

Valmiki, Kamban, Krttivasa, and Tulsidas's Rama: Negotiating Godliness and Humanity

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Abstract

The character of Rama created by Valmiki has been interpreted and re-interpreted in Indian Literature. Rama has been presented as the warrior hero, the ideal man, the Maryada-Purushottam, an iconic God, an incarnation/avatar of Vishnu, and an ordinary human being. Authors like Valmiki, Bhavabhuti, Tulsidas, Kamba and Krttivasa have delineated the character of Rama in various 'avatars'. Each author has focused on certain aspects of this character and has highlighted them through his narrative. Though Rama is presented by Tulsidas as a calm and composed personality who does not give in to emotions, whether of joy, sorrow, or anger, the Kamba Ramayanam shows his wrathful and angry side as well. Bahavabhuti has focused on the humane aspect of Rama's personality in his play Uttararamcharitam where Rama quite openly mourns the loss of his wife, Sita, and cries for her. Bhavabhuti, in his dramatic presentation, humanizes the God and does not bring his warrior-like, kingly, Godly persona into focus. This paper examines these varied characterizations of Rama, who is more than a literary character in India, to explore the different interpretations of his personality and their presentation by authors belonging to different periods but writing in Sanskrit-derived languages. It focusses on the phenomenon that is Rama and the way he has been used by authors belonging to varied cultures in India during the Sanskrit era for different purposes and to present different messages.

Keywords: Ramayana, Rama, Mythology and History, Godliness in Avatars

The narrative of *Ramayana* has been appropriated by authors from different historical periods, cultural backgrounds and even countries. Authors have used the basic plot of the story of Rama to create a new *Ramayana* each time through variation in some episodes, characterization, structure and presentation. In her introduction to *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* Paula Richman writes,

The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning (Richman 4).

Rama can be seen as one of the most evolved characters in terms of presentation if one takes into consideration the multiple versions and interpretations of his personality. He is presented as an exemplary man (Maryada Purushottam), an iconic God, a warrior prince (Kshatriya), an incarnation of Vishnu and the destroyer of evil in the different versions of *Ramayana*. This paper explores the characterization of Rama in the 'Balakanda' and 'Yuddhakanda' of the versions of *Ramayana* by Valmiki, Kamban, Krttivasa and Tulsidas.

Valmiki is supposed to be the first creator of the Rama story in the *Ramayana* written between 750 and 500 B.C. He presents Rama as a warrior hero who fights against an almost insurmountable enemy to rescue his wife, Sita, and the people of Lanka. Valmiki's Rama is not presented as god or an incarnation of god till the war ends, though he is compared to gods because of his might and valour. The figure of Rama is bestowed with many more qualities with each successive author who appropriates the character according to the literary tradition he follows for writing the epic, his personal devotion to and involvement with the character, his creative vision, his ideological agenda, and his social milieu. Each author uses the immensely popular figure of Rama to put forward his personal vision of the character he wishes to promote in his society, culture, religion and country. So, Rama is elevated from the status of a valorous, idealistic mortal to the status of the guru mantra (a name), "the redeemer of the world" (Tulsidas 12), "the heavenly king" (Tulsidas 40) and "(Narayana) incarnated on earth to subjugate that demon" (Krttivasa Volume I 5).

Valmiki builds Rama as an "ideal man" as he questions Narada, "Is there a man in the world today who is truly virtuous?" (Valmiki *Balakanda* 121) and the answer is 'Rama'. He is 'self-controlled, mighty, radiant, steadfast and masterful' and he is the 'guardian of righteousness' (Valmiki *Balakanda* 121-122). He is "as mighty as Vishnu" but not Vishnu himself or Vishnu incarnate at this moment in the text. He is a "mighty man" and hence, the model for

humanity to follow. Alois Wurm states, "R. not only is a hero and paragon of nobility of character (*dharmavira, dhirodatta*), but he embodies the story of a human destiny in its most sublime expression" (Wurm 528). Krttivasa, Kamban and Tulsidas present Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu, as God, as the Guru mantra, the highest name from the very beginning of their texts.

After eulogizing the city and country that Rama would be born in, Kamban directly comes to the point of 'The Divine Descent'. Vishnu speaks, "I myself shall alight on earth as Dasaratha's son and pulverize with my deadly shafts the mirage of boons that so misleads that rakshasa. Adishesha, my capacious bed, my conch, and my discus too will come to earth as brothers for me to command" (Kamban 10). Rama is an 'avatar' from the very beginning of Kamban's version written in Tamil during the twelfth century. In the 'Adikanda' of *Krttivasa Ramayana* (fifteenth century) Rama is again presented as an incarnation. Brahma directs Vishnu to take birth in the human form because Ravana can be killed only by a human being and "in an auspicious time the lord of the universe, descended on earth" (Krttivasa Volume I 61). Krttivasa strengthens the reason behind Rama's human form by showing an anxious Ravana who wants to kill Rama in his childhood itself. He sends Shuka and Sarana to kill Rama but they are presented as worshippers of Vishnu. They envision Vishnu's avatar in Rama and return to Lanka only to warn Ravana.

Tulsidas' *Sri Rama Charitmanas* (sixteenth century) presents Rama not only as an incarnation but as the supreme, Almighty God. Tulsidas expresses his immense devotion towards Rama as he invokes Rama at the beginning of his text and refers to him as the "the source of all light...vital breath of the Veda; the passionless; the incomparable; the source of all good" (Tulsidas 22). He wants everyone to hear Rama's story because it is a "resting place for intellect, a universal delight...a match to enkindle the fire of wisdom" (Tulsidas 27). He depicts Rama's legend as a story which even Shiva wants to listen to. "Rama is the omnipresent God, the blissful Lord of all, the most ancient Being" (Tulsidas 89). All human forms are shown as Rama's incarnation and he is considered beyond the grasp of intellect, or soul, or speech and that is why the cause of his incarnation cannot be 'dogmatically defined'. In fact, Tulsidas narrates a few stories which tell the reasons behind the birth of Rama like the curse of Narada, Rama's own wish, the destruction of evil. Through these discussions he also makes it clear that Rama has meant different things to different people at different times. Throughout his description of Rama's greatness he emphasizes Rama's divinity, his omnipresence and his omniscience. With each successive version of the *Ramayana* Rama has become less human and more divine.

As an ideal for human beings Rama has to be human, he has to suffer through the troubles that any ordinary human being might suffer. Valmiki emphasizes this aspect of Rama and presents him as an epic hero, a man of virtue and valour, of forbearance, and of patience. As the editors of *Indian Literature: An Introduction* put it, “Valmiki’s Rama is not an ‘avatar’ but a ‘mahapurush’ (a great man), a man endowed with extraordinary qualities but a man nonetheless, who debates the validity of his actions. He overcomes his human frailties to become divine” (Dev 2). With interpretations and re-presentations of his character, Rama consistently became less human. Human beings can listen to the story of his brilliance, valour, forbearance, patience, righteousness, virtue, but they can never hope to emulate it because he is divine, he has powers which the human beings cannot possess.

Valmiki presents his hero as valorous and powerful by narrating the stories behind each weapon he gains as a human being. ‘Balakanda’ of *Valmiki Ramayana* is the story of the birth and growth of an epic hero who gains power because of his actions and through the guidance of his Guru, Vishwamitra. While the later authors focus on the inherent greatness of Rama, Valmiki has provided stories of Rama’s inheritance, his family which provide him with many of the strengths he has. As Rama wanders through jungles, he follows the commands of Vishwamitra and is shown as a young inquisitive boy who is keen to learn. In his meeting with Parasurama Rama tries to maintain his calm “out of respect for his father” but he cannot control himself and lets his anger out, “But Bharagava, you regard me as if I were some weakling, incapable of discharging the duty of a Kshatriya. Now you shall witness my strength and valour for yourself” (Valmiki *Balakanda* 267). He “angrily snatched the superb weapon” to wield it. Valmiki presents Rama as an ideal son and a person of quiet resolve. He puts an emphasis on Rama’s Kshatriya personality which does not bow down to insults and believes in asserting its power. Robert P. Goldman writes about Valmiki’s Rama, “He is the perfect man, an ideal toward which ordinary mortals should strive.... [The] exaltation of Rama to the status of a perfect man is an independent development of and, in fact, a precursor to the elevation of this ideal figure to the rank of earthly manifestation of God” (Valmiki *Balakanda* 43). Goldman also states that, “The devotional element never permeated the Sanskrit epic and has left the bulk of it untouched” (Valmiki *Balakanda* 45).

The popularity of the Rama story gradually led to serve the purpose of the later authors to establish *Ramayana* as a religious, devotional text. Yet, the later authors may direct attention towards his divinity, but their depiction of Rama’s character also betrays his all too

human emotions. The expression of human emotions by Rama makes him more accessible to the readers/ audience who might lose interest in a completely flat character who displays no emotion except a quiet calm in any situation. Krttivasa's Rama indulges in playful banter with the sakhis of Sita who make fun of him for his dark complexion. His divinity is more important for the author who displays devotion towards the Lord. The characters around Rama are shown to behave according to their relations with him despite the fact that some of them are aware of his divinity. While facing Parasurama Rama first smiles 'in fun' and then shoots an arrow in anger. Kamban presents the passionate side of Rama at the sight of Sita. Valmiki's Rama and Sita do not see each other before marriage but Kamban's Rama and Sita not only see each other but are besotted with each other as soon as they look at each other because they are "the spotless pair who were once together on the milky ocean" (Kamban 27). Rama pines for Sita the night before the marriage and says, "Though heartlessly she has devoured me with her terrible, venomous eyes, I see in all things moving or still, only her golden image" (Kamban 28). Such images seem to be derived from Tamil love poetry, Akam, which talks of the union and separation of lovers. Here, Rama is made a Tamil hero separated from his love and expressing his pain due to the separation.

In *Sri Rama Charitmanas* as well Rama and Sita meet each other before marriage and fall in love with each other instantly. "Beholding Sita's beauty he was enraptured, but his admiration was all within, and utterance failed him" (Tulsidas 176). Tulsidas does not spend much time on the meeting of the lovers though and moves on to describe their marriage. After this display of emotion Rama is again restored to his calm, quiet, smiling self. Parasurama calls him a 'wretch' and his humility 'a mockery' yet he does not show any signs of anger. He reproves Lakshmana for arguing with Parasurama and insulting him. He bows before Parasurama and says, "In every way I am your inferior" (Tulsidas 220). Parasurama is amazed by Rama's 'profound and calm' speech. Tulsidas presents Rama as an all-knowing power who is so sure of himself that he does not even need to speak much in his defence.

By contrasting the behaviour of Rama and Lakshmana he depicts Rama's character as the superior one. Tulsidas does not depict any other emotions of Rama except for love and grief. In any other situation Tulsidas' Rama is the benign God. Yet the subtle betrayal of some emotions in all these versions shows that the authors might revere Rama as an incarnation, a God but they have to present his human side to make his character more accessible and approachable for the readers. He needs to go through human experiences because that binds him to them. In these later versions, his simultaneous humanity and divinity endear him to his

followers but also makes devotees of them. He no longer remains an epic hero but the God who chose to take on human form.

'Yuddhakanda' of the different versions of *Ramayana* is again a depiction of his divine personality as well as his human failures and weaknesses. All authors except Valmiki try their best to maintain the persona of Rama as a smiling, all-knowing divine warrior who does not panic in the situation of war and fights with immense strength yet he is shown to be weakened due to his emotions at a lot of moments. He falls prey to the treachery of his enemies at some points and he is injured by them. Krttivasa and Tulsidas have presented this as the workings of fate and the unfolding of the destiny of not only Rama but the other characters as well. These incidents again depict Rama as an ordinary human being who feels anxiety, pain and sorrow and who cries as well. These incidents lend a human-ness to Rama's character and also imbalances the author's presentation of Rama as an omnipresent God. He is called God by the other characters and is referred to as a divine being by the authors but the events of the 'Yuddhakanda' reveal his human frailties. While Ravana constantly refers to him as a mere human being in all the versions, his supporters and followers worship Rama as God. 'Yuddhakanda' brings out the complexity in presenting a character like Rama whom the author wishes to eulogize as God but who is a literary character which needs to be shaped through not only through the references of other characters but through important events as well.

Valmiki presents Rama as a human being for the major part of the 'Yuddhakanda'. Rama is depressed, sad, angry, gloomy and doubtful of his own capabilities according to the situations. He thinks "with a sorrow-laden heart" about crossing the "vast impassable sea" (Valmiki, Sen 394). It is Sugriva who tries to cheer him up by invoking his Kshatriya spirit and says, "Why hast thou been cast down like an ordinary man?" (Valmiki, Sen 394). His eyes grow "dilated with rage" when the sea does not respond to his prayers. He loses all hope each time Lakshmana is injured and also when he is reminded of Sita. He needs the support of his friends and followers constantly. He is "overwhelmed with grief at the sight of the condition of Lakshmana. Tears rolled down his cheeks in streams" (Valmiki, Sen 527). He gets extremely angry at the insinuating words of his enemies like Ravana and Kumbhakarna. He answers each insult with harsh words and does not take them calmly or lightly. He challenges Ravana angrily, "Wait, Thou villain! How would you save yourself after inflicting such injuries on me?" (Valmiki, Sen 463). The display of his emotions is in continuity with his portrayal as a valorous

warrior, a doting brother and a loving husband. His anxieties and fears seem real because he is not continuously referred to as God.

Authors like Krttivasa and Kamban constantly try presenting Rama as a smiling, calm, wise godlike figure who is unperturbed by disturbing events. But at a lot of moments Rama is shown to be getting anxious, angry, depressed and sad. These authors follow Valmiki's version when they present Rama's varied emotions in certain circumstances but they have also made interpolations about his divinity which makes Rama's character inconsistent. On the one hand he smiles at the spies sent by Ravana and ensures them of their safety and, on the other, he berates Ravana in front of them and also sends Angada to insult Ravana in his assembly. "O great warrior Angada, you go and speak some abusive words to Ravana" (Krttivasa Volume II 17). He is "immensely delighted" when Angada tells him that he "rebuffed and abused" Ravana (Krttivasa Volume II 28).

Surprisingly, Rama also takes the form of Krishna to fulfill the boon he has granted to Garuda. "Rama, to whom his devotees are quite dear, stood there in the form of Krishna in *tribhanga* posture" (Krttivasa Volume II 39). Krttivasa asserts Rama's character as an incarnation of Vishnu through this incident which is not present in the other versions. Despite being an incarnation Rama 'panics', 'loses hope' and becomes 'anxious' at various points in the text. In Valmiki's *Ramayana* he is unaware of his divinity till the end of the war, but here he's reminded of his divine status quite a few times yet he is not shown to be completely confident of himself. At the appearance of new enemies, he needs the advice of Vibhishana whose role would become completely redundant if Rama is shown to be knowledgeable of every adversary and adversity. He is often surprised when he sees enemies like Kumbhakarna, Bhasmaraksha and asks for Vibhishana's counsel. In fact, he also has to be 'reminded' of his weapons that he should use against a particular enemy (Krttivasa Volume II 121).

On the one hand, Krttivasa shows that Rama emotionally withdraws from the battle because even the demons are his devotees and he cannot kill them and, on the other, he also shows that Rama is delighted at the death of his adversaries. In such situations he is not the detached, composed God who is fighting only because it is Dharma. In fact, he stops the battle with Ravana when Ravana prays before him because he cannot kill his devotee. Rama, the God, takes birth in the human form with the purpose of killing Ravana yet he cannot kill Ravana. His dual character seems an impediment to his Dharma and also proves difficult for the authors to etch out without contradictions. This contradiction becomes quite apparent at Ravana's death. Rama, the God, helps Ravana gain redemption by letting him have 'a glimpse'

of himself and Rama, the man, wants to learn 'politics' from Ravana. He sends Lakshmana to learn the 'lessons of politics' from Ravana.

Kamban's Rama also "looked on with compassion at seeing Ravana reduced to this sorry state" (Kamban 303). He becomes 'utterly disconsolate' at Lakshmana's pain. 'Overcome with grief he blames himself and says, "I was born only to be a burden to this earth" (Kamban 340). He considers his life "a catalogue of errors" (Kamban 347). In such dire situations Kamban also shows the monkey army deserting Rama and showing no respect to him. They fear that the same person whom they called 'Lord of the world' cannot save them. "What does it matter who rules the world—Rama or Ravana? All we want are fruits and vegetables to eat..." (Kamban 369). To heighten the effect of the battle between Ravana and Rama and to present Ravana as an able competitor who cannot be killed easily Kamban presents Rama as utterly 'helpless' in front of Ravana. "The gods concluded that the fight had gone out of Rama. Even Dharma began to shake. Born a man, he seemed not to have any knowledge of his own powers" (Kamban 377).

Tulsidas proves to be the most devoted bhakta of Rama in terms of depicting him as God, as well as the name that can be chanted for redemption. In *Sri Rama Charitmanas*, Mandodari describes the cosmic form of Rama. His body parts are described as the parts of the universe. He wants Angada's message to "achieve my cause and serve his interest at the same time" (Tulsidas 823). He provides the dead demons "a quarter in His own abode" (Tulsidas 856). He does not need much advice, uses his weapons with a smile on his face and does not get affected by abuses hurled at him by the enemy. Even when he is overpowered by the adversary Tulsidas justifies such acts by calling them 'His' allowance for the workings of fate or to invest the war with glory. Indrajit injures him badly and Tulsidas writes, "It was in order to invest the battle with a glory that the Lord allowed himself to be bound by the snare of serpents..." (Tulsidas 385). He meets Ravana's attacks with ease and a smile on his face and whenever he displays the slightest of emotions, they are the most balanced emotions which come and go on his face before he composes himself again. Valmiki presents the most human Rama and Tulsidas presents the most godlike Rama. From Valmiki to Tulsidas, the status of Rama has seen a sea change, almost a complete reversal. Tulsidas has made Rama the iconic God whose name can lead to salvation during the Bhakti period in Northern India. Valmiki's Rama worked as an inspiration, an ideal that can be emulated, and a revelation of human potential and possibilities, Tulsidas's Rama is the God who can be revered from a distance, a

utopic possibility that can never be achieved again and a figure one can be devoted to but never be able to emulate.

One of the most important events in the 'Yuddhakanda' is the testing of Sita which seems uncalled for and unjust from Rama, the God. Here too Tulsidas goes over the incident quickly and justifies it by writing, "Sri Rama sought the fire-test to bring Sita back to light" (Tulsidas 925). None of the other characters are shocked or disturbed by his act. Everybody sees it as the Lord's wish. Even Sita performs the test happily. Rama does not show any emotion throughout and stands unperturbed by the incident. It is Valmiki and Krttivasa who present the conflicting emotions of Rama. Both the authors provide "public scandal" as the reason for Sita's test and show that Rama is grieved by the fact that he has to do this for his family honour. He is 'pained at heart' and tears flow from his eyes but he wants to protect his Dharma. In both the versions Sita retaliates and does not take the insults quietly as the words of God.

Kamban makes the situation more dramatic as Rama looks at Sita "like an angry serpent" and accuses her quite heartlessly for not only staying at Ravana's palace but also for eating 'flesh', drinking 'toddy' and 'enjoying herself'. Here, Kamban presents Rama as a Tamil hero and not the knowledgeable God. This is inconsistent with the earlier references to him as God or an incarnation who is aware that Sita is Lakhshmi incarnate and cannot be blamed. David Shulman sees this as Kamban's use classical imagery and writes, "Seen in relation to the central story of Rama and Sita's common fate, the entire *Iramavataram* might well appear as an extended love poem in the *bhakti* mode. Like earlier Tamil *bhakti* poets, Kampan conflates heroic or panegyric themes (*puram*) with *akam* or 'interior' elements..." (Richman 102). Agni accuses Rama of 'abandoning Dharma' while Brahma comes to remind him of his true status which he has already been aware of in other parts of the Epic. Shulman provides an explanation to this contradictory presentation of Rama, "...Kampan's protagonist is a god who discovers repeatedly, often to his own amazement, the painful cognitive and emotional consequences of being human" (Richman 109). Krttivasa's and Kamban's Rama is a human-god who is mostly aware of his own story but also rediscovers his divinity when he falters but Valmiki's Rama is a man who discovers his status as an incarnation only at the end which makes Valmiki's presentation more believable and consistent.

Conclusions

Rama's question about himself in the Valmiki's *Ramayana* defines the dilemma that surrounds his character after so many versions of the *Ramayana* have been written. "I am the

son of Dasaratha and consider myself a human being; now tell me what I really am?" (Valmiki, Sen 551). When Rama asks this question in the other versions it seems redundant since the dual or contradictory nature of his character has already been revealed before Sita's test. The duality is part of his character from the very beginning of these versions which is a result of the popularity of the Rama story and the growing devotion in the minds of the authors. While Valmiki wrote the story of an epic hero who discovers he is God, the other authors write the epics considering Rama a God from the very beginning which makes their delineation of Rama's character difficult and affected by contradictions. From the vantage point of the later authors this complication has become a part of Rama's character. Shulman writes,

The *Ramayana* is the portrait of a consciousness hidden from itself; or, one might say, of an identity obscured and only occasionally, in brilliant and poignant flashes, revealed to its owner. The problem is of forgetting and recovery, of anamnesis: the divine hero who fails to remember that he is a god comes to know himself, at least for brief moments, through hearing (always from others) his story (Richman 93).

Goldman historicizes the popularity of *Ramayana* and the character of Rama and its appropriation by devotees, theological narratives and religious sects.

The *Ramayana* was not originally intended to be a theological narrative.... On the contrary, we would suggest, it was the great popularity of the work at an early date that attracted the interest of the sectarian bards of the puranic tradition and, later, of the Vaishnava theologians and the great *Ramabhaktas* among the poets of India's modern languages. Although the traditional regard for Rama as a compassionate manifestation of God on earth must certainly be a major factor in our understanding of the increasing vitality of the poem and its extraordinary destiny in medieval and modern India, this cannot be the principal reason for its early spread and popularity (Valmiki *Balakanda* 47).

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