

Utopia and Indian Imagination: Revisiting the *Ramayana* of Valmiki

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Abstract: Utopia, as defined by lexicographers, refers to a perfect system or society freed from corruption, oppression and stagnation which sounds to be an idealistic and imaginary construct; the equivalent of 'utopia' is *Ram Raj* as pictured by Valmiki in the *Ramayana*, the Indian classic. Gandhiji whose imagination is strikingly Indian, conceives of *Ram Raj* not as Hindu Raj but Divine Raj where watchwords are liberty, equality, dignity and fraternity.

Ram the hero of this epic, steels his heart against any kind of temptation: pelf, power, position or woman, annihilates the miscreants and reestablishes the order over-thrown by rakshyasas (terrorists). Sita, the heroine, is the embodiment of chastity and establishes mental union and spiritual communion with Ramchandra, her husband which is exemplary. Helen the most beautiful seductress of Greek myth stands comparison with her because both of them were the cause of devastating wars but Sita outshines Helen in the practice of womanly virtues: a devoted wife, a caring mother and a beloved Queen. Both the hero and the heroine prefer self-sacrifice to self-enjoyment—here glows the beauty of Indian imagination. This voluminous epic, divided into seven books, excites imagination and affords aesthetic pleasure derived from the experience, at once, the mundane and the supra-mundane. This paper aims at shedding light on the uniqueness of Indian imagination that dwells upon self-sacrifice, compassion and endurance—the virtues that elevate the humans to be the fit inhabitants of a utopia.

Keywords: Utopia, Indian, Imagination, Compassion, Endurance.

Utopia as an idea has stirred the imagination of the Indians since time immemorial because the Indians have always longed for perfection; Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate dreams of an ideal India 'where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection.' Tagore's vision is utopic. Long ago Valmiki, the epic poet of *The Ramayana* was gifted with such a vision and this immemorial myth has excited the Indian poets, philosophers and politicians to realize it. In all standard Dictionaries utopia is defined as a perfect society or system freed from corruption and stagnation. Corruption is as old as man himself; hence to conceive of a system or structure freed from corruption appears to be an imaginary proposition. However, imagination has the inherent potentiality to be transformed into reality. In this context utopia as a concept acquires significance. The end of this paper is to highlight the nature of Indian imagination specially of the seer poets who philosophize and visualize a better humanity—a utopian society and the forces that shape it. The forces may be visible or invisible but the history of the world can't be made without them. *The Ramayana* originally written in Sanskrit is a classic—an immortal work of art because it is the product of creative imagination of a high order; it has been translated and trans-created into different languages. The word 'revisiting' in the title of the paper is not without a meaning. Since the composition of *The Ramayana* this literary work has drawn the attention of a circle of cultured readers and critics. Hence this magnificent and popular work by Valmiki needs to be assessed and interpreted through many

a critic or researcher through diverse approaches in order to enhance the aesthetic enjoyment. This paper is concerned with Indian imagination and utopian ideals. It has been designed after *The Ramayana* written originally by Valmiki. References have been made to R. K. Narayan's *The Ramayana*, and *The Ramayana* of Valmiki trans-created by P. Lal. It has been divided into four sections: the opening section is the introduction that spells out the objectives of paper; the second section focuses on surroundings which stirred the imagination of the seer poet Valmiki to write it. The third section sheds light upon the ideas and ideals that constitute utopia, as meant by Valmiki and interpreted by R. K. Narayan, P. Lal and Gandhi. The fourth section is the conclusion which highlights the splendour and creativity of Indian imagination, high readability of the text *The Ramayana* and above all the conditions that determine the formation of utopia which the humans in general and the Indians in particular long for.

II

The French critic Taine makes a pertinent point that every work of art is created under the impact of 'race', 'moment' and 'milieu'. Valmiki represents Aryan culture; the whole epic *The Ramayana* gets originally written in Sanskrit. The surroundings in which the classic epic struck the imagination of Valmiki, the sensitive soul provoke literary research. The great sage was wandering in a forest near the river *Tamasa* and meditating on the beauty and bounty of nature. Suddenly he caught glimpse of a pathetic sight that stirred his imagination which is primarily Indian because *The Ramayana* that was the outcome represents Indian thought or culture to be distinguished from the occidental. P.Lal in *The Ramayana* of Valmiki narrates the episode in heart-touching language. The episode has four phases: the scene of mating between two Krauncha birds, the killing of male Krauncha by the hunter of Nishada tribe, the female Kraunch sobbing and weeping, and finally the awakening of the poet in Valmiki. Valmiki pictures the first phase of the incident:

Two sweet-voiced Krauncha birds were mating,
Savouring the delights of spontaneous love. (Lal 1)

Valmiki captures the intimate moments between the Krauncha couple. The moments are intimate and the love relation between the male and the female Krauncha is profound because both the birds use the language of natural love- here the language consists of gestures that manifest closeness. Valmiki the master poet highlights the source of intimacy between two creatures which is based upon effective communication or nice gestures. Then he describes how the male Krauncha gets killed by the hunter:

An ill-minded fowler of the Nishada tribe,
With deliberate malice,
In Valmiki's presence,
Killed the male bird. (ibid.)

The poet attributes ill motives of the hunter to the act of killing the birds in mating because nothing can be crueller than killing the birds engaged or absorbed in the act of love-making. The description of the piteous cry of the female Krauncha merits attention. Valmiki feels, in

the core of his heart, the screaming of the female bird which arouses but pity. The sensitive poet grows compassionate. The poetic out-burst is worth mentioning:

...the female, seeing blood gush out,
Screamed.
She screamed piteously.
Compassion stirred in Valmiki's heart
When he saw the bird die.
More compassion stirred in him
When he heard the screams of the female. (ibid.)

The arousal of the dormant poet in Valmiki in a pathetic situation is an issue worth contemplating. The female bird trembles and cries when her mate unexpectedly meets the end. The blood gushing out of the body makes the female bird experience horror. The basic function of tragic poetry: the evocation of pity and fear is accomplished in a dexterous way. Valmiki turns reflective; his eyes get fixed upon this pathetic event:

For some time
Wise Valmiki brooded;
Then, turning to his discipline Bharadvaja,
He said:
...
From shoka comes shloka:
There is no poetry without compassion." (Lal 2)

Valmiki realizes that poetry is born out of intense grief: such poetry is sure to arouse the feeling of compassion in the sensitive humans. Here there is echo of the romantic poet Shelley that our 'sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.'

Thus, the source of composition of *The Ramayana*, the classic epic, as delineated by Valmiki is different from that of ordinary lyrics. William Wordsworth, the great romantic poet cum critic, holds the that poetry is the spontaneous over-flow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility. But in the creation of the epic poem *The Ramayana* the source is poignant feeling—the heart-rending experience: the poet identifies with the creature of observation—the natural pity wells up in his heart and poetry comes as naturally as leaves to a tree. Thus, the key to the understanding of the master poem *The Ramayana* is understanding the value of compassion—the virtue of virtues. *The Ramayana* is a master piece of world literature because the striking episodes are woven around the feeling of mercy—the cultivation of which can transform the present structure of society or system into a utopia. The basic characteristic of utopian land is perfection and without the nurturing of love and compassion utopia is a mirage. The episode narrated above drops hints about the arousal of two sublime human instincts: love and kindness. Thus, the source of composition of the epic signals the vision of a better world order—an order that corresponds to the formation of a utopia, at least, in master poetry.

R.K.Narayan sheds light upon the origin of the epic in a different way. He begins the epic in a dialogic situation-the dialogue between the sage Narad and Valmiki. He writes:

One day Sage Narada visited me. I asked him, 'Who is a Perfect man-possessing strength, aware of obligations, truthful in an absolute way, firm in the execution of vow compassionate, learned, attractive, self-possessed, powerful, free from anger and envy but terror-striking when roused?' Narada answered, 'Such a combination of qualities in a single Person is generally rare, but one such is the very person whose name you have mastered, that is, Rama. He was born in the race of Ikshvahas, son of King Dasaratha...'' (5)

Rama, the protagonist of the epic *The Ramayana*, is a perfect man. He is so called by Valmiki because on the one hand, he is the embodiment of truthfulness, dutifulness, learning, compassion and power; on the other he is freed from the basic human vices like jealousy, anger, lust, infatuation, pride and greed. He is the paragon of virtues and keeps himself far above the vices of the ordinary humans. Perfection is the key word in the creation of utopia. Thus like P. Lal Narayan discovers utopian elements in the form and design of *The Ramayana*.

To sum up, both P. Lal and R.K. Narayan, deeply interested in Indian myths, like *The Ramayana* are haunted by the idea of utopia-an imaginary land of abundance, liberation and perfection. They highlight that Valmiki professes the awakening of sublime feelings like love and compassion and treats them in a masterly manner in his magnificent epic *The Ramayana*. The source and the subject of *The Ramayana* is a perfect world order which is another name for utopia.

III

Mahatma Gandhi who dreamt of utopia and longed to materialize his dream used to pray Lord Rama. To him Ram, Rahim and God are convertible terms (Tikekar130). In other words, Gandhiji didn't believe in the religious fanaticism but the oneness of humanity which is the secret to undiluted peace and happiness. By Ram Raj he advocates 'not Hindu Raj but Divine Raj, the kingdom of God' (ibid.). Thus, Gandhiji expounds that the experience of spirituality is the way to perfection and, therefore, towards utopia. To build utopia what is needed is absolute sincerity and devotion for the ideal, of which Hanuman of *The Ramayana* is the incarnation. Gandhiji holds that Hinduism would not have been much of a religion if Ram had not steeled his heart against every temptation (ibid.). Rama had the inner confidence to battle against greed which is the ordinary human weakness-a vice that begets sin which leads to death. Thus, *Ramayana* as Gandhiji remarks 'purifies while it cures, and therefore, it elevates.'

The concept of utopia is an ideal one because perfection is the watchword in a utopia. In this sense Rama, the king of Ayodhya is an ideal ruler who banished his beloved wife Sita only to respect the sentiment of an ordinary woman married to a washerman. He didn't hesitate to be an exile for fourteen years in order to fulfil the vows of his father. Laxman and Bharata are

ideal brothers who were prepared to sacrifice their royal comforts for the sake of the elder brother. Sita renouncing the comfortable life in the palace preferred to accompany her husband in the dense forest inhabited by demons. Thus, the characters in *The Ramayana* profess and practice idealism which opens out new vistas for the establishment of a new world order which can be branded as utopia. Valmiki, the artist tries to idealise the real and realize the ideal-here he creates a space for the utopian imagination. Doubtless, the demons like Ravana, Indrajit live but they startle others through their penance, austerity, meditation and above all the art of warfare. Thus, in the imagination of Valmiki the devils are not without virtues if strength or valour is the mother of virtues. The utopia is the creation of the strong not of the weak. The denizens of utopia are not hollow men. Valmiki, the sage poet, has visualized the strong ones who have tremendous willpower to embark upon the career of adventure- be he Rama or Ravana, Sita or Mandodari, Laxman or Bibhishana. Thus, Valmiki supernaturalizes the natural. He is also adept in naturalizing the supernatural. For example, when he depicts that Indra, the king of Gods got attracted by the mortal beauty like Ahalya he dexterously points out the seductive power of mortal woman. Thus, the great epic poet tries to juxtapose the natural with the supernatural in such a fashion that he becomes the messenger of a new era which is remarkable for wonder, heroism and startling revelations that constitute the rudiments of utopianism.

The Ramayana is divided into seven chapters: *Balakanda* (the birth, youth and marriage of Lord Rama), *Ayodhyakanda* (Ram's exile), *Aranyakanda* (the kidnapping of Sita in the forest, *Kiskindhya Kanda* (search for Sita), *Sundarakanda* (the finding of Sita), *Yuddhakanda* (the battle). *Utterkanda* (the coronation, banishment and departure). Thus, the epic is replete with incidents and accidents which are multidimensional. Doubtless, Valmiki is endowed with a kind of artistic imagination which is lovely, creative and powerful. In the ancient times India was considered to be 'the guru of the world' because Indian rishis were enlightened people. Enlightenment happens; it can't be attained through stress or strain, struggle or suffering. Utopian imagination is linked with enlightenment because it is only through enlightenment perfection can be realized and imperfections conquered. Inaugurating a utopia is ushering in a golden age. Rama Rajya is the golden age and Rama; the mighty warrior is the harbinger. Doubtless, the world pictured by Valmiki is different from the world the humans experience in the present times. In the 20th century T.S. Eliot visualized the war-torn world as the 'wasteland' but war-torn land in Valmiki's imagination is not the wasteland. In the battle between Rama and Ravana vices are wasted but not the virtues. Eliot bewails the deterioration of human values but Valmiki celebrates the restoration of human values. Hence Valmiki's imagination is utopic rather than horrifying.

The exact equivalent of utopia in Indian languages is *Rama Rajya*; it means it is a land in which Rama is the ruler. Rama the man and the administrator is a non-attached individual- here lies the soundness and sagacity of his judgment. He is a model administrator in the sense he could refrain himself from the practice of nepotism, favouritism and indulgence in sensual pleasure which characterise the life styles of modern rulers. As a king he loved his subjects so dearly and so well that just to resolve the conflict between a washerman and her husband he sent his beloved wife to the ashram of Valmiki, the seer poet. Doubtless, such an act hurt the refined

sentiments of Sita and her well-wishers but Valmiki, the *rishi* proved to be a father-like figure under whose care grew up to two warrior sons: Lava and Kusha, born to Sita. Valmiki makes a point here: for an ideal ruler blood is not thicker than water. It is the wellbeing of the subjects that matters most. In fact, such an attitude is expected in a utopia not in our world where the politicians are slaves to self, power and position and tend to forget the people once the election is over. Thus, Valmiki is dwelling upon an ideal world inhabited by the subjects who attach importance to human values the cultivation of which is a must for the utopia. Empathy is the key word to describe the relation between the inhabitants of the utopia. Sita was so much devoted to Rama that her union with Ram was much more than the physical; her love was platonic. This is also the case with Laxman and his wife Urmila. The brotherly love between Bharat and Ramachandra is exemplary; so is also between Ravana and Kumbhakarna. Both the demons loved each other so well that they died for the same cause. The cause may be wrong and it resulted in their untimely death but the way they identified with each other is unique.

Mahatma Gandhi the politician and the statesmen, after Valmiki, imagined utopia. His attitude corresponds to that of Ramachandra. In the book *India of My Dreams*, R.K. Prabhu the compiler quotes Gandhiji's views that an Indian Governor should be 'a teetotaler'; 'he must dwell in a cottage accessible to all' (279). Thus, Gandhiji's idea of Governor is that of Ramachandra who spent fourteen years in forest and could afford to live in a humble cottage at Panchabati where Ravana the demon could easily come and kidnap Sita with him. This is the price Rama could pay in his preference for humble dwelling and high thinking. Gandhiji wrote in his diary; 'let India be and remain the hope of all the exploited races of the Earth whether in Asia, Africa or in any other part of the world' (Prabhu 302). Again Gandhiji says if you want to give a message to the west it must be the message of love and the message of truth...in this age of democracy, in this age of awakening of the poorest of the poor you can redeliver the message with the greatest emphasis (302-03). Gandhiji's views echo those of Rama. When Ramachandra listens to the conflict between the washerman and his wife and banishes his chaste wife, he emerges as the champion of democracy because he honours the sentiment of an ordinary subject of the kingdom. P. Lal in his *The Ramayana* of Valmiki writes:

It was essential
That Sita be tested
By the Fire Ordeal
To convince my subjects. (158)

Fire stands for intense spirituality and purity. In a utopia the citizens must have concentrated energy to achieve something, that is, sublime and pure. In this context the message of Vivekananda as quoted by Sabina Thorne be cited:

Live for an ideal, and leave no place
In the mind for anything else. Let us
Put forth all our energies to acquire
That which never fails:
Our spiritual Perfection (cover page)

Both Ramachandra and Sita strove for spiritual perfection; they could achieve it because despite adverse circumstances they could retain serenity, composure and peace that passeth beyond understanding. They are the model citizens of utopia-an imaginary construct.

IV

To sum up, Valmiki's *The Ramayana* is the product of Indian imagination-an imagination that dwells upon self-sacrifice, compassion, unflinching devotion for the master and organized efforts to destroy the evil and restore the good. Rama the protagonist of this epic is not an ordinary ruler because he had the extraordinary capacity to identify himself with the ordinary masses like the quarrelsome washer woman or a prejudiced step-mother like Kaikei or the army of monkeys. He is an exemplary leader because he is not slave to power but uses power for the good of the subjects. Ravana, his antagonist, can be looked upon as the leader of the mob because he could command loyalty from a large number of demons-adept in archery even if the cause was unjust. In a contest between the two virtue triumphs. Utopia is land where truth wins over falsehood; peace prevails and happiness is experienced by the citizens. Thus, Valmiki's *Ramayana* is based upon a better world order which is rooted in utopianism-here lies the perennial appeal of the epic-an epic of compassion.

Valmiki is dwelling upon an ideal world but he has not lost contact with the real. He focuses on the step motherly attitude, the fear of public opinion, attachment between the kith and kin. The utopian imagination of Valmiki can be well-compared with that of John Keats. The world of nightingale represented by Keats the English romantic appears to be a utopia but Keats does not like to prolong his sojourn there through esemplastic powers of imagination. But Valmiki the epic poet returns to utopia time and again. Thus, *The Ramayana* proves to be idealistic in its conception and tone. Utopia as presented by Thomas More deals with perfection in socio-economic and political sphere but Valmiki goes ahead of it. He deals with spiritual perfection which mothers progress, prosperity and peace in every arena of human Endeavour. Thus, Valmiki's imagination is strikingly Indian. Self-sacrifice rather than self-enjoyment is the motto of the hero and the heroine who practice a way of life that can be distinguished as Indian. Sita the heroine of this classic can be compared with Helen of Greek myth who was the cause of devastating war of Troy. But Sita outshines her in the practice of womanly virtues: fidelity to single husband, nourishing of profound love rather than possessing sensual attraction. The epic glorifies monogamy, champions the cause of love over lust, celebrates the triumph of the good over evil-the trends and tendencies that herald a utopia.

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