

Lord Rama: The Chivalrous Incarnation of Morality

Priya¹

Department of English, Chaudhary Ranbir Singh University, Jind, Haryana.

Email: malikpriya129@gmail.com

Abstract

Today, India stands as a powerful and multi cultured society because it has absorbed many cultures and moved on. People here follow different religions, customs, and traditions. So, it is not possible to know India without exploring and understanding it's religious beliefs. Such an Indian religion is Hinduism, the world's third largest religion with over 1.25 billion followers, or fifteen to sixteen percent of the global population. One of the main deities in Hinduism, Lord Rama, is the epitome of enlightenment. Rama is recognized to be an illuminated man, with great moral values. He has also been given the title of Maryada Purushottama . He has been called as , “ the embodiment of truth, of morality, the ideal son, the ideal husband, and above all , the ideal king”, by Swami Vivekananda. Rama is the central figure of the ancient Hindu epic Ramayana and is especially important to Vaishnavism. Rama legends are also found in the texts of Jainism and Buddhism, though he is sometimes called Pauma or Padma in these texts. Rama is, in the words of the sage Valmiki, sab ke priya sab ke hitkari (beloved of all and loved by all). Lord Rama can be simply described as a man who demonstrates perfect moral as well as social behavior. Our society should realize the strong value system that revolves around Lord Rama.

Keywords : Hinduism, Morality, Enlightenment, Vaishnavism, Buddhism.

Introduction

“ Abandon pride, which is the same as Tamas- guna (darkness), rooted as it is in ignorance and is a source of considerable pain; and adore Lord Shri Rama, the chief of the Raghus and an ocean of compassion.”

Dashratha, king of Kosala is childless and desperately wants a son to succeed him as king. He asks his mentor for help who remembers a vision in which the God appealed to Vishnu to help them defeat Ravana, a demon who uses his powers for evil. Vishnu agreed to incarnate as a human to defeat Ravana. The messenger tells Dashratha to call a specific sage to conduct a sacrifice. When

¹ Author's note

Priya has recently completed her M.A. from the Department of English, Chaudhary Ranbir Singh University, Jind, Haryana. Her reasearch interests include Literary and Cultural Theory, and Indian Literature in English. She is fascinated by Legendary tales, Myths, Folklores and how Literature intersects with religious viewpoints. She has also been exploring the relationship between philosophy of language and philosophy of realism, and she likes to gather knowledge on various subjects. She occasionally pursues a variety of ironic and subversive interests such as reading poetry and fiction.

the sacrifice is completed, Dashratha's three wives bear sons . Kausalya has Rama, Kaikeyi has Bharata, and Sumitra has the twins Lakshmana and Sathrugana.

One day, the sage Viswamitra comes to Dashratha and asks that Rama accompany him to protect him during a sacrifice. Dashratha is heartbroken, but agrees, and sends Lakshmana with Rama. As Viswamitra travels with the boys, he tells them the story of a demoness, Tadaka, who threatens to eat the travelers, but Viswamitra instructs Rama to kill her. Rama does so and the Gods ask Viswamitra to teach Rama about weapons. Viswamitra tells the boys several more stories before they reach the site of the sacrifice. Rama assures the sages and saints of their safety as they begin the sacrifice, and he shoots the gathered demons with his bow. Viswamitra then takes the boys to Mithila city. When they enter the city, Rama sees a beautiful young woman on balcony, Sita, who immediately falls in love with him. The next day, Rama meets king Janaka. When Janaka sees Rama, he laments that Rama can't marry his daughter, so he set the condition that a suitor must be able to lift and string Shiva's bow, a massive bow once owned by the God. Viswamitra asks if Rama can attempt to string the bow. Rama not only strings the bow, he breaks it. A handmaid tells Sita, and she is overjoyed to learn that Rama won her hand. Janaka invites Dashratha to the wedding in Mithila, and after the ceremony, they return to Ayodhya, the capital city of Kosala. "Sita is domestic and chaste because Rama pays her attention. Tadaka is wild because her husband is dead and she is attached to no single man. Thus the onus of maintaining a field falls squarely on a farmer," says Devdutt Patnaik.

After Rama and Sita have been married for twelve years, Dashratha expresses his desire to crown Rama. On the eve of the great event, Kaikeyi claims two boons that Dashratha had long ago granted her. She demands Rama to be exiled into the wilderness for fourteen years, while the succession passes to her son Rama accepts his father's reluctant decree with sober self-control which characterizes him as a moral being throughout the story. He is joined by Sita and Lakshmana. When he asks Sita not to follow him, she says, " the forest where you dwell is Ayodhya for me and Ayodhya without you is a veritable hell for me." Ramayana, one of the two major epics of ancient India, the other being the Mahabharata, forms the Hindu Itihasa. It's story follows Rama's travels across forests with Sita and Lakshmana; the kidnapping of Sita by Ravana (the evil king of Lanka), that resulted in war ; and Rama's eventual return to Ayodhya.

Rama, Lakshmana and Sita travel far away from Ayodhya so that people won't come to convince them to return. They meet Jatayu, a great eagle who was a friend of Dashratha's. He promises to protect Rama until he can return from exile. One day, Rama sees a beautiful woman (Soorpanakha, Ravana's sister in disguise) approaching their dwelling, who tries to woo Rama and convince him to marry her, but he refuses. Soorpanakha spend the night in agony and decides the next morning that if she can kill Sita, Rama will love her. When Rama leaves the dwelling (Forest of Panchavati) the next day , Soorpanakha stalks Sita and jumps on her. Lakshmana rescues Sita and chops off Soorpanakha's nose. Insulted and humiliated, Shurpanakha crashes into Ravana's court and tells him what happened. She tells him that Sita is exceptionally beautiful and Ravana should take her for himself. Ravana falls in love with the image of Sita that Shurpanakha creates and goes to his

uncle Mareecha (a demon) for help, who agrees to abduct Sita. Rama and Ravana represent two ends of the human spectrum as said by Devdutt Patnaik in *The Book of Ram*.

Mareecha turns himself into a golden deer and walks near Rama's home. Sita sees the deer and asks Rama to capture it for her. Rama then goes to chase the deer, leaving Lakshmana to guard Sita. Rama chases the deer for miles before he realizes it's a trap. He shoots the deer, but with his dying breath, he impersonates Rama and cries for help from Sita and Lakshmana. On hearing the cry, Sita convinces Lakshmana to go for Rama's help. When Lakshmana is gone, Ravana disguises himself as a Brahmin and approaches Sita. He kidnaps Sita and carries her away. In their search for Sita, Rama and Lakshmana enter the land of Kiskinda, where they meet Hanumana and Sugreeva (king of Kiskinda).

Sage Valmiki has presented an idealized, if not beautified, image of Lord Rama, establishing the basis for his popular reverence. “ I salute Valmiki, the cuckoo, who, perching on the tree of poesy, melodiously sing the sweet syllables – *Rama, Rama*”(Ranganathanda Swami cited in *Subramaniam*, 2003, p.vii). Later versions present Rama as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the principal Hindu deity who helps preserve moral order in the world, giving epic literature a sacred dimension, and helping make The Ramayana part of the cult of Vishnu, one of the major cults of popular Hinduism. But many of these versions contradict one another. In the version preferred by Jains, an Indian sect organized around the principles of asceticism, Ravana is a sympathetic character, and Rama and Sita end up as world-renouncing monk and nun, respectively. The devotional *rasik* tradition in North India focuses on the marriage of Rama and Sita and ignores most of the events before and after it. The nineteenth-century Anglicized Bengali writer Michael Madhusudan Dutt chose to exalt Ravana over Rama in a long narrative poem. The South Indian activist E.V. Ramaswami saw *Ramayana* as a tool of North Indian upper-caste domination.

In Hindu tradition, Valmiki's *Ramayana* is considered to be the *Adi-kavya* (first poem). It has 24,000 verses divided into six *Kandas* (books) namely *Bala Kanda*, *Ayodhya Kanda*, *Aranya Kanda*, *Kishkindha Kanda*, *Sunder Kanda*, *Yuddha Kanda* and a seventh Kanda named *Uttara Kanda* stands apart from the main epic. It describes the duties of relationships, the importance of moral virtue in the life of a citizen and in the ideals of the formation of an operational society. Rama is truth, Rama is soul and Rama is found everywhere, and present in every atom, molecule and in every particle or object of universe, whether living or non-living. He is in all of us, need is to search him in ourselves. Being a symbol of truth and love, Ram nam has much power and is rightly said by Neem Karoli baba that : “ By taking the name of Rama, everything is accomplished, and by repetition of 'Ram' one can come closer to God.” It is mentioned in the Mahabharata that once Lord Shiva said that reciting the name of Rama thrice gives the grace equal to pronouncing the names of thousand deities. Lord Rama is known to be the oldest deity worshipped in human form, as Lord Rama was born in Treta Yuga. All the characters Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata, Hanumana, and Ravana are cardinal to the cultural consciousness of the South Asian nations of India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the South-East Asian countries of Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia. Lord Rama is not about “ Hindu identity” but about “Moral Values”. If he wanted to spread Hinduism, he could have converted all the Rakshasas into his own vansh after killing

Ravana, but he preferred not to do so. The warfare was over principles and not over the identity of the two sides involved in the battlefield. They were the principles of truthfulness, integrity, helpfulness and honesty, that need to be rejuvenated in a society. Here the question arises: What sort of values should be considered as moral ?

Morality can be a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct or from a particular philosophy, religion, or culture, or it can be derived from a standard that a person believes should be universal. Morality may be synonymous with “goodness” or “rightness”. German philosopher Immanuel Kant devised an argument that the goal of humanity is to achieve perfect happiness and virtue. In his book “Mere Christianity”, C.S. Lewis argued that “conscience reveals to us a moral law whose source can not be found in the natural world, thus pointing to a supernatural Lawgiver”. Lord Rama is also such a Lawgiver (a person who enacts a code of laws for entire nation). Rama, the name itself symbolizes courtesy, bravery, virtue, generosity, etc. Many great saints spent their whole life singing the glory of Lord Rama. Today Rama is widely accepted as “tribal hero of ancient India.” The name of Rama is used in many salutations among the masses like “Ram Ram” or “Jai Ram ji ki”. Rama was very simple, noble, forgiving, sincere and completely free from flamboyance. He always respected his elders and treated all humans of different social groups equally. He was the symbol of virtues and full of magnanimous personality. He never deviated from the path of Dharma and Karma and reacted calmly even in dire circumstances. He set an example of unmatched moral conduct. Parabrahma had created this universe and endowed powers to all. Lord Rama being the incarnation of Parabrahma thus respects his own creation. This respect to Dharma shown by Lord Rama is called as Maryada. Sage Tulsidas said, “No Father/Mother can get a son like Ram”. Even Dashratha loved him so much that he gave up his life after being separated from his son.

When Kaikeyi (Ram’s step Mother) demanded king Dashratha to banish Rama for fourteen years, he tried his best of stopping Rama but Rama said, “I cannot break our family tradition of keeping promise”. So, he is also known as Ekvachani (honouring one’s promise). King Dashratha said : “Raghukul Reet Sada Chali Aayi Pran Jaye Par Vachan Na Jayee”. On hearing his step mother’s punishment, Rama didn’t show any anger. Instead, he appreciated her for giving him an opportunity of serving forest sages. He followed her words faithfully and gave her the same respect as he gave to his mother Kaushalya. Lakshmana expressed displeasure on Kaikeyi’s punishment, but Rama pacified him and told him to obey as a dutiful son. Just to honor the Ishvaku (Ram dynasty) tradition of keeping promise, Shri Ram sacrificed his royal throne.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, while commenting on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the two great epics of India, says:

“They deal with the early days of the Indo-Aryans, their conquests and civil wars, when they were expanding and consolidating themselves, but they were composed and compiled later. I do not know of any books anywhere which have exercised such a continuous and pervasive influence on the mass mind as these two. Dating back to a remote antiquity, they are still a living force in the life of the Indian people.....They represent the typical Indian method of catering all together for various degrees of cultural development, or the highest intellectual to the simple uneducated and

untaught villager.....Deliberately they tried to build up a unity of outlook among the people, which was to survive and overshadow all diversity.”

One of Rama’s adorable qualities was Ekpatni (having only one wife). Those times Kings had the norms of having more wives so as to expand their kingdom but Lord Rama promised Sita that “ she will be his only wife”. So, he is also known as Ekpatni Vratha dhara. During Rama’s rule, everyone was given justice and not even a single person belonging to the lowest class of citizens, was treated unjustly in his kingdom. He established unity among people of all social classes by breaking various societal barriers like sharing meal with Shabaras, freeing Devi Ahilya from sage Gautama curse etc. As per the ideas put forward by E.M Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*, Lord Rama can be considered a sort of flat character who remains the same throughout the course of his entire life i.e; virtuous, generous and an ideal figure. He doesn’t undergo any kind of change and is relatively uncomplicated.

Shri Rama's kingdom became popular as Ram-Rajya, a synonym for peaceful, secure and ideal state . He was an ideal king. When he came to know that his citizens doubt the purity and chastity of Sita, then Rama ordered Sita to undergo Agni Pariksha Test. He knew about Sita's innocence, but as a king, he cannot go against the will of his citizens. Moreover, he also wanted to establish the idealism of a king by showing that the king should work in the interest of his nation. By ordering his wife for Agni Pariksha, he suffered more than Devi Sita did. In the words of Amish Tripathi , “.....a leader must love his country more than he loves his own soul”. Unlike Lord Krishna, Lord Rama never showed his Godly figure, divine powers, and thus limited himself to a simple human being. He could have crossed the ocean, could have defeated Ravana with his divine weapons and could have liberated Sita, but to spread the message that even a simple human being can defeat a mighty demon (like Ravana), he took the help of animals, birds etc. in his fight against evil . After killing Ravana, when all the deities came forward to esteem Lord Rama and said that He was Lord Vishnu then Rama said, “ I don’t know all that. I am just a man, son of Dashratha, brother of Lakshmana”.

Conclusion

Lord Rama is known for his kindness and well-established moral code of conduct, however morality is a subjective connotation and maybe vary from one culture to the other. He always gave the message, “ Truth and right path always achieve victory over evil”. Because of such qualities, Lord Rama is not only treated as a hero, but also as a God by the Hindus and his event of defeating demon Ravana is celebrated every year as Dussehra. In this Kalyuga, people are so much involved in materialism that they have lost the true meaning of duties, responsibilities, and moral virtues. In today’s world, corrupt politicians act as Ravana but unfortunately, we don’t have any Rama to defeat this Ravana. The only way to defeat this Ravana is that the common man take the initiative of becoming Rama which will not be possible unless there is unity amongst all Indians. It’s difficult to happen but we can still hope for the best and pray to Lord Rama for his blessings.

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