

Rama : a historic or epic figure ?

Mr. L. K. Advani, in his foreword to the BJP's White Paper, April, 1993, has said : "Sri Rama is the unique symbol, the unequalled symbol of our oneness, of our integration, as well as of our aspiration to live the higher values. As *Maryada Purushottam* Sri Rama has represented for thousands of years the ideal of conduct, just as Rama Rajya has always represented the ideal of governance ... There is scarcely a folk tradition which does not celebrate the life and legend of Sri Rama. And one saint of our land after another, one saintly tradition after another has immersed itself in devotion to Him."

We are further told by Mr. Advani, leader of the BJP, which, like the rest of the Sangh Parivar, claim to be the true inheritors of the ideal conduct and government represented by Rama and Ramrajya, that to condemn the Kar Sevaks, the demolition of the Babri Masjid for the liberation of the birthplace of Rama—the 'holiest of holy'—is to revile the resurgence of Hindu sentiments.

But who is Rama, the question of whose birth-place has brought about such an upheaval, such violence and hatred which no smooth talk can gloss over? Is he at all a historical figure? What have our great historians and scholars got to say on that question? It is a subject which has intrigued historians and scholars for the past one and half century. Some of the most brilliant intellects in our country and abroad, have explored, studied and carried on scientific research on the characters of the *Ramayana* and origin and development of this great work, which in popularity remains unsurpassed. Though opinions of such a host of great scholars is bound to vary on some points, on others a broad consensus has been reached. Thus, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, National Professor of India, and a renowned linguist and orientalist, former President of Shahitya Academy, New Delhi, who has been highly acclaimed and accepted as an authority on such questions, has stated on the basis of such consensus : "The *Ramayana* is basically a literary creation by some single poet, who has been named Valmiki — with of course, later interpolations, additions and alterations ... There is evidently no historical core below the surface — no scholar of Indian History now thinks that Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana* was a historical person who can be relegated to a particular period of time." (*World literature and Tagore*)

Highlighting the epic character of the *Ramayana*, and hailing Valmiki as the first conscious poet, and indeed one of the greatest poets of the world, Dr. Chatterjee stressed: "The *Ramayana* may not be true in history, but it is hundred per cent true as a picture of human character, endeavour and destiny. It was, to start with, the first great epic — verse romance or novel with a full element of the marvellous and the magical, the bizarre and the improbable, side by side with the human and the realistic which we all understand and love, — and thus its appeal was irresistible to all sorts and conditions of men." (*The Ramayana, Its Character, Genesis, History, Expansion and Exodus A Résumé*)

It was due to this fact and because the "Ramayana story and characters supplied the

unquenchable thirst for social virtues and happiness, and joys and sorrows" that its enduring popularity stems, which has far surpassed other great stories in Indian literature of which there was no lack, according to Prof. Chatterjee, from the *Vedas* onwards, and that it spread throughout Asia to almost every country where it became intermingled with local legends and traditions and grew into national epics — a process which started from c. 200 A.D. onwards, once the Valmiki *Ramayana* had reached its present form.

Archaeologists have tried for years not only to locate the legendary Ayodhya of the *Ramayana* but to find corroborative evidence of the historicity of Rama from excavations, inscriptions, sculptural pieces and other sources. But in vain. Countless excavations undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of India and Archaeology Departments of the BHU among others, in present-day Ayodhya and different places have yielded absolutely nothing. Not a single object, no ruins that could even be faintly associated with the urban setting mentioned in the *Ramayana*, not to speak of such antiquity, not even a coin or seal that could point to the possible historicity of Rama, or the legendary Ayodhya, could be found.

Thus, Dr. Sukumar Sen, the famous linguist and orientalist, has aptly remarked : "We pronounce in one breath that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are two religious scriptures of equal standing and worth. This is not at all correct. Our tradition too does not corroborate this. Whereas the *Ramayana* is poetry, an epic composed by a poet, the *Mahabharata* is an 'Itihas' (history) based on popular hearsay, handed down from one generation to the next.... Here I may point out that *Mahabharata* is an 'Itihas' all right, but not in the modern sense. In ancient time this term meant old stories ('*Ramkathar Prak Itihas*', free translation)

Some scholars on the basis of puranic tradition, have held that the *Ramayana* being set in the *Treta Yuga*, the events are supposed to have taken place 9 lakh years ago. Some others have calculated that Rama, if at all a historic person, ought to have been born about 2000 or 3000 BC — a date more generally accepted. But in this case one expects to find especial mention in the ancient texts. But countless great scholars studying different sources of ancient texts have not found any such reference. Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, thus, pointed out that : "In Indian literature from the later Vedic times (including portions of the Vedic Hymns, and the later exegetical literature of the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanisads as well as the Sutas, c. 900-200 B.C.), there are many references, mostly indirect and therefore all the more valuable, to persons and incidents of the *Mahabharata*". But in this earlier Brahmanical literature, there is no reference to any of the *Ramayana* personalities and incidents. The few names mentioned do not tally with the characters of the *Ramayana*. Thus, "There is no mention of a hero Rama. We have got to come down to Buddhist literature (e.g. the Pali Jatakas) for any names from the *Ramayana*, and that would be about the 4th century B.C. — in all likelihood later, and not earlier. But in the same Pali Jataka

literature, we have plentiful references to *Mahabharata* personalities and incidents.... Patanjali's *Mahabhasya* also does not mention Rama. So even before 100 B.C., the *Ramayana* was not yet so very well-known. But there are evidences from the Jaina and Buddhist literatures that the *Ramayana* was already a finished epic by the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D." (*ibid*)

Indeed, pointed out Dr. Chatterjee, "We find only in the Pali Jataka literature, as it was being developed during the 4th century B.C. and later, a full statement of the Rama story in only one of its sections, the first or earliest one, narrating just the harem intrigue in the capital city which sent Rama and Sita and Lakshmana to exile, not to the unopened forests of the South, but to the Himalayas. The story ended with the return of the exiles to their paternal heritage which was Varanasi, and with Rama marrying Sita who was his own sister. This was the form in which the story was known to the redactors of the Buddhist Jataka stories in Pali. Rama is praised here just as a *Pandita*, or, Wise Man, who was not perturbed by the death of his father Dasaratha! ... "The great moral and social background is as yet absent." (*ibid*) This, according to Dr. Chatterjee, provided the nucleus of the *Ramayana* story. And artistically integrating this story of the harem intrigue and exile of Rama and Sita and Lakshmana, with different stories, all unrelated in themselves, or fragments of stories we find Valmiki, "The poet of the *Ramayana* was a genius, who created a single coherent narrative poem out of some three fragmentary or different stories — such is the consensus of opinion among the larger number of critics." And thus we get the first great literary epic, the Sanskrit *Ramayana* of Valmiki "standing in its beauty and glory as something perfect in itself ... with all the finer situations and touches and the intensely human atmosphere, bringing in an exaltation of family relation." (*ibid*)

That Rama is the incarnation of Visnu, is found only in *Balkanda* (Introductory Chapter) of Valmiki *Ramayana*, which according to the scholars is a definite interpolation.

Far from being a glorified, or idealised divine being, in the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Rama is portrayed realistically as a human being, endowed with great and noble qualities, side by side with human weaknesses, Dr. Chatterjee stressed. (*ibid*)

Valmiki's *Ramayana* leaves us in no doubt that Rama was not only portrayed as a human being but a human being with both greatness and

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weaknesses. Does his behaviour with Sita and his address to her after her captivity strike any person as noble?

This is what he says :

"I have got you as a prize in a war after conquering my enemy your captor. I have recovered my honour and punished my enemy. People have witnessed my military prowess and I am glad my labours have been rewarded. I came here to kill Ravana and wash off the dishonour. I did not take this trouble for your sake." He goes on : "I suspect your conduct. You must have been spoiled by Ravana. Your very sight is revolting to me. Oh you daughter of Janaka, I allow you to go anywhere you like. I have nothing to do with you. I conquered you back and I am content for that was my object. I cannot think that Ravana would have failed to enjoy a woman as beautiful as you are." (Yudhakanda Sarga 115 Slokas 1-23: Translation taken from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar *Writings and Speeches Vol. 4. Unpublished Writings : Riddles in Hinduism*. There are other episodes, like the killing of Vali and how he got rid of Sita, that point to such weaknesses — which are of course beyond the scope of this discussion.

It is only much later, that "religion came to the further exaltation of Valmiki's poem, when from the early centuries of the Christian era, Rama, who was just a human hero in the *Adi-Ramayana* or the basic *Ramayana* as composed by Valmiki, came to be regarded as an incarnation — and the great human incarnation with all the attributes of men and of the Supreme God Visnu" and during the closing centuries of the 1st thousand years after Christ, the Rama story became "a most popular and potent Legend of Sacred History." (*ibid*)

This divine atmosphere especially permeates the famous *Ramacharitanas* composed by Tulsidas in the Early Avadhi speech, making the text available to vast sections of the people, where Rama is portrayed as a divine being, the incarnation of Vishnu, and which has become immensely popular and is the best known version of the *Ramayana*. Of course, there are countless versions and regional variations of the *Ramayana*, with countless incongruities. To talk of uniformity is to talk of a myth. While in northern India Tulsidas's version may be predominating, in southern states many regional variations in regional languages exist. And then there are the Buddhist and Jaina versions. According to Dr. Sukumar Sen, in some Jaina versions it is Laksmana who should be considered as the main hero, since it is he who gives advice to Rama while Rama listens to him. (*ibid*) And Romila Thapar, another Historian, points out that in the *Ramayana* written by *Paumacaria*, Ravan, far from being a villain, is a devoted Jaina, while the main protagonists (Rama and Sita) become Jaina ascetics.

How can Rama be called "the unequalled symbol of our oneness, of our integration" as Mr. Advani has done in the white paper, when there are diametrically opposed views in our country about Rama like the extreme view of the Dravida Kazhagam, parent body of DMK and AIDMK, who denounced the *Ramayana* as 'a shameless glorification' of Aryan invaders at the expense of Dravidian sons of the soil — a view which his descendants have not entirely or at all repudiated?

It is also known that the rebellious poet of Bengal Madhusudan Datta, talked of 'Rama and his rabble' being no match for 'Ravan the grand fellow'. He did not have to suffer any persecution for such 'heretical' talk. But one wonders what would have been his fate or rather that of his descendants, had the BJP been in power. Besides, there are people who have called Rama mean — because of the way he treated Sita, his most faithful wife and how he killed Vali — Dr. Ambedkar, one of the founding fathers of the Constitution of India and a great scholar, being one of them. Sita herself raised this point and called his behaviour low and mean. Moreover, neither Dr. Ambedkar nor his forerunner, Jotirao Phoolley, the great social reformer and educationist who tried to achieve the upliftment of the downtrodden and emancipation of women, had a high opinion of the moral values, as relevant to present society, of the *Ramayana*. The latter said : "The *Ramayana* is not a true history. It consists of fabricated tales and conveys no moral lessons.

... The man who keeps in mind the fear of truth and behaves rightly with all men, Muslims, Christians and others, is a moral man." (*Mahatma Jotirao Phoolley, Father of the Indian Social Revolution*, Dhananjay Keer)

The BJP combine is promising 'Ramarajya' and has at the same time decided to promote Dr. B. R. Ambedkar as its hero, (at the national executive meeting held recently in Calcutta) : but how can that be? Dr. Ambedkar, whose concern was for the downtrodden was no lover of Ramrajya. In *Annihilation of Caste* he wrote : "Some people seem to blame Rama because he wantonly and without reason killed Shambuka. But to blame Rama for killing Shambuka is to misunderstand the whole situation. Rama Raj was a Raj based on Chaturvarnyya. As a king, Rama was bound to maintain Chaturvarnyya. It was his duty therefore to kill Shambhuka, the Shudra, who had transgressed his class and wanted to be a Brahmin. This is the reason why Rama killed Shambuka. But this also shows that penal sanction is necessary for the maintenance of Chaturvarnyya. Not only penal sanction is necessary, but penalty of death is necessary. That is why *Manu-Smriti* prescribes such heavy sentences as cutting off the tongue or pouring of molten lead in the ears of the Shudra, who recites or hears the *Veda*. ... Assuming that Chaturvarnyya is practicable, I contend that it is the most vicious system."

(Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1, p. 61)

So it is clear that Rama can by no means be called the 'Symbol of our unity and integration'.

Be that as it may, it is clear that the appeal of the *Ramayana* is due not to the historicity of Rama, but to its greatness as a literary epic because it affords us a glimpse of the social and cultural life and norms in ancient India, and because of the universal appeal of the dignity, the heroic and noble qualities of the characters, the devotion and steadfastness with which they discharged their duty according to the then prevailing precepts, and the charm of deep brotherly affection, in the background of the then social conditions.

Rabindranath Tagore, the great poet, educa-

tionist and Nobel laureate, whose genius and deep affinity with the spiritual and cultural heritage of our country, has been universally acclaimed, likewise highlighted that the truth of the *Ramayana*, lies in its truth as literary creation, while paying tribute in a poem to Valmiki, the unknown poet: That will be true, whatever you will compose : that which actually happens is not all true. Oh Poet, the land of your mind is the birthplace of Rama — and know that to be truer than Ayodhya. (Bhasha 'O Chanda).

Thus, with Rama being an epic figure, a literary creation, how can the question of his birthplace arise at all? How can the question of the 'sacred' birthplace of a mythical or epic figure become a matter of dispute? If he evokes such veneration, the place accorded to him will be in the heart or emotion of people. But the RSS-BJP-VHP combine declare that their belief in the sacredness of Rama's birthplace is a matter of faith, which they pronounce cannot be questioned or examined in the light of the findings of science and history. Hence their faith is blind. But when confronted with logic, to convince the sceptics among the Hindus, they come forward with proof, archaeological and documentary, so they say, to substantiate their claims and justify their action. But how can such blind faith which they themselves declare to be beyond science and history, be at the same time substantiated by 'archaeological evidence', only they can explain.

Actually BJP's acts of 'liberation' of Rama's birthplace are clearly not prompted out of love for Rama but out of greed for power. In order to unite and rally the amorphous Hindu community, it needs a single Avatar, a single holy book which can act as a unifying force, which it has found in Rama and the immensely popular *Ramayana*.

Hence this falsification and distortion of history! And this is BJP!

Communalism : at what cost to the people

In India, the evils of communalism and parochialism claimed the In secular (!) India, communal and casteist riots snatched away lives of 50,000 people during the period 1982-1992.

Toll of communal riots and other violent incidents :

- Victims in Punjab in sequel to Khalistan movement — 20,000
- Toll in the above movement in outer Punjab — 5,000
- Toll in 'Blue Star Operation' added with allied events — 2,000
- Toll in November, 1984 in anti-Sikh massacre — 5,000
- Toll in terrorist movement in Kashmir — 4,000
- Toll in different violent incidents in north-east region including Nelly — 3,000
- Toll in communal riots in Ayodhya episode and Advani's Rathayatra together with Bhagalpur riots — 4,000
- Victims of other violent incidents — 7,000
- Total — 50,000

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