



GLIMPSES OF POLITICAL IDEAS IN VALMIKI'S RAMAYANA

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Abstract

This research paper tries to stress the virtue of adherence to conventional morality. The conventional wisdom is reflected in the political thought of Ramayana. V.R. Mehta has claimed that it seems it was written at a time when the materialist outlook had gained the upper hand, leading to violence and corruption. While some writers have questioned the authenticity of the story. But there is no doubt that in Rama and Ravana were created two powerful personalities centering round dominance and subordination of ethical principles to materialist reality. Valmiki's Ramayana intentioned to uphold the superiority of the ideals cherished by Rama in his whole life. The epic originally consisted by 600 verses and in its present form it consists of 24000 slokas. The objective of the research paper is to introduce the reader with political ideas depicted in the Ramayana as we find it today.

Keywords: Conventional, Ethical, Materialist, Morality.

Introduction

Human development and social progress are inseparable from each other. This inseparable relation between man and society is basic factor for any familial, social and political development of the society since time immemorial. From ancient time, Indian thinkers have expressed their views on principles of politics in various epics and manuscripts. For example, *Chanakayaniti*, *vidurniti*, *sukraniti* and *manusmriti* etc. had specifically explained the principles of politics for the governance of the society and their objectives to form a strong, stable, developed society and nation. The political thought in the *Ramayana* was more a synthesis of conventional wisdom. In this chapter the virtue of adherence to conventional

morality was tried to stress. Valmiki intentioned to uphold the superiority of the ideals cherished by *Rama* and his whole life was depicted as an effort to establish the supremacy of right (Mehta, 2016, p. 43).

This epic originally consisted of 600 verses which were first inflated to 12000 and finally to 24000. The compilation of this epic started around 500 BC. Since then it passed through five stages and the fifth stage is assigned to the twelfth century A.D. (Sharma, 1995, p. 15).

In its present form it consists of 24000 *slokas*. *Valmiki's* work is called an *AdiKavya* and it is a religious book of Hindu India. Macdonnel holds that the composition of the original part of the *Ramayana* was finished before the epic kernel of the *Mahabharata* had assumed a definite shape. The story of *Rama* is referred to in the *Mahabharata*, in book III (Cantos 277 to 291 of the *Vanaparva*) of the *Mahabharata*. In *Ramopakhyana* it appears that in those days *Rama* was regarded as a famous hero (Varma, 1974, p. 287).

Life sketch of Valmiki

Valmiki, the supposed writer of *Ramayana*, is made to appear as a contemporary of *Rama*. The hermitage of *Valmiki* was situated not very far from *Ayodhya*, as it was situated in the south of the *Ganga*. *Valmiki* is called the *Adikavi*. He was the composer of the first Sanskrit poem (*the Adikavya*) known the world over as the epic *Ramayana*. He is considered as father of Indian poetry. It is believed that he was born to sage *Prachetasa* and was called as *Ratnakar*. One day he got lost in the forest. He was adopted by a hunter and was trained to be an excellent hunter. It is said that *Valmiki* was converted into *Brahmarishi* from bandit by sage *Narada*. Sage *Narada* asked the reason of committing so many sins. *Ratnakar* replied that it was for the maintenance of his family and they would share sins too. Sage *Narad* asked

him to get the confirmation from family and the Ratnakar realized that no one was ready to share his sins in the family. This incident taught him about the selfish nature of everyone in this world. It is believed that by sage Narad's suggestion he started meditating and when Narad returned after few years he found Ratnakar covered by anthill and was still meditating. Sage Narad blessed him and began to be called Valmiki. The Sanskrit meaning of the word is anthill. It is said that Lord Brahma gave him vision to foresee leelas of Lord Shri Rama and asked him to write Ramayana. Ramayana was sung by two sons of Rama, Lava and Kusa. It is observed that the two names Kusa and Lava are the inventions of popular etymology to explain the Sanskrit term Kusilava which means the bard or an actor (Ibid.). Rama is the first king around whom a whole new concept of life, society and politics emerges in the writings of Valmiki. Ravana was a man possessed of immense knowledge and power. He ruled over Lanka which was unequalled in wealth and splendor. And yet because he had become arrogant and transgressed into the spheres of everyone else, he had to suffer the fate of all tyrants. Rama, on the other hand, was bound by the customary morality and worked for the welfare of his subjects by upholding it (Mehta, 2016, p. 42).

Conception of an Ideal State

It was a well-cultured and an organized civilization during Ramayana era. Rama, the eldest son of the Maharaja Dasaratha, was married to a princess Sita, the daughter of Janaka. Janaka was the ruler of the neighbouring kingdom of Mithila. Shortly after the marriage of Rama a question of considerable importance was agitated at the court of Ayodhya. This was the appointment of an heir apparent to the throne under the title of Yuvaraja. Yuvaraja was appointed, whilst the Maharaja was still living, in order that Maharaja might be relieved from the sovereignty of the heavier duties of the administration and at the same time to prepare Yuvaraja to succeed the throne (Wheeler, 1973, p. 43). Rama being the eldest son of Dasaratha, the latter wanted him to be the successor and made an announcement to this effect in the Sabha or the assembly. He summoned a great council of chieftains and people, and publicly announced his intention of appointing Rama to the post of Yuvraj.

In the *Balkand* of *Ramayana*, it is mentioned that the rulers of *Suryavansh* must be patriarchal. The eldest son of the king was to be the heir to the throne. This has been mentioned at various instances in the *Ramayana*. For example, in *Ayodhayakand*, Bharat declared that Rama was the real heir to the throne because he was the eldest son of Dasaratha. Bharat stated that it was against Dharma to deprive the eldest son from his legitimate right to rule the people if he was efficient and capable of discharging his duties. Similarly, in *Balkand*, it has been mentioned that king Dasaratha had declared Rama as worthy Prince and ordered him to accept his responsibility because people of Ayodhya wanted Rama to be their king (Bhatta, 1984, pp. 154-155).

According to the epics probably the justification of kingship was that only through its existence family and property were made secure, a thing which was not possible in a kingless state. The *Ramayana* observes that in a kingless state private property cannot be retained and a wife is not under control (Sharma, 1995, p. 66).

Dasaratha's announcement in the assembly to make Rama his heir apparent indicates that the Sabha had moral and political importance. The assembly approved this promulgation; however it is a fact that this announcement was reversed by the machinations of Kaikeyi. It unmistakably reveals that the role of the Samiti or Sabha had declined as Kaikeyi's will had prevailed over the announcement made in the assembly (Verma, 1974, p. 291). In such a situation, the *Ramayana* has mentioned three possible solutions to become a ruler if the eldest son is forbidden to ascend the throne in spite of his good conduct and character. The first solution suggested by Lakshman was to imprison their father because he was acting in accordance with the wishes of Kaikeyi. As per the second arrangement, Dasaratha suggested Rama to imprison him because he was bound by the promise given to Kaikeyi. While the third solution depended on the cooperation of the general populace. It is mentioned in *Ayodhayakand* that people were also ready and eager to go with Rama and Sita for exile from Ayodhya (Bhatt, 1984, pp. 154-155).

Thus *Ramayana* breathes a patriarchal spirit. By portraying the evils and multiple inconveniences and deprivations that are experienced by the people when there is no

ruling king, the epic seeks to glorify monarchical power. *Rama's* willingness to undergo exile undoubtedly shows his tremendous patience and unflinching obedience. His abnegation and his immense filial piety show that he is a person of genuine exaltedness. According to the *Ramayana*, after performing funeral rites of *Dasaratha*, *Bharat* subsequently undertook a journey into the jungle in order to offer the *Raj* to his elder brother *Rama* and request him to return back. But *Rama* refused to return back to *Ayodhya*. This shows the firm character of *Rama*. *Dasaratha*, *Lakshman* and even *Bharat* tried to persuade him against going to exile. In a sense it can be said that both *Bharat* and *Rama* were supreme exemplifications of the abnegation of political sovereignty. *Rama* gives to the former his *Padukawhich* he places on the throne of *Ayodhya* and puts the royal umbrella over them. Thus in *Ramayana*, *Rama* is made to appear as a defender of *Brahmanical* ritualism and creeds. In this sense it would appear that the statements made in the *SatapathaBrahmana* that the king should be the protector of *Dharma* was concretely realized in the character of *Rama* (Varma, 1974, p. 291).

In *Yudhkand*, it is mentioned that *Bharat* considered himself as caretaker of *Rama's* kingdom and appealed *Rama* to invigilate treasures, army etc. after completing his fourteen years exile (Bhatt, 1984, p. 157). When *Rama* was living in the forest in exile, *Bharat* went to meet him and attempted to persuade him to return to *Ayodhya*. It is mentioned in *Ayodhayakand* that during this meeting both discussed matters of political significance. In this, *Rama* says that king should consult those ministers who are experts in the *Nitisastra* and are capable of tendering advice. He also asserts that if the minister is intelligent, courageous, and wise and an expert in handling his job, then even one such minister can render great help to the king (Varma, 1974, p. 292). In *Ramayana*, according to *Valmiki*, an ideal king should be wise, courageous, kind, strong willed, of good conduct, knowledgeable, self-controlled and peaceful in nature. He should have attractive and impressive appearance and he should also be well versed in *Vedas* and *Shastras*.

During *Ramayana* era, king used to live a transparent and an accountable life and there was no gap between internal and external aspect of his life. People expected him to be ideal in

his personal as well as in social life. *Balkand* mentioned that king *Dasaratha* ruled and protected *Ayodhya* like *Manu*. According to *Manu*, king should always remain away from gambling, sleeping in the day, criticism, envy, drinking alcohol, dancing, bad language etc. (Bhatt, 1984, p. 160) similarly there is categorization of the fourteen defects of the king (*Rajadosha*). These are: (i) Atheism, (ii) Recourse to falsehood, (iii) Anger, (iv) Neglect of duty (*Pramada*), (v) Procrastination, (vi) Not associating with learned persons, (vii) Idleness, (viii) Sensual indulgence, (ix) Contemplating a single policy (*ekachintana*), (x) Consulting people who do not know about *Artha*, (xi) Not implementing the policy which has been decided after consulting the ministers, (xii) Revealing the secrets of the state, (xiii) Not performing religious ceremonies in the morning and, (xiv) Attacking the enemies together (*pratyuttana*) (Varma, 1974, p. 293)

Dharma and Ethics

The foundation of the state in the *Valmiki's Ramayana* is *dharma* which is the prime object and basis of truth. *Valmiki* took the position that all creatures are bound by both general and specific *dharma*. He believed that man can discern it with the help of their intelligence. *Dharma* cannot be divorced from prosperity and pleasure. *Valmiki* believed that *dharma* is supreme because it regulates both out quest for prosperity and for pleasures. *Dharma* is purity of mind and it is also necessary in order to create order in society. *Valmiki* is clear that we need *dharma* because in its absence there would be anarchy and the weak would perish (Mehta, 2016, p. 46).

In the *Ramayana's*, *Ayodhyakand*, there is a description of *Rama's* meeting with *Jabali* who tries to persuade him to return to *Ayodhya* and exercise sovereign power. *Jabali* appears as a gross materialist and a hedonist. But *Rama* repudiates his hedonistic teachings and is a defender of the traditional ethics of truth, fidelity and compassion and a believer in the *Vedic* ceremonies.

Valmiki's Ramayana established the image of *Rama* as an ideal ruler. He was also an upholder of the supremacy of public opinion. Banishing his wife, *Sita*, from the kingdom was certainly a poor way of showing deference to public opinion. But considering the fact that *Rama* did not marry again, there is no doubt that it finally established in the public mind the idea that for

the ruler's public opinion is more important than anything else. It is in this light that the feeling that the state envisioned in the *Ramayana* was an ideal state is not without foundation. *Rama* was a symbol of an enlightened king, who would subordinate his own interest and that of his nearest and dearest to the interest of the people (Mehta, 2016, p. 43). Thus kings were ideal in so far as they elevated the concept of public welfare above personal welfare.

In the *Aranyakanda*, there is a description of the heroic prowess of *Ravana*. He is regarded as a victorious fighter as well as a person who had amassed great powers through asceticism. This will indicate that *Ravana*, to some extent, represents the acquisition of political power based on religious practices. This, furthermore, implies that the poet as well as the people accepted in those days that the performance of religious sacrifices and the pursuit of rigorous austerities were paths of political supremacy (Varma, 1974, p. 293).

In *Aranyakanda*, *Surpanakha* talks to *Ravana* and tells him that dried wood, a lump of clay and even dust can serve useful purpose but a king who has lost his political power is of no use. This is a clear enunciation of Real politics. So far as the military organization is concerned, in the *Ramayana*, references to the *Caturanginisena* implying the cavalry, infantry, elephants and chariots. Even before engaging in the battle against the demons, *Rama* on the advice of the sage *Agastya*, procures weapons from *Indra* (*Ibid.*, pp. 293-294).

The *Ramayana* idealizes the family life, in which regardless of consequences the son obeys his father, the younger brother the elder brother, and the wife her husband. *Rama* and *Sita* are the *Hindu* ideals of a perfect man and a perfect woman. Sorrow and suffering, trial and endurance, are a part of the *Hindu* ideal of a perfect life of righteousness. *Rama* suffers for fourteen years in exile, and is chastened by privations and misfortunes, before he ascends the throne of his father. The *Ramayana* embodies the domestic and religious life of ancient India, with all its tenderness and sweetness, its endurance and devotion (Dutt, 1997, pp. 156-157).

In the *Sundrabanda*, *Hanuman* flies over strip of the ocean in an attempt to find out *Sita's* whereabouts. The *Hanuman*, desiring to test the strength of *Ravana*, destroys the Asoka garden

and kills the guards of the garden. With his tail ablaze, *Hanuman* roams about the city, setting everything on fire and in the end plunges into the ocean to extinguish the blaze on his tail. *Hanuman* return back after taking leave of *Sita* and he is warmly received by *Angada* and other monkeys who are all pleased with the success of his mission. Then they all meet *Rama*, *Lakshmana* and *Sugriva* and narrate *Hanuman's* successful flight to and from Lanka. *Rama* anxiously asks for details about *Sita* whereupon *Hanuman* offers his the crest – jewel and give a detailed account of how *Sita* was living in the hope of her rescue by *Rama* himself. (Jhala, 1966, p. xxxi). In this part of *Ramayana*, *Hanuman's* loyalty, love and devotion towards *Rama* has been narrated.

In *Valmiki's* state the upper level is composed of the king, council of ministers and sages who are generally *brahmanas* and the base is constituted by those who are actually engaged in the task of production. The most important thing, *Valmiki* believes, is that there should be a clear distinction between all castes. The possibility of movement from one caste or *Varna* to another is not ruled out. *Valmiki* advocated the caste system because he believed that it conforms to the natural hierarchy, the rulers are there to keep everyone in his proper place (Mehta, 2010, p. 50). They are themselves subject to natural laws and cannot claim absolute power because this would disturb the natural order of things where everyone has his appointed function in accordance with his nature and temperament. *Valmiki* was providing legitimacy to the system which practical experience had taught him was functional. The crucial thing according to him is that everyone in society must perform his functions, the rulers are no exception, they too must operate the system to uphold the sovereignty of *dharma* in terms of the guidance they receive from men of knowledge and wisdom. By postulating a disinterested performance of duties by the king as well as his subjects in the welfare of all, *Valmiki* made it possible to transcend this dualism of consciousness and material world in our journey towards the unman fest (*Ibid.*).

Conclusion

Rama, as depicted in the *Ramayana*, is not a political theorist. Importance of *Rama* lies in the concretization of the idea of harmonious ethico-political action in his own career as a warrior and as a king. The renunciation of the royal

throne which legally belonged to him and the acceptance of voluntary exile for fourteen years show that he did not want to indulge in power politics but was always guided by an insight into the highest obligations. His war with *Ravana* is to a great extent in conformity with the “laws of war” (Verma, 1974, p. 299). It can be pointed out that *Rama* did not advocate complete non-violence as a legitimate means of social and political constraints. He propounds the cult of righteous warfare. *Rama* is important in the ancient political theory and history of India because to the latter generations he became the symbol of moderation in social and political relationship. *Rama*’s spirit of self-sacrifice, self-abnegation and restraints became the ideal characteristics for the political leaders in India. Thus the *Ramayana* of *Valmiki* is important for having drawn the ideal picture of a king of high moral character and self-restraint. *Rama* is the first king around whom a whole new concept of life, society and politics emerges in the writings of *Valmiki*. It was a well-cultured and an organized civilization during *Ramayana* era. The epic justify kingship because only through its existence family and property were made secure. *Ramayana* shows the firm character of *Rama*. *Rama* and *Bharat* were supreme exemplifications of the abnegation of political sovereignty. Similarly, *Sita* and *Lakshman* are the best examples of devotion and dedication to *Rama*. The notion mentioned in *SatapathaBrahmana* that the king should be the protector of *Dharma* was concretely realized in the character of *Rama*. In *Ramayana*, king was expected to be ideal in his personal as well as in social life. The foundation of the state in the *Valmiki*’s *Ramayana* is *dharma* which is the prime object and basis of truth. *Valmiki* took the position that all creatures are bound by both general and specific *dharma* and anarchy would prevail in the absence of *dharma*.

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Glossary

- Slokas* – It is a category of verse line developed from *Vedas*.
- Yuvaraja*– Prince or the eldest son of the king.
- Suryavansh* – From royal blood.
- Ayodhyakand* – Part of *Ramcharitmanas*
- Dharma* – Religion, Custom, Law of social order, virtue, ethics, the rule of the nature, action of life, deepest law of our nature.
- Balkand* – Part of *Ramcharitmanas*
- Yudhkand*– Part of *Ramcharitmanas*
- Nitisastra*– Hindu book of laws and planning.
- Vedas* – Hindu knowledge texts originates in the ancient Indian subcontinent.
- Aranyakanda*– Forest episode of the *Ramcharitmanas*.