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Ramayana in Puranas

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Abstract

Ramayana is one of the two great Indian epics that influenced the world culture. In majority of the literatures of the world, we can see the story of Ramayana being narrated, adopted or retold in one or the other formats. In India, the Puranic literature has also included the story of Rama with slight modification to that of the original. The present paper deals with few key incidents in the story of Ramayana, retold in Padma Purana.

Keywords: Ramayana, Purana, Padma Purana

Introduction

Like almost every other country, which are the cradle and home of great ancient Civilizations, India too has its two great epics. The Ramayana is one of them. The original epic and many of its versions in different regional languages have never lost their charms or ceased to exercise their influences on the life, culture and creativity of the people. Its sub-plots have been used as plots of many other ancient, medieval even modern literary works. Quite a number of those who adopted whole epic into their own mother tongues or regional languages allowed the magic of their imaginations to play into the frame work of the original Ramayana. With their poetic gifts they transmitted their translations into great works of arts and craftsmanship as did a great poet of the North - East, which will be discussed later.

It is universally accepted that Sage Valmiki is the author of Ramayana. It is believed that the story of Rama was scribed by Sage Valmiki for long in form of oral recitation, later was made into a book. Ramayana indicates that hearing the story of Rama from present in form of oral recitation and Sage Valmiki.

From the ancient times its appeal has remained undiminished on literature, arts and in religion its influence is unparalleled. There is not a single village or city where the Ram katha did not reach either in this or in that way. From the sages' places of meditation deep in the forest to the popular city, everywhere the story of Ramachandra finds people to bring and keep under its spell. Ramleela is regularly enacted. Like water and air Ramayana Katha is equally indispensable in the life of Indian people. There is no language in which Ram katha has not been written.

The Puranas, a part of the Vedic literature, also mentioned the story of Rama, along with many other stories. The story of Rama found in the Puranic literature can be seen with minor changes in the incidents of the story, but chiefly followed the story line of Valmiki Ramayana.

The word Purana is commonly used to indicate matters which are ancient in nature. Purana can also be treated as a bundle of ancient stories. The exact number of Puranas is not easy to state. It can be generally stated that the Puranas are 18 in number. Apart from these, Puranas like Sthala purana, Kula Purana, Buddhist and Jain Puranas are there. The major 18 Puranas have been classified into three according to the trinity aspects of the divine Lord. Majority of these Puranas described the story of Rama either as a conversation or as a narration. The present paper deals with the story of Rama, as found in Padma Purana, as a representation.

The voluminous Padma Purana, essentially a Vaishnavite text, makes fascinating variations in its retelling of the Ramayana story. It is one of the largest Puranas and the third largest book in Indian literature. The Srushti Khanda of the Purana has a small section dealing with Rama's killing of Sambuka and a couple of other things. Uttara Khanda too deals with Rama's story in a few chapters which tell the story of his birth, birth rites, the naming ceremony, etc.

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Here we are also told briefly of the birth of Bharata, Lakshmana and Satrugna as well as of Sita, Rama's guarding Vishwamitra's sacrifice, the weddings of the four brothers, Rama's exile to the forest and life there, Sita's abduction and Rama's subsequent battle with Ravana, his return to Ayodhya, the crowning and his eventual departure from the world. The narration here is mostly the same as what is found in Valmiki Ramayana, with some variations. Rama's story here ends with Sita entering the earth and later Rama and his brothers walking into the Sarayu accompanied by the citizens of Ayodhya, the Vanaras, the Rikshas and so on, to end their life on earth, as in the Uttara Kanda of Valmiki's epic.

However, it is in the Patala Khanda that we have the detailed narration of Rama's story. Though this Khanda also speaks of other things, most of the Khanda is essentially Rama's story, named Rama Aswamedha, which is the story of the last part of the Ramayana narrated against the background of the first Aswamedha sacrifice that Rama conducts years after he abandons the pregnant Sita in the jungle. The story is not narrated in strict chronological order – for instance, the abandoning of Sita, an incident that takes place at the earlier part of the story, is narrated towards the end.

Let's now take a look at how the story of Sita's abandonment given here differs from that in the Uttara Kanda of Valmiki Ramayana. In the Uttara Kanda of Valmiki Ramayana, we meet Sita for the first time in Chapter 42, in the beautiful Asoka Vatika gardens attached to her palace. This is a beautiful place, filled with all kinds of flowering and fruit trees, with hundreds of birds perched on the trees. A beautiful fragrance fills the whole place. There are several bowers there. There are pools and tanks with steps paved with gems, their water cool, in which stand lotuses and water lilies in bloom. In the middle of all this beauty, Rama is seated with Sita and is giving her a drink with his own hands. The Ramayana compares Rama here to Indra who gives drinks with his own hands to his wife Sachi. Servants bring all kinds of delicious food. Apsaras and Naga and Kinnari women, all experts in dancing and singings, sing and dance near Rama. Several pretty women get drunk and in their intoxication, dance close to Rama.

The Uttara Kanda now tells us this is how Rama spends his all his days. He spends the first half of the day in his court, dealing with official matters, and the second half with Sita. It is on one of these days that Rama discovers the signs of pregnancy in Sita. Rama is delighted and enquires her of her longing. Sita, smiling, tells him she desires to spend at least one night in the ashram of holy ascetics living on the banks of the Ganga. Rama assures her that her desire will be fulfilled the very next day. That night, as was his habit, Rama is with his friends, ten of them mentioned by name, sharing light moments of fun with them. In the middle of some story, Rama asks them what the people of the city are saying about him, about Sita, about Bharata, Lakshmana and Satrugna and about Kaikeyi. One of the friends, Bhadra, tells him the people are all praise for him, but Rama insists on hearing their criticisms too. He assures Bhadra that he can speak freely about these, for he wants to know so that he can practice what people appreciate and avoid what they criticize.

Bhadra again assures him that the people have only the best of things to say about him. But he also tells him people are not happy about his having brought Sita with him. She was abducted by Ravana and kept in the pleasure gardens of his antahpura for long and it is amazing that Rama does not detest her. The men of the city say 'they are afraid that now they will have to keep their own tainted women too with them– for

what the king does is what the people follow. Bhadra tells Rama people are saying many such things all over in cities and all towns. Rama asks his other friends if this is true. They all agree it is so without a doubt, such talks are common among the people. Rama immediately sends away his friends from his chamber and asks one of the guards to go and fetch all his three brothers. They come to him immediately. Rama embraces them and asks them to be seated. Then he tells them how the people of the city are talking evil about Sita and him. He reminds Lakshmana he was present when Sita entered fire to prove her chastity. Agni, the god of fire, had appeared and testified to her purity. The gods in the heavens and the sages had appeared and declared her stainless. Indra himself had appeared and handed her over to him. He knew she was pure and that was why he had brought her to Ayodhya with him. But now things have changed. The people of Ayodhya do not approve of her, do not approve of his keeping her with him.

Rama then tells his brothers that there is nothing worse than ill fame. He says he would give up his very life out of fear of the censure of the world, he would give up them, his brothers, what to talk of Sita. Having stated this, he asks Lakshmana to take Sita the next morning and leave her beyond the Ganga in the wild forest near the ashram of Sage Valmiki. As Rama speaks these words, his eyes well up with tears. The next morning Lakshmana takes Sita to the jungle in a chariot driven by Sumantra. Sita has no idea that she is being abandoned, though evil omens throughout upset her. She can see Lakshmana's open grief. She asks him lovingly if it was because he will have to be away from Rama for two days. She tells him she too loves Rama more than her life itself, but she does not grieve as he does. She asks him not to behave so childishly. They will visit the ashramas, give gifts to the ascetics and after spending the night there, come back.

They spend the first night on the banks of the Gomati and continue travelling the next day. Lakshmana is silent throughout the journey. When they reach the Ganga, Lakshmana leaves the chariot with Sumantra on this side of the Ganga and crosses the river with Sita in a ferry.

On the other side of the river Lakshmana is no more able to control himself. Joining his palms he weeps uncontrollably and says he wants to die rather than do what he is doing, or if there something worse than death even that is better. Unable to stand the heartlessness of what he is doing, he collapses on the ground. Sita is shaken and asks what is wrong. It is only then that he reveals the truth. Sita faints on hearing what Lakshmana has to say. When she comes to, she asks Lakshmana what she would say when the sages ask her what the fault for which Rama has abandoned her is. She tells him she would have ended her life – she was not doing that only because she was pregnant and she did not want her husband's royal lineage to come to its end. Through Lakshmana she sends her respects to all her mother-in-law and all her elders at Ayodhya and assures Rama that he should not grieve over abandoning her, he should do what will get him righteous fame, and that is his dharma. When Lakshmana leaves, leaving her to the mercy of the jungle, she falls on the ground, weeping. She watches Lakshmana disappearing across the Ganga and on the other side, feeling fully the sense of being abandoned by her husband and being all alone in the world. Later Valmiki hears of her wailing in the forest from ashram boys who happened to be near where she was and takes her to the shelter of his ashram.

In the Patala Khanda of the Padma Purana, the palace garden scene is altogether missing. There is no scene describing Sita and Rama sitting together in the gardens attached to their

palace, no scene in which Rama tenderly offers Sita drinks with his own hands, no scene in which Apsara, Naga and Kinnari women, intoxicated from drinks, sing and dance near Rama. The Padma Purana is specific about the fairly advanced stage of Sita's pregnancy – we are told she is five months pregnant, while Valmiki tells us only that Rama observes on Sita the signs of pregnancy. In private, that Rama asks her about her desire. And whereas in Valmiki it is the ascetics that she wishes to visit in their ashrams on the banks of the Ganga, it is specifically female ascetics that she wishes to see in the Padma Purana.

It is interesting to wonder why Padma Purana felt the need to make these changes – to avoid the scene of intimacy between Rama and Sita which includes his giving her a drink with his own hands, and the scenes of drink-intoxicated dances close to Rama by Apsara, Naga and Kinnari women, which he appreciates. It is also equally interesting to wonder why the Padma Purana felt the need to change the gender of the ascetics – the ascetics of the Ramayana become female ascetics here, with Lopamudra specifically mentioned.

As in the Ramayana, Rama gladly promises her that her desire shall be fulfilled the next day. As we saw, in the Ramayana he makes the promise in the evening and it is the same night that he hears about the displeasure of the people. And it is his close friends that tell Rama about what the people are saying. When Rama hears of the evil talk of the people from Bhadra, his friend, in the Ramayana, he has been joking and laughing with his friends for a while. When he asks his friends to tell him what people say about him, his brothers, his wife and about Kaikeyi, it is his past achievements that Bhadra mentions as what people are happy about: his commanding the obedience of the Vanaras and Rikshas, his building a bridge across the sea, his slaying the mighty Ravana, etc. There is no mention about how pleased people are with his rule. And the whole conversation, including the report of the evil thing that people say about his keeping Sita with him, is very brief.

Whereas in the Padma Purana, it is all very different. Here it is not from his friends that Rama seeks and gets feedback, but from his spies. Unlike in the Ramayana where this takes place the night after Rama's conversation with Sita, in the Padma Purana it is in the morning, and it is in the royal court where Rama is seated with his ministers, sages and advisers, his brothers attending on him, that his spies approach him to report to him. They are apparently disguised as citizens. Seeing that they wish to speak to him, Rama takes them into a secret inner chamber. Alone with them he instructs them to give him the facts exactly as they are.

In the Uttara Kanda of Valmiki's epic, what Bhadra reports is that there is widespread displeasure among the citizens about Rama still keeping Sita as his wife after her stay in Ravana's pleasure gardens as his captive. They speak about it in cities and towns, everywhere where people assemble. In the Padma Purana, the sixth spy reports that while his fame has spread everywhere, because of such things as his slaying of Ravana, this is not so about his wife who has lived in Ravana's house. He reports what he has overheard the washer man telling his wife. The implication is that only one person, the washer man, is unhappy about his keeping Sita with him.

The Padma Purana not only says all people are happy about Rama, it gives us interesting details of the conversations among Rama's subjects at night, reported to Rama by his spies [all collected from their homes and not from the streets]. For instance, in one home a mother, suckling her infant asks him to drink as much of her milk as possible, for he is not

going to get it in his coming lifetimes. There will no future lifetimes for him – those who live in Rama's city will have no future lifetimes, they will attain liberation in this life itself. In another home, a wife compares her husband to Rama and the pleased husband denies the comparison – where is Rama the sun in the sky and where is he a mere moth; where is Rama, the sacred Ganga and where is he, but a mere pool on the road? In yet another house, there is a game of dice going on between a love-intoxicated young husband and wife. The wife beats her husband quickly at the game and declares herself the winner, making her bangles dance as she speaks gesturing with her arms. The husband, laughing, refuses to take the beating and declares he is not yet beaten and is going to beat her in an instant, by remembering Rama, as the Devas in the past defeated the Daityas.

Interestingly, while people are certainly proud of Rama's past achievements, it is equally about his present rule that they are happy. It is in yet another home that a spy overhears a washer man shouting at his wife asking her to get out of his home, abusing Rama over bringing Sita back from Ravana. Hearing this news from Bhadra Rama faints and collapses on the floor. In Valmiki, Rama remains in control of himself when he hears the criticism, though he is deeply upset. He immediately sends for Bharata. In the Ramayana, it is all three of his brothers he sends for on hearing of what people say about his keeping Sita, though Rama's order to take Sita to the forest and abandon her there is given specifically to Lakshmana. In the Padma Purana, initially it is only Bharata that Rama calls to his chamber. Rama tells Bharata of how his fame has been tainted by the words spoken by a washer man. He asks Bharata what he should do now: end his life, or give up Sita. Saying this Rama starts shivering and collapses on the floor. Bharata reminds Rama about Sita's purity has been proved through the fire. For up keeping his fame, Rama informs Bharata that he is giving up Sita. When Bharata refuses to follow Rama's instructions to leave Sita is far jungle, Rama summons his remaining brothers one after the other. Finally Rama instructs Lakshmana to leave Sita in Jungle.

As the Ramayana does, the Padma Purana too describes several evil omens on Sita's way to the jungle, the first of which happens as she takes her first step out she trips over the threshold. Lakshmana takes her up to the Ganga by chariot and then across the river by a ferry. All along he is silent and weeping, puzzling Sita. The jungle that they reach is nothing like the area where ashrams are to be found – it is wild, filled with terrifying animals and scalded trees, and there is no sign of human habitation anywhere near. A shaken Sita now insists that Lakshmana should tell her the truth. It is only then he informs her that Rama has abandoned her. At those words, Sita collapses on the ground. Lakshmana brings her back by fanning her. When she came to senses, Lakshmana consoles her and informs her about the Valmiki's ashram which is close by. He then circumambulates her in reverence and then walks away, eyes streaming with tears. The Padma Purana tells us here that Sita is still unable to fully believe what Lakshmana has just said, in spite of all she has spoken.

After Lakshmana leaving, Sita wept aloud, calling out to Rama. Valmiki who happens to go to the jungle at this time hears her cries and sends his disciples to find out who is wailing in the middle of the forest. That is how Sita reaches the sage's ashram.

Many things here suggest that the author of the Padma Purana is trying to glorify Rama going beyond the Valmiki Ramayana, as most of the retellings of the Ramayana since Valmiki do. He drops both the light scenes in this episode, the

one in which Rama sits with Sita, watching female dancers performing and giving Sita a drink with his own hands, and the one in which he is sitting and having fun with his close friends at night. It is perhaps beneath the dignity of the Rama of Padma Purana to do such things. To justify the action of Rama, the Padma Purana tell us the past life story of the washer man. Through the story, the blame has been shifted quietly from Rama to Sita. It is Sita who is to blame for her abandonment, and not Rama. She is abandoned because of what she did long ago when she was a young girl – it is the curse of the birds to whom she had been cruel. In addition to shifting the blame for abandoning the pregnant Sita from Rama to Sita, the washer man's past life story achieves another purpose. It says that none of his subjects is really unhappy with Rama. The only one who criticizes him is the washer man and his criticism is not valid because it is only an expression of the sorrow that Sita had caused him in his previous birth.

The Padma Purana intensifies Rama's pain at the words of the washer man. Padma Purana does not in any way reduce Sita. She is purity itself, and her purity sanctifies the world. Such is the awe in which Bharata and Satrugna hold her that as realization sinks in that Rama is bent on abandoning her, they both faint. So deeply are they shocked that when Lakshmana enters Rama's chamber, they are still lying unconscious on the floor. No less is Lakshmana's love and respect for Sita. The Padma Purana adds fine touches to Sita's innocence and naivety. Both the Ramayana and the Padma Purana give us the same reason for Rama's decision to abandon Sita: his boundless attachment to spotless, untainted righteous fame, which Indian culture asked every king to strive for.

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