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The Ramayana: A Vedic Self-Portrait

Historians estimate that *The Ramaya* was originally written around 400 BCE (Narayan, *The Ramayana*, 32), a time associated with cultural commingling and spiritual revolution in the Indian subcontinent. The moral codes, cultural norms, and actions of each society in this story seem to mirror common imperialistic themes of conquest, exploration, and assimilation. The “humans” in this story (Rama’s society) seem to represent the vedic society during its cultural growth and expansion. This comparison is illustrated through the interactions of each society in the book. The Vedic moral code is conveyed largely through the actions of Rama. One of the most prominent aspects of the moral code in Vedic society is commitment to family. An analysis of how Rama’s family values differ from the two other main societies in this story--the monkey society and the asuras--will likely inform us on some of the ways Vedic society conflicted with its neighboring societies during its expansion.

We are first introduced to the human society, which Rama seems to personify. Rama lives by extreme honor and dignity before anything else. He is a man of his word who complies with whatever his family commands of him. Rama even describes spoken words as an arrow shot from a bow: “...it goes forward. You cannot recall it midway...”

(Narayan, *The Ramayana*, 118). Rama's actions throughout the Ramayana indicate his strong commitment to his family, which likely reflects his society's family values. A major event in the story that illustrates the intensity of Rama's commitment to family is his acceptance of Kaikeyi's demand that the throne be given to Bharatha rather than himself. Rama immediately accepts an extreme punishment without question, just to prevent bringing his father shame. He even continues to call Kaikeyi (his stepmother) "mother" after this extreme sentence (Narayan, *The Ramayana*, 104). Clearly, Rama prioritizes the pride and reputation of his family over his own personal success.

The asuras seem to be the only race of people Rama blatantly dislikes. Rama actually declares that his purpose in life is to wipe out the asura race (Narayan, *The Ramayana*, 132). The first time we learn of the asura class is during Thataka's story in which Agasthya condemns Thataka and her sons to the asura class after killing Sunda (Narayan, *The Ramayana*, 52). As he condemns them to demonhood, he says, "Since you are destroyers of life, may you become asuras and dwell in the nether worlds." It seems that the humans define the asura class as "destroyers of life" and enemies of peaceful society. When comparing the family values of Rama's society to the society of the asuras, they seem to be opposites. The family values of the asuras are seen through how Ravana, the ruler of the asuras, interacts with his family members throughout the story. For instance, Ravana's expulsion of his brother Vibishana from the asura society seems to be unwarranted, as Vibishana was only warning his brother about his inevitable doom if he attempted to challenge Rama (Narayan, *The Ramayana*, 228). It is also notable how Ravana becomes most motivated to help his sister Soorpanaka after

he falls deeply in love with the description of Sita (Narayan, *The Ramayana*, 150). This part is interesting because it shows two aspects of Ravana's family values. This part shows that Ravana seems to be much more interested in Sita than he is interested in avenging the mutilation of Soorpanaka. It also shows that Ravana has no problem with obtaining a wife through kidnapping. These norms of asuras seem to disagree entirely with the family values of Rama's society.

An interesting society in the story is the "monkey" society led by Vali, followed by Sugreeva. The monkey society is at first neutral in relation to Rama's mission. The monkey race is portrayed to be a less civilized society than the human society. One instance in which this is conveyed is during the rainy season, in which Sugreeva was supposed to form an army to search for Sita, but instead spent the entire season getting drunk and having sex in his palace (Narayan, *The Ramayana*, 207). Sugreeva even admits to his inability to maintain promises and responsibilities (Narayan, *The Ramayana*, 207).

After Vali's defeat by the arrow of Rama, Vali makes an interesting point about the justness of Rama's decision. Vali calls out Rama for intervening in a dispute in which he had only heard one side, and neither side were inherently evil. Rama justifies this by claiming that Vali must have known that his actions of fighting off his brother and taking his brother's wife were evil. However, there seems to be no definitive proof that Vali ever comprehended the nature of his misunderstanding with Sugreeva. Vali also responds to the claim about taking his brother's wife by arguing that, by their society's outlook on sexuality and marriage, there was nothing wrong with his actions (Narayan,

The Ramayana, 190). From Vali's narrative as he is dying, we can understand that the monkey race has either a less strict or less defined perspective on marriage in comparison to Rama's society. In the monkey society, it was apparently appropriate to take the wife of one's brother, should they disappear. This was to make sure someone is taking care of the wife. However, from the lens of Rama's society this is not permissible, as it is important in Rama's society that women only have relations with their husband. This importance is also shown at the end of the story when Rama had Sita set on fire to prove her chastity (Narayan, *The Ramayana*, 258). Rama's judgment of another society's cultural norms through the lens of his own illustrates Rama's ethnocentrism. From the perspective of a member of the monkey society, what Rama did may have been wrong, but because the humans consider the monkey race less civilized and less responsible, their moral code is also considered inferior.

This brings up another interesting dynamic of the relationship between the humans and the monkeys. The monkeys seem to act incredibly similar to humans in the story, at least in comparison to how real monkeys act. In fact, most illustrations of monkey characters like Hanuman depict them as more human-like than monkey-like, with the most defining monkey characteristics being a puffy upper lip and a long tail. One might think of the monkey race as a hyperbolic metaphor for a less civilized race encountered by vedic society. Comparing them to monkeys, an animal that looks similar to humans but lacks intellect, self-control, and structured society, seems like almost an insult to the significance of any society that wasn't yet as organized or advanced as the vedic society at that time, as if to consider them less than human. This lack of self

control and leadership skills is shown during the first three months of Sugreeva's rule during the rainy season, in which he was so overwhelmed by his power as a leader that he did nothing but drink and have sex. By the end of the story the monkey society has been "saved" because of the actions of Rama, but he has also changed their societal expectations through his interventions in order to reflect the norms of his own society. These norms included the cultural rules of marriage, sex, and family found in Rama's society. In this way, even if he hadn't gained control of the kingdom of the monkeys, he had established dominance over their race.

At the beginning of the story, there were three powerful societies identified, but by the end there seems to be only one. The human society was destined to expand and become the ultimate society, as it was literally chosen by the gods. The family values held by the asuras and the monkeys become irrelevant by the end of the story because those cultural norms have been eliminated. Rama's victories in *The Ramayana* very clearly outlines how vedic culture, as most dominant cultures, took over: assimilation and annihilation.

Works Cited

Narayan, R. K. *The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*.

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