Guiding the Possibility of Conduct: A Reading of 'Rama-Katha'

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Abstract

Ramayana is not a solo entity. The number of *Ramayanas* and the range of their influence in South and Southeast Asia over the past twenty-five hundred years or more are astonishing. Different versions of Rama story are available. We can trace the story line in Burma, Thailand, Japan, Oman etc. But from 20th century, from the time modern thought of learning came into practice, Valmiki *Ramayana* and *Ramcharitmanas* started gaining unprecedented importance.

'Ramakatha' has such great influence that still its repercussions are felt. Bhakti notion has completely erased the original scripts of *Ramayana* which characterized the pangs, desires, ambitions of a king who with his power and subjectivity has overcome the difficulties of his lifetime. Rama is portrayed as an ordinary man with all lot of desires and doubts. But with Bhakti movement, all the humane character disappears and he becomes divine. The angst in the original *Ramayana* and how he overcomes this with his general concern for the humans disappears.

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Foucault argues against understanding the exercise of power as strict coercion or pure violence. Rather, he argues that ‘power consists in complex relations’, which involves a set of rational techniques, the efficiency of which depends on the ‘subtle integration of the coercion-technologies and self-technologies.’ My paper attempts to read how Rama, the king employs technologies of self in guiding his subjects.

Ramayana emanate out as a cultural representation of the diverse class in the nations across. Adikavya, *Ramayana*, works in differently in the diverse layers of social life. *Mappila Ramayanam* within the base structure of the society, sankritised singular entity in the elite section of the society and interact as variant versions in different languages in the middle structure of the society. Even when Ezhuthachan bounds Rama in divinity, he does uphold dharma. The story of Rama in its travails has to be understood as one that has variegated meanings and apprehensions. Bhakti movement has created such great ripples that it has masked all other variance of *Ramayana* and has just projected Valmiki *Ramayana*. My paper intends not to negate the culture, cult or values that the great literature has provided but to identify the variance and diversity of life that ‘Rama-katha’ has granted. The comportment of humans decides the culture. To formulate a culture, human beings are made subjects. How Rama- katha conducts the conduction of the generations also form the study of my paper.

Ramayana is not a solo entity. The number of *Ramayanas* and the range of their influence in South and Southeast Asia over the past twenty-five hundred years or more are astonishing. Different versions of Rama story are available. We can trace the story line in Burma, Thailand, Japan, Oman etc. But from 20th century, from the time modern thought of learning came into practice, Valmiki *Ramayana* started gaining unprecedented importance. The enormous figure of Lord Rama has shadowed the transposition of different cultures, languages and religious traditions. A.K. Ramaujan’s “Three Hundred *Ramayanas*” is a stupendous effort in this grab of the study.

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All *Ramayanas* to an extent are meta-*Ramayanas*. In Valmiki *Ramayana* we get an instance of the diversity of ‘Rama-katha’, when he describes Sita’s insistence in taking her along with Rama in his journey to forest. She reminds him that in countless *Ramayana* sung before, none had sung that Rama had travelled without Sita. This clearly states that there were many ‘*Ramayanas*’ before. One can have innumerable interpretations for the source that reaches one’s hand. Different units gush up for a story. The wisdom to acknowledge the difference, variance, parallels, diversions etc assisted in the advancement of divergent thoughts in the society. Singularity is a concept which developed with modernism and the nationalist struggle. One cannot limit the scope of epic kavyas to a singular entity.

More than as an ‘Ithihasa’, *Ramayana* stands as ‘Adikavyam’. *Ramayana* sees life in a linear manner. The epic prioritizes negation of violence. The great literature begins so: ‘Aruthu Kattala’. The one who was a ferocious hunter turns out to be a poet with the evocation of concern and compassion in him. This basic principle of concern and the thread of *rajdhrama* is what makes *Ramayana* still a literature of eminence not just in India but even in south Asia.

In India, *Ramayana* can be found in languages like Assamese, Bengali, Kambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Bengali, Kashmiri, Marathi, Sanskrit, Malayalam, Oriya, Prakrit, Santhali, Sri Lankan, Tamil, Telugu, Pali etc. Outside India, Burma, Sumatra, Tibet, China, Malaya, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia etc. have the story line of Rama which is identified as ‘Rama katha’. Even in Sanskrit alone one can find variance of the Rama story: Bhasa’s *Uthara Ramayana*, Kalidasa’s *Reghu vamsha*, Bhavabhuti’s *Uthara Ramacharitham*, etc. Valmiki is only an adage that links variance. In Kerala, it is Ezhuthachan’s *Ramayana*. Thus likeness is there only in the basic story line and characters. But the way it is woven is different in different places.

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Bhakti notion has completely erased the original scripts of *Ramayana* which characterized the pangs, desires, ambitions of a king who with his power and subjectivity has overcome the difficulties of his lifetime. There are instances in *Ramayana* where Rama becoming suspicious of Bharata when he comes to meet him in the forest. Rama doubts his arrival as an expression of enmity. Apart from this, Rama also diverted Shurpanakha to Lakshmana though he was well aware of Urmila's pangs. Thus Rama is portrayed as an ordinary man with all lot of desires and doubts. But with Bhakti movement, all the humane character disappears and he becomes divine. The angst in the original *Ramayana* and how he overcomes this with his general concern for the humans disappears.

Ramayana finds its expression after Buddhist period. Historians say that it's the peace and prosperity of the Mauryan era that paved the way for the expression in the textual form. Historians read "Bala kanda", "Ayodhya Kanda" and "Uthara Ramayana" as later addition, after 2nd century AD. The story of Rama remains the same but narratology stance different. In Vimala Soori's *Bhauma Soorya*, Ravana is the hero. All the adjectives given to Rama in *Adyathma Ramayana* goes well with Ravana in *Bhauma Soorya*. In *Kamba Ramayana*, 'Ahalaya episode' is grammatically reconstructed to elevate Rama as divine. The story of Rama in its travails has to be understood as one that has variegated meanings and apprehensions. It provides the thought of mixing or sharing of cultures with compassion and justice as its cornerstone.

Emergence of culture is not a natural denominator. Nietzsche relates truth, knowledge and power in the development of social mores. The dominant trait is the imposition of the norms acceptable for the ruling elite. Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* raises the proposition on power. He defines power as "the multiplicity of forces immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization" (92). These forces develop certain discourses and repudiate and nullify the extant ideas and thoughts. It

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structures the demeanour and deliberation of the plebeians. It braids the social, cultural and political order by regulating the commonplace activities.

‘Power exercised over bodies and desires’ decides the proclivity and praxis of the people. It is a pointer index in deciding the conduct of the people. “Conduct is the activity of conducting, of conduction if you like, but it is equally the way in which one conducts oneself, lets oneself be conducted, is conducted and finally, in which one behaves as an effect of a form of conduct as the action of conducting or of conduction” (Foucault, 193). The conduct of the humans decides the social cultural and linguistic system of a society. To authorize it, divergent layers are added by churning people as subjects.

Foucault attributes two meanings to ‘subject’— “subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (23). Both these meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates individuals and make them subjects. Through this subjection, Foucault alludes to a form of power in our everyday life. Power is categorized by defining and attaching us to our individuality. It imposes a law of truth on us that we ourselves have to recognise and that others have to recognise it in us. For this imposition of power, new techniques of social control were developed.

Discipline, as Foucault argues, emerged as a technology aimed to control the behavior of people, to keep them under surveillance and to regulate their lives. Apart from technical aids to control the lives of the people, leaders also employ effect of their own means to transform themselves and those around them to develop certain attitudes

The technologies which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination are called the technologies of power. The technologies, “which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom,

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perfection, or immortality”, are the technologies of self (Foucault 224-225). People use certain techniques to understand themselves. If technologies of power are the means to objectify the subject through determining their conduct and submitting them to certain ends or domination, technologies of the self are the means by which the individuals on their own or with the help of others effect certain operations on their own bodies, conduct or thought and transform themselves to attain happiness, perfection, purity or wisdom. Certain mode of training on themselves modifies the behavior of the individuals so that they could acquire certain attitude.

Rama, the king of Ayodhya, employs techniques of self to govern the people. He uses the weapon of knowledge, truth and ideology to govern his people. He is venerated and worshipped for the dharma he practiced. Living in an age of polygamy, he need not practice monogamy but by developing and practicing it, he inculcated the idea of dharma into his brothers and his subjects. His dharma becomes the ideology of the land and the various tribes associated with the land.

It is humanity that predominates in the entirety of epic. Be it any - the king, queen or the ministers - the characters are not without flaw. Sita fell for the golden deer. She even accused Lakshmana of desire for her when he hesitated to leave her alone. Lakshmana too evolved with time. The anger and dissent of Lakshmana matured with time. D.P. Sangalia who studied the historicity of the epic, states that whenever Rama sleeps, Lakshmana was found awake. Such is the affection. It's the story of brotherhood and sacrifice. Of the four brothers – Rama- Lakshmana, Sugriva- Bali, Sambathi- Jadayu, Ravana- Vibhishna, it's the bird's bond that stands higher. Sambathi, the elder sacrifices his wings to save his brother.

Sacrifice is the moral that epic renders. Rama without a second thought adheres to Kaikeyi's wish and sacrifices his kingdom for his brother's sake. Not just the abstinence from kingship but readily consents to abode for fourteen years in the forest. Sacrifice of his

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kingdom forms the first ideology of self. With time and space, morality varies. But Rama transcends time and space because of his sacrifice. It is not that Rama is sacred or without errors, but as a character who moulds himself to mould his kingdom and people. Rama is described as 'Poorvabhashi', one who always take initiative in his introduction with others. Even *Ramayana* seems to question the tenacity of Rama. But we find Rama despite his faults stands prime as he evolves with devotion and compassion for the beings around. Reverence towards father, love for his people are beyond the conception of today's politics. He never promotes or advertises himself.

Rama as proposed by the Bhakti movement is not the divinity born. He is a plebian born with all faults and idiosyncrasies. That is why despite the Bhakti cult attributed to Rama, we find flaws scattered and intrinsic in lines. When Dasaratha on demand of Kaikayi asks him to abandon the throne and reside in forest, he readily obliges. But as he informs this to his mother Kausalya, we find him grim but retains his composure: "enthenmakane mukhambujam vaduvan/Bandamundayathu param vishakkayo" (306-07).

In Rama's address to Shoorpanakha, his testifying nature is revealed. Shoorpanakha, unlike the 'Kula Stree' cult, dared to voice her fascination for Rama. When approached Rama could have well stated the policy of monogamy they practice and bid her away. Instead we find her being shuttled upon by the brothers. Why did Rama send him at all to Lakshmana? Didn't he know that his brother too practice the same vow as him? Didn't he remember Urmila who waste her life on Lakshmana? Even when accepting the idea that Rama should not authoritatively deny marital bliss for Lakshmana and should not insist monogamy for Lakshmana since it is his personal choice, why did they went on teasing her after negating her request? This seems a cruel game played on her or his strong adherence to patriarchal norms

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In his act of killing Vali, the same act of injustice is revealed. He is killed from behind. One wonders why a person who is acclaimed as valour even from his childhood, did this? It is believed that Vali possessed the boon of acquiring half the strength of his enemy. Was Rama afraid that he will loose the battle? Whatever, the act of injuring from behind despite all the greatness dims his halo. Ezhuthachan justifies the act by stating the cruelties Vali done to Sugreeva – riding him off the kingdom because of the suspicion and making Ruma his wife. Later we find Sugriva does the same act – making Thara, wife of Vali, his queen. But then it was not questioned and was accepted as a practice of the tribe. Even the beautiful rendition of the event failed to prevent people from questioning Rama's ethical concept. Throughout the war, we find Rama and the vanara soldiers, though not rampant like Mahabharata war, negating the ethical rules of the war. We find Rama giving consent to the soldiers to disturb the yajna of Indrajith and Ravana for fear of being defeated. Had he actually been the divinity incarnated why should he fear yajas and the strength of his enemies? He is a mortal who has all the fears and anxieties when in war.

Rama, in many studies today, is blatantly put to criticism for asking Sita to take the fire ordeal. But in the political sense, he is setting the code of conduct for a ruler/leader. A ruler's personal life should be freed from all black spots. He evolves as Gandhiji addresses 'Maryada Purushothaman', a leader on whom none can charge accusations. This is evident later when Sita is sent to forest when his subjects doubt her chastity. Though one cannot justify the act of Rama, especially because she has already gone through the fire ordeal, he was standing for a value that needs to be practiced for the state. This very element of ethical concern he sowed in his subjects made them criticize the act of Rama – abandoning of Sita. When Valmiki's 'Rama Katha' was listened by the people, they questioned the ethicality of their king. It is the self regulation of Rama that made him 'conduct the conduct of the people'. Not just his brothers but kings of various tribes adopted the ethical code set by

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Rama. He is represented throughout as a genuine king who shaped the kingdom. Through restraining himself of the practices, Rama transmuted those practices to the state making his behavior as surveillance for the conduct of the entire nation.

Ravana is depicted as wise, discreet and exquisite. The figurative representation of 'ten heads and twenty hands' of Ravana shows his supreme knowledge and power. Lanka was the richest land. The tower, plates, drama stage etc were all made of gold. *Ramayana* describes the wonder of Hanuman on witnessing the beauty and wealth of the land. Ravana was a great artist too. He dances, sings, and plays rudra veena exquisitely. But his hubris failed him. He believed that whatever beautiful has to be his. Listening to Shurpanakha's description of Sita, Ravana insisted on having Sita in Lanka. He tries hard to impress Sita but in vain. But despite all his fruitless efforts, he never imposes him on her. But that does not justify his deed. This is evident when his subjects criticize him when Rama comes for war. Despite all the good deeds done by him, subjects suffered for the lack of ethical principles of their king. They lamented that it was because their king had fallen for another man's wife that they were forced to suffer. He is a great man undone by a passion that he had vowed against but that he cannot resist. Unlike Rama who moulded and shaped the conduct of the people through self regulation and ethical values, Ravana was licentious and was into splurge and spree. Despite all his higher potentials, Ravana was never venerated.

'Bhakti' is bait. Once caught there is no easy way out. Ezhuthachan to inculcate spirituality among people deftly chose the story of Rama. Rama was valoured and venerated for his truism. His concern for governance stood above his personalia. Even when stated injustice to Sita, being wife as well as his subject, one cannot fail to see that he too convulsed. This eschewal for a social deter elevate him as 'Maryadapurushothaman'.

Myths and moral stories float on one's thought but reality proves otherwise. Stories and reality stand at extreme ends. Hence they are dismissed as narrations which are

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unattainable. In a social political scenario where people in power resorts on gimmicks, craft and technical devices, a character like Rama stands odd. One can easily mark him as divine and set apart as a character in the cloud. Instead of haloing the great ruler, one needs to imbibe the techniques of self that Rama practiced to govern his subjects. He was not merely a strict practitioner of rules. His dharma was based on compassion. He was compassionate to every tribe. At a time when caste distinctions were intrinsic, Rama embraced people based on their virtuous deportment. He did not make any distinctions and rated men on their virtuousness. This act of dharma was emulated by Gandhiji.

Gandhiji viewed Rama as 'Maryadapurushothaman' or as 'Maryada Raman'. His Rama is not the king of Ayodhya or son of Dasharatha or husband of Sita, but a representation of unending consciousness of truth in his mind. Rama is born to define the utmost humanity. Numerous adjectives ascribed to Rama place him as embodiment of truth, of morality and of justice. He is considered as a complete ruler and the most kind and good human being and.

Today in the technologically driven post modern world, caste, class racial differences are rampant. It has huge undertones. Apart from material benefits and selfish creeds, nothing affects man. It's all a question of comfort. Virtue just flees over one's head. Suicides of agriculturalists, killing each other in the name of religious totem etc has becomes rampant in India. It is in this phase Rama, who for Gandhiji was a representation consciousness of truth in a ruler, has to be remembered. 'Rama Rajya' for Gandhi was a nation where all are treated with compassion. Hence his mission: 'to wipe out the tears from the eyes of the common man'. Such is dharma and that can be embraced only by the technologies of self adopted by the leaders in a world driven by lust and greed.

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