

The Ramayana: A Roadmap to Righteous Living

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Abstract:

The Ramayana serves as an immortal roadmap for righteous living, offering a timeless manual for good conduct that remains relevant from the Treta Yuga to the modern era. As a "Maryada Purushottam," Lord Rama exemplifies a flawless character defined by integrity, compassion, and an unshakable adherence to dharma, regardless of the challenges faced as a human being.

This epic provides profound moral guidance through its diverse characters, whose life-like struggles allow readers to correlate their own experiences with the narrative. Beyond Rama's virtuous leadership, the work highlights Hanumana's unparalleled devotion, Bharata's sacrificial brotherly trust, and the possibility of redemption through genuine remorse, as seen in the deliverance of Ahalya.

Valmiki's composition, born from spontaneous poetic inspiration, establishes a cultural foundation that binds people across diverse backgrounds. By illustrating that the means must always justify the ends, the Ramayana teaches the path of surrender and renunciation as a means to liberation. Ultimately, the epic functions as a vital educational tool for young minds, fostering resilience, noble action, and a realistic acquaintance with civilization.

Keywords:-

Dharma (Righteousness), Maryada-Purushottam, Ethical Leadership, Bhakti (Devotion), Redemption

It is said, "...One need not look beyond the Ramayana to learn everything necessary to lead a meaningful life in this birth and progress towards God." Lord Rama lived in Treta Yuga, but to this day, even in Kaliyuga, his life as narrated in the Ramayana continues to be the most reliable manual of good conduct, both spiritually and physically.

Rama's flawless character inspires everyone.

Over centuries, this work has been translated into various languages, under different formats by various savants, sages, poets, and musicians. It offers a solution to man's search for the perfect guide to lead a good and meaningful life. Whenever a devotee listens to the Ramayana, he or she not only finds answers to many problems in life, but also derives the immense benefit of receiving the blessings of his or her ancestors. It is interesting that many of us can correlate ourselves to many of the characters in the Ramayana, since the characters in the Ramayana undergo similar life-like challenges.

Every Canto in the Ramayana has a moral guidance and lesson. One of the lessons of the Ramayana that should be noted is how Rama, the obedient disciple followed his teacher, Visvamitra. Rama's character is considered to be so flawless that as soon as a child is born, parents desire two things for the child—a healthy life and integrity of character like Rama. Materialistic goals come much later. This is where the Ramayana holds sway as a guide to principled living. It highlights the sixteen desirable qualities that Rama possessed, enabling him to lead a virtuous life adhering to dharma in every way, regardless of the challenges faced as a human being. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are considered to be the two immortal epics of India—there is nothing more inspirational for the human race than these two classics. Few narratives contain more lessons from real-life situations than these two epics.

While reading Western classical literature and Scriptures, we become familiar with Zeus, Apollo, Beelzebub, Ulysses, Achilles, Aeneas, Hector and many others. But we remain unaware of legendary personalities like

Kumbhakarna, Visvamitra, Dasaratha and Hanumana. The beauty of Helen of Troy and the shrewd, diplomatic coquetry of Cleopatra can be matched by Menaka, Rambha and Urvashi to name a few. But through the annals of Western mythology and classics there's almost none to match the guiles of characters like Soorpnakha, Manthara, Taraka and Pootna.

Thus, it becomes imperative particularly for students in schools and colleges to read and assimilate these elemental works

They must understand, feel, and know the vectors and the trajectory of the unfathomable human mind and its myriad manifestations. There is not a single Canto that does not inspire us or fill us with greater valour and stronger will for resilience and rejuvenation. After reading the Ramayana, our young minds will learn to face life with more courage, stronger will, nobler actions and purer minds. Thus, a realistic acquaintance with culture and civilization is ensured at an early, impressionable age.

It is believed that Valmiki wrote the Ramayana during the life-time of Rama. Over the years, historians and archaeologists suggest that the story of Rama had been in existence, though not in the written form, long before Valmiki wrote his epic. It is remarkable that Valmiki has portrayed Rama so vividly as a great and exemplary character—flawless, unblemished, and noble with deep compassion for humanity and a firm, unshakable belief in human values: Maryada- Purushottam (the supreme man of dignity and character). At the same time, he was equally known as one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu, depicted in some of the cantos. Centuries later, the glory of Rama was sung by Kamban (Ramavataram) in Tamil and by Tulsidasa in Awadhi (Ramcharit Manas). By that time it had become widely accepted that Rama was truly the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Many temples came into existence with ritual worship of Rama as a god. Following Tulsidasa, many poets of later times depicted Rama as a god.

It is amazing how Valmiki conceived the idea of writing this vast and grand epic. In Hindu mythology, Sage (Muni) Narada with his ability to travel at will, is known as the omnipresent messenger of God Vishnu and is popularly known as "the first journalist" of the universe. One day, Narada Muni visited Valmiki's ashrama just at random. After welcoming the saint, Valmiki asked him:

“O, omniscient Narada! Please tell me, who among the heroes of this world is the highest in virtue and wisdom?”

Narada's description of the ultimate hero is quite majestic—

“Hermit, where are graces found so high and rare?

Yet listen, and my tongue shall tell

In whom alone these virtues dwell.

From Ikshvaku's line he came,

Known to the world by Rama's name:

With soul subdued, a chief of might,

In Scripture versed, in glory bright,

His steps in virtue's paths are bent,

Obedient, pure, and eloquent.

In each emprise he wins success,

And dying foes his power confess,¹

Valmiki was simply overwhelmed by such a majestic description of Rama by Narada Muni. He was so impressed that even long after Narada had left, his mind was occupied by Rama's great deeds. While thinking about Rama's story, he went to the river Tamasa for his morning ablutions. During his bathing and praying he saw a pair of fearless curlews in condition, sporting and singing in their ecstasy of life and love. Suddenly, being shot by a hunter, the male bird fell dead near the hermit. The female bird lamented deeply over the death of her mate.

Extremely stunned by the condition of the slaughtered bird, Valmiki cursed the hunter that he would wander homeless forever as an expiation for his heinous sin. Utterly shocked and bewildered, he unwittingly cursed the hunter in the following spontaneous verse:

“Woe to the fowler's impious hand
That did the deed that folly planned;
That could to needless death devote
The curlew of the tuneful throat!”²²

After cursing the hunter, the sage was full of remorse for what he had just uttered; he was in deep agony for losing his calm in anger— being a sage, he had no right to curse anyone. But Valmiki's spontaneous words were coincidentally, the first words of poetry in the world and Brahma (the Creator, four-faced god,) saw this instantly and smiled in glee and said,

“O best of hermits, see!
A verse, unconscious, thou hast made;
No longer be the task delayed.
Seek not to trace, with labour vain,
The unpremeditated strain.”²³

It was the creator Brahma who himself commanded Valmiki to start writing the story of Rama. The task at hand was not to be delayed any longer. Unconsciously and spontaneously from soka (mourning) sprang sloka (verse) and the metre and rhythm were in perfect ambience: the perfect time for the story to be told had come.

This is the story of the beginning of the Ramayana by Valmiki, one of the greatest epics ever told and taught to the world for ages. The purpose of writing the Ramayana was to establish order and morality on earth. Brahma's words hold true even to this day—

“As long as the mountains stand and the rivers flow so long shall the Ramayana be cherished among men and save them from sin.”

India is known for its diversity, and in every religion, mythology plays an integral part for maintaining and preserving culture and civilization. In its true sense, the Ramayana binds our huge numbers together as one people, irrespective of caste, colour, creed, culture, and cuisine.

The Ramayana by Valmiki is an excellent work that encompasses all aspects of dharma. It is a way of life— ever flowing, ever evolving and yet remaining ever the same at its roots. However, it is difficult for everyone to understand the intricacies of dharma.

When king Dasaratha asked his son Rama to go into exile, citizens of Ayodhya were aghast, asking why the king should impose this unscrupulous order on Rama who was so dear to them, treading along the path of righteousness. Rama's character is reflected in his conversation with Lakshmana. He says that he could

obtain anything in the universe but he would not get it through unrighteous ways. Rama felt that the means must justify the ends. Rama said he was satisfied with whatever came by following dharma. Rama said that he had two fears: the fear of seeing unrighteousness flourish, and the fear of being answerable to the Supreme God in the Eternal world for his deeds in this mundane world. Sita remains to be the innocent victim of circumstances throughout the epic. Introducing Rama to Ansuya, the wife of sage (Muni) Atri, in his hermitage, Sita says,

“He possesses all pious virtues compassion towards all beings, and is the conqueror of worldly pleasures.” The Ramayana teaches us another lesson of great significance— howsoever dreadful one’s sin may be, one may hope to undergo penance and be freed from its consequences by expressing genuine remorse and achieve redemption through genuine expiation. This phenomenal truth can be seen in palpable form in the episode of Ahalya's (wife of sage Gautama) Deliverance. Ahalya was assisting her husband in his penance and austere life. It is said that all the celestials would come and pay their homage to Gautama. But Indra, the chief of the celestials, driven by unholy, lustful desire, went to the hermitage disguised as Gautama when the sage was away performing his daily rituals. On return, smelling foul play, the sage reprimanded Indra. He cursed his wife Ahalya, too, for complicity in the act. He cursed her to be turned into stone and prescribed a long penance to her. The sage said she would be freed when Rama set his foot in that Aashrama. She had undertaken penance for several years, waiting for Rama to come. When Rama eventually came to the aashrama, the dust particles of his divine feet transformed Ahalya back to her original form. Instead of criticizing others for their sins it is advisable to look within ourselves and try to purify our own hearts and souls from evil thoughts and sins.

Hanumana's impeccable devotion to his lord Rama sets the golden benchmark for bhakti and has become a synonym for complete, unqualified, unflinching, unparalleled devotion. Hanumana is believed to be still on earth by Hindus as per his will— it is widely believed that Hanumana chose to remain on earth to listen to Rama Katha and be part of the various celebrations related to Rama. Rama’s dharma or Rama Rajya was to serve the good, to establish order and righteousness and to vanquish the evil. Throughout all this, Sita remained to be of great support to him in spite of being an innocent victim of and on, even to the end. Bharata remains to be the supreme example of brotherly trust, service and unadulterated devotion. His devotion to Rama and sacrificial nature have made him immortal on earth. We have a lot of examples of devotion in the Ramayana. The divine devotion is one of the chief characteristics of the Ramayana and has made it a unique epic of love, trust, justice, compassion and supreme sacrifice:

“Let noble thoughts come to us from every side.”—Rigveda, I-89-i

The vedas say that those who aspire to liberation should surrender at the feet of God. Complete surrender to the Will of the Supreme Authority is the way to live a righteous and meaningful life: Lose no hope and do not forget Him: He sees, He waits, He tests, He evaluates— He Delivers. The Ramayana explains the same concept. It, too, has a lesson for those who aspire to liberation: Surrender— Renunciation is the path to adopt. All the celestials surrendered to Lord Vishnu to protect them from Ravana’s atrocities. Lakshmana renounced worldly comfort to accompany Rama to the forest. Bharata surrendered to get Rama’s divine sandals and ruled as a deputy in proxy for Rama instead of becoming king himself. Sugreeva surrendered to slay his atrocious and usurping brother Baali. Above all, the surrender of Vibhishana is considered significant because he renounced everything, praying for absolute liberation.

Rama’s unmatched character defines truly what the Geeta teaches us later on in the next era or Yuga (Dwapar yuga):

"Thou art entitled to work and not to its fruit.."

All the sages in the forest pleaded with Rama to protect them from the clutches of demons by slaying them. Why couldn't the sages slay the demons by themselves through the power of their penance? As sages, it was

not their duty. But as a Kshatriya, it was Rama's duty to protect the good people from the atrocities of the wicked. Rama gave the supreme example of following dharma and protecting the same.

Rama is known for showing gratitude. He wished to hear the Ramayana in its entirety, not because he wanted to know his achievements, but to recall the various incidents through the people who had helped him; he wanted to express his gratitude. Listening to the rhapsodists Lava and Kusa and going through their recitation, he was moved and his heart melted, and he revered all those people.

To conclude, the Greek philosopher Plato had banished poets and poetry from his ideal state because he felt that poets live in a world of fantasy and poetry is based all on fancy and unreal situations. Had he read the Ramayana, he would have got ideal citizens and real situations along with his ideal state.

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