

## From Evil To Evil: Revisiting Ravana as a Tool for Community Building.

*Anita Shukla*

### **Abstract**

The eternal story of conflict between the good and the evil needs to be retold to emphasize the good in the evil and the evil in the good. When one picks up an ancient Hindu text towards this task, the challenges are not only intellectual but also from a community which will resist that narration given that such fixity and essentialisation is one of convenience for community building. One such story is that of the Ramcharitmanas by Go swami TulsiDas.

It portrays Rama as the revered God and Ravana as a multidimensional villain. This paper attempts to revisit the uniqueness of his character projecting both his villainy and his academic prowess in equal measure. While the original text points out at the nuances of the character and dispels any myths about the absoluteness of his evil, the popular notions have come to completely disregard them.

While the grand narrative is a complex text, in different historical phases, communities have come to interpret or misinterpret according to their own requirements and temperaments (or as Foucault says that every society creates a 'regime of truth' for a certain kind of domination). The popular culture in North India of burning Ravana's effigy in the celebration of Dusherra symbolizes mass hatred towards a character whose evil is not too well explored. This paper seeks to explore the strength of such crutches for community building and the impact this has on shared value systems.

**Key Words:** Ravana, Ram, Ramcharitmanas, evil, villain, community, politics, culture

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The rise of nation states in the Eastern world has been accompanied by several tools of community building where religion has come to be the most distinguished of all these forms despite the essentially pluralistic texture of these societies. The use of visual culture to meet such ends has been utilized time and again by the right wing Hindu forces in the Indian context.

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The celebration of Dusshera which is marked by the burning of massive effigies of Ravana and his brother Kumbhakaran and son Meghnad is one of the most popular symbols of the victory of good over evil in Indian culture. Wild cheering and applause usually accompanies this celebration. This particular act has diffused from region to region to include large parts of the Hindu community irrespective of local cultures and traditions in the celebration of Dussehra within the Hindu fold. So powerful is this message of the victory of good over evil, that traditions on the same landscape that worship Ravana, have come to be marginalized and the characteristics of Rama provide the value base for several Hindu families in which to train their little sons. Media images reassert the same values and make definite what could otherwise be contestable. The enactment of the Ramlila is said to inspire children towards the goodness of Rama and the destruction of the evil of Ravana.<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of this gripping and ubiquitous cultural phenomenon, the text of the Ramayana from which the whole story of good and evil pours has been largely ignored, not only by the lay reader of the *Ram Charit Manas* but also often by the priests who read out parts of the text when the Ramlila is enacted.

While Ravana is the powerful symbol of evil, traditionally, he has been deeply contrasted by the virtuous Rama whose iconography has been frequently used in Hindu nationalist politics, particularly in the Ram Janmbhoomi<sup>2</sup> movement, specially the years leading up to the demolition of the Babari Mosque. Rama was powerful yet restrained. He was a sympathetic God, attributed with *udaarta*, compassion, serenity and benevolence yet being the *Maryada purushottam* and the Lord of the Universe. Using example of visual images, the telecasting of the serialized Ramayana, and certain propaganda based videos, it was examined how the news media was used (along with older forms of visual expression) to project certain familiar images and icons of Rama, in the movement to mobilize Hindus. The progression from the earlier period of right wing Hindu nationalism needs larger social, economic and political changes brought about by liberalization and globalization.<sup>3</sup>

The context for the increasing appeal of the right wing Hindutva ideology lay in the crisis of political legitimacy of the Congress ruling government, coupled with the trend towards economic liberalization, wherein the existing political policy of the state controls on economic growth were

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held responsible for the slow economic growth. The Bhartiya Janta Party's claim of a resurgent, triumphant nationalism along with their Hindutva ideology attracted the support of the middle and business classes seeking political expression for their economic ambitions.

In addition, the screening of the televised Ramayana created a new televisual culture, and a new Hinduised visual regime which created a shared experience among viewers tuning into a narrative that introduced new images of a golden age that could be recreated with political will, and concepts and idioms of collectivity, that could be reflected upon in the private spaces of viewers. While the Congress attempted to use the broadcasting of a religious epic on the state run television to counter its crisis of legitimacy and extend its support base, it was the BJP, a party already associated with Hindu symbolism that could make better use of it for political mobilization. Hindu nationalism hinged together growth, this vision of the golden age of *Ramarajya*, and the new world of consumer goods and economic growth promised by the expansion of the market and economic liberalization, as indicators of a better future. The embracing of the new regime of neo liberalism and globalization went together with the political campaign rallying around the symbol of Rama, invoking an epic golden age.

This tranquil image of Rama was however transformed into that of an aggressive, masculine warrior god. The posters associated with the Ram Janmabhoomi tended to utilize the image of the martial, aggressive Rama. Rama here was shown as a muscular hero, heavily armed with drawn bows and arrows, aiming at an invisible target in anticipation of war. Kapur<sup>4</sup> has suggested that this increasing display of masculine Rama iconography was related to the notions of male chauvinism in Hindutva. Also, the juxtaposition of Rama with the image of the future temple, along with attempts at realism, suggests that Rama's anger was a departure from the Ramlila performances where Rama is shown to be controlled even when facing his arch enemy Ravana, for his enemies are always shown to be less powerful than him. Rama here is then linked to the figure of a human crusader, fighting for control and possession, in mobilizing support. The transformation of Rama into an aggressive, masculine figure also indicates certain conceptions of gender, that also include certain notions of masculinity as much as they define gender through the use of the Mother India or *Bharat Mata* figure in invoking Hindu nationalism.

The forging of a new Hindu collectivity around the icon of Rama also required the invention of new performative rituals and practices, along with the deployment of the visual strategies. Earlier, rituals and practices had

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been specific to castes and sects, whose collective performance bound the members of a *caste* or sect together. New rituals were invented to transcend these differences, and mobilize people around a larger notion of the Hindu community. These included Hindu sammelans (conferences), processions and *rath yatras*, that sought to forge unity through the use of consecrating bricks to be used for building the temple, *Ganga jal* etc. The burning of the effigies of Ravana was one of these several powerful symbols that gathered the Hindu community in a common space and bound them by common values.

However, this usage of the popular characteristics of Rama and Ravana have not gone uncontested. The building of one version of Rama as being representative of Hindu, unity implied a selective appropriation of one version of Ramayana and the silencing of contesting and heterogonous voices which question dominant visions of the Ramayana.

Several narratives draw upon these to put forward their interpretation of the figure of Rama, challenging the notion of the image that has seemingly sought to dominate the, political, social and cultural landscape. Rama is also represented as evil in killing Bali Raja in an unethical combat. The Dalits of South India venerate Bali Raja and contest the claims of representing Rama as a virtuous king. Finally, Ramayana is claimed to be an allegorical story of northern imperialism over the south<sup>5</sup>.

In the film, Tisri Azadi, Joshi analyses the projection of Rama. She says that the film claims to critique Rama by providing a view that Ramarajya was a period where justice was a privilege only for certain castes. Like every avatar of Vishnu, Rama too is seen to be a part of a brahmanical strategy to counter threat to their dominance from non Brahmins. The critique of Rama here centers on the killing of the shudra Shambook. In an inversion of *Ramrajya* as the golden age, a return to *Ramarajya* would then imply a return to this period of brahmanical dominance, as *Ramarajya* itself is not seen to be the ideal rule in a golden age but a period of brahmanical dominance and suppression of women, lower castes and tribes.

The emergence of lower caste political movements and their access to political power has been a part of this challenge to the Hindutva interpretation of the past. At the same time, it must be remembered that this does not imply a monolithic challenge to the use of the icon of Rama by right wing Hindu nationalism.

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On the other hand the portrayal of Ravana as the ultimate epitome of evil has also not gone uncontested. Curiously, in Baijnath, an ancient pilgrimage town in Himachal Pradesh, the devout Hindus will allow no Ravana bashing. Baijnath is believed to be the place where Ravana made his austere penances to Lord Shiva, the Hindu God of destruction. Residents here believe that burning Ravana's effigies would bring on them the wrath of Lord Shiva.

Another example that contradicts the popular culture of Ravana as evil is the Ravana temple in Kanpur, a city in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, where Ravana is worshipped as God. This opens only once in a year on Dussehra festival when people who view him as a highly learned individual who had knowledge of all Hindu scriptures, visit this temple to pay their homage. The foundation stone of this temple was laid in 1868 and a few years later, an idol of Ravana was consecrated here.

Hariom Tiwari<sup>6</sup>, the temple priest explained that Ravana was a brave, intelligent and good King of Dravidian Gaud tribe.

“This is our fifth generation which is performing puja here and our ancestors were here during the installation of this temple. During the Vedic era, Ravana was considered to be a very intelligent person, hence his statue has been installed here in spite of his stated shortcomings. He used to favor all demons and did not do anything for the Brahmins. Hence to break his arrogance, Vishnu took birth as Rama. Only on Dashmi, a puja is offered and people of all communities come here to offer prayers,” said Tiwari.

Well read analysts of Hindu epics remember Ravana as a learned and noble King and an exponent of Sam Veda. It is also said that music was his forte. They also say that it was pre-ordained that he kidnapped Sita. But he never exploited her. Further, it is said that Ravana possessed several virtues, the foremost being his knowledge of the sacred books, medicines and sorcery. An ardent devotee of Lord Shiva, Ravana is credited to have composed the vibrant Shiva Tandava Stotra. “This is the only temple of its kind in north India, Ravana was considered to be the body guard of this Kailash Nath temple and Maa Shakti temple. Neelkanth (blue necked bird) often comes to this temple,” said K.K. Tiwari, manager of the Ravana Temple, Kanpur.

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The above section of this paper was an attempt to look at the various ways in which the symbolism of Ravana burning has been utilized for the construction of the Hindutva community time and again. Alternative cultures which de-demonize Ravana have been marginalized to polarize the characteristics of good and evil in society. While this has been done in the name of the text of the Ramayana there have been no serious attempts to look at the nuances of the text or its popularized version by Goswami Tulsidas as the '*Ram Charit Manas(Rcm)*).

The following section seeks to bring out the nuances of the character of Ravana and revisit his "evil" character by revisiting episodes from the Ram Charitmanas.

The *Rcm* is of special significance, as the original text Ramayana from which it is taken was penned by sage Valmiki who was a bandit but in the latter course of his life was reclaimed by the seven seers and eventually turned out to be a great seer and poet himself. The text thus begins with an example of how change of heart can result into a great creative force, the transformation of a personality like Valmiki from a cruel bandit to a great poet is an apt example of why the exploration of the knowledge traits of evil is important for molding or channelising energy in a direction where it can be used for the welfare of mankind and adding 'the evil's' contribution in the art and literature of the world. The language of *Rcm* was primarily Sanskrit – a language of demigods, which obviously was not understood by the common masses, therefore the use of the regional language Awadhi was reverted to in order that the community's dominant set of values, norms and ideals could be propagated and imbibed by the masses.

The '*Rcm*' is portrayed as a devotional text which commences with the invocation of deities / gods as established and accepted forms for community worship / reverence. In this backdrop the reader would then get an understanding of the comparisons between good and evil. Religion has generally been promoted as a matter of faith and belief which ought not to be

explored by reason, therefore, we have to come to terms with the fact that it is not only difficult but at times impossible to go against the innately 'good' and 'evil' - a dominant feature of the Indian psyche.

In the opening chapter of the 'RamCharitmanas' 'Balakanda' there are references of invocations of God, salutations to the Guru, salutations to Brahmans and Saints and in the same sequence salutations to the wicked are mentioned. In the same chapter of the 'Balakanda' the contrast between saints and the evil minded is brought out. In the very beginning of the first chapter of the Rcm, the elements of characteristics of evil are described.

The Construct of evil in 'Ram Charit Manas'

Many analogies are used to describe the nature of evil persons. In the very beginning of the first chapter in 'Bal Khanda' we come across a specific subtitle 'Khal Vandana' (salutations to the wicked). In this part the reference of nature of the wicked and evil personalities have been mentioned. The text accepts that the good and evil both exist in this world and to function smoothly in our day to day life, man has to salute both.

Bahuri banidi Khala gana satibhae, je binu Kaja dahinehu bae,  
Para hita hani labha jinha kere ujare harsa bisada basee<sup>7</sup>

What is to be highlighted here is the manner in which evil is accepted and it is explicitly laid out that even though evil traits exist, man has to pay salutations to them as much as the good is revered.

The references also clarify why the 'evil' is 'evil' and explain the characteristics of evil personalities. A description of the characteristics of evil has been described as:

- Who are hostile without purpose;
- Who are hostile even to the friendly;
- To whom other's loss is their own gain;
- Who delight in other's desolation;
- Who wail over other's prosperity;
- Those who detect other's faults with a thousand eyes;
- Evil works for other's woe with thousand efforts;
- Evil designs and evil minds mar other's interest.

Hari hara jasa rakesa rahu se, para akajabhata sahasbahu se,  
Je para dosa sakhahi sahasakhi, para hita ghrta se jinha ke mana makhi<sup>8</sup>

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The analogy given here clearly indicates that evil give away his own life to destroy other's interests as a fly spoils clarified butter.

- evil lay down their very life in order to be able to harm others;

Akaju lagi tanu pariharahi, jimi upala krsi dali garahi,  
Bandau khala jasa sesa sarosa, sahasa badana baranai para dosa<sup>9</sup>

Udasina ari mita hita sunata jarahi khala riti  
Jani pani juga jori jana binati karai sapriti<sup>10</sup>

The above examples of the 'Balkanda' present the deep insight into the psychological disposition of the wicked and evil person. In the same references we get a comparison between 'saint' and 'evil' and how both inflict pain.

The wicked give agonizing torment during their meeting, while the good cause mortal pain while parting. Hence with special analogy the poet tries to establish that they are different traits like the 'lotus' and the 'leech' (both of which spring from the same water) but the 'lotus' is soft and full of fragrance whereas the 'leech' is a blood sucker. The good and the wicked resemble nectar and wine respectively; the unfathomable ocean in the form of this world is their common parent. The 'good' and 'evil' gather a rich harvest of good reputation and infamy by their respective doings.

Mai apani disi kinha nihara, tinha nija ora na lauba bhora,  
bandau samta asajjana carana, dukhprada ubhaya bica kachu  
barana bichurata eka prana hari lehi, milata eka dukha daruna dehi  
Upajaht eka samga jaga mahi, jalaja jomka jimi guna bilagahi,  
Sudhasura sama sadhu asadhu, janka eka jaga jaladhi agadhu.

While they are polarized for an explanation of their traits, the highlight is the emphasis on the same source of their origin. The nuances which find mention in the text have unfortunately not been well explored by the community.

Excerpts from the Ram Charit Manas

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**Episode – 1:** Suparnakha tells Ravana that Laxman chopped off her ears and nose and mocked at her when she told him that she is the sister of Ravana. Ravana consoled her and boasted of his strength in several ways but he retires to his palace full of great anxieties and does not sleep the entire night. After the dialogue between Ravana and Suparnakha the text refers to a monologue of Ravana which shared the sheer genius of his learned character.

He thought that among gods, human beings, demons, nagas and birds “there is none who can withstand my servants, as for Khalā and Dusana, they were as powerful as me. Who else could have killed them, had it not been the Lord himself, if therefore the Lord himself, the delighter of the Gods and the reliever of earth’s burden has appeared on earth, I will go and resolutely fight with him and “cross the ocean of mundane existence by falling to his arrows”. He thought that the adoration is out of question from his demonic body which is made up of principles of ignorance (Tamasa- the darkness). He knew if he would be killed through God’s arrow he would get salvation<sup>11</sup>

The fact to be highlighted here is that Ravana, being the learned King that he is, is fully aware of his characteristics and his ultimate aim of engaging with Rama, Laxman and Sita in finding salvation by receiving death through Rama’s arrows.

**Episode 2 – Kidnapping Sita<sup>12</sup>:** Ravana tries to win Sita over promising her that “O beautiful and wise lady: I will make Mandodari and all other queens your handmaids. I swear provided you cast your look on me only once”. When Sita tells Ravana that he is talking like a villain, he reveals his real form. She castigates him a lot –

“As a tiny hare would need a lioness, so have you wooed your own destruction. (by setting your heart on me, o king of demons)”.

Interestingly, even though on hearing this Ravana flew into a rage in his heart he rejoiced to adore her feet. Even while he is alluring Sita, in his monologues he is worshipping her and wishes to fall at her feet. This duality is actually the helplessness of Ravana which he well realizes. His form of a demon and his elements of darkness (tamas) prevent him from being in form, what he really feels.

**Ravana’s religious character:** With pride he says “for Lord Shiva’s worship I offered my heads as flowers, times without I have removed my head (lotus like) with own hands to worship Lord Shiva. The text also reflects here the description of eight elephants which protect all directions. His immense

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penance, learning, and devotion to Brahma earned him the latter's gratitude. Brahma conferred on Ravana the benefit of near immortality, making him resistant from destruction by gods or (other) demons; by this he also acquired the capacity to change his form. He was endowed with the strength of moving the seas and splitting the tops of mountains.

**Pride in Ravana:** Ravana tells Angad (the son of his friend, Bali). "Even as I walk, the earth shakes, like a small boat when a mad elephant steps into it. I am the same Ravana known for his might all over the world." He scolds him (Angad) for not having heard of his fame calling him a lying prattler. He does not believe the prophecy of Brahma (the creator of the universe). He says that when he saw the decree of providence traced on his brow and read that he was going to die at the hands of a mortal, he laughed. He makes fun of Brahma, that Brahma must have traced the decree in his senile dementia.

The miseries in the life of Ravana are not much popularized as the betrayal by his brother Vibhishan<sup>13</sup>. In fact, the differences with Vibhishan are brought to a climax when he is the one to provide clue to Rama that Ravana's life can only be taken when the arrow hits his navel. The behaviour of Vibhishan is popularized in a Hindi proverb giving advice to brothers not to behave like Vibhishan.

**Erudite Ravana:** When Ravana hears the news of his son's death, he was grieved and so was his wife Mandodari. The ten headed (that the ten heads signify that he had knowledge spanning in all the ten directions) monster then consoled all the women folk in various ways, he said "Perceive and realize in your heart that the entire universe is perishable". Ravana imparted them with sound wisdom though vile himself, his counsel was pious and wholesome indeed. Ravana was a reputed and valued intellectual. He was the author of many books. However, parts of his few books are found. They are the Samaveda, Nadi Prakasha, Kumara Tantra, Uddisha Tantra, Prakrurtha Kamadhenu, and Sivathandava Sthothra and the Ayurvedic book 'Arka Prakasha'. His superior acquaintance in Sanskrit can be evaluated from Sivathandava Sthotham, furthermore, he was a proficient Ayurvedic physician. The art of distilling of Arka and the preparation of Asawa was his invention; states Ayurvedic history. He invented the 'Varuni' machine to brew Arka. Ravana was the founder of SINDHURAM medicines. These medicines cured wounds instantly. He was known as Vaidya Shiromani as he

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rendered valuable service to Ayurveda. He was a divine pharmacologist and a Dhayana yogi. *Ravana Samhita* is a renowned book on astrology.

**Salvation to Ravana:** At Ravana's death his soul enters the Lord's mouth in the form of effulgence, as the demons minds were absorbed in the thought of Sri Rama when they gave up the ghost that is why they got liberated and were rid of the bonds of mundane existence.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, as a monologue of Ravana, earlier in the text tells us it was in his death that Ravana's real victory lay, for the entire battle was nothing but a pursuit for salvation.

The 'Rcm' reiterates that evil and good originate from the same source so the evil in good and good in evil can be emphasized. 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali writer, Dutt (1824-1873) has been inclined to the view that Ravana displayed the qualities of masculinity, honour, consistency, reliability and justice to a greater extent than did Rama.

He argues that what is so particularly noble about a hero who having allowed himself to be exiled showed himself incapable of protecting his own wife? He goes on to say that if the welfare of the nation had been entrusted in the past to inept and effeminate leaders like Rama and these supposed heroes were still held up for emulation it is no surprise that India had come under colonial yoke. Though this explanation has flaws of its own, it does bring for Ravana whose character may seem like a closed book, proof of sufficient plurality in Indian traditions so that even Ravana is capable of some respect.

The philosophical approach to the concept of evil in most societies remains a part of popular culture and common belief<sup>15</sup> Myths of father Ram as the primordial male principle leading to the institution of devta worship is directly related to resistance to the evil power, called Ravana, as projected by the community. Evil is attributed as a cause and then it is represented in symbolic and imaginary terms.

It is the community which receives the impressions. What they are composed of depends upon the various tales legends and scripts which are believed by different communities. Discrete elements in the complex personality of such a character as Ravana therefore, are varying or differential impressions in the community. The impressions the community gathers are of necessity not homogenous: rather they are inevitably

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heterogenous. The popular perception of Ravana, constructs the community's perception of the character that is Ravana, which is the result of this last mentioned phenomenon.

Here it must be emphasized that there should be a clear understanding that the character of Ravana has been shaped only to reinforce the character of Rama, and often so many of the higher qualities which were supposed to be elements in the persona of Ravana, were being underplayed for this very purpose. The popular perceptions of the evil in Ravana have not really existed in the text as much as they have been utilized for the maintenance and sustenance of certain primordial values which have been polarized in society and very often politicized by communities to meet their own ends

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Little Ramas Get lessons on Goodness": The Tribune, 11<sup>th</sup> Oct, 2008

<sup>2</sup> The Ram janma bhoomi controversy may have said to begin in 1855 with the local Sunni Muslims making claims over the Hanumangarhi temple in Ayodhya, with the subsequent claim to the Babri mosque possibly being a counter to this. Following this as attempts to worship in the mosque were turned down by the British government, in 1949, an icon of Ram lalla was found in the mosque. The inner sanctum sanctorum was declared as disputed and closed to the public following this. In 1984, the movement for the creation of the Ram janmabhoomi was started by VHP and BJP, under the leadership of LK Advani. The disputed site was opened for worship to Hinduism 1986, subsequently being seen as an attempt by the Congress to cultivate the Hindu vote to counter the consolidation of Muslim opinion in the government's decision on the Shah Bano case. The intensification of the VHP-BJP led movement in 1989-90 culminated in the demolition of the mosque on December 6 1992, triggering large scale rioting. The symbol of lord Ram as a rallying point for Hindus only came to occupy greater significance in the context mentioned above.

<sup>3</sup> Sonam Joshi (Mphil, JNU) in her unpublished paper "Visual Culture and the Representation of Difference".

<sup>4</sup> Anuradha Kapur, Deity to Crusader, The Changing Iconography of Ram, in Gyanendra Pandey ed. Hindus and Others

<sup>5</sup> MSS Pandian, We Do Things Differently, The Times of India, 24 September 2007. Pandian also refers to the non Brahmin critique of the Ramayana in Tamil Nadu, as a part of their critique of the privileging of Brahmins over non Brahmins. This also translates into a critique of attempts to forge a monolithic Hindu

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<sup>6</sup> ICT By ANI, 12<sup>th</sup> October, 2008. References from the Ram Charit Manas

<sup>1</sup> Cou-1, Page 8, RCM

<sup>1</sup> Ibid Couplet-2 p 8

<sup>1</sup> Ibid Cou – 4, Page 8,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid couplet 4 p 9

<sup>1</sup> Ibid p. 681

<sup>1</sup> Ibid Cou – 4,5,6,7, Page 686,

13 Ibid p 786

<sup>1</sup> Cou-77, Page 886

<sup>1</sup> p. 993

<sup>1</sup> Devraja 1993

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