

**THE MAKING OF AN AVATĀRA :
DEIFICATION OF RĀMA IN THE
VĀLMĪKI RĀMĀYANA**

Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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1996

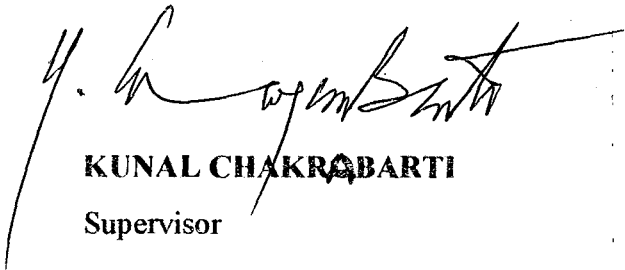



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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this M.Phil. dissertation entitled. "The Making of an *Avatara*: Deification of Rama in the Valmiki *Ramayana* "submitted by Kumari Anjana in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of this university, is her original work and has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this university or any other university to the best of our knowledge.

We recommend, this dissertation to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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PREFACE

"Memory is life. It is always carried by groups of people, and therefore it is in permanent evolution. It is subject to the dialectics of remembering and forgetting, unaware of its successive deformation open to all kinds of use and manipulation. Sometimes it remains latent for long periods then suddenly revives. History is the always incomplete and problematic reconstruction of what is no longer there. Memory always belongs to our time and form a lived bond with the eternal present; history is a representative of the past". (Pierre Nore, in E.J. Hobsbawn, The Age of Empire, 1875-1914, Rupa & Co., Calcutta, 1982, p.1).

Rāmakathā is a tradition, a memory. As a tradition it is part of me. As a memory it has induced me to embark on this study of the epic Rāmāyana one of the earliest versions of Rāmakathā, in the light of the recent developments and examine the deification and historicity of Rāma. In spite of being a deeply embedded memory, little study has been undertaken to trace out the historical development of Rāma's deification. This work is an attempt to address some of the important issues involved in the process of development of Rāma from an ideal man and an ideal king to an avatāra.

Many people have contributed to this work. To begin with, I am indebted to my supervisor Kunal Chakrabarti, whose intellectual contribution to this work is immense. He stood by me from the very inception of the idea, to the framing of the topic, till the final analysis.

In addition, I am particularly grateful to Prof. Romila Thapar, whom I have personally never met, but whose writings on the epics, especially on the Rāmāyana were of great use and directed me to study the epic as a source of history, when others questioned the very historicity of my primary source. I extend my thanks to Prof. B.D. Chattopadhyay whose comments I have deeply valued while examining geographical locations and archaeological evidences. My special thanks to Dr. R.N. Nandi, who initiated me into research and whose influence on my thinking has been deep and abiding.

I thank the staff of Sahitya Academy Library, National Museum Library and A.S.I. Library for their co-operation. A special thanks to Sri L.N. Mallick, Asstt. Librarian, J.N.U., for his unfailing courtesy and ever helping attitude.

I am so deeply indebted to my friends that words of gratitude seem insufficient repayment. They have not only supported me throughout and rejuvenated me whenever I was retiring but have also enriched my work with their challenging questions, insightful suggestions and by furnishing me with some of the indispensable references, books and articles. I cannot discharge my debt to my parents. I can only acknowledge their affection and support. I must acknowledge the contribution made by Ruby and Bablu. Their love and enduring faith in me sustained both me and my work when things appeared to be falling apart.

To all these people I express my gratitude, I alone am responsible for any shortcomings.

NEW DELHI

July 22nd 1996

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.D.	Āpastambha Dharmasūtra
B.D	Bandhayana Dharmasūtra
B.G	Bhāgavad Gītā
G.D	Gautama Dharmasūtra
Mbh.	Mahābhārata
V.D.	Vāśiṣṭa Dharmasūtra
V.R.	Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa

Introduction

1. Introduction

This work is an attempt to trace the process of deification of Rāma as depicted in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* and to understand its significance in the backdrop of ideological, material and social milieu of the contemporary society. I have argued that the period of codification of the text was a period of reassertion of brahmanism in several spheres of life. Brahmanism was attempting to construct an ideal theoretically through the *Smṛiti* literature and was bringing in some of the salient features of these ideals in the popular stories of the epics, particularly in the didactic sections. Rāma served the purpose of providing a subject where all the ideals coalesced, whether as a man or as a king, which contributed to his eventual deification as an incarnation of Viṣṇu.

The Text

We treat the *Rāmāyaṇa* here primarily as a historical document, because even though the actual events narrated in the epic are not historical, "it does supply us with information about the integrating values around which the societies were organised. It codifies belief, safeguards morality, attests for the efficiency of ritual and provides social norms. In a historical tradition, therefore, the themes of myth act as factors of continuity. In other words the analysis of a myth can reveal the structure of the society from which it emanates".¹ For literary works are not mysteriously inspired. They

¹ Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1979, p.296

represent particular ways of seeing the world, and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the social mentality or ideology of an age. That ideology, in turn, is the product of the concrete social relations into which men enter at a particular time and place. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is important for us because it helps us to understand this ideology and the social relations that produced it.

Important secondary literature on the *Rāmāyaṇa* includes monographs by the sanskritists such as Frank Whaling's *Rise of Religious Significance of Rama* (Motilal Banarasis, Delhi, 1980), J.L. Brockington's, *Righteous Rama* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984), Paula Richman's *Many Rāmāyaṇas* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994). From historical point of view Romila Thapar's *Exile And Kingdom* (Mythic society, Bangalore, 1978) connects the process of evolution of the epic with the socio-economic and political formations of its times. H.D. Sankalia in *The Ramayana; Myth or Reality* (People's Publishing House, Delhi, 1991) has tried to relate the text with archaeological evidences.

Frank Whaling begins with the observation that scholars have neglected Rāma for Kṛṣṇa. The reason behind the neglect of Rāma, he explains, is that little attempt has been made to view his development as an integral character. He says that in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, the most important level of meaning in the Rāma symbol is the human level, i.e., as personification of *dharma*. At the second level Rāma represents the gods and cosmos over against demons and chaos. Thus at this stage the deeper level of the meaning of Rāma is that he is the successor of Indra, although he is not mythologically identified with him. At the third and deepest level of meaning Rāma is

an avatāra of Viṣṇu. After accomplishing his task he returns back to heaven in his original form of Viṣṇu. He demonstrates that the three stages of development of the symbol of Rāma, the old level are always integrated with the new, an important features of Indian religious life, which exemplified the willingness to accept new elements and ability to integrate the new and old. The different symbols can function for different people at different level.

Whaling emphasises the aspect of continuity in the Rama ideal. While he works out in great detail the elements of continuity at religious and philosophical levels and shows one integrated with the other in the realm of ideas, he makes no attempt to view these ideas in relation to any other context. Thus the religious aspect has been studied in isolation without being sensitive to the contemporary surroundings.

J.L. Brockington starts with the history of the text. He argues that the long time-span and the transmission factor of the epic makes it clear that it was composed against the oral background of heroic ballads. He does not rule out the possibility that there was a kernel of historical and semi-historical truth around which the epic has developed. He explains that myth is the final stage in the development of a heroic saga. Through continuous transmission the historicity and particularity of this heroic legend are transformed in the popular memory into a mythical and universal form. He studied the people, the court, the army, the stratified society as described in the different layers. He discusses the religious pattern and a shift towards righteousness. He maintains that the elevation of Rāma's character, combined with his standing as a prince, makes it natural for him to be compared with gods. Thus, in the first place, he

is regularly compared with Indra. Further, it goes beyond just comparison and Rāma is directly linked with Indra and later as an incarnation of Viṣṇu.

Brockington is aware of the existence of a larger social context in which the text has to be located. But although he systematises information on society and economy as contained in the text with a good deal of precision, he nevertheless seems to be insensitive to the need for correlating this date with the development of the ideal of Rāma.

Paula Richman's book is a useful collection of pieces of literary analysis of the regional versions of the text. The first section of the essays illustrates different depictions of the same episode in different versions, and dangers of domination of one story. In the second section highlights the refashioning, opposition and diversity of Rāma's story. However, the essays seldom take into account the underlying historical process. The book is sensitive to the cultural context, but the essays taken together do not offer an explanation of why local requirements varied and to what extent these requirements were met by the regional versions.

H.D. Sankalia helps us in situating the text in its geographical location. Romila Thapar propounds that the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa* can be seen as largely mythical in some of its references, but mythology is based on certain assumptions and it is with these that the historian is primarily concerned with. Why the exile and the kingdom-for the two themes appear to be main pivots of the story representing two contrasting societies and two contrary images. She argues that these pivotal societies could have existed separately in the earlier tradition and were probably first put together in a single text to become a standard version of the Rāmakathā. The juxtaposition between the state

and the tribal chiefships and spread of Vaiṣṇavism provided the perennial theme of the *Rāmāyaṇa* to broaden its base. The dominance of classical culture over the local culture was established through political control over the new areas. The *Rāmāyaṇa* provided a good component for an integration of the new areas.

Romila Thapar, thus, locates the text in the backdrop of the changing process of Sanskritisation and internalisation of culture. Her study helps us in understanding the religious as well as mythical aspects of the epic. But there is no discussion on the possible relation between the development of Rāma as an incarnation of Viṣṇu and the contemporary Brahminical agenda. This work is to analyse the deification of Rāma in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* from historical point of view.

It is difficult to date a text such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Scholars have, however, tried to fix its date within fairly close limits. Several eminent historians of Sanskrit literature such as Jacobi, Keith and Macdonell has suggested that the core of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was composed before 500 B.C. Camil Bulke and J.Gonda date it to the fourth century B.C.² These are the earliest possible dates of the epic.

H.D. Sankalia has argued and opines that the uppermost limit of the *Rāmāyaṇa* cannot be earlier than the beginning of the Iron Age as *ayasa* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* definitely refers to iron and not copper³. He therefore suggests that the text began to be codified during the period between 800 to 400 B.C. The maximum interpolation, he explains, seems to have taken place between the second century B.C. and third century A.D. when

² M.R.Yadi, *The Ramayana : Its Origin and Growth, A Statistical Study*, Bhandarkar Oriental research Institute, Poona, 1994, p.54.

³ H.D.Sankalia, *Ramayana Myth or Reality*, People's Publishing House, 1991 (reprint)p.51.

descriptions of Lañkā, Ayodhyā, Kiṣkindhā, came to be entirely recomposed. For instance, the episode of finger ring that Hanumān presented to Sītā was introduced at this time, for signet rings were unknown before the first century B.C. and was only introduced by the Indo-Greeks in the early part of first century B.C.⁴

B.B. Lal has pointed out that the excavation at the *Rāmāyana* sites have proved the absence of PGW found at the *Mahābhārata* sites and therefore, if Rāma was a historical figure living in Ayodhyā, he was later in date than the period of the *Mahābhārata* heroes.⁵ H.D. Sankalia, who made a brief exploration of Ayodhyā, had found PGW shreds there⁶. Prof. B.D. Chattopadhyay however explains that the evidence of literary texts such as an epic and that of archaeology can perhaps meet only a certain points, for these texts represent different types of culture which cover a vast span of time. The epics were written over a number of centuries and the process presupposes a considerable degree of overlapping in time. He, therefore, suggests that it would be risky, if not totally futile, to single out any particular archaeological cultural trait for correlation with the literary evidence of this kind. Perhaps it may be possible to undertake a total structural study of society in terms of both archaeology and literary tradition⁷.

M. R. Yardi, on the basis of astronomical evidence, has argued that the

⁴ *ibid.*, p.55

⁵ B.B.Lal, "Archaeology and the Two Indian Epics". *Annals of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*. Vol XXIV, 1974, p.7.

⁶ H.D.Sankalia, *op.cit.* p.45.

⁷ B.D.Chattopadhyay, "Indian Archaeology and the Epic Tradition," *Purnatva*, No.8, 1975-76, p.70.

Rāmāyaṇa was composed before 400 B.C., and its final redaction seems to have been completed by the first century A.D. The earliest reference to the seven days a week and, therefore the planets, is made by Garga who flourished in the first century B.C. Thus the *sarga* 4 in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* must have been added by an author who could not have lived before the first century B.C.⁸

J.L. Brockington suggests that the period of greatest interpolation was the fourth century A.D. and it was only after the Gupta period that Rāma was deified and regarded as one of the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu. The first available depiction of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in sculpture has been found at Deogorh in the Dasāvātāra temple, dated in the fifth century A.D. Episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* have also been depicted at Nacana (M.P.), dated once again in the fifth century A.D.⁹ A terracotta plaque, datable to the second century B.C. from Kauśāmbī, shows a plump short-statured man with bulging eyes and wrinkled face holding a woman in his arms. Both the hands of the woman are raised in alarm and some of her ornaments have fallen on the ground. This depiction reminds one of Sītā's abduction, but it can not be definitely traced to the *Rāmāyaṇa*¹⁰.

So far as the interpolations are concerned, Brockington has tried to identify four different layers (p.307-327). The orally transmitted phase, according to him, belongs to the fifth to fourth centuries B.C. This first stage is that in which the heroic aspect of the story is most evident, the material culture and the social pattern are at their

⁸ M.R.Yardi, *op.cit.*, pp.49-60, referring to V.R - 3.4.17-19

⁹ Jayantika Kala, *Epic Scenes in Indian Plastic Art*, Abhinav Prakashan, New Delhi, 1980, p p. 17-19. and Joanna Williams, *The Art of Gupta India*, Heritage Publication, New Delhi, 1993, plates 115-170

¹⁰ Jayantika Kala, *op.cit.*, p.27

simplest, and the geographical horizons are most restricted. The king surrounded by his court is the focus of the society and he is respected rather than revered as divine. His right to levy tribute or taxes is matched by his obligations to protect his subjects. Warfare was a prominent aspect of society at the stage, not only because of the material condition of the period but also due to the fact that audience at the royal court loved to listen to the heroic tales. The social organisation was relatively simple with little emphasis on the four *varṇas*. There was no marked sign of inferiority for non-settled or tribal groups, and women enjoyed some degree of favour. The evidence of the religious norms prevailing in the first stage, though limited, is one of the strongest pointer to an early date. The pattern alluded to is markedly nearer the *Vedic* pattern than the *Purānic*, as attested by the prominence of Indra. It contains most of the verses of the book 2 to 6.

The second stage is dated between the third century B.C. and the first century A.D. and it covers 34% of the critical edition of the text. With the second stage there is a certain shift of emphasis from the heroic to the aesthetic, which in part accounts for the greater elaboration of the story visible at this stage. Caravans of merchants, staircases, water towers, personal ornaments such as ear-rings, necklaces, anklets etc. suggest a more developed social and economic pattern. Geographical awareness at this stage shows little extension from that of the first stage. The status of the king was now enhanced through claims of divine status and his role as a protector was still emphasised. Warfare was becoming more elaborate with the switch from chariots to elephants. Socially the most obvious change was in the position of women with emphasis placed on a wife's subservience to her husband and on her chastity. The

varṇa system was beginning to surface and allusions are made to the distinctive role of the *brāhmaṇas* who were supposed to study and conduct rituals. Greater prominence was given to Brahmā, and heaven and hell were distinguished. The inclusion from this stage onwards of a divine chorus or audience as spectators at crucial points in the narrative is perhaps the first sign of the increasing religious significance with which the epic came to be invested, ultimately turning it into a *Vaiṣṇava* work.

The third stage has been dated by Brockington to the first to third centuries A.D., when the books one and seven were composed. It constitutes nearly one fourth of the text. In this stage there occurs much greater emphasis on the four *varṇa* model and correspondingly on the king's duty to punish breaches of this religiously ordained social system. The position of women had declined further and they now at times appear simply as temptresses. At the same time the need for sons to continue the family and perform the memorial rites for the father has been stressed. A note worthy feature of this stage is the growth of urban centres, mostly in the Gaṅgā basin. Both Taxilā in the north-west and Prāsthāna in the Deccan, which had great prominence in the first and second century A.D, have also been mentioned. In the description of warfare, realism was replaced by fantastic imagination and the employment of divine or magical weapons became common. Viṣṇu and Śiva rose in status and challenged Indra and Brahmā for supremacy among the gods. Nevertheless, Brahmā has been described in greater detail with occasional reference to his four heads and his birth from a lotus. However, although Indra and Brahmā were still important, it was already evident that Viṣṇu and Śiva were the only contenders for the role of the supreme deity.

The fourth stage is dated between the 4th and 12th centuries A.D. which admitted some minor interpolations. Emphasis on religion increased further during this stage. But the greatest change can be observed on the social level, for the epic had by now largely moved away from its heroic origins and most additions were made either for aesthetic effect or for didactic and religious purposes. The social organisation was clearly based on the *varṇa* system and greater emphasis was placed on the elevation of the *brāhmaṇas* and the degradation of the *śūdras* and the outcastes. The wife now came to be seen merely as an adjunct of her husband. The increasing hold of astrology is very evident and it now included the Hellenistic system which became available from the middle of the second century A.D.

M.R. Yardi has objected to Brockington's method of identifying distinct layers of the text. Yardi points out that "there is a subjective element in the choice of the linguistic features. Secondly, no author can write continuously in a homogenous style and a method has to be found by which we can separate the chance variations in his style from those which are significantly different" ¹¹. However, it should be noted that Brockington has based his study not only on the linguistic features but also on the variation in the socio-economic and political context of the text.

M.R. Yardi divides the layers of the text in five stages. The first reduction was made by Sūta and his son Sauti (fifth century B.C.), then by Harivaṅśakāra (second century B.C.) and the Parvasangrahaḥakāra (first century B.C.) and the last was interpolated in the first Century A.D. He maintains that of the critical edition, which

¹¹ M.R. Yardi, *op.cit.*, p.IV.

consists of 17868 *ślokas*, only 8121 *ślokas* belong to the original *Rāmāyana* of Vālmīki and the rest were added by the above mentioned four stages.¹²

It is also important to identify the geographical location of the places mentioned in the text for the purpose of historical study. Ayodhyā was the capital of Kośala, which seems to have spread over a large part of the Indo-Gangetic doab. B.C. Law mentions that Ayodhyā was a village during the later Vedic period.¹³ Brockington also observes that Ayodhyā in days of Vālmīki did not materially differ from a village.¹⁴ We, however, get fanciful descriptions of Ayodhyā, Kiṣkindhā and Laṅkā. These descriptions of the cities as well-developed urban centres may belong to the period associated with the NBP ware (500 B.C. - 100 A.D.). Brockington suggests that in the first stage the real limits of the Āryan settlements southwards was that of the Yamunā and the Gaṅgā, with some vague knowledge of the country to the south as far as the Vindhyās. "At this period then both Kiṣkindhā and Laṅkā would have lain in the upland areas approximately between Jabalpur and the Chotanagpur plateau."¹⁵ He argues that it does seem clear that both Laṅkā and Godavari had become proper names, while the former simply meant an island or an isolated hill.

H.D. Sankalia has identified Laṅkā and Daṇḍakāranya in the Chotanagpur plateau. In the *Rāmāyana*, the Sāla tree has been described as a weapon of war between the *Rākṣasas and the Vānaras*.¹⁶ Sankalia refers to a botanical study which shows that

¹² *ibid.*, p.V.

¹³ B.C.Law, *Historical Geography of Ancient India*, Paris, 1954, p.67.

¹⁴ J.L. Brockington, *Righteous Rāma*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984, p.69.
¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.119-120.

¹⁶ *V.R.* - 4.11.47-49, 4.12.3-4, 4.16.21.

the Sāla tree grew in the Chotanagpur plateau alone and nowhere else. Thus Laikā has had to be somewhere in the Chotanagpur Plateau ¹⁷.

The Socio-Economic and Political Milieu

The Rāmāyaṇa envisages a stratified society, with the royal court as its centre. The *varṇa* order seems to have been a later development, for instead of enumeration of the four *varṇas*, in many instances lists of different occupational groups occur. For example, in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, *brāhmaṇas*, *ṣatriyas*, soldiers, courtiers, heads of guilds and other principal citizens were summoned to attend Bharata's *sabhā*.¹⁸ Similarly, *brāhmaṇas*, courtiers, generals, and leading merchants assembled on the occasion of the coronation of Rāma.¹⁹ "What is perhaps most striking about all such listing is the relative prominence of the leading merchants, a situation only paralleled in the early Buddhist texts and presumably reflecting a comparatively short-lived phase of society before the presence of orthodoxy reasserted themselves. Yet this feature is apparent only in such incidental listing and is nowhere reflected in the narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa*".²⁰

There is indeed a tendency to standardize the number and functions of the four *varṇas*. When Bharata set out to meet Rāma in the forest, members of the *brāhmaṇa*, *ṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śudra varṇas* are said to have got their horses, camels, asses and

¹⁷ H.D. Sankalia, *op.cit.*, p.48.

¹⁸ *V.R.* - 2.75.11.

¹⁹ *V.R.* - 2.13.1-2.

²⁰ J.L. Brockington, *op.cit.*, p.154.

elephants ready to go with him.²¹ Rāma enquired from Bharata in the forest whether the *brāhmaṇas*, the *kṣatriyas* and the *vaiśyas* were devoted to their own duties.²² Bharata told Rāma that if he thought that the cause of morality was best served by suffering, then he would undertake the trouble of protecting the four *varṇas*.²³ Finally, Nārada articulated the ultimate brahmanical anxiety that with the decline of *dharma* in successive *yugas* the other *varṇas* would usurp the privileges of *brāhmaṇas*.²⁴

There is no explicit evidence of tension and conflict among the *varṇas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The *varṇa* order was flexible enough to enable the *kṣatriya* king Viśvāmitra to become a *brāhmaṇa*.²⁵ There is however, a stray reference to the hostility of the *brāhmaṇas* towards the *kṣatriyas*, as Paraśurāma challenged Daśaratha²⁶. But he was humbled by Rāma and no further allusion to this hostility occurs in the text.

The occupations of the four *varṇas* have not been spelt out in one place, but they can be gleaned from the references scattered throughout the text - the *brāhmaṇas* were *Vedapāraṅgas*,²⁷ and *yajñikas*,²⁸ their duty being study of the *Vedas* and performance of sacrifices. Bharata, as he approached Ayodhyā, considered that the *brāhmaṇas* proficient in the *Vedas* and devoted to the performance of sacrifices were the symbol of that city.²⁹ The hermitages in the Dandakāraṇya echoed with the sound

²¹ V.R. - 2.76.39.

²² V.R. - 2.94.35.

²³ V.R. - 2.98.57.

²⁴ V.R. - 7.65, 8-26.

²⁵ V.R. - 1.52.5.

²⁶ V.R. - 1.73.5.

²⁷ V.R. - 1.23.5.

²⁸ V.R. - 1.12.5.

²⁹ V.R. - 2.65.16.

of Vedic recitations and the beginning of the rainy season was the time for the *brāhmaṇas* to chant *samans*.³⁰

Ḳṣātradharmā or the function of the *ḳṣatriya* was to protect others. The *vaiśyas* were the leaders the guild of merchants and caravans.³¹ They were also invited to attend the *sabhā* which Vasiṣṭha convened to discuss the question of succession after Daśaratha's death. There are a few instances of intermixing of the *varṇas*. Daśaratha killed a young ascetic, born of a *vaiśya* father by a *śūdra* mother.³² Rāma killed the *śūdra* ascetic Śambūka for he transgressed his *varṇa* limitations which was considered inimical to the larger interests of the society. This episode presents a contrast to an earlier, more liberal attitude, when Rāma accepted the offerings of ascetic Śabarī.

It is doubtful whether the four *āśramas* had come into vogue. The only reference to the *āśrama* system in the text occurs when Bharata persuading Rāma to return to Ayodhyā, argued that the householder's stage was the best of the four stages of life.³³ The term *brahmacarya* seems to have been used in the *Rāmāyaṇa* in its literal sense of celibacy or continence, as Rāma is said to have observed *brahmacarya* in exile.³⁴ There are also many references to ascetics. In spite of these examples, it seems that the practices of the division of life into four *āśramas* was yet to be firmly established.

³⁰ V.R. - 4.27.34

³¹ V.R. - 2.61.17, 2.48.28, 3.58.31

³² V.R. - 2.57.37

³³ V.R. - 2.91.58

³⁴ V.R. - 2.46.10

Norms of family relationship plays a major part in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Obedience to and respect for the parents was considered to be one of the cardinal virtues, the standard against which other loyalties were to be judged. Correspondingly the parent's affection for their children and concern for their welfare are attested by Daśaratha's pleasure at Rāma's proposed coronation and Kausalyā's mourning at Rāma's departure for forest. The relationship between the brothers was supposed to be one of warm affection and closeness, the only exception being Lakṣmaṇa's anger against Bharata, when he believed that Bharata was usurping the throne which rightfully belonged to Rāma. But he was pacified by Rāma.³⁵ Rāma's selflessness in declaring that he would gladly give away everything to Bharata, Bharata's refusal to assume the throne of Ayodhyā, and Lakṣmaṇa's devotion to Rāma are examples of ideal brotherly affection.

The status of women in society is a measure of its cultural accomplishment. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, women were free to move about in public and were not confined to the inner apartments of the household. Sītā accompanied Rāma to the forest and Kaikeyī nursed Daśaratha in the battle-field.³⁶ The presence of wives at some of the important public rituals or other ceremonial occasions is a common feature.³⁷ The king's *antahpura* (inner apartment) is often mentioned, but this seems to have been meant for their protection rather than for their seclusion. The appointment of female superintendent as well as the female door-keepers must have served the same purpose. Men were supposed to be courteous towards women and they could not be sentenced

³⁵ V.R. - 2.97.17

³⁶ V.R. - 6.99.19-20

³⁷ V.R. - 1.13.26-27, 2.69.9, 2.70.19-21.

to capital punishment.

Rāma of course killed Tātakā, but the act is justified by the fact that she was a *Rākṣasī* and her presence was a threat to the sages³⁸. There is no evidence in the *Rāmāyana* that the widows were considered inauspicious. Women often lived in the *āśramas*. Anasūyā, Śabarī, Vedavati and Sītā herself stayed in the *āśramas* in different stages of their life.³⁹ However, we also find in later stage the traditional mythological role of women as temptresses to distract ascetics in the story of R̥ṣyaśṅga, and Viśvāmitra.

The prime role of the husband was that of the protector of his wife. It is mentioned in a passage in the text that the responsibility of protecting women devolves first upon the husband, then on the son, then on the other relatives, and failing these, on the king.⁴⁰ Sītā proclaimed her confidence in Rāma's ability to protect her in the forest. The description of mutual affection and companionship between Rāma and Sītā in the forest suggest that the husband was supposed to be the wife's friend as well. Sītā advised Rāma to lead the life of an ascetic in the forest and asked him not to harm the *Rākṣasas* without provocation.⁴¹

However, this relationship of friendship and trust was reversed in the later stages and was replaced by his wife's absolute subservience to her husband. The insubordination of the wife was considered to be one of the major threat to the smooth

³⁸ V.R. - 1.24.13-19

³⁹ V.R. - 2.109, 3.17, 7.17, 7.49

⁴⁰ V.R. - 2.94.42, 3.48. 5-7

⁴¹ V.R. - 3.8.20

functioning of the society. The dominant position of the husband is attested by the use of such epithets for him as *nātha* or *pati*.⁴² The husband has been described as the supreme deity of the wife.⁴³ The women were being cast in their later mythological role of being seducers who distracted the sages in meditation, such, as *R̥ṣyaśṛṅga* or *Viśvāmitra*.⁴⁴

Polygamy was a norm specially among the kings, but adultery was severely condemned.⁴⁵ Ahalyā had to suffer for ages for her supposed adultery and Rāma punished Vālī for his union with Rumā.⁴⁶ A polygamy royal household could become a place of tension and intrigue. Rāma's exile was the outcome of one such intrigue. In contrast, Rāma took only one wife and in the *Uttarakāṇḍa* it is stated that Rāma did not marry even after Sītā was consigned to the *āśrama* of Vālmīki. Instead even he made a golden statue of Sītā to fulfil the obligation of performing the *Aśvamedha* sacrifice.

A great emphasis came to be placed on the chastity of the wife. Rāma declared, "I find the very thought of Sītā being touched by another person abhorrent".⁴⁷ Sītā, conforming to this expectation, told Hanumān that she would not touch a *Rākṣasa* even with her left foot.⁴⁸ She declared that she would not voluntarily touch another male.⁴⁹

⁴² V.R. - 2.61.9-10

⁴³ V.R. - 2.26.14, 2.34.27, 3.54.3, 5.26.12

⁴⁴ V.R. - 1.5.7

⁴⁵ V.R. - 2.66.38

⁴⁶ V.R. - 4.18.6-15

⁴⁷ V.R. - 3.2.19

⁴⁸ V.R. - 5.24.9

⁴⁹ V.R. - 5.35.62

When public opinion questioned the chastity of Sītā, she first had to undergo a fire-ordeal and was then banished to Vālmīki's *āśrama*. This extreme emphasis placed on the chastity and fidelity of women resulted in the seclusion of women, and the inner apartments, now came to be guarded by the eunuchs.⁵⁰

There are very few references to the economic life in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In the Ayodhyākāṇḍa, a number of occupations have been mentioned. These include *bhumipradeśgyah*, *sutrakarmaviśāradah* (skilled in designing buildings), *khanaka* (experts in dagging), *yañtrakovidah* (experts in mechanics), *sthāpatayah* (architects), craftsmen, spies, jewellers, potters, weavers, armourer, goldsmiths, doctors, perfumers, washermen, tailors, actors, fishermen, etc.⁵¹ They all accompanied Bharata when he went to visit Rāma in the forest.

References to cattle are only half as either horses or elephants, suggesting the martial interest of the epic. It indicates that either the practice of agriculture was little developed during this period or the interest of the poet and the audience did not lie in that direction. The latter assumption seems to be correct, since by the first centuries of the Christian era the Gaṅgā valley was undoubtedly under habitation, as attested by the location of Daśaratha's capital at Ayodhyā. This would have necessitated advanced agricultural techniques, but it is mentioned that the population was not dependent on rain.⁵² However, regular rainfall could only be ensured by maintaining proper order in society, for it is mentioned that it does not rain in a kingless state.⁵³ The only

⁵⁰ V.R. - 7.99.10

⁵¹ V.R. - 2.77.12.15

⁵² V.R. - 2.94.3- *adevamātrka bhūmi*.

variety of grain mentioned in the early parts of the text is rice (*nivāra, sāli*). References to other kinds of grain that occur in the stages are wheat (*gōdhūma*), barley (*yava*), millet (*syamaka*).⁵⁴

Dairy products are mentioned throughout the text. Birds, fish, honey, roots, fruits, fresh and dried meat and forest products were important food items.⁵⁵ The *Rāksasas* ate deer, buffalo, bear, peacock, fowl, rhinoceros and goat.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, one can detect a steady decline in the use of meat and in the later passages meat eating has been condemned. Brockington, however, argues that vegetarianism was prescribed only for the ascetics in the forest, and even then it was more an expression of their rejection of society and organised labour than of respect for animal life.⁵⁷

Kiṣkindhā and Lañkā were just as affluent and urban as Ayodhyā. Kiṣkindhā was crowded with mansions and palaces and was adorned with all sorts of flourishing trees's.⁵⁸ Lañkā was designed by Viśvakarmā, the god's own architect. It had a moat filled with lotuses and hundreds of watch towers and its buildings had pillars, pitched roof, staircases leading to the upper storeys and daises and lattice work in precious stones or gold.⁵⁹

These descriptions contradict the general impression that the dwellers of

⁵³ V.R. - 2.61.8-9

⁵⁴ J.L.Brockington, *op.cit.*, p.100.

⁵⁵ V.R. - 2.78.9-16.

⁵⁶ V.R. - 5.9.11-14.

⁵⁷ J.L.Brockington, *op.cit.*, p.84.

⁵⁸ V.R. - 4.32.

⁵⁹ V.R. - 6.28.10.

Kiṣkindhā and Laṅkā were none but uncivilised monkeys and demons. Brockington points by that the commonest term for the inhabitants of Kiṣkindhā is *Vānara*, derived from *vana* (forest). According to him, it simply denotes inhabitants of the forest which, is quite compatible with their being a forest tribe.⁶⁰ In the text they behave like wise and cultured people. The degree to which they were brahmanised can be inferred from the ceremony of the installation of Sugrīva as the king of Kiṣkindhā. The ceremony even included gifts to the brāhmaṇas.⁶¹ The ambivalent attitude of the epic toward the *Vānaras* could be due to the poet's unfamiliarity with the tribal customs and their ways of life.

The *Rākṣasas* as portrayed in the *Rāmāyaṇa* were essentially human, with some exceptions. They have been frequently describes as *kāmrupinah*, a trait which they shared with the *Vānaras* and by which they could assume any form. They have also been described as cannibals. Śūrpanakhā, when repulsed by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, threatened to devour Sītā. Their is, however, clear evidence that the *Rākṣasas* belonged to an advanced culture. There are references to the *Rākṣasas* adopting Vedic customs and rituals under the influence of the sages in Janasthāna.⁶² This may indicate that the *Rākṣasas* did not resist the brahmanical culture, but opposed brahmanical penetration into their own territory. Most of the conflicts between the humans and the *Rākṣasas*, mentioned in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, occur in the latter's territory. Thus, the essential difference between the *Vānaras* and the *Rākṣasas*, seems to be that the former were

⁶⁰ J.L. Brockington, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁶¹ *V.R.* - 4.25.26.

⁶² *V.R.* - 3.31



friendly to Rama with the latter were hostile to him.

The king and his court were the focal points of the society. Indeed, the centrality of the ruler for the maintenance of an orderly society is well illustrated by the two descriptions of an ideal society with which the epic begins and ends. Conversely, the evils of a kingless state have been delineated in great detail⁶³. During the righteous rule of Rāma, there were no untimely deaths, people were happy dutiful and blessed with sons, trees bore fruits and it rained in time. The king was to be honoured and respected in all circumstances, for he partook of the nature of five gods.⁶⁴ Thus, the king was the representative of the gods on earth, and therefore, the text says, he should never be criticised.⁶⁵ The king, on the other hand, had the obligation to protect his subjects which gave him the right to levy taxes (*bali*). This was the basis of the appeal made to Rama by the sages in the Dandaka forest for their protection against the *Rākṣasas*.⁶⁶

The Social Crisis of the Kali Age and the Brahmanical Remedy : The need of An Avatāra

To analyse the actions of human agency it is important to have an insight into the contemporary society and the popular perception of its governing norms. At one level, the concept of the four *yugas* provide us with a framework to understand the nature of the ideal society that brahmanism was attempting to construct through the

⁶³ V.R. - 2.61

⁶⁴ V.R. - 3.38.12-13

⁶⁵ V.R. - 4.17.28-30

⁶⁶ V.R. - 1.6.19, 2.100.41

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composition of such texts as the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the reasons behind this process.

One of the earliest reference to this concept occurs in the *Mahābhārata*. According to this theory, four *yugas* the *Kṛta*, *Tretā*, *Dvāpara* and *Kali* - through the righteousness gradually decreases and is replaced by evil, till during the Kali age only one quarter of *dharma* remains and *adharma* occupies three quarter of the social space.⁶⁷ Manu however, points out that the *yugas* are not inviable units of time. It is the king who, by his conduct, can introduce the characteristics of one *yuga* into another.⁶⁸ A great emphasis was therefore placed on the nature of the age and the quality of kingship.

B.N.S. Yadav has summarised the characteristics of the *Kali* age. These are occurrence of foreign invasion such as by the Yavanas, Sakas, Hunas, etc., natural calamities such as famine and flood, decline in economic conditions, disruption in the *caturavarna* system characterised by the rise of the *śudras* and the degradation of the *vaiśyas*, the older ruling aristocracy and the priestly elite. These result in heightened social conflict and greater exploitation of the peasantry by means of oppressive taxes and forced labour by the newly emerging ruling classes. The impact of these disturbances can be witnessed in the rise of heretical religions, the general decline of traditional moral standard and religious values⁶⁹. Available sources indicate that the above mentioned features of the *Kali* age was perceived to have obtained by the third

⁶⁷ P.V.Kane, *History of Dharmasastras*, Vol.III, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, 1941, p.892

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p.892.

⁶⁹ B.N.S.Yadav, "The Kali Age and Social Transition", *Indian Historical Review*, Vol V, July 1978-79, p.33

century B.C. The first clear inscriptional reference to the that social crisis conforms to the description of the Kali age occurs in the Sātvāhana inscriptions of the second century A.D. where Gautamīputra Satkarnī has been credited with putting an end to the confusion created by the disruption of the *varṇa order*.⁷⁰ Thus, the composition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* falls within this period of social crisis. The *Dharmasūtras* of Āpastamba, Gautama, Baudhāyana and Vasiṣṭha (600 B.C. - 400 B.C.), the *Manusmṛti* (200B.C. - 200A.D.) and the *Viṣṇu smṛti* (100 A.D. - 400 A.D.) helps us to form a broad idea of the contemporary social crisis and the manner in which brahmanism helped to combat it.

To begin with the word *dharma* is derived from the root *dhṛ*, meaning to uphold, to support, to nourish. At the request of the sages Manu imparted the *dharma* of all the *varṇas*⁷¹. *Dharma* is a difficult terms to define. Depending on the context, it variously means ordinance, usage, duty, right, justice, morality, virtue and religion. *Dharma* is also personified as a deity.⁷² Manu further explains that *dharma* is a way of life practised by the learned who lead a moral life, who are free from hatred, and who act in accordance with their conscience⁷³. According to Kāmandaka, *dharma* is that which is practised by the Āryans (respectable people) who are conversant with the Vedic tradition, and *adharmā* is what such people censure⁷⁴. The Gautama *Dharmasūtra* says that the *Veda* is source of *dharma*, tradition and practice. There are

⁷⁰ Epigraphia Indica, VII, No.8, 1.60. cited in D.N.Jha (ed.), *Feudal Social Formation in Early India*, Chankya Publication, Delhi, 1987, p.32.

⁷¹ Manu - 1.1

⁷² *ibid*, 7.16

⁷³ *ibid*, 2.1

⁷⁴ Cited in P.V.Kane, *op.cit.*, Vol.I, P.1, p.5.

five different sources of *dharma* according to Manu. These are *varṇadharmā*, *āśramadharmā*, *varṇāśramadharmā*, *naimitikadharmā* (such as *prāyaścitta*, etc.) *guṇadharmā* (The duty of king, etc)⁷⁵.

It is important to ask whether the theory of the four *varṇas* with their peculiar privileges and duties described in the *Dharmasūtras* and the *Smṛtis* was merely an ideal at the time of the composition of these texts, or they were already in practice. P.V.Kane has argued that the manner in which these text refer to the privileges and the disabilities of the four *varṇas* ring so true that one is tempted to believe that they represented the real division of society, at least to a very large extent.⁷⁶ However, one may also wonder, if this was the actual state of affairs in the society, what was the need for such strong and repeated emphasis on the necessity of maintaining the *varṇa* order? There is enough historical evidence to suggest that the ideal fell short of practice. Let us have a brief look at what this duties and responsibilities of the different *varṇas* were for we are concerned with the ideals that the *Rāmāyaṇa* was attempting to establish.

Manu declared that "for priest, He, (god) ordained teaching and learning, sacrificing for themselves and for others giving and receiving. Protecting his subjects, performing sacrifices, studying and remaining unattached to sensory objects are the duties of a ruler. Protecting his livestock, giving, performing sacrifices, studying, trading, lending money and farming the land are the duties of a commoner. The lord assigned only one action to a *śūdra*, i.e. serving the others without resentment".⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Manu - 2.1

⁷⁶ P.V.Kane, *op.cit.*, Vol. II, p.47

⁷⁷ Manu. - 1. 88-91

The higher the *varṇa* of a person, the lesser was the punishment for him for any kind of crime. Āpastamba declared that a *śūdra* who assumes a position equal to that of the first three *varṇas*, in conversation, on the road, on a couch, or in sitting, shall be flogged⁷⁸. If a *śūdra* views the *Vedas*, his body should be split into parts. A *śūdra* who intentionally reviles a *brāhmaṇa* or criminally assaults him with blows, should be deprived of his limbs. If he deliberately listens to the recitation of the *Vedas*, his ears shall be filled with molten tin⁷⁹. For wilfully using abusive language towards a member of three upper *varṇas*, a *śūdra* will have his tongue cut off. A *ksatriya* shall be fined one hundred *kārsāpanas* if he abuses a *brāhmaṇa*, and a *vaiśya* who assaults a *brāhmaṇa* shall pay one and a half time as much as a *ksatriya*. But a *brāhmaṇa* who abuses a *ksatriya* shall pay fifty *kārsāpanas*, one half of that amount if he abuses a *vaiśya* and if he abuses a *śūdra*, nothing⁸⁰.

The attitude of the authors of the *Dharmasūtras* towards the criminals was guided by the consideration of their *varṇa* status. Among the higher castes, the *brāhmaṇas* naturally enjoyed the greatest privileges. Gautama categorically prohibited the infliction of corporal punishment on the *brāhmaṇas*. What ever be the crime committed by them, they were totally immune to death-penalty.⁸¹ However, for offences of certain kinds, the punishment was heavier for the members of the higher *varṇas* than those of the lower *varṇas*. Theft was one such offence. For theft in general, a *śūdra* was to restore the stolen property eightfold to the owner. It was

⁷⁸ A.D. - 2.10.27

⁷⁹ G.D. - 12.1.5

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 12.8.13

⁸¹ G.D. - 12.43

sixteen fold, thirty-two fold and sixty-four fold for the thieves of the members of the *vaiśya*, *ṣṭriya*, and *brāhmaṇa varṇas* respectively.⁸² Even in this, brahmanism did not show any leniency to the *śudras*, for the assumption was, being a *śudra*, he would be naturally prone to such low offences.

We have already mentioned that family relations were central to the plot of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the authors of the didactic text have devoted a good deal of their attention to the ideal norms of relationship that must prevail within the family. Manu, in describing the obligations of householders, stated that the husband and the wife should remain true to each other till death⁸³. The deities delight in places where women are revered.⁸⁴ A householder should feed a priest as a means of pleasing the ancestors during the performance of the five great sacrifices. And he should play an important role in maintaining the *varṇa* system in its pure form⁸⁵.

Gautama laid down that the guests of the *varṇas* other than those of the *brāhmaṇa* and the *ṣṭriya* should be entertained merely out of human consideration, because they, not being *atithis* in the proper sense of the term, are not legitimately entitled to the honour deserved by the guest of the two upper *varṇas*.⁸⁶ Charity, however, must be within one's means and should never be indiscriminate. Āpastamba expressly forbade one to make gifts to anybody who begs for the enjoyment of sensual

⁸² G.D. - 12.12.15

⁸³ Manu - 9.101, 102.

⁸⁴ *ibid.* - 3.56.

⁸⁵ A.D. - 2.1.2.8-10

⁸⁶ G.D. - 5.45.

pleasures.⁸⁷ Gautama, similarly stated that one must not give anything that may be utilised for immoral purposes.⁸⁸ Among the persons deserving gifts from a householder, the most worthy are the students begging for their *guru*. People performing sacrifices or getting medicine for the diseased, the destitutes and the travellers. There seems to have been an apparent uncertainty about the proper position of women in society. On the one hand she has been regarded as pure, while on the other, she has been denied independence at all stages of her life. She is supposed to remain under the guardianship of her father in her infancy, of her husband in her youth and of her son in her old age. Her dependence was so complete that Gautama declared that a woman can neither perform a *yajña* or a *vrata*, nor can she undertake fasts on her own.⁸⁹ Her only duty was to serve her husband with utmost loyalty. At the same time, Baudhāyana stated that the wife was more precious than wealth, and as such, deserved careful protection. A man was debarred from forsaking his wife at his will. Āpastamba prescribed a six-month long penance for unjustly forsaking one's wife. Similarly, the wife was forbidden to desert her husband without sufficient reason.⁹⁰ However, although some of these norms may appear to accord respect to women, it is evident that women were already turned into a commodity. That is why husbands have been advised to guard the wife like precious wealth. Also the emphasis on her chastity was to ensure that the male issue inherits the father's property and continue the patriarchal lineage.

⁸⁷ A.D. - 2.10. 2-3

⁸⁸ G.D. - 5.24

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 18.1

⁹⁰ A.D. - 1.28.19-20

Speaking about the king, Manu explained that the God created the king with essential parts taken from Indra, Yama, Agni, Varuṇa and Kubera. Therefore he surpasses all beings by his majesty⁹¹. Gautama and Āpastamba asserted that a king and a spiritual teacher must not be reviled⁹². The Nārada Smṛti declared that it is Indra himself who moves about on earth in the form of the king, and even if he is devoid of qualities, he deserves honour from his subjects, for he performs the functions of the five deities.⁹³

This divine status does not necessarily place the king above all questions. He has been asked to remain dependent on the brāhmaṇas for ever and his authority is said to extend over all except the brāhmaṇas⁹⁴. The king who treats his subjects harshly loses his life, his family and his kingdom⁹⁵. Moreover, the principle of *danda* if properly wielded, conduces to the advancement of the three *puruṣārthas* but if a mean and unjust king yields it, it recoils on him and destroys him together with his relations⁹⁶. Protection of the *varṇadharmā* is his highest duty⁹⁶. The *brāhmaṇas* have been invested with the authority to destroy an oppressive *ksatriya* king⁹⁷. Gautama laid down that the justice should be administered in accordance with the *Veda*. The king has been advised to come to a decision regarding matters concerning a particular *varṇa* after consulting the members of that *varṇa*. A *pariṣad* of brāhmaṇas was to advise the

⁹¹ Manu - 5.96, 7.4.5

⁹² G.D. - 11.32, A.D. - 1.2.31.5

⁹³ Narada - 5.20, 5.26.31, cited in P.V. Kane, *op.cit.*, Vol. III, p.23

⁹⁴ G.D. - 11.1.78

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 7.27,28

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 9.7.10

⁹⁷ Sukranitisāra, 4.7. cited in P.V.Kane, *op.cit.*, Vol. III, p.26

king and help him in complex legal issues.⁹⁸

The socio-economic, political and religious norms as discussed in the didactic texts suggest that brahmanism perceived threats to its social order and attempted to remedy them by setting up ideals which were to be followed and enforced.

So far as the society of Ayodhyā is concerned it does not appear as if it was facing any crisis. How could adversity befall a kingdom that was ruled by so righteous a king as Rāma, who upheld all at the ethical norms and social values prescribed by brahmanism. The responsibility of Rāma, however, was not merely to maintain peace and *dharma* in Kośala, but to extend the brahmanical norms on other societies as well. The norms of society of the *Vānaras* and the *Rākṣasas* differed from the ideals that Rāma stood for. The *Vānaras*, escaped the wrath of Rāma, for they befriended him. But the *Rākṣasas* challenged the incursion of brahmanism and had to be subordinated. The major conflict in the *Rāmāyana* is not symptomatic of the typical crisis of the *Kali* age, but of a conflict between two contrasting social values. Rāma succeeded in upholding and establishing the brahmanical ideal by his personal examples, as we have already seen in our discussion on the socio-political context and the four layers of the *Rāmāyana*. He embodied *dharma* which in this context meant, above all things, righteousness. It is this personification of the ideal which eventually led to his deification and his elevation into the status of an *avatāra* in the later stages. His deification ensured that he served the purpose of being the model to be followed by all. How exactly did Rāma match up to the ideal is what we are going to discuss in the subsequent chapters.

⁹⁸ G.D. - 2.11.33

Rāma : The Man

2. Rāma : The Man

" Be pleased to hear of the man endowed with the manifold and rare virtues that have been catalogued by you ". (V.R.-1.1.7).

Vālmīki's Rāma was essentially a human being with the usual human limitations. He overcame his limitations by practising *dharma*. Vālmīki began with the quest for a man who would answer his catalogue of high moral virtues. These included, " a man who is mighty and yet knows both what is right and how to act upon it? Who always speaks the truth and holds firmly to his vows? Who exemplifies proper conduct and is beneficent to all creatures? Who is learned, capable and a pleasure to behold? Who is self controlled, having subdued his anger ? Who is both judicious and free from envy? Who, when his fury aroused in battle, is feared even by gods"¹. Nārada said, "even among the gods I do not find one endowed with all these virtues?"². However Nārada knew of a person who had them all; his name was Rāma.³ "All men might know of him for he is self controlled, mighty, radiant, steadfast and masterful. He is wise, grounded in proper conduct, eloquent and majestic, he annihilates his enemies. He knows the ways of righteousness and is always true to his words. The welfare of his subjects is his concern. He is the protector of all living things. He is versed in the essence of the *Vedas* and their subsidiary sciences, he is equally expert in science of arms"⁴.

¹ V.R. 1.1.25

² V.R. 1.1.7

³ V.R. 1.1.8

⁴ V.R. 1.1.9.13

So the hero of the epic *Rāmāyana* was not a god, but a man, for only a human being can become a suitable role model for other human beings. Sukumari Bhattacharji argues that "the *Rāmāyana* performs this task by creating a set of convincing characters placing them in complex critical situations and by presenting moral act together with their causes and effects."⁵ The text records many incidents in which Rāma's human qualities come to the fore. It is very human to be elated at the prospect of advancement of career and become downcast at times of distress. Rāma was happy while informing Sītā that he was to be anointed as a king. When he was summoned by Daśaratha and Kaikeyī, he thought that his father and the queen were planning some pleasant surprise for him. But as he came to know about the sudden reversal of his fortune, he felt like a horse lashed with a whip⁶. He left the king's palace with downcast eyes and had to make a special effort to bear the sorrow within his heart and keep his senses under his control⁷. He narrated to Sītā how Kaikeyī had compelled the king to change his mind as a result of which Bharata was to be installed as the king and he was to go into exile for fourteen years.

Rāma blamed his destiny for this misfortune and indeed bore his disappointment with fortitude. He said to Lakṣmaṇa, "it is my destiny which takes me to the forest. Otherwise, how can I explain why Kaikeyī who had so far made no distinction between Bharata and myself, became so cruel as to cause me misery? Destiny is the source of inexplicable causes which bring about happiness and misery, fear and anger, profit and

⁵ Sukumari Bhattacharji, 'Validity of the Ramayana Values' in V. Raghavan (ed.), *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1989 (reprint) p-77.

⁶ *V.R.* 2.16.44

⁷ *V.R.* 2.16.60

loss, birth and deliverance. I am not at all sore about the loss of kingdom, for, who knows this destiny may have in store a glorious future for me. Desist therefore from blaming your younger mother and take quick steps to stop the installation arrangement"⁸. But this is a normal human tendency to blame an unknown agency for one's misfortunes and try to keep one's hopes alive.

Rāma killed Tātaka by violating the rule that the punishment of a female offender should stop short of killing. It is however, mentioned in the text that originally Rama's intention was to immobilise her by cutting her hands. But at the end he had to slay her, as he found that she was still capable of great mischief"⁹. The text naturally justifies all the action of Rama, but this is an instance of clear violation of accepted norms of conduct.

Similarly, Rāma killed Vāli by concealing himself behind a tree. He, thus, broke the elementary convention of warfare. Vāli questioned his action, "what possible merit have you gained by killing me when I was not looking at you? " He ridiculed Rāma, "(You are) well born, virtuous, powerful, compassionate and energetic, (You have) observed vows, know pity, is devoted to the welfare of people, know when to act, and (are) firm in (your) vows. That is how everyone spreads your good reputation throughout the world"¹⁰. Vāli questioned the very foundation of Rāma's popularity and his righteousness by pointing out that he had unethically killed Vāli who had committed no offence against him.

⁸ V.R. 2.23.15-24.

⁹ V.R. 1.24.25

¹⁰ V.R. 4.17.13-18

Rāma justified his action. He argued that he as the deputy of Bharata has punished Vāli for taking his younger brother's wife." The earth with its mountains and woods belong to the Ikṣvākus as does the right of punishment and rewarding its beasts, birds and men. He is a king who knows the proper place and time for action". Moreover, "righteousness is subtle and extremely difficult to understand even for the good people. You acted according to your desires, O monkey and in violating your brother's wife, you departed from righteousness. That is why this punishment was administered to you"¹¹. Rāma struck him down regardless, because after all he was a monkey¹². Rāma finally succeeded in convincing Vāli. Vāli accepted his argument and said, "please do not find fault with me even for the unseemly, displeasing words. I spoke before by mistake, O Rāghava ! for you understand worldly interest and know the truth, and you are devoted to the wellbeing of the people. Your immutable judgement about determining crime and punishment is correct"¹³.

It should be noted , however, that in the description of Rāma's journey from Ayodhyā, the boundary of Kośala ended at Śrngaverpura, i.e., at the river Gaṅgā and so it did not extend to Kiśkindhā. Therefore, Rāma had no legal jurisdiction on the territory to which Vāli belonged. Thus he not only acted unethically, but also as an aggressor. Moreover, Rāma addressed Vāli merely as a monkey who could not understand the subtleties of righteousness. It is difficult to see how one could mistake Vāli for an ape after his intelligent articulation of a serious argument. Vāli was the king of Kiśkindhā, a

¹¹ V.R. 4.18.6-16

¹² V.R. 4.18.36

¹³ V.R. 4.18.45-47

Kingdom no less prosperous than Ayodhyā. By enforcing the rules of Ayodhyā, Rāma made it clear that he was a roving ambassaḍor of Kośala and was all set to force others to follow his concept of righteousness; if necessary even by force. He considered Vāli's action of keeping his brother's wife an immoral act. But when the same act was repeated by his friend Sugrīva who took Vali's widow, he ignored it because it suited his purpose.

Rāma's poignant grief at the loss of Sītā, his beloved wife led him to lose his composure. He reproached Lakṣmaṇa for leaving her alone despite his instructions¹⁴. He had a faint hope that she could have gone to pick flowers or fruits, or to the river to fetch water. In a state of frenzy he thought that he had seen her and complained to her, "very fond of flowers, you are hiding behind the boughs of the *Asoka* tree, augmenting my grief all the more, o queen. Both your thighs, even though screened by the plantain tree, resembling as they do the stem of a plantain tree, you are no longer able to hide them from my view. O Fair one! have you no pity on me? You are not the one to play pranks. Then how could you be so indifferent to me"¹⁵. He wailed like an ordinary human being and asked the animate and inanimate objects around him to obtain information about her¹⁶. He resolved to upset the whole world if the gods did not restore Sītā to him¹⁷.

These actions of Rāma may either appear normal or questionable to our sensibilities. But his action can be properly understood only against the contemporary ideas of good and evil. Here what is crucially important is, what was meant by the term

¹⁴ V.R. 3.57

¹⁵ V.R. 3.58.70

¹⁶ V.R. 3.58.11

¹⁷ V.R. 3.64.66

dharma. *Dharma*, Wendy O'Flaherty says, is the principle of order which must be obeyed regardless of what that order actually is¹⁸. It should be remembered that Brahmanism considered the period when the *Rāmāyana* was composed as one of transition, marked by insecurity, widespread lawlessness, intermixture of *varnas* and sharp social conflict. In such a period, ideals strengthen the purpose of establishing social stability. The concept of *dharma* included these ideals.

Dharma has been variously defined in the Vedic literature as religious ordinance,¹⁹ principles of conduct,²⁰ truth²¹ duties particular to each stage of life²² In the *Rāmāyana* it stands for a set of ethical norms recommended by brahmanism. Rāma underwent endless suffering to fulfil what he conceived to be his highest *dharma*. In the discussion of *dharma*, there is no concept of the rights of the human beings in the entire *Dharmasāstra* literature. When law givers wanted to discuss the rights of a particular social group, they would discuss these as duties of another social group towards the previous group. Thus the rights of the people were attended to not as rights but as duties. For example the rights of the husband were guaranteed by emphasising the duties of the wife, and those of the wife were assured by insisting on the duties of the husband.²³ It was the responsibility of the king to ensure that these duties were performed properly.

¹⁸ Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origin of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1976.p.94

¹⁹ *R̥g Veda* 1.22.18

²⁰ *R̥g Veda* 4.53.3

²¹ *Bṛhadaranayaka Upanishad* 1.4.14

²² *Chāndogya Upanishad* 2.23.1

²³ Saral Jhingran, *Aspect of Hindu Morality*, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1989 p. 101

Sukumari Bhattacharji explains that the reason for the popularity of the ideal characters in the *Rāmāyana* is that the characters look true to life, because there is nothing which is totally good or totally evil. Even the three ideal characters Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa behave questionably at times²⁴. She elaborates that temptation is a situation of crisis and all the major characters face real temptations at one point or another. It is through their response to them that they become or remain good or bad. "Transgression of the accepted code of ethics is portrayed as sinful, but as in all major literary products, in the *Rāmāyana* too what constitutes its essence is its attempt at revaluation of the accepted values. This is achieved by placing the characters in critical situations and letting them deliberate, act and suffer consequences".²⁵

Bhattacharji further argues that these critical situations are of two kinds. The first was of the kind which deflected the characters from the path of virtue, i.e., from the broad humanistic values for the sake of selfish, personal gains. But there was also other situation where a character faced a conflict arising from two sets of contradictory values both accepted traditionally and both apparently equally valid. But the situation demanded that he chose one. Such situations, according to her, test the real moral fibre and only the great i.e. the significant characters pass the test²⁶.

Different social groups had their special *dharmas*, but neither an individual nor a group was looked upon as having acted in pursuance of *dharma*, if actual practice

²⁴ Sukumari Bhattacharji, *op. cit.*, p.77

²⁵ *ibid* p.77

²⁶ *ibid*, p.78

resulted in clash, oppression and misery and obstructed the cause of Brahmanism. Rāvāna, for example, had all the advantages of a brahmanical descent. In due course he himself, his son, and Kumbhakarna underwent the hardest austerities for obtaining divine favour and they received it. Yet, they employed their enhanced power for the oppression of the virtuous. The extraordinary process which divine grace conferred on the demons was therefore made to serve wicked ends and not to further the cause of *dharma*. Kaikeyī, on the other hand was not an evil character to begin with. Her first reaction of joy at the news of Rāma's coronation shows this.²⁷ Then came the temptation and she fell a prey to Mantharā's appeal to her mother-love²⁸. Such episodes underline the need for discrimination, judgement and courage to oppose the apparent reason of self interest for the higher reason of truth and justice.²⁹

However, it is one thing to attempt to fulfil one's *dharma* and quite another to define it in such a manner as to cover all contingencies. Conflicts therefore inevitably arise. Brockington suggests that whether it is the result of exigencies of the original plot or of the changes in attitudes which took place in society during the long period of composition of the epic, it is these conflicts which give life to the characters and prevent them from appearing as mere puppets³⁰. At the time of Rāma's coronation, Daśaratha was faced with a choice; i.e., keeping a promise to his queen, thus denying justice to his first son or acting justly but declaring that the promise itself was evil. Dasaratha did not want to part with his favourite son nor did he want to deprive the people of the best available

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V.R. 2.7.32-36

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V.R. 2.9.2

29

J.L. Brockington, *op.cit* p.221

30

ibid. p.222

ruler. Daśarathasuffered, but Rāma stood firm in his obedience to his father and *dharma* took its own course. Rāma's banishment of Sītā to allay the suspicion of his subjects regarding her virtue appears foreign to the spirit of the earlier part of the story. Brockington argues that this was as a part of the process of brahmanisation of the text at the third stage. Here too a monarch subordinated his personal happiness and thus inflicted a cruel injustice on an individual³¹. Rāma is the ideal man because he usually chose the path of suffering as he believed that in a situation of moral crisis, that was the correct way of living according to *dharma* .

He was an ideal son. Although after Kaikeyī's demand for Rāma's banishment and Daśarath's failure to uphold Rāma's claim to the throne there really was not much of a choice, but what rendered Rāma as the ideal in this episode was his attitude. He said that he would have gladly given away all that belonged to him to Bharata without his asking³². Since by his exile, Daśarath,would be released of a vow, he immediately offered to go to the forest. This unhesitating acceptance of what was evidently unjust brings all the more into relief his commitment to *dharma*, for was prepared to ascend the throne and participated int the festivity. But without any apparent regret he left everything and accepted the life of an ascetic. He in fact advised Bharata that as a son, it was Bharat's bounden duty to keep his father's promise to his mother by accepting the throne³³. The grieved subjects who had accompanied Bharata rejoiced at the extraordinary resolve of Rāma. They were unhappy because Rāma had declined to return to Ayodhyā, but they

31

ibid p.223

32

V.R. 2.16.33

33

V.R. 2.99.3-5

also appreciated his firm determination to keep his promise³⁴. He had forgiven even Kaikeyī and respected her as his own mother when she went along with Bharat to the forest. He persuaded Kausalyā to perform her primary duty towards her husband rather than to follow him into the forest. He was thus, a good son to all his parents.

Lakṣmaṇa, Kausalyā, Sītā and later Bharat tried to persuade him that his insistence on acting in accordance with *dharma* on this occasion was wrong. Lakṣmaṇa argued that the exile of Rama was against *kṣatriyadharmā*³⁵. Bharat wanted Rāma to return to Ayodhyā for the sake of *rājadharmā*, for the earth's sake³⁶. When Jābali, a wise sage reminded Rāma of *kṣātradharmā*, and asked him to ignore Daśarath's promise to Kaikeyī, Rāma got angry. He argued, *dharma* is the highest truth in the world, and the root of heaven , "I renounce *kṣatriyadharmā* for it is *adharmā* posing as *dharma*." Rāma still refused on the grounds of *satya dharmā*. He considered that as an ideal son, his primary duty was to ensure that his father does not deviate from the path of *dharma* for his sake.

He at the same time practised *kṣatriyadharmā* by killing the Rākaṣasas in the forest. Sītā asked him to live the quiet life of an ascetic and practise *Kṣatriyadharmā* after returning to Ayodhyā³⁷. Rāma reasoned that the ascetics regard him as their king and that *rājadharmā* and *kṣatriyadharmā* require that he protects them.³⁸ Rāma, thus interpreted *dharma* in terms of the demand of every situation. His interpretation always involved his

34 V.R. 2.98.70

35 V.R. 2.18.2-15,19

36 V.R. 2.97.16

37 V.R. 3.8.24

38 V.R. 3.8.24

own suffering and the benefit of others and the society at large.

Similarly he placed *rājadharmā* above his personal feelings. It is best illustrated by his attitude towards *Sītā*. He declared that he had undertaken to rescue *Sītā* only in order to vindicate his own and his family's honour and not for her sake. Although he himself was convinced of *Sītā*'s chastity, he refused to accept her until her virtue was publicly established beyond doubt through the fire-ordeal³⁹. This is what the brāhmanical conception of *rājadharmā* demanded. Brockington is of the opinion that this episode was a late substitution for an original straightforward happy ending because till then *Rāma*'s love for *Sītā* was always portrayed in glowing terms.⁴⁰

Rāma was an ideal brother. He was happy to leave the Kingdom for Bharat. He told *Kaikeyī*, "I would give even *Sītā* my kingdom, all my wealth and even my life to Bharata without prompting from any body."⁴¹ Such selfless love for the brother also engendered in Bharata a great adoration for *Rāma* and he addressed him as *Rāma*, the righteous, devoted to truth. He upbraided his mother for being the cause of *Rāma*'s exile and his father's death⁴². Bharata refused to ascend the throne and tried to persuade *Rāma* to return to Ayodhyā. *Rāma* embraced him and said, "O destroyed of foes, I do not find even the smallest fault in you, nor should you blame your mother out of childishness. The mother is entitled to as much respect as the father. I have been told by both of them to reside in forest for fourteen years. The king has allotted the kingdom of Ayodhyā to you

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V.R. 6.102.104

40

J.L.Brockington, *op.cit*, p.224.

41

V.R. 2.16.33

42

V.R. 2.68.10

and Daṇḍaka forest for me. We are both therefore duty bound to follow his behest".⁴³ After fourteen years of his exile when Rāma returned to Ayodhyā with Sītā, he sent Hanumān to Ayodhyā with the message that if Bharata wished to continue to rule, he had no objection to it.⁴⁴ Rāma exclaimed with joy when he heard of Bharata's advance in the forest and reproached Lakṣmaṇa for suspecting Bharata of foul motives⁴⁵. But his affection for his brothers is best demonstrated in the episode where Lakṣmaṇa lay unconscious in the battle field; Rāma refused to live without Lakṣmaṇa, and lamented, "wives may be found every where and kinsmen too can be had every where, however, see no place where a real brother could be had. Even victory of hero, will not really conduce to my pleasure. What delight will moon afford if it appears before a man who has lost his vision, he wailed."⁴⁶

Most of all, Rāma was an ideal husband. He was monogamous in principle as well as in practice, which must have been in contradistinction to the usual norm, as suggested by the example of Daśaratha. There is no direct reference in the *Dharma Śāstras* that monogamy was considered an ideal form of marriage. Although there is no clear evidence of monogamy being the ideal in the *Rāmāyana*, there is also no reference to the contrary. However, wife is always referred to in the singular. Ideally a man should have only one wife for he can not have an equal relationship with all the wives. After the banishment of Sītā, Rāma performed the *aśvamedha* sacrifice by placing golden statue of Sītā next to him as the ritual demanded the presence of the wife. Sītā's golden statue at the *aśvamedha*

⁴³ V.R. 2.97.2

⁴⁴ V.R. 6.113.16

⁴⁵ V.R. 2.97.17

⁴⁶ V.R. 6.101.11,15

sacrifice would have been unnecessary had he had other wives. Although he preferred to attach greater importance to the suspicions of his subjects rather than safeguard the interests of Sītā, he ruled Ayodhyā with heavy heart after Sītā's exile and later her disappearance within the earth.⁴⁷ Thus, Rāma chose to practice *dharma* in preference to *kāma* and *artha*. He assured Kaikeyī, "queen, I do not approve of living in this world solely devoted to *artha*. Know me who has taken recourse to *dharma* as equal to the sages."⁴⁸ He repeated this to Kausalyā, "I cannot forsake glorious fame for the sake of mere kingdom. Since life is of short duration, o queen, I do not choose this trivial world by unrighteous means"⁴⁹.

Sītā was indeed devoted to Rāma. She was an ideal wife and offered to go with Rāma to the forest. Without Rāma, even heaven was not a good enough place for her⁵⁰. Rāma's relationship with Sītā was based on his understanding of *dharma*. He felt constrained to come to terms with the conflicting demands of *dharma* as was expected of him both as a husband and a king. He believed that his *dharma* was not just to protect and care for Sītā, but also to act impartially as a king and, if necessary, to banish her in the interest of a 'higher' *dharma*. The manner in which their relationship has been portrayed in the *Rāmāyana* betray the genuine emotion of a true lover and a responsible husband. Today, many of his actions towards Sītā may not meet with our approval, but we must assess them in the context of his times and the *brahmanical* ideals which he embodied. By those

⁴⁷ V.R. 7.97.3-4

⁴⁸ V.R. 2.16.46

⁴⁹ V.R. 2.18.39

⁵⁰ V.R. 2.30.17

standards, Rāma certainly comes through as an unusual husband, human most of all, practising monogamy and exhibiting emotions towards his wife which we do not find in any other epic hero. She shared with her husband a relationship based on mutual love and respect. She was confident enough to question Rāma's annihilation of the demon in the forest with respect, but none the less freely, even though this could be merely a device of the redactors to allow Rāma to justify his action⁵¹. Rāma on his part, was exceedingly fond of her. She was his only wife. His love for her was based on his appreciation of her sterling virtues which is evident from the epithets he used while addressing her. He called her *manasvini* (high minded), *dharmacārini* (dutiful), *kalyāni* (virtuous) and *bhāmini* (passionately loving). Their mutual affection was cemented by the ordeal of exile. After her exile, he was full of sorrow and apprehension about her safety. He exclaimed in anguish that he could not live even for a moment without her⁵².

Rāma was an ideal friend too. He killed Vāli and restored the throne to Sugrīva. He pledged himself to friendship with Sugrīva before fire and agreed to help him. He never deviated from his promise. He restrained Lakṣmaṇa when the latter was angry with Sugrīva at his tardiness in fulfilling his part of the pact. He protected Vibhīṣaṇa when every one in his camp was suspicious of him. He was loyal and considerate to his friends and maintained lifelong friendship with Sugrīva and Vibhīṣaṇa. After killing Vāli and Rāvāna he did not feel tempted to annex their kingdoms to Kośala, but installed their rightful successors as kings of Kiśkindhā and Laṅkā respectively. He fulfilled his mission by bringing these two kingdoms within the realm of brahmanical influence.

51

J.L. Brockington, *op.cit*, p.225

52

V.R. 3.56.4

Even towards his enemies he was fair and affectionate⁵³. He ensured that Aṅgada succeeded Sugrīva to the throne of Kiṣkindhā as Vāli had requested him to protect the interest of his son. He told Sugrīva that he would offer protection even to Rāvāṇa, if he would surrender. At the human level, Rāma was the protector of everyone who was loyal to him.

Lakṣmana was an ideal brother too, but he presents a complete contrast to Rāma. In valour and prowess he was almost equal to Rāma and his submission to Rāma paralleled Rāma's obedience to his father. But here the resemblance ended. When Rāma was resigned and composed, he was rebellious. When Rāma was trusting, he was suspicious. When Rāma was calm, he was irascible or fearful. But when Rāma raved and tended to lose control, he reassured. This was obviously not intended as a realistic portrayal of his character, for he acted as a fool for Rāma, partly to heighten Rāma's virtues by contrast, partly to afford Rāma the opportunity to expound the correct values⁵⁴.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa* there was no space to entertain more than one ideal. There was only one order which was absolute and eternal. It prevailed irrespective of and in spite of particularities. The highest good consisted in living in harmony with it. Conversely, any attempt to thwart or reverse the order was sure to prove to be self ruining as it happened in the case of Rāvāṇa. The conflict between Rāma and Rāvāṇa was a conflict between the values of good and evil. Rāvāṇa disturbed the moral order by opposing the brahmanical system and by abducting Sītā. He had to die because he stood against all that Rāma symbolised.

53

V.R. 6.12.21

54

J. L. Brockington, *op.cit*, p.225

Thus, the key principle for the organisation of society was *dharma* (duty and order). One who upheld *dharma* was righteous. The major concern of the text was the stability of social organisation from the brahmanical point of view and the morality conducive to it. The moral issues often revolved around the question of the interest of one person vis-a-vis wider social welfare. Rāma's action either as a son or as a brother or as a husband were to benefit the society even if he personally had to pay a heavy price for that. He satisfied the brahmanical parameter of an ideal man in the contemporary society. Thus Rāma, who began as a human being, gradually got transformed into an idea. But this idea was that of an ideal man.

Discussing the place of man in Hindu thought, R.N. Dandekar observed : " It has been rightly pointed out that one of the most outstanding paradoxes of Hinduism is that it gives one absolute liberty in the world of thought but enjoins upon him a strict code of conduct. Whatever, therefore, might be the philosophical asseveration of a Hindu, he would consider conscientious observance of the *āśramadharma* and *varnadharma*, more particularly of the latter, to be a duty of prime importance. This is indeed, in a sense, as it should be. Practice concerns the whole mass of the people. Therefore, without their confirming to some disciplined and well regulated way of life, the solidarity and stability of the society would be difficult to achieve".⁵⁵ If the human emotions, dictated by the liberty in the realm of thought, come in conflict with the social codes, then the latter must prevail. Rāma displays human emotions, but invariably acts in accordance with the social codes. He thus presents the model of an ideal man which later contributed to his deification.

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R.N. Dandekar, *Insights into Hinduism*. Ajanta Publication, Delhi, 1979. p.101

Rāma : The King

3. Rāma : The King

Since the subjects copy their ruler's habits a monarch must adhere to the truth (V.R--2.101.1).

Vālmīki portrays Rāma not just as an example of ideal human relationships, and not just as a hero, but also as a model king. Although Rāma actually became the king of Ayodhyā only at the end of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, the concept of Rāma as a king is present throughout the *Rāmāyaṇa* in one way or another. He has constantly been described in royal terms¹. He was renowned², majestic³, illustrious⁴, noble (*ārya*)⁵, greatly resplendent⁶, chief of beings⁷, beloved of the world⁸, capable of killing demons⁹, lord of the three worlds¹⁰, greatest ruler in the three worlds¹¹ lord of the earth¹², protector of the whole world¹³, unconquerable by the *devas* and the *asuras*¹⁴, destroyer of the sorrows of the world¹⁵, lord of the people¹⁶, and lord of men.¹⁷

¹ Frank Whaling : *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama*, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1980, p.64.

² V.R. - 1.1.8

³ V.R. - 1.1.8

⁴ V.R. - 1.1.6

⁵ V.R. - 1.1.15

⁶ V.R. - 1.1.46

⁷ V.R. - 1.17.16

⁸ V.R. - 1.17.16

⁹ V.R. - 1.18.9

¹⁰ V.R. - 1.75.19

¹¹ V.R. - 2.2.11

¹² V.R. - 2.6.22

¹³ V.R. - 2.36.5

¹⁴ V.R. - 2.45.10

¹⁵ V.R. - 2.77.8

¹⁶ V.R. - 2.93.14

In general, the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* does not contain any detailed exposition of the art of state-craft and the *rājadharmā* or moral conduct of the king. But the epic at the same time strongly pleads the case for monarchy by describing the ideal society under an ideal king and negatively exemplifying the state of anarchy in a kingless state¹⁸. It informs us that "in a kingless state, clouds do not sprinkle rain on the earth, nor are the seeds sown. The son does not obey his father nor the wife her husband. There is no safety for one's life or wealth. How then can truth prevail there? In a kingless state people do not form associations, nor design gardens or places of worship. There are no festivities, nor performing arts, nor nation-building rallies. In a kingless state rich farmers and herdsmen are afraid to sleep with their doors open, nor can merchants travel, in safety, long distances with their rich wares. Even the wondering monks, meditating on the infinite soul, do not find safe lodging, when night overtakes them. In a kingless state one fails to protect what one has, nor can one procure what one has not. Even the soldiers are powerless to overcome a foe. One can own anything and people devour one another like the fishes. Even those who believe in god, infringe the bounds of morality and give themselves airs with impurity. If the king did not exist to adjudicate between right and wrong the world will grope in the dark and no one will know how to behave or act¹⁹. These are the reasons why Bharata was immediately recalled from his maternal uncle's place because Ayodhyā had become a kingless state after demise of Daśaratha and the exile of Rāma.

¹⁷ V.R. -2.82.16

¹⁸ V.R. -2.61

¹⁹ V.R. -2.61.4.20

Indeed, it is possible to trace the gradual transition from the ruler being accorded affection and respect in the first stage, through the claims to his divine status made in the second stage, to hyperbolic statements about the king's absolute power in the fourth stage²⁰. The first phase of the conception of royalty can be observed in a statement made by Rāvaṇa to Mārīca that kings were to be honoured and respected in all circumstances²¹. At the second stage Bharata urging Rāma to return to Ayodhyā, declared that the king, though human, was regarded like a god²². Rāma's statement to Vāli is another example of a similar kind : "The kings being gods in human form should not be harmed or slandered²³". This identification of the king with the gods is made more explicitly in a passage in the fourth stage which was closely modelled on a *Dharmaśāstra* passage. Manu explained: "When this world was without a king and people ran about in all directions out of fear, the lord emitted a king in order to guard their entire (realm), taking lasting elements from Indra, the Wind, Yama, the Sun, Fire, Varuṇa, the Moon, and (Kubera) the Lord of Wealth. Because a king is made from particles of these lords of the gods, therefore he surpasses all living beings in brilliant energy, and like the Sun, he burns eyes and hearts, and no one on earth is able even to look at him²⁴". This sentiment, even some of the exact words, have been echoed by the ministers of Daśaratha while discussing the evils of a kingless state : "Yama, Kubera, Indra and Varuṇa are outstripped by a king of excellent conduct by his virtue²⁵".

²⁰ J.L. Brockington *op.cit.* p. 125

²¹ *V.R.* - 3.38.12,13

²² *V.R.* - 2.95.4

²³ *V.R.* - 4.17.28,30

²⁴ Manu - 7.3.6

²⁵ *V.R.* - 2.6.10

Other statements occurring in the fourth stage emphasise the king's absolute and arbitrary authority, stating for example that a king can kill by a mere smile²⁶ and that he is the maker of things and people, and is also their destroyer²⁷. The passages emphasising the divinity of the king served a dual purpose. First, these were resorted to by the kings themselves to elicit absolute obedience from their subjects, and second, these referred to the functional semblance between the king and the various guardians of the world²⁸. Agastya told Rāma: "In the primeval age, the Kṛtayuga, people begged Brahmā, the creator, to give them a king, and he, in granting their request, endowed him with the attributes of the Lokpālas²⁹.

We notice that the rule of primogeniture had become fully recognised. The general impression was that the king's eldest son should succeed him. Even Mantharā accepted this in principle while rousing Kaikeyī's jealousy against Rāma: Kaikeyī said: "After a hundred years of the installation of Rāma, Bharata too will inherit his ancestral throne." Mantharā retorted: "Rāma will be crowned king and after him he who is born as his son; whereas Bharata will be excluded from the royal line for ever... Kings hand over the reigns of government to the eldest son, even though others may be full of virtues³⁰."

However, there is a strong suggestion that there was a group of *brāhmaṇas*, called

²⁶ V.R. - 1.8.36.7

²⁷ V.R. - 1.8.36.7

²⁸ Ramashraya Sharma, *The Socio-Political Study of the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi 1971, p. 297

²⁹ V.R. - 7.1.12

³⁰ V.R. - 2.8.13, 14

rājkartarah, literally 'king-makers', who genuinely had a role to play in selecting the king's successor. After the death of Daśaratha, they went to the *sabhā* along with the *amātyas* to discuss the evils of a kingless state. Earlier, when Daśaratha decided to appoint Rāma as his successor, he consulted his chief priest Vasiṣṭha and summoned the citizens of Ayodhyā to submit their views. The citizens and the subordinate rulers of the different parts of the kingdom of Kośala³¹ vigorously endorsed Daśaratha's decision. It should be noted here that this was not an elected council whom the king consulted. Perhaps some remnants of the 'republican' idea still persisted. Therefore, it seems that the succession was not a completely automatic process, though this must have been due, in part at least, to the special circumstances created by the exile of the eldest son. However, some kind of endorsement by the *sabhā* or the group of ministers in the matter of royal succession seems to have been necessary.

In the light of the views expressed on kingship, it is perhaps ironic that Daśaratha and Rāma, in comparable circumstances, acted at variance with them. Daśaratha, supposedly more particular in eliciting the opinion of his court and his subjects, banished Rāma arbitrarily, without consulting anyone, and against the wishes of his subjects. In the third stage, however, we observe that Rāma was very anxious to conform to public opinion and sacrificed his wife to placate the unfounded prejudice of his subjects³². The text, however, has rationalised the whole episode of Rāma's exile. It was not Daśaratha who banished Rāma, but Rāma himself was adamant to

³¹ V.R. - 2.1.46 *Prithvīpati, Medini Pradhānam*

³² J.L. Brockington, *Op. cit.*, p. 126

fulfil his father's promise. Rāma told Sītā that the rule of succession was not absolute and kings were known to have abandoned their sons if found incompetent and appointed capable sons in their stead³³. Suta narrated the story of Sāgara who had to banish his eldest son Asamañjasa, as he used to derive pleasure in drowning children in the river. The outraged subjects asked Sāgara to choose between them and his son, and the king was forced to exile the latter to pacify his subjects³⁴. Here, the subjects wanted Rāma to succeed Daśaratha, but Rāma willingly went to exile, for, he was first an ideal son.

Daśaratha's court is the centre of action in the first half of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, but the text does not furnish any detailed account of how it functioned. The council is referred to by *sabhā*³⁵ or *parisad*³⁶. It met on three occasions. The first was called by Daśaratha to seek its advice on the question of coronation of Rāma³⁷. The second met to consider the situation after the sudden death of Daśaratha and decided to appoint a scion of the Ikṣvāku family as his successor³⁸. The third was summoned by Vasīṣṭha to consider Bharata's refusal to become the king³⁹. Vasīṣṭha, Vāmadeva and Jābāli were the prominent *brāhmaṇas* mentioned in the second meeting of the *sabhā* and they have

³³ V.R. - 2.23.33

³⁴ V.R. - 2.32.15-19

³⁵ V.R. - 2.1.4

³⁶ V.R. - 2.61.12

³⁷ V.R. - 2.2.1.15

³⁸ V.R. - 2.61.1

³⁹ V.R. - 2.75.8-11

been described as *rājkartarah*⁴⁰. The exact role played by them is in the *sabhā* is however, not clear.

The King was assisted by the ministers, usually eight in number⁴¹, known as *amātyas* or *sacivas* or *mantrin*⁴². The term *mantrin* applied to ministers as well as counsellors or advisors. Sumantra, Dasaratha's *sūta*, combined the functions of a charioteer and a confidant and was enlisted among the *amātyas* and *mantrins*⁴³. The king's *purohita* was carefully distinguished from the *mantrins*. Vasiṣṭha, Dasaratha's *purohita*, played an important role in the arrangements for Rāma's coronation and took the initiative in sorting out the procedure following Dasaratha's death. But otherwise he was not particularly prominent in the earlier sections of the text. His prominence, it appears, was related to the ritually important occasions and he did not have the role of a special advisor in the manner in which it later developed.

The decision of the *pariṣad* was not binding on the king. For instance, when Jābāli attempted to persuade Rāma to get back to Ayodhyā by arguing that, "relinquishing the kingdom inherited from your father, you ought not to tread the wrong path, which is painful, rugged and bristling with thorns. Get yourself consecrated on the throne of

⁴⁰ V.R. - 2.61.2

⁴¹ V.R. - 2.61.2-3

⁴² V.R. - 6.31.63-65

⁴³ V.R. - 1.7.1-2

prosperous Ayodhyā, for the city eagerly awaits your return⁴⁴. Rāma retaliated: "I will act according to my own inclination by which he meanly, he will act in accordance with *dharma*, for his natural inclination is to uphold *dharma* and, following my example, the whole of this world is likely to turn licentious; for people follow the same way of life as the kings do. Truthfulness alone, which is divorced from cruelty, is the eternal way of life prescribed for the kings. Therefore, truthfulness is the soul of a kingdom; the world itself is founded on truth⁴⁵. Rāma, thus claimed superiority of a king's personal decision over the authority of a member of the king's council.

The king's decision was final if he believed that it provided a positive role model before the society. When everyone present in the Citrakūta argued for the superiority of a teacher in comparison with one's parents, Rāma contended that one's parents were more worthy of respect,⁴⁶ and was accordingly insistent on implementing the pledge already given by him to his father. Rāma was always conscious of his being a model for the society, be it as a son or as a king.

The text throughout lays emphasis on the protective rather than the punitive role of the king. Daśaratha told his council that he had been protecting his subjects with vigilance according to his ability⁴⁷. He advised Rāma: "He who protects the earth while

⁴⁴ V.R. - 2.108.7-8

⁴⁵ V.R. - 2.109.10

⁴⁶ V.R. - 2.111.9

⁴⁷ V.R. - 2.2.4

keeping the people content and loyal will give his allies cause of rejoice like the deathless gods when they obtained nectar. So hold yourself, son, and behave in this fashion"⁴⁸. Rāma was also of the opinion⁴⁹ that the *kṣatriyas* should wield the weapon only to prevent distress of the people. Brockington points out that the need of protecting the women, in particular was recognised, and this duty rested with the king⁵⁰.

Exemplifying the duties of a king, Rāma enquired of Bharata: "I trust- you avoid the fourteen errors of kings, atheism, falsehood, inaccessibility, inattention, procrastination, shunning the wise, indolence, sensual indulgence, solitary determination of political affairs, taking counsel with those ignorant of such affairs, failure to execute your decision, to keep your counsel secret or to employ auspicious rites, and indiscriminate courtesy". Rāma added: "I hope you are able to meet your expenditure from your revenue. I hope you cherish all men who make their living by farming and cattle raising, for a well-founded economy promotes the world's happiness. I trust your wise ministers render judgement impartially when a rich man and a poor man are engaged in a suit, for the tears people shed when falsely accused come to slay the livestock and children of the king who rules for personal gain. You should never deny the claims of righteousness in the name of statecraft⁵¹".

⁴⁸ V.R. - 2.3.25

⁴⁹ V.R. - 3.10.3

⁵⁰ Brockington, *op.cit* p. 125

⁵¹ V.R. - 2.94.8-56

From where did the king derive his authority? One source was definitely his divine status. Bharata told Rāma: "Although people regard a king as human, yet when his conduct is governed by *dharma* and *artha* he should consider himself super human, indeed a god"⁵². Rāma himself asserted while arguing with Vāli that kings are capable of dispensing religious merit, which is difficult to attain otherwise, longevity and earthly blessings too; there is no doubt about it. One should neither assassinate nor reproach nor insult nor speak unpalatable words to them. Being gods themselves the kings move about on earth in human semblance⁵³. Evidently the divine status of the king gained currency by the time the text was composed.

Along with the principle of the king's authority explained above, the text also mentions, after the *smṛtis*, the complementary principle of the king's obligations towards his subjects. The king was not expected to act arbitrarily, according to his personal inclinations. Manu declared : "Day and night he should make a great effort to conquer his sensory powers, for the man who has conquered his sensory powers is able to keep his subjects under his control. Many kings have been destroyed, together with their family due to lack of humility. The supreme duty of a ruler is to protect his subjects, for a king who enjoys the rewards is bound to that duty."⁵⁴

U.N. Ghoshal has pointed out that the king's quasi-contractual obligation of

⁵² V.R. - 2.95.4

⁵³ V.R. - 5-18.38-41

⁵⁴ Manu - 7.40,44

protecting his subjects was considered as important in the *Rāmāyana* as the obligation of the subjects to respect the authority of their just ruler"⁵⁵. The king's power finally depended on his fulfilling his obligations to his subjects, for which he was paid taxes. This was the basis of the appeal of the sages to Rāma in the Dandaka forest for protection against the Rākṣasas": "The king who just takes away the sixth part of the produce by way of land revenue, and does not protect his subjects like his children, commits great *adharma*. By always protecting his subjects, he attains fame lasting for many years, and having reached the realm of Brahmā, is honoured even there"⁵⁶.

That the king followed the advice of *brāhmaṇas* is clearly indicated in the didactic literature. The king depended on others not only for his power, but also, and more importantly, for his *authority*⁵⁷. The kings and the *brahmanas* definitely constituted two separate sources of power. The ultimate authority was not the exclusive domain of the *brāhmaṇas* who held the monopoly of the *Vedas*. But the king desperately needed the *brahmana* to sanction his power. The greater the king's power, the more was the need for the approval of the *brāhmaṇa*⁵⁸. The *Dharmasūtras* endorse this point. Gautama stated : "The king is the master of all with the exception of the *brāhmaṇas*"⁵⁹. It has been declared in the *Vedas*, the text adds, that the "*brāhmaṇas*

⁵⁵ U.N. Ghoshal, *A History of Indian Political Ideas*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966 (reprint), p. 274

⁵⁶ *V.R.* - 2.100.41

⁵⁷ J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflicts of Tradition*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, p. 112

⁵⁸ *Ibid* p. 127

⁵⁹ *Ibid* p. 127

united with the *kṣatriyas uphold* gods and men"⁶⁰. Manu further decreed : "Even if the king is dying of hunger, he must not take taxes from a priest. If a priest who knows his Veda by heart faints with hunger, the kingdom of the king in whose territory he lives will also soon faint with hunger"⁶¹.

Part of the king's obligation towards his subjects was to ensure that no illegal or immoral act was committed within his kingdom, for it might lead to premature death of his subjects. The sage Nārada told Rāma that when a man indulged in an evil act within a kingdom, he as well as the king doubtless went to hell⁶².

Accordingly, Rāma went to trace instances of unrighteous conduct in his kingdom. The prime example of this seems to have been transgression of the privileges of the *brāhmaṇas*. Rāma came across a person called Śambūka in meditation and asked him "O Powerful one, O good man, O ascetic, are you a *brāhmaṇa*, a *kṣatriya*, a *vaiśya* or a *śudra*? For what are you practising penance?" On hearing that Śambūka was a *śudra*, Rāma immediately beheaded him. The gods praised the scion of Kākustha and allowed him to ask for a boon. Rāma requested them to bring back to life the child of a *brāhmaṇa* who passed away because of the evil caused by the practise of penance by a *śudra* in his kingdom. The gods replied that the moment the sudra was beheaded the child was joined to life⁶³.

⁶⁰ G.D. - 7.1

⁶¹ Manu - 7.133-4

⁶² V.R. - 7.74.31

⁶³ V.R. - 1.6.1-28

Towards the beginning of the epic, Dasāratha has been portrayed in glowing terms as a very able ruler. His kingdom was prosperous and he was popular among his subjects.⁶⁴ However, we receive the impression that the reign of Rāma would be even better. Dasāratha cherished all his four sons as if they were four arms extending from his body. But it was Rāma who brought his father the greatest joy, for he surpassed his brothers in virtue, just as the self-existent Brahmā surpassed all beings⁶⁵.

Rāma was always even-tempered and soft-spoken. Even if he was harshly addressed, he would not react. Such was his self control that he would be satisfied with a single act of kindness and ignore a hundred injuries⁶⁶. He was an excellent judge of men and could tell when it was appropriate to show his favour or withhold it⁶⁷. He knew the right means of collecting revenue and regulating expenditure⁶⁸.

He was a natural leader of the army and incible in combat, even if the gods and the *asuras* were to unite in anger against him⁶⁹. While returning from battle, he always stopped to ask the men of the city after their welfare as if they were his own kinsmen—about their son, sacred fires, wives, servants and students without omission and in due order just as a father might ask his sons his own flesh and blood⁷⁰. By his virtues the prince won the esteem of the people in all the three worlds for he was as patient as the

⁶⁴ V.R. - 2.1.9-11

⁶⁵ V.R. - 2.1.15,16

⁶⁶ V.R. - 2.1.20

⁶⁷ V.R. - 2.61.54

⁶⁸ V.R. - 2.1.24

⁶⁹ V.R. - 2.2.25

⁷⁰ V.R. - 2.1.26

earth, as wise as Brhaspati, and as mighty as Indra, the lord of Suci.⁷¹ His conduct and valour made him like one of the gods who guard the world that the earth herself desired to have him as her master⁷².

Seeing these incomparable virtues in his son, Daśaratha decided to appoint Rāma as the *yuvarāja*. His advisors endorsed the opinion of the king when the townsmen heard the king's announcement, it was as if they had secured some longed for object and taking leave of the land of men they went home and worshipped in deep delight⁷³. Even children playing in groups at their front doors talked together in praise of Rāma⁷⁴. Such was the popularity of Rāma among his subjects that the cities of Ayodhyā could not bear the pains of separation from him. They followed Rāma when he was banished from the city and refused to return even when requested by Rāma.

However, Rāma's reign was postponed for fourteen years by the circumstance of his exile. Still when Bharata came to the forest to persuade Rāma to take back his throne, Rāma enquired about the state of Ayodhyā. His questions indicate his own conception of Kingship and suggest that even in exile he maintained a keen interest in the welfare of Ayodhyā. He enquired about the health of his kith and kin, asked whether the *brāhmanas* could pursue their studies without hindrance, whether due homage was being prayed to the gods, whether able ministers were consulted while

⁷¹ V.R. - 2.1.26 72. V.R. - 2.1.28

⁷³ V.R. - 2.3.32

⁷⁴ V.R. - 2.94.5-59

important decisions were being taken, whether jobs were distributed according to merit and character, whether justice was being impartially administered, whether reliable spies were appointed and whether elaborate provisions were made for the protection of Ayodhyā and its citizens⁷⁴. Even during his exile, Rāma acted in accordance with Rājadharmā. Although he refused to accept the throne, he never gave up his responsibilities of a king.

Ghoshal has observed that the above example illustrates the application of the triple principle of the ethico-religious, the divine and the quasi-contractual aspects of the king's obligations towards his subjects, which are laid down in the *Smṛtis*. "The king", he argues,⁷⁵ is charged with universal and complete protection of his subjects evidently in accordance with the law of his order. The same obligation is imposed upon him by virtue of his being a portion of the divine ruler and as a corollary of his collection of taxes from the people. The king's obligation is supported by the usual double sanction in the sense that he is not only liable for his own *karma*, but he also acquires by transfer the whole or part of the good and evil *karma* of his subjects according to his reaction to this obligation. By an extension of the *Smṛti* principle of the king's sanction we are told that the king's neglect of protection results in shortening the life-span of his subjects⁷⁵. The reverse is also true. The text says that a king who protects his people gains one-fourth of the merits which a hermit acquires living on roots and fruits⁷⁶.

⁷⁵ U.N. Ghoshal, *op.cit.*; p. 275.

⁷⁶ V.R. - 1.24.15-16.

In fact, Rāma's killing of Tātaka was his first act that can be explained by reference to *rājadharmā* because, strictly, speaking *ksatriyadharmā* did not allow the killing of a woman. But the text says that the responsibility of maintaining the *varṇa* order is the eternal *dharma* of those who bear the burden of kingship⁷⁷. Tātaka, a *Rākṣasī* threatened this order and she had to be killed. It was for the same reason that he killed the *Rākṣasas* in the forest. As we have already mentioned, he continued to take keen interest in the affairs of the state even in exile, and he never actually ceased to be king. He accepted Vibhīṣaṇa as a friend, because it was his duty as a king to afford protection to those who came to seek refuge. He understood that Vibhīṣaṇa was an upholder of *dharma*, and reasoned that this was more important than anything else. The world was divided between the contrasting elements of *dharma* and *adharmā*. Rāma's mission was to proclaim and exemplify this notion of the world this. His coronation of Sugrīva in Kiṣkindhā and of Vibhīṣaṇa in Laṅkā was determined by the consideration of the establishment of *dharma* in place of *adharmā*⁷⁸.

Thus, Rāma applied the *dharma* of kingship before he actually become a king. Throughout the epic, Rāma was destined to preside over an ideal kingdom, but he could do so only when his term of exile was over and the reign of Rāvaṇa came to an end. The actual reign of Rāma witnessed ideal social harmony when all the *varṇas* cooperate together with each other in a state of mutual trust. It was a time of stability and

⁷⁷ Frank Whaling, *op. cit.*, p. 68 -

⁷⁸ *V.R.* - 6.11.6, 82-90, 7.14.17-22 .

prosperity when all works reaped happy results⁷⁸.

How his reign symbolised the triumph of *dharma* on earth can be seen most clearly if we make a comparison between the respective careers of Rāma and Rāvaṇa. In terms of material prosperity and worldly success Rāvaṇa's kingdom was no less than that of Rāma. Moreover, both of them have been depicted as great heroes. The main difference between them was that Rāma lived in accordance with *dharma*, and Rāvaṇa did not. "Rāvaṇa had greatness but not goodness, Rāma had both. *Rāmarājya*, therefore, stood not just for strong and successful government; it stood above all for righteous government and Rama stood for the ideal of righteous kingship"⁷⁹

The period of the composition of the text witnessed many upheavals in the social, economic and political milieu. Rāma as an ideal man and an ideal king could serve several purpose. On the one hand he had set the norms to be followed by the people if they wanted harmonious relations in family as well as in society at large, and on the other he validated the monarchical form of government which ensured the stability of the *varṇa* order. However, the success of the *Rāmarājya* depended on the personal qualities of Rāma. As Whaling comments, "Rāma's rule could be ideal if he himself was an ideal"⁸⁰. Thus kingship, which was already invested with the attributes of divinity, achieved in Rāma, the person, its ideal form and paved the way for his eventual transformation from being the representative of the gods to becoming a god himself.

⁷⁹ Frank Whaling, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 70.

Rāma : The *Avatāra*

4. Rāma : The Avatāra

You are the great god Nārāyaṇa, Sītā is Lakṣmī and you are god Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa and Prajāpati. For the purpose of killing Rāvaṇa, you entered a human body." (V.R. - 6.105.12-15)

An *avatāra* is a manifestation of the divine in an animal, mythological or human form. Vaiṣṇavite doctrine which seems to have evolved with the identification of Bhāgvat-Nārāyaṇa with the hero god Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, who thus came to be looked upon as the human incarnation of the former¹. Some scholars trace the idea to a *R̥g Vedic* passage, where Viṣṇu is said to have assumed another form in the battle². J.Gonda maintains that in the *R̥g Veda* Indra is especially the god who roams about in several forms³.

However, the Vaiṣṇavite theory of incarnation is not confined to the idea of the god's multiformity or metamorphosis alone but is based on a clear belief that the godhead manifests himself with a purpose to destroy the wicked and protect the righteous. The earliest reference to this idea can be found in the *Bhāgavad Gītā*,⁴ where it is clearly mentioned that whenever *dharma* declines and vices predominate, the godhead appears on earth and thus takes numerous births in different ages. The Bhāgavad

¹ Jacobi, Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, VIII, p.175 cited in Suvira Jaiswal, *Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1987, p.129

² *R̥gveda*.7.100.06 cited in S. Jaiswal, *ibid*, p.129

³ J.Gonda, *Aspects of Early Vismuism*, Motilal Bārasidas, Delhi, 1969

⁴ Bhāgavad Gītā - 4.5.8

Gītā further states that whatever is endowed with power springs from a part of the God's energy.⁵ This explains how the good and the mighty is a partial manifestation of the God.

Suvira Jaiswal has argued that in this form the doctrine seems to have been considerably influenced by the Buddhist concept of the former Buddha whose prime attribute is compassion⁶. She cites Farquhar who also suggested that the *vaiṣṇavas* were influenced by example of the Buddhists, who had already raised Buddha to divine status and had created a series of precedent Buddhas stretching away into the distant past.⁷

The term *avatāra*, literally means, 'to descend', 'to come down'. The word is derived from the root 'avt.r' which is not found in earlier works. The *Bhāgavad Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata* where the concept occurs for the first time the idea of an incarnation has been expressed through such words as *janam*⁸ (birth), *sambhava*⁹ (spring forth), *srjna*¹⁰ (creation) and *prādurbhāva*¹¹ (appearance).

Even the number of the *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu* varies from one text to another. Describing the incarnations of *Nārāyaṇa Viṣṇu*, the *Nārāyaṇiya* section of the

⁵ B.G. - 10.49.

⁶ Suvira Jaiswal, *op. cit.* p. 130.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ B.G. 4.5.

⁹ *ibid.* 5,6,8.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 5.7.

¹¹ *Mbh* - 12.326.61.

Mahābhārata furnishes two lists. The first mentions maintains six¹², while the second only four incarnation¹³. Scholars are of the opinion that the second list, giving the names of the four incarnations -Varāha (boar), Narasiṃha (man-lion), Vāmana (dwarf) and Manuṣa (human i.e. Kṛṣṇa) seems to represent the original nucleus which is found in the Aranyaka Parvan of the *Mahābhārata*. Gradually the number increased and the *Vāyu Purāṇa* gives the number of incarnations as twelve at one place and ten at another¹⁴. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* enumerates the names of the incarnations of Viṣṇu in three different passages. In the first book twenty two, in the second book twenty three, and in book eleven sixteen names are mentioned. It was only later that the number of the *avatāras* was fixed at ten.

The Bhāgavad Gītā says that since the *avatāras* emanate from the god's energy, they are naturally not as powerful as the original one¹⁵. Hence there must be some difference between Viṣṇu and his incarnations. It shows the intrinsic superiority of the principle god Nārāyaṇa-Viṣṇu. Thus, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* describes Kṛṣṇa as an *amśavatāra* or a part manifestation of Viṣṇu¹⁶. The *Bhāgavad Gītā*, however, takes him to be *the pūrṇa brahma*. The difference is reconciled by the commentators, who assert that even as a lamp lighted from another lamp does not reduce the light of the first, and yet is as bright as the first, so the divine spirit, which has the character of

¹² *Mbh* - 12.326

¹³ *Mbh*. - 12.337.36

¹⁴ R.G.Bhandarkar, *Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Minor Religious System*, Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1965. p.42

¹⁵ *B.G.* - 1.49

¹⁶ *amśvatrar brahmarse yo yam yadukulodbhavaḥ*, cited in P. Jash, *History and Evolution of Vaiṣṇavism in Eastern India*, Calcutta, 1982. p.95.

light, cannot suffer diminution or enhancement. Hence, " a full arises out of a full, if a full is taken away from a full, a full remains"¹⁷.

In the beginning, the tendency seems to have been to incorporate various popular divinities such as the Boar, the Man-lion, and Vasudeva-Kṛṣṇa by recognising them as incarnations of the same god. It is interesting that the stages of the *avatāra* parallel the evolution of life on earth, such as *Matsya* (fish), who resides in water, *Kūrma* (tortoise) an amphibian, *Varāha* (boar) who lives on earth, and *Narasiṃha* (man-lion), an intermediary stage in the transition from animal to man. Balarāma is an agriculturist, while Paraśurāma, Dāśrathī Rāma and Buddha represent some of the human forms¹⁸. One of the most popular incarnations of Viṣṇu is *Varāha* (boar), who seems to have been linked with the pre-Āryan cult of the sacred pig. The first direct references to the boar as an incarnation performing the specific task of raising the earth from primeval water occur in the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*, where he has been identified with the creator god Prajāpati. It is possible that some of the totemic gods of the non-Aryan people of India were gradually being absorbed within the brahmanical pantheon and they eventually merged with Viṣṇu and his *avatāras*. The earliest literary reference to Viṣṇu's Narasiṃha form is to be found in a late passage of the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* which describes him as a deity having mighty claws and sharp teeth. Analysing the episode, P.V.Kane has observed that some elements of the story appears

¹⁷ J.Muir, Original Sanskrit Texts, London, 1972-84. Vol.IV., p.219. cited in P. Jash, *op cit*, p.95

¹⁸ Madelone Biardieau, *Hinduism : The Anthropology of a Civilization*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994, (Second Impression), p.103

to have been derived from the legend of Indra and the demon Namuci¹⁹. The Dwarf incarnation is anticipated in the three strides of Viṣṇu mentioned in the *R̥gVeda* which was elaborated with the assimilation of some popular elements²⁰. The *Rāmāyaṇa* also contains the same story.²¹

Of the three Rāmas, Bhārgava Rāma (Paraśurāma), Rāghava Rāma (Rāmachandra) and Balarāma, Bhārgava Rāma's identification with Viṣṇu occurs only once in the *Mahābhārata*. However, V.S. Sukthankar has pointed out that the glorification of Paraśurāma was not accepted by a section of the *brāhamaṇas*, who were the custodians of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and this epic invariably portrays the Bhārgavas, and specially Paraśurāma, in an unfavourable light. It narrates the story of the defeat of Paraśurāma at the hands of the kṣatriya prince Rāma, a major incarnation of Viṣṇu²².

Rāmacandra, the earliest available version of whose story is available in the *Daśaratha Jātaka* and which differs from the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki at certain important points, descended to on earth to destroy Rāvaṇa, the wicked and powerful master of Laṅkā who was made invincible through divine grace. According to the *Daśaratha Jātaka*, Daśaratha was the king of Vārāṇasī, who has four children called Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Sītā and Bharata. Daśaratha had sent away Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa into exile for twelve years in the Himalayan region to protect them from the evil

¹⁹ P.V.Kane, *History of Dharmasashtras*, Vol.II, BORI, Poona, 1941, pp.718-19

²⁰ S.Jaiswal, *op.cit.*, p.123-4.

²¹ V.R. - 1.27.12-14

²² J.N.Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1954, p.419.

machinations of their step-mother, and Sītā insisted on accompanying her brothers. When the period of exile was over, Rāma married his sister Sītā and made her his chief queen. There is no reference to the abduction of Sītā. This entire episode appears to have been invented or derived from some other source by the author of the *Rāmāyana*²³. Probably because of the ethical notions prevailing at the time of the composition of the *Rāmāyana*; the author of the text, who describes Sītā as the daughter of Janaka, could not conceive of Rāma of being both the husband and the brother of Sītā at the same time.

We observe that though the number of the primary incarnations of Viṣṇu had been fixed at ten, their names vary in the lists given in the early *Purānas* and it is believed that the standard list did not find general acceptance before the eight century A.D.²⁴. The *Vāyu Purāna* mentions Nārāyaṇa, Narasiṁha, Vāmana, Dattātreyā, Mandhātā, Jamadagṇya, Rāma, Vedavyās, Kṛṣṇa and Kalki as the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu. The first three are described as divya sambhūti (divine incarnations) and the rest as human incarnations²⁵.

In this essay we are concerned with the process of the transformation of an epic hero into a god. Therefore, the relevant questions to ask are—under what circumstances a popular character is divinised? Or, conversely, to what extent does a god's character

²³ S. Jaiswal, *op. cit.* p. 141

²⁴ R. C. Hazra, *Studies in the Puranic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs*, Dacca, 1940, p. 88

²⁵ The *Vāyu Purāna*. 98.88., cited in S. Jaiswal, *op. cit.*, p. 129

reflect the socio-economic political milieu in which he is worshipped? What can a theogonic myth tell about a society and about the internalization and use of power within a society? Fred Clothey has suggested some answers to these questions at the theoretical level which are useful for our purpose. He argues that the manner in which a divine being is perceived reflect particular historical circumstances and geographical context which are incorporated into the mythology of certain gods. These historical particulars include, among others, sociological factors. For example, a deity can serve as a prototype for the occupational status of a particular social community as when the god is a warrior or a king. However, virtually no deity which rises in dominance reflects a contemporary moment alone. Divine lineage ascribes continuity, authenticity, identity and power to a god. In brahmanical theogony especially each deity reflects not simply a particular cultural moment but an ongoing tradition that by incarnation and homogenisation derives its authority from a mythic or historical original moment. This process, and each god developed within it, becomes appropriated personally because a process of personal and or family internalisation makes a deity extremely real for many devotees. In this process there occurs an enhancement of credibility through the particular manner of transmission of the tradition and the sharing of incidents or stories in which the god has performed miraculous deeds not only in times of past but in one's own time. In short the power of the god is personally credible and human perception about the god, who is loving, forgiving, dominant authoritative etc. reflect the human situation.²⁶

²⁶ Fred W. Clothey, "Theogony and Powers in South India", in Bardwell L. Smith(ed.), *Religion and the Legitimation of Power in South Asia*. E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1978, p.3.

In the *avatāra* myths we observe that several of these processes were simultaneously at work. A number of the *avatāras* performed miraculous deeds, most notably Kṛṣṇa. Rāma, however, never indulged in miracles, unless his incredible feats of heroism in the battlefield are considered as such. But the appeal of Rāma was even deeper. He was certainly the prototype for the ruling authority the *kṣatriya*, who had the ideological sanction of the *brāhmaṇas*, for as a king he organised and presided over the ideal brahmanical society. Deborah A Soifer has pointed out that the Viṣṇu-Śiva and the *brāhmaṇa-ksatriya* pairs characterise the *avatāra* and are particularised expressions of the basic cosmological theme of creation and destruction²⁷. Rāma was the embodiment of this ideal combination who destroyed evil and reestablished the rule of *dharma*- a crucial moment in the cosmological cycle. Moreover, even though often a representative of a particular social community to begin with, the god makes himself accessible through his *avatāras*, to all the worshippers across communities and becomes the object of their supreme desire.²⁸ Rāma, the symbol of compassion, has been consistently portrayed as just and righteous because he is supposed to be equally concerned with the welfare of all his subjects. Finally and more importantly, an *avatāra*, such as Rāma, is not the product of a historical moment, but of a historical process. Rāma in many ways, was the culmination of the process of reassertion of brahmanism which spread over a long period of perceived social crisis. The heroic legend gradually crystallized into an epic and assumed normative status, but the original mythico-historical moment was never lost. The "loving, forgiving dominant,

²⁷ Deborah A. Soifer, The Myth of Narasimha and Vamana: Two Avatars in Cosmological Perspective, *State University of New York Press, 1991, p.4.*

²⁸ Madeleine Biarreau, *op. cit.*, p.113.

authoritative" gods of Utothey did reflect the human situation. Geoffrey Parrinder, explaining the concept of the *avatāra*, argued that Rāma is the example of virtuous life and a teacher of righteousness, because he is really thought to have lived on earth²⁹. An exemplar of high moral virtues does not easily acquire personal credibility. It depends on the successful creation and effective transmission of a tradition. The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition assumed its present form through diverse channels of transmission for many centuries, of which we are concerned with only the early part, the final redactions of the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa* where the righteous king and the mighty hero turned into a benevolent god for the first time.

The first episode which refers to the idea of Rāma as an incarnation of Viṣṇu is mentioned in the *Bālakāṇḍa*. Daśaratha was performing the *putreṣṭi yajña* to beget sons. Exactly at that time the gods were discussing among themselves in heaven how to destroy Rāvaṇa who had become a menace to them. Rāvaṇa was armed with a boon by Brahmā that no one except a man could kill him. Rāvaṇa thought he was so powerful that a man would be too weak to challenge him. When the gods approached Brahmā he directed them to Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu, at the request of the gods, decided to manifest himself as the four sons of Daśaratha. Agni emerged from the sacrificial fire and handed over to Daśaratha a pot of porridge, supposedly containing the seed of Viṣṇu, to be distributed among Daśaratha's wives. Rāma was thus a partial incarnation of Viṣṇu, although Viṣṇu was best exemplified in him. for Kausalyā, the mother of

²⁹ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatāra and Incarnation*, Faber and Faber, London, 1970, p.123.

Rāma, had taken half of the sweet porridge and the remaining half was divided between Kaikeyī and Sumitrā³⁰.

Another reference to the *avatāra* idea is found in the *Phalaśruti* section of the *Bālakāṇḍa* (merits of listening to the text): "Who ever reads this story of Rāma, which is purifying, destructive of sin, holy and equal to the Vedas, is free from all the sins, leads a long life and enjoys heaven with ancestors."³¹ The *Phalaśruti* supports the idea that the *Bālakāṇḍa* was a late addition. The audience were already aware of the heroic ballad and were now being informed of the fruits of listening to the story. *Vaiṣṇavism* was a new element which was to be introduced to the masses and here the *Rāmāyaṇa* served as an active instrument for the propagation of this idea. So Rāma was found suitable and was therefore conceived as the incarnation of Viṣṇu. People got to know of the merits of Rāma as a hero who manifested on earth to establish righteousness. R.P. Goldman has shown how the idea of the *avatāra* was slowly being associated with Rama. He cites a verse in the *Balakanda* which described Rāma in company of Sītā: "In the company of that lovely princess who was like Śrī in her celestial beauty, Rāma, resplendent in his own lustre, was rendered illustrious, as the glory of the incomparable Viṣṇu enhanced by the presence of Śrī; and argues that these allusions to Viṣṇu presuppose the identification of the god and the hero and are intended to convey this to the audience. With the introduction of the Vaiṣṇava elements, the contemporary audience familiar with the original heroic ballad, could hardly be

³⁰ V.R. 1.14.18-20

³¹ V.R. - 1.1.77.78

expected to believe that on hearing this they would be free from their sins and would go to heaven with their descendants. The interpolation, however, was gradual and Rama as a hero and an ideal human being remained the central figure of the *Bālakāṇḍa*.

In the early stages of the epic at least, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was a martial story with a kṣatriya background and Rāma was its noble hero. This was implied by Rāma himself when he stated that he was subject to fate³². Even when his divine identity was revealed to him he declared himself to be a human informant of the gods. Hanumān also identified him as a great human being³³. Sugrīva who compared Rāma with Indra and Varuṇa³⁴, however, described him as a man with superhuman powers: "You are capable of killing with arrows all the gods along with Indra, O lion among men, why not Vāli also". Similarly Mārīca asserted: "Rāma is *ṣḍharma* incarnate, pious, truly brave and the king of the whole world, as Vāsava is of the gods"³⁵.

Mandodarī lamenting on the death of Rāvaṇa, however, doubted whether Rāma could be just a human being and said that he must be Indra himself in the form of Rāma. She recalled the great powers of Rāvaṇa and concluded that Rāma, who had slain Rāvaṇa, Khara and the other *Rākṣasas* must be more than a mere human being.³⁶

J.L. Brockington suggests that Rāma was extolled for his martial abilities, with more

³² V.R. - 2.98.15

³³ V.R. - 5.48.11, 5.49.26

³⁴ V.R. - 4.12.10

³⁵ V.R. - 3.35.13

³⁶ V.R. - 6.99.5-11

than a hint of his kingly function, whether for protection or punishment, and so was frequently compared to Indra, throughout the first two stages³⁷.

There is a fairly clear continuity between the epic hero god Indra and the epic hero Rāma. One can also detect elements of continuity in the conflict between Indra and Vṛtra and between Rāma and Rāvaṇa. Rāma used Indra's weapons to conquer his enemies and there have been a number of allusions to the motif of Indra slaying Vṛtra and in the kāṇḍas two to six of the *Rāmāyaṇa*³⁸. Both Rāma and Indra killed a large number of demons in addition to Rāvaṇa and Vṛtra respectively. It is significant that Indra interfered at a vital stage in the great battle in order to offer Rāma his own chariot and the charioteer³⁹. Whailing makes the comparison between Indra and Rāma explicit: "At another level of interpretation, disorder exists not just at the human level but also at the cosmic level. The world is in a state of chaos and needs to be restored to a state of cosmos. Just as Vṛtra had held back the waters of the earth, thereby causing drought and disorder, so also Rāvaṇa impedes the cosmic order of the world. Just as Indra with the help of the Māruts had used his thunderbolt to release the waters imprisoned by Vṛtra and thereby restored cosmos, so also Rāma defeats Rāvaṇa and establishes the possibility of *Rāmarājya* on earth, for the symbol of *Rāmarājya* has cosmic as well as human implications. It represents a state of order in the universe as well as a state of order in Ayodhyā"⁴⁰. We have already noted that the cosmogonic

³⁷ Brockington, *op.cit.* p.195

³⁸ Frank Whaling, *op.cit.* p.77

³⁹ *V.R.* - 6.90

⁴⁰ Frank Whaling. *op.cit.* p.78

them of creation- destruction- recreation is intrinsic to the concept of the *avatāra* and Rāma satisfied this condition by restoring order on earth as Indra did in the past.

However, the similarity between two ends there-Indra had restored cosmic order which can be interpreted in a way as the restoration of *dharma*. But Indra was hardly a champion of *dharma* in the same way that Rāma was. Indra killed the demons through his magic power, employed brutal force to achieve his objective, and his moral character was open to question. Rāma's triumph over Rāvaṇa was a triumph of *dharma* over *adharma* in a moral sense. This indicates an advance in the moral significance of the concept of *dharma* since the time of the *Rgveda*, as well as the moral superiority of Rāma over Indra⁴¹.

Rāma released Ahalyā of her curse which indirectly links him with Indra, who was responsible for the curse. However, we notice a gradual shift of emphasis from Indra to Viṣṇu in the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself⁴². One reason can be that Indra was in the process of being displaced from his pre-eminent status by Viṣṇu, a process which crystallised in the *Purāṇas*. Also perhaps the personality of Indra was not compatible with the growing emphasis on Rāma's upholding of *dharma* and can be a factor in the disjunction of the association of Rāma and Indra. The highest level of representation of Rāma in the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* was as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. At this level he was no longer merely an ideal man or merely a successor of Indra. He was an incarnation of

⁴¹ *ibid*,p.79

⁴² J.L.Brockington, *op.cit*,p.220

the God.

Rama has been compared with Indra on sixty occasions in first two stages of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and only on eight occasions with Viṣṇu. But the pattern changes in the later stages. The reference of Rāma as the the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu mostly occur in the first and the seventh books, which are considered to be later interpolations. Books two to five practically contain no specific reference to Rāma as an *avatara*, except in the *yuddhakāṇḍa*. Towards the beginning of the epic it is clearly mentioned that Viṣṇu, at the request of the gods, decided to become the four sons of Daśaratha in order to kill Rāvaṇa. The remainder of the *Bālakāṇḍa* contains some stories about Viṣṇu, but none of these specifically state that Viṣṇu was actually Rāma. They were presumably included in order to point out the closeness between Rāma and Viṣṇu. However, an episode in the *Bālakāṇḍa* itself suggests that the idea of Rāma being the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu was gaining ground. Paraśurāma, after being vanquished by Rāma, addressed him as "the imperishable slayer of Madhu, the lord of Gods"⁴³.

In the *Yudhakāṇḍa*, Malayavat, a minister of Rāvaṇa told him, "I consider Rāma to be Viṣṇu who has taken the form of a man, for this Rāghava of firm valour who built this remarkable bridge over the sea is not just a man. Therefore, O Rāvaṇa, conclude peace with Rāma, the king of men"⁴⁴. The most comprehensive statement on Rāma's divinity occurs in the episode where Sītā underwent the fire ordeal. Indra rebuked

⁴³ V.R. - 1.75.17

⁴⁴ V.R. - 6.26.331.32

Rāma for his distrust of Sita : "How could you distrust her, for you are god, the creator of the whole universe (an epithet often applied to Brahmā), and the foremost among the wise and knowledgeable persons"⁴⁵. Rāma, oblivious of his divinity, enquired of Brahmā : "I consider myself to be Rāma, the offspring of Daśaratha. Who then am I and where have I come from, tell me that lord"⁴⁶. Brahmā replied : "You are the great god Nārāyaṇa, Sītā is Lakṣmī and you are god Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa and Prajāpati. For the purpose of killing Rāvaṇa, you entered a human body"⁴⁷. The *Yuddhakāṇḍa* projects Rama as a *Purnavatāra* (complete incarnation) of Viṣṇu rather than a partial one, as expressed in the *Bālakāṇḍa*. Rāma himself was unaware of his divinity and was informed about this by the gods.

In the *Uttarakāṇḍa* there are many instances in which Rāma has been portrayed as an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Once Gautama assured Ahalyā : "In the house of the Ikṣvākus there will be born a mighty warrior named Rāma, renowned in the universe That long armed hero will be none other than Viṣṇu in human form.... It is he who can efface the sin you have committed"⁴⁸. In another passage Bhṛgu cursed Viṣṇu, : "You will be born in the world of man, O Janārdana, and there you will live separated from your wife for many years"⁴⁹. This statement directly connects Viṣṇu with Rāma. In the *Uttarakāṇḍa* Brahmā again reminded Rāma of his divinity when Rāma lamented over the disappearance of Sītā into the womb of the earth and vowed to destroy the

⁴⁵ V.R. - 6.105.58

⁴⁶ V.R. - 6.105.10

⁴⁷ V.R. - 6.105.12-18

⁴⁸ V.R. - 7.30.41-42

⁴⁹ V.R. - 7.41.6

universe. Brahmā said to Rāma : "O Rama, the virtuous one, do not be incensed. Recollect your divine origin and nature . . . now recall that you are Viṣṇu . . . O invisible hero".⁵⁰

Rāma has been addressed as *paramātman*⁵¹ and Nārāyaṇa⁵². Finally Rāma was told by Kāla : "Your task is accomplished, O friend, O protector of the worlds. You are mind born⁵³ and you have completed your long stay among the mortals. O foremost of men, return to us"⁵⁴. Brahmā welcomed him to the abode of the gods : "Hail ! O Visnu ! Hail ! O Rāghava ! With your god-like brothers now enter your eternal abode. Return to your own body if you so desire . . . occupy the realm of Viṣṇu . . . enter into your real body if you want"⁵⁵. Rāma finally realised his true nature : "Hearing these words of Brahmā, the supremely virtuous Rāma formed his resolution and entered Viṣṇu's abode in his body with his younger brothers. Thus Viṣṇu returned to heaven, and it is he who pervaded the three worlds, both the moving and the fixed"⁵⁶.

Rāma of Vālmīki transcended the human qualities to become equal with gods which ended in his identification with Viṣṇu. However, he was not yet the object of devotion and worship who could grant *mokṣa*. At the same time he contained all the elements of being a deity and was not very far from being the object of devotion. There are

⁵⁰ V.R. - 7.98.12-13

⁵¹ V.R. - 7.41.7

⁵² V.R. - 7.26.28

⁵³ V.R. - 7.104.13

⁵⁴ V.R. - 7.104.1-13

⁵⁵ V.R. - 7.104.8-13

⁵⁶ V.R. - 7.111.2

some instances the *Uttarak ānda* which presupposed the idea of *bhakti*. The *Vanaras* were so devoted to Rāma in Ayodhyā that a month passed by as if it were an hour⁵⁷. Later the inhabitants of Ayodhyā wished to accompany Rāma to heaven as an expression of their love and devotion for him.⁵⁸ On resuming his form as Viṣṇu in heaven, Rāma told the gods that the citizens of Ayodhyā were his devotees and they sacrificed themselves for his sake⁵⁹. It was during the medieval period, when some of the major *bhakti* poets accepted Rāma as their preeminent object of devotion, that the image of Rāma as the deliverer of man from their earthly sorrows became widely recognised. However, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, having set the scene for the full realisation of the divine aspect of Rāma in heaven seems to have been content to dwell more on the human nature of Rāma on earth.

The deification of Rāma towards the final stages of the composition of the epic suggests that brahmanism had found Rāma a model to embody and transmit the norms it prescribed to overcome the social crisis it was facing. The story of Rāma was chosen for it was an attractive and popular story in which Rāma was deified in degrees through various stages. Rāma was viewed in the early stage as a perfect *ksatriya*, a position which in no way came in conflict with the religious ideals of his time, for it was recommended that each one should follow one's *varṇa* duty⁶⁰.

⁵⁷ V.R. - 7.39.27

⁵⁸ V.R. - 7.107.13

⁵⁹ V.R. - 7.107.17

⁶⁰ J.L. Brockington, *op. cit.*, p.220

Rama was a connecting link between the people and the unseen heaven. Because of his supposedly physical presence, it was comparatively easier to project him as an incarnation of the God, and yet make him appear credible. The image of the ideal family man and the ideal king superimposed on the magnificent hero helped in the construction of the *avatāra*.

Rāma belonged to the ruling class, who wielded power. Heesterman argues that power in order to be legitimate, must be sanctioned by authority, and authority in turn must be validated by priesthood, which provided the channel to the divine or transcendent source of authority. The pair of king and *brāhmaṇa* stands for temporal power and spiritual authority. "The king-brāhmin formula takes care of power and authority distinguished from each other in an absolute fashion. Power and authority should complement each other and that the king and brāhmin, therefore, must cooperate".⁶¹ Rāma, the god, was the result of this cooperation.

Moreover, by providing the religious coat, brahmanism could enter new areas to inculcate the values of what it perceived as the ideal society. Acculturation increasingly required that Sanskritic tradition should incorporate elements of local cultures. Although Rama did not belong to the non-brahmanical society, the development of Rāma as an incarnation of Viṣṇu can be properly understood in the backdrop of the whole theory of incarnation where the manifestation of Viṣṇu varied from animal to mythical and finally to a human form. Through these incarnations brahmanism could

⁶¹ J.C.Heesterman, *The Inner Conflicts of Tradition*, OUP, Delhi, 1985, p.42

gradually incorporate the local beliefs and cultures. Thus the *avatāra* theory functioned as a channel of assimilation and an extension of Sanskrit culture. Although the *bhakti* element of later times was absent, the *Phalaśruti* section did convey the message strongly that whoever listened to the story of Rāma would be free from his sins and would enjoy heaven. This also acted as an agent of broadening the base of Vaiṣṇavism.

Thus, the deification of Rāma served several purposes. The *Rāmāyaṇa* was not the end but the beginning of the process, a process that was to reestablish the supremacy of brahmanism from the post-Gupta period onwards. The ideals that Rāma represented and the popularity of the story helped to serve this purpose. Rāma was seen as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu who deliberately limited himself and agreed to conform to the human condition. By his perfect adaption of the human condition, he set up an example of how life should be lived. And yet, this adaptation never interfered with his essentially divine nature. However, one should never lose sight of the fact that in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma was little more than *dharma* personified. The unqualified attribution of divinity to him in the later stage appear somewhat artificial.

Conclusion

5. Conclusion

The historical significance of the process of transformation of a martial hero into an *avatāra* can be understood with greater clarity if we compare Rāma with Kṛṣṇa the central character of the other Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* and an equally popular *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. The differences in character between the two of them are as fundamental as the manner in which they have been deified and they reflect the difference in the chief concerns of the two epics.

Although it is generally acknowledged that the epic literature cannot be precisely dated, containing as it does formations that cover several centuries, scholars have generally accepted that the *Rāmāyaṇa* in its present form belongs to the period between 300 B.C and 300 A.D. and the *Mahābhārata* to the period between 400 B.C. and 400 B.C. and 400 A.D. Thus, even though in terms of the *yuga* theory, the *Mahābhārata* describes the events of a later period than the *Rāmāyaṇa*, these two texts were more or less contemporaneous of one other. The material, cultural and political pattern is somewhat simpler in the *Rāmāyaṇa* compared to that of the *Mahābhārata*. But the epics record accounts of civilized, materially affluent societies following the brahmanical norms based on *Varṇāśrama*, and loudly proclaim the need for the preservation of *dharma*. It seems therefore that there exists a lot of similarities in the material and cultural contexts of the two epics, and yet the protagonists of the two texts, despite superficial resemblances, were different from each other. Let us look at the two characters a little more closely.

The most important difference between the two seems to be that Kṛṣṇa was an *avatāra* from the very beginning and he was aware of his divine status in the *Mahābhārata*, while Rāma answered the requirements of a god and his deification was gradual. Till the very final stage of the epic Rāma was unaware of his divinity. Kṛṣṇa's birth was dramatic. Viṣṇu manifested himself as Rāma with a mission to kill Rāvaṇa and just as Kṛṣṇa was born to destroy the wicked king Kāṁsa. Rāma's divine character before his birth was known only to the gods but Kṛṣṇa's divinity was revealed to all concerned by the circumstances of his birth. Rāma in his childhood behaved as a normal, responsible if highly gifted, boy. As a child, Kṛṣṇa exhibited extraordinary powers. Kṛṣṇa's popularity was based on his miraculous exploits and that of Rāma on his ideal behaviour. Both of them helped to get rid of evils when they were young, but while Rāma's actions were heroic, Kṛṣṇa's operations were supernatural. Indeed, the exploits of young Kṛṣṇa are not recorded in the *Mahābhārata*. They appear for the first time in great detail in the *Harivaṁsa*, considered to be an adjunct of the *Mahābhārata*. But since we are not left with any doubt that these two texts describe two phases in the life of the same person, it is difficult to disassociate the Kṛṣṇa of the *Harivaṁsa* and the Kṛṣṇa of the *Mahābhārata*.

It is the awareness of Kṛṣṇa of his own divinity and the absence of it in Rāma accounts for the difference in the pattern of their respective behaviours. Rāma released Ahalyā of her curse but it does not seem as if he realised that he could do so because he was endowed with divine power. All his great achievements, such as his victory over Rāvaṇa, could be accomplished by a great warrior. It were the gods who informed Rāma about his divinity. Kṛṣṇa, on the otherhand, promised to Draupadī: "The heavens might fall, the

Himāvat might split, the earth might be rent, or the waters of the ocean may dry up, but my words that you will again reign as queen and the wives of your enemies will weep, shall never be in vain"¹. This is not merely a promise, but a prophecy which only a god can make. He revived Parikṣita, the still-born child of Uttarā. He firmly established his divine status through the exposition of the *Bhāgavad Gītā*. He told Arjuna: "You and I have passed through many births, I remember them all, you do not remember"². He said : "Whenever righteousness is on the decline, and unrighteousness is in the ascendant, I body myself forth. For the protection of the virtuous, for the extirpation of evil-doers, and for the establishment of *dharma* on a firm footing, I am born from age to age"³. He naturally informed Arjuna: "My birth and activities are divine. He, who knows this in reality is not reborn on leaving his body, but comes to me"⁴.

Kṛṣṇa exemplified the outcome of devotion to God : "whosoever seek me, even so do I approach them, for all men follow my path in every way"⁵. He who sees me present in all beings and all beings existing within me, never loses sight of me, and I never lose sight of him"⁶. Rāma, on the other hand, considered himself only as Daśarathī. He asked Brahmā: " I consider myself to be Rāma. Who then am I and where have I come from, tell me that lord"⁷. When he vowed to upset the world after Sītā's departure into the earth, Brahmā had to console him that Sītā would be reunited with him in heaven. But Kṛṣṇa

¹ *The MVH*, 3.13.117, cited in V.S. Sukhtanker, *On The Meaning of the Mahabharata*, The Asiatic Society of Bombay, p.72

² *B.G.* - 4.5

³ *B.G.* - 4.7,8

⁴ *B.G.* - 4,9

⁵ *B.G.* - 4.11

⁶ *B.G.* - 6.30

⁷ *V.R.* - 6.105-10

knew and explained that the soul was never born nor died nor did it become only after being born. For it was unborn, eternal, everlasting and ancient, even though the body was slain, the soul was not⁸. When it came to the expression of human emotions, Rāma often reacted like a normal human being, even though, being the ideal man, he controlled his emotions. But Kṛṣṇa always responded in a divine manner, because he knew from before what was to happen. He had already killed the Kauravas; Arjuna was nearly a human agent who carried out what was inevitable⁹.

The prime concern of both the epics was to demonstrate the triumph of *dharma* over *adharma*. Both Rāma and Kṛṣṇa ensured that *dharma* prevails, as it must, because *adharma* carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. But they behaved in a markedly different fashion. Rāma preferred the path of suffering as being the right way of living according to *dharma*. He never preached *dharma* but only practised it Kṛṣṇa preached and explained the subtle ways of *dharma*. Kṛṣṇa himself seldom personally intervene to establish *dharma*. Rather, he inspired others to act. He was a great teacher who taught the world *Jnanayoga*, *Karmayoga*, *Atmayoga*, *Sāṅkhyayoga*, *Brahmayoga* etc. He informed Arjuna, "There was never a time when I was not , or when you or these kings were not. Nor it is a fact that hereafter we shall all cease to be. Just as boyhood, youth and old age are attributed to the soul through this body, even so it attains another body. The wise man does not get deluded about this."¹⁰ Rāma, however, grieved the loss of his dear ones. Rāma in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, as we have seen, was essentially a human being who,

⁸ B.G.- 2.20

⁹ B.G.- 3.27

¹⁰ B.G.-2.12-13

through his seeds, enacted the brahmanical ideals of a perfect social order. Kṛṣṇa was a god who was not supposed to lead by personal example. He was the mediating agency through whom *Dharma* would be established. Yudhisthira comes closer to Rāma, but he lacked Rāma's heroic quality and is therefore not as inspiring a character.

The mention of Yudhisthira brings another crucial difference between the two epics to the fore. It is the difference in the conceptualisation of *dharma* itself. *Dharma* in the *Rāmāyana* is invested with a good deal of morality. Rāma never suffers from the kinds of moral dilemma with which the characters in the *Mahābhārata* are often afflicted. Usually Kṛṣṇa solved these moral problems either through his miraculous powers, or philosophical discourses or cunning. In neither case the reader is surprised, for Kṛṣṇa is the god. He is beyond human perception or reasoning. The morality in the *Rāmāyana* is much more flat and one dimensional. Rāma acts in accordance with the prescriptions of the *Dharmaśāstra* and is seldom called upon to explain his actions. Perhaps the only exception was the assassination of Vāli. When he beheaded Śambūka, no question was asked. This difference in apparent towards *Dharma* in the two epics arises from the fundamentally different manner in which they addressed the problem of the social crisis of the *Kali* age. Brahminism sought to solve this problem in the *Rāmāyana* by constructing an ideal son, ideal brother, ideal husband. Kṛṣṇa had no relationship with his biological parents and the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma can hardly be described as intimate. It is true that they lived and respected each other but their roles were very different. During the *Mahābhārata* war Kṛṣṇa was on the side of the *Pāṇḍavas*, but Balarāma remained neutral. Even if, Kṛṣṇa's dalliance with the Gopis' in *Vṛndāvana* forms no part of the *Mahābhārata*, his conjugal life had so little to do with the plot of the epic that it could not

possibly sense of a role model.

Rāma was above all an ideal king but Kṛṣṇa was never a king in the sense Rama was. When he became the king at Mathurā, Jarāsandha attacked him. To avoid unnecessary bloodshed, he ultimately left Mathura, migrated to with his people Dvārakā and settled there. In the *Mahābhārata* Kṛṣṇa does not appear primarily as a king; he functions more as a statesman. But even in this role, his righteousness is not above question. Duryodhana, Karṇa, Gāndhārī and others blamed Kṛṣṇa at times with good reason, for his unrighteousness actions. Rāma, as a king, was never in doubt regarding what the correct course of action is, and all his controversial decisions, such as the exile of Sītā, are always amenable to simple explanation, in accordance with the highest standard to *rājadharmā*, and are made acceptable through his personal suffering. Kṛṣṇa was much more of an enigmatic character than Rāma.

When Rāma left the earth, Brahmā welcomed him in heaven. He left behind a prosperous kingdom where *dharma* reigned supreme. Kṛṣṇa's Dvārakā, however, faced doom. The Yādavas grew sensuous and vicious. They fought against each other and all adult males of clan were wiped out these feuds, except Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma, Dārūka (Kṛṣṇa's charioteer) and Babhru. Kṛṣṇa sent his charioteer to Hastināpur with a message to Arjuna to come down to Dvārakā and look after the women and children of the Yādavas. He consoled the wailing women and children, and asked them to accompany Arjuna to Hastinapur, as Dvārakā was destined to be swallowed by the sea¹¹. Kṛṣṇa himself retired into the deep forest. When in meditation he was hit by the arrow of a

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A.D. Pusalker, *Studies in the Epics and Puranas*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1995, p.78

hunter who mistook him for deer and he passed away. The god who appeared on earth to restore *Dharma*, failed to protect his own people and died in an accident.

The contrast in the manner in which the two *avatāras* met their end is in itself a pointer to the difference in the major thrust of the two epics. Rāma accomplished his mission and went back to heaven where he finally came to terms with his true identity. Kṛṣṇa with all the awareness of being the god himself, helped to defeat the forces of evil, but he himself died a disillusioned man. The message of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is simple and direct, that of the *Mahābhārata* much more complex and involved. Both the texts upheld and propagated the brahmanical ideas in a period of transition and crisis. But while Rāma fulfilled these ideals in his own life and thus qualified to be elevated to the status of a god, Kṛṣṇa's explicit divinity from the beginning was a hindrance to his becoming a role model for men. Rāma offered to protect the brahmanical ideals on earth; Kṛṣṇa promised salvation to all who sought refuge in him. That is why Rāma's deification was a process that history helps to understand while the Kṛṣṇa who came to receive worship as an object of devotion was not the Kṛṣṇa of *Mahābhārata*, but the child god of Vṛndāvan.

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