

IDEAL POLITY AS SEEN IN RAMAYANA: IT'S RELEVANCE FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Prashantha N

Assistant Professor of Political Science

Lakshmi Soma Bangera Government First Grade College, Kota-Padukere, Udupi

1. Abstract

The principle of righteous way of governance which is known as “polity” in modern era is not a new way of governance in our nation. The practice of ancient Indian political system was mainly administered by king as Righteousness (Dharma - which includes Raja Dharma as well as Praja Dharma) with Rama as a model king depicted by sage Valmiki in Ramayana. In this regard, Rama's reign as a king entails his Dharmic role as the son of a king, as a disciple of Sage Vishwamitra in his formative years, as an obedient son who follows his father's orders (although it might not have looked completely righteous from the public point of view) and departs for forest life along with his younger brother Lakshmana and his wife Sita, as a loving and responsible elder brother who gives advice to Bharatha, as a citizen who follows Dharma in his interactions with people that he comes across in his forest life, as a husband who frees his wife from the clutches of the demon Raavana by defeating and killing him in war, as a crown-prince who returns to his capital after fulfilling his father's orders and as an ideal king who rules his kingdom for several years following Raja Dharma. These are good governance practices applicable even in our modern times.

2. Introduction

Ramayana and Mahabharata, the two great epics of Hindu tradition are replete with sound political and economic theories. Ramayana contains references to principles of ideal state, good governance, diplomacy, war and peace. Valmiki's primary intention was inner perfection, virtuous actions and establishing an ideal society by overcoming evils.

Ramayana has had, and continues to have a profound influence on the life of people in India over several centuries. People see it as a reference for moral values such as obedience, sacrifice, devotion, dedication, charity and humanity. Valmiki's description of Ramarajya based on Dharmarajya has had a profound influence on the modern notion of welfare state based on law and rules; and an efficient system of administration in India. Ramarajya advocates ethical governance built on the values of morality, peace, justice and prosperity. According to M.K. Gandhi, Ramarajya means a return to the ultimate Indian value of Dharma, upheld since time immemorial.

The depiction of a system which maintains happiness and harmony in the social sphere within Ramayana is taken as an ideal, which provides guidelines for the rulers as well as to the subjects. Ramayana also teaches us the sanctity of institutions, from family to the state. There have been numerous attempts by scholars across several countries, to explore different dimensions of Ramayana; ranging from culture and philosophy, to religion and spirituality, to polity and economics.

The principle of righteous way of governance which is known as “polity” in modern era is not a new way of governance in our nation. This system can be traced back to early days of human civilization. The practice of ancient Indian political science was mainly administered by king as Rajadharma or Righteousness ruling who was in turn guided by the Kulapurohita (family priest). The Kulapurohita was a person with high emotional intelligence (jnana) with full knowledge of Vedic sciences comprising all aspects of righteous living including mundane rules and rituals for individual and social life. The king was not only the commander-in-chief at war times but was also responsible for building a strong military service. The king was also helped by able ministers, with support from other sections of society comprising businessmen, farmers and servicemen; in administering his duties. This system reflected varna or categorical nature of society and has been wrongly represented by western society with a wrong assumption of caste based politics. Indeed this system is absolutely essential for good governance even today, as reflected by adviser’s rulers and soldiers, servicemen in the government at national level, state level, district level, taluk level and finally at panchayat level of present Indian government. In this regard, Rama’s reign as a king tails his Dharmic role as the son of a king, as a disciple of Sage Vishwamitra in his formative years, as an obedient son who follows his father’s orders (although it might not have looked completely righteous from the public point of view) and departs for forest life along with his younger brother Lakshmana and his wife Sita, as a loving and responsible elder brother who gives advice to Bharatha, as a citizen who follows Dharma in his interactions with people that he comes across in his forest life, as a husband who frees his wife from the clutches of the demon Raavana by defeating and killing him in war, as a benevolent person who gives shelter to his enemy’s brother Vibhishana and crowns him as the righteous king of Lanka following the killing of his brother Raavana, as a crown-prince who returns to his capital after fulfilling his father’s orders and as an ideal king who rules his kingdom for several years following Raja Dharma. These are good governance practices applicable even in our modern times.

From the epic point of view and divine aspect, Rama was one of the divine incarnation of Supreme soul or Lord (Mahavishnu) and whose purpose on earth was to kill demons such as Raavana and his brother Kumbhakarna who were troubling society to no end; to avail justice to rulers with immoral character such as Vaali; to relieve certain noble souls like Ahalya of their curses; and to provide darshana to devotees like Shabari. Rama was also a victim of his stepmother’s jealousy but he followed the orders of his father Dasharatha by willingly choosing to spend 14 years of exile in forest. During the period of exile in the forest, Rama avenged Raavana for having kidnapped his wife Sita; and thereby restored peace on earth by slaying the demons. Following this, he returned to his kingdom spanning from Kosala to Ayodhya; to provide an extended period of righteous rule for an eleven-thousand-year golden age, also referred to as Ramarajya (Rama’s reign). Aadikavi Valmiki, the composer of Ramayana had foreseen several thousand years ago that lessons from this epic will remain alive for years to come, thereby elevating this epic to the status of a classic. Although Rama’s janmabhumi (birthplace) and the associated temple in Ayodhya was subject to occupation by different rulers, currently there are efforts ongoing to rebuild a temple at the original site, which can also be seen as symbolical of bringing back Ramarajya or righteous rule.

3. Objectives

The objectives of this study are

1. To describe the view of Valmiki's notion of kingship and state
2. To study Rama's advise to Bharatha as an example of Valmiki's notion of kingship and state
3. To study Rama's actions of Rajadharma in the forest and after his return from forest life.

4. Review of literature

Indian political tradition holds Valmiki's Ramayana as the first expression of Raja Dharma (good governance by an ideal king). It is the oldest work written in Sanskrit literature. Besides narrating the story of Rama's life and his struggles, it paints a picture of the political structure of the period.

4.1. King

Monarchy is the only form of government recognised by the Ramayana and disobedience to king was, therefore, a great sin. The eldest prince, if not physically and mentally unsound, was eligible for the throne though it is evident from Ramayana that, the king could use his discretion to transfer kingship to any of his sons. Valmiki also mentions good education and warfare training was mandatory for princes in order to prepare them to shoulder the responsibility of kingship.

4.2. Qualities of the king

An ideal king was expected to have virtues like truthfulness, righteousness, compassion, gratefulness, self-restraint, selflessness, discipline and courage. He would uphold the law (Dharma). During those days it was believed that Dharma had its root in the king and the king was expected to have exemplary moral and religious values. The king was expected, even according to Valmiki, to sacrifice his life to make his people happy. The king was the real source of happiness of his subjects. He was expected to lead a life of purity and discharge his duties without fail. Valmiki mentions that only tyrants live like rootless trees. According to K.P. Jayaswal, the king was akin to the trustee of a trust, the trust being the state here. This needed the king to lead a regulated life following Dharma and avoid wasteful expenditure.

4.3. Public security

Public security was also a part of Rajadharma and the king was expected to protect all sections of people. All internal and external sources of threats were to be eradicated through maintenance of a sound army and a treasury capable of handling related expenses. The king was to protect his people from natural calamities and wild animals. He was also expected to protect his people from fire, wind, water, famine, diseases etc.

4.4 Economic development

The duty of the king was not just restricted to security alone. He was expected to support the development of the economy by providing facilities to agriculture, trading etc.

4.5 Administration

According to Valmiki, in his Ramayana, the king was supposed to have a strict watch over the administrative system and make sure that people do not suffer from corrupt and inefficient administration. He had to promote justice by punishing the wicked and rewarding the good. He was the sole controller of the treasury and the sole decision maker on taxation, revenue and expenditure. Being the supreme commander of the army, he was responsible for making sure that the kingdom had a sufficient armed force to be defended. Valmiki's king was very powerful. He was the head of the executive and the sole authority in appointing ministers, commanders

and priests. He was also the head of the department of justice with the power of punishing disobedient officials. In Ramayana we see that Rama over-rules the opinions of a given majority on numerous occasions.

5. Valmiki's notion of kingship and state

5.1 King

In Valmiki's Ramayana, the kings were invariably from the warrior class and the kingship was hereditary. However the king wasn't absolute. He was supposed to follow Rajadharma and to strive for the welfare of his subjects. In the Aranyakanda of Ramayana, Valmiki mentions about sages advising Rama that it is sin on the part of the king to collect more than 1/6th earning of the people as tax.

5.2. Political Institutions

Though the words 'Sabha' and 'Samiti' and 'Samsad' occur in Ramayana, they were not well-accomplished political institutions as it was in the Vedic period. Valmiki used these words to convey different meanings like meeting places of king and his ministers, court of justice, and social gathering of people. But the word 'Parishad' used by Valmiki stands for a political institution discharging important affairs of the state. During his rule as king, Dasharatha called the meeting of Parishad before taking decisions in all crucial situations. Though the king was the final decision maker, members had the freedom to express their opinion. According to K.P.Jayaswal, the term 'Paura-Janapada' occurs many times which was an executive council of the representatives of the towns, villages and the capital.

5.3. Social System

The caste system had firm existence and Kshatriyas alone were considered fit to rule. In order to maintain the social order, the division of the labor has been codified through varna system where the divergent interests are reconciled by the state authority. Though the elements of the state was not so clear as it was in Mahabharata and Arthashastra, Valmiki wasn't ignorant of it. In his notion of kingship, the use of words like Prakrithi Pradhana, Sansad, Parishad etc. indicate that Valmiki had a sense of the state elements. The use of the word 'Rastra', 'Vishaya' and 'Desa' denotes Janapada (territory inhabited by people). Ayodhyakanda mention about a specific Janapada with thick population and natural resources. It also mentions that a Durga should have large number of elephants, chariots and warriors. Ramayana highlights the importance of Kosa & says that the king should control the Kosa, Bala and Mitra along with controlling himself. Even the various kinds of alliances that Rama had undergone during his struggles are well-known.

6. Illustration of Rajadharma as reflected by Rama's advice to his brother Bharatha

The subject of political science or Rajadharma in the eyes of Rama can be seen in his advice to his brother Bharatha when the latter visited him requesting him to reconsider his decision of going to exile of 14 years. Rama refused his request, and advised Bharatha to become an able administrator and rule the kingdom in his absence.

The questions that Rama asked Bharatha on a king's rule and his suggestions reflect the rules and regulations to be followed for good governance. Some of the examples are as follows :

1. Rama asks whether all is well at Ayodhya, meaning if people are living peacefully, have due respect for the king and follow the dictum of king.
2. Rama tells Bharatha that he hopes Bharatha prefers one learned man over many less experienced / learned people in his council of ministers.
3. Rama indicates to Bharatha that he has a handful of ministers and people whose faithfulness and ability he has tested and can be trusted.
4. Rama further tells that the people that he has selected as his council of advisers maintain harmonious relation with the public.
5. Rama confirms with Bharatha that the selection of key positions for military administration have passed the tests of loyalty with highest honesty, and that their loyalty is also reflected in the fact that they are part of hereditary lineages which was loyal to the king and his predecessors.
6. Rama confirms with Bharatha that labour relations are well maintained and salary distributions are very fair and done in a timely manner.
7. Rama assures Bharatha that women are duly protected in his rule.
8. Rama further asks Bharatha to investigate if forests are well maintained and elephants are well protected; thereby reflecting his concern for nature and its preservation.
9. Rama also asks Bharatha about the financial position and its stability.
10. Rama inquires about the law and order situation, and about crimes and punishment.
11. Rama is also serious about treating elders and teachers with respect and maintenance of religious activities in the most appropriate manner.
12. Finally Rama asks whether Bharatha is aware of the evil habits of the king including anger and procrastination.

7. Rama's Rajadharma while in Forest and his return from forest life

This section details the Rajadharma followed by Rama in the phase when he lived in exile in the forest for 14 years, and the phase when he returned home victorious from war following his 14-year exile.

7.1. Rama's Raja Dharma while in Forest

7.1.1 Killing of Vaali and justice to Sugreeva, brother of Vaali

Vaali ruled a kingdom called Kiskinda. Vaali, because of some misconception, doubted on Sugreeva's moral character and in turn took away Sugreeva's wife and kept her with him, thereby committing an unpardonable crime. Vaali, by driving his brother Sugreeva out of his kingdom and more importantly keeping Sugreeva's wife with him, committed a great sin punishable by death. Rama came to know this, killed Vaali and gave justice to Sugreeva.

7.1.2. Killing Raavana

Rama killed Raavana because of the sin committed by Raavana who took away Rama's wife Sita. Raavana, in spite of being knowledgeable about all principles of Dharma, committed this sin, which completely drove away Raavana's so-called "Punya" or good deeds and resulted in him losing the war against Rama. These two examples demonstrate Rama's concern for righteousness.

7.2. Rama's rule after returning of forest and killing of Raavana

Rama returned to Ayodhya after defeating and killing Raavana in a war, at the end of his 14 years of exile and forest life. He was quite popular with his virtues and ruled for a period of 11000 years. There was perfection in all aspects of his rule, including peace, prosperity and freedom for all citizens, and absence of ill health and undue suffering of people. He used to visit the city anonymously at night in order to understand the real opinion of his people about his administration. He used to take the decision which was right not just from his personal point of view, but also from the state's point of view, and was willing to sacrifice personal comfort for the same. When there arose questions about Sita's character among few of his subjects, Rama sent his pregnant wife back to the forest in order to set an example of uniformity of law for all subjects including the king. He did this in spite of being fully confident of Sita's good character. This shows that Rama gave very high priority to the execution of his duties as king, even at the cost of personal sacrifices.

8. Conclusion

This paper presents the relevance of the ethics-based politics described in the Indian classical epic Ramayana for modern governance. It is seen in Ramayana that an ideal state gives importance to welfare of its subjects while upholding Dharma. Ramayana considers the king as the father of his subjects contributing for their overall development as well as the development of the kingdom. Therefore security of the king and his family was considered paramount. In the age of Ramayana, the king was the symbol of victory and the basis of Dharma. The eternal law of righteousness of Ramayana has not lost its significance even now. A king's duties and responsibilities in terms of maintaining the law and order situation, financial responsibility, welfare measures, military build up, public interaction, business prosperity, and prevention of crime and corruption are as relevant today as it was several thousand years ago in the Treta Yuga. This makes Ramayana a true classic whose relevance to governance shall continue even in the times to come. In modern times where there is a steep decline in personal and public probity, Ramayana serves as a guiding light from which the right lessons can be learnt not just from a religious point of view, but also from a point of view of governance and value system in public life.

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