

The Ramayana Controversy Again

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Abstract

While commenting on the recent controversy in Delhi University about A.K. Ramanujan's essay on the *Ramayana*, this short paper emphasizes the need to understand the sociological dimension of the study of India's past.

“As long as mountains and streams endure upon earth, so shall the Rama's story continue to circulate in the world.” This is how Valmiki himself, who composed the *Ur-Ramayana*, visualized the time-transcending strength of the epic story. Truly the story not only endured for two long millennia and more but, far from remaining a monolithic narration, acquired many different versions according to time, place and cultural context. But I guess that Valmiki would have hardly imagined that his story, primarily meant for ennobling human minds, will become a topic for intense academic debates, spilling over to print and electronic media.

The enthronement some years ago (2006) of A.K. Ramanujan's essay on ‘Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation’ (1992) in the curriculum of Delhi University and its removal last year (October 2011) are rather intriguing. And Rama's story is once again in the news! A full century and quarter ago Sir Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (Utgikar 1933: 362-93) underscored the need for adopting the critical, comparative and historical method of inquiry in Indological scholarship. He made a pointed reference to putting the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the Puranas under the scanner. Following Sir Ramakrishna's footsteps H.D. Sankalia (1973, 1982) and other scholars reexamined the empirical basis of the *Ramayana* epic and also sought to locate Lanka on the mainland itself. Then came up the Ayodhya dispute and, more recently, the controversy about existence of Ramasetu: both these disputes are before the Supreme Court. One must concede that in all these three cases there was a fair degree of scientific tenor in the disputes. That is, these scrutinized the availability, or lack, of empirical evidence, as obtained from historical, archaeological and geographical sources.

The controversy about Ramanujan's essay is of a different kind. The disputes here are no longer about validating empirical evidence. One suspects that the *chat-pata* or juicy components of the essay (e.g. Indra's romantic escapades with Ahalya) were a factor that influenced its inclusion in the reading list and now its withdrawal. It will be useful to undertake a survey for gauging the extent to which the professed objective of promoting the spirit of critical inquiry among students and teachers was realized.

Anyway one is struck by one or two aspects of Ramanujan's essay. First, it is a contribution in the realm of literature. Ramanujan is not marshalling any historical or archaeological or any other kind of evidence in support of or against the versions of the Rama's story he has chosen for study nor is he seeking for his essay a place in history writing. Rather the essay is a very perceptive literary analysis of certain parts of the epic story, as these were interiorized by various linguistic, cultural and ethnic groups across time. As in the case of his equally famous essay (1990) on 'Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay', Ramanujan's aim is one of highlighting the ingenuity of the Indian mind, in weaving around a specific theme multiple meaning-impregnated interpretations. Much earlier Romila Thapar (1978, 1989) drew attention to the multiple renderings of the Ramayana. Novel tellings of episodes from the epics crop up even now. For example, Sankalia (1973: 64) refers to a Pune *kirtankar's* narration in which Sita, enraged by sage Durvasa's doubts about her chastity, curses him and a hundred of his followers and turns them into women to reaffirm her purity. On receiving a proper apology she of course relents and shapes them into men again!

Secondly, Ramanujan did not intend even in a remote way to ridicule the beliefs held by people about the events or characters of the epic story. On the contrary, the concluding paragraph of his essay makes it clear that he for one recognizes that the Rama's story produces an enthralling effect on the minds of people. I imagine that he would have gladly endorsed Mircea Eliade's (1960:23) statement that all of us, at one time or another, would like to detach ourselves for a while from profane time and enter the Great or Sacred Time through the medium of myths.

So what are we to make of the hullabaloo about the *Ramayana*? To me it appears there was an overdose of enthusiasm both in prescribing Ramanujan's essay as an item in the reading list for B.A. students of history in Delhi University and in its scrapping. Neither of these acts seems to have been guided by elaborate reflection. One way of redeeming the situation is to seriously consider whether this essay as well as Ramanujan's other essay on the Indian way of thinking could be listed as readings in methodology courses for post-graduate students in literature, history/archaeology, and sociology/anthropology. Students as well as teachers would benefit by way of undertaking a critical analysis of the *raison d'être* of the changes that literary texts undergo in content and style as they travel across ethnic, cultural and linguistic boundaries in time and space. Richman (1992:16) puts the matter in these elaborate words: "It (the *Ramayana* tradition) is a multivoiced entity, encompassing tellings of the Rama story that vary according to historical period, regional literary tradition, religious affiliation, genre, intended audience, social location, gender, and political context". In a large measure this is also true of the other great epic of India, the *Mahabharata* (e.g., Karve 1962). Still there is enormous scope to understand the whys and hows of the numerous versions which these two texts gave rise to across centuries and far-flung regions.

This brings us to another important lacuna in our historical studies. There is a need to enlarge our debates beyond academic cloisters and metropolitan boundaries and take these to the society at large. Nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru did peep in their own way into this sociological dimension and realized that the Indian psyche is imbued with a deep sense of the past. As I pointed out elsewhere, academic custodians of the past stand to learn

much about the working of the Indian mind by way of probing into the sources and content of the past that is prevalent among the literate and non-literate sections of the population and the uses (beneficial and baneful) it is put to (Paddayya 2011).

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