

Valmiki Ramayana

Critical Essays

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Uttara-kanda, the pretender kanda

1. Introduction

§1 The *Uttara-kanda* (abbr.: U-K), which claims to be Valmiki's narration of the story of Rama after his consecration as King of Ayodhya, is generally presented in complete editions of the Ramayana as though it is the seventh *kanda* of the Ramayana. However, for over a century scholars are generally agreed that most if not all of the U-K is a later addition tacked on to Valmiki's Ramayana (Valmiki-ramayana). This essay takes a fresh look at the U-K and its status.

3. A preliminary comparison of the Ramayana and the Uttarakanda

§3.1 Valmiki's Ramayana is superbly planned and is executed with great poetic skill. The U-K lacks the poetic quality, dignity, unity and high moral standpoint that one finds in the Ramayana proper. The concepts, plan and execution of the U-K are all poor, and the text is a hodge-podge of purana-like stories.

Characterization of Sita

§10.1 The Sita of the U-K is portrayed as a weak and submissive person, meekly accepting her exile ordered by her husband even though she has done no wrong, was faithful and devoted to him and was free of all blame. She neither questioned, nor argued or protested her husband's action. The U-K thus portrays Sita as accepting that a husband may treat his wife however harshly and unjustly as he pleases, and that his wife should meekly accept such treatment.

But that is not how the Sita of the Valmiki-ramayana is portrayed by Valmiki. As soon as Rama told her that he was going to the forest and that she should remain in Ayodhya (2.23.34), she protested angrily (2.24.1: *samkrudha*). Rama persisted and told her, "You must stay here and do your duty . . . You must do as I say" (2.25.2-3: *iha acara svadharmam tvam ma yatha manasah sukham || site yatha tvarn vaksyami tatha karyam tvaya abate*). He went on to cite the dangers of life in the forest.

Then Sita angrily asked him, “Did my father give me in marriage to a woman with the body of a man?” (2.27.3). So we see that the Sita of the Valmiki-ramayana did not meekly accept whatever her husband said.

Later too in the Valmiki-ramayana, Sita is portrayed as brave and strong. After she was abducted by Ravana, she was offered enticements and threats, by Ravana himself and by the Rakshasis guarding her, but she spurned them all. Later still when Ravana had been killed and Rama uttered words rejecting her, she forcefully argued against his reasoning (that an abducted woman should not be welcomed back into the family); she publicly rebuked him for speaking like an uncultured person, and she proved that Rama was wrong, by herself doing an *agni-pravesa* and emerging gloriously out of the fire.

That is how the Valmiki-ramayana portrays the fortitude of Sita. But we saw that the Sita of the U-K is portrayed as weak and submissive, meekly accepting her unjust banishment by Rama.

§10.2 The fact that the Sita of the U-K was pregnant when she learnt of her exile should have really added to her strength; but the U-K portrays her as a weakling without any spirit, and as practically thanking Rama for abandoning her. Thus, we see that the Sita of the U-K is totally unlike the Sita of the Valmiki-ramayana.

Characterization of Rama

§8.0 The character of the Rama of the U-K is strikingly inconsistent with that of the Rama of Valmiki-ramayana. The behaviour of the Rama of the U-K is like that of Ravana, or even worse.

§8.1 It is true that people would not like to have a king whose wife's character was not above suspicion, for people would feel that such a king will be corrupted by having a corrupt wife; and they would also like their king to follow time-honoured customs and laws. The U-K says that Rama decided to send Sita into exile because he heard reports that there were widespread rumours among the people of Ayodhya strongly disapproving of his taking back Sita as his wife, although she had spent nearly a year in Ravana's custody. Rama knew that Sita was most chaste and pure and blemishless; he knew also that the people expressed no

suspicion or complaint about Sita or her character, but only about his action in taking her back. After sending Sita into exile, Rama continued to rule as king for several years.

But we know that the Rama of the Valmiki-ramayana did not always feel obliged to act according to the people's wishes. To fulfill his father's promise to Kaikeyi, he was determined to go into exile. As he set out for the forest, the people pleaded with him, most pitifully, to return to Ayodhya. But Rama did not heed to their pleadings.

§8.2 Some people argue that it is a king's Ksatriyadharma requires not only that his queen should be above all suspicion, but also that the king should also uphold established customs and laws, and that it was for that reason that the Rama of the U-K arranged for Sita to be abandoned in the forest although he knew that she was absolutely pure and innocent — and pregnant at the same time. But such action by Rama would be a typical instance of Ksatriyadharma where righteousness and unrighteousness go hand in hand — and it is precisely this kind of *dharma* that the Rama of Valmiki's Ramayana had rejected. He had said, more than once, that his concept of *dharma* transcended the Ksatriya code - a code that he rejected, describing it as a code “where unrighteousness and a little bit of righteousness go together, a code that is followed only by vile, greedy and wicked men of sinful deeds.”

§8.3 In acting according to the defective Ksatriyadharma that had been resolutely rejected by the Rama of the Valmiki-ramayana, the Rama of the U-K behaves very unlike the Rama of the Valmiki-ramayana who had declared that it was not for earthly wealth that he cared to live in this world, and that, like a rsi (Rishi), he cared only for *dharma*, righteousness. The action of the Rama of the U-K shows him to have been keen on enjoying the good opinion of his subjects and also on retaining the kingship; it shows him also as totally lacking any sense of justice or compassion: he did not even tell his pregnant wife that he was abandoning her, and why. Ravana too was proud of his kingship, wealth and glory and enjoyed the good opinion of his Rakshasa subjects but had no sense of justice, nor any respect for women. That is, the *Uttarakanda*'s portrayal of Rama is rather like that of Ravana and is very unlike the portrayal of Rama in Valmiki's Ramayana.

§8.4 The Rama of Valmiki's Ramayana never demanded that any one should accept his decisions meekly and unquestioningly. He was willing — indeed, he welcomed — dissent and debate. This can be seen from his discussions with Kausalya and Laksmana when they wanted him not to go exile, and also from his discussions with Sita and with Laksmana when they each wanted to accompany him to the forest. The behaviour of the Rama of the U-K is in strong contrast: he sternly ordered his brothers from offering any discussion whatsoever on his decision to abandon Sita in the *tapovana* beyond the borders of the kingdom. We note that the Rama of the Valmiki-ramayana had accepted with gratitude the advice that Laksmana gave him from time to time, and praised it as excellent. He had welcomed and praised the advice from Sugriva also. On the other hand, faced with a serious situation the Rama of the U-K not only did not seek the advice of Laksmana or any others, but sternly warned them against offering any comment. His behaviour is similar to that of Ravana who, driven by lust upon hearing Surpanakha's description of Sita, did not want to consult his ministers and advisors, but dismissed them and decided to abduct Sita. The warning Rama issued to his brothers is similar to Ravana's scolding his uncle Marica for advising him against abducting Sita, and similar to his admonition to Marica that he should speak only when asked and that even then he should not criticize his king. Indeed, the behaviour of the Rama of the U-K forbidding any comment from his brothers is much worse than that of Ravana who several times did allow Vibhisana to advise him to return Sita to Rama, even though the advice was not to Ravana's liking. This was even before Hanuman returned from Lanka to Kishkinda. Even on the eve of the arrival of Rama and Sugriva and others in Lanka, Ravana allowed Vibhisana to repeat his advice again and again, although at the end of it he, Ravana, was overcome by anger and cursed and execrated his brother. We see then that the behaviour of Rama of the U-K who ordered his brothers to voice no comment is most unlike that of the Rama of the Valmiki-ramayana and is in fact much worse than that of Ravana.

§8.5 In the Valmiki-ramayana, whenever Rama fell into sorrow or anger or despair, Laksmana or Sugriva would remonstrate with him and ask him to stop behaving like an 'ordinary' uncultured (*prakrita*) man; Rama would then recover his normal composure and express his appreciation of them. On the other hand, the Rama of the U-K acknowledged that

he had “fallen into the ocean of sorrow,” and yet strictly forbade his brothers from making any comment on his decision to exile Sita.

§8.6 The Rama of the Valmiki-ramayana is portrayed not only as most truthful but also as loving his wife Sita so much that he could never leave her behind or abandon her; he himself says that she was dear to him as his own life, indeed even dearer than his own life and that he could not live without her even for a short while. Even the Rakshasas Marica and Ravana said the same of Rama. Valmiki also declared that for Rama, Sita was dearer than life itself. Whereas the Rama of the Valmiki-ramayana had declared before the assembled Devas themselves that he can never abandon Sita, the Rama of the U-K arranged for the abandonment of Sita, did not even have any discussion whatsoever with her about it, and continued to rule as king for many years as though nothing had happened. We see that the behaviour of the Rama of the U-K is in sharp contrast with that of the Rama of the Valmiki-ramayana.

§8.7 Also, for quite some years the Rama of the U-K seems to have had no curiosity about the fate of his wife Sita who had been banished from his kingdom, nor about the fate of the baby/babies, he had fathered through her. His behaviour is in strong contrast to that of the Rama of the Valmiki-ramayana who was madly in love with his wife, was most compassionate and was also devoted to righteousness — a righteousness that transcended mere *Kshatriyadharmā*.

§9.1 The Sambuka story blames a Sudra's tapas for a Brahmin boy's death hundreds of miles away. It takes the stand that the Sudra deserved to be killed for his ‘offense’ and it gloats that the Brahmin boy came back to life when Rama beheaded the Sudra. But the story is contradictory to the spirit of the Ramayana and is apparently the creation, not of Valmiki but, at a later date, of some extreme conservative person. For, the story not only contradicts what the Ramayana says more than once, that during Rama’s reign there were no child deaths, but it also contradicts what the Valmiki-ramayana says about sudras performing tapas. The Valmiki-ramayana refers to a young Sudra (the son of a Sudra woman), as well as a Sudra woman (Sabari) as ascetics engaged in tapas (2.57.18, 20, 37; 3.70.7). In the Valmiki-ramayana, both Rama and Valmiki refer to Guha, of the lowly hunter tribe, as Rama’s friend dear to him as his own self (*atmasamah sakha*). The feeling was not one-sided condescension; for instance, when Rama met with Guha, the latter took

the initiative and embraced Rama. This shows that in the days described by Valmiki there was no distinction based on sex, jati, varna, or race etc. Rama's first words to Sabari, a Sudra woman, of the "lowly" hunter tribe, were to enquire whether her tapas was proceeding well without hindrance from anybody. Rama looked upon everybody equally, making no distinction based on sex, varna, jati (caste) or even race. Among those he revered were his dearest friends were Sabari and Guha, both of them of the hunter tribe, the vulture Jatayu, the monkeys Sugriva and Hanuman, and the Rakshasa Vibhisana. Finally, in regard to the U-K story of Rama killing the sudra ascetic Sambuka, we first note that Valmiki's Ramayana says that Dasaratha realized that he had committed a great sin (*mahatpapam*) when he had unwittingly killed a sudra practitioner of tapas and, as the Sudra ascetic's father reminded Dasaratha, it would have been a far greater sin if the killing had been intentional. Certainly, Dasaratha's son Rama, described as righteous and learned, and who showed such high regard for the Sudra tapasvini Sabari and looked upon the nisada Guha as his *atmasamah sakha*, would not have intentionally killed the Sudra ascetic Sambuka for performing tapas. We see then that the Rama of Sambuka story cannot be the Rama of the Ramayana and the story is certainly not by Valmiki.

§ 9.2 Thus we find that the U-K repeatedly paints a picture of Rama that is very different from the picture of Rama in Valmiki's Ramayana and one can only conclude that Valmiki could not have been the author of the *Uttara-Kanda*, and that the U-K cannot be a part of the Valmiki-ramayana.