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An Alternative Narrative: Re-reading Ramayana as *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*

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Literature has been a persevering partner to the human race and has stayed a loyal companion through thick and thin. It comfortably precedes the 'discovery' of calligraphy, which made literature 'standardized' and increased its significance in the lives of humans. The invention of printing, definitively made literature 'standard' as also made mass production a possibility. Alongside this perspective and point-of-view, sustained another perspective whose vestiges can be seen concretizing today: parallel literatures. It adheres to the idea that there have been two strains in literature, spatially and temporally: the dominant and the dominated. The former has been an integral part of the mainstream society while the other survived underneath it, underground. Bakhtin uses the word 'Carnival' to bring that dominated strain of literature to the fore.

The underlying principle behind the presence of these two strains has been a force that has guided the human race since times immemorial: power. Rightly so, because literature is an expression of the human race and hence it was immanent that the governing factor of human life played a decisive role in literature. This principle of "power" constructed identities on the parameters of the 'self' and the 'other', the "masculine and the feminine, where the former unleashes power while the latter is subjected to it. The two primary ways this power is exhibited by the 'self' are Coercion and Hegemony. While the former relies on the "repressive apparatus", the latter foregrounds the "ideological apparatus". One of the salient weapons of the "Ideological apparatus" that the 'self' directs against the 'other' is literature. However, at the core of it works the coercive measure negating, and worse than that,

silencing the alternative voices. But in spite of all these measures this parallel literature, voicing the 'dissenting' notes, has survived. These 'dissenting' voices revolve around the principle of Alternative Narrative, and is composed either simultaneously (spatially) or later, in case of a long sustaining oppression, when it finds space for expression (temporally).

Indian literary and social history, identically, has been moulded and managed through power and this power enjoys a pivotal place ever since the 'absolute past' when the Aryans, apparently, came to the mainland and settled here. The 'taken-for-granted' dichotomies: *Dev-Danav* and the Gods-*Asur*, are all its extensions and as binaries work: the first happens to be the 'self' while the latter, 'other'. Temporally and spatially, since then, these binaries have been used as the "standard myths" with the point-of-view, in mainstream literature, strictly on the side of the former, the "unleashers of power", who presented 'their side' of the story. In other words, the 'self' has told the 'history' and 'his story' by virtue of being the dominant strain in literature, thereby relegating the 'other' to the 'peripheral and dominated'.

One of the most popular epics of Indian literature, *Ramayana* by Valmiki, is a glorious examples of this telling through the eyes of the dominant. *Ramcharitmanas* by Tulsidas is an extension of the same dominant ideology. *Ramcharitmanas* says at one place:

Bishnu jo sur hit nartanu dhaari. Sou sarbagya jatha tripurari.
Khojie so ki agya iv naari. Gyandhaam shripti asuraari.

(Devtaaon ke hit ke liye manushyasharir dhaaran karne waale jo Vishnu bhagwaan hain,
Ve bhi shivji ki hi bhanti sarvgya hain. Ve gyan ke bhandar, lakshmipati aur asuron ke shatru bhagwaan Vishnu kya agyaani ki tarah stri ko khojenge?)

The 'focalization' here, as Genette calls it, is from a worshipper of the *devtas* and enemy of the *asuras*, a member of the 'self', the dominant one. Consequently, the narrative centers on the perfection and divinity of Lord *Rama* against the viciousness of the demon *Ravana*. *Ramacharitmanas*, the title corroborates, was primarily woven to glorify the virtues and perfections of *Rama*, the God incarnate. In addition, his 'human limitations' are glorified by the sobriquet *'Maryada Purushotam'*. Ravana, on the other hand, with all his ills and vices, needs renunciation through Rama for salvation.

Literary history, however, has witnessed "voices" of the 'other' side and this comprises the canon of Alternative Narratives. Adaptations of *Ramayana* by Chandrabati and Mola; Jotirao

Phule's scathing attacks on the Brahmins in his seminal works *Gulamgiri* and *Shetkaryacha Asud* and Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* are outstanding examples of this parallel line in literature. These texts have validated the definitive presence of an Alternative Voice, the one belonging to the oppressed and silenced. These narratives strove to see history and mythology by shifting the focalization to the marginalized, the 'other'.

A significant addition to this Alternative Voices is *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished, The Story of Ravana and His People* by Anand Neelakantan, a work belonging to the canon of Fiction, composed in 2012. Unlike *Ramacharitmanas*, that begins in the epical style, with invocations and praises sung to Rama, the lord incarnate, and a creation of the backdrop; *Asura* begins with the humane construction of the war that stands at the centre of the story of Rama and Ravana. The novel begins as, "Tomorrow is my funeral…hairy rats. They conquer the battlefields after foolish men have finished their business of killing each other" (9). His narrative is far from the narrative of the epics that has its own protocol to follow. However, the way he begins his version of *Ramayana*, through Ravana, at the doorsteps of death, Neelkantan offers a deliberate diversion from the standard of the Epical genre. No longer does the Valmiki of the modern times work his narrative around the Epical, nor does he want to. The genre of the 'vanquished' abrogates the one of the 'victor' and offers a narrative that is humane and reveal the story of a human, *Ravana*, with all his glory and pride, worth and vanity using the genre of a novel.

The narrative of *Asura* deviates from that of *The Ramayana* in the treatment of the central conflict behind the narratives: the abduction of Sita by Ravana. *Asura* constructs a narrative where Sita was abducted by Ravana to save her, from the masculinity rampant in the *Deva* kingdoms, because she was his daughter he was forced to abandon because the 'learned' of his kingdom had prophesied disaster. This alteration in the narrative challenges the Rama-Ravana dichotomy by turning it around to Ravana-Rama duality. Ravana distinctly emerges as the hero for his fidelity towards his daughter, his accepting his decisions and his belief in the superiority of 'his' culture that pushed him into the battle with Ram. His virtue shines in full glory when he accepts Mandodari even after she is molested by the forces of Rama during the war.

The superior-inferior dichotomy gets redefined when the 'voice' of the other describes the kingdoms of the *Devas* and the *Asuras*. Mainstream Literature always projected a superior *Deva* culture in contrast to the inferior and uncivilized culture of the *Asuras*. An example that manifests this narrative is Rahul Sankrityayan's *Volga se Ganga,* a collection of short stories with a single plot: journey of the highly cultured Aryans from the banks of the Volga to the Banks of the Ganges that was home to the uncivilized aborigines. The Aryan Culture, in *Volga se Ganga,* is highlighted by an egalitarian society where the community rule prevailed, and it is contrasted against a ruthless, master-slave society of the aborigines:

Kuch bhi ho arya asuron ko kisi tarah bhi apne barabar maanne
Ke liye tayiyaar nahin the, khaskar jab ki unhone unke hazaron
Daas-daasiyon, aur kothon par baithkar apne shareer ko bechne
Waali vaishyaaon ko dekha (69).

Tale of the Vanquished, on the contrary, constructs the narrative of culture on opposite grounds, where the *Asura* civilization boasts of an egalitarian society under the leadership of Ravana, brought to destruction by the hierarchized *Deva* civilization. In other words, the narrative of *Asura,* constructs an India that is in direct confrontation with the India of Valmiki and Sankrityayan. At one place Ravana says,

These northern people had a strange custom. The father of the prospective bride would announce a contest among eligible suitors. I found it boorish. Was a bride a prize to be won in a contest? I had even heard of Deva men selling their wives as slaves, mortgaging them, or using them as wagers. It was terrible but what could one expect from a semi-civilized, nomadic tribe? Women were treated by the Deva men as nothing more than commodities. Perhaps I was prejudiced as I belonged to an entirely different culture. But I had always believed a society could be called civilized only when it treated its woman and downtrodden people, well…our girls were brought up almost exactly like our boys. There were social differences like the caste system among the Asuras too, but it was not based on birth or skin colour. Anyone could reach a position of power through hard work and luck" (Pg. 291-292)

The respect for women, the defining quality of a civilized society, distinguishes Rama from Ravana and the narrative of *Asura* expostulates that it is Ravana, who in spite of being the

demon, lives up to this iconic principle of civilized societies. While in *Ramayana*, the *maryada purushotam* Rama abandons his wife even after she proves her chastity, Ravana, does not, even once, try to impose himself on Sita, who safely stays in the *Ashoka Vatika* under the care of *Trijata*. Moreover, in *Asura*, Ravana's entire war with Rama works on the one principle: the treatment of women by the Devas. He does not want his daughter to face what befalls her in *vanvasa*, as she belongs to a better culture, that of the Asuras.

Ravana's character, in *Asura* emerges in stark contrast to the character of Rama. Given the Alternative Voices, it was implied that this distinction would emerge, but this distinction, rather than overturning the conventional notions, constructs Ravana as humane rather than divine. This humaneness of Ravana makes the narrative take cognizance of the limitations and drawbacks in his character and his dream kingdom. The dying Ravana's, the narrator's "…utopian dreams of equality for all men on which I had built an empire" (Pg. 12) have been shattered as he has not been able to create the kingdom he wanted. The mature narrator, speaks of the young and energetic Ravana who wanted a civilized kingdom for his people but as Bhadra, the other narrator says, "Ravana's revolution had given us nothing. We were perhaps slightly better off. Maybe even more civilized. But we had been put in our place and quickly learnt how to behave. There were the nobles, and then there were all the others. They were the privileged ones, and then us" (Pg 301).

Ravana lives with his own sets of qualities and limitations. He , "believed that to be respected in the world, he had to be a secular king, and treat every religion with respect and tolerance" (Pg. 302) and this became his weakness, as the Deva rishis settled in the Ausra kingdom and 'polluted' the natives by their religious talk. But he is the same Ravana who, bowed down before an old woman asking for forgiveness for his decision to persist with keeping Sita and contemplating, "I had failed as a king. I could not protect my citizens from a lowly monkey" (Pg 336), says to the old woman, "Mother…forgive me…I…I…" (Pg 336).

The narrative strategy is of humanization of the protagonist, unlike *Ramayana*. So Ravana is human, and he says it, "He was humane despite his faults…" (Pg 345). This is in contrast to the divinity of Rama and the visible reluctance and rejection of the perfection that comes with that divinity. Ravana says, "…I was always a creature of passion. I had lived as Ravana and I would die as Ravana. I did not intend to become Rama, the perfect man and God. There was no dearth of gods in my country. It only lacked men" (354).

This construction by the erstwhile 'other' in *Asura* is critical. Unlike Rama, who is sublimity and 'perfection' personified as he follows the brahminical rules, Ravana, describing himself asserts his independence as an individual having his own mind and the courage to own responsibility for his choices and actions. He says, as a young student:

> My aim is neither become God nor achieve moksha. At best I think,
> those are old wives' tales. I do not believe in a heaven where you
> will be given all that you purposefully denied yourself in this world.
> I do not believe in rebirth, when I will be born as a Brahmin if I do
> good deeds in this life—good in the way the Brahmins describe.
> If being born a Brahmin is the ultimate reward, then I may even refuse
> to die for fear of being reborn (Pg 41).

His follies and fallibilities become starker in contrast to the character of Rama in *Ramayana* & *Ramcharitmanas*. Rama is the God incarnate, the divine human of *Tretayuga* in human history, a period when all was glorious and perfect. This is highly unlike Ravana, who followed the dictates of his own conscience and did what he felt right. In the mainstream narrative, while Rama made, apparently, no mistake, Ravana, in his *Ravanayana*, has his share of follies and mistakes that he does not try to evade.

This narrative foregrounds a very significant aspect of the narrative techniques used by the 'self' and the 'other'. While on the one hand, the 'self' works on the virtuous-vicious in its literature; the 'other' even when speaking 'of' its own, refrains from the 'only virtuous' tag for itself but focuses on the humane culture and tradition, which may or may not be worthy of emulation. The dying, aged Ravana in retrospect says, "Was it the foolishness of youth or an inner urge to speak my heart which prompted me to contradict the great Emperor? I have yet to figure it out. But even now, as I am being eaten alive by rats and jackals, I believe the things I told him then" (Pg 37). Ravana, aware of his imperfections, still is decisive and determined to pursue his actions to the end even in the face of imminent defeat and destruction.

Ravana's character, then, as told autobiographically, is far from being a beauteous picture of his life that is replete with perfections and idealizations. He defines himself as 'flawed but with dauntless courage to stand for his actions and what he considers just. He grows from a very humble and degraded childhood, albeit belonging to the royalty, under the clutches of

Kuber, the brother of Ravana and the king of the *asuras*. Commencing his journey from a thatched hut on top a mountain, he grows to be the ruler of the vast *asura* empire over a major length and breadth of India and Srilanka. However, through his journey, he admits to having made some rash decisions and mistakes but rather than escaping them, he stands to face the consequences. Moreover, given his conscience, he is also sorry for not being able to do much for the common *asuras* like Bhadra who expected a golden period under his kingship.

The death of Ravana also assumes significance in the narrative. While the traditional texts, like *Ramayana* and *Ramcharitmanas*, project it as desired by Ravana, through the hands of Rama for the attainment of Moksha; in *Asura* Ravana, in spite of all that transpired, says, "I wanted to start again. I wanted to make the same mistakes, love the same people, fight the same enemies, befriend the same friends, marry the same wives and sire the same sons. I wanted to live the same life again. I didn't want the seat Rama has reserved for me in his heaven. I only wanted my beautiful earth" (13-14). The narrative also counters the popular notion of Rama being the bringer of the much wanted *Moksha* to Ravana being the great one by coming to him as he was dying. Ravana says, "One thing I cannot understand is why Rama came and stood over me after I had fallen. He stood there as if he was bestowing his blessings on me. He said to his brother that I was the most learned man in the world and a great king and one could learn the art of governance from me…I could appreciate the irony of it" (Pg. 11-12).

The narrative of *Asura* also incorporates the "*carnival*": the 'voice' of the 'unsung' of the *Ramayana*, the soldier, the footman, who lived under the kings and worked for them, anonymously, has been offered space. Along with Ravana, the narrative has another narrator who speaks of incidents and situations as does Ravana, and often emerges as a reliable narrator having narratorial authenticity that frequently matched that of Ravana. This narrator is *Bhadra*, the common soldier, and a survivor of the *Deva* rampage that destroyed his family and house.

This narrative technique adopted by Neelkantan makes *Asura* a story, not only 'of' the vanquished, but also 'of' the lowest amongst the vanquished. Bhadra becomes important in the "*Tale of the Vanquished*" because he is the double oppressed, as an Asura and as a poor in the Asura kingdom. The role of Bhadra, then, assumes critical significance as the

personalized manifestation of the man that Ravana is shown to be. At one place Ravana says, "*Why did I choose to be king?* I should have chosen a simpler life on the beautiful shores of the Poorna river, dreamt small dreams, and lived and died like the insignificant millions of the world" (Pg. 349). This aspiration of Ravana is manifested in the life of Bhadra, the common man with 'little dreams' but being the king, he is not able to achieve that.

However, Bhadra's life also showcases that conscience and courage, in a king or a common man, makes life full of challenges. In other words, Bhadra showcases the destiny of the humane at the other extreme of the social class, who are, at the end of all, individuals with their own convictions and doubts; actions and thoughts; strengths and weaknesses.

What this narrative also highlights is the humaneness of the asuras against the verisimilitude of 'divinity' practiced by *devas* under the pretext of social good. Bhadra, in the narrative, serves a polyphonic purpose: the judge of actions of king Ravana in the outside world; and secondly, the conscious of Ravana, the thoughts Ravana could muster and nurture had he been an ordinary human.

In the entire narrative of *Asura*, it is the human that occupies the central position. Through this Neelkantan explicitly questions the status of *Ramayana* as the Foundational Epic of Hindu and Indian mythology and folklore. Neelkantan is not only raising an alternative voice of the vanquished but also questioning the significance of the *Ramayana* as one of the Foundational Narratives of India. Jonathan Culler opines that Foundational Narratives are those whose stories are independent of the narrative in which they are put. *Asura's* narrative has totally altered the story, and hence *Ramayana* probably cannot be iconized as a Foundational narrative. His narrative counters and challenges all that is conventional and traditionally accepted. Consequently, what is believed to be a foundational narrative loses the pedestal.

Asura, Tale of the Vanquished: The Story of Ravana and His People is a harsh indictment on the traditionally revered and considered sacrosanct. His 'voices' construct a narrative that refuses to toe the line of mainstream literature. Myths, shows the narrative of *Asura*, have for long, dominated our life as the 'Absolute Past', but it is only one-half of the story, told by the 'self' to coerce or hegemonize the 'other'. This imperial 'Other', the 'self' deliberately, by virtue of being the wielder of power, subdued alternative voices, but, in spite of being suppressed, the latter stayed and when space was offered, caught fire.

Myths, then, as we have known them, do not hold invincibility, especially in the Indian context, because in the journey through history, voices were negated and drowned in the victory celebrations of the "Aryans". Myths, such as represented through *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* then, are a hegemonic notion to keep the vast oppressed majority as the "Insignificant millions". Ravana sums up the construction of myths by the 'self' and its breach by narratives of the 'other', when he asserts:

> I had heard that the Vanaras believed him to be an *avatar*
> of Vishnu himself. *'That is a good piece of propaganda,*
> *I must admit. Claim that God is with you, or better,*
> *you are God, then anything you do, any adharma*
> *you commit, becomes divine play'*" (Pg. 368).

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