

THE IDEA OF LIBERATION IN RAMAYANA

Thomas Manickam ■

"As long as the mountains stand and the rivers flow, so long shall the Ramayana be cherished among men and save them from sin."¹ This is a benediction given by Bhrama to Valmiki, the adikavi, the composer of the first Epic of India. In the invocation to Brahma this benediction is narrated by Valmiki and repeated by every redactor of Ramayana. The last phrase, "save them from sin" seems to be the central message of Valmiki's Ramayana. But what about the central messages of other Ramayanas which have sprung up from the core material of Valmiki's Ramayana? This article is probing into that aspect too.

1. The Offshoots Of Valmiki's Ramayana

Some of the most important versions of the story of Ramayana of Valmiki are condensed in the following literary works:

1. *Raghuvamsa* of Kalidasa (5th c.A.D.).
2. *Setubandha* of Pravarasena (6th c.A.D.).
3. *Ravanavadha* of Bhatti (7th c.A.D.).
4. *Janakiharana* of Kumaradasa (7th c.A.D.).
5. *Ramacarita* of Abhinanda (9th c.A.D.).
6. *Uttaramacarita* of Bhavabhuti (9th c.A.D.).
7. *Pratimanataka* and *Abhishekanataka* by Bhasa (9th c.A.D.).
8. *Mahavirarchita* of Bhavabhuti (9th c.A.D.).

■ **Thomas Manickam** teaches Indian Philosophy in the Faculty of Philosophy, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, India. Currently he is the Director of the Centre for the Study of World Religions.

¹ C. Rajagopalachari, *Ramayana* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidyabhavan, 1990), p.11.

9. *Kundamala* of Dinnaga (10th c.A.D.).
10. *Anargharaghava* of Murari (9th c.A.D.).
11. *Balaramayana* of Rajasekhara (10th c.A.D.).
12. *Mahanataka (Hanumannataka)* of Rajasekhara (10th c.A.D.).
13. *Prasannaraghava* of Jayadeva (12th c.A.D.).

In none of the above mentioned works Rama is described as a divine image of worship. However, there is the understanding that he is an incarnation of Vishnu along the line of the Puranic narration of the ten avataras of Vishnu, beginning with Matsya and ending with Kalki. Except the literary interest of the authors of the works there was not much of religious devotion (*bhakti*) developed in the early stages of the formation of the Epic literature of Ramayana. However, a turning point of the literary movement took place when there developed *Rama-bhakti*. Since the ideas of salvation or liberation are fundamental religious or spiritual concepts, it is important to trace out this growth of the popular consciousness around the image of Vishnu in the incarnated mode of Rama.

In a historical survey it is found that the hymns of the Alvars (8th c.A.D.) of South India depict the first literary expression of a popular devotion to Rama; although *Rama-Bhakti* as a religious movement seems to have developed from 13th c. onward steadily by the devotional writings of Namadeva, Kabir, Eknatha, Tukaram, Ramdas, Surdas and by the great Hindi version of Tulsidas' Ramayana known as *Ramacaritamanas*. This religious growth along the streams of Rama-bhakti corresponds more or less with the expansion of various vernaculars, with the result that in many cases the most famous literary work in these languages is a version of Ramayana. Thus we have the *Kamban Ramayana* in Tamil (12th c.A.D.), *Ranganatha Ramayana* (13th c.A.D.) and the *Molla Ramayana* (16th c.A.D.) in Telugu, *Ramacarita* (14th century), the *Kannassa Ramayana* (15th c.) and Ezhuthachan's *Adhyatma Ramayana* in Malayalam (16th c.), the *Torave Ramayana* (16th c.) in Canarese, the *Krittivasa Ramayana* (15th c.) in Bengali, Tulasidas's *Ramacaritamanasa* in Hindi, *Balaramadasa Ramayana* and the *Vilanka Ramayana* (15th c.) in Oriya, and Ekanatha's *Bavaratha Ramayana* (16th c.) in Marathi. Among the Sanskrit sectarian

Ramayanas the most famous is the *Adhyatma Ramayana* (14th c.,) which is one of the main sources of Tulasidas' Ramacaritamanas. Besides this, there are also Ramayanas written in Sanskrit such as *Adbhuta Ramayana* (15th c.,) and the *Ananda Ramayana* (15th century).

As already mentioned above, Rama-bhakti developed into a sectarian religion in Hinduism. This development changed the whole trend of the Rama-story. In the new sectarian religious perception Valmiki's Ramayana, which was mostly secular in nature because of its literary style and the universalistic moral tone, was relegated to its classical literary status, and other sectarian Ramayanas which are more religiously overtone became mostly the theological source of each denominational and regional religious pursuits. In most of the sectarian religious traditions Rama was no longer a mere *avatara* of Vishnu, but the embodied *parabrahman*, the supreme God. The whole Rama-story was re-written from this perspective and the new Ramayanas were read by devotees as their religious books. In these religiously and devotionally oriented Ramayanas, Rama has been devinized and enthroned as the supreme Lord of the universe superseding all human limitations and human characteristics, and for all practical purpose *Rama* became the God who shelters all devotees and the one who provides eternal life, a place in his own *savargaloka* after the sojourn of mankind in this *samsara*. Ram is the rewarder and punisher of the righteous and the unrighteous respectively. Hence the question of liberation or redemption or salvation in their own respective cannotations are relevant and search for its understanding is meaningful. A typical example of such devinization of Ram as realized in the life of an individual may be the case of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, who breathed his last at the shot of Nathuram Godse uttering the sacred name of Ram: "Hey Ram" was his last word.

2. The Person Of Ram According To Ramacaritamanas

The Ram of Ramacaritamanas, the most popular sectarian Ramayana in Hindi is the embodiment of all human virtues. He is a

man of perfect dharma, upholding the values enshrined in the scriptural traditions. Ram is worthy of all veneration because he is the *maryada purushottam*, the most excellent ideal person. Ram is called the "protector of scriptures" (*setu srutipalak*), the bridge built by the scriptures, the sum total of all righteousness or *maryada*. He was considered as descent of god Vishnu. But Tulasidas goes further and considers Ram as the descent of the Absolute Being, the *nirgunabrahman* itself (2:92, 4). "Ram is the Absolute Reality, the Ultimate Meaning of everything. He is the unknown, the imperceptible, the beginningless. He is incomparable, unchangeable and indivisible. The scriptures speak of him only by way of negation, *neti, neti*, "not this, not this".

Ram is pure awareness (*visudha bodha vigraha*). He is the Fire burning away all sorrows (*samasta dukha tapaha*). Serenity itself, he is eternal. He gives *liberation* from the cycle of transmigration and bestows peace (*nirvana shanti prada*). He is present in creation but distinct from it as the sun is different from its heat. Ram is supremely happy and contented, glorious and praiseworthy. He upholds the universe. His will always find fulfilment. He is desireless and perfect in everything. He is truth itself. According to Tulasidas, when Ram visited the sage Valmiki in the forest, the sage told him that even the great gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva could not know the mystery that is Ram. Then how could anyone else know him, who was the very descent of *nirgunabrahman*, thus goes the descriptions of Tulasidas.

Yet, for the purpose of promoting personal relationship with Ram, as the Lord of all *bhaktas* (devotees), Tulasidas describes the *saguna* aspect of Brahman as realized in Ram. Accordingly Ram is the Lord of Maya. He makes everything in this universe dance like wooden puppets.

"The whole world is a sport. You, Oh Ram, watch the sport. You make the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva dance to your tune". (4:10, 4). The whole universe is the sport of *sagunabrahman*, including the various descents of God Vishnu on this earth. Ram as the *sagunabrahman* is the player and the watcher of this sport (*lila*). As such Ram's beauty surpasses the combined beauty of numerous

love gods (*kamadevas*). His might in battle exceeds the might of countless Durgas. His fame and glory is far above the fame and glory of thousands of Indras. He allays all fear from the hearts of his devotees. Countless pilgrimages cannot purify a person, as Ram can purify his devotees. His favours to them are limitless. The very goddess of Wisdom, Saraswati is but a pale reflection of Ram's wisdom. Ram is more majestic than any ocean, and firmer than any mountain. The immense power of creation, preservation and destruction of worlds, the power of *maya*, is but an infinitesimal part of the power of Ram. The abundant riches of this universe is only a faint shadow of his riches, better say that Ram, the lord of this universe is infinite and incomprehensible (*niravadhi nirupam prabhu jagadisa* 7:91, 4).

3. Descent (Avatar) of Saguna Brahman in Ram for the Liberation

The descent, avatar, of sagunabrahman into this world of ours is a great act of love on the part of God. He became tangible to human beings, an object of their spiritual experience, love and devotion. There are many stories of this reaching out of God to man as added by Tulsidas with the purpose of boosting devotion to Ram as the Lord incarnate.

It is the traditional belief of the Hindus that god Vishnu has taken many avatars whenever there was decline of *Dharma*, and rise of *adharma* (Gita 4:7). The purpose of such descent also is stated in Bhagavadgita as the "protection of the good, destruction of the wicked and the establishment of dharma."

*Paritranaya sadhunam , vinasaya ca dushkritam,
Dharma samsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge* (Gita 4:8).

In an old sanskrit verse the ten descents (*dasavataras*) of Vishnu are enumerated as follows:

*Matsya kurma varahasca narasimhasca vamanah,
Ramo ramasca ramasca krishna kalkir janardanah.*

God Vishnu (*Janardana*) has descended in the form of fish, a tortoise and a boar. He has taken descent in the form of a lion-man, a

dwarf, Parasuram, Shri Ram and Balram and as Krishna. He will come again in the form of *kalki* (the destroyer of all humans)".

The traditional interpretation of the *dasavatara* is that it is in sequence to the evolution of life on planet earth. God who created the whole universe and initiated the life process in it condescends again and again to the level of the life's evolution process in view of maintaining it so that the creation may not be destroyed due to the malfunction of the life-system from within or due to the irrational intervention of human reason in it, because of which the order of primeval innocence (original righteousness) might be disturbed and degraded or deteriorated. So the concept of *avatara* itself implies the idea of liberation and restoration of the creation from its fallen state to the pristine state of perfection and harmony. Hence the ideal of liberation of Ramayana, especially in the sectarian Ramayanas, as that of Tulsidas is highly inflated with the ideal of restoring true righteousness.

Of all the *avataras* Shri Ram and Shri Krishna, forms of Vishnu are the most important from the point of view of redemption or restoration of the lost righteousness of mankind. These *avataras* have gone deep into the hearts of people and they have become perennial objects of devotion, worship and spiritual commitment. Tulsidas's thoughts on Ram as the object of devotion, worship and ultimate spiritual surrender of devotees (*saranagati*), which is the true *sadhana* for spiritual liberation may be summarised as follows:

Ram is the *avatar* of Paramatman himself. He assumed the human form out of condescending love for the human beings. Even though he possesses all the virtues in infinite measure, he deigns to share their weakness.

He takes even sinners and his own enemies into his protection and liberates them from the ocean of transmigration. His human conduct is a sport (*lila*). He is not really man, but only appears to be one. His body is a *lilatanu*, a mere appearance of body, a sport body.²

² Swami Premananda. *Shri Ramacharitamunas* (Allahabad: St.Paul Publications, 1989) .p.53.

Thus much of the *visishtadvaitic* theology of Ramanuja has been integrated by Tulsidas in his Ramcharitamanas. A deep personalist theology of *Paramatman* (*nirguna brahman*) has been assumed as the foundational thinking in Ramacaritamanas. Accordingly Paramatman is gracious and is in love with his devotees. It is for them that Paramatman has taken incarnated form in Ram. Rama represents the totality of the godhead of the Hindu religiosity. What is important about this *avatara* is that human beings are given a more holistic relational attitude to the entire creation and with the help of which (Hanuman represents the animal-human link), mankind is offered a spiritual ideal of integration with the creator by means of the creation. The more effective *sadhana* for realizing this communion of creation and creator is the *bhaktimarga* and its resultant grace of God. It is God who saves mankind from its wretchedness and sinfulness by bestowing on it His unconditional grace-touch.

4. Bhakti Sadhana

The inanimate and animate creation allow us only a glimpse of the Absolute Reality. Man is like a child living away from its mother. Human beings, though having their very being in the Absolute Reality, are still far away from it in so far as they have no grasp of the Absolute. They are not sure whether this immense power is concerned with their lives, their world, their joys and sorrows, their problems. Like helpless infants they cannot reach Parabarhman by themselves. It is Parabrahman who deigns to condescend and lifts up the infants reaching out to the human beings, just as a mother reaches out and carries her child in her arms and carresses it. Similar is the case with Parabrahman in the form of Rama the incarnated 'Father-Mother Divine Communion' into which mankind can enter by the *Vay of Bhakti* (*Bhaktimarga*). In the *avatara* of Rama it is believed that the Absolute Brahman became tangible to human beings, an object of their daily experience, love and devotion.

Namopasana is one of the practical spiritual discipline of the Rama-Bhaktas. The belief behind this is that, although the historical Ram is no more with us he is closer to us and lives within us and

among us. Name is identical with reality whether living or dead. Remembering the name of somebody brings the presence of that reality close to us. This is the basis of *namopasana*, and the recital *kirtana* of the same name generates psycho-spiritual energy in the devotee. This energy is what is felt as the power-touch of God who is contained in the name of Rama. Tulsidas has a beautiful way of explaining this identity of name and reality by means of the analogy of fire.

Fire-power is hidden in the wood and that which springs to flame is the same power or energy. The only difference is that we can see only the colourful flame but *experience by vay touch* the reality of the burning fire, so is the case with God in Ram. Nirgunabrahman like the power for fire, as its energy, is hidden in the flame of the fire, and the flame in its form represents the same *nirgunabrahman* as *sagunabrahman* it is this that is manifested in the person and form of Ram. Therefore as a devotee remembers Ram and recites his name repeatedly with *sraddha* (faith) actually worships the ultimate Reality in and through the name of Rama. So the foundational belief is that the name of Rama is a saving name, and is charged with divine power of the supreme Divinity. This power that is emitted through the name of Rama purifies the devotee of all his/her sins and elevates the person to the level of a liberated spirit, worthy of enjoying the same bliss of the eternal abode of God, that is also the abode of Ram, "*Ramarajya*", the highly spiritualized state of human consciousness, that is normally achieved by each Ramabhakta.

The same spiritual union-experience is further explained by Tulsidas using the analogy, of master and servant. As a servant accompanies his mater so Ram accompanies his name. It is only the enlightened, who grasp this intimate relationship between a name and its reality realizes his union with Ram as his God. The name as well as the form (person) are indeed the ineffable and eternal attributes of *sagunabrahman* who is the manifestation of the hidden *nirgunabrahman*, the *paramatman* who is the ultimate saviour of the whole creation, and this hidden power exhibits its saving design through innumerable names and forms, and the name "Rama" is the most articulated and effective form of divine energy. This name saves a person and accompanies him to the eternal abode. With this belief

the *Rambhaktas* recite the sacred name of Rama at the death bed of a person, all along the procession of his dead body carried for cremation and the same name is repeated as a saving *mantra* for the repose of the soul of the dead by the relatives of a dead person on all occasions of the memorials. Even this name is used as a greeting symbol with the addage of "jai Ram" or "Ram-Ram", through which not only the good feelings of devotees of Ram are mutually exchanged by way of passing courtesy by fellow travellers, but also the meaning of the name of Ram as a saving sign is revived in the memory of the passersby. This way of greeting by *Rambhaktas* while they meet and pass by on the public road is a pleasant experience especially when we travel in north India where this form of popular devotion is very intense and alive.

"*Ram-Ram*" (the name 'Ram') is the most sacred word (*mahamantra*) even continually recited in some of the Ram temples of north Indian cities especially of Varanasi and Ayodhya. The *Rambhaktas* believe that uttering the name 'Ram' *once* is as meritorious as reciting the *sahasranama* (thousand names) of Vishnu. It is eulogised by devotees that even Shiva experienced the power of Ram-Nam when he drank the dreaded poison '*kalkoot*' emitted by the serpent Vasuki. Remembering the name "Ram", Shiva swallowed the whole poison and it turned into lifegiving nectar in his mouth.

5. The Saving Grace of Ram

The Grace (*kripa*) of the Divine is the necessary means of purification and sanctification of the devotees. The *Grace of Rama* understood as the "blessing" or "good pleasure" of the Divine Reality hidden in the avatar of Ram is brought into focus in several ways by Tulsidas and other devotional writers of Ramayana. The many instances in the Ramayana where the Grace of Sri Rama has served to redeem the seeker, serve also to highlight the abstract moral teaching of the Bhagavad Gita in which several instances of actual saving a devotee by the grace touch of Lord Krishna are narrated in the high spirit of bhakti. Similar concrete instances of saving the devotee with the grace-touch of Ram is mentioned in Ramayana also. The redemption of Sabari, Jatayu, Sarabhanga and Vibhishana have passed

into the most cherished heritage of Hinduism, derived from Ramayana. They have been told and retold to countless generations and their effect on human minds is as fresh today as it was so many centuries ago. The Adhyatma Ramayana for example practically follows Valmiki's approach in describing the descent of Grace on Sabari, but emphasises the bhakti aspect of Sabari's sadhana. The Adhyatma Ramayana gives also an opportunity to the devotee to praise the Avatar and offer gratitude to Him for showering the salutary Grace. In fact in the Adhyatma Ramayana, all the persons to whom Rama's arrival had brought about deliverance by an act of Grace are credited with *stotras* (thanksgiving hymns) of real poetic beauty. Ahalya, Viradha, Kabandha, Sabari and Jatayu are illustrations of this fact.

Rama's Grace bringing about *moksha* or salvation is described in the most direct and simple manner in the case of Jatayu. The bird was old and infirm. He had sacrificed his life for saving Sita, the beloved of Ram and met with fatal wounds. He was about to breath his last when Rama met him and understood his great act of sacrifice. In Valmiki, expression of gratitude by way of repayment of a good deed done, is given the highest place among the virtues of Rama. Sri Rama, without the least hesitation, commands Jatayu's soul to go to Heaven as fitting reward for his service and sacrifice. There is no attempt here by Valmiki to camouflage Sri Rama the Divine, as Rama the man, the Prince of Ayodhya. He functions openly and assertively as the Highest Divinity, performing an act of Grace of redemption from the cycle of births. The sacrifice of Jatayu merited no less at the hands of the Avatar, who was Dharma incarnated and personified according to Narada as told to Valmiki who described elegantly the same in his *Kavya* with his own pedagogic master mind, and poetic genius, which made Valmiki the *adikavi* - the first poet of Indian literary tradition.