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The richness of the Ramayana, the poverty of a University



'What people don't recognise is that the story of Ram, what we call the Ram Katha, extends over a huge historical period.' Photo: Valmiki Ramayana, illustrated with Indian miniatures from the 16th to the 19th century, edited and published by Diana De Selliers

'Will they bash up universities in Jakarta and other places for teaching different versions of the Ramayana?' An interview with noted historian Romila Thapar.

The controversial decision earlier this month by the Academic Council of Delhi University to drop A.K. Ramanujan's celebrated essay on the Ramayana, *Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translations from the B.A. History (Honours) course* has evoked sharp protests from several historians and other scholars.

Coming three years after the Hindutva student body, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), vandalised DU's History department to protest against the teaching of this essay, the decision has been criticised as a surrender of academic freedom in the face of political pressure.

Romila Thapar, the foremost authority on early Indian history, spoke to **Priscilla Jebaraj** about the decision, its adverse consequences for scholarship and knowledge, and the efforts by vested interests to project one version of Hindu cultural heritage and religious tradition over all others.

You have said that this issue is not purely about history and academia simply because it involves the Delhi University's History Department and Academic Council, but that there's a political background to it.

I think there's a political background to it because the initial attack against this essay [in 2008] was led by the ABVP which made sure that TV cameras had begun to roll when they carried out the attack, so that it would be properly recorded.

Their demand was that this hurt the sentiments of the Hindu community and therefore it should be withdrawn. This is hardly an academic demand. And quite clearly, the way in which the activity was organised, it was an act of political opposition to the History department and to this particular essay.

The University initially took an academic position and appointed a committee of four historians to assess whether this essay should be withdrawn. Three experts categorically said that under no circumstances should it be withdrawn. One of them, interestingly, did not say that it hurt the sentiments of the Hindu community, but said that it was inappropriate for undergraduate teaching, that undergraduates would not follow the whole question of variants and nuances and so on. So the expert opinion again did not think it was necessary to withdraw the essay.

In spite of this expert opinion, and perhaps because the matter came up in court, it was taken to the Academic Council. And from what I can gather, there was no indication given that this issue would be discussed, and therefore people went there unprepared and suddenly had to decide on this one way or the other. And what this initial action and the reaction of the University raise are the question whether courses and syllabi can be changed by groups beating up faculty and vandalising departments. And I think this is a very fundamental question which academia has to face and answer and take a position on.

Ramanujan discusses several versions, including the Valmiki Ramayana and the Kamba Ramayana, both of which seem to have problematic elements for Hindu fanatics. Which version are they supporting?

Well, I think that probably none of them has even read the whole of the Valmiki Ramayana ... Half of them haven't even heard of the Kamba Ramayana.

What are they supporting? Their notion from hearsay of what the Valmiki Ramayana perhaps expresses. And you know, one is angered by the fact that there are people who don't take the trouble to read and to study and to understand what the issue is before they just stand up and start shouting and screaming and wanting the dismissal of it.

What people don't recognise is that the story of Ram, what we call the Ram Katha, extends over a huge historical period. There's a distance of almost a thousand years between the first composition of the Valmiki Ramayana and Kamban's. There are also gradually regional studies... So, inevitably there will be variants. The moment somebody sets out to write a new version of the story, however dependent that person is may be on a particular version, there will be additions as indeed there were even to the original Ramayana. And this is the inevitable structure of an epic.

When an epic captures public attention, bits and pieces are always added on and bits and pieces are subtracted. It's a growing kind of rolling stone, gathering and dropping as it goes along.

So given that that is the structure of an epic, is there a danger in establishing a particular version in the minds of the mainstream as the definitive version? You once spoke of that danger regarding Doordarshan's Ramayana serial ...

Absolutely. You have to emphasise the fact that there were variants, or people tend to assume that there was only one version of the story or that that was the definitive version.

Now at the time when the Valmiki Ramayana was written, there were two other versions current, which were, in one case, entirely different, and in another case, very substantially different.

There were the Buddhist Jataka, the Dasarath Jataka as it is called, where Ram and Sita are brother and sister...and rule as consorts. Now this is very much within the Buddhist tradition of origin myths and is really making a statement about the superior status of Ram and Sita, which has been completely misinterpreted by the uneducated, who go around screaming and shouting at all of us who mention this version because it talks about Ram and Sita ruling as consorts.

The Jain variant, which Ramanujan also speaks of, is extremely interesting, because the author Vimalasuri, begins by saying that 'The versions of the Ram Katha that you have heard so far are totally false and incorrect, written by foolish men. I will tell you the true story.' And he goes on to locate it in the court of the historical king Srinika...and says that it is nonsense to depict the *rakshas* as demons, that they were perfectly normal human beings. In other words, the version of Vimalasuri is trying to rationalise the fantasy of Valmiki and, therefore, it is fascinating to see the two versions together.

So how is it that the Valmiki Ramayana has become the mainstream of Hindu culture?

It comes partly out of the tradition of giving greater precedence to Sanskrit literature, because it was, in fact, the main cultural tradition over a long period, but it's also partly that this was reinforced by colonial scholarship mentioning these as definitive texts.

In the post-colonial era, as academia has been questioning that concept, has there been any similar move to change perceptions in the wider society?

No, there hasn't been and for this I blame particularly the visual media, because they have fostered the notion of there being definitive versions of every single major text in our cultural heritage and they have totally underplayed the fact that there have been variants.

But you see, it starts with academia. What is very disturbing in this whole story is that you have an Academic Council in one of the leading universities in this country, which debates the issue for over two hours and the vote is 90 against Ramanujan and 10 for. And one sits there and thinks, of the 90, how many actually took the trouble to read this essay when they were condemning it. [Many] people in the Academic Council had no idea of what the contents of this book were, except that they were going on hearsay once again.

Somebody gets up and condemns it, and then a group turns around and says, "Oh well, if that is the case, then, of course, we must condemn it." So in a sense...what we lose out in this country is the habit of reading. We don't go back to reading texts. We either see them on television or we see them in *Amar Chitra Katha*.

...I don't know what the politics of the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University may be or, for that matter, even the politics of the 90 members who voted to remove Ramanujan's essay.

But there is obviously a political element in this. There's a political element that a) says this is what my party doesn't

object to, and would quite like my supporting it, or b) that this is really not my concern, it's a political issue, let the Academic Council take a decision, which is why I gather there were quite a few abstentions as well, or c) don't take a positive role in this because tomorrow, you may be in the dock and no one will support you.

Maybe, the Academic Council should be reminded that every scholar is required to question existing knowledge because that is the only way in which knowledge grows.

The single expert on the committee who said it would not be appropriate for undergraduate education felt that the teacher would not be able to sufficiently explain the background. So at what point do we draw the line on when it would be appropriate?

Well, that's precisely my point. If you go on saying that the teacher can't explain it, why have you appointed that teacher? And why have you trained that teacher to be somebody who cannot explain a simple thing like the variants of a text?

Was it an issue for the Academic Council at all or should it have been left to the History Department alone?

It should have been left to the History department, but I guess the Academic Council got cold feet because it had gone to court.

It's been pointed out that Ramanujan himself is not a historian, but poet and folklorist. When it was suggested that instead they replace his essay with yours and R.S. Sharma's, it was pointed out that both of you are historians and that there was a value to having an interdisciplinary view.

This is a really very creative essay. We've all written on this subject,...but what was nice about Ramanujan's essay was that you got a different perspective on this, and that is what is so valuable for the student. In a course like that, where you're dealing broadly with culture, you need to have a different perspective every now and again.

So as a broader issue, isn't the interdisciplinary approach a good thing? Getting perspectives from those outside the field of History?

There's nothing to stop a Physics professor from reading that essay and asking questions or coming to different conclusions. But in the same way as a History professor would not intervene in the Physics syllabus, one doesn't expect the Physics professor to intervene in the History syllabus...

The interesting thing about this whole argument about interdisciplinarity is that the social sciences are always attacked. But the sciences are never attacked because people are scared of making a fool of themselves by saying that this is not something worthy of teaching. So nobody questions the sciences. But with the social sciences, the world and his wife are there to comment, in some cases, without any kind of background knowledge of the subject. There's a feeling that you don't need to be an expert; this is all common sense.

For many Indians, this is not just ancient mythology for an academic discussion, but also their own current religious beliefs. Do you think there needs to be any kind of leeway given because of that?

You're quite right that it's not just mythology but also religion, and it was made that. Let me just go back a little bit into history and say that initially, many scholars believe the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were just epic stories about heroes, and that's the way they continued to be for quite a while. And then they were converted into sacred literature, by making Ram and Krishna *avatars* of Vishnu. And there's a superb analysis of this by V.S. Sukthankar in Pune, who talked about the Bhrgu Brahmins converting these epics into Bhagwat literature, that is, converting the heroes into incarnations of Vishnu. And then it becomes sacred literature. Now today, yes, it's considered sacred literature, but that is really not its roots.

Secondly, even if it is sacred literature, it is based substantially on mythology. I mean, this is very different from Buddhism and Jainism, where the stories ... there are mythologies, very many mythologies, but at the same time, there is the hard core of the historical evidence of a historical founder, and what that founder is supposed to have taught. This is a different story altogether.

It's again different from Islam or Christianity where you have the people of the Book, who believe that the Book is the truth. Most Hindus don't believe that.

No, and one of the crises in the colonial period was when they set up the law courts and they said, according to European law, you swear an oath on the Bible. So they went running around asking which is the sacred book of the Hindus. And so you got the Bhagvad Gita, you got the Ramayana, you got the Vedas, you got all kinds of answers, because there isn't a single sacred book, there's a multiplicity of sacred books. And there again, the question of variation comes in. Who accepts which book as the primary sacred book?

Are we seeing, over the last few decades, a change similar to that described by Sukthankar, of a group of people deliberately trying to create these definitive versions of Hindu sacred literature?

Yes, in fact there's this move to make Hindu belief and worship very much based on the idea of the sacred texts.

Ramanujan also discusses some international variants...

South East Asia, for example, where the Ramayana is an absolutely fundamental text of culture, but it's their own versions, not the Valmiki Ramayana. It is a fundamental part of the story in many versions in South East Asia, that Sita is the daughter of Ravan and Ravan doesn't know this, because she was secreted away. So what do you do? I mean, are these people going to go bash up the universities in Jakarta and all those places because they're teaching these versions?

And this in a time when we want to spread, and globalise Indian culture.

I find it ironic that you have this incident taking place in Delhi the same week as the Minister of HRD is sitting in the United States trying to persuade the top universities to set up campuses in India. Ramanujan was one of the most respected faculty members of the University of Chicago and the Ministry of HRD would give its left hand to have the University of Chicago set up campus in India. Now if Ramanujan had been alive and the University had a campus in Delhi, and this had happened, as is perfectly feasible, what would have been the reaction? The whole thing is bizarre.

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