

THE RIDDLE OF THE *RĀMĀYANA*

by

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Vālmīki, not even the most orthodox thinker will be disposed to doubt. Whoever even cursorily reads the poem, cannot but be struck with the inconsistencies, the severances of connections, juxta-positions of new and old ideas which abound so greatly in the present *Rāmāyaṇa*, whether we take the Bengal or the Bombay text of it. And one cannot but come to the conclusion that the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki was substantially reconstructed at some subsequent date.

A few glaring instances of contradiction will here be sufficient to convince those who have not gone through the poem. The first canto is an answer to a question by Vālmīki to Nārada as to who was then the best of kings and Nārada gives the palm to Rāma and recounts the whole history of his life. The canto is thus almost a precis of the whole poem. It seems from this as if Vālmīki knew not Rāma nor his great exploits. And yet further on he says to Sītā in the Uttarakāṇḍa that he knew her father-in-law Daśaratha who was his friend and knows her father Janaka, that he knows why and how Rāma has abandoned her. In fact, Vālmīki knows everything and yet asks Nārada who is the best of kings. Either the first or the second is a subsequent interpolation. Again, Sugrīva in the Kiṣkindhā-kāṇḍa first says that he does not know the abode of the evil Rākṣasa (Rāvaṇa) nor his prowess, nor his family.

न जाने निलयं तस्य सर्वथा पापरक्षसः ।

सामर्थ्यं विक्रमं वापि दीष्कुलेयस्य वा कुलम् ॥

And yet further on Sugrīva gives a detailed description of the whole world to the search parties sent by him and therein describes Laṅkā itself mentioning the fact that that country belonged to Rāvaṇa.

स हि देशस्तु वध्यस्य रावणस्य दुरात्मनः ।

राक्षसाधिपतेर्वीराः सहस्राक्षसमद्युतेः ॥

Even Kabandha extols Sugrīva's knowledge of all the places inhabited by Rākṣasas.

स हि स्थानानि कात्स्न्येन सर्वाणि कपिकुञ्जरः ।
नरमांसाशिनां लोके नैपुण्यादधिगच्छति ॥

The inconsistency is irreconcilable. The commentator sees the evident contradiction herein involved and makes a frantic effort at reconciliation by remarking that न जाने means तज्जाने एवति शेषः । In fact the commentator makes a negative sentence mean exactly the corresponding affirmative. But the difficulty of explaining the next *śloka* which follows न जाने निलयं तस्य &c. is insuperable. For therein Sugrīva says—

सत्यं तु प्रतिजानामि त्यज शोकमरिदम् ।
करिष्यामि तथा यत्नं यथा प्राप्स्यसि मैथिलीम् ॥

If Sugrīva did not know the abode of Rāvaṇa, his saying “but I swear truly, give up thy wailing; I will make such effort that thou shalt soon recover thy Sitā” is consistent. But if he *knew* his abode as the commentator would have it, he should not have said “but” or तु in the next *śloka*; he should have said “and” or च i.e., “and I know his abode and I swear that thou wilt soon recover thy lost love.” It is needless to comment further on the opinion of the commentator. Candidly speaking the geographical description of the whole world given by Sugrīva is, as we shall show hereafter, a subsequent interpolation which formed no part of the original poem of Vālmīki. Forgeries always expose themselves, and the numerous additions, alterations and amplifications in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are so evident that the conclusion cannot be avoided that the text of Vālmīki has been recast almost wholly and by unskilful hands.

The old nucleus of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is, however, easily distinguishable from the vast accretions which have gathered round it. It essentially belongs to that ancient period of Indian History when sacrifice was the most distinguishing feature of Aryan worship, when Buddhism was unknown, when idol-worship did not exist, when Brahmins and Kṣatriyas freely ate animal food, when women

learnt the Vedas and performed Vedic rites, when Kṣatriyas competed with Brahmins in learning and Brahmins competed with Kṣatriyas in archery. If we scan the life of Rāma and Sitā, Daśaratha and Kausalyā, Bhāradvāja and Agastya, we find a state of society entirely dissimilar to our own, a society uncontaminated with the feelings and circumstances to which Buddhism has given rise. Rāma fails not to perform a sacrifice himself in consecration of the hut built by Lakṣmaṇa and offers in oblation the flesh of deer specially killed for the occasion. The fact that Lakṣmaṇa roasts a whole deer must strike us, accustomed as we are to vegetable food and even vegetable sacrifices for centuries, as something very startling;

अयं सर्वः समस्तांगः श्रितः कृष्णमृगो मया ।
देवता देवसंकाश यजस्व कुशलो ह्यसि ॥

When Rāma performs the last obsequies of Jaṭāyu, he offers venison to the departed bird;

रोहिमांसानि चोत्कृत्य पेशीकृत्वा महायशाः ।
शकुनाय ददौ रामः रम्ये हरितशाद्वले ॥

Again, he is an adept in reciting the Vedic *mantras* on the various occasions in man's life—

राघवोपि महातेजा नावमारुह्य तां ततः ।
ब्रह्मवत्क्षत्रवच्चैव जजाप हितमात्मनः ॥

And further on—

यत्तत्प्रेतस्य मर्त्यस्य कथयन्ति द्विजातयः ।
तत्स्वर्गगमनं क्षिप्रं तस्य रामो जजाप ह ॥

The poet nowhere fails to describe how Rāma performed his *sandhyā* every day. In fact Rāma's proficiency in Vedic *mantras* and his strict observance of Vedic rites could not be less than those of any rigid Brahmin. In Rāma's time even women performed sacrifices and made their *sandhyā* obeisance. When Rāma went to see Kausalyā after the order for his banishment had been obtained by Kaikeyī from her husband, she was performing a sacrifice not in

the presence of her husband but by herself with Vedic *mantra*s —

सा क्षीमवसना हृष्टा नित्यं व्रतपरायणा ।

अग्निं जुहोति स्म तदा मंत्रवत् कृतमंगला ॥

When Māruti did not find Sītā after his wearisome search for her, he sat on a tree by the side of a beautiful rivulet in the Aśokavana of Rāvaṇa, believing that she would come to that very stream early in the morning to perform her *sandhyā*.

संघ्याकालमनाः श्यामा ध्रुवमेष्यति जानकी ।

नदीं चेमां शुभजलां संघ्यार्थे वरवर्णिनी ॥

A woman performing *sandhyā*—woman who is now believed to be incapable of learning the Vedas—seems passing strange to our ears. And it did so strike the ears of the modern commentator also, for he remarks—

किञ्च सम्यग्भगवद्ध्यानस्यैव संघ्यापदार्थत्वेनास्त्येव तत्र स्त्रिया अधिकारः ।
गायत्रीमंत्रेण तदर्थस्मरणपूर्वकघ्याने तु द्विजस्यैवाधिकार इत्यन्यत् ।

[*Sandhyā* simply means contemplation of God and hence in that sense a woman has permission to perform *sandhyā*. It is entirely another thing that only a *dvija* or a twice born has the right to perform *sandhyā* in the sense of contemplation of God by knowing and reciting the *Gāyatrī mantra*]. This is however an unwarranted quibble; for what worship women are now allowed to perform, cannot be and is not styled *संघ्या*. And what should we think when we are told that Kausalyā killed by her own hands the sacrificial horse with three sword strokes.

कौसल्या तं ह्यं तत्र परिचर्य समंततः ।

कृपाणैश्चिशशासैनं त्रिभिः परमया मुदा ॥

She must have been a very strong and a true Rajput lady indeed.

The pictures of the Āśramas of Bhāradvāja and Agastya are very interesting. Fond of retired scenes of great natural beauty and intensely religious and monastic in their occupation and spirit, the Ṛṣis passed their time in

ablutions, in study, in contemplation and in sacrificing. Yet they were not strangers to what was passing around them and raised their own subsistence from fields ploughed with their own hands. When compelled by necessity, they took up arms in defence of themselves, their sacrifices and their cultivations. Then again they ate flesh like their Kṣatriya friends.

पंच पंचतला भक्ष्या ब्रह्मक्षत्रेण राघव ।

They could sacrifice a cow in मधुपर्क.

उपानयत घर्मात्मा गामर्घ्यमुदकं ततः ।

There was no idol-worship in their devotion; their huts contained separate sacrificial alters for the various deities of the Vedas—Indra, Varuṇa, Yama and so on.¹ These and other similar circumstances disclose a state of society which existed long before the rise of Buddhism, a society accustomed to the adoration of Vedic deities by sacrifice, a society in which the Brahmins and Kṣatriyas were not separated by an unbridgeable gulf, a society in which women played as strong and independent a part as men. Undoubtedly such was the time of Vālmīki, the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is impossible that any poet who lived about the beginning of the Christian era (when the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as we shall soon show, assumed its present shape) should have such ideas in his mind though such ideas existing in a poem already respected might be retained from a feeling of sanctity attached to them.

1. Rāma's place also contained a separate Āyatana for Viṣṇu. श्रीमत्यायतने विष्णोः शिष्ये नरवरात्मजः ॥ II. 6, 4. The commentator wrongly explains this by saying निजभवनवति देवपूजालये. If it were a देवपूजालय why is it called Viṣṇu's house? It appears that Rāma's palace had separate sacrificial apartments for each of the Vedic gods in the same way as the humble habitation of Agastya.