

Rama

The Hindu epics are a source of entertainment and religious guidance. Today, Rama, the titular character of the Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*, is seen as the ideal man, who follows *dharma* to rigid perfection. *The Ramayana*, one of the two great Hindu epics, continues to have great significance today, despite being originally composed approximately two thousand years ago. While there are thousands of variations of the epic across southern Asia, its original authorship is attributed to the sage Valmiki, who lived sometime between 200 BC and 200 AD. Rama, who is married to the ideal woman, Sita, is portrayed and celebrated today as enacting true *dharma* in his role as son, brother, husband and member of the *ksatriya* class. He is also recognized as the “incarnation of Visnu in his role as Supreme God” (Gonzalez-Reimann 203).

The Ramayana is an epic that contains over 20,000 verses. Within these verses are the adventures surrounding Rama, son of King Dasaratha of Ayodhya, and heir to its throne. Laksmana, Rama’s half-brother and inseparable companion accompanies the hero throughout his many adventures. Both Laksmana and Sita, Rama’s wife, accompany him into a fourteen-year exile to the forests, during which the trio meet with various sages, encounter and defeat demons, and learn the ways of a forest-dweller. Much of Rama’s tale centers on his rescue of Sita from Ravana, a ten headed *raksasas*. While Rama’s adventures within *The Ramayana* provide entertainment, it is his action and philosophical reasoning that provide Hindus with direction in regard to *dharma*.

Rama is portrayed as one who is the “embodiment of...infinite virtues” (Bhattacharji 32). He is the obedient son, ready to “give up the throne and go into exile to redeem his father’s pledge” (Bhattacharji 43). Rama displays great love and faith in his

brothers, trusting that Bharata would adhere to duty, caring for his throne during his banishment, and eventually restoring him. Rama's love for even his wife Sita "became subsidiary and insignificant in comparison with love for the brother" (Bhattacharji 36). Living as a forest-dweller, he killed demons to protect sages, for "as a prince he was obligated to exercise the protective function of the warrior class" (Goldman 34). Ruler of Ayodhya for 11,000 years after his banishment, Rama "was a true warrior hero with a strict code of heroism" (Bhattacharji 43).

Rama's fame for his goodness has led to an expectation among readers and followers that he is pure, and acts righteously in all circumstances. Supported and "reinforced by scholars who have...their own expectations" (Stewart et al. 244) of Rama, it is often the case that Rama is seen as a flat divinity, one that is non-complex: he is good, therefore he is *dharmic*. This however is not the case; Rama is complex, whether portrayed as man or as god incarnate, and strays from the righteous path from time to time. Rama's slaying of the monkey king Vali from behind a tree "violated the fundamental law of combat by striking at the enemy from behind" (Bhattacharji 36). In killing from behind, undercover, and an individual whom Rama had had no personal conflict with, he sacrificed the *ksatriya* codes of honor to increase his chances of finding Sita.

Although Sita, as the ideal woman, follows her *dharma* and willingly stays at her husband's side and places her complete faith, love and allegiance with him. Rama does not do his wife justice, frequently disregarding Sita's love for him. He fails to protect her from physical harm and dishonor. Upon his rescue of her, his main goal, he reveals, was not to rescue his beloved wife, "but to ensure the piety of his... lineage" (Bhattacharji

40). Despite unshakeable proof of Sita's chastity, Rama abandons and humiliates her three times, doubting her devotion to him.

During the rare times that Rama strays from the path of *dharma*, it is often for his own personal gain and image. Rama kills Vali to gain the help of the monkey king to find Sita, and avenge his tarnished image. He belittles Sita, viewing her as tainted, something that he can no longer enjoy. For his personal and family honor, he doubts her purity thrice, despite receiving ample proof and being reproached by the gods that she has stayed true to Rama alone. While scholars have discussed and critiqued Rama for his cowardly killing of Vali, and his frequent betrayal and abandonment of Sita, no explanation has truly been given that adequately explains these few transgressions from the *dharmic* path (Goldman 35-36). Despite these few flaws in his righteousness, Rama is still considered today as the example of the ideal man, the incarnate of the god Visnu.

Visnu is one of the most prominent gods in the Hindu tradition. Within Hinduism, Visnu has a tradition of returning to earth in varying incarnations or *avatars* to carry out or ameliorate *dharmic* situations. Rama, who, throughout the epic continuously acts *dharmically*, kills the demon Ravana near the end of the story. This, according to Gonzalez-Reimann, is the main reason for Rama's assumed divinity within Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Rama's incarnation as "the great god Narayana...Visnu, Krsna and Prajapati" (Gonzalez-Reimann 208) creates an identity that is a "combination of man and god" (Gonzalez-Reimann 210). As an *avatara* of Visnu, Rama embodies the "protector of society and brahmanical *dharma*" (Gonzalez-Reimann 207). Because Rama is the representation of *dharmic* action, and because he is associated with the god Visnu in this

way, like Visnu himself (who has a group of followers dedicated primarily to him), Rama today has an important role in some forms of Hindu worship.

Built into the very social structure of society, the Hindu practice of renunciation lays the path to knowing and awareness of the Self and *moksa*. The practice of devotionism, or *bhakti*, can and does take many forms within Hinduism, varying from elaborate to simple offerings, or prayers. Devotionalism can be given to a single or multiple deities. Ram *bhakti*, which is a movement that was founded by Swami Ramananda in the 16th century, attempts to gain liberation from bondage by transferring “emotional attachments...to the spiritual realm”(Lamb 582). Of the numerous religious texts that have been written on the topic, none have been quite so influential as Tulsidas’ *Ramcharitmanas*. A revision of Valmiki’s *The Ramayana*, the text is immensely popular, and “has ultimately set the tenor for Ram *bhakti*...providing ideal examples for family and society relationships, for righteous action, and for selfless devotion” (Lamb 580). Followers of Ram *bhakti* show devotionism through the chanting of prayers or repetition of Rama’s name. Ultimately, the relationship aspired to between devotees and the Divine is paralleled to the relationship of Rama and Hanuman; the relationship “is one of Ram[a] as lord and master” (Lamb 582).

The main character and hero of Valmiki’s *The Ramayana*, Rama is the righteous prince of Ayodhya, whom, accompanied by his brother and wife, has many adventures in both fictitious and actual places. Acting always in the right, Rama gives an example to modern followers of the correct way to follow *dharma*. Despite some of his actions being critiqued as unrighteous and morally wrong in today’s world, such actions were more or less seen as socially acceptable at the time of the epic’s composition, and Rama is still

seen as the ideal man, in part due to his role as an incarnation of Visnu. Based on this fact, religious orders such as Ram bhakti have been fashioned after Rama's example. Despite being created thousands of years ago, Rama still has relevance today, providing entertainment, rules of social etiquette, and religious prescriptions for people around the globe.

Bibliography and Related Readings

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Related Websites

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rama>

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