Research Paper

Rama as a righteous hero: A critique of the non-egalitarian elements in the Ramayana

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ABSTRACT: Rama is generally acclaimed as a righteous hero. He is represented as a manifestation of truth, a model husband, an ideal son and an exemplary king also. The term 'maryadapurushottam' is attributed to Rama owing to these traits. Despite being a dutiful king, Rama has often deviated from his truth and dharma (duty). Critiques demonstrate that Rama is not an ideal hero but an amalgamation of good and evil. He has strayed from the path of truth and duty on numerous occasions. Rama's inability to accept people with an egalitarian view is questioned. If Rama were an ideal hero, he would respect people irrespective of their religion and caste. Rama is not a righteous hero but a male chauvinistic one directed and dominated by Brahmanical Hinduism.

KEYWORDS: Rama, the Ramayana, righteousness, maryadapurushottam, ideal hero, egalitarian

Rama, the principal character of the Ramayana literature, is generally acclaimed as the symbol of righteousness. People believe that Rama possesses not less than a dozen qualities that a human being should have. He is represented as an embodiment of truth, a model husband for his consort Sita, an ideal son to his father Dasaratha, and moreover, an exemplary king to his subjects. Owing to these qualities, the term '*maryadapurushottam,*' which means a perfect man, is attributed to Rama. For those who worship Rama as a deity and the literati also, Rama is a righteous hero. However, these traits of Rama are often questioned through the critical reading of the Ramayana. Scholars who delved into the Ramayana tradition have testified that Rama is not a righteous man as generally propagated.

The Ramayana stands as an ancient epic deeply rooted in folk tradition. This long narrative poem, roughly spotted around two and a half millennia ago, embodies the classic traits of epic storytelling since its compilation by Valmiki. The tale has traversed through diverse regions and cultures over ages, existing as fragments, before Valmiki compiled it into a coherent literary masterpiece. Being deeply entrenched in folklore, the story has been gradually transmitted orally from one generation to the next by travelling bards.

The Ramayana narratives have the history of an evolution of approximately two thousand and five hundred years or more. As time passed, the story began to evolve through various stages and spread in diverse branches. Thus, being a tale that traversed for millennia through miscellaneous paths and took shapes in innumerable forms, presently there are hundreds of tellings of the Rama story. By birth, the Ramayana was the story of a warrior prince, transmitted orally by the travelling bards. As time progressed, the idea of giving a religious colouring to the protagonist and to the story crept in, and the warrior prince hero was gradually modified as a Hindu deity. Therefore, after centuries' evolution, the Ramayana has been venerated as the most chanted Hindu sacred text, also in different names across India.

Since Rama has evolved as a deity, the proprieties attributed to him also began to flourish tremendously. The protagonist Rama evolved as a moral hero. The various roles he has played in the story are interpreted as exemplary to others. His actions are celebrated as models to the men in society, especially in the Hindu community. He is represented as the manifestation of moral values. However, his actions are often questioned also. Despite being a dutiful king and protagonist, Rama has often deviated from his truth and

dharma (duty). A critical analysis of his deeds will prove that he is an amalgamation of both efficiency and deficiency.

Rama is generally considered the epitome of truth. He embodies truth through the unwavering perseverance of his duties and commitments. He does not hesitate to obey his parents, as he is a loyal son. Therefore, he willingly accepts Dasaratha's request to go into exile following Kaikeyi's demand. Rama knows fairly well that he is the rightful heir of the kingdom. However, his willingness to respect his father's words leads him to accept the uninvited challenges of life. Abstaining from power, he then sacrifices his throne. He is prepared for the hardships of exile life owing to his commitment to truth. Due to his selfless love to his father over the personal gains, Rama is able to manage the situation without any conflicts. He understands that obeying his parents as adherence to *dharma*.

Rama's commitment towards his family is reflected in the approach towards his consortSita and brother Lakshmana. Even though he is aware of the risks of life in the woods, Rama agrees to take both Sita and Lakshmana with him. The conjugal love between Rama and Sita is depicted as ideal. That is why Sita wanted to accompany Rama in the exile life. Despite the hardships of exile, Rama insists on spending his time with her. Her presence acts as a consolation during life's rare experiment. However, their togetherness in the woods does not last long. The abduction of Sita results in Rama's agony. Thereafter, the investigation and final retrieval of Sita by Rama form an integral part of the Ramayana. Rama's efforts and risks to rescue his consort indicate his love and responsibility as an ideal husband. Rama's love for her is not a mere commitment but a moral responsibility also. The amalgam of love, devotion and respect make their bond one of the most esteemed relationships in Hindu mythology.

Rama's commitment to righteousness and dedication for the welfare of his subjects makes him an acclaimed ruler. He considers duty and responsibility superior to his personal interests. This priority enables him to uphold *dharma* in the decisions he has taken both as a king and a citizen. His willingness to sacrifice his personal desire and to serve people in a selfless manner transforms him into a model king respected by all. King Rama always gives due respect to his subjects' demands and listens to the concerns over their day-to-day lives. Keeping his loyalty and humility, Rama is always approachable to his people. Rama is revered for the manifestation of his righteousness and compassionate governance. He is bold and generous enough to sacrifice his material life for the sake of the public. Therefore, he has to suffer the most painful separation from Sita, lending his ears to the opinions of his subjects regarding Sita's chastity. Hence, Rama's rule, which is often termed 'Rama Rajya,' is considered an embodiment of selflessness and *dharma,* suggesting a model for an ideal society.

The above expositions suggest that Rama is generally read as an ideal figure. Most of the Ramayana narratives propagated in society posit Rama as a *maryadapurushottam*. However, as Paula Richman states, a careful analysis of the narrative has proved that Rama "himself has deviated from the path of dharma." Even though Rama has been acclaimed as an ideal figure, numerous episodes in the Ramayana are instances for Rama's deviation from *dharma*. They include Rama's beheading of the Shudra named Shambuka, killing of Bali from behind, mutilation of Shurpanakha, banishment ofSita to the forest while she is carrying etc. Critical reading of the Ramayana questions the role of Rama in all these episodes.

Despite his identity as an ideal ruler, Rama lacks an egalitarian concept and is deprived of the minimum level of justice in his actions on some occasions. His slaying of Shambukais one of the most infamous episodes in the Ramayana. Rama beheadsShambuka, executing the order of Brahmins, who have blamed the 'untouchable' Shambuka's performance of asceticism as the reason behind the untimely death of a Brahmin child. This incident is a testimonial for the influence of the caste ranking system posited by Brahmanical Hinduism. They have recognised Brahmins, Kshathriyas and Vaishyas as the three castes of the social ladder. For the elite Brahmins, *Shudras* are the untouchable, and they represent the lowest rank of the social order. Though Rama represents the Kshathriya caste, he is under the clutches of the Brahmin elites. Despite being a man from the royal lineage with all power, Rama commits a grave mistake, killing an innocent citizen in his 'ideal state.' His involvement in such crimes seems he is not an ideal ruler.

The Shambuka episode of the Ramayana invited rampant criticism from various sources. ForPeriyar E.V. Ramasami, Rama is merely an embodiment of the Aryans' political dominance over the Dravidian people. He virulently attacks Rama by denoting what would have been the condition of Dravidians' lives if Rama had ruled them for a long time. Richman remarks: "E.V.R. reserves his greatest outrage, however, for Rama's treatment of Shudras, the lowest group in the four-part brahmanical caste ranking and one of the major audiences of his pamphlet. He notes that Rama killed a Shudra named Shambuka because he was performing asceticism, which Vedic tradition prohibits for those not twice-born." ("Ramasami's Reading" 185)

The killing of Bali in the Ramayana is a significant event as it posits complex questions about Rama's *dharma*. Not only the researchers, but the wounded Bali himself has criticised Rama for his unethical warrior code. As he is in search of Sita, Rama comes across Sugriva, who is exiled by his brother Bali, king of Kishkindha. Promising a help to find Sita in return, Sugriva seeks the help of Rama in order to defeat Bali.

Rama kills Bali through an ambush hiding behind a tree. This unjust deed of Rama, breaking the warrior code, is severely criticised due to Rama's recognition as a righteous hero. Rama is celebrated as a *maryadapurushottam,* and hence he is not supposed to commit such immoral deeds. Scholars who have delved into the study of the Ramayana narratives have castigated Rama. The dying Bali himself questions Rama for his going away from the warrior code.

It is not Rama but Lakshmana who badly mutilates Shurpanakha's body. The episode in the epic is consequential due to its role in the final confrontation between Rama and Ravana. The incident has been critically evaluated by the academia as it scrutinises Rama's distrustful attitude towards women. Though Rama is not the person who has cut off the lady's nose and ears, it is completely committed with his consent. While Rama as well as Sita and Lakshmana are in exile, Shurpanakha comes across them. In her infatuation she approaches Rama but he turns down her request, telling that Sita is his wife. As Lakshmana also declines her plea, enraged Shurpanakha attempts to attack Sita. This leads Lakshmana to cut off her organs. In fury and humiliation, Shurpanakha meets Ravana, her brother, and recounts her plight. His sister's condition prompts Ravana to seek revenge on Rama by abducting Sita. Hence, the mutilation of Shurpanakha is the root cause of Sita's abduction and the ensuing war between Rama and Ravana.

Rama's attitude towards Shurpanakha is severely criticised. Being an embodiment of virtue and righteousness, he should have shown a minimum level of empathy towards her, as she is a woman. Instead, Rama treats Shurpanakha insolently, leading her to humiliation. The incident is symbolised as a patriarchal control of Rama over womanhood. Even though Shurpanakha approaches him and Lakshmana inappropriately, Rama is supposed to resolve the situation sensibly. He would rather respect her than treat her with disrespect. It is also plausible that the rationale behind Rama's idiosyncratic behaviour indicates the influence of the caste system. As Rama represents Kshathriya, the second highest ladder of the *varnashramadharma*, he cannot help obeying Brahmins priests' demands. Both of these groups have a scornful attitude towards *shudras*, the lowest group of the caste system posited by Vedic period. In their eyes, Shurpanakharepresents a 'marginalised' class. Therefore, Rama's treatment of such alady, acting as a sentinel of *varnashramadharma,* is quite irritating.

The banishment of Sita to the forest while she is pregnant is yet another instance of Rama's unusual behaviour. This action of Rama has led to complex questions about his duty and commitment towards his wife. Rama has to face rumours of the public regarding his consort's purity owing to her life in Lanka after abduction. When his subjects and courtiers question Sita, Rama should have stood by her with consolation. Instead, his mind wavers, and he gives in, lending ears to the public's pressure. Rama does not value the significance of his conjugal love with Sita. He values public opinion rather than his trust and love for Sita.

Rama's action is criticised as an example of gender inequality and society's attitude towards women. He has undergone a conflict between his duty as a king and duty as a husband. People will have to play diverse roles in public and personal life. Despite the greatness of one's public life, one should take meticulous attention in designing the personal life too. Though Rama is a great king, his greatness fails before the baseless gossips of his subjects. Being a patriarch who represents the ancient society where the story of the Ramayana is set, Rama is not free from the societal judgement towards women. Lakshmana, the staunch brother of Rama, takes Sita in to the forest and leaves her obeying Rama's words. If he were compassionate towards his sister-in-law, he would hesitate to abandon her in the wild forest. Instead, he silently commits what his brother has ordered. Hence, the banishment of Sita symbolises the male chauvinistic attitude of Rama andLakshmana.

Rama is generally presented as a perfect moral hero owing to a number of qualities attributed to him. The diverse roles he has played, including a loyal son, a model husband, an exemplary king, and an embodiment of truth, have prompted others to view him as the ideal hero. Rama's willingness for an exile of fourteen years sacrificing the throne is often symbolised as the saga of a unique focus character, which is rarely seen in the history of literature. Since the Ramayana has evolved as devotional literature, Rama's recognition as a deity also progressed tremendously. Therefore, the ascribed attributes in Rama grew more concrete and explicit. However, critiques of the Ramayana demonstrate that Rama is not an ideal hero but an amalgamation of good and evil. Despite his name and fame as a *maryadapurushottam,* Rama has deviated from the path of truth and duties on numerous occasions.

Rama's inability to accept all the people with an egalitarian perspective is undisputable. If Rama were an ideal hero, he would respect people irrespective of their religion and caste. He, alone and with the influence of Brahmin priests, tends to express his malice towards the downtrodden people, behaving aggressively. The slaying of Shambuka's head and mutilation of Shurpanakha are instances. He is profoundly influenced by the existing norms and customs of the caste system. Additionally, Rama is not free from the clutches of Brahmanical hegemony that considered caste system as a value in earlier days. His lack of an egalitarian view is also reflected in the gender bias he showed in dealing with the issue of his own consort. Had he been aware of the value of equality among people irrespective of the gender, he would not have abandoned Sita into the wild forest, lending his ears to the gossipy town people. Therefore, Rama cannot be considered an empathetic man towards his wife and women in general. He has humiliated Shurpanakhaalso allowing Lakshmana to cut off her

body parts. These actions are the testimonials for the patriarchal nature of Rama. Hence, Rama is not a righteous hero but a male chauvinistic one directed and dominated by Brahmanical Hinduism.

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