

Ravana - The Serial Culture-Killer

"Ravana - shakti dekhi par bhakti kisne dekhi?" screamed hoardings throughout Mumbai, which promoted the then-new serial Ravana. This serial claimed to broadcast the less known virtues, as found in historical sources, of Ravana, the well-known Ramayana villain.



The original and most authentic rendition of the Ramayana is the Valmiki Ramayana. Over the centuries, many other versions have been written, which have different degrees of variations, dilutions, contaminations and perversions of the original storyline and message. So a biased mind can, if it so desires, select suitable sections from different versions and present a new interpretation, from Ravana's point of view, as this serial

professed.

Let's objectively examine the bhakti of Ravana toward Shiva. During his murderous, universe-conquering campaign, Ravana arrogantly tried to dislodge Mount Kailash, the abode of Shiva. He thus invited curses from both Shiva's carrier Nandi and Shiva's consort, Parvati. When Shiva crushed the impudent Ravana's hands under the mountain, the demon, to save his own life, pacified and gratified Shiva with prayers and obtained celestial weapons in return. Empowered with those weapons, Ravana started a reign of terror, in which he abducted or defiled multitudes of beautiful women – including celestial nymphs like Rambha and ascetic ladies like Vedavati. Hundreds of kidnapped princesses constituted his harem in Lanka. Ravana's insatiable lust ultimately caused his downfall, when he abducted Sita, the consort of the Supreme Lord, Shri Rama. After Lord Rama destroyed Ravana, Shiva personally congratulated the 'killer of his worshiper', "You have killed the scourge and the dread of the universe." Why? Because Shiva could easily recognize that the demon's devotion never went beyond self-serving

sycophancy. Thus those who worship Ravana as a shiva-bhakta are ill-informed about the demon's mentality – or they themselves have a perverse mentality which wants to idolize a woman-hunting, egomaniac, pseudo-religious terrorist.

Social historians have pointed out that the caliber of a society can be judged by the caliber of its heroes. Societies that adored matadors (bull-killers, to put it bluntly) were also known to delight in killing fellow humans. Therefore every progressive society needs healthy role models for individual growth and social harmony, models of personalities that its members hold sacred, models that inspire its members to aspire for virtue and stick to morality amidst life's inevitable trials.

The Ramayana has inspired virtues – fearlessness, determination, steadfastness, morality, sacrifice, dutifulness, heroism, and devotion – in over a quarter of the world's population for millennia. French thinker Louis Revel, author of *The Fragrance of India: Landmarks for the World of Tomorrow*, elucidates, "Every civilization which is not based on the culture of the spirit is doomed to perish in brutality and blood. Oh! Rama and Sita, noble human heroes, you who give the example of a sublime spiritual ideal, in your atmosphere of peace and infinite tenderness there reigns a hope, the hope of the regeneration of humanity through the understanding of these ancient symbols and by their realization in the inner lives of men."

The examples of Vedic heroes like Lord Rama and His devotees are so powerful, memorable and inspiring that the effect was seen in the caliber of Indians for centuries - even up to the time of British India, as noted by British statesman Edmund Burke,

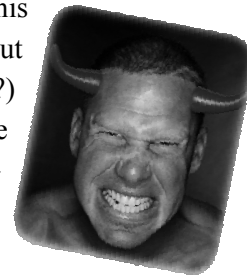
"This multitude of men (the Indian nation) does not consist of an abject and barbarous populace, much less of



gangs of savages; but of a people for ages civilized and cultivated; cultured by all the arts of polished life while we (Englishmen) were yet dwelling in the woods. There have been in (India) princes of great dignity, authority and opulence. There (in India) is to be found an ancient and venerable priesthood, the depository of laws, learning and history, the guides of the people while living and their consolation in death. There is a nobility of great antiquity and renown; a multitude of cities not exceeded in population and trade by those of the first class in Europe; merchants and bankers who vie in capital with the banks of England; millions of ingenious manufacturers and mechanics; and millions of the most diligent tillers of the earth."

But today India is a free nation - free from foreign rule to "freely" destroy her own glorious culture that evoked admiration even among its enemies. Modern India has been witnessing a catastrophic decline in its hero-worship standards and correspondingly its moral standards. For centuries we adored great saints, who selflessly and heroically strived for the highest social and spiritual welfare of all living beings. During British rule, we started eulogizing political leaders, who promised independence. Subsequently we turned toward movie stars, whose heroism was restricted to sex and violence on the celluloid screen. Then started a peculiar genre of movies with skewed values, in which a popular movie star (normally a hero) would play the role of a villain. So Ravana, which portrays the villain as a hero, is a natural though shocking fallout of a history of degradation.

'Controversy sells' is a well-known media axiom. So the opportunistic mentality that wants to hog the limelight by creating controversy centered on a popular epic is understandable. But far less understandable is the moral irresponsibility regarding the social consequences of this perversion of values. In Europe, a hit movie about werewolves in which the central character (the hero?) would murder people and drink their blood led to a spate of murders – especially of helpless, elderly people – with their bloods spilled all over their bodies, probably after having being drunk by the imitator werewolves.



Do we want something similar in our society? If not, then let's cherish the sacred values of our culture – and share them with others. 