

The Need and Influence of The Ramayana in Today's Cultural Context

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Abstract

The Ramayana is an ancient Sanskrit epic. It is not just a story; it has a philosophical, spiritual significance and a deep truth in it. It teaches and preaches morality, spirituality, dharma, values, codes of conduct. The Ramayana is a splendid creation which transcends the limitations of time and place. The Ramayana is a part of world literature. It has deeply and richly nourished the Indian generations time after time. It is the foundation of Indian Culture and Civilization. This work has a universal appeal. The Ramayana is neither an "Itihasa", nor "Purana" but is an "Adikavya" - the first poem, which reflects human behaviour, ways of thinking. The Ramayana is a living force which symbolizes ethical living.

Key Words: Culture, Morality, Dharma, Relationships, Duty, Empowerment, Values, Virtues, Society.

Introduction

The Ramayana is a part and parcel of Indian culture. The Ramayana is the foundation of the Indian way of living and it is the basis for understanding the guiding principles of Hinduism. This is a vehicle of consciousness. It represents and reflects human behavior, ways of thinking, attitude and perceptions towards aspects of life. The Ramayana can be studied in relation to human beings/man- as it presents all kinds of characters, in relation to society -as it presents three cultures: Raksasas, Vanars, Aryans, and in relation to divinity. The Ramayana is one of the major sources of cultural and religious heritage. It may be used for understanding and examining something about the changing social and cultural practices. It is a work of a morally and spiritually mature culture.

The philosophical, moral and spiritual essence of this work has sustained people through the changing times. There is an incredible hope in this epic. There are rules outlining the comprehensive, moral, cultural and philosophical aspects that still exist in India as “living traditions”. The Ramayana have greatly influenced the life, culture, value system and consciousness of people. The Ramayana conveys the ideals such as duty, morality, social responsibilities and moulded and transformed the psyche of the people.

Tulsidas writes in “Ram Charit Manas”-

“Rama Katha jag mangal karni” that means the story of Rama will bring about the good of the world.

Ramayana focuses on the relationships, like the relation between a father and a son, a son and his mother, relation between brothers and relationship between a husband and a wife. Rama is considered as a perfect son, an ideal king. He is a model for human behaviour; an ideal example of self- control, selflessness, love and respect. Whereas Sita is a symbol of purity, self -sacrifice, faith, devotion and moral integrity and power. Rama had lived being righteous and follower of law. Throughout his life he followed laws that he had inherited. Rama subordinates the goals of his own life to those of his father. He did not question his father’s words. The Ramayana is a symbol of human perfection in the personas of Rama and Sita as they have all the good attributes and all the ideals such as faithfulness, sincerity, obedience, truthfulness, sacrifice, sense of duty and righteousness etc. In this work of art there is clear definition of the qualities that men and women should aspire for.

In this regard, the statement made by U. Thein Hen, Chairman of the Burma Historical Commission, deserves a special mention- “Ramayana is not only a literary treasure but also a source of ennobling influence of the relationship of men as parents and children, husbands and wives, relations and friends, teachers and pupils and rulers and the ruled”.

One of the most compelling element of the Ramayana is how much Rama embraces his dharma and his sense of duty.

The Ramayana has the concept of Dharmaraj. Dharma means righteousness, truth and justice. The Ramayana regards Dharam – one's duty is more important than one's emotions. Dharma and Duty is a part of the culture in Ayodhya. Ram is so insistent on following its path. This story teaches us the threefold Dharam- Dharam pertaining to an individual, a family and the society. One should cultivate love for god fear of sin and morality in society. The Ramayana speaks of the true identity of an individual, the significance of family and the sanctity of the society. The Ramayana is a book which teaches us the importance of morality and justice and emphasizes on the way to live a Dharmic life, free from sin. The significance of Godly devotion in order to attain spiritual bliss is also upheld in this work of art. Morality helps to differentiate between right and wrong and good and bad behaviour. It also refers to personal and cultural values and codes of conduct. Moral living and spirituality are very closely inter-related. Morality is synonymous to spirituality, spirituality has everything to do with morality, ethical decisions, compassion and tolerance. Spirituality helps to develop qualities of soul. Honor and Respect are the two qualities which the Ramayana stresses upon. If a person wants to attain salvation , one should follow the path of Dharma and then only one can be free from the guilt of sins and can unite with the supreme soul.

‘As birds are made to fly and rivers to run, so the soul to follow duty’.

Ramayana presents a family structure

Dashratha his three wives – Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi, their four sons- Ram, Bharat, Lakshmana and Shatrughan , their daughter in laws – Sita, Mandavi , Urmila and Shrutakirti, they all live under the same roof.

Each one has a well-defined role and position to maintain. Ramayana is embedded with the view that the welfare of the family supersedes individual interests. The family members are willing to do anything and even willing to die for one other. Lakshman symbolizes sacrifice, he left his mother and wife in Ayodhya and leave with Rama for exile and swore to protect him with his life. Bharat place Rama's "khadau" on the throne, this shows that the throne is of Rama's and the

would rule in his name and complete all the royal duties. Sita accompanied Rama to the exile. She stated that there would be no point in living if Rama is not there with her.

Ramayana describes the structure of society

There were only two divisions in the human society – Arya/Aryans and Unarya/Non Aryans. The people with impeccable characters and following morals were called Aryas/Aryans. The people of weak characters and immoral and unreliable were called Unaryas/Non Aryans, Rakshas, Asur. The world was not divided into Hindus, Muslim, Sikh, Jews, Christians and nor broken up on the basis of caste.

Ramayana simple tale of triumph of good over evil

The story suggests that good and evil coexist in this world and one's choices in life can move one's life closer to one pole or the other. Throughout the story of the Ramayana we are able to see where does examples of good deed being made to eliminate a bad deed. with every notion of good there was an equal part of evil that was occurring one way or another but it is up to us to choose the path.

“Do not be led by others,

awaken your mind,

amass your own experience,

and decide for yourself your own path.”- The Atharava Veda

Powerful women

Sita is a fully devoted wife and companion who is always ready to serve her husband all the times. She evokes curiosity in the minds of the readers, sometimes she is regarded submissive and sometimes she seems to be an assertive woman. But it is generally regarded that Sita has a very strong and bold character. Sita's devotion towards Rama has been questioned and discussed widely by feminists. They criticize her submissive nature but if one observes the character

realizes that Sita has her own individuality and she maintains her self- respect and dignity throughout and that too without moving away from the path of dharma. Sita tends to serve as a role model for women carries out all the duties yet she maintains her self- respect. There are some examples that show Sita's strength and self- esteem, such as, when she was a child she picked up Shiv Dhanush by one hand which represents her mental and spiritual strength. When Rama remains adamant not to take Sita with him into exile she grows angry and rebukes him harsh language. Sita refers to him as “a woman disguised as man and says that the world is wrong when they say that there is no one greater than Rama, and calls him depressed and frightened”. When Ravana came disguised as sage to kidnap Sita, they had debate over Ram’s superiority and abilities. She did not let him question her husband's bravery. This debate represents her confidence. She did not let anyone violate her dignity even when she was kidnapped by Ravana and had to stay in Lanka for long period. Moreover she raised her kids single handedly. She fulfills all the duties of a mother and of a father. Thus it can be concluded that despite being regarded as a subordinate by feminists Sita has a very powerful and a bold personality.

Linda Hess in her article “Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man’s Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife” states that “Today more than ever before, Sita is a site of contestation. The Sita who clung to the dharma of worshipping her husband and bowing to his will, even when he repeatedly and cruelly rejected her, is still embraced as the ideal woman by many Hindus of both sexes. But others, increasingly, are describing that ideal as concocted by and serving the interests of dominant males from ancient times to the present”.

Relationship between Vedas and Ramayana

The mention of link between Vedas and Ramayana is very prominently visible in the Rigveda, the Yujurveda, and in the Upanishads.

The Vedas which are generally considered as the guiding principles of Hindu culture and society has a close relation with the Ramayana as all the principles and ideals discussed in Vedas are somehow similar to that discussed in the Ramayana.

“The truth can not be suppressed and always is the ultimate victor”- The Yajur Veda

The value system, the dharma and the qualities like self -sacrifice, brotherhood portrait through a wide variety of characters in the Ramayana are similar to the teachings of Vedas. Thus through the Ramayana one intended to promote and endorse the significance of Vedas in Hindu culture and society. The Ramayana and Vedas tend to serve the same purpose of inculcating moral values in an individual.

A second chance in married life

Marriage is an important decision especially when someone is considering it for the second time. The practice of widow marriage existed in the vedic period. In the Ramayana, the custom of marrying the elder brothers widow prevailed among the non arjans and Rama had no objection to this.

The Rig Veda contains a passage mentioning Sati and preventing it. To a widow who is with her husband on the funeral pyre, the text says: rise up, abandon this dead man and rejoin the living.

The widow marriage happened for the first time in the Ramayana itself. Tara wife of Bali, married to Sugreeva after Vali's death. Whereas after the death of Ravana his wife Mandodari becomes the wife of Ravana's younger brother Vibhishan.

Honor, Loyalty, Duty: as the inherent drivers of society

“One should, perform karma with nonchalance without expecting the benefits because sooner or later one shall definitely get the fruit”- The Rig Veda

The characters in the Ramayana place a great deal of importance on honor, loyalty and behaving dutifully to their family members and towards masses also. Honor and loyalty control every character, humans as well as demons and even the Gods. The work shows that even though honoring one's promises and loyalty often has disastrous consequences for a short period of time but it will later result in a long-term success. This help us to understand that though behaving

loyally and honorable maybe difficult initially but it is necessary and important for future happiness.

‘The fragrance of the flowers is never borne against the breeze; but the fragrance of human virtues diffuses itself everywhere’.

The Ramayana as the handbook of Indian society

From rich to poor, from metro cities to villages, the Ramayana has touched every aspect of Hindu culture with its wide and timeless appeal. From celebrating festivals to visiting temples, we witness the Ramayana and its characters everywhere and it has a very strong influence on the minds of people.

Due to religious and ethnic significance the Ramayana can be easily regarded as the handbook of Indian values and culture and thus it can be safely placed in the hands of children as the Ramayana preaches and teaches values.

Relevance of the Ramayana in the modern society

In this era of modernism and science where families are becoming inclusive and compact where every human being is running after materialistic gains and spirituality has lost its significance. It is the Ramayana which stands strong having deep roots in society and culture as it has the potential of bringing out a positive change through its teachings. Whoever goes through this epic realizes duty towards the family, dharma and society. Among all the creatures, living on the earth humans are the only one who are endowed with the ability of reasoning and thus regarded as rational beings. Humans act in accordance with their perception that they have of the things around them. Modern society has become materialistic leading to a situation where humans are bound to suffer isolation and degradation of self-respect. Thus it can be said that slavish mentality and longing for worldly possessions and pleasures are the chief causes for degeneration of morals as well as social life. By ditching moral values and by deviating away from the path of Dharma humans themselves have become their own enemy; this slavish mentality and excessive greed for materialistic gains are driving humans away from real happiness and

contentment. This is where the Ramayana comes into action as Lord Vishnu's incarnated Rama signifies the thought that God is present within every individual and thus everyone is capable of bringing a positive change by discarding servile mentality and excessive greed for worldly pleasures and adopting a life full of self-respect and consciousness by following the path of dharma.

The way the Ramayana touches various aspects of life and human nature, it is safe to assert that the Ramayana is still relevant to the contemporary human existence and one can catch a glimpse of the Ramayana in the works of various writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Anita Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande etc. For example, in Anita Desai's novel "Where shall we go this Summer", Sita is a neurotic character who revolts against male tyranny. Bharti Mukherjee's work "Holder of the World", considers the impact of Sita who settled in India but belongs to different culture. In Shashi Deshpande's short story "The days of Golden Deer", the character Sita is not a believer in fate. She thinks that she is responsible for the consequences and outcome of her own actions.

It is evident that the Ramayana has a very deep impact on Indian thought, society, culture, customs and literature.

Meenakshi Mukherjee writes-

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

Conclusion

The Ramayana is a masterpiece connecting the links between ancient times and modern times as the philosophy it preaches is still relevant and will be relevant in the upcoming ages as it deals with the sociological and spiritual aspects of life. By sociological, one means the teachings that it contains and how they are relevant for the well being of every individual who strives for a life full of dignity, morality and values. Values like self-sacrifice, comradeship, individual duties towards: family, society and other people and it forms the core of the Ramayana. Thus in order to achieve a state of contentment one needs to enroot the underlying principles in one's personality. The Ramayana displays the way a son, a brother, a king act in Hindu society.

Culture today still value relations but the bond is nowhere the same. Since the Ramayana touches all the aspects of human nature, it has and it will have deep influence on Hindu culture and on an individual. It teaches us ethics required for the smooth functioning of human beings, but when people violate their Dharma, things fall apart. If everyone or everything in the universe does its Dharma the universe will work evenly and fluently. This work of art is beyond religion, beyond nationality, beyond race and beyond color and creed. The Ramayana fascinates, influences and inspires people of various caste, cultures and countries. It became a common cultural heritage reflecting the local conditions, standards of values and relation between different sections of society. The Ramayana is a work of antiquity, it brings true wellness to the world. The Ramayana is a legacy of good life. It is a work which uplifts us. People find solace and solutions of their problems in the Ramayana. It is an excellent example as it merges religion with morality and statesmanship with common sense. Moreover the Ramayana has also influenced the art and architectural works of India such as painting by Syed Thajudeen. It also affected musical and poetic compositions of Indian history. Some songs narrates the complete story of the Ramayana such as Ramachandraya of Muthusvami Diksitar. The Ramayana has been adopted on screen as the television serial “Ramayana” by Ramanand Sagar, based on the “Ram Charit Manas” by Tulsidas. Our mind has accepted the epic at different levels and there are various ways looking at the Ramayana.

“Within infinite myths lies an eternal truth

Who sees it all?

Varuna has but a thousand eyes

Indra, a hundred

You and I, only two.

In 2005, The UNESCO declared the Ramlila to be a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity.

The Ramayana is the most valuable work of art in every way possible.

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