

Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa As Taught by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

This is the second part of the serial article, continuation from July 2021 newsletter.

Even today the Ramayana attracts many people. They do *kathanam*, *rāmakatha*. The story of Rama is told, many people come, and there is always some music in it. The verses are always sung. Making the Ramayana more popular, other verse translations have come in regional languages. In North India the Hindi Ramayana is popular. It was written by Tulsidas. Another language, Brijbhasha, influenced his version. Many in the North have forgotten about the original, and Tulsidas' version is all they know. They will read their Ramayana in nine days. It is called *parāyaṇam*: just repetition of the verses some many hours each day. In Punjab, the Sikh *gurus'* words, called the Guru Granth Sahib, are repeated over the course of ten days in the same manner. The *paṭhī*, the one who does the reading, follows a specific method for the reading. There are rules for all of it, and it is a religious act of worship. The reading of the Ramayana is an act of worship to Rama.

Katha is narrating the stories of Rama. For the *katha* they draw verses from the original or from the translations. They recite one or two verses, and then they tell the story. The verses give you the feeling of the original and that authenticity. Everywhere you will find ten, twenty, even forty *katha* of Ramayana. In the South there is the ancient Tamil version written by Kamban, *Kambaramayanam*. It is very interesting, and you will find variants there from the original. They have that license; they add and subtract. They make it their own. But I found that, at the same time, the original sense is never lost. That is why it is still called Ramayana. In the South the original is equally popular. In fact, what you hear daily is the original, and they refer to the local versions. The main thing is the original. The *kathakāras*, the ones who narrate the story, use music and dance, and the hundreds of songs of Rama and the sculpture of the temples. Thereby, Rama, and more Rama than Krishna, has come to influence the people and their lives. Because

Rama's life is something from which you can draw a certain value structure. Krishna's life is not as clearly a source for a value structure. It is easy to draw from Krishna's teaching, and you can draw from his life story. But you need to be more informed than you do for listening to Rama's life. Any ordinary person can listen to Rama's life, and it gives him a value structure. Fully understanding Krishna requires a certain maturity and wisdom.

Even an Indian Christian or an Indian Muslim, though he says he has nothing to do with this, has been influenced by the books like the Ramayana. Nobody can say anything against the Ramayana; its influence has been prevalent and deep. The Ramayana is not *śruti*, not a revealed scripture, it is a written book. Rama was a historical person. There were many stories that circulated about and around him. Some may not be true. As with many important figures, the main stream of his life is there, and there are many embellishments. That makes it an epic-like composition.

There is a story about how the story itself came to be. Valmiki, before he became Valmiki, was a bandit. He was a robber. He was married, living with his parents and his wife in a cottage in the forest. Daily, as if going to work, he would go and stand by the nearby road. There were few who came by, but he would wait for travelers to pass. When someone came, he would size up the fellow and decide if the traveler could be robbed. He would do the deed, and bring the booty back to the house. This is what the family was living off of. This was his daily work, and he never thought twice about it. If someone had to be pushed around or beaten up, he would do it, snatch the goods and run. He was fast and intelligent and strong. He got away with it for a long time.

One day on the road there came this famous Sage Narada. This posed a problem. Narada was a great troubleshooter - and a troublemaker too. First he would create the trouble, and then he would solve it. Narada is a wonderful figure in the Indian tradition, and everyone knows Narada's tendency to stir up trouble and then resolve it. He would get it going before it blew up itself. He

knew where trouble was brewing, and before things got worse, he would come deal with it. He would provide all of the factors necessary for the problem to get solved. This is Narada, and he comes in many stories.

Narada came that way - perhaps purposefully. It was said that he could travel in all the three worlds. The earth, the heaven, and all that is in-between are considered to be the three worlds. *Bhūh bhuvah svaḥ* are those three. He needed no provincial passport, and nobody asked any questions. He had his inter-terrestrial passport. He had the capacity to move freely in all these three worlds. He is a colorful figure, and he always comes with the word Narayana in his mouth. Even in the Upanishad he comes - though it is in a different situation. Narada comes with the *ekatala*, the one-stringed instrument which gives you this drone. It gives you the pitch. He sings Narayana to that pitch, descending from the clouds. At least that is how in the movies they depict him appearing in this world.

Narada comes to the place where this would-be Valmiki, the great poet-to-be, is waiting. Narada meets him there and stops. The robber asks what Narada has in his bag. Narada says that he is a *sādhu* and that he has a few things in his bag. "Why do you want to know about it?" Narada asks.

The robber says, "Please, give it to me."

"I am a *sādhu*; what would I be having in this bag? Why do you want it?" says Narada.

"I know that *sādhus* carry many different things. I want to see what you have." says the robber.

Narada hands over the bag. There was not much in it. He asks, "Why do you do this?"

"Why shouldn't I do it? There is no other way I have to live."

Narada says, "But there are other ways of living. You cannot claim my possessions from me. I have the right to carry what I want. How can you take it away from me? If I were to give it to you, that would be different. But if I want to keep

it, how can you justify taking it from me? Is it not a wrongful action?"

"Nothing is wrong or right." says the robber.

"Who told you things were that way?" asks Narada.

The robber says, "I take the risk; suppose you beat me. Somebody could get me. I take the risk, and the law or the people can get me. I may be caught, and I take that risk. I've been careful and lucky up until now. I know the right fellows to rob. If you do not take a risk, you do not get anything. This is my way of earning a living. When you do business, you take risks and you make money. I too take risks, and I make money. What is wrong with this. I don't risk just my investment, I risk my life. I too earn my way."

Narada replies, "This is not earning a way. Money that is invested involves a risk, but there it is your money and not somebody else's money. If it gets you what you want, it is fine. If you are not lucky, then you can still live with that. But just to want what I have is different. What I have legitimately earned I should get to keep. You cannot claim what is mine. Even if you find a lost bag on the road, you should try to find the owner and return the bag. If you cannot find the owner, you should give it to a temple, or do some charity because it is not yours. To take someone else's possession is not correct."

"Why do you bother about this? I've been getting away with it." says the robber.

"No, you do not get away with it. This action is a wrong action, and it will produce a result. It is an improper action." says Narada.

"What is improper action? I have never heard about that." queries the robber.

Narada replies, "Improper action is that which catches you if not now, later. It is always credited to your account. You are the one who performs the wrong action, and every action produces a result. The result of good action is *punya*. Wrong actions produce *pāpa*. For all the wrong actions you have done, you have definitely piled up a big bundle of *pāpa*. I tell you. You are going to pay for it."

To be continued...