

CASTE, GENDER AND RACE: IS RAM RAJYA AN IDEAL STATE?

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Ram Rajya is not unheard of to anyone in the Indian context as it is used so much in the realm of politics since independence, even though its connotation has changed from one of an ideal secular state to a Hindu state (and not Hindu nation, as I'd like to draw a distinction between Hindu rashtra and Hindu rajya here, where the former refers to a Hindu nation and the latter, a Hindu state) based on the perverted ideology of Hindutva (classic/ pure/ non-perverted Hindutva, as Savarkar alluded to, was concerned only with the revival of the Hindu nation, which India already is, and aspired for a secular state) (Sharma, 2011).

In simple terms, Ram Rajya is the governance based on ideals and principles of mythical and epical king Lord Rama. Lord Rama is the protagonist of the epic Ramayana which is standardly referred to be first written by Maharishi Valmiki and made popular by Tulsidas through Ramacharitmanas: the Ocean of the Deeds of Ram.

Nevertheless, the concept of Ram Rajya is highly contested. Whether the Ram Rajya promotes the caste system, gender inequality, racial discrimination or not, remains an enigma. This article aims to analyze Ram Rajya based on parameters of caste, gender, and race.

Caste in Ram Rajya

Those who opine that Ram Rajya was free from the caste system draw inferences from Nishadraj who belonged to the lower caste and was a good friend of Lord Rama. Nishadraj was the monarch of the Nishad community (fishing community) who aided Lord Rama, Sita, and Lakshman in crossing the Ganga River during their 14-year vanvas (exile). Lord Rama stayed at Nishadraj's house for the first night after the Vanvas ended. He gave Nishadraj the same respect that he gave to his other royal friends. In this way, Ram Rajya is claimed to be free from caste discrimination.

However, in the sixth book of the Valmiki Ramayana, Lankakanda, Ram Rajya is described as, "All [i.e., Brahmins (the priest class), Kshatriyas (the warrior class), Vaishyas (merchants and agriculturalists) and Sudras (the servant class)] were performing their own duties, satisfied with their own work, and bereft of greed". This points toward the rigid caste-specific duties and hence, prevalence of the caste system. Though Savarkar's Hindutva proposed the revival of the Hindu nation, which, acting as a universal solvent, dissolves caste in it, leaving behind a land-based (artha of Kautilya) identity of being a Hindu, the Ram Rajya (which is presently interpreted as the Hindu state of Lord Rama), seems to be riddled with caste considerations, antithetical to the Savarkar's obsession with unity- unity created by the Hindu nation (not state), acting as a universal solvent (Raghuramraju, 2007).

This point is corroborated by scholars like Dr. BR Ambedkar, Periyar Lalayee Singh (Shambook Vadh), and Swami Achhutanand (The Justice of Ram Rajya) through the Shambuka incident given in Uttarakanda of Valmiki's Ramayana. Shambuka was a lower caste man who was beheaded by Lord Rama because of practicing tapas (asceticism) which is a caste-specific duty of Brahmans only under the caste system. Some opine that Rama did not kill Shambuka in his own will, instead of on the will of Brahmins who considered it to be the duty of the king to check transgressions in the practice of the caste system. "Not to blame Rama for killing Shambuka is to misunderstand the whole situation" (Ambedkar, 2014).

Gender Dynamics in Ram Rajya

Proponents of Ram Rajya praise Sita as an ideal daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law. Even though she lived in a palace and had many sevaks (servants) she used to do her chores by herself and took care of her mother-in-law. She always stood by her husband and was his strength.

Ram Rajya has been called patriarchal by many scholars. Ambedkar is critical about how Ram treated Sita in 'Riddles in Hinduism'. From Valmiki's Ramayana, he quotes Ram's words following his triumph over Ravana where Ram refers to Sita "as a prize" and subject of his "honour". In Ram Rajya, Sita is asked twice to prove her purity and chastity. After being free from the captivity of Ravana, she is subjected to Agnipariksha (test of fire) in which she passes though. Nevertheless, this does not satisfy the public, and she faces expulsion based on rumors "in a somewhat advanced state of pregnancy in a jungle, without friends, without provision,

without even notice- in a most treacherous manner” (Ambedkar, 2014). Ambedkar criticized Rama as a “weak and cowardly monarch” who “yielded to the public gossip”. Feminists condemn him for violating basic rights of women like the right to dignity, health, safety, and life (Article 21 of Indian constitution). Lord Rama again demands a test of chastity from Sita when he finds her in the forest through his two twin sons Lava and Kush. “Sita preferred to die rather than return to Rama who had behaved no better than a brute” (Ambedkar, 2014). Rama has been charged with 'Abetting Suicide' by feminists.

Proponents of Ram Rajya claim that Rama considered his duty to listen and protect the views of every person who comes seeking justice. Feminists counteract that he did not investigate and give a chance of fair hearing to Sita. He defended a woman's enslavement as just. The deontological considerations of being a king bound by the dharmashastras and the nitishastras forced the sovereign of Ayodhya to turn a blind eye towards teleological considerations of being a husband.

Another female character in Ramayana is Surpanakha (a widow). Her nose was sliced off by Lakshman because she expressed lust for a man (Lord Rama). She did not know that Rama was married. She met this fate by breaking a patriarchal code that views women as passive receivers of male desire. Feminists argue, in Ram Rajya, Sita is revered because she behaved 'ideally' by bearing all atrocities of a man (Rama) according to the patriarchal norms. Whereas, Surpanakha defied the code of conduct, hence, not revered.

Ram Rajya and Race

Proponents of Ram Rajya claim it to be free from racial discrimination. An example of Mata Sabri is provided in this context. She was a tribal woman who ardently worshipped Lord Rama. When he came to meet her because of her dedication, he graciously accepted the semi-eaten plums offered by the tribal woman. She semi-ate the plums to discard the sour ones.

On the contrary, the example of the killing of Vali can be given. He is referred to as a monkey in Valmiki's Ramayana whom Rama killed from behind while hiding in a tree without hearing his stance. One of the justifications he gave was that while hunting, no consent is needed of an animal and it can be killed from behind. Rama gave him the status of an animal, i.e., monkey. Rationally, he must be of a different race with somewhat different physical features. Ambedkar writes, "this murder of Vali" who was "unarmed" was a "planned and premeditated murder".

Conclusion

The concept is not free from critiques and hence, there exists more than one interpretation and image of Ram Rajya. Learning from mythology has no harm unless we don't carry the elements which prove to be non-coherent to the present scenario. "As knowledge grows, our theology develops" (Radhakrishnan, 1927). Valmiki's Ramayana was written (around 5th century BCE) according to the sociology of that time.

An illustration of Rama, Sita, and Lakshman returning from Sri Lanka is drawn at the beginning of Part III of the Indian constitution (fundamental rights). Does this make Ram Rajya coherent with the values of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity of the Indian constitution? Other illustrations in the constitution include Rani Lakshmi Bai, Akbar's court, Indus valley seal, conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, etc. However, all these illustrations are not part of any written article and represent India's culture and history only.

The Indian constitution is not confined to the limits of a 'person-centric' raj. It establishes a 'people-centric' republic state even though it may reflect Lord Ram's ideals as claimed by proponents of Ram Rajya. A utopian Ram Rajya with a secular connotation is coherent to the values of the Indian constitution which Mahatma Gandhi had sought to achieve. However, it does not mean to completely wipe out casteist, patriarchal and racist interpretations of Ram Rajya or the idea of utopia from other epics or religious books. Because, Ultimately, the Indian constitution stands supreme.

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