The Ramayana: The Mythology Of A Great Indian Epic
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A significant section of Joseph Campbell’s book, The Power of Myth, concentrates on the hero’s adventure. According to Campbell, the adventure involves “a hero or heroine who has found or done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience” (p. 151). The adventure itself, in Campbell’s view, “is symbolically a manifestation of [the hero’s] character” (p. 158). Campbell further elaborates on the role of the mythological protagonist in his book, The Hero with a Thousand Faces. He explains that the “hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory won...” (p. 30).

Additional insight into the realm of mythology is also offered in the publication, A Joseph Campbell Companion: Reflections on the Art of Living. In it, Joseph Campbell expounds on the hero’s journey, which begins with an invitation from a guide. Accepting the call to adventure, the hero will “cross the threshold...into the dark forest” (p. 78). Along the way, the hero encounters characters that aid in the task at hand, while others must be confronted in a pattern of “increasingly difficult trials” (pp. 78-79).

In the book, The Ways of Religion, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a distinguished intellect and former Vice President and President of India, explains that human growth consists of four consecutive stages. The attainment of a greater spiritual being requires existence in the third stage which Radhakrishnan terms “the forest dweller” (p. 17). In the process, according to Radhakrishnan,

The individual begins to feel the greatness of the soul that is behind the veils of nature and longs to reach his true universality.... The mystery of life, as of death, each one has to discover for himself. We can sing and taste with no tongues but our own. Though each one has to attain his purpose by his separate encounter, the result is of universal significance (p. 17).

R. K. Narayan’s interpretation of The Ramayana brings the reader quickly to the main attributes of a mythological account just noted. Sage Viswamithra is announced to the king, Dasaratha. The sage is characterized as one with “complete mastery over his bodily needs through inner discipline and austerities...above the effects of heat, cold, hunger, fatigue, and even decrepitude” (pp. 7-8). This description coincides, by the way, with the fourth stage of human life outlined by Radhakrishnan, in The Ways of Religion. It is the stage of the monk, or sātvāsyaṁ. Radhakrishnan describes the monk as one with “a freedom and fearlessness of spirit, an immensity of courage, which no defeat or obstacle can touch, a faith in the power that works in the universe...” (p. 17).

Meeting with the king, Viswamithra asks for Rama, the king’s son, to accompany him on a journey to perform a sacrifice (yāga) that “will strengthen the beneficial forces of this world, and please the gods above” (p. 8). It is Rama’s call to adventure—the commencement of the hero’s journey.
During the initial phase of crossing over to the dark forest, Viswamithra, Rama, and Lakshmana (Rama’s brother) are greeted by hermits offering assistance. Harsh conditions prevail and malevolent creatures confront the hero and his company from the onset as well.

Rama subsequently earns the hand of Sita in marriage. He does so by an extraordinary act. As a condition to marrying King Janaka’s beautiful daughter [adopted as a baby girl—“a gift of Mother Earth”] Rama must lift, bend, and string the king’s bow, which had been left to an ancestor by Shiva (p. 27). Narayan’s account describes Rama’s feat:

Rama approached the bow. Some of the onlookers, unable to bear the suspense, closed their eyes and prayed for his success, saying, “If he fails to bring the ends of this bow together, what is to happen to the maiden?” What they missed, because they had shut their eyes, was to note how swiftly Rama picked up the bow, tugged the string taut, and brought the tips together. They were startled when they heard a deafening report, caused by the cracking of the bow at its arch, which could not stand the pressure of Rama’s grip. (p. 28)

Thus, Rama performs, in accordance with Joseph Campbell’s classification in The Power of Myth, “something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience” (p. 151). (It might also be argued that, in addition to doing something extraordinary, Rama found something extraordinary—Sita.) This achievement directly precedes Rama’s real thrust into the dark forest, which is initiated by the contrived efforts of his mother-in-law, Kaikeyi.

As one of two boons granted by her husband, King Dasaratha, Kaikeyi requests that Rama be banished “to the forests for fourteen years” (p. 45). Hence, Rama must inhabit the forest regions in which, according to Radhakrishnan, “true universality” can be sought (p. 17). Accepting his fate, Rama addresses his mother, Kausalya:

After living in the forests, I will come back—after all, fourteen years could pass like as many days. If you remember, my earlier stay in the forests with Viswamithra brought me countless blessings; this could be a similar opportunity again, for me. So do not grieve (p. 49).

The call to adventure is again embraced by the hero with an acknowledgment that, from the time spent in the forests, great boons can be had.

Nevertheless, the trek is a dangerous one. Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita face various demons, culminating in combat with Ravana, ruler of the demonic rakshasas and abductor of Sita. In addition to the direct aid provided by Lakshmana along the way, other benevolent creatures offer their assistance. The great eagle, Jatayu, contributes to the adventure (pp. 94-95), as does his elder brother, Sampathi (pp. 129-130). The monkey race inhabiting Kiskinda, and especially the efforts of Sugreeva and Hanuman, are instrumental in the conclusion of Rama’s confrontation with Ravana. Again, these attributes demonstrate the classic tradition of mythology present in The Ramayana.

Furthermore, Rama’s purpose, while chronicled throughout the story, is not fully attained until after Rama concludes his habitation in the forest. While meeting with King Dasaratha to acquire the talents of Rama for the upcoming expedition, Viswamithra advises the emperor that everyone “when the time comes, has to depart and seek his fulfillment in his own way” (p.10). Fulfillment for Rama (the accomplishment of his mission) entails encountering and destroying the asuras (demons) “causing suffering and hardship to all the good souls” (p. 67). He cautions Ravana’s sister, Soorpanaka, during his exile that “my mission in life is to root out the rakshasas from the face of this earth” (p. 74). In essence, especially by the denouement of the story, Rama is mankind’s single combat warrior—in battle against Ravana and the demons.

Moreover, after victory over Ravana, during a period when it appears that Rama has “lost sight of his own identity,” the ultimate boon is presented to the hero (pp. 163-164). Brahma (the Creator) counsels Rama:

Of the Trinity, I am the Creator.
Shiva is the Destroyer and Vishnu is the Protector. All three of us derive
our existence from the Supreme God and we are subject to dissolution and rebirth. But the Supreme God who creates us is without a beginning or an end. There is neither birth nor growth nor death for the Supreme God. He is the origin of everything and in him everything is assimilated at the end. That God is yourself, and Sita at your side now is a part of that Divinity. Please remember that this is your real identity and let not the fear and doubts that assail an ordinary mortal ever move you. You are beyond everything; and we are all blessed indeed to be in your presence (p. 164).

Thus, in agreement with Radhakrishnan's assertion, Rama, by virtue of his forest journeys, reaches his "true universality."

The mythology of the sort examined has probably permeated every culture. Like the modern-day saga of Star Wars, myths such as The Ramayana capture the conscious (and subconscious) ideals of one's being. Their application in the respective societies adhering to their content likely has always traversed many different levels of interpretation. As Narayan cites in his introduction: "The Ramayana pervades our cultural life in one form or another at all times, it may be as a scholarly discourse at a public hall, a traditional story-teller's narrative in an open space, or a play or dance on stage" (p. xi).

Indeed, Rama and the entire company of other characters that compose The Ramayana create a mythology that works on many levels. Throughout the account, for example, there are references to desire and the consequences of unbridled passion. In Chapter Two, "The Wedding," while attesting to their very deep love for each other and laying the foundation for their union, the passions of Rama and Sita that are presented to the reader also illustrate the potential obstructive nature of such uncontrolled sentiment. Sita's scenario follows:

The cry of birds settling down for the night and the sound of waves on the seashores became clearer as the evening advanced into dusk and night. A cool breeze blew from the sea, but none of it comforted Sita. This hour sharpened the agony of love, and agitated her heart with hopeless longings. A rare bird, known as "Anril," somewhere called its mate. Normally at this hour, Sita would listen for its melodious warbling, but today its voice sounded harsh and odious.... The full moon rose from the sea, flooding the earth with its soft light. At the sight of it, [Sita] covered her eyes with her palms. She felt that all the elements were alien to her and combining to aggravate her suffering (p. 25).

While Sita's desire for Rama impeded her natural existence, Rama, too, was afflicted with a similar fever:

In the seclusion of his bedroom, he began to brood over the girl he had noticed on the palace balcony. For him, too, the moon seemed to emphasize his sense of loneliness.... Now he caught himself contemplating her in every detail. He fancied that she was standing before him and longed to enclose those breasts in his embrace. He said to himself, "Even if I cannot take her in my arms, shall I ever get another glimpse, however briefly, of that radiant face and those lips? Eyes, lips, those curly locks falling on the forehead—every item of those features seemingly poised to attack and quell me—me, on whose bow depended the destruction of demons, now at the mercy of one who wields only a bow of sugarcane and uses flowers for arrows..." (p. 26).

Ravana's passion for Sita obviously is a natural aspect of the story. It is this passion that ultimately leads to the final confrontation between Rama and Ravana, Rama's victory, and his subsequent realization of "true universality." Dealing initially with his obsession for Sita, Ravana's erratic and nefarious nature contrasts strikingly with the noble and steadfast resolve of Rama. "[O]verwhelmed by the vision before him," Ravana concedes in one moment that he'll "make her the queen of [his] empire and spend the rest of [his] days in obeying her command and pleasing her in a million ways" (p. 91). In the next
moment, in appreciation of the contribution of his sister, Ravana vacillates: "How good of my darling sister to have thought of me when she saw this angel! I shall reward my sister by making her the queen of my empire. She shall rule in my place..." (p. 91). It is the perennial statement of the unpredictable and selfish character of one whose disposition is less than honorable.

Of the virtues considered in The Ramayana, one's obligation to duty is perhaps most pervasive throughout the tale. Dasaratha is the dutiful king, father, and husband. Lakshmana is the obedient brother. Sita is Rama's faithful mate. Rama's duty is to mankind—the quintessential single combat warrior. The importance of one's commitment to duty is disclosed aptly in Narayan's account of the counsel offered by Dasaratha's wife (Rama's mother), Kausalya, as her husband grieves over the exile of his son:

Kausalya, when she saw her husband's plight, was most moved and tried to comfort him in her own way. Concealing her own misery at the prospect of Rama's exile, she told her husband clearly, "If you do not maintain the integrity and truth of your own words, and now try to hold Rama back, the world will not accept it. Try to lessen your attachment to Rama and calm yourself" (p. 52).

In her own way, as a wife and mother, Kausalya consoles her husband while shrouding her own anguish over the matter of Rama's expulsion. The king is properly reminded of his obligation to honor integrity and truth, lest he lose the approbation of the world.

Lastly, one more analysis of the forest representation will perhaps best conclude this examination of The Ramayana as myth and its transcending references. After Kausalya concludes her counsel with her husband, Dasaratha responds with the following recollection:

Once while I was hunting in a forest, I heard the gurgling of water—the noise an elephant makes when drinking water. I shot an arrow in that direction, and at once heard a human cry in agony. I went up and found that I had shot at a young boy. He had been filling his pitcher; and water rushing into it had created the noise. The boy was dying and told me that his parents, eyeless, were not far away. He had tended them, carrying them about on his back. They died on hearing of this tragedy, after cursing the man who had killed their son to suffer a similar fate. And so that is going to be my fate... (p. 53).

The fact that the event occurs in the forest must be considered. It is while in the forest that one can experience growth, where boons are bestowed, and, subsequently, where one can advance to the stage of saññyāsīn.

Yet, the forest can be a treacherous place. The boy’s "eyeless" parents, for example, cannot traverse the forest without the aid of their son. One cannot, therefore, tread in the forest blindly. From that, the consequences of proceeding into the forest without sight of the reason for doing so are made manifest by Dasaratha’s actions. He shoots an arrow at an object (perhaps better termed as his objective) without ever actually seeing it. The resulting tragedy is the result of Dasaratha’s blind pursuit.

Furthermore, no boon is conferred upon Dasaratha. Rather, from this seemingly inconspicuous little tale composing only a very small part of the whole story, the boon is bestowed upon the reader! That, after all, is the power of myth.

Works Cited


