

Who is Afraid of the Ramayana?

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THE ACADEMIC COUNCIL OF Delhi University in its collective wisdom with nine dissents decided to remove from the recommended readings for BA history course, A K Ramanujan's article "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (originally published in 1991 and reprinted as part of his Collected Essays in 1999). The AC explicitly chose to go against the recommendation of the History Department and three out of four experts whose opinion had been sought. It was also learnt subsequently that Oxford University Press, the publishers of the Collected Essays, had withdrawn the book as far back as 2003, in view of the fact that it hurts the sentiments of some sections of the Indian population.

On the face of it Ramanujan states what is very widely known and even commonsensical to a large extent. In fact there is a legion of great scholars who have written much about this issue. Fr Camille Bulcke published his monumental work on the *Ramakatha* way back in 1940 and V Raghavan, a very respected and orthodox Sanskrit scholar edited a volume on *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia* based on an international seminar held in 1975.

Ramanujan points out what should be self-evident to anyone familiar with the Ramayana tradition that there are thousands of renderings of the story of Rama, Sita and Ravana and that each rendering (or telling as he terms it) is distinct in that it uses the story to say something new or different.

"Story may be the same in two tellings but the discourse may be vastly different. Even the structure and sequence of events may be the same but the style, details, tone and texture—and therefore the import—may be vastly different."

In this essay he seeks to explore "how these hundreds of tellings of a story in different cultures, languages, and religious traditions relate to each other : what gets translated, transplanted, transposed."

The essay actually is not an exhaustive survey or listing of these issues. In fact it has a stimulating quality in that it only hints at several possibilities leaving the reader to pursue some of them. There are influences of regional literary genre and religious traditions like Bhakti to be seen in Kampan's *Ramavataram* ; political reading as in South East Asian *Ramakien* with its focus on war; psychological dimensions (Oedipus complex in the Ravana-Sita relationship), the Kannada folk rendering by 'untouchable bards' which keep focusing on the tragic travails of Sita, rationalist and humanist rendering by Jainas which instead of vilifying Ravana portray him as a pious, noble, learned and wise person led astray by uncontrollable passion.

After these examples of possibilities Ramanujan moves on to discuss the three ways in which an original text like that of Valmiki could be 'translated'; the iconic which seeks to remain

faithful to the original, the indexical in which the new text is embedded in its context, incorporates it and can't be understood without it and third, symbolic which the text can invert or counter the original text it is seeking to translate. "The Rama story has become almost a second language of the whole culture area, a shared core of names, characters, incidents, and motifs with a narrative language in which Text 1 can say one thing and text 2 something else, even the exact opposite." Further he says—"the culture area has a pool of signifiers that include plots, characters, names, geography, incidents and relationships.... These various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallisation, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context."

Ramanujan concludes the essay with an unexpected twist—he turns from the telling of Ramayana to its listening. He uses a folk tale on listening to a discourse of Ramayana; "this story is about the power of the Ramayana, about what happens when you really listen to it. Even a fool cannot resist it; he is entranced and caught up in the action. The listener can no longer bear to be a bystander, but feels compelled to enter the world of the epic: the line between fiction and reality is erased."

One may wonder what is it that even a narrow minded reader could find objectionable in this essay. Is it because of his quotation from Valmiki and Kampan which talk of the sexuality of the Rishis and Gods? Or is it because he cites Jaina version extolling Ravana? Or is it simply because the head of the history department at that time happened to be a Muslim?

While it is difficult to unravel the mindset of the bigoted one can indicate some points which may be disturbing to them. This in some ways relates to the erasure of the line between fiction and reality—the fact that Ramanujan inverts this erasure.

Ramanujan was no historian and his main area of interest lay in literature and cultural studies around them. He thus does not seek to explain the different tellings of the Ramayana by going into their class or historical settings. On the other hand he opens up a new possibility in culture studies and comparative literature. Hitherto even historians were lost in trying to examine the historicity of Ramayana—whether it actually happened, if so where and trying to look for archeological finds to corroborate their theories. The saner historians abandoned this project in favour of treating the Ramayana as a 'source of information' of periods when it was composed. This being very problematic—it is not possible to determine the period and location of its composition—did not deter them from using different 'layers' of the text. The regional Ramayanas were similarly treated as 'sources of information' of the concerned period and region. It is for this reason that this essay of Ramanujan was seldom used in teaching history.

Ramanujan went beyond seeking 'facts' from the texts. He looked at Ramayana as a language whose syntax and lexicon was used by diverse and even rival traditions/communities to articulate their own ideas and concerns and explore meanings in their own contexts. What turns out to be disturbing is this conversion of the Ramayana from a factual account of actual events that took place at a point of time and space and an articulation of a normative vision of

the world into a mere set of symbols and motifs. A language used by diverse peoples for diverse purposes including questioning the normative patriarchal, casteist, hierarchical order. He thus inverted the fact-nonfact dichotomy into which the communal and even the secular discourse has been locked. The communities, societies and social groups which are 'telling' the Ramayana are really entering into the world of the text and actively shaping it and in doing so are shaping their own real lives and struggles.

This places the epic squarely in the hands of the people who are rendering and listening to it—transformed into a potent weapon with no single control over it.

The fight to restore the essay in the reading list and to bring it back into print is therefore really a fight for the weapons of the weak and the poor and in equal measure the fight of diverse regions and cultures for their own identity against centralising and standardising tendencies.

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