

Valmiki Ramayana and the Case of Sita in Historical Context

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Abstract:

Present paper attempts to investigate the issue of interpolation in *Valmiki Ramayana* on the basis of historical evidences. Most of the scholars are of the opinion that at least two kandas (books) of *Valmiki Ramayana*; namely, *Balkanda* and *Uttarkanda*, are not part of the original *Valmiki Ramayana* but have been annexed to the same at a later stage. In agreement with this argument, I have tried to critically examine the episode of banishment of Sita on historical basis.

Keywords: Valmiki, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, Epic, Gender

Presently, *Valmiki Ramayana* has 24000 verses in seven books (*Kandas*). Since the beginning, scholars doubted authenticity of the first and the last *Kanda* of the *Ramayana* i. e. *Balkanda* and *Uttarakada*. Most of the historians are convinced with such arguments.

Europe's contact with India has brought into play a critical attitude to all significant elements and outcrops of Indian tradition and *Ramayana*, for obvious reasons, has been subjected to severe analytical probe giving rise to appraisals and theories of varying nature. In recent times feminists have investigated gender issue in *Ramayana*.

Ramayana has been told, retold, written, rewritten, translated and retranslated in all major languages of the world since second century AD when it is said to have been completed.

The *Ramayana* has generally been accepted until modern times as a homogenous work of a single author, Valmiki. Critical examination now suggests that it not only must have passed through many stages of development, but might also contain numerous interpolations, and additions in Book I and Book VII. Valmiki never tried to transform his hero, Rama, into a divine being. On the contrary, he, under the advice of Narada narrated story of Rama, the best man (*Narottama* or *Purushottama*). To establish the idealistic view of life, the poet has had to introduce such high qualities which led his hero to cross the bar of human world and enter the realm of divinity in the later period (Brockington 261-64).

Different historians have given different dates for *Valmiki Ramayana*. In *Ramayana*, Vedic gods were quite popular which shows that the contemporary society was closer to Vedic times.

Considerable evidence shows that *Ramayana* was a well-known story by the beginning of the Christian era. A short passage of *Mahavibhasha* (commentary on *Jnanaprashthana* of Katyayaniputra), mentions that there were 12,000 *slokas* in *Ramayana*. Composed perhaps during the reign of king Kanishka, it is the earliest record mentioning the word *Ramayana* and its volume and size. Terracotta from Kausambi (second century B.C.) depicts the abduction of Sita by Ravana (Sengupta 127). Kautilya warned that nobody should follow the examples of Ravana and Duryodhana, which would lead to one's downfall (Kangle 8). Vaidya points out that Valmiki is mentioned in *Taittiriya*

Pratisakhya and in *Vajasneyi Samhita* (6). Again, *Ramayana* gives a graphic picture of *ashrams* of sages-Bharadvaja, Sutikshna, Agastya and others. The description of various practices of *asramas* in *Ramayana* reveals a society of the pre-Buddhist times. This would indicate that the original Valmiki *Ramayana* was composed before the advent of Buddhism (Vaidya 10). MacDonell, however, claims that *Ramayana* was composed during the mid-fourth century B.C. and attained its present form by the end of second century B.C (Macdonell 575). Keith also places composition of the original portions of *Ramayana* in the fourth century B.C. (318). In Winternitz's opinion, Valmiki composed original *Ramayana* on the basis of ancient ballads and probably *Ramayana* in its present form came into existence towards close of the second century A.D. (496, 516). Thus, it is generally agreed that the entire text appears to have been completed by third century CE (Lal 3).

Valmiki, author of the present *Ramayana*, composed his work on the basis of ancient stories current in the society. Lal has confirmed that the tradition of composing and singing ballads based on real events accurately has been prevailing in eastern region of Uttar Pradesh even today (32).

This is one of the methods of keeping important events and people alive in folk memory in traditional societies since the ancient times when the art of writing did not prevail. If Valmiki was a contemporary of Rama, as goes the Indian tradition, then the oldest *Ramayana* was sung in Vedic dialect, for Rama belonged to Vedic age; and the present *Ramayana* is a Sanskrit redaction of *Ramayana* (Banerjee 10).

Rama was an illustrious descendant of *Ikshvaku* dynasty with its capital at Ayodhya. For this statement, though there is no contemporary (historical) record, still this fact is vouchsafed by all the Puranas and early Jain- Buddhist traditions, which are not later than the 3rd century B.C. The names of Rama and his father occur in the list of ancient Indian historical kings.

Likewise, besides Ayodhya, Mithila, Kausambi, Kanyakubja are well known places and the history of these places, though not fully lay bare archaeologically, might be as old as 1000 B.C. at least. On the basis of findings of potsherds of the Painted Grey ware (PGW) (J. Huxtable 62), Sankalia fixed the date of its occurrence between 800 B.C. to 400 B.C. and taking the uppermost limit, he says that the antiquity of Ayodhya, and other places, said to be contemporary to it, might go back to this period, that is 800 B.C. (45). This date might be taken back if the deepest layers of Ayodhya, Mithila and Kausambi yield the OCP (Ochre Colored Ware), and dated to about 1700 B.C. (Sankalia 46). Lal conducted excavation at the sites associated with *Ramayana*, and found that, the settlement at Ayodhya began with a phase when a very distinctive and deluxe pottery called NBP (Northern Black Polished Ware go back to 1000 BC (as attested by Carbon 14) had come into being (20). However, excavations from Sringaverapura revealed OCP settlements. On the basis of excavations from other sides- like Bhardwaj Ashram, Nandigram and Chitrakuta, Lal infers that all these sites were inhabited even in the beginning of NBP culture or before (23).

In Sankalia's view, the foundation of Ayodhya and other sites in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar might be placed provisionally to about 1500 B.C. Excavations at Chirand, on the confluence of Ganga and Ghaghra, have yielded evidence which places the beginning of a pastoral-cum-early agricultural life going back to 2000 B.C. Ayodhya is described in the *Ramayana* as having storehouses of rice, though this reference is very probably late, and might not belong to the earliest phase of the city. Thus Rama and his times could be taken back up to 1500 B.C.

Therefore, there might have been a long gap between *Ur* (original) *Ramayana* and the *Ramayana* as produced by Valmiki and it is quite evident that the original *Ramayana* might be quite different from the *Ramayana* we have at present. The sources of *Ur Ramayana* might go back to a period between 1500 and 1000 B.C. Valmiki made *Ramayana* into a heroic poem and his poem went

on inflating from time to time, incorporating at least some features of that time. When this heroic poem was created, mythical things-characters and events were introduced into the story. Recent historical writings (Thapar and Richman) try to interpret the Indian past with the present socio-political concerns and problems (Thapar x).

There are three recensions of Ramayana, consisting of 24,000 slokas in seven books and all of them suffer interpolations. Not only the regional *Ramayanas*, but Sanskrit *Ramayanas* also offer many variations between themselves in respect of Ramkathas. Valmiki was the first to systemize various stories current about Rama legend in the society. But in the course of time, the Rama's story narrated by him also acquired various modifications. This is apparent from three well known recensions of *Valmiki Ramayana* itself. All three go comparatively to ancient times and they offer several differences in reading, at least one-third of the verses that one recension has, does not occur in other two recensions. These differences are due to fluctuations of oral traditions among reciters of the epic. Thapar calls attention to the plurality of *Ramayanas* in Indian history: "The *Ramayana* does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places" (Thapar 72). Critical examination now suggests that it must have passed not only many stages of development but also that it contains numerous interpolations and addition of Books I (*Adikanda*) and VII (*Uttarakanda*). Sharma writes that the *Ramayana* of Valmiki originally consisted of 6000 verses which were raised to 12000 and finally to 24000 (6). He further states, "Although this epic appears to be more unified than *Mahabharata*, it has also its didactic portions which were added later. *Ramayana* compositions started in 5th century B.C. Since then it passed through as many as five stages, and the fifth stage seems to be as late as the twelfth century A. D. (Sharma 6).

Mahabharata, towards the end of its third book, dedicated a subsection to Rama Story, called *Ramopakhyana*; besides, it also had several short resumes of the story of Rama in different contexts. Jacobi, Winternitz and Sukhthankar, the first editors of the critical edition of *Mahabharata*, concluded that the *Ramopakhyana* knew Valmiki and represented a free summary of Valmiki's text (Winternitz 505).

Ramayana with seven kandas might have got its complete shape by 2nd century A.D. The caste rigidity shown in *Uttarakanda* through the Sambhuka incident and discriminatory attitude towards women, as reflected in the banishment of Sita, reveal the tendencies of later Vedic times.

In this historical background of the text and society, let us examine the case of Sita, keeping in view the gender issue raised by feminist scholars. Goodman observes, "Feminism is a politics: a recognition of the historical and cultural subordination of women (the only world-wide majority to be treated as a minority), and a resolve to do something about it" (x). The scholars and feminists examine literary sources of ancient India including epics and draw inferences based on such sources regarding gender discrimination.

More recently, *Ramayana* has been critically examined by feminists, critics and historians (Kelkar 65). Hazarika examines gender issue in the light of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, "During Epic age, society was patriarchic and females had to struggle for their identity and honor" (295). Linda Hess, Paula Richman, Beighlie Ozmun, Kali Withlow, Jodi Erickson and many other scholars through their scholarly articles have critically examined the issue of Sita in *Valmiki Ramayana* and very correctly appreciated the role of Sita and condemned Rama.

An episode at the end of *Yudha Kanda* proves Rama's unjust and harsh behavior towards Sita. After Rama had killed Ravana and the battle was over, he asked Hanuman to give this news to Sita seeking her reply, with the permission of Vibhishana. Hanuman came back and conveyed to Rama

that Sita desired to see him. Rama then asked Vibhishana to go to Sita and ask her to take a holy bath, dress befittingly, put on her jewels and then bring her to him. Sita, as desired by Rama appeared before him and with great affection called out, 'My Lord' and could not speak any more out of anxiety and happiness. But Rama looked at Sita and said she has been rescued and Ravana is killed. This all he did for his honor and now her name bears a stain and it is not proper for him to accept her again. She assured him of her chastity and for proving that she herself proposed to undergo fire test. Sita emerged out of fire with all her strength of character and conviction. And fire god himself asked Rama to accept her as she is fully chaste. Rama said: "My Lord! Agni! This Sita is pure enough to purify three worlds. She is as chaste as snow. Even as a good man can never abandon his fame, so, Sita cannot be abandoned by me. If there is one thing I am afraid of, it is the censure of the world of men." (Subramanyam 548-49).

The second instance of Rama being cruel to Sita is in *Uttarakanda*, where, the gossips in the town regarding Sita's abduction and custody by Ravana for a long time and his own acceptance of Sita, did not sound well to Rama. Consequently, he banished her.

Rama has been criticized by feminists in above context. (Hazarika 295); (Bose 39); (Thapar x); (Arya 147). On the basis of historical sources, we have tried to establish earlier that a lot of interpolations took place in Ramayana and not only *Uttarakanda* and *Balakanda* were added to the *Valmiki Ramayana* later on, but numerous other verses also inflated the epic. If we keep aside the episode of *Yudhakanda* pertaining fire ordeal and *Uttarkanda* from *Valmiki Ramayana*, it has a happy ending and Sita is a popular Queen, ideal, acceptable and loving wife of Rama. But a sheer interpolation has brought havoc on Sita and disgrace to Rama. Can we, as the students of history, afford to accept all this? If yes, then we have to establish the chronology of Rama, Ramayana, and Valmiki first. Only then we can logically interpret such acts. We know that in early Vedic society, there was hardly any discrimination against women. Only during later Vedic phase did the male domination and female subjugation surface in the society. Secondly, if we accept the episodes mentioned in *Yudhakanda* and *Uttarakanda* as historical, we have to accept the mythical divine intervention as real historical event and Rama as the born God, incarnation of Vishnu. And if we accept that Rama was God then, he cannot be a part of human history. At the same time, we have to accept that Sita was an incarnation of Lakshmi and whatever happened was according to divine scheme. Therefore, we as historians cannot raise questions on divine activities performed for the welfare of humanity. We cannot be selective in choosing data as per our convenience. If we accept Rama as human being, as he himself claimed to be, we have to analyze his attitude towards other females also, and find out whether he was really anti-woman. Rama, despite knowing very well about the incest of Indra and the humiliation Ahilya was subjected to, showed generosity towards her. The same Rama, in order to set free Sugriva's wife from the custody of Vali, even played foul in killing him and thus protected the dignity of a woman at the cost of his own ideals. But how strange! See the cruelty of the same Rama in case of Sita. He fought a tough battle against Ravana, killed him and ultimately relieved Sita, got her back after her successful fire trial and accepted her as a Queen, but just due to gossip of a washer man he banished Sita to satisfy a washer man (Arya 143). Rama very well knew that Sita was chaste and he brought her back to Ayodhya with full honor. But now a great sorrow consequent upon the censure of the citizens has perceived his heart and in this situation he ordered Laksmana to leave Sita near Valmiki ashram. It is just a concocted story and if one believes it, how would one explain Rama's attitude to Ahilya, Tara, and Ruma? In majority of the cases, Rama was chivalrous, magnanimous and dutiful to women. Bharata, son of Kaikeyi was disrespectful to her after she banished Rama, but the latter was most respectful and obedient even to Kaikeyi who filled his life with horror and gloom. At the same time, portraying Sita as submissive and meek, as several recent studies have demonstrated, do not match the original story by Valmiki (Bose 38).

In the light of these arguments, one must apply reason while understanding the case of Sita's exile. This story seems to be an invention and addition of post-Vedic times and the interpolator, in order to justify male dominance and female subjugation, used *Ramayana*. Rama, most probably, lived during Rig Vedic times around the beginning of the 18th century B.C. (Bhargava 273). The Rig Vedic society hardly witnesses any case of gender bias. Therefore, in the light of above facts and arguments, the case of Sita's trial and exile by Rama should be seen as a concocted story. However, the intention of the poet, whosoever he might be, is patriarchal, discriminatory and anti-female. The episode of Sita reflects the male domination in ancient times but the episode as a historical happening might not have ever taken place.

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