

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.

II. The Sambuka story in the Uttara-Kanda

§5.2 The major portion of the U-K has nothing to do with Rama or Sita. The only significant chapters of the U-K are devoted to the story of *Sita-parityaga* (discussed above) and to the Sambuka story. The Sambuka story says that an aged Brahmin brought the dead body of his very young son to Rama's presence and complained that the death of a young boy had happened in Rama's kingdom only because of some grievous misconduct on Rama's part (U-K 64.9: *ramasya duskritam kimcin mahad asti na samsayah*). Rama consulted his ministers Vasista, Markandeya, Maudgalya, Vamadeva, Kasyapa, Katyayana, Jabali, Gautama and Narada who advised him that the Brahmin boy's death happened because some Sudra was performing tapas somewhere, and that Rama should take action against him. According to the *Uttara-kanda*, Rama went in his aerial car searching all over his kingdom for the Sudra; in the course of his search he came upon a person performing tapas; Rama asked him what his varna was, and he identified himself as born of a Sudra mother and that his name was Sambuka. The U-K says that Rama then cut off

the Sudra's head and that as already predicted by Rama's advisors, the Brahmin boy in far-away Ayodhya immediately came back to life!

But Rama's killing of Sambuka is inconsistent with the portrayal of Rama in the Ramayana.

§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.

The intent of the Sambuka story seems to have been to establish that sudras are not eligible to practice tapas (or other activities associated with especially Brahmans). It was probably thought that the best way to present these right-wing reactionary ideas that are really contrary to the spirit of Valmiki-ramayana, is to make them part of a text, name the text as a “later kanda” (of the Valmiki-ramayana) composed by Valmiki himself, and then claim that it is ‘a part of Valmiki Ramayana;’ for the Valmiki-ramayana had by that time been universally recognized as an exemplary text on *dharma*, and Rama as the ideal exemplar of *dharma*. By such means, the messages implicit in Valmiki-ramayana were subverted, and ideas contrary to those of the genuine Ramayana were presented as though they were endorsed by Righteous Rama himself; note that the U-K contains no episodes of real interest except for the exile of Sita by Rama and the killing of Sambuka by Rama.

§17 The numerous instances where the U-K is inconsistent with the Valmiki-ramayana and the spurious nature of the story of Sita’s exile to the forest and of the Sambuka story — almost the only important part of the U-K — shows that the U-K cannot be a part of Valmiki’s Ramayana, and that its author is not Valmiki.

§18.3 Kalidasa’s (400-500 CE) Raghuvamsa presents several tales of Raghu’s (fictional) dynasty, as well as about Rama and his descendants. Its primary focus is not Rama, and it gives creative versions of the *Sita-parityaga* and Sambuka stories of the *Uttara-Kanda*. But this only shows that Kalidasa was aware of those stories, and it does not mean that he considered them to be part of Valmiki-ramayana.