

WHY SO MANY RAMAYANAS: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

The epic of Ramayana, which is present in different versions, is one of the most important texts in Hinduism which holds significant cultural, philosophical, spiritual, and religious connotations. Despite a common theme across the different versions of Ramayana, there exist significant differences. The piece “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation” by A.K. Ramanujan” (Ramanujan, 1992) showcases these variations by taking reference to five different versions of it.

Ramanujan’s article analyses the different “tellings” of Ramayana through the lens of different authors, places as well as cultures. While showing how different “tellings” are interrelated, he argues the need to look at stories and narratives from different perspectives. Through the means of highlighting differences, the article shows that the same story can be portrayed in myriad ways in terms of their – starting, ending, theme, chronology of events, and emphasis on characters. For example, while the Tamil Ramayana emphasizes on water as a source of life and fertility, such emphasis is missing in Valmiki’s Ramayana (Ramanujan 1992, 40). However, the article is silent on the question of why there are differences in the ‘tellings’ of Ramayana. Why has the same story been written in different styles with varying emphasis on characters, plot, and themes? It is this silence on the questions which this essay attempts to answer.

While critically analysing Ramanujan’s piece, I would answer the above-mentioned questions in a twofold manner. The first part of the essay argues that Hinduism as a religion is composed of various cultures and that the process of ‘Sanskritisation’ has attempted to integrate them within the ambit of Hinduism through the circulation of stories, narratives, and epics. The second part attempts to put a spotlight on the fact that because each community holds a different set of values in terms of – beliefs, ideologies, et cetera, the stories that circulate among them get ‘indigenised’ to reflect the values and ideals of that community.

Reshaping of Epics through Sanskritisation

It is a well-known fact that the population of India is an eclectic composition of various races such as Aryans, Mongolians, Scythians, Dravidians, and many others. All these races came from different directions and after fighting among each other, got settled into different parts of what we now call India. Each of these had their own beliefs, customs, rituals, and institutions which were, more often than not, not in consonance with each other. Still, if we observe today, there is a stark commonality between the practices, rituals, traditions, narratives, and stories that are followed within the diverse region and population of India. Why is it so and what contributed to this apparent ‘uniformity’?

Mary Douglas (Douglas, 2003) explained that a society can be divided into the form of two concentric circles – the inner circle which consists of the dominant class representing purity and the outer circle which represents the classes who seek to come as close to this inner circle as possible through imitation of practices of the dominant class. In the Indian context, this process is termed ‘Sanskritisation’ where the lower caste attempts to ‘adapt’ to the customs, rites, beliefs and, all other things which seem to represent the Brahminic way of life though it is not a one-way process (Srinivas, 1956). This process results in uniformity in terms of stories, narratives, customs, rituals, and traditions among the diverse population of India.

This process of Sanskritisation is not only limited to the adoption of new customs and habits but also includes the exposition to new ideas and values, mostly through Sanskrit literature. One of the primary tools of Sanskritisation are myths and stories of Sanskrit literature which spread themselves to the non-Sanskrit population through the means of harikatha (Srinivas, 1956). These stories depict the values, standards, and beliefs, that a particular community upholds as ideal. For example, in versions of Ramayana, Rama is portrayed as an ideal of holding the institution of monogamy.

However, what is considered to be ‘ideal’ varies across communities. What communities may consider the warrior-like spirit of fighting as ideal, others may consider the ability to solve things peacefully as ideal. Therefore, the stories depicting the standards of ‘ideal’ also get ‘modified’ or ‘indigenized’ from community to community.

Stories: A Tool of Cultural Hegemony

One may ask – why do communities want to promote their ideals through stories and epics? And why Ramayana was chosen as a means of promotion of values?

Gramsci (Lears & Jackson, 1985) mentioned the concept of hegemony as “a condition in which a fundamental class exercises a political, intellectual, and moral role of leadership within a hegemonic system cemented by a common world-view or organic ideology.” In the Indian context, the upper castes form the “fundamental class” which aims to exercise its intellectual and moral leadership to maintain its

position in the caste system. One of the means to this end is the employment of common narratives in the form of epics or stories which reinforce their value systems. For example, in some Ramayana, society in Ayodhya was based and ordered on the rules of castes (Prakash, 2022). By using such versions of Ramayana, the upper castes attempt to exercise their hegemony to further reinforce their position in the caste system.

Why was Ramayana chosen as a text to promote a ‘common-world view’, but not some other texts? The answer probably lies in the text of Ramayana which is based on hierarchies and legitimisation of it. The clash of “subaltern” communities with upper-caste versions of Ramayana led to the subordination of their Gods and rituals (Prakash, 2022). Another reason could be the vast amount of reverence that the text of Ramayana and its characters command across various communities in India.

The next section engages with the phenomenon of ‘indigenisation’ vis-a-vis the Jaina and Thai version of Ramayana, and will attempt to analyse how these versions reflect their cultural values and ideals.

Stories: A Mirror of Values Of Community

Ramanujan, in his essay, shows the differences between the Paumacariya and the Valmiki’s version of Ramayana (Ramanujan, 1992). In contrast to the portrayal of Ravana in Valmiki’s Ramayana, the former shows Ravana as one of the leaders of Jainism with qualities of a noble leader (such as chastity), who got killed by Lakshman. Further, while containing references to various legends in Jainism, the Paumacariya version presents a more rational version of Ramayana by avoiding the instances which were devoid of common-man logic such as lifting of mountains or crossing sea in one jump. This is in accordance with the community values of Jainism which revolves around Satya (truth) Brahmacharya (chastity) et cetera.

Similarly, in the Thai version (Ramanujan, 1992), where the values of Buddhism such as – Right Thought, Right Action, refraining from taking what is not yours, et cetera – are considered to be ideal, the incident of Sita’s birth is related to stealing of rice ball which gives rise to the prophecy that she will cause the death of Ravana. The instance highlights that violating these values may invite tragic consequences as happened with Ravana.

Conclusion

While critically analyzing Ramanujan’s article, this essay attempts to find out the causes of differentiations among versions of Ramayana. This piece argues that since each community considers some values as ‘ideal’, the stories and epics which are central to Sanskritisation get ‘indigenised’ or ‘domesticated’ when they come across those communities. This highlights the importance of not using

the binary lens of right or wrong while looking at a story or narrative, but placing it in the appropriate contextual background. This becomes increasingly important in today's polarised world where cultural appropriation and weaponisation of epics have become an art.

While the scope of this essay was limited to Ramanujan's piece and Ramayana, this phenomenon of 'indigenisation' of epics is neither limited to the Ramayana nor Hinduism. The epics such as Mahabharata and sacred books of other religions such as the Bible and Quran are also the objects of the phenomena of 'indigenisation'.

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