THE UNIFYING ROLE OF THE RAMAYANA
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The atmosphere is so charged after the ceremony for the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya that it seems well nigh impossible to discuss positive aspects of this epic in the life of India without flare-ups. But we are not here to debate whether it is myth or history, or even bits of both, nor condone or condemn the destruction of another place of worship. Here, our focus is on the historic unifying role of an epic that is viewed by some as a sharply divisive text.

It is a fact, nevertheless, that no other epic or religious text in the world has played such an indubitably assimilative role and linked so many scattered geographies by pegging them to its episodes. This could succeed only if the texts provided flexible mechanisms that permitted the identification of 'local geographies' with the 'historic sites' mentioned. While A K Ramanujam's Three Hundred Ramayanas (or even more) showed it allowed diverse ethnic or linguistic communities across India to express their uniqueness, aspirations, anxieties and genius within an amorphous and accommodative framework, the identification of place names completed the uphill task of sewing India together.

Specific sites on this vast subcontinent claimed or were deemed to be those very holy sites that are mentioned in the two great epics—mostly in the Ramayana, because its hero did traverse a lot. It is rare to find the same tract like Kishkinda linked to both the epics; the two are said to be in different yugas or aeons. What really clinched it were the 'long peripatetic periods' mentioned in both epics, when the protagonists were compelled to leave their own kingdom and wander around this vast land. In the Ramayana, it is the Aranya Kanda of 14 years, when Rama travelled through forests and hills; this setting provided immense opportunities to describe in detail the many remote places visited.

In the Mahabharata, the five Pandavas were also exiled for 12 long years, their Vanavas, followed by a thirteenth year of living totally incognito, the Agyatavas, which offered even more flexibility to more sites to claim the honour of being the ones mentioned. In addition to these convenient phases that the composers utilised to bring in so many far-away places, individual heroes like Arjuna or Hanuman also ventured on their own into unknown kingdoms.

This, in turn, offered scope to so many more places and people to be identified with the two epics and their divine characters. The major destinations covered by the 'Ramayana Express', for instance, give an idea of how distant sites in ancient India were garlanded together. They are Ayodhya, Nandigram, Sitamarhi, Janakpur, Varanasi, Prayag, Chitrakoot, Nashik, Hampi,

Kanchipuram and Rameshwaram. It may be charged that myth and reality are being confused, but this highly imaginative geo-identificatory exercise did bring far-flung corners to 'nationwide' attention.

Even 'backward areas' like Dandakarnaya gained in respectability and became must-visit sites of pilgrimages. The epics brought them from the periphery to the 'centre', and tribals and marginal castes were given a symbolic position under the sun. In the bargain, the Ganga valley reinforced its position as the heartland of Hindus, the Aryavarta. It is a fact that the outer regions of India also found satisfaction in being linked to the heartland, as Rajendra Chola's Gangaikonda Cholapuram demonstrates. In effect, therefore, this ingenious strategy of linking sites actually helped create a nation out of so many contesting ethnic and linguistic entities.

The popularity of the Ramayana is clear from the names of numerous places all over India. There are, for instance, countless Rampurs and so many places named after Sita. After the 2011 Census, a survey discovered that 3,626 villages in India are named after Rama, while 3,309 honour Krishna. Interestingly, while Hanuman's name is imbedded in 367 villages, Bharata has 187 villages featuring his name and brother Lakshmana has 160.

We are, of course, not counting other famous spots like Lakhnauti, an ancient capital of Bengal, or Lakshman Jhula in Rishikesh. But many claims are not without contest, as we see when Karnataka's Hampi-Kishkinda vies with Anjaneri mountain in Nashik for the distinction of Hanuman's birthplace, while Anjan in Jharkhand's Gumla district, the Anjani cave in the tribal district of Dang in Gujarat and even Kaithal of Haryana join the fray.

This actually offers five sites located in different regions the opportunity of claiming the laurel—with local guides passionately pointing out exact spots linked to the epic. The process of linking myth and reality is further strengthened by creating or publicising local legends about where exactly the heroes or central characters were born or visited; caves, temples, ruins, groves and water bodies reinforce both claims and beliefs.

So significant is this claim game that even Nepal's PM has now thrown his hat into the ring by insisting that Ram was born in Birgunj district of his country. Sri Lankans may not like to be linked to Ravana and demons, but a thriving tourist industry markets quite profitably the 'historic spots' connected with the Ramayana. So powerful is faith that a decade ago, an economically lucrative 'Sethusamudram' proposal for a shipping channel between India and Lanka had to be abandoned as it was to cut through Rama's Sethu. Whether myth or history, one can thus hardly ignore the sheer strength of faith.