

Title

SHRI RAMA CHANDRA
The Ideal King

Some lessons from the Ramayana

By
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About this eBook

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SHRI RAMA CHANDRA – The Ideal King

I. Introduction

Two years ago we were studying together "one of the greatest books in the world," the *Mahabharata*. Now we are going to study the second great epic poem of India, the *Ramayana*. These two books stand out from the rest of Indian literature in a very marked way. The *Vedas*, the *Institutes of Manu*, are the great authorities for the learned, and only through the learned for the mass of the people. But the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are wrought into the very life of every Indian man, woman and child. Mothers tell their stories to their children, teachers to their pupils, the old to the young. Every child grows up knowing the heroes of these poems as familiar friends, having been moved to tears and laughter from earliest days by these loved names.

Despite the influence wielded by these two books, however, their moulding power on life is not so great as once it was. If we could bring back their influence on character, we should indeed lift our India upwards. They hold up to us ideals of conduct, virtues acted out on life's stage as practical examples for old and young alike, for husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends and enemies. This is even more true of the *Ramayana* than of the *Mahabharata*. For in the vast story told in the *Mahabharata*, we have the picture of an age when life was very complex, and relations very tangled it is a modern drama. Good and evil are everywhere intermingled in the characters drawn for us, and scarcely one – save the blameless Bhishma - shows us an ideally perfect man. The great Avatara, of course stands apart as superhuman. It is a book for men who have developed intellect and judgment, and who can trace the connection between sin and sorrow.

In the *Ramayana* we move in a different atmosphere, and breathe an air of heroic simplicity. The characters are sharply cut one is to be followed, another is to be shunned. Good is good, evil is evil. Black is black, white is white, and there are no greys. Great types stand forth as ideals of right and wrong. The young can feel their inspiring beauty or their repellent ugliness. Can a Hindu wife have fairer and sweeter exemplar than the gracious Sita? Can a Hindu prince shape himself on more regal lines than those of Ramachandra? Can a Hindu brother find a nobler type of fraternal devotion than Lakhmana? Why, the very names carry a thrill through every Hindu heart. All the melody of their lives sounds sweetly out when the keynote of their names is struck.

Nor should we forget that we owe to these great poems most of what is known publicly of ancient India. Therein we see how the national, social and family life was carried on, the ways of living, the joys and sorrows, the education of the young, the ideas of the populace. To think of ancient India, with all that we have learned from these books blotted out, would be to gaze at a blurred canvas instead of a living picture.

The *Ramayana*, then, is to be the subject of our study, a study that will, I hope, be practically profitable. May we see, as we study character after character, the lessons each is meant to teach, and their value to us in modern India.

Let us glance first at the circumstances which surrounded the composition of the original *Ramayana*. We read that the great sage Valmiki met another great sage, Narada, and asked if there was on earth a perfect man, knowing duty, grateful and truthful, with heart and passions subdued, and intelligence evolved. To him answered Narada, that such a one there was, a

prince of the great line of Ikshvaku, named Rama. Patient, self-controlled and learned was he, of noble beauty and of manly strength, heroic in war and gentle in pace, beloved by all around him. Then Narada briefly outlined his history, and told how he was then ruling his kingdom with justice and kindness, being as a father to his happy subjects.

Narada described the state of Ramachandra's kingdom in glowing terms, telling how disease and famine did not touch it, nor fire nor flood. Fathers did not lose their sons, nor wives their husbands. Corn and wealth were everywhere, and no man feared hunger or theft. (Balakandam §. i.) Such is the happy story of a nation where prince and people join together in righteous life and devotion to the common good. Material prosperity follows on the heels of spiritual life. Material welfare is the blessing bestowed by the Gods on the nation that lives nobly, wherein each performs his Dharma. If a nation falls in the scale of nations, the fault lies in itself; and if it would rise again, it must lay a foundation of righteous living, and on that prosperity can be builded and on no other. The future of India lies with you, her younger sons, and if you grow up into a noble manhood, your country will grow up with you, and thus will rise among the peoples of the world.

His mind filled with this glowing picture of an ideal king, Valmiki went on his way, and as he walked through the forest he marked with pleasure the happy sights and sounds around him, the playful animals, the merry birds. And as he was watching a pair of Kraunchas sporting with each other, a fowler shot one of the harmless birds, and the hen-bird fluttered round her dying mate, uttering piercing cries. Then Valmiki, pitiful as are all good men, and knowing that cruelty brings misery in its track, cried out that he who had thus slain the happy bird should never attain prosperity. The words fell into the form of a shloka, musical and sonorous, and Brahma, appearing to the sage, bade him tell the story of Rama in that melodious measure, declaring that as long as mountain and sea existed, so long should his poem spread among men. Thus from a heart of love and pity was born the melody of the *Ramayana*, and wherever it is chanted love and pity still find birth. (§. ii.)

But Valmiki needed more than the metre of his poem; he needed its materials. So he sat him down and engaged in meditation on the subject, till the inner vision opened, and he saw "before him Rama and Lakshmana and Sita, and Dasharatha together with his wives in his kingdom, laughing and talking and acting, and bearing themselves as in real life." (§ iii.) Thus he watched the history unroll itself before him, a living picture, true in every detail; for no event occurs that does not leave an imperishable record in that subtle akasha which surrounds and interpenetrates all.

There are two ways of gaining knowledge. One the way of study, by which we may learn what other people know and have written down for the instruction of those who know not. The second way is by developing within ourselves the nature which is knowledge, the nature which can reproduce within itself all to which it turns its attention, as the eye reflects the object at which it looks. Now the second way is the better, though by far the more difficult. We must prepare ourselves for it by treading the first. We must develop and train our intelligence by learning that which is written by men wiser than ourselves: then later in life, we may pass onward into the second path, and evolve the inner nature till it can see and know, and need seek no aid from books.

Thus did Valmiki see the story and invent the metre for its telling, and then he told it in twenty-four thousand shlokas, which have been grouped into five hundred chapters, and these again into seven Kandas, or Sections.

But still the poem needed means to reach the public ear in an age when knowledge passed from mouth to ear instead of from hand to eye. And Valmiki pondered: "Who shall sing this poem in assemblies?" While he thus pondered, two young ascetics came in and touched his feet; and these were the brothers Kusha and Lava, who were sons of Rama, though they knew it not how and why this strange thing happened we shall learn here-after. Finding that these youths were gifted with sweet voices and were skilled in music, he taught to them his wondrous poem, and going forth they sang it "in the assemblies of ascetics and of Brahmanas and of all good men." And thus singing, they came to Ayodhya, where Rama ruled in royal splendour, and were seen of Him as they walked along a street. Then Rama's heart was drawn to the handsome modest youths, and He sent for them and bade them sing in presence of Himself and of His court. And thus they sang of Rama's birth and life, of His sorrows and His troubles, of Sita and Lakhmana and Bharata and all the rest, in the very ears of the heroes of the story. And all men wondered as they listened to the wondrous tale, and marked the singers who bore the signs of royal birth upon them, though seeming but as two young ascetics in outward garb and mien.

Before we listen to their song, we must consider the time at which it was given, and the significance of the coming of Shri Rama.

The period of the world's history at which Ramachandra lived was the closing of the Treta Yuga. The history of the world and indeed of any separate nation is divided into four great periods, or Yugas, named respectively the Satya, the Treta, the Dvapara, the Kali. Shri Rama ruled during the last part of the Treta Yuga, and when He passed away from earth the Dvapara Yuga began. That Yuga, again, was closed by the coming of Shri Krishna, and with His death was opened the Kali Yuga.

And what was Shri Rama? Not simply a great warrior, a mighty king. He was an Avatara, a and a divine incarnation of a special kind. All men are divine incarnations. In the heart of every man the supreme Self abides. It is that Self who presses us onward and upward, who continues a never-failing pressure to which we are indeed blessed if we yield. But when we speak of an Avatara we mean more than this. An Avatara (from "tri," pass over, and "ava," prefix implying descent) is a special incarnation, a human form being taken in which the Divinity veils Himself and through which shines forth His glory. Not in germ, in "divine fragments," as in us, but in the full radiance of Deity, God reveals Himself in man to man.

For such coming there is always special reason, and one reason is the strengthening of the forces that work for good and the weakening of those that work for evil. This may be said to be the most general reason: "When Dharma decays, when Adharma is exalted, O Bharata, then I myself come forth. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the evil, for the firm establishment of Dharma,, I am born from age to age." (*Bhagavad-Gita* vi. 7, 8.)

Another question arises in connection with the Avataras in their aspect as Destroyers of evil. The world-process is carried on by means of opposing forces. The world is unfolding all the powers of the inner life breathed into it by Ishvara. As a seed is placed in the ground and grows into a plant bearing flowers and, within them, fruits, so is it with the world; a seed of divine life is planted in matter, and grows into a world, bearing humanity as its flower, a flower that yields the fruit of divinity. For we also are Gods, but Gods in the making.

In order that this evolution may take place, two things are necessary two forces that apparently work the one against the other. One pushes on evolution and that is seen as helping

it. The other pushes against evolution, and that is seen as hindering it. But the appearance deludes us. The force that pushes against evolution is as necessary for it as the one which pushes it onwards. Think of 'a wheel the wheel of a bicycle, if you like. You can turn the wheel round very quickly in the air, but then the bicycle does not go on; only when you place the wheel on the ground, which offers resistance to it, can it go on. Motion is only possible where there is resistance. You can only leap by having firm ground to stand on which resists the pressure of your feet. This resistance which makes possible the forward movement of the world is called "evil." But you must understand clearly that it only helps you when you push against it. If you were to lie down on the ground instead of pushing your feet hard against it, you would not rise into the air. And if you yield to evil instead of resisting it, it will not draw forth your strength. Evil is used rightly when we strive against it, for then the efforts call out our divine nature. Evil is God's servant as much as good, but serves Him in a different way. In your athletic exercises you exert yourselves, and thereby grow strong. You use dumb-bells and Indian clubs, and by exerting your muscles against their weight, you make your muscles grow. When you race, and play football and cricket, you are exerting your strength to overcome obstacles, and your strength grows. If you are lazy and slothful, you cannot become strong; only exercise increases strength. So evil calls on the soul to exert itself and conquer it. Remember that when you yield to evil, it pushes you back; when you strive against it, it gives you the resistance that enables you to go forward.

When these forces of resistance are growing too strong by men's yielding to them, so that they threaten to retard evolution, then an Avatara comes to restore the due proportion, and the forces of evil are drawn together, usually culminating in a single individual, and this individual appears as the opponent of the Avatara. Ravana plays this part in the *Ramayana*. Ramachandra stands for the Good, Ravana for the Evil, and they struggle together, and Ramachandra triumphs. After the triumph of the Good, the Evil shows that it also has its root in Ishvara, for Ravana, slain by Rama, ascends to Vishnu's heaven.

But there are other reasons also for the coming of an Avatara. Sometimes He is also a Teacher, as in the case of Shri Krishna, whose divine "Song" is still the world's wonder. Sometimes He is also an Example; and as an example for men of the world not for the recluse, the ascetic, the sannyasi, but for the son, the husband, the brother, the ruler, the warrior, the man who would lead "a spiritual life in the world Ramachandra stands supreme, the ideal man in every relation of life. Ideal king and warrior, the beauty of his character also shines out in all His domestic relations, in those ties which bind the home, and therefore society, together. Among all the great ones who stand out in Indian literature, there is none whose life serves as a more noble and practical model than that of Him who came down to show what a man might be, and to illumine human relations with divine light.

Especially was it Shri Rama's mission to shew forth the ideal Kshattriya. For the Kshattriya caste had abused its strength and right of rule, and, like many strong men, had become tyrannous. It had used its power for oppression instead of for protection, for self instead of for others. The strong man's duty is to defend the weak, never to tyrannise over him. So is it the strong boy's duty to protect the little boys, and to see that they are not unfairly used. A big boy who strikes a little boy is a coward, and is looked down upon by brave boys.

Now the Kshattriya caste had been cut down to its very roots by Parashurama, as a punishment for its abuse of power. He slew them, that they might learn that those who used strength to oppress and slay would be slain by a power greater than their own. When that stern lesson had been taught by Rama of the Axe, then Ramachandra came to serve as model for

the ideal Kshatriya.

We shall study this ideal in detail, but I may say of it in this introductory lecture that it is one which sorely needs revival in modern India. There come out in it very strongly what are called the manly virtues which are needed to make a nation great; among these are courage, strength, patience, endurance, self-respect, readiness to stand up in defence of right and against wrong, much vital energy and nervous force. These manly virtues were very conspicuous in Indian heroes in the past, but are lamentably deficient in the India of to-day. No nation can be great which lets slip out of its character these strong and virile virtues, and we must re-build them in India's sons.

Do not think that these virtues must be accompanied by aggressive insolence or roughness, though they are too often thus attended. There was nothing of insolence or roughness in Ramachandra. He was very gentle and compassionate, very courteous and well-mannered, showing a tender reverence to his parents, deference to the aged and the learned. You must seek to build into your characters courage and self-respect along with sweetness and courtesy: then you will be ideals of manliness, strong and gentle.

Try not to be afraid of those above you in age or in social position. A boy should not be afraid of his father or of his teacher, but while he should treat them with respect, he should have frank confidence in their good-will. Be frank, brave, honest and courteous, and you will be beloved and trusted by your superiors. No brave man likes others to cringe to him, and he treats manliness with respect.

Turning now to the story, we learn something about the place in which Ramachandra was to be born. It was in the city of Ayodhya, the capital of the country of Koshala, the city the very name of which means the unconquerable. In this city a King descended from the great Ikshvaku was ruling; the land was watered by the pleasant river Sarayu, and was prosperous and wealthy. A very attractive description of this city is given, and the details shew us the high state of civilisation that had been reached. The roads, were broad, and were kept well-watered and strewn with blossoms. There were shops filled with goods of all descriptions, and artisans and merchants of all kinds. There were public buildings such as theatres, and splendid palaces and pleasure-grounds. The soldiers there were chosen for their skill in wielding weapons combined with propriety in their use; they would "slaughter infuriated lions and tigers and boars roaming in the forest," but "would not pierce with arrows persons lorn, or abandoned, or hiding, or fugitive." They guarded the peaceful against attack whether from man or beast, but wrought no harm on helpless folk. And Brahmanas too were there, pious, virtuous and learned, "ever abiding by truth, high-souled, and resembling mighty ascetics." (§. v.)

Such a population was naturally prosperous and well-to-do, and it is remarked that each was "contented with his possessions," and that there were no poor and none who were unlettered.

Would that we could say the same of modern India, but now-a-days only the few are educated, while the vast majority are left in ignorance. Contentment, also, is not a very widespread virtue, though one most productive of happiness. Contentment does not depend on position, nor on wealth, but on mind. It is an attitude of the mind, not a result of circumstances. Many a poor man is contented with the little he has, while many a rich man is discontented with his abundance, The mind is the root alike of content and of discontent.

All the citizens, it is said further, were of good character, 'pure and clean in mind and body, and hence it was that "no man and no woman was seen devoid of grace or beauty," for physical beauty and grace are attendants on pure character and refined ways of life. (§. vi.)

Another cause of happiness for the people was the goodness and diligence of their King, Dasharatha, and the wisdom with which he chose his counsellors. These are described as being devoted to their monarch, ever intent on his good, learned and modest, conversant with policy, self-controlled, energetic, gentle in speech, and "never committing themselves to a lie from anger or interest or desire." With such a monarch and such counsellors, well might the people be happy. (§. vii.)

But there was a shadow in all this brightness: the King was childless, and he was very old. King and people alike longed to see an heir to the throne, and the King therefore betook himself to prayer and sacrifice. (§. viii.) A learned and famous sage, Rishyashringa, was chosen as the leader of the sacrificial ceremony, the horse sacrifice (§ ix-xiii.), and after all preparations had been duly made, the King and his wives were initiated for the performance of the rites. (§. xiii.) It is note-worthy that no Brahmana was allowed to officiate who "was not versed in the Vedas and Vedangas, or that did not observe vows, or that was not profoundly learned, nor did any assist at the sacrifice that did not argue ably." The illiterate or ignorant Brahmana was regarded as no Brahmana in those happier times. Then was the dictum of Manu no idle word: "As an elephant made of wood, as an antelope made of leather, such is an unlearned Brahmana: these three have nothing but the names." (ii.157) No ceremony is rightly done where the officiating priest is ignorant; knowledge, purity, truthfulness where these are absent, the chant of the priest cannot reach the Gods. Only where the sacrifice is rightly performed, will the great Ones deign to be present.

It is interesting to note that at this great public ceremony, attended by crowds of Brahmanas, Kings, nobles and warriors, the celebrant was a woman Kaushalya, the eldest wife of King Dasharatha. Among the many precious things which ancient India possessed and which modern India has lost, is the position held by woman. The restoration of the old position is a necessary condition of the revival of national greatness, for the influence of the mother weighs greatly in the development of the son. (§. xiv.)

After the completion of the horse-sacrifice, that for conferring a son was performed, and at this the Gods prayed to Brahma that He would devise some means for destroying Ravana, the great Rakshasa, who, by virtue of a boon conferred on him by Brahma Himself, was harassing the three worlds. "The sun does not burn him, nor does the wind blow on him; and at sight of him the one engarlanded with billows, the Ocean, dares not stir." By men alone, answered Brahma, could Ravana be slain, for He had given him immunity from death at the hand of other beings; Ravana, in his pride, did not include men among his possible assailants, hence only by men could he be slain.

Then Vishnu appeared, bearing the conch, the discus and the mace, objects that are always placed in the hands of the upholder of the worlds. Now these objects are not meaningless, but each is a symbol of divine power. The conch symbolises sound, the creative power which shapes matter into forms. The chakram, or discus, is the symbol of destruction, the whirling vibratory forces that shatter the worlds. The mace is the rod of power, the sign of the protecting and supporting forces that preserve the universe. You may see these symbols in the temples in connection with Vishnu, and you should know their meanings.