

## **Chapter III**

# **Influence of *The Ramayana* on Indian Thought and Culture**

*Many know the story. Few know its meaning – Tamil folk narrative*

## Chapter III

### Influence of *The Ramayana* on Indian Thought and Culture

#### 3.1 Valmiki Ramayana as the Most Authoritative Telling

The story of The Ramayana, what we call Ramakatha extends over a huge historical period. Many versions and variants of this story exist. The Valmiki Ramayana has seven Kandas or parts and 2400 shlokas or verses. The epic is four times the length of *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined. Ever since its original composition in Sanskrit by Valmiki – possibly over 3000 years ago, it has grown to be an all-pervasive and hugely loved part of Indian life and ethos. The appeal of the epic has been timeless. For most of the Indians, this is not just ancient mythology for an academic discussion, but their own current religious beliefs.

According to both, Ramanujan and Romila Thapar, Ramayana tellings take shape in particular contexts. The version and the tellings may be influenced by the beliefs of individual religious communities, the literary conventions and regional cultures and the specific configurations of social relations. The story of Ram has been told hundreds of times in diverse ways. The writers have expressed how they perceived and interpreted the narrative in light of their own time in history, place in society, literary inclinations, religious beliefs and

commitments along with political and social views. The additions and the variations reflect the perspectives of the period of composition. Therefore, the collective term 'The Ramayana Tradition' is used referring to the diverse sets of tellings that present the story of Ram in different languages, styles and mediums. Many modern writers have chosen to rewrite the stories from The Ramayana tradition. The folklore Scholar Ramanujan once called The Ramayana tradition a second language, as Indians have always turned to the ancient story of The Ramayana for language to articulate their day to day experiences. The characters in the epic have been shaped as the archetypes in course of time and are still alive in the Indian social life.

Within The Ramayana tradition, Valmiki Ramayana has earned a greater prestige, influence and authority than all other versions and renditions of the story. Valmiki's Ramayana is venerated as the 'Primordial' story and assessed as the foundational manuscript. The great status of the epic can also be attributed to its antiquity. The epic has gained respect for its literary qualities also. According to Indian tradition, this epic belongs to the genre of *Itihasa* (like the *Mahabharata*), as one definition of *Itihasa* is a narrative of past events which includes teachings on the goals of human life. Valmiki's Ramayana, in this sense, explores human values and the concepts of *Dharma*.

The epic tends to affirm the values of the social order of its day and emphasizes the performing of one's assigned duties including those to spouse, parents, elder brother, lineage, master, ruler and the kingdom. Valmiki's Ramayana is the first full literary text of Ramakatha in Sanskrit. The epic is also described as preeminent historical, religious and aesthetic authority. It is the most authoritative telling of the story of Rama in India. Paula Richman says,

*The phrase authoritative telling of Ramakatha refers to the texts that share three characteristics: first, they espouse normative ideologies of ranked social hierarchy, second, they are influential beyond the temporal and geographical context in which they were written, continuing to be respected, studied and transmitted, centuries after their composition. Third, they have gained recognition as privileged texts.*

(Richman Paula, 2008:9)

Sanskrit is lauded as the sacred language in ancient Indian tradition. The story of Ram is written in various literary genres in Sanskrit. Scholars have made an estimate of more than twenty-five Sanskrit renditions of Ramakatha. But Valmiki's Ramayana is the most influential literary work which has influenced all the later versions, variants, telling and renditions. All the stories of Ram that come after Valmiki's Ramayana, take Ram's dignity as a starting point for their tale.

Considering the reasons stated above, the researcher thought it appropriate to refer to Valmiki's Ramayana for summarizing the story of Ram.

*The Ramayana* is the journey (*Ayana*) of Ram. Valmiki's Ramayana narrates the journey of virtue to annihilate vice with Ram as the hero. The narration in the epic begins with how Valmiki came to be a great sage. Valmiki saw a Krounch, a crane couple mating on the banks of Tamasa River. He was pleased to see the happiness of the birds. Suddenly hit by an arrow, the male bird died on the spot. Filled with sorrow, the female bird screamed in agony and died of shock. Valmiki's heart melted at the sight of the death of mating birds. He saw a hunter with a bow and arrows nearby. Spontaneously in his intense wrath and sorrow, Valmiki cursed the hunter. Valmiki's curse emerged from his lips in a perfect metrical form called 'Anushtup Chhanda' with the blessings of Lord Brahma:

मा निषाद प्रतिष्ठां त्वं अगमः शाश्वतीः समाः

यत्क्रौंचमिथुनादेकं अवधीः काममोहितम्

(You will find no rest for the long years of eternity, as

you have killed an unsuspecting bird in love.)

This was the first shloka in Sanskrit literature and also of The Ramayana. Thus the shloka originated from Valmiki's *shoka* or sorrow about the separation of lovers. This shloka is revered as 'first *shloka*' and Valmiki is revered as the first poet, 'Adikavi'. The Ramayana is the

journey of virtue for annihilation of vice and also 'Kavya' of the inevitability of separation. Loss of Krouncha bird's mate prefigures narrative art of Ramakatha since its overall story recounts the separation of Ram and Sita and their consequent suffering.

The name of the bird, Krouncha, since then has come to be a metonym for the separation of lovers and the creation of poetry. The separation of the male and female is considered the most poignant of love in Indian poetry and it is the most intense sentiment. The Ramayana becomes one of the founding epics and a masterpiece of Indian literature, which tells the story of exemplary life of Ram and Sita.

Scholars have done a meticulous and painstaking comparison of manuscripts and manuscript traditions. They have separated the verses and passages that were composed at a date later than the bulk of the text. They are regarded by the scholars as 'interpolations' or additions to the main text.

Though the story is retold many times, it is quite interesting to know that each retelling is integrally linked to the source, though it differs in certain aspects from the source. All the retellings are linked to the mythic origins of the text. The epic has tended to be both organic and dynamic because of the constant retellings and reconstructions. Almost every Indian language has to its credit its own retelling of Ramayana. The epic has become central to the cultural consciousness of India.

### **3.2 The Gist of *The Ramayana* Story**

#### **1. Bala Kanda**

The celestial sage Narada narrates the sacred tale of the life of Ramachandra, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu, to Valmiki. Valmiki earns the gift of composing poetry, by the boon of Brahma. Valmiki transforms himself as a saint from a dacoit, Ratnakar and becomes the first poet. When Valmiki witnesses the death of a male *Krouncha* bird while mating with its companion, hit by the arrow of a hunter, he almost unwittingly composes the first shloka of poetry in world literature. Instructed by Brahma, the creator, Valmiki writes *The Ramayana*, the story of the life of Ram, the perfect ideal man on the earth.

King Dasharatha of the Ikshwaku dynasty in Ayodhya had three queens – Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi, but had no sons. The king had handed over his only daughter Shanta to be adopted by his friend Lompad. Shanta was married to the ascetic Rishyashringa with whose help Dasharatha performed a *yagna*, to get sons. Dasharatha was blessed with four sons. Koushalya gave birth to Ram, Kaikeyi gave birth to Bharatha, and Sumitra got twin sons Lakshman and Shatrugna.

The great sage Vishwamitra visited Dasharatha's court to take Ram and Lakshman with him to kill the demons, Subahu and Marich. Though King Dasharatha was unwilling to send his young sons, on sage

Vashistha's advice agrees to send Ram and Lakshman with him. On the way Ram killed the demon Taraka. Ram killed the demon Subahu who was disrupting the rituals in Vishwamitra's hermitage. Marich was flung eight hundred miles away into the sea hit by Ram's *Manavastra*.

Sage Vishwamitra takes Ram and Lakshman to Mithila where King Janaka ruled. While entering Mithila, Ram freed Ahalya of the curse of Sage Gautama, her husband. Ahalya had become invisible by the curse of her husband Gautama. She was invisible to all except Ram. Ahalya's penance of many thousand years had turned her into a goddess. After being relieved from the curse, she was visible to Vishwamitra and Lakshman as well. The two brothers paid respects to Ahalya and continued their journey towards Mithila.

Janaka, the king of Mithila, had an adopted daughter. Janaka had found her while ploughing the fields. The mark made by the plough is known as Sita. So King Janaka had named the girl as Sita. Vishwamitra tells the brothers about the special *Yagna* organized by King Janaka at Mithila and about the huge bow Haradhanu which belonged to Shiva, and was now remaining with Janaka. Janaka had announced that whoever was able to string the bow on the Haradhanu, could marry Sita.

Ram broke the Haradhanu and Sita garlanded him accepting him as her husband. King Janaka's younger daughter Urmila was married to Lakshman. Mandavi and Shrutakirti, the daughters of Janaka's

brother Kushadhwaj, were married to Bharata and Shatrugna respectively. After the marriage ceremony was over, Dasharatha set out for Ayodhya with his four sons and daughters in law. Vishwamitra returned to the Himalayas to resume his penance. On the way they had an encounter with Parashurama, son of the great sage Jamadagni, who boasted that no one would be able to string his 'Vishnudhanu'. Ram humbled Parashurama's pride. Parashurama recognised that Ram is Lord Vishnu himself.

## **2. Ayodhya Kanda**

People of Ayodhya loved Ram for his virtues. Preparations began for Ram's coronation as the crown prince of Ayodhya. King Dasharatha's beloved queen Kaikeyi had a maid, a hunch backed woman called Manthara. Manthara poisoned Kaikeyi's mind. Manthara reminded Kaikeyi of the two boons given to Kaikeyi by Dasharath. Kaikeyi now demanded the earlier promised boons from Dasharath. According to the first boon, Kaikeyi's son Bharata was to be the crown prince of Ayodhya and according to the second boon, Ram would have to go into exile for fourteen years.

Ram, the ideal son, honoured his father King Dasharatha's promise and decided to go into exile for fourteen years. Lakshman, the loving and ideal brother and Ram's devoted wife Sita accompanied Ram. Dasharath died pining for Ram.

At this time, Bharata and Shatrughna were in their uncle's house, in Kekaya. They were oblivious of the happenings in Ayodhya. When they returned to Ayodhya, they came to know what had happened. Bharata rebuked his mother and rejected the proposal of being crowned as king of Ayodhya. He went to Chitrakoot in the forest, along with his mothers and Sumantra, Many Brahmins, priests, ministers and a large army accompanied Bharata. Many people from Ayodhya also joined them to bring back Ram to Ayodhya. Bharata held his elder Ram's feet, wept and requested him to take over the reins of the kingdom. But Ram did not consent to return. Bharata carried Ram's sandals on his head, went back to Ayodhya, placed them on the throne and looked after the affairs of the kingdom of Ayodhya as Ram's representative.

### **3. Aranya Kanda**

Ram, Sita and Lakshman proceeded to Dandaka forest (Dandakaranya). Ram killed the *demon* Viradh, who was a cursed Gandharva. Ram killed him and freed him of his curse on the advice of saint Agastya. Ram Lakshman and Sita went to Panchavati. On the way to Panchavati, they met king Dasharatha's friend, the giant bird Jatayu.

Shurpanakha was the Sister of Ravan, king of Lanka. After seeing the charming figure of Ram, Shurpanakha, who had the powers to transform herself in any form, appeared before Ram as a beautiful

woman and asked Ram to marry her. When Ram refused, she made advances towards Lakshman. Lakshman cut off her nose and ears.

Furious Shurpanakha rushed to her brother Ravan and narrated what happened to her. To take revenge on Ram and Lakshmana, Ravan sent Khar, Dushan and Trishira, the three demon warriors to Panchavati. Ram killed the demons. Ravan planned to abduct Sita, on the advice of the demon Akampan. Ravan approached the demon Marich, who was living in Dandaka forest in the guise of a hermit. Marich did not approve of the plan of Ravan to abduct Sita. He requested Ravan to abandon the plan of abducting Sita. Ravan returned to Lanka. Shurpanakha was restless. She provoked Ravan to execute the plan of abducting Sita. Ravan went to Dandaka forest again to meet Marich. Marich was scared of Ravan and in his helplessness, agreed to help in the plan of abduction of Sita. According to Ravan's orders, Marich disguised himself as an illusory golden deer (Maya Mriga) and roam about in Panchavati. Sita was fascinated by the sight of the golden deer. She made a capricious demand of possessing the deer.

Ram went in search of the golden deer. When pierced by Ram's arrow, the deer called out mimicking Ram's voice, crying in pain. Sita feared that Ram was in danger and asked Lakshman to go into the forest to rescue Ram. Lakshman tried in vain to explain to Sita that the voice was one of trickery, done for deception. Sita was stubborn. She even hurt Lakshman with her harsh words. Lakshman could not bear

Sita's insinuations and went to look for Ram. Ravan appeared before Sita in the guise of a hermit, and abducted Sita and carried her to Lanka in his flying chariot.

On the way, Jatayu the big bird, who was then sixty thousand years old, had an encounter with Ravan. Jatayu tried to dissuade Ravan in polite terms, but in vain. A fierce battle ensued between them. Ravan cut off Jatayu's wings. Ram and Lakshman began their frenzied search for Sita and came across the dying Jatayu, who told about the sad event. On the way, Ram killed Kabandha demon. Kabandha, while dying, gave news of Sugreev. Kabandha was relieved of his curse. According to the advice of Kabandha, Ram and Lakshman proceeded towards Rishyamuk mountains to meet Sugriva. On the way, they visited the hermitage of Shabari, the old woman ascetic, who was counting her days and waiting for Ram. The hermitage was on the banks of the lake Pampa. Shabari's long wait came to an end when Ram and Lakshman visited her.

#### **4. Kishkindha Kanda**

Sugreev was the exiled king of the monkeys. Sugreev's brother Vali had ousted Sugreev from his kingdom and had forcibly married Sugreev's wife Ruma. Ram and Lakshman met Hanuman. Ram made friendship with Sugreev. He promised Sugreev that he would kill Sugreev's elder brother Vali and return Sugreev's kingdom and wife to him. Sugreev promised that he in turn, would help to rescue Sita from

Ravan's clutches. Ram kept his word by killing Vali. Sugreev got back his wife Ruma. Angad, Vali's son got information regarding Sita's whereabouts from Jatayu's brother Sampati. Hanuman became a great devotee of Ram. It was decided that Hanuman would go to Lanka in search of Sita. Sugreev ordered Hanuman to gather an army of monkeys from around the world. The army went to look for Sita.

### **5. Sundar Kanda**

Hanuman was powerful, knowledgeable, wise and intelligent. Sugreev called him a great warrior. Ram understood that Hanuman was the greatest amongst the monkeys. Ram gave Hanumana ring with his name engraved on it and asked Hanuman to show Sita the ring, So that she would understand that Hanuman was Ram's representative. Hanuman touched Ram's feet and began his journey.

Hanuman gave a massive leap from the peak of the Mahendra Mountain. Then with a single jump, he crossed the sea into Lanka. He landed in the Lamba mountains, covered with coconut and other trees. From there, he got a glimpse of the magnificent kingdom of Ravan which looked liked Indra's Amarvati. When dusk fell, Hanuman shrunk his body to the size of a cat's and entered Lanka.

Wandering around Lanka, Hanuman reached Ravan's palace. Hanuman was amazed to see the luxury of Ravan's Lanka and his palace. The doors of houses were made of gold and the steps of blue sapphire. The kingdom of Lanka was built by Vishwakarma himself.

After a long search, Hanuman found Sita in the Ashoka forest, beneath a big Simsupa tree, surrounded by ferocious demonesses. Hanuman introduced himself as the son of the god of wind and the messenger of Ram. He gave her the ring with Ram's name engraved on it. Sita believed him then. She took out an ornament from the fold of her *saree* and gave to Hanuman to pass it on to Ram.

Ravan came to know about Hanuman. He sent eighty thousand fierce soldiers to punish Hanuman. But Hanuman killed them all. Indrajit, Ravan's bravest son, captured Hanuman and took him to Ravan's court. As punishment, Hanuman's tail was set on fire. Hanuman burnt the city of Lanka with his flaming tail. Hanuman returned to Ram with the assurance of rescuing Sita. Ram and Lakshman were now certain of rescuing Sita from the clutches of Ravan.

## **6. Lanka Kanda**

Ravan's pious brother Vibhishan tried to dissuade Ravan and implored him to return Sita to Ram. Ravan refused to return Sita to Ram and insulted Vibhishana. Vibhishan joined hands with Ram.

Nal, the engineer of the monkeys, took up the task of building a bridge across the sea to Lanka with the help of monkeys and bears. They used enormous blocks of stone and large trees. Ravan came to know about it. Under Nal's leadership, the army of monkeys built a bridge almost eight hundred miles long and eighty miles wide.

Vibhishan helped them by guarding the bridge on the side of Lanka with his four trusted bodyguards with directions from Ram. The large army of monkeys and bears rushed towards Lanka. The war began.

Many brave demons gave their lives in the battle. Brave demons were killed by Ram, Lakshman and monkey warriors. Ravan's son Indrajit fought courageously with his wonderous powers, even fought from behind the clouds. Indrajit used serpentine coils to overpower Ram and Lakshman. Hearing this news, Garuda, the arch enemy of the snakes rushed to the battle field. All the snakes slithered away immediately with fear. Ram and Lakshman were freed from serpentine coils and they regained consciousness.

Now Ravan himself came to the battle field, accompanied by his great warriors, along with his son Indrajit. Many warriors joined him. Hanuman's blows made Ravan fall unconscious. Lakshman collapsed because of Ravan's power. Ravan's brother Kumbhakarna was aroused with great efforts to fight Ram's army but he was killed.

The next day, Indrajit came to battle, hurt Ram and Lakshman with his arrows and made them unconscious. Hanuman went to bring specific herbs for medicines and brought the whole mountain. Ram, Lakshman and all other injured monkey warriors recovered with the aroma of the medicines. Following Vibhishan's advice, Lakshman killed the unarmed Indrajit.

Now Ravan himself came to fight with Ram and Lakshman. Ravan's shaktishell shattered the chest of Lakshman. The physician of the monkeys, Susen, saved Lakshman's life with the help of medicinal herbs from Gandhamadan Mountain. A furious battle ensued between Ravan and Ram. As soon as Ram cut off Ravan's head, another head would grow back. Ram at last used Brahmastra and killed Ravan.

Vibhishan was crowned king of Lanka. Sita had to undergo a fire ordeal, as she had lived in Ravan's place for so long, to prove her chastity. Sita determined to sacrifice herself to the fire. But Agni, the fire god carried Sita in his lap and returned her to Ram declaring that Sita was pure and was the very epitome of chastity. Fourteen years had elapsed by now.

Ram returned to Ayodhya in Pushpak chariot with Sita and Lakshman. Ayodhya celebrated this happy event. Ram was crowned as the king of Ayodhya.

## **7. Uttara Kanda**

Ram ruled over his kingdom happily. But rumours amongst some wicked subjects regarding Queen Sita reached Ram. They criticized Ram for taking back his wife Sita who was imprisoned in Ravan's palace for so long. Ram decided to renounce his pregnant wife Sita to maintain the reputation of his family as he knew that it was his duty as the king to respect people's opinions. Ram ordered Lakshman to take

Sita to the 'ashram' of Sage Valmiki on the banks of river Tamasa. Sage Valmiki gave shelter to Sita in his hermitage where she gave birth to twin sons, Kush and Lav.

Ram organized Ashwamedh yajna. Lav and Kush were taken to the place of Ashwamedha yagna by Valmiki, where they sang the songs of The Ramayana composed by Valmiki. Valmiki told Ram that Lav and Kush were his sons.

Sita was once again asked to undergo fire ordeal to prove her chastity but she felt it was against her dignity. Angry and humiliated Sita decided to renounce her life on the earth. She returned to her mother, Mother Earth.

One day Brahma's messenger, Kalapurush came to Ram and said that he had something say to Ram but no third person could enter the room when he was talking to Ram. Ram ordered Lakshman to strictly guard the door. But at this juncture, Durvasa, the well known temperamental sage came to meet Ram. He threatened Lakshman that he would curse everyone if he was not taken to Ram instantly. To save everyone from Durvasa's curse Lakshman decided to take the risk. In order to keep his promise, Ram abandoned Lakshman. Lakshman went to the banks of Sarayu River and sitting in yogic stance stopped breathing. Indra carried him to heaven in his full bodily form.

Ram, overwhelmed with grief, made Lav the King of North Koshal, and Kush of South Koshal. He surrendered his mortal life in River Sarayu. Bharata and Shatrughna also followed Ram. The Ramayana ends here.

### **3.3 Indian Versions of *The Ramayana***

The story of the epic Ramayana has been very enthusiastically adopted by the literatures of virtually every language of modern India. It has been one of the major springs of poetry, painting, folklore, puppet theatre in many languages and cultures of India.

The popularity of *The Ramayana* has been such that it has crossed not only the boundaries of caste, religion and language but even those that divide major cultural areas. It has spread to many Asian countries outside India including Burma, Indonesia, Cambodia and China. Depending on the methods of counting, three hundred to as many as thousands of versions of *The Ramayana* are known to exist. The essence of Valmiki's Ramayana has been expressed in diverse array of regional cultures and artistic mediums.

The rendering of the epic in different languages have enriched The Ramayana tradition. The noteworthy examples are:

1. The Ramayana by Kamban in 12<sup>th</sup> century 'Iramavataram'
2. Telugu 'Ranganatha Ramayana' by Buddha Reddi in 13<sup>th</sup> century.
3. Assamese 'Kotha Ramayana' by Madhav Kandali in 14<sup>th</sup> century

4. Oriya 'Dandi Ramayana' by Balram Das in 15<sup>th</sup> century.
5. Kannada 'Torave Ramayana' by Narahari in 15<sup>th</sup> century. There is another version in Kannada titled 'Ramachandra Charita Purana' by Nagachandra in 13<sup>th</sup> century.
6. Bengali Ramayana 'Krittivas Ramayana' by Krittivas Oza in 15<sup>th</sup> century.
7. Malayalam 'Adhyatma Ramayana' by Ezhutha Chan in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
8. Hindi 'Ram Charita Manasa' by Goswami Tulasidas in 16<sup>th</sup> century.
9. Marathi 'Bhavartha Ramayana' by Eknath in 16<sup>th</sup> century.
10. Punjabi 'Gobinda Ramayana' by Guru Gobind singh in 17<sup>th</sup> Century
11. Kashmiri Ramayana by Divakar Prakash Bhatt in 18<sup>th</sup> century
12. Gujarati 'Giridhar Ramayana' by Giridhardas in 19<sup>th</sup> century
13. Tulu 'Mandara Ramayana' by Marathi poet Mandara Keshav Bhat. Kannada Translation of 'Mandara Ramayana' by the same poet is published by Sahitya Akademy in 2001

### **3.4 Contemporary Versions**

1. Ramayana Darshanam in Kannada by Kuvempu (Kuvempu got Jnanapith Award for this work).
2. Telugu 'Ramayana Kalpavrikshamu' by Vishwanath Satyanarayana in (Vishwanath Satyanarayana got Jnanapith Award for this work)

3. 'Geet Ramayana' in Marathi by G. D. Madgulkar. This version was rendered in music by Sudhir Phadke. This is considered as masterpiece of Marathi literature.

4. The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version Of The Indian Epic, by R K Narayan

5. Ashok Bankar, a modern Indian author has written six English novels based on Ramayana.

6. Ramesh Menon wrote a single volume edition of The Ramayana which is highly praised by the scholars.

7. Martin Buckley's Ramayana based on Travelogue 'Indian Odyssey' is published by Random house London.

8. In September 2006, the first issue of 'Ramayana 3392 AD' was published by Virgin Comics featuring The Ramayana as re-envisioned by author Deepak Chopra and film maker Shekhar Kapur.

9. P. Lal's *The Ramayana of Valmiki* (condensed from Sanskrit and transcreated into English, published in 1989)

The Ramayana has been adopted on screen as the television serial 'Ramayana' by producer Ramanand Sagar, based primarily on the 'Ram Charit Manas' by Tulasidas and Valmiki Ramayana. It was highly successful and phenomenally popular epic television series created by Ramanand Sagar. The impact of the epic is so deep that it has inspired poets to compose the epic again and again in their own languages, with the stamp of their personalities on it. The Indian mind has accepted the epic at different levels; as legends of great interest and also the

masterpiece of literary composition. Subtler meanings can be discerned while interpreting each episode of *The Ramayana*.

The retellings and versions, though they follow Valmiki's Ramayana, are different in content and interpretations. Tulasidas's Hindi *Ramcharit Manas*, in Avadhi language and Kamban's Tamil masterpiece *Ramavataram* are still regarded as great pieces in the literary traditions of important languages. Tulsidas's Ramayana exercises a great influence on the masses in north India and the same is true with Kamban's Ramayana in the South.

Telugu version of The Ramayana by Vishwanath Satyanarayana (Ramayana Kalpavrikshamu) and K. V. Puttappa's Kannada 'Ramayana Darshanam' have won *Jnanapeetha* awards.

### **3.5 Influence of *The Ramayana* on Indian Thought and Culture**

No great classic has nourished the Indians generation after generation as richly as the epic Ramayana. The universality of The Ramayana has no parallel in the history of literature. The epic Ramayana by Valmiki was the first to enter the world of literature. Eventually it became part of the world literature. The epic has laid the foundation of the Indian way of life. The philosophical, moral and spiritual essence of the epic has sustained people of India through the changing times as a perennial spring. The comprehensive, moral, cultural and philosophic codes still exist in India as 'living tradition'. Very few literary works produced anywhere at any time in the cultural

history, have influenced the life and culture of a people as The Ramayana. The legends of The Ramayana have become a part of people's consciousness and have influenced the value system of not only the educated elite but also of the illiterate, thereby defining their culture.

Down the ages, the Indian psyche is moulded and transformed by the mythological legendary tales. As Meenaxi Mukherjee writes,

*“The Indian people are still closer to their mythology than the Celtic folklore or Greek legends.”*

(Mukherjee Meenaxi 1974:131)

The underlying messages that *The Ramayana* seeks to convey are the ideals, particularly in relation to duty, morality and social responsibility. *The Ramayana* is the delineation of life's softer emotions, presenting an idealized world. The simple family relations like the relations between father and son, brother and brother, husband and wife are raised to such an ideal height as to become the subject of an epic. Loving brothers are still Ram-Lakshman, ideal couple is still Ram-Sita and the exile (vanavasa) and the *Lakshmanrekha* carry a weight of meaning which is proverbial in sense. Ram is a model for human behaviour. He is the perfect man, an ideal toward which ordinary mortals should strive. Ram has come to be regarded in India as the great exemplar of devoted monogamous married love. A true son

and 'ideal man,' who subordinates the goals of his own life to those of his father. He is the ideal of self control. Sita is an icon of single-minded devotion for her husband, of purity and self sacrifice. The epic has lessons in the presentation of motives, actions and reactions. They are applicable for all times and all human conditions of life. Ravan, for example, is a metaphor for evil who can be discerned in the areas of military, politics, economics as well as in the small units of family. We come across Ram as striving to fight Ravan, the 'evil' and to establish peace and protect justice. *The Ramayana* is a story of annihilation of evil, the ultimate triumph of the good, the inevitability of separation and exiles, quest for perfection and a struggle to establish ideals of life.

*The Ramayana* has become a living element in the lives of Indians, ever pulling even the unread masses up from the drudgery and the ugliness of their everyday existence to higher realms pointing towards a righteous living.

Michelet, the French historian, writing in 1864 with special reference to *The Ramayana*, as quoted by Nehru, says,

*Whoever has done or willed too much, let him drink from this deep cup a long draught of life and youth... Everything is narrow in the west – Greece is small and I stifle; Judea is dry and I pant. Let me look towards lofty Asia and the profound east for a little while. There lies my great poem, as vast the Indian Ocean, blessed, glided with the sun, the book of divine harmony where in is no dissonance. A serene peace reigns there*

*and in the midst of conflict an infinite sweetness, a boundless fraternity, which spreads over all living things, an ocean (without bottom or bound) of love, of pity, of clemency.*

(Nehru 2010:105)

Jawaharlal Nehru says,

*I do not know of any books anywhere which have exercised such a continuous and pervasive influence on the mass mind, and these two, Ramayana and Mahabharata are still a living force in the life of the Indian people.*

(Nehru 2010:99)

Through the millennia of its popularity, *The Ramayana* has attracted the interest of many kinds of people from different social, economic, educational and religious backgrounds. The Ramayana has served as a bedtime story for countless generations of Indian children and, at the same time, intellectuals, thinkers, social reformers and philosophers steeped in metaphysical subtleties of classical Indian thought have found it a subject worthy of their intellectual energies. Great men like Aurobindo, Pandit Nehru, Gandhiji, C. Rajagopalachari, Radhakrishnan and many others during the pre-independence period were highly influenced and inspired by the ideals of Ramayana.

According to Sri Aurobindo, the epics of India incorporate a great deal of moral and ethical content. He wrote:

*A profound stress of thought on life, a large and vital view of religion and society, a certain strain of philosophical idea runs through these poems and the whole ancient culture of India is embodied in them with a great force of intellectual conception and living presentation*

(Aurobindo <http://intyoga.online.fr/indlit>).

Sri Aurobindo writes on in his book *Foundation of Indian Culture*:

*All the characters are intensely real, human and alive to the Indian mind. The idealism of characters like Ram, Sita is no pale and vapid unreality, they are vivid with the truth of the ideal life.*

*These epics are therefore not a mere mass of untransmuted legend and folklore, but a highly artistic representation of intimate significances of life, the living presentation of a strong and noble thinking, a developed ethical and aesthetic mind and a high social and political ideal, the ensouled image of a great culture. The Indian epic poems were fashioned to serve a greater and a completer national and cultural function and that they should have been received and absorbed by both the high and the low, the cultured and the masses and remained through centuries, an intimate and formative part of the life of the whole nation, is of itself the strongest possible evidence of the greatness and fineness of this ancient Indian culture.*

(Sri Aurobindo 1990:282-293)

Gandhiji regarded The Ramayana as the greatest book in all devotional literature. He articulated it as a metaphor for spiritual experience and vision of Ramraj that was rooted in fervent devotion to it and often explained his own political activities by referring to The Ramayana narrative. Ramraj was not only Swaraj but also 'Dharmaraj'. The concept of 'Dharmaraj' was something higher than the concept of political emancipation. 'Dharma' meant righteousness, truth and justice. He made citations from Tulsidas Ramayana whenever he addressed the public. These citations sometimes helped him in the times of crisis. When he addressed a meeting of untouchables in 1925, he made a mention of Ram's compassion for the lowly.

*You might be acquainted, if you have known Tulsidas's Ramayana, with the fact that Ramachandra, Sita and Lakshman had very affectionately embraced the untouchable Guha, and I want to see the same repeated once again in India. I would therefore appeal to Hindus of the higher castes present here, that if they call themselves Sanatan Dharmi, if they love the cow, they should not hate members of the untouchable classes*

(M K Gandhi, *Collected Works* 1928:179)

The notion of Ramraj is a recurring theme in his discourse. Sita was Gandhiji's model woman to be emulated, as Sita had an infinite capacity for suffering, associated with self sacrifice, chastity and moral power. Such qualities could inspire men with higher notions.

Gandhiji had felt the need to integrate Indian's past with enlightened values and notions adopted by the Indian national congress. He tapped the powerful symbol of 'Sita, when he gave a call to the women of India, to join the struggle for freedom. In fighting for their rights, however, Gandhiji wanted the women of India not to imitate the west, but to apply methods suited to the Indian genius and Indian environment.

*"It is from Sita, Draupadi, Savitri and Damayanti and not amazons and prudes that women today can derive strength and guidance for heroic conduct".*

(*Young India* Oct 17, 1929)

He wrote,

*God had endowed women with great power. If women resolve to bring glory to the nation, within a few months they can totally change the face of the country because of the spiritual background of the Indian women.*

(*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* Vol 87, Pp 250 and 294)

Gandhiji was referring to the free will of women and not subservience to male authority usually associated with them. He wrote in *Young India*,

*'Ram would be nowhere without Sita, free and independent even as he was himself*

(*Young India*, Feb 3 1927).

Nehru lashed out strongly against the passive acceptance by women, over the years of man-made laws and rules, which could shackle and enslave women, treating them as chattels. Nehru had an admiration for the depiction of Chitrangada, (a character from Mahabharata), in Rabindranath Tagore's drama, in which Tagore recast the mythical image of Chitrangada, making her strong and demanding equality.

Chakravarti Rajgopalachari was one of the principal congress leaders of the Gandhian era and incisive thinker. His condensed prose renderings of the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata in English (Translated from his own original Tamil versions), have enjoyed a great vogue in the country. In the epilogue to his version of *The Ramayana*, Rajaji writes.

*Whether the epics and songs of a nation, spring from a nation's faith and ideas are produced by its literature, is a question, which one is free to answer as one likes. Does a plant spring from the seed or does the seed issue from the plant ? was the bird or the egg the first cause ? Did clouds rise from the sea or was the sea filled by the waters in the sky? All such inquiries take us to the feet of God transcending speech or thought.*

(Iyengar 1985:558)

Srinivas Sastri was persuaded in 1944 to give a course of thirty lectures, in the grounds of the Madras Sanskrit college on the 'Ramayana of Valmiki'. He wrote to his friend T. N. Jagadisan from Coimbatore,

*On that immortal epic one wants to say nothing, which is not one's ripest thought. On other topics one is not held back by such notions of perfection. But on The Ramayana a tentative opinion is blasphemy.*

(Iyengar 1985:560)

Swami Vivekananda had his own traditional perceptions of *The Ramayana*. Regarding Sita he said:

*You may exhaust the literature of the world that is past, and future, before finding another Sita. Sita is unique; that character was depicted once and for all. There may have been several Ramas perhaps but never more than one Sita. She is the very type of the true Indian woman for all the Indian ideals of a perfected woman have grown out of that one life of Sita.*

(*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* 7 vols. Calcutta Advaita Ashrama 1-8-1989)

Romila Thapar in her book, *Cultural Pasts*, writes about various philosophical schools, influencing the evolution of Sita as a character.

*The belief that Sita herself was not abducted by Ravan but it was only her shadow which went with him, is ascribed to the preponderance of Advaita Vendanta philosophy and its doctrine of Maya in fact, Sita walking between Ram and Lakshman in the days of exile in the forest, is often compared to Maya, which impedes the individual soul or Jivatman, symbolized by Lakshman from perceiving the paramatman that is Ram.*

(Thapar Romila 1999:1084).

Swami Vivekananda places Sita at unassailable heights of glory: *“Sita purer than purity itself, all patience, and all suffering, she, who suffered without a murmur, she the ever chaste and ever pure wife, Sita the ideal of people, the ideal of the gods, Sita had gone into the very veins of our race. She is there in the blood of every Indian man and woman. We are all the children of Sita. The women of India must grow and develop in the foot prints Sita and that is the only way”.*

(Swami Vivekananda 3;1989:256)

For Swami Vivekananda, Sita’s story is symbolic of the soul’s journey towards salvation. According to him,

*Ram is the paramatman and Sita is the Jivatman and each man’s or woman’s body is the Lanka. The Jivatman which is enclosed in the body, or captured in the island of Lanka, always desires to be in affinity with the Paramatman or Shri Ram. But the Demons would not allow.*

*Elaborating this he says Vibhishana represents satvaguna, Ravan represents Rajas and Kumbhakarna represents Tamas. These gunas will keep Jivatman (Sita) back from joining Ram, the Paramatman Sita visits Hanuman the Guru or divine teacher who shows her divine ring – that is Brahmajana, the supreme wisdom, that destroys all illusions. Sita finds her way to Paramatman.*

(Swami Vivekananda 5, 1997:415)

According to S Radhakrishnan it is the spirit of these great epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata) that has always furnished the Indian spirit with love for Supreme Self.

*“Here in lies the secret why Indians as a race, could not be vanquished by any number of onslaughts.”*

(Anand Mamta 2006:46)

India’s leading socialist thinker Ram Manohar Lohia says that Sita’s influence is all pervasive.

*The Ramayana* has captured the imagination of the Indian English writers of all genres. The theme of *The Ramayana* has gripped the creative imagination of the Indian writers, who have used it to articulate the experiences of life, in the backdrop of *The Ramayana*. They realized that the one story can be expressed in so many different forms and can touch upon the universal truths. They have taken delight in uncovering

the hidden and obvious meanings, bringing added beauty and meaning to the study of human condition.

They could make the contemporary realities more comprehensible to Indian readers by using the archetypes, images and myths of *The Ramayana*. R K Narayan said,

*I am prepared to state that almost every individual among the five hundred millions, living in India, is aware of the story of The Ramayana in some measure or the other. Every one of whatever age, outlook, education or station in life, knows the essential part of the epic and adores the main figures in it – Ram and Sita Every child is told the story at bedtime. Some study it as a part of religious experience, going over a certain number of stanzas each day reading and re-reading the book several times in a life time. The Ramayana pervades our cultural life in one form or the other at all times, it may be a scholarly discourse at a public hall, a traditional storyteller’s narrative in an open space or a play or dance-drama on stage.*

R. K. Narayan further says:

*One accepts this work at different levels; as a mere tale with impressive character studies, as a masterpiece of literary composition, or even a scripture. As one’s understanding develops, one discerns subtler meanings; the symbolism becomes more defined and relevant to the day*

*to day life. The Ramayana in the fullest sense of the term could be called a book of 'Perennial Philosophy.*

(Narayan R. K. 1987:6-7)

Raja Rao singled out *The Ramayana* as the book that had influenced him most, as it had every Indian. He adds,

*What could be more glorious, more sacred, more fantastic, a book of books- showing every beauty and treachery of this our tragic-comic existence, absurd, inhuman, gentle, devout, noble, cruel, yet not altogether felt as of this world, described for our terror and our joy, and final wisdom than The Ramayana. The book that has filled my imagination and come to me for years at every crucial point of my life, to interpret and to help, is The Ramayana.*

(Raja Rao, *The Illustrated Weekly of India* February 10, 1963:45).

The theme and characters of *The Ramayana* are skilfully exploited by the creative writers in Indian English literature.

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