

A 9th-century critic freed Ramayana of religious meanings. It was just literature for him

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A folio from Benares' gilded 'Kanchana Ramayana' | Photo by Philippe Calia | Courtesy: MAP Academy

Dhananjaya, the author of *Dasharupaka*—arguing that the sole aim of drama is pleasure—makes a passing reference to *i ihasa*, which, in contradistinction to it has only instruction as its aim:

“As for any simple man of little intelligence who says that from dramas, which distil joy, the gain is knowledge only, as in the case of history (*i ihasa*) and the like—homage to him, for he has averted his face from what is delightful”.

However, Anandavardhana does not entertain any such difference between the epics and creative literature and takes it for granted that *i ihasa* is first and foremost poetry.

This perspective is evident in Anandavardhana's evocation of Ramayana and Mahabharata in connection with his assertion that the concept of suggestion, although unknown to poeticians, is present in all great poetry. Here, it is significant that he refers to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as *lakshya* (target), making clear that he is very clear about them being poetry. He profusely quotes from both these epics to illustrate the principle of suggestive art.

With reference to the Ramayana, we find in Anandavardhana an approach different from traditional scriptural hermeneutics and modern historical/philological method relying on textual criticism and textual history. He takes the text of Ramayana as a unified whole. This can be contrasted with the fragmented picture of the text as having a “kernel” portion to which some portions like the Balakanda and the Uttarakanda (the first and the last books respectively) were added, a view which has gained currency in modern Indological studies.

Anandavardhana always regards the epic as the handiwork of a gifted poet with a unified vision. The view that the Ramayana is a collection of songs of wandering bards, *kushilavas* as they are called (from which modern scholars derive the names of Kusha and Lava) also does not find any possibility in Anandavardhana's understanding.

As such, in the Ramayana, he expects an organic structure in the work, triggered off by an intense and genuine emotional experience in the poet and not as an assortment of fragments written anonymously at different points of time. According to him, "In the *Rāmāyana*, the *karunarsa* (the flavor of compassion or tragic mood) is prepared by the first of the poets himself, where he says that his 'grief became verse'. He carries out the same *rasa* throughout his composition up to Rāma's final, irreversible separation from Sītā".

This emotive element permeates and pervades the entire work, as a "compositional suggestion" (*prabandhadhvani*). In this perspective, the well-known story of the genesis of the Ramayana assumes significance. According to this story, the very first verse of the epic was a spontaneous outpouring of the poet, overwhelmed by the grief of the *krauncha* bird. Anandavardhana takes this as the starting point of the epic, the logical culmination of which is the eternal separation between Rama and Sita.

Thus, according to him, the epic, an epitome of pathos, begins with a tale of grief and ends in the denouement wherein grief is the dominant emotion. There is no doubt that there is a symbolic relation between the *krauncha* episode and the Rama story in Anandavardhana's perspective. It has far-reaching implications, not always spelt out by the critic. There are some puzzles unsolved in the citation of the *krauncha* episode in the *Dhvanyaloka*.

According to the original Ramayana story, it is the male bird which is being killed and Valmiki's grief is aroused at the sight of the wailing female bird: *tasmat tu mithunadekam pumamsam papanishchayah/ Jaghana vairanilayo nishadastasya pashyatah//*.

But in Anandavardhana's account, it is the female bird which is killed and the male bird who wails. Many commentators like Kuppusvami Sastri and Pt. Badari Nath Sarma have tried to tide over this discrepancy by interpreting Anandavardhana's passage in a farfetched manner into which we need not enter. But as Ingalls, following Masson, points out, Anandavardhana seems to have altered the text of Ramayana to suit his purpose.

What could be Anandavardhana's purpose then? His interpretation is clear: just as the *krauncha* episode brings to the fore the tragic predicament of the male bird, the Ramayana story culminates in the tragedy of Rama who stands helplessly as his wronged wife descends to Mother Earth, never to return.

Such a tragic end is significant in the case of the Ramayana where Indian tradition sometimes stops with the coronation of Rama and ignores what happened thereafter. Most of the Sanskrit poets and playwrights who have borrowed from the theme of Ramayana either focus on the earlier part of the epic or, as in the case of Bhavabhuti, attempt drastic changes to it to have a happy ending.

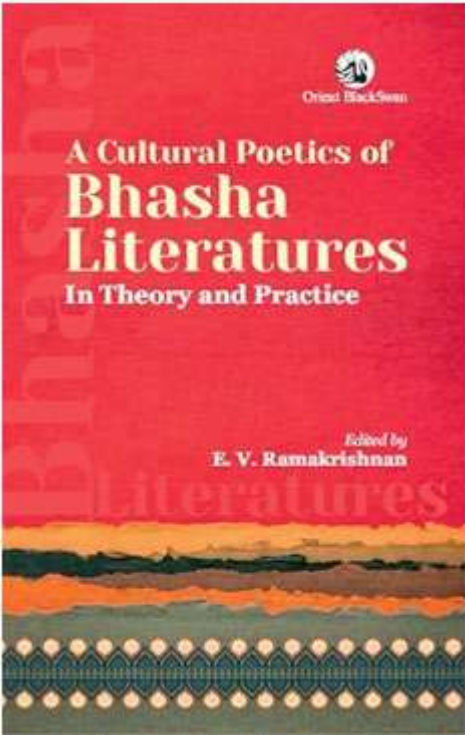
Kalidasa, in his *Raghuvamsha* fearlessly treads the path of Valmiki and portrays the tragic plight of Sita without any inhibition. However, in the grand narrative of the poem, the Rama story is only an episode to be subordinated and subsumed by the history of a whole race. Thus, Anandavardhana's vision of Ramayana stands in bold relief against the conventional reception accorded to the epic.

It unravels a tragic vision permeating the epic, raising several ethical questions about the story, especially as related to the unwarranted repudiation of a chaste woman, which becomes the seed of the tragedy. A tragic end always signifies unresolved moral issues and puts a question mark on our conventional wisdom based on societal norms.

The vision also goes against the grain of a teleological perspective which is usually adopted in the reading of religious scriptures. Such texts usually do not end in tragedies with unresolved moral issues; rather, they are designed to dispel moral dilemmas and to give proper instruction.

No doubt, the moralist in a literary critic also may insist on moral instruction in creative literature, but it is doubtful if this goes hand in hand with a tragic vision. It may be noted here that within traditional poetics, when it is claimed that literature gives moral instructions like “one should act like Rāma and not like Rāvana (*rāmādivadvartitavyam, narāvanādivat*)”, a tragic world view is not intended at all.

Thus, it is clear that Anandavardhana approaches the Ramayana primarily as a literary text and focuses on the human predicament as revealed in a literary work. This is actually a sort of retrieval of a literary text from the labyrinth of scriptural and didactic interpretations which are caused by its religious dimensions accrued over a period of time.



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