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The Cultural Trajectories of *Ramayana*, a Text beyond the Grand Narrative

Abstract

Ramayana, the mythical story developed into a grand narrative as Valmiki Ramayana at a particular point of time in a social context, is a cultural text that contained acknowledged and unacknowledged responses to the epistemes of historical periods. Though the popularity of the grand narrative and power structures disseminate the knowledge that Ramayana is a singular narrative, studies proved this understanding wrong. Many Ramayanas produced across the centuries questioned the unilateral theories of fixing Ramayana to a solitary text and the production of the text to a single author. Not only the diversity was associated with historical periods, but also Ramayana found its oral, written and performing renditions across geographical terrains. The current paper examines the multiplicity of Ramayana narratives that contribute to the liberated reading of Ramayana as a text beyond the grand narrative. The objectives of the paper include stating the rationale for promoting the multiplicity of Ramayana, unraveling the plurality of Ramayana by introducing texts across times, geographies and religions and juxtaposing different Ramayanas with varying perspectives and focus. The paper also depicts the way how the knowledge of multiplicity contributes to the thoughts on tolerance and dissent.

Key words : Ramayana, Plurality, Dissent, Culture

Ramayana, the epic that survives the centuries and revisions, though essentially is plural narrative, has been projected as a singular grand narrative and conceived in that particular mode in the popular perception. The politics behind such a formulation about limiting a narrative into a single thread and propagating the belief that the exceptions and diversions are to be erased is the work of hegemony which is to be contested on several grounds. Primarily the idea of legitimizing Ramayana into a single body of literature is a gross blatant untruth derived from a propaganda with the intention to generate and disseminate a particular ideology which is not inclusive of the marginalized communities and perspectives. The second issue is that the cultural messages it transmits are not progressive enough to transform the society to the good though the pretensions of the text display otherwise. The third explanation for promoting multiplicity of the narrative is the micro and macro level violence embedded in the texture of the grand narrative probably normalize aggression and hostility. A fourth motive for considering the articulations of plurality is a historical understanding of the potential consequences of the singular

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narrative. The fifth reason is indeed the new insights derived from renaissance that the tendency of hegemonic existence of a certain narratives is to be contested. The visibility of canonical narratives and inevitability of hiding of marginal narratives are the epistemological project of the powerful. The current study, addressing the plurality of Ramayana, history and culture of production of the narratives and the question of dissent, is an attempt at unraveling the various contours of deliberations on *Ramayana*.

In its interactions with the times and cultural discourses, *Ramayana* manifests itself into umpteen oral, written and performing forms across the historical periods, geographical terrains and, of course, religious spheres. *Valmiki Ramayana* being the first full length work based on the “ path of Rama” was the most acclaimed source of the Ramayana stories though even before its production innumerable stories narrated in *Ramayana* existed in *Vedas*. The basic thread of Valmiki's work was the quality of virtue as evolved in the layers of the tale of Rama, a man, the elder prince of Ayodhya , son of Dasaratha, who married Sita, was destined to abandon the palace and separated from his wife, who killed Ravana, the ruler of Lanka, to restore his wife abducted by him, who later abandoned his wife on the chastity debate in the society and lived a life based on a particular set of ideals legitimized in the society. The story was narrated through seven sections namely *Balakanda*, *Ayodhyakanda*, *Aranyakanda*, *Kishkindhakanda*, *Sundarkanda*, *Yuddhakanda* and *Uttarkanda*. Though sometimes twisted in discussions on the paradoxes of prudence, the work engages the reader with the ideal of sacrifice whether the recension followed is the Bengal edition of *Valmiki Ramayana* reprinted in the Gorresic edition, Bombay recension printed by Nirnaya sagar press, or Gaudiya and Western Indian recension of Dayanand Mahavidyalaya. (Sakalani 58). Some critics were of the opinion that Utterkanta, telling the grief stricken plight of Sita, was a later addition to *Valmiki Ramayana*. Though Valmiki cannot be considered as the exclusive author of *Ramayana*, “Drona Parva” and “Shanti Parva” of *Mahabharatha*, *Balakanda* , “Phala sruthy” of *Yudhakanda* and *Utharakanda* of *Ramayana* contained substantial evidence to reckon Valmiki, as the writer of the narrative, Ramayana. (Bulcke 47,53). Still in *Ramakatha* of Camille Bulcke and in the essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five examples and Three Thoughts in Translation” by A K Ramanujan, we encounter a large number of Ramayana tales which sometimes are radically different in content and approach. In addition to the variant endings such as the one with the return of Rama and Sita to the capital of Ayodhya, an ideal episode of reunion, coronation and peace, and the other tragic one with the grief stricken life of Rama and Sita after the slander spread on their return to Ayodhya as seen in Kampan, the texts on Ramayana showed less resemblance in their beginning too. (Richman *Many Ramayanas* 39, 40). Another difference lies in the way how different characters are treated with intensity: while in Valmiki Rama is the focal point of discussion, in Bengali *Chandabati Ramayana* Sita is the focal point. Vimala Suri's Jaina Ramayana and Tai Ramayanas Ravana's adventures were prioritized better than Rama's virtue.

Explorations into the diverse texts on Ramayana tale can be divided on the basis of religion, geography and language. While seeking the variety of *Ramayana* one has to proceed with the fundamental notion that the scope of *Ramayana* extends beyond Hindu tradition. Probably the redundant narrow essentialist views of reducing Ramayana as an exclusive Hindu religious text can be contested with such an argument. The impact of such an alternative knowledge is that it makes visible a flexible cultural text of the tale. Buddhist Ramayanas, Jain Ramayanas, Muslim Ramayanas, Dalit and Tribal Ramayanas are the pertinent texts beyond the versions of Valmiki, Kampan or Tulsidas. A few notable Buddhist texts are *Dasaratha Jathakam*, *Anamakam Jthakam* and *Dasarathakathanam*. Being based on Jathaka tradition of telling and related to the incarnations of Buddha, the content of these texts touched upon the three basic cultural questions in relation to the tale: 'the cultural scenario of narration, the aspect on which the story is narrated and the aspect that rationalizes the narration' (Bulcke 74). In Jain Ramayanas, Rama did not kill Ravana as he practiced ascetic life of nonviolence. Also Ravana was not a demonic king in the Jain texts. Instead Rama, Lakshman and Ravana are "Thrishastimahapurush" as the eighth Baladeva, Vasudeva and Prathivasudeva respectively. (Bulcke 80). *Hikayat Seri Rama* written in the Islamic tradition from Philippines propagated the belief that Ravana attained the boon to rule four worlds from Allah. Asees Tharuvana in his description in *Vayanadan Ramayanam* stated that the genealogy of Dasaratha, the father of Rama can be describe as follows: "Adamnabi, Dasaratharaman, Dasaratha, the ruler, Dasaratha" (Tharuvana 180). Keeping Rama, Sita, Hanuman and Surpanaka in the cultural dynamics of Kerala Muslim context, *Mappilaramayanam* was composed in the form of Mappilappattu. T.H. Kunhiraman Nambiar identified this anonymously written text and M.N. Karassery popularized it. There are divergent stories circulated among the Dalit and tribal communities such as Birhors in Bihar, Santhals in Bihar and Bengalis, Pardhans around Narmada, Agariya in Madhyapradesh and Irula in Kerala.

Ramayana stories could also be identified in folk oral renditions of Kannada literature. This subversive tradition exists in parallel to the canonical Sanskrit tradition initiated by *Valmiki Ramayana*. Probably the intentions of the rulers in eleventh and twelfth centuries to provide a fertile soil to Vaishnava tradition lies behind the Bhakti turn of Ramayana tradition and the incorporation of theological doctrines to it. Propagation of the theological texts of Ramayana in Sanskrit made it as a book of reverence rather than a literary work so much so that the critique of it would be treated as blasphemy. This Bhakti turn interpreted Ravana's abduction of Sita as an act from Ravana to attain salvation (Bulcke 168). Texts like *Adhyathma Ramayana*, *Ananda Ramayana* and *Adbudha Ramayana* were the inevitable productions of the theological indoctrination of the literary work. 'Ramayana was considered as a text used to destroy Dravida culture by demonizing Ravana', observed M.S. Purnalingam Pillai, a scholar on Tamil antiquity representing non-brahmin intelligentsia (Pillai ii). *Krittivasi Ramayana* or

Sreeramapanchali of Krittibas Ojha and *Chandrabati's Ramayana* were two notable Ramayanas written in Bengali Language. Considering the Urdu literature one would get surprised to see a certain texts such as *Ramayana Maseehi* written by a poet named Mulla Maseeha during Jahangeer's time in which references on Jesus and Maria were included. *Iramacharitham*, *Kannassa Ramayanam*, *Ramayanam Chambu* and *Adhyathma Ramayanam* are a few among the notable Ramayanas in Malayalam literature. Geographical boundaries rather than limiting *Ramayana*, in fact, provided plural manifestations for the text. The tradition spread across Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Indo-China and Japan resulted in the renditions namely *Ramayanakakawina*, *Hikayat Seri Rama*, *Sri Rama Pathayani Ramayanam*, *Ramakelinga*, *Serathkandam*, *Khotani Ramayanam* that configure the life of Rama and Sita in varying cultural frameworks.

The very knowledge about diversity of Ramayana will be instrumental in eradicating the biases and prejudices arise out of unilateral explanations. Negotiations on plurality of Ramayana invalidate the argument that Ramayana texts are the literary re-appropriations of *Valmiki Ramayana*. Ramayana is emerged as an open text which could appear in varying forms based not only on the prerogatives of the producers of the text. It could assimilate varying dimensions focusing on class, caste, gender or religion, as responses to the subtle paradoxes of existence. This perspective is vital while engaging with the deliberations on *Ramayana* as Romila Thapar rightly commented in her essay, "The Ramayana Syndrome": "If we are to be aware of at least this strand of our cultural tradition then the debate and the dialectic embedded in these various versions should be more openly discussed." (Thapar 1)

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