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The Ramayana

The epic “Ramayana” is so naturally ingrained in every Indian that it is difficult to recollect the earliest memories of being introduced formally to the story of Rama, the ideal ruler, revered as an incarnation of God on earth by the Hindus. India has been known as a land of sages and saints since times immemorial. Spirituality has been flowing like the Ganges throughout the country over the centuries. The worship of deities like Rama and Hanuman is a difficult concept for people from other faiths. Hindus have been called “kafirs” or non-believers sometimes for this reason.

My earliest memories of the “Ramayana” include watching “Ramlila”, a play that is dramatized everyday on large play grounds or theatres for the public between Dusshetra and Diwali, the main festivals of the Hindus. Tall effigies of Ravana, with many faces, are placed at strategic points on roads and streets. These effigies are burnt on the last day of Dusshetra in remembrance of Ravana being killed by Rama after a long battle. Dusshetra signifies the victory of good over evil and culminates into Diwali, a celebration at the end of a long period of Rama’s exile and return to Ayodhya. People wear new clothes, prepare and exchange sweets with friends and neighbors, buy new silver coins and utensils and families offer special prayers in the evening at home. The houses are decorated with lamps that are lit with butter or oil. Later, adults and children come out of their houses and burn firecrackers until mid-night. There is an array of lights in the sky and the noise of crackers fills up the air. No one can miss the story of Rama in the midst of this fanfare.

I also remember watching a film named "Ramayana" with my friends in childhood. It showed Rama's sons Luv and Kush growing up with their mother, Sita in exile. In the original story, Sita was found underground as a newborn baby by Janak. In this movie, Sita was taken underground by mother earth at the end. It was the first time I saw a different version of the "Ramayana". As a teenager, I studied verses written by Tulsidas, a blind poet who is known to have written the epic. The verses were written in a dialect and style that is difficult to understand for an average Hindi speaker. I found these verses boring compared to those of "Surdas", who described the antics of Krishna, another deity worshipped by the Hindus. Later, I watched the story of Ramayana on television in episodes on weekends. The people in villages and smaller towns watched it religiously. The residents in urban areas watched it out of curiosity, hoping to gain a better understanding of their holy scripture written in Sanskrit, an ancient language and the realm of Indian priests.

My flirtation with the Ramayana ended here as I became interested in other religions and their teachings. The esoteric practices of all the faiths did not agree with me and I streamlined into spirituality. My journey on the spiritual path changed my perspective in many ways.

I started reading the translated and abridged version of the "Ramayana" by R.K. Narayan out of curiosity since he is a famous writer. My curiosity turned into admiration at his precision of words and the elaborate narratives of certain scenes. I had never read, watched or heard these narratives as depicted in this version. The vivid description of Valmiki visiting Ayodhya and

asking for Rama's help to destroy the demons, Rama and Sita falling in love at first sight, the people of Ayodhya going on a journey for Rama's wedding, the scenes and dialogues between Kaikayi and Dashratha are a few examples that make it difficult to comprehend and analyze if the verses of "Ramayana" were written by one of the greatest poets of the century or spurred by real events in that period of history.

Rama is a deep-rooted concept of an ideal being and will remain prevalent for many centuries in Hindu tradition. However, modernization and materialism have impacted Hindu culture and a major shift is seen in recent times. The festivals of Dussehra and Diwali, the idols and pictures of Rama have become ritualistic symbols instead of models of ethical conduct. Women are mostly loyal to their husbands, like Sita, but men are not Rama anymore. There is dishonesty and widespread corruption at every level. While the people in Ayodhya flourished in wealth and happiness, modern Indians have faced poverty and hardships due to over-population. This has given rise to materialism and greed.

In spite of these changes, people are loyal and caring. Families are close-knit and there is a spirit of sacrifice among parents and children even when they grow up. Brothers generally help each other in times of need. Marriage is still considered to be a sacred bond and women are expected to live in the shadow of men. Traces of the "Ramayana" still trickle down the spine of Indian culture.