

Guha, a tribal equal of Rama

Kum. Srinidhi, B.Sc+M.Sc Computer science, Female President at Scaler school of Technology, WEBOLIM's Ramayana student & teacher

तत्र राजा गुहो नाम रामस्यात्मसमस्सखा।

निषादजात्यो बलवान् स्थपतिश्चेति विश्रुतः।।2.50.33।।

- *There lived the mighty king Guha who was born in the race of nishadas (hunters) and became famous as their lord. He was a friend to Rama who was like his own self.*

Introduction

The Ramayana, one of the greatest epics of Indian tradition, is not merely a tale of heroism, devotion, and duty but also a text that subtly highlights the values of equality and inclusivity. A core theme of the Ramayana is Rama's inherent nature of treating all individuals with fairness and respect. His actions consistently show that he values people for their wisdom, righteousness and experience rather than their social status, wealth, caste, power, or education.

One of the most profound examples of this is his relationship with Guha, the Nishada king. Rama does not see Guha as a subject or subordinate, but as an equal friend—his आत्मसमस्सखा “*aatma sama sakha*” (a friend equal to himself), demonstrating his ability to look beyond material distinctions and value people for who they are. Unlike superficial egalitarianism, where equality is often a facade, Rama's approach is authentic and deeply rooted in respect and friendship. This paper explores how Rama's interactions with Guha in the Ramayana highlight his unprejudiced nature and how this principle remains relevant in contemporary society.

Rama and Guha: A Friendship Beyond Social Barriers

When Rama, accompanied by Sita and Lakshmana, enters the forest during his exile, Guha, the chieftain of the *Nishadas* (hunters) rushes to meet Rama with his elders upon hearing of his arrival. When Rama notices Guha coming towards him, with great enthusiasm, he rushes with Lakshmana to meet Guha and embraces Guha. (“*Overwhelmed with grief (to see Rama in bark), Guha embraced Rama.*” 2.50.36)

तमार्तस्सम्परिष्वज्य गुहो राघवमब्रवीत्।।2.50.36।।

Rama's behaviour towards Guha stands out. Unlike a king who sees a tribal chief as a subordinate, Rama greets Guha with warmth, trust, and genuine friendship.

Although Guha cannot be considered his equal in **status, education, wealth, or birth**, Rama calls him **his equal**, denoting that for a relationship to be truly equal, none of these **material constructs or societal prejudices** matter. What defines a true bond is the **loyalty, wisdom, and righteousness** that one holds. Going forward, it is noticeable how this phrase "*aatma samah sakha*" isn't merely words, but rather a deep feeling Rama holds towards Guha in his heart.

On the other hand, Guha, despite being a tribal chieftain, does not see himself as equal to Rama but as his humble servant. He expresses deep gratitude, believing that everything he possesses is a blessing from Rama ("*I am seeking supreme fame in this world through the attainment of dharma and acquisition of abundant artha by the grace of Rama alone.*" 2.51.5).

अस्य प्रसादादाशंसे लोकेस्मिन् सुमुहद्यशः।

धर्मावाप्तिं च विपुलामर्थावाप्तिं च केवलम्।।2.51.5।।

Yet, despite this reverence, Rama **does not assume a superior stance** but treats Guha as **his true friend** rather than a subject. This interaction highlights Rama's ability to recognize the inherent worth of individuals **beyond societal classifications**.

When Guha, overwhelmed with emotion, offers food and hospitality, Rama politely declines, as he has taken a vow of asceticism. However, he does not reject Guha's offering dismissively but instead **acknowledges the devotion** behind it. In this incident, we note that Guha does not hesitate to approach Rama with his elders. This interaction underscores Rama's **accessibility**—Guha, although at a 'lower status' than Rama, does not have to go through intermediaries but meets Rama directly, showing that even tribals had direct access to Rama.

At this juncture, Rama **inquires about Guha's well-being**—not just about his personal health but also about his kingdom, revenue, and allies. ("*Rama embracing him tightly with his strong arms said, 'O Guha it is fortunate that I am able to see you and your relations in good health. Hope, all is well with your friends, kingdom and revenue.'*" 2.50.42)

भुजाभ्यां साधु पीनाभ्यां पीडयन्वाक्यमब्रवीत्।।

दिष्ट्या त्वां गुह पश्यामि ह्यरोगं सह बान्धवैः।

अपि ते कुशलं राष्ट्रे मित्रेषु च धनेषु च।।2.50.42।।

This shows that Rama is not merely passing through but genuinely cares about Guha's land and his people. Equal relationships, especially friendship are often marked by **emotional reciprocity**, and Rama treats Guha with the same warmth and concern that he would extend to his brothers or closest allies.

A true king is responsible not only for his immediate kingdom but also for maintaining harmony with those on the outskirts. However, unlike other rulers who might see tribal communities as subordinates, Rama treats Guha and his people as his own.

Upon understanding Rama's predicament, Guha offers his kingdom to him with utmost sincerity and respect. (*"O mighty armed prince, welcome to you This entire land belongs to you. You are our master and we, your servants. Rule this kingdom happily."* 2.50.38).

स्वागतं ते महाबाहो तवेयमखिला मही।।2.50.38।।

वयं प्रेष्या भवान्भर्ता साधु राज्यं प्रशाधि नः।

However, Rama respectfully declines, reaffirming that Guha is truly just his *Sakha* (friend) and not a political tool to exploit. Rama does not take advantage of Guha's loyalty for his own benefit. He **does not expect sacrifices** from Guha but acknowledges his devotion and **treats him with fairness**.

In this complete episode, Rama inquiring about Guha is done on the basis of genuine care and **not as a formality** done by a ruler to a subject. Similarly, we can notice how comfortable Guha is about offering food and hospitality, Guha is more driven by **concern and love** than by having to extend a formal invitation. And this is only possible when Rama **not only gives but also receives without discriminating**. We can understand that Guha's invitation and hospitality are not a mere formality in Guha's action the following night.

That night, as Rama rests before crossing the river, Lakshmana remains awake to guard him. Guha, moved by this devotion, offers to keep watch, saying that he and his people **would protect Rama** even against a four-winged army. This instance shows that Guha does not see himself as an outsider but as someone **deeply connected to Rama and his cause**. Guha also quips that Rama is **the dearest man to him**. (*"For me, there is none dearer than Rama in this world. I speak the truth. I swear by truth."* 2.51.4).

न हि रामात्प्रियतमो ममास्ति भुवि कश्चन।

ब्रवीम्येतदहं सत्यं सत्येनैव च ते शपे ॥2.51.4॥

Despite Guha's assurances, Lakshmana refuses to sleep, and the two spend the night discussing Rama, Ayodhya, and the trials ahead. Guha's commitment is evident—not only does he offer his resources and protection, but he personally stays awake by Rama's side out of **love and concern**. This **unwavering loyalty** would not have been possible had Rama treated Guha merely as a subordinate. Instead, their friendship is one of **mutual trust and shared responsibility**.

At dawn, Rama prepares to leave and advises Guha:

“Take care of your kingdom and remain vigilant. A ruler's greatest duty is the well-being of his people.”

This parting message further cements Rama's **respect** for Guha, treating him as a responsible leader too.

Fourteen years later, as Rama completes his exile and returns victorious, he has not forgotten Guha. Before even reaching Ayodhya, he instructs Hanuman:

“Go to Sringeripuram which is seen from the sky, meet Guha the leader of Nishadas and tell him of my inquiry and well-being. He will be very happy to hear that I am in good health free from anxiety. He is equal to me and my friend.” (6.128.4-5)

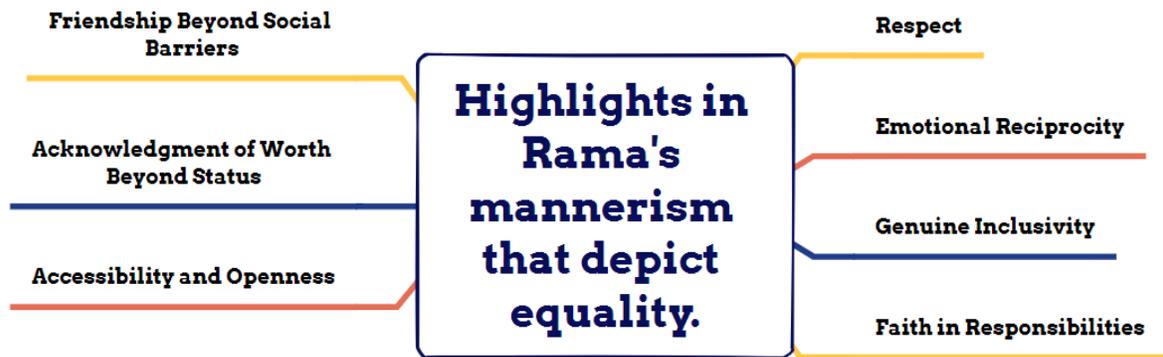
शृङ्गबेरपुरंप्राप्यगुहंगहनगोचरम् ।

निषादाधिपतिंब्रह्मिकुशलंवचनान्मम ॥6.128.4॥

श्रुत्वातुमांकुशलिनमरोगंविगतज्वरम् ।

भविष्यतिगुहःप्रीतस्सममात्मसमस्सखा ॥6.128.5॥

Despite forming new alliances with Hanuman, Sugriva, and Vibhishana, Rama does **not let these relationships overshadow his deep bond** with Guha. He ensures that Guha is among the first to know of his return, proving that his friendship is **not based on convenience or circumstance**. Whether during exile or after victory, Rama's **consistency** in his character highlights that his approach to equality is **not circumstantial** but an intrinsic part of his dharma. Also, in the same instance, he proudly calls Guha explicitly as his atma samah sakha once again, showcasing that he is **genuinely unbiased** and unaffected by any probable societal prejudices as well.



Superficial vs. Genuine Equality

In many societies, there is a tendency to project an image of inclusivity and egalitarianism, but in reality, hidden biases and social hierarchies still persist. Many rulers and leaders may outwardly claim to treat everyone equally, but their actions reveal otherwise. Rama, however, does not just perform acts of equality for appearances—his interactions with Guha and others from different social backgrounds are driven by sincerity. He does not see Guha as a ‘lower’ being, nor does he treat his loyalty as an obligation. Instead, he cherishes the friendship in its truest form, making no distinction between Guha and his other royal allies.

Those who engage in performative equality may:

- Publicly claim to support inclusivity while privately maintaining discriminatory practices.
- Interact with people from lower social backgrounds for political or personal gain or rather than out of genuine respect.
- Offer assistance as an act of charity rather than mutual respect.
- Change their behavior based on social situations, treating others as equals only when it benefits them/ when they need to exploit them.

In contrast, Rama:

- Treats Guha with unwavering consistency, from exile to his victorious return.
- Seeks Guha’s well-being not out of obligation but from genuine concern.
- Declines Guha’s generous offer to govern Shringiberapura, affirming that their friendship is genuine and not a backup resource to exploit for political convenience or personal gain.
- Respects Guha’s wisdom and leadership, treating him as an equal in matters of governance and protection.

A Model for Leadership and Society

Rama's friendship with Guha sets an example of how leadership should be exercised. A true ruler does not merely govern but nurtures relationships with all sections of society. By treating Guha as his equal, Rama reinforces that a kingdom thrives when there is respect and cooperation between its ruler and its people, including those from the outskirts. His mannerism reflects the true Vedic principles said in mantras like

दृ॒ते दृ॑ ह॒ मा मि॒त्रस्य॑ मा॒ चक्षु॑षा॒ सर्वा॑णि भू॒तानि॒ समी॑क्षन्ताम्।
मि॒त्रस्या॒हं चक्षु॑षा॒ सर्वा॑णि भू॒ तानि॒ समी॑क्षे। मि॒त्रस्य॒ चक्षु॑षा॒ समी॑क्षामहे ॥

Dr̥te dr̥ḥha mā mitrasya mā cakṣuṣā sarvāṇi bhūtāni samīkṣantām।
Mitrasyāham cakṣuṣā sarvāṇi bhūtāni samīkṣe। Mitrasya cakṣuṣā samīkṣāmahe॥

"May all beings look at me with the eye of a friend. May I look at all beings with the eye of a friend. May we all look at one another with the eye of a friend."

- Yajur Veda, 36.18

स॒मा॒नो मन्त्रः॑ स॒मि॒तिः स॒मा॒नी स॒मा॒नं म॒नः स॒ह चि॒त्तमे॑षाम् ।
स॒मा॒नं मन्त्र॑म॒भि मन्त्र॑ये वः स॒मा॒नेन॑ वो ह॒विषा॑ जुहोमि ॥

Samāno mantraḥ samitiḥ samānī samānam manaḥ saha cittam eṣām |
Samānam mantram abhi mantraye vaḥ samānena vo haviṣā juhomi ||

"Common be the prayer of these (assembled worshippers), common be the acquisition, common the purpose, associated be the desire. I repeat for you a common prayer, I offer for you with a common oblation"

- Rigveda 10.191.3

अ॒ज्ये॒ष्ठासो॑ऽक॒नि॒ष्ठास॑ ए॒ते सं भा॑त॒रो वा॒वृ॒धुः सो॒भ॒गाय॑ ।
यु॒वा पि॑ता॒ स्वपा॑ रु॒द्र ए॒षः सु॒दु॒घा पु॒षिः॑ सु॒दी॒नो म॑रु॒द्गणः॑ ॥

Ajyeṣṭhāso akanīṣṭhāsa ete sam bhrātaraḥ vāvṛdhuḥ saubhagāya |
Yuvā pitā svapā rudra eṣāḥ sudughā ṛṣniḥ sudinā marudbhyaḥ ||

“ No one is superior or inferior; They are brothers, of whom no one is the elder, no one the younger, but who grew up together for their mutual prosperity; may their father, Rudra, ever

youthful, and Prṣṇi (their mother), grant favourable days for the Maruts.”

- *Rigveda 5.60.5*

सहृदयं सांमनस्यमविद्वेषं कृणोमि वः।
अन्यो अन्यमभि ह्येत वत्सं जातमिवाघ्न्या ॥

Sahrdayam sāmanasyaṃ avidveṣaṃ kṛṇomi vaḥ |
Anyo anyam abhi haryata vatsaṃ jātam ivāghnyā ||

"I establish concord among your hearts and minds, free from malice. May you love one another as a cow loves her newborn calf."

- *Atharvaveda 3.30.1*

The essence of these Vedic mantras promotes unity and equality among all beings, emphasizing a vision of harmony and impartiality. This principle is reflected in Rama’s interactions with those around him, such as his relationship with Guha. Their bond is not dictated by birth or status but by mutual trust and devotion, embodying the Vedic ideal of seeing all beings with an equal and friendly gaze.

The Timeless Importance of Rama’s Unbiased Nature

The Ramayana is more than a religious or historical epic—it is a guide to ethical living and governance. Rama’s treatment of Guha stands as a prime example of his unprejudiced nature and principle of equality, which is relevant even today. By acknowledging and practising these values, societies can move towards greater harmony and inclusivity. Rama’s ability to reach out to individuals without bias teaches an important lesson—true nobility lies not in one’s birth but in one’s actions and character. His friendship with Guha stands as a shining example of how leadership and respect are built not on social status but on integrity and mutual recognition.

In a world still grappling with social divisions, Rama’s unwavering commitment to treating people with genuine fairness and love serves as an inspiration. His story urges us to look beyond superficial differences and build true relationships. This principle is not only a cornerstone of the Ramayana but a timeless ideal that continues to hold immense significance in shaping a more just and inclusive society—where worth is determined not by status but by virtue and character.