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Ramayana: A Cruise on the Waves of Curses?

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Abstract:

In the spiritual and metaphysical realms, words hold profound significance, as vessels for conveying energies, intentions, and profound insights. The ancient Indian scriptures gracefully emphasize this profound significance of words, recognizing them as the essence of wisdom, conduits of spiritual energy, and carriers of timeless truths. It is a strong belief that words become powerful, mighty, and effective when body, mind, and spirit are synthesized, akin to the Mantra science. With noble intentions, they have hidden energy of becoming boons and when agonized, tortured, or angered speak to inflict harm or punishment on someone, it becomes a curse. *Ramayana*, the noble and ideal epic in Indian culture, also considered as national history, uses legions of curses and boons that enrich the beauty, structural unity and force of the story. Different characters use curses as the combatants use magical weapons called Astras, capable of destroying planets. The main thrust of this paper will be on how word potency and verbal purity direct Ram Katha and how curses blended in the structure of the story make it a tragedy of fate. The place of fate and free will in one's life is an ongoing question in literature. This article explores the cursed realms of *Ramayana* to unravel the intricate interplay of fate, morality, and divine justice. Can its parallels be drawn with Greek, Roman, and Elizabethan tragedies? This paper examines how the story is shaped through curses and how it would have been propelled differently if words were not considered to have the power to elicit the supernatural. What is the relevance of this concept in the present scenario? Can the story be considered true, as it goes against the scientific fervour of modern times?

Keywords: curse, supernatural, fate, free will, tragedy, epic.

Narrative techniques developed because a story matters far less than how it's told.

1. Introduction

In the spiritual and metaphysical fabric of India, words wield immense power, serving as conduits to transmit energies, articulate intentions, and impart profound insights. Sound and words are deeply revered. Sound is Brahm, eternal, and a way to connect to the Supreme. Words are like deities. Speech is personified as Vak, a form of Saraswati, Goddess of wisdom. It is believed that words become powerful, mighty, and effective when body, mind, and spirit are synthesized, akin to the Mantra chanting science. With noble intentions, they have hidden energy of becoming boons and when agonized, tortured, or angered speak to inflict harm or punishment on someone, it becomes a curse. Such words can destabilize the minds and disrupt the order and regularity of the world. Sound and speech are interlinked with basic Indian concepts of Karma/action (all actions and functions of the body and mind including thoughts and words). It establishes the conditions necessary for the fruition of past actions and determines the fate of living beings at each birth. In modern times, the concept of Karma is somewhat explained with near approximation by Emerson in "Compensation" in which he wrote, "Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be severed; for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end pre-exists in the means, the fruit in the seed."

The main thrust of this paper is on how word potency and verbal purity direct Ram Katha and how curses blended into the structure make it a tragedy of fate and a living epic, an epitome of model behavior. The idea is to revisit the Ramayana through the eyes of cursed people and to ponder the question of fate versus free will. A curse is destiny and destiny is the result of past actions/ Karma. This paper examines how the story is shaped through curses and how it would have been propelled differently if words were not considered to have the power to elicit the supernatural. The story of *Ramayana* takes many twists and turns, owing to the curses and boons that constitute the warps and woofs of the fabric of the epic. Curse consumes enormous energy of the person who delivers it but most of the curses come out of extreme anger or grief. Boons become curses in the case of bad people/asuras. Another angle is that it is the *word- piercing* hunting skill of King Dashrath and consequently incurred curse from Shruvan Kumar's dying parents that a king's simple story is turned into the saga of Maryada Purushottam Shri Ram.

2. Ramayana / Ram-Katha

Ramayana is "the march (Ayana) of Rama", Rama's journey in search of human values. Rama's willingness to suffer and sacrifice for the ideal of 'Dharma' and truth still appeals to every Indian soul and is the reason for the everlasting appeal of the story. It has been imbued into the country's culture and has become a composite element of India as a Nation as it's difficult to separate religion and culture. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, "The work of Valmiki has been an agent of almost incalculable power in the molding of the cultural mind of India." Accepted as avatars of Lord Visnu and Lord Shiva respectively, Sri Rama and Hanuman are some of the most beloved among the divinities in Hinduism who worshipped in thousands of temples all over the world. For many centuries, Valmiki has been known as the Adi Kavi, the first poet, and his Ramayana is considered by many as the most ancient poem, so famous in the Indian subcontinent that its storyline is known in nearly every house. The hero of the story, Prince Ram, son of King Dashrath of Ayodhya, has become an incarnation of God and every man, woman, and child in India knows the story of Ram and his fight with the demons. One reason for this tale's mass popularity is Ram Leela, which is played every year in all of India especially in North India for nine days. The tenth day is Dussehra, the killing of Ravana. The greatest festival of the year for Hindus, present at every corner of the globe, Deepawali or Diwali, is celebrated for the return of Rama from exile after 14 years with wife Sita and brother Lakshman after killing Ravana.

After the Mahabharata, Valmiki's Ramayana is the second greatest Sanskrit epic and it has influenced the philosophy, religion, and culture of India for centuries. It remarkably influenced later Sanskrit poetry, drama, and literature, and has inspired many poets to write their versions of the epic, among which some of the most notable are Kalidasa's Sanskrit mahakavya "*Raghu-vamsa*," written in the 5th century C.E., and Tulasidasa's "*Rama-carita-manasa*," written in Awadhi in the 16th century, which became so popular in North India. This epic provides an archetype for all human creative endeavors in India and has been recreated again and again in various literary genres and various art forms. Ram Katha is the fountain of thousands of stories and at present, more than three hundred *Ramayana* exist.

Ramayana is the narration of the struggle of Prince Rama, the true heir to the throne being the eldest son of King Dashrath who has three wives, to rescue his wife Sita from the demon king, Ravana, when he is in exile because, young Queen, Kaikeyi, the stepmother has got her boons fulfilled, asking the throne for her son Bharat, at the time of Rama's coronation.

The true origins of the story are debated, but the authorship of the epic as we generally know it is assigned to the great sage Valmiki. According to a legend, Valmiki was a robber who one day met a hermit who transformed him. Once upon a time, while the sage Valmiki was performing austerities on the bank of the river Tamasa, Narada Muni appeared before him and narrated a summary of the Ramayana, called the "Mula-Ramayana" or the Original Ramayana. After hearing the Mula Ramayana, the sage Valmiki composed thousands of Sanskrit verses to elaborately narrate all the incidents in this great epic. We know the incident from Valmiki himself. The great sage, Valmiki saw the death of a bird when he was about to take a bath in the holy waters of the Tamasa River in the early dawn. He was shocked by this cruel incident and his heart melted out of pity. He utters the following verse unknowingly.

“मा निषाद प्रतिष्ठाम्त्वमगमः शाश्वती समाः।

यत्क्रौञ्च मिथुनादेकमवधिः काममोहिता॥”

"O hunter! you will never be respected in this world, as you have killed a bird, which was in passionate love-sports."

Thus, the pity of the sage was expressed in the form of a curse unknowingly. The Ramayana was composed after receiving a boon from Brahma, the Epic became "Live" only by the boons given to Kaikeyi by Dashrath, and has its origin in the curse given by Valmiki to Nishath. Its origin is pathetic and Ramayana ends due to a curse, though not actually pronounced, with the disappearance of Sita into the belly of mother-earth and she never unites with her husband again. Maybe the Curse becomes so important in the structure of the story because Narada related the story of Narayan to Valmiki. After all, he was cursed and Valmiki's birth as an author lies in his curse to Nishath.

3. Curses and Boons as warps and woofs of Ram-Katha

In the *Ramayana*, the curses and boons are so numerous that, one can say without any exaggeration, that *Ramayana* is a story of boons or curses. They are the kingpin of the structural pattern of the Ramayana. In the beginning Ravana's story is in great detail that with meditation and tapasya of many years, Ravana has got boons from Brahma, and these unlimited boons of limited immortality have turned him into a monster and the reason for God's incarnation in human form as Rama. Many curses and bones are blended in Ramayana like cause and effect. Though Curses and Boons in the Valmiki *Ramayana* have no independent

existence, they are inseparably blended with the main story. If they are removed from the Epic, it is difficult to reconcile or harmonize various threads and links of the story. Though the devices of boon and curse are as old as humanity, and prevalent in world pieces of literature, Valmiki employed them skilfully and has thus enriched the beauty-structural unity and force of the Epic. Famous curse episodes, kings (Dashrath, Ravana, Vali), Devas (Indra, Rambha), Gods (Brahma), and mortals (Ahalya) are examples of victims of Curse in Ram Katha. These curses are integrally fabricated in the pattern of *Ramayana* with constraints of space, only the curse given by Sharvan's parents to Dashrath has been dealt with in detail in this paper as it becomes the basis of the story development. There is a strong axis between curse and boon and sometimes both curse and boon provide strong support to the beginning to the end and the important events in the Ramayana. They give a flip to the web or the structure of the story of the Ramayana. The story of the curse pronounced by Shraavan's parents to King Dashrath was used as a flashback technique when Dashrath who was grief-stricken by the news of Rama's exile, narrated to Kausalya, the incident that took place in his earlier life. The Story goes like this; There was a boy named, Shraavan Kumar. His parents were old and blind and he served them with full devotion. As their wish, when he was taking them on pilgrimage in the large baskets attached to a sling, he carried that sling on his shoulders. During the pilgrimage, he came to Ayodhya. When at night time they were resting in the forest, they asked for water. Shraavan left them to bring water, he went to the nearby flowing Saryu River. King Dashrath who was a skillful word-piercing hunter, was also present in the forest for hunting. When he heard the gurgling sound of Shraavan's pot from the river, he shot an arrow at the sound, and soon he heard the painful groans of Shraavan. He hurried to spot, and dying Sarvan Kumar implored for the water to his parents. When King Dashrath reached there, he kept quiet and offered water. before taking water Sharvan's parents asked about his identity, and Dashrath talked about the incident. The poor blind parents were so full of sorrow that they cursed the Dashrath that as they were suffering because of their son he would also suffer the separation of his dear son and would die from the same pain.

3.1 King's curse and Queen's boons

The two boons that Dashrath had given to young queen Kaikeyi had become of extraordinary importance due to that curse in the *Ramayana*. Had Kaikeyi not got the boons, the story of Ramayana would not have been as it is available today. The two boons had a tremendous force to stir up the events and give a twist to the entire story of Ramayana. Though

those were boons given to Kaikeyi, they were extremely terrific from the point of view of other characters. The unlimited boon of limited immortality that Brahma gave to Ravana promotes and fosters the boon given to Kaikeyi. The killing of Ravana was the main purpose of the human incarnation of Rama. For that reason, it was necessary to bring Rama and Ravana face to face. It was not possible in Ayodhya and there was no strong reason to send Rama out of Ayodhya. Being the eldest among Dashrath's sons, he was the rightful heir to be coronated as a crown prince. He had also secured the love and affection of all, even that of Kaikeyi by his conduct. Therefore, it was not easy to overlook his claim and set him aside. The story required that Rama should go away from Ayodhya for a long time. Considering the requirement of the story, the boons of Kaikeyi are arranged very deftly. Sufficient care is taken to avoid the impression that the boon is suggested at the nick of time or is extraneous. Kaikeyi's father had compelled Dashrath to take a pledge, even before his marriage with Kaikeyi that her son would be the next heir apparent and thus the roots of the boon were further deepened. To provide some alibi for giving a boon to Kaikeyi. She is described to have helped Dashrath when his life was in danger on the battlefield. There is nothing unnatural in Dashrath's giving a boon to Kaikeyi who had saved his life. She did not accept the boons immediately and kept them pending with a request that the implementation of the boons would be accepted at a proper time. She probably had no idea at that time that the boons could be exploited in that manner. She too was delighted by the news of Rama's coronation as crown prince and there was no serious obstacle in the coronation of Rama as planned before. Nobody would have put any obstacle and so Manthara was used as an instrument to give rise to Kaikeyi's anger and fan it further by reminding her of the boons given by Dashrath, thereby giving an unexpected turn to the main story which would seem to be natural. It was not easy to bring about a change in Kaikeyi's mind because she had the same affection for Rama as she had for Bharata. This momentous task of inflicting punishment on Dashrath for the fulfillment of grief-stricken Sharvan's parents' Curse is carried out by Kaikeyi's maid Manthara. The amazing fact about the narrative technique of Rama's story is that this is just one example. All other curses are also inflicting harm by invoking the supernatural with their interrelatedness with some boon and the question of the intervention of fate versus free will enters into the narrative.

4. Ram-Katha as tragedy

Tragedy, as developed in ancient Greece in the hands of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles is the spectacle of man at grips with destiny, the strain of the strife too strong for

mortal beings to handle but essentially establishes profound affirmation of life. Ram Katha ensuing from The Ramayana, is the best example of tragedy. It is essentially tragic in the Western sense of the term. It is not simply a tragedy. It is a grand tragedy of a brilliant epoch consisting of numerous tragedies. The stories of its principal characters illustrate the tragic rhythm of an action growing from their fatal flaws and ending in their fall and death. They illustrate various patterns of tragedy developed in the Western tradition of literature and discussed in learned works on tragedy as a literary form. The Heroic Ideal of the Western Epics is discernible in The *Ramayana*, the responsibility for the sufferings of the divine characters of The *Ramayana* falls to some extent upon them. Nobody is the maker or destroyer except one's Self.

The element of the wonderful, required in Tragedy depends on its chief effects on the irrational/supernatural. Curses become instrumental in the part supernatural/fate plays in human life. They are probable impossibilities; sometimes the character is not responsible for incurring a curse. Does Dashrath accept Kaikeyi's demands of his free will or is his fate at play? There are a bunch of coincidences that don't directly have anything to do with the curse, such as young queen, Kaikey helping Dashrath in the war, his promise, and Manthra's instigation at the coronation of Rama. Is his shooting the arrow on Sharwan, mistaking it as a deer's sound, a cruel twist of fate, predetermined by a supernatural power because Lord Vishnu was cursed by sage Bhrgu and Narad? Are the boons that have made Ravana arrogant and the consequent curses heaped on him the reason for Lord Vishnu being cursed? The role of fate versus free will in one's life becomes debatable. Besides Indian commentators like Prof. Baldeo Upadhyaya and G.K. Bhat think that no tragedy has ever been written in Sanskrit drama. The very concept of tragedy is alien to Indian philosophy according to them, as an unhappy ending of human life is never conceived in Hindu philosophy. Life is, of course, a continuous process of birth and death, till it attains salvation. Death is only a temporary phase in the continuous life of man. Moreover, the prevalent belief is that God is just and impartial, and hence good will ultimately prosper and evil be destroyed. If a man suffers, he suffers on account of his misdeeds or sins in his previous life. Suffering is a means to the test of man's character and his integrity. There is nothing disastrous in it. Thus, in the Indian context, it is an epic poem, a tool for teaching proper behavior through the examples of Rama and Sita. Ramayana it's not a tragedy but an epic that uses Karun Ras (Karuna=Empathy) which ultimately results in enjoyment. This enjoyment results in the catharsis of the turbulent emotions. According to Angus Ross, a discussion of the nature of the narrative and the mode of narration can carry us

to the heart of the "meaning" of a work of fiction (qt. Ramana 156). Valmiki's *Ramayana* was written in a frame narrative, the narrative style (which Shakespeare used for *Macbeth*) where Narad narrates the whole story in the beginning, and the question arises when the beginning, middle, and is already known, why 24000 shlokas have been written in seven Sargas. The reason is that this epic is not written in a didactic style but is in the Kanta smit style of the Sanskrit language. He neither praises Rama nor does he speak ill of Ravana's character. He issues no certificates to them. He only wrote what they did, what they had spoken and what were the consequences of their actions. There are many incidents in the *Ramayana* where after getting the boons, the person becomes degenerate and then gets punished and comes back to his senses, like Ravan and Bali.

It is up to readers to decide whom to imitate and how to end the life story. Valmiki, the poet has used the narrative as a potent vehicle for transmitting important philosophical, ethical, and cultural ideas. In the first Katha by Valmiki Ram is a human being with divine qualities, over time, he becomes the incarnation of the God Vishnu. Ram Katha has been imbued into the culture of society. Rama is perceived as a divine ruler.

After Valmiki's *Ramayana*, this story has developed through the ages, several incidents are termed as interpolations, sometimes the one incident has many versions, and over time, many characters, and incidents have been interpreted differently. The greatest example is the Goswami Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* which has become more popular than Valmiki and later on the 300 versions of *Ramayana* and where and till now it is being written from various angles from the point of view of various characters. It tells that reader-response theory is working and the most interesting and exciting story is being told repeatedly.

5. Ram-Katha as an epic

The way curses and blessings regulate the main actions; lends an epic grandeur to essentially tragic. As Mahapatra stresses in "Epic and Romance", epic is finally a tale of tragedy against the ultimate backdrop of destiny. But the larger context, themes, and cultural significance established this poem as an epic. Aristotle's statement that epic poetry has a great special capacity for enlarging its dimensions, is seen concretized in The *Ramayana*, where Valmiki has effectively comprehended almost all the aspects of life. Universally acclaimed and accepted as the first among Sanskrit poets, Valmiki was the first to discover a metrical expression of epic dimension and vision to match the emotional ecstasy of the story of Rama.

That way it is difficult to find a parallel of it in the literature of the Western world. Homer, in *Iliad*, covers only a part of the war of Troy which lasted for ten years. He aimed at thematic unity, artistically acceptable magnitude, and beauty of form free from superfluities. Milton, the great English Epic poet, narrates the aim behind writing his epic poem, *The Paradise Lost* as "To Justify God's ways to Man". Valmiki, unlike Homer and Milton, aims at the cosmic majesty of God pervading and transcending our universe: Obviously, it includes our terrestrial stream with its petty socio-political and psychological conflicts and the "comprehensive essence" of a culture at the apex of its progress i.e. "The eternal tragedy of Man- the pain of separation from the dearer and the nearer ones." Thereby it exhibits in addition the features of tragedy and epic. Beyond the physical conflict lies the greater conflict i.e. a war between man and his conscience." According to the Bible, existence on this earth is the result of a curse. Adam and Eve suffer because they fall short of the ideal, the ideal of Christianity. Shakespeare writes in *Julius Caesar*: "Men at some times are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlying." Shakespeare's heroes have their tragic flaws which bring about their ultimate ruin. The character of Rama, through the incarnation of God Vishnu, never tries to surpass human boundaries, becomes prey to human folly, and human pain, and yet rises to perfection. He is at his best an Ideal hero within the human limitations of mind, body, and soul, who suffers like a common man and yet at times, rises to divine status. Most of the other characters in *Ramayana* have their drawbacks that make them convincing as human characters and lend credibility to the narrative itself. Thus, the Ancient Indian epic, *The Ramayana* is written "To justify Man's ways to God.

Matthew Arnold describes literature as a "criticism of life". The ancient epic *Ramayana* written centuries before the beginning of the classical period is the criticism of life. It is a massive recordation ensuring the nation's hoary and still living tradition that is the nectarine clue connecting the present with the past and the future, beyond the religious treatise, only as a mythological religious tale of the incarnations of Gods and Goddesses, where human action becomes negligible. when we notice its narrative technique, it establishes a critical attitude toward life that was there in the great work of Valmiki centuries ago.

To deal with it only as a tragedy will be to narrow down its scope. There are many coincidences in this epic like when Ram is sent to exile., his younger brothers Bharat and Shatrughan are not present at the scene and the spontaneous reaction of Bharat is not available at the moment when the throne is being asked for him. It is strange that Seeta's father, Janak,

is not invited to the coronation ceremony. the rest of the world can be surprised to read that there is a Kop Bhavan in the palace where the royal people can show their anger and displeasure and might hinge on their whims or selfish interests like Ram's stepmother Keikey does. Perhaps, this is the first epic in world literature where such a place has been shown.

The Spiritual aspect dominates life on the Indian subcontinent. The events of Ramayana show a very high level of interaction and understanding between the animals and human beings of that time. Mountains are responding to Rama's quest for the Sita, and talking birds, sea, and animals, all show that human beings are in complete harmony with nature. It's important to note how nature and all the four elements of existence coexist; the sea animals, trees, and birds are all inculcated in the story, written many thousand years ago by the poet Valmiki. Ramayana is an epic adventure having all the elements of a great story, a supernatural tale of love, wisdom separation, war, pain, morality, and ultimately justice. It is written in such a style that Valmiki is a character in this so it becomes itihās/history. When a reader response theory is applied to it then interpolations and later additions take Katha in line with myths. To conclude this discussion in the present scenario, in India, the position is such that this Katha has gone beyond the boundaries of written and oral and it has become a live Epic. Presenting an ideal for a family like Maryada Purushottam Shriram and a model nation like Ram Rajya, going itself into the cultural veins of the country and the issue of the construction of Rama Mandir influences the politics of the country a lot.

5. Conclusion

This great Indian epic that can't be categorized as History or Myth, is not only a great religious treatise but is a true criticism of life and human nature with such depth and subtlety that it was, is, and would never be seen in any work of art in the world literature. When we notice the narrative technique of *Ramayana*, we have to treat Valmiki not only as a seer but as a poet who has tried to reflect the life of his times not only as it is, but as it should be or ought to be and the whole story not the predestined drama of fate, the characters of this great epic as human beings with all its limitations what Aristotle calls Hamartia. The objective reading of *the Ramayana* supports the doctrine of character as destiny. Therefore one finds the words of a prominent critic McCollom, applicable to the *Ramayana* that tragedy is a monument to the freedom of human choice. As a literary work, it has been said to combine "the inner bliss of Vedic literature with the outer richness of delightfully profound storytelling. Valmiki's *Ramayana* is the most authoritative version of India's epic classical tale of eternal love and

wisdom centering on the warrior Prince Hero lord Ramchandra who left its mark on the consciousness of man with the truths that are at present today as they were thousands of years ago.

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