

Exploration of the Rama legend in India: a Sociological Perspective

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Abstract: A chronological survey of the exploration of the Rama legend in India reveals the major trends and aspects of evolution of Indian society. For the ultimate human values and ideals enshrined in it, the Ramayana of Valmiki, the earliest extant work on the Rama legend, exerted tremendous impact on every sphere of life, thought and creative consciousness of Indian people. For its immense popularity, the thinkers and composers of subsequent period strategically exploited the Rama story to promote and propagate their faith and ideology. The Rama story was adapted to the values of patriarchy and caste hierarchy in the interpolations of the Valmiki Ramayana and some other texts of Rama literature. During the rise of Buddhism and Jainism and, at a later stage, during the Bhakti movement, the Rama story was retold by appropriating the legend to suit the egalitarian values of these faiths. With the rise of subaltern studies in India in the last decades of the twentieth century, Rama literature became a major area of study to probe into the phenomena of caste and gender inequality in India. The paper makes an attempt to make a study of exploration of the Rama legend in India from ancient to modern times to find out their sociological implications and impact.)

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Rama legend exerts immense influence on the ethical, spiritual and creative consciousness of the Indian people. From Vedic times till the present, the themes and ideals of the Rama story have been explored in multifarious manners in divergent fields. For the overwhelming popularity of the Rama story, there have been attempts in every age to exploit it in order to promote and propagate certain values and ideologies. While the eternal human values and ideals enshrined in the legend are the force behind the undying popularity of the story down the ages, each attempt to retell the story from a certain ideological standpoint have involved a considerable amount of appropriation of the story, which resulted in subtle yet significant changes in its import and implications. In view of the immense popularity of the legend, these renditions exerted deep and far reaching influence in Indian life and society. Thus both society and the legend have been deeply influencing each other in a continual manner. A chronological study of the exploration of the Rama legend in India reveals the nature and extent of the sociological impact of the legend on Indian life.

Objective of the Study:

The objective of the study is to examine the exploration of the Rama legend in India from ancient to modern times to find out their sociological implications and impact.

Methodology:

The study adopts an analytical approach to examine the nature of exploration of the Rama legend in India from ancient to modern times.

Exploration of the Rama Legend in India

The earliest recorded reference of the Rama legend is found in the Vedic texts like the Rigveda, Krishna Yajurveda, Atharva Veda, a few Upanishadas and Brahmanas. These texts mention Ikshaku, Rama, Dasharatha, Sita, Lakshmana and a few characters as persons with remarkable merit and virtue. But all were mentioned in isolation from one another without the slightest hint of family relation among them. Valmiki's Ramayana was the first extant work to explore the Rama legend with a well-constructed, elaborate story. Significantly, this very first rendition of the Rama story is characterized by a clearly declared objective. As mentioned in the beginning of the epic, on Valmiki's request to name an ideal person living on earth possessing ultimate human virtues, Sage Narada narrates the story of Rama of Ikshaku dynasty. Valmiki rendered the story of Rama upholding the ideals of self sacrifice, devotion to duty and commitment to relationships to present an example of ideal life for the humans to emulate. The entire work is replete with attempts at elaborating and deliberating on ideal living at every conceivable sphere of human existence. Private and the public, socio-economic to political –every domain of existence is probed to address various concerns of just and ethical living in the epic. *“The Ramayana deals with polity, administration, diplomacy, war and*

other topics, which fall under the domain of Artha-sastra. The benefits of good governance and democracy are exemplified in the Ramarajya, while the contrary is shown under Ravana.The Ramayana is a Niti-sastra, expounding lofty ethical ideals. The importance of moral virtues-simple living, modesty, restraint, obedience to elders, charity and humanity is fully stressed.”¹

The sociological impact of the Valmiki Ramayana on Indian life was profound and far reaching. The Rama ideology as expounded by Valmiki was considerably explored in early post-Valmiki period. The Ramayana of Valmiki “*had become a part of the disciplines and education of young princes.*”² The kings assumed titles after Rama as he was regarded the ultimate model of a virtuous king. Kautilya’s ‘Arthashastra’, an authoritative treatise on ideal polity and governance, repeatedly refers to the Ramayana to substantiate various principles. The Rama ideology was explored and implemented in public and private domains in pursuit of virtuous living.

The preachers and thinkers of the post-Valmiki period exploited the Rama story to propagate their faith. In the process the legend was subtly retold appropriating the themes and materials to adapt to the basic tenets of these faiths. As early as the second century B.C., the Buddhist and Jain religious literature adapted the story of Rama to preach the ideals of these faiths. The Jataka tales made Rama an incarnation of Bodhisattva, the previous births of the Buddha. In the Jain versions of the Rama story starting with Paumacharya of Bimalasuri(3rd or 4th century A.D.) , the characters and the episodes were considerably modified to adapt to the Jain ideals like compassion, non-violence and penance.

Valmiki Ramayana came to exert immense influence on the artists, composers and thinkers of subsequent times. Till a certain period, Rama, the ideal human hero of the Ramayana came to be delineated in various works of Sanskrit literature. In the earliest sculptural representations of the Rama theme found in India too, Rama is depicted as human. The Rama reliefs in the Vishnu temple at Deogarh constructed during the Gupta period, the earliest sculptural representation of the Rama theme found anywhere in the world, depict Rama “*as human, two-armed, and a participator in the normal activities of the world.*”³

In spite of Valmiki’s avowed aim of presenting Rama as an ideal human being and its realization in the various episodes of the life and works of the protagonist in the epic, the Ramayana came to assume the role of a devotional text in subsequent times. It is held by scholars that the Valmiki Ramayana assumed its present shape between 400 B.C. and 200 A.D. In the later centuries of the period, many episodes were interpolated deifying the character of Rama attributing divine traits to him. Scholars hold that if not wholly, a considerable portion of the Adikanda and Uttarakanda of the Valmiki Ramayana presenting Rama as a divine figure are later interpolations. Very soon, Rama came to be regarded as an incarnation of God, and after that, though the depth of impact of the figure of Rama remained the same, the orientation towards his image drastically changed. Rama came to be confined to the spiritual consciousness of the people. His human virtues became his divine grace beyond the reach of the mortals.

Gradually the divine image of Rama and the devotional status of the Ramayana came to be firmly established and the ideal human hero of the original Valmiki Ramayana receded into oblivion. Two Ramayana texts, viz the Bhushundi Ramayana and the Adhyatma Ramayana played a significant role in consolidating the divine image of Rama.

During the Bhakti movement, a reformist movement flourishing in the medieval period as a strong reaction against the hierarchical, orthodox aspects of Brahminical Hinduism, the preachers explored the Rama story to propagate the egalitarian ideals of their faith. The Ramayanas rendered by the bhakti poets like Madhava Kandali, Krittibas and Tulsidas tell the story of Rama in consonance with the Bhakti ideals of simple worship and humanism.

In each age, the dominant socio- cultural ethos of the time are accommodated in the renditions of the Rama story. Both the progressive and regressive attitudes involved in various renditions of the Rama story in India exercised deep influence on the Indian psyche. While the emergence of a Rama cult made religion easily accessible to common people irrespective of their position in the social hierarchy, many regressive attitudes towards the lower orders of society(viz., women and low caste people) , which was solidified in Rama literature from an early date caused considerable harm to collective Indian psyche. In the Valmiki Ramayana, despite the objective, realistic depiction of inferior and declining social position of women and low caste people in the post- Vedic period, there was a visible attempt to present these people in a positive light attributing them dignity and identity. Sita is depicted as a sensible, wise and brave person, ‘manaswini Sita’ by Valmiki and her rational and argumentative mind is painstakingly established in the epic.⁴ The episodes depicting Guhaka and Shabari , two characters belonging to low castes, show Valmiki’s positive stance with regard to caste. The status of the people marginalized in terms of caste and gender increasingly deteriorated in the renditions of the Rama story in post-Valmiki period corresponding to the consolidation of patriarchy and caste hierarchy in Indian society. The status of both women and low caste people alarmingly deteriorated in the age of smritis and puranas. From this period, women and shudras came to be regarded ‘naturally’ impure and inferior without any identity of their own born solely to serve men and the higher castes. This attitude is extensively reflected in the Rama literature of the post-Valmiki period. From the Adhyatma Ramayana, a progressive relegation in the attitude toward women becomes visible. The Adhyatma Ramayana, and following it the Kambana Ramayana and the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas incorporated the episode of maya Sita to save her from the touch of Ravana to emphasize physical purity as an essential virtue of women. The Krittibas Ramayana and Ramcharitmanas reduce the dignified and bold Sita of Valmiki to a meek, submissive and delicate woman without a mind of her own. These texts repeatedly emphasize ‘natural’ inferiority of women and lower classes.

In view of the immense popularity and authoritative position of the Ramayana in Indian society, the depiction of women and low caste people emphasizing their inferiority caused serious harm to Indian society. Rama literature has been used by regressive forces to justify patriarchy and caste hierarchy in society. The negative attitudes reflected in the various texts of

Rama literature of the post-Valmiki period is considerably responsible for the inferior position accorded to the marginalized sections of the society.

From the concluding decades of the last century, with the emergence and growth of feminist and subaltern studies in India, Rama literature has assumed a significant role as an area of study to probe into the phenomena of gender and caste in Indian society. To examine how these texts have been used and abused to endorse values of patriarchy and caste system in Indian society has been a major area of feminist and subaltern studies. In the sphere of gender, the episodes like Sita's fire-ordeal and banishment, Shurpanakha's mutilation as a punishment for her assertion of sexuality, Kaikeyi's right to have the boons granted by Dasharatha are examined from an alternative, feminist perspective. In the domain of caste, the Shambuka episode has been a major area of discussion. Apart from treatment of these episodes and characters, the various reactionary assertions in the narrative and in the authorial voice have been closely examined.

The feminist and subaltern studies of Rama literature have given rise to new avenues of creative writing exploring the themes, episodes and characters of the Rama story from the perspectives of these approaches. The Characters of Ravana, Sita, Kaikeyi and Urmila and episodes centering round these characters have been recreated in poetry, fiction and drama subtly subverting the established patterns of thoughts and values in Rama literature. These alternative perspectives have been explored in various fields of creative art from literature to painting to television soaps in present time.

II. CONCLUSION

The foregoing analyses reveal that from the very first rendition of the Rama story, all the efforts to tell the story have been purpose-oriented. All the renditions exploited the popularity and power of the legend to propagate a definite ideology. And all these renditions have exercised immense sociological impact on Indian life. Through changing forms and significance, the Rama legend has continued to exercise vital influence on the life, thought and creative consciousness of the Indian people. Significantly, while the legend has been shaping the life and society in India, the views and attitudes of the society has been continually reshaping the legend down the ages. An objective, chronological study of the exploration of the Rama legend in India reveals an increasing stricture and narrowing of the Rama ideology to cater to the interest of regressive forces. In view of the immense popularity of the Rama story, a sensible strategic exploitation of the Rama story may yield amazing results in building of the nation and society. An objective analysis will also provide ways and insight into exploiting the eternal human values and ideals embedded in Valmiki's rendition of the legend in the most effective and desired manner. In this regard, a comparative analysis between the explorations of the Rama legend in India and Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand may prove very rewarding.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- [1]. Pusalkar, A.D., The Ramayana : Its History and Characters, The Cultural Heritage of India(Vol.II) 1982, pp 27-28
- [2]. Raghavan, V, The Ramayana in Sanskrit literature, The Ramayana Tradition in Asia, 2009, p 4
- [3]. Vatsyayan Kapila, Ramayana in the Arts of Asia. The Ramayana Tradition in Asia, 2009, p.687
- [4]. Cantos IX & X , Aranyakanda of Valmiki Ramayana are wholly devoted to establish Sita's rational and argumentative mind.

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