *Ramayana* age the Vedic gods were popular. This points to the fact that the *Ramayana* reflects the state of an ancient society not far removed from the Vedic times. Various recensions and innumerable versions of the *Ramayana* also speak of its antiquity. Again except a few big cities like Ayodhya and Lanka, Rama did find hardly any big *Janapada* or city. However, he came across many big forests interspersed with small hermitages of sages. It means urbanization was limited which was the late Rigvedic phenomenon (10<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.).

There is a considerable evidence to show that the *Ramayana* was a well-known story by the beginning of the Christian era. In the *Mahavibhasha* (commentary on the *Jnanaprashthana* of *Katyayaniputra*), there is a short passage, which says that in the book called *Ramayana* there are 12,000 slokas and they refer to two topics-the abduction of Sita by Ravana by violence and the rescue of Sita through Rama and their return. Composed perhaps during the reign of king Kanishka, it is the earliest record mentioning the word *Ramayana* and its size. Asvaghosha was well acquainted with Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. A terracotta from Kausambi (second century B.C.) depicts the abduction of Sita by Ravana. This terracotta (Allahabad Museum, Allahabad) identified first by R. Sengupta<sup>5</sup> would also testify to the popularity of the Rama legend during the period. The antiquity of the *Ramayana* can still be pushed back further. Kautilya (fourth century B.C.) warned that nobody should follow the examples of Ravana and Duryodhana, which would lead to one’s downfall<sup>6</sup>. C.V. Vaidya has pointed out that Valmiki is mentioned in the *Taittiriya Pratisakhya* and in *Vajasneyi Samhita*. Again the *Ramayana*

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5. Sengupta, R. 1972-73. “Ravana carrying away Sita, Terracotta from Kausambi”, *Journal of the Andhra Historical Research Society*, Vol. xxxii, pp. 127-32.

6. Kangle, R.P. 1965. *The Kautilya Arthashastra*, Bombay, part 1, 1.6.8

gives a graphic picture of the ashram of the sages-Bharadvaja, Sutikshna, Agastya and others. The description of the various practices of the asramas in the Ramayana reveals a society of the pre-Buddhist times. This would indicate that the composition of the original *Ramayana* of the Valmiki took place sometime before the rise of the Buddhism<sup>7</sup>. MacDonnell is, however of the opinion that the *Ramayana* was composed during the middle of the fourth century B.C. and it attained its present form (including the Bala and Uttarakanda which are considered to be later additions) by the end of the second century B.C.<sup>8</sup>. Keith also places the composition of the original portions of the *Ramayana* in the fourth century B.C.<sup>9</sup>. M. Winternitz, however, pushes down the date of the composition of the *Ramayana* by some centuries. In his opinion, Valmiki composed the original Ramayana on the basis of ancient ballads, and probably the *Ramayana* in its present form came into existence towards the close of the second century A.D.<sup>10</sup>.

The *Ramayana* had existed in oral tradition for a long time before it was recorded in writing. Valmiki, the author of the present *Ramayana*, composed his work on the basis of the ancient stories current in the society. If Valmiki was a contemporary of Rama, as goes the Indian tradition, then the oldest Ramayana was sung in the Vedic dialect for Rama belonged to the Vedic age; and the present *Ramayana* is a Sanskrit redaction of Ramayana<sup>11</sup>.

Rama was an illustrious descendant of the *Ikshvaku* dynasty with its capital at Ayodhya. For this statement though there is no contemporary (historical) record, still this fact is vouchsafed by all the Puranas and early Jain and Buddhist traditions, which are not later than the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. The names of Rama and his father Dasaratha occur in the list of ancient Indian historical kings. One of their important contemporary Vedic kings was Atithigva Divodasa of Panchala whose sister; Ahilya was married to the Rishi Gautama. A son born to them was Satananda,

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7. Vaidya, C.V., 1906. *The Riddle of the Ramayana*, Bombay, p. 10.

8. Macdonnel, A.A., *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 10, p. 575.

9. Keith, A.B., 1915. "The Date of the Ramayana", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, pp. 318-321.

10. Winternitz, M., 1927. *A History of Indian Literature*, University of Calcutta Publication, Vol. I, Part I, p. 453.

11. Banerjee, P., *op. cit.*, p. 6.

who was Janaka's priest. Rama met this Ahilya on his way to Mithila. The Ramayana story of Ahilya is well known. But the reasonable interpretation would be that there was an estrangement between Ahilya and Gautama for a long time, and Rama brought about a rapprochement or reconciliation between them. Dasaratha and Divodasa were allies as they both fought Sambara<sup>12</sup>. It is true, however that there is no clear, unambiguous reference to Rama in the early and later Vedic literature, though Janaka, a king of Videha, figures often in the Upanishadas.

Likewise besides Ayodhya, Mithila, Kausambi, Kanyakubja are well known places and the history of these places, though not fully laid bare archaeologically, might be as old as 800 B.C. at least. On the basis of the findings of the potsherds of the Painted Grey ware<sup>13</sup> (P'GW), Sankalia fixed the date of its occurrence between 800 B.C. to 400 B.C. and taking the uppermost limit, he says that the antiquity of Ayodhya, and other places, said to be contemporary to it, might go back to this period, that is 800 B.C.<sup>14</sup> This date might be taken back if the deepest layers of Ayodhya, Mithila and Kausambi yield the OCP (Ochre Coloured Ware), and dated to about 1700 B.C.<sup>15</sup> But this is just a wild assumption. The archaeological evidences suggested by Sankalia are not very much convincing. He suggested a tentative chronology of the Valmiki *Ramayana* based on assumptions and not on solid evidences. The chronology of the Valmiki *Ramayana* can be decided only if deeper excavation at Ayodhya is conducted and some authentic evidences are discovered.

In Sankalia's view the foundation of Ayodhya and other sites in U.P. and Bihar might be placed provisionally to about 1500 B.C. Excavations at Chirand, on the confluence of the Ganga and the Ghaghra, have yielded evidence which places the beginning of a pastoral-cum-early agricultural life, subsisting on rice, fishing and hunting and going back to 2000 B.C. And Ayodhya is described in the

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12. Pradhan, Sitanath, 1979. *Chronology of Ancient India*, p. 6ff.

13. Sankalia, H.D., 1972. *Ramayana: Myth or Reality?*, Peoples Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 45.

14. For OCP see *Indian Antiquity*, March 1972, p. 45 where on the strength of thermoluminescent examination, a date around 1700 B.C. has been suggested by J. Huxtable and D.W. Zimmerman.

15. Sankalia, H.D., *op.cit.*, p. 46.

Ramayana as having storehouses of rice, though this reference is very probably late, and might not belong to the earliest phase of the city. Thus Rama and his times could be taken back upto 1500 B.C., but could Ayodhya have developed into a city as described in the *Ayodhya* and *Balakanda* of the *Ramayana* by that time? In view of Sankalia<sup>16</sup> the descriptions of Ayodhya, Kishkindha and Lanka, as available in the critical edition of the *Ramayana*<sup>17</sup> are those of the cities, which were built between A.D. 100 and A.D. 400. It is possible that some of the descriptions, particularly that of Ayodhya, might go back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. as at that time we had fortified cities with houses, having a few floors and terraces. But still the date may go back or we may get factual picture of the development of the city-life before and after Buddha. But all that urban development and material life as mentioned in the *Valmiki Ramayana* can not be viewed as back as 1500 B.C. Therefore, there might have been a long gap between *Ur* (original) *Ramayana* and the *Ramayana* as produced by Valmiki and it is quite evident that the original *Ramayana* might be quite different from the *Ramayana* we have at present. And if Valmiki composed *Ramayana* during the lifetime of Rama, it certainly does not match to one, which is attributed to him. The origins or sources of the *Ur Ramayana* might go back to a period between 1500 and 1000 B.C. Valmiki made the *Ramayana* into a heroic poem and his poem went on inflating from time to time, incorporating at least some features of that time. When this heroic poem was created, mythical things-characters and events were introduced into the story. This inflation has not stopped; it is going on even today. Romila Thapar quips about the interpolation in the *Ramayana* story in the following words, "Soon after the time when the secular epic the *Ramayana* had been converted into sacred Vaisnava literature by the Bhargava Brahmins and the hero Rama had been recorded as an *avatar* of Visnu, a Jaina poet, Vimalasuri, in the early centuries A.D. wrote his version of *Ramayana* in Prakrita, the *Paumacariyam*".<sup>18</sup>

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16. *Ibid.*

17. *The Critical Edition of Ramayana* has been prepared at Baroda after collating all the manuscripts of different versions (1960-75).

18. Thapar, Romila, 2000. *History and beyond*, New Delhi, p. 14.

Being a Kavya, it was recited from region to region and naturally events of later periods came to be interpolated in the story. The greatest interpolation seems to have taken place between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. and 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. After the Gupta period, Rama was deified and regarded as one of the *avatars* of Visnu. The scenes from the *Ramayana* were now, sculptured in temples, but it took some more centuries before Rama was actually worshipped. This is what historical evidences suggest, but it does not mean that if we do not have any earlier recorded evidence about Rama worship, it was not there. This is a problem of historical writings, and historians have to cope with this. The ancient Indians left innumerable material remains. But the major part of these remains lies buried in the mounds scattered all over the country. If excavated properly, these mounds can throw some light in understanding the various phases of socio-cultural development depicted in our ancient literature like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In the lack of contemporary manuscripts, it is very difficult to know the actual date of the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and any such ancient text. All attempts to decide the accurate date of our epics are based on assumptions. Although the ancient Indians knew writing as early as 2500 B.C., our most ancient manuscripts belong to the fourth century B.C. and they are found from Central Asia, where the Prakrit language had spread from India. Thus in the absence of accurate evidences-archaeological as well as historical-literary sources are interpreted by the historians according to their own ideological biases and notions. The interpretation of Indian history from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards relates closely to the worldview of European, and particularly British historians, who provided the initial historiographical base. The resulting theories reflected, whether consciously or not, the political and ideological interests of Europe – the history of India becoming one of the means of propagating those interests.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, recent historical writings<sup>20</sup> try to interpret the Indian past with the present socio-political concerns and problems. All this is happening in the lack of availability of original sources which can confirm or reject the

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19. Goldman, R., 1981. *The Ramayana of Valmiki, Balakanda*, Princeton University Press, USA, Vol. I, p. 14-29.

20. Thapar, Romila, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

literary writings. Therefore, no interpretation of Indian past can be claimed as a final and authentic one.

*Valmiki Ramayana and Other Ramayanas:*

It is generally accepted that the Valmiki or *Adi Ramayana* is a homogenous work by a single author, Valmiki. There are three recensions of this work, consisting of 24,000 slokas in seven books and all of them suffer additions and interpolations. These recensions reflect regional influence, and thus differ on many points. Not only the regional *Ramayanas*, but Sanskrit *Ramayanas* also offer many variations between themselves in respect of the Ramkathas. Valmiki is the first systemiser of the various stories current about Rama legend in the society. But in the course of time the Rama story narrated by him also acquired various colorations, modifications. This is apparent from three well known recensions of the *Valmiki Ramayana* itself, namely – the Bombay Edition, represented in the *Ramayanas* printed by the Nirnay Sagar Press, Bombay; the Gaudiya or Bengal represented in the Gorresic Edition (Paris) and in the *Ramayana* printed by Amresvara Thakur and other scholars of Calcutta, and the third one is the West Indian recension of the Dayanand Mahavidyalaya, Lahore and the *Sadhu Asrama*, Hosiarpur (Punjab). The Bombay recension containing archaisms in language seems to be the oldest form of the text. All these recensions go comparatively to ancient times and they offer several differences in reading, at least one-third of the verses that one recension has, does not occur in the other two recensions. These differences are due to the fluctuations of oral traditions among the reciters of the epic. Thapar calls attention to the plurality of Ramayanas in Indian history: “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.”<sup>21</sup> Critical examination now suggests that it must have passed not only many stages of development but also that it contains numerous interpolations and addition of Books I (*Adikanda*) and VII (*Uttarakanda*). R. S. Sharma writes that the *Ramayana of Valmiki* originally consisted of

21. Thapar, Romila, 1989. “The Ramayana Syndrome” *Seminar* No. 352. p. 72.



6,000 verses which were raised to 12,000 verses and finally to 24,000.<sup>22</sup> He further says, “Although this epic appears to be more unified than the *Mahabharata*, it has also its didactic portions which were added later. The *Ramayana* compositions started in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Since then it passed through as many as five stages, and the fifth stage seems to be as late as the twelfth century A. D.”<sup>23</sup>

The *Mahabharata*, towards the end of its third book (Vana), dedicated a subsection to Rama Story called *Ramopakhyana*, besides it also has several short resumes of the story of Rama in different contexts. Jacobi, Winternitz and Sukhthankar, the first editor of the critical edition of the *Mahabharata*, discussed the question of relation of the *Ramopakhyana* in *Mahabharata* with *Valmiki Ramayana* and concluded that the *Ramopakhyana* knew Valmiki and represented a free summary of Valmiki’s text.<sup>24</sup>

Jain poets wrote the saga of Rama in detail – either in Sanskrit or Prakrit. They were Vimal Suri, Ravisena, Jinasena, Gunabhadra, Svayambhu, Puspadanta and others. Their *Ramayana* stories were composed between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Certain myths were incorporated in these compositions, e.g., the association of *Vidyadharas* (in some places, *Yaksas* or *Nagas*) with the Ravana group and the basis of these myths is associated with the Himalaya. Vimal Suri’s *Padmacarita*, sometimes called *Padmapurana* or *Ramayana Purana* and is said to be composed in 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The Jain used the *Ramayana* with drastic changes in the story, incidents and characters.

Early Buddhist literature, Pali and Sanskrit, knows the *Ramayana* story very well, which it uses with orientation to its own purpose. There are several *Jatakas*, which thus use the main story of the *Ramayana* as well as its episodes. The earliest literary evidence of the Rama story, of its first component is recorded in the thirteen Pali verses (gathas) of the *Dasratha Jataka* (no. 461). The period of the *Jataka* stories ranges from 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. The

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22. Sharma, R.S. 1990. Ancient India, NCERT Publication, New Delhi, p. 12.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Raghavan, V. 1980. “The Ramayana in Sanskrit Literature” in V. Raghavan ed. *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, p. 3.

*Jatakas*- the *Lalitavistara*, *Mahavastu*, *Saadharmapundarika*, etc. have not merely echoes but actual verbal parallels with the descriptions of Rama, his personality, his qualities of head and heart and the descriptions of palace and *harem* in Lanka in the *Ramayana*. To enjoy its vogue among the people of South-East Asia, who follow the *Dhamma* of the Buddha, there has already been a long historical background for the *Ramayana* as part and parcel of the Buddhist writings and for Rama as a *Bodhisattva*.

The story of Rama seems to have been popular in Bengal quite early and it increased with the advancement of time. The archaeological evidences suggest this. The story was used for glorification of the Pala ruler Ramapala by Sandhyakarnandin in his *Ramacarita* composed in 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The *Ramacarita* describes by means of *slesha* the double story of Rama, king of Ayodhya and Ramapala (C.1077-1130 A.D.), king of Bengal. It is interesting to note that the verse seventh of the *kavi-prasasti* portion of the *Ramacharita* describes Rampala as the new incarnation of *Narayana* (*Abhinava-Narayanavata*). This seems to be supported also by a later work called *Sekh-subhodaya*.

The earliest extensive treatment of The *Ramayana* theme in Bengali is the *Ramayana* by Krittivasa supposed to be composed in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Though Krittivasa's *Ramayana* in the main is based on the *Valmiki Ramanayana*, it cannot be called a mere translation of the latter. Without altering the main outline of the story, Krittivasa has introduced many new episodes, bearing on local customs and sentiments. While some of these new episodes are his own creation, the majority can be traced to the Sanskrit *Adbhuta Ramayana* and *Jaimini Bharata*. Perhaps, the projection of *bhakti* by different Vaishnava and Sakta sects of subsequent days had profound effect on the post- Valmiki Sanskrit *Ramayanas* and their composition in various regional languages.<sup>25</sup> There were several works written on the *Ramayana* theme in Bengali after Krittivasa's work.

Kalidasa's (5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) narration of the Rama story in his *Raghuvamsa* was largely based on Valmiki's *Ramayana*. But at the same time he incorporated many new aspects into it under the influ-

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25. Banerjee, P., *op.cit.*, p. 187.

ence of the religious developments of his times.

Kamban composed *Irāmāvatāram* around 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. in Tamil. There are deviations in *Kamban Ramayana* from *Valmiki Ramayana*. In terms of basic elements such as plot, it is filled with local detail, folklore, poetic traditions, imagery, and so forth as in Kamban's telling or that of the *Bengali Kirttivasa*. Very often these later texts use the plot and characters and names of the earliest text, and use them to say entirely new things, often in an effort to subvert the predecessor by producing a counter text. *Ramakatha* was written in *Khotanese* language in Verse around the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Bhavabhuti's *Uttararamacarita* is not only the best work of Bhavabhuti, it is also the best drama of the *Ramkavya*. The ending is happy and this is Bhavabhuti's originality and Sita, at the end returns to Ayodhya with Rama. We find the *Ramayana* in almost all the languages of India and even in dialects. *Ramacaritmanas* of Tulsidas is one such work, which makes Rama story more popular and widespread because it was in a dialect of Hindi and could be easily communicated and presented among the people in North India. Thus the composition of new *Ramayanas* increased their number and Camille Bulke, counted three hundred such tellings. To some extent all other *Ramayanas* play on the knowledge of previous tellings. In several of the later *Ramayana*'s such as the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, (16<sup>th</sup> century) when Rama is exiled, he does not want Sita to go with him. At first she uses the usual arguments – she is his wife, she should share his sufferings, exile herself in his exile, and so on. When he still resists the idea, she is furious. She bursts out, "countless *Ramayanas* have been composed before this. Do you know of one where Sita does not go with Rama to the forests". That clinches the argument and she goes with him.<sup>26</sup>

Thus there are so many *Ramayanas* besides *Valmiki Ramayana*. They vary not only from *Valmiki Ramayana* but also from each other. There are marriage songs, narrative poems, palace legends, temple myths, paintings, sculpture and the many performing arts. The various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but

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26. See Rai Bahadur Lala Baijnath trans., *The Adhyatama Ramayana*, Allahabad; the Panini office 1913, rept as extra Vol. I in the sacred Books of the Hindus, New York, AMS Press, 1974.

they relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Ramanujan likens the *Ramayana* Tradition to a pool of signifiers that includes plot, characters, names, geography, incidents and relations, arguing that each *Ramayana* can be seen as a crystallization”.<sup>27</sup> As we see, Valmiki *Ramayana* originally consisted of only five kandas and it presented Rama as a human hero, while the Bala and the Uttar kanda glorify him as an incarnation of Vishnu. The present *Ramayana* with seven kandas including Bala and Uttar kandas might have got its complete shape by the second century A.D. for these two kandas clearly reflect the socio-economic developments of that time. The level of urbanization attained, the description of material life such as plenty of golden jewelry, prosperity, fine silk clothes etc., all reflected the characteristics of the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., when India’s trade with western world was flourishing and gold was pouring from Roman empire. The caste rigidity shown in Uttar kanda through Sambuka incident and discriminatory attitude towards woman as reflected in the banishment of Sita by Rama on the grounds of gossip of a washer man about Sita’s chastity, reveal the tendencies of the later Vedic times. Therefore, the addition of these two kandas to the genuine Rama story might have taken place around 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. or even after that.

Keeping in view the various *Ramayana* versions, a need was felt for a critical edition of the *Ramayana*.<sup>28</sup> Such an edition was prepared at Baroda after collating almost all the manuscripts of these different versions. It is interesting to note that the oldest manuscript known so far is one from Nepal. It bears the date A.D. 1020, whereas the latest one is of 1800 A.D.

### *Questioning the “Questioning of Ramayanas”:*

As discussed above, the *Valmiki Ramayana* went on being inflated from time to time and many other *Ramayana* stories were composed and concocted later on. This inflation has not stopped and it is still going on.

27. For a discussion of the geography – physical and emotional of Classical Tamil poetry, see A.K. Ramanujan, *The interior Landscape*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1967.

28. Sarkar, Amal, 1987. *A study on the Ramayanas*, Rddhi India, Calcutta, p. 2.

Europe’s contact with India has brought into play a critical attitude to all significant elements and outcrops of Indian tradition and the *Ramayana* for obvious reasons, has come to be subjected to severe analytical probe, giving rise to appraisals and theories of widely varying nature. Since such critical approach to the *Ramayana* is in progress, the endeavors of appraising and assessing the *Ramayana* from various angles of vision tend to be on the increase with the passage of time, revealing the unfading popularity of the *Ramayana* saga.

More recently the *Ramayana* has been in question by the so-called protagonists of social justice, feminists, critics and historians. The *Ramayana* is being used and misused by different politicians as per their own need and for their advantage. Such questions need a threadbare examination and their validity if any, needs to be questioned on historical grounds.

The first such question is raised time and again by the so-called protagonists of social justice and even by certain prominent historians<sup>29</sup> who ask Rama to justify his killing of Sambuka. “For the Upper Castes Rama may be the-*maryada purusottam* – the man to be venerated but would the same be true of the lower castes, who would be familiar with the story of Rama killing a *sudra* because he had dared to perform rituals permitted only to the Upper Castes?” Now as has been discussed earlier, that interpolation took place in the *Ramayana* story, the Uttarakanda was not the part of the original *Valmiki Ramayana*, and it seems to be an interpolation of the later Vedic times (3<sup>rd</sup> century to 2<sup>nd</sup>), the Sambuka episode is a later addition since it finds place in Uttarakanda. Therefore, such an interpolation, and question based on interpolation seems to be out of context. If Rama was the king of the post-Vedic times, the Sambuka incident might have been authentic and somewhat real, but since the history of Rama is not very clear, we cannot associate him with the caste ridden society. The question itself is irrelevant and uncalled for, since the history of Rama is still to be probed and no one knows whether Rama really killed Sambuka or not. And if Rama killed Sambuka, who was that Rama, Rama of *Valmiki Ramayana* or Rama of later interpolated and inflated versions of

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29. See *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* edit. by Paula Richman, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001. p. x.

*Ramayana*? And if Rama's killing of a *Sudra* is being highlighted and publicized, why not his affection for Nishad Raj Guha (Kevat), and the modesty he displayed by gladly eating the pre-tasted fruits offered to him by Sabari? Valmiki himself supposed to be a lowborn<sup>30</sup> was highly respected by Rama. Why Rama did not kill Valmiki for performing so many rituals and imparting education to his sons since these duties were supposed to be meant for upper castes only? The champions of social justice and historians of ancient Indian history and culture must try to find out the answers to these questions before picking up questions on unestablished facts. Since the date of *Ramayana* has not been yet very authentically and satisfactorily decided and as has been discussed earlier, the original *Ramayana* story may go back up to 1000 B.C. or 800 B.C., or even before that, how could a historian look for a four-fold caste based society in that period, since it is very clear that caste-based society emerged only during the later Vedic period.

Similarly, the second case for which the trial of Rama is very regular in the court of historians and feminists is the episode of Sita's banishment by Rama in Uttarkanda. What an unjust and inhuman attitude Rama had for his pregnant wife when he just banished her even after verification of her purity, because he had to protect his honour so much under threat by the gossip of a belligerent washer man! Not only this, Rama has been accused for asking Sita how Ravana would control himself in the presence of a beautiful woman like Sita.<sup>31</sup> He declared that Sita was impure and that is why he was leaving her. "He also advised her to stay either with Lakshmana, Bharata or Satrugana who were her brother-in-laws."<sup>32</sup> Now this is something just like crossing the '*Lakshmana rekha*'. Originality of Uttarakanda itself is under question and scholars of the *Ramayana* tradition consider it an interpolation not only on philological grounds but also on the technical aspects.<sup>33</sup> If we keep aside Uttar kanda from the *Valmiki Ramayana*, it has a happy end-

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30. Lutgendorf, Philip, *op. cit.*

31. Kelkar, A. Meena, 1995. *Subordination of Woman: A New Perspective*, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi, 1995 p. 65.

32. *Ibid.*

33. The Uttarakanda in *Valmiki Ramayana* is after *Phalashruti*. *Phalashruti* is supposed to be the end of any sacred story or prayer. Therefore, Valmiki does not

ing and Sita is a popular Queen and ideal, acceptable and loving wife of Rama. But a sheer interpolation and addition has turned the tables and brought havoc on Sita and disregard for Rama. Let us apply a little bit logic also. Rama, despite knowing very well about the immoral act of Ahilya, showed generosity towards her and relieved her of her suffering and thus displayed magnanimity to a guilty woman. The same Rama, in order to set free Sugriva's wife from the custody of Vali, even played foul in killing him and thus protected the dignity of a woman at the cost of his own ideals. As stated earlier Rama showed a great sense of modesty and respect to a tribal woman by accepting her pre-tasted fruits even though he knew that the fruits were not pure. But how strange! See the cruelty of the same Rama in case of his own beloved wife Sita. He fought a tough battle against Ravana, killed him and ultimately relieved Sita, got her back after her successful fire trial and accepted her as a Queen, but just after listening to the gossip of a washer man he immediately banished his wife and the queen of Ayodhya to satisfy a washer man. It is just a concocted story and if one believes in it, how would one explain Rama's attitude to Ahilya, Tara, Ruma and Sabari. In majority of the cases Rama was chivalrous, magnanimous and dutiful to women. Bharata, the son of Kekeyi was disrespectful and abusive to her after she banished Rama, but the latter was most respectful and obedient even to Kekeyi who filled up his life with horror and gloom. In the light of these arguments and reasons, one must apply reason while understanding the case of pregnant Sita's exile. This story seems to be an invention and addition of post-Vedic times, when male domination was an established fact and subjugation of woman was complete. Rama story supposed to be popular and ideal, was used by the interpolator to sanctify the male dominance and female subjugation.

There are other questions besides the above prominent one, posed to Rama and the *Ramayana*. In view of Romila Thapar the story of Ramayana was not "so sacrosanct by the time *Dashratha Jataka* was composed",<sup>34</sup> and therefore, the writer of *Dasratha Jataka* had no

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compose Uttarakanda. Also experts of Philology on the philological grounds consider it an interpolation.

34. See Paula Richman ed. *Questioning Ramayanas, A south Asian Tradition*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001. P. X.

knowledge of Ramayana Story. Very simple point is that if the *Ramayana* story was not sacrosanct by that time, it was at least there and it must have attained a certain degree of popularity or circulation in the society, that is why the Buddhist writers had to take its support for propounding the virtues of the Buddha in his previous birth and thus winning the faith of people and creating an environment for the acceptance of Buddha as a figure no less than Rama, endowed with divine virtues not only in his current life but also in his previous births. This sort of claim in religious propagation has been there in history and in the same spirit later on *Vaishnavites* count Buddha as one of the ten incarnations of Vishnu himself. Not only Buddhists, but also even Janis had the *Ramayana* as a source of writing their own *Ramayanas* with variance. For a new tradition or faith it is always unavoidable to bank upon the established tradition. Therefore, how does it matter if *Dasratha Jataka* or *Jain Ramayanas* are somehow related with *Ramayana* Tradition. Why such irritation and conflict in accepting the truth? Again as mentioned earlier that Rama was deified during the early centuries A.D., the Rama story might have gained popularity during the early centuries B.C.<sup>35</sup>

The questioning of the *Ramayana* may not be an appropriate tool to make it handy rather it may prove fatal not only to this glorious tradition but to the social harmony and religious tolerance. The work of a historian is not to divide but to put the facts in the right perspective and interpret them in totality. The need is to understand the various phases of the development of the Rama story and identify original story rather than accepting the interpolated versions as real one. And if questioning is to be done, questions must be based on proven facts and historical realities not on hypothetical and interpolated versions.

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35. Thapar, Romila, 2000. *History and beyond*, Oxford, University Press, New Delhi, p. 14.