

Shabari – The Tribal Thapasvini: An illuminate of Equality in the Ramayana

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Introduction

Ramayana is more than just the journey of Lord Rama it is Dharmic guide that teaches human values. It stands tall for dharma, devotion , human values and equality. Among the many compelling figures in the epic, the character of **Shabari**, a tribal ascetic (thapasvini), stands as a testimony to Rama’s inclusivity and deep-rooted commitment to treating all beings as equal. Shabari is introduced by Kabandan to Rama AK 73.25¹ as a long living mystic and a person who serves the disciples of Matanga Rishi. Such was her glory that Kabanda knew about her austerity even while being so far away from Pampa where she was expected to depart to the heavens on attending Rama the venerable divine to all.

Rama’s Arrival and the Sweet conversation

As described in **Valmiki’s Ramayana (Aranya Kanda, Sarga 74)**, Lord Rama, accompanied by Lakshmana, arrives at Shabari’s hermitage² AK 74.4 in a moorland which is west of Pampa as described by sage Valmiki. Overcome with joy, she welcomes them with tears of bliss and reverence touching the feet of Rama AK 74.6³. She offered water and made them comfortable. AK 74.6⁴. She shared with Rama that she had collected various fruits that ripen on the moorlands on Pampa for his sake. AK 74.17⁵ This is one of the most poignant moments in the Ramayana, **Rama, true to his divine nature, joyfully accepts her offerings**, recognizing her devotion. This moment underscores **His rejection of discrimination and emphasis on pure love and devotion.**

Rama, who is in Dharma knowing Shabari’s true self, addresses her as **sweet speaker**. AK 74.7⁶. He enquires to know about her conquering of hindrances such as wrath and uncontrolled food intake in the path of spirituality and the growth of her austerity while gaining inner peace. AK 74.7⁷ Such is the kind of conversation Rama conducts with the

¹ श्रमणी शबरी नाम काकुत्स्थ चिर जीविनी ॥

² तौ पुष्करिण्याः पंपायाः तीरम् आसाद्य पश्चिमम् ।
अपश्यताम् ततः तत्र शबर्या रम्यम् आश्रमम् ॥

³ तौ दृष्ट्वा तु तदा सिद्धा समुत्थाय कृताञ्जलिः ।

पादौ जग्राह रामस्य लक्ष्मणस्य च धीमतः ॥

⁴ पाद्यम् आचमनीयम् च सर्वम् प्रददात् यथा विधि ।

⁵ मया तु विविधम् वन्यम् संचितम् पुरुषर्षभ ॥

तव अर्थे पुरुषव्याघ्र पम्पायाः तीर संभवम् ।

⁶ पाद्यम् आचमनीयम् च सर्वम् प्रददात् यथा विधि ।

⁷ कच्चित् ते निर्जिता विघ्नाः कच्चित् ते वर्धते तपः ।

कच्चित् ते नियतः कोप आहारः च तपोधने ॥

tribal Shabari in which there is no such hint of doubt to the reader of Valmiki Ramayana which does not reserve any eligibility to a particular being, if devotion is pure and sincere. Knowing that she is waiting for her final departure upon His arrival, Rama again checks with her if her service to her Gurus, Matanga and other rishis is fructified finally. Shabari understands the depth of this questions and astoundingly answers that her austerity and birth has been fructified upon seeing Rama and that her Gurus are honoured. AK 74.9⁸, AK74.10⁹, AK 74.11¹⁰

In *Aranya Kanda* (74.18¹¹, 74.19¹²) of *Valmiki Ramayana*, Rama speaks to Shabari, acknowledging that she is not ignorant of esoteric knowledge. He mentions that he has heard about her greatness and that of her Guru from Kabandha. He then expresses that if she wishes, she may show him around *Matangavana*, as he would like to see the woodland as she presents it.

This passage clearly reveals that esoteric knowledge is not confined to a particular class or creed. Instead, it is attained by those who have conquered their senses, practiced austerity, and cultivated a pure state of mind. Notably, Rama does not assume that Shabari would automatically comply with his request simply because he is the much-awaited divine being she wanted to meet before she left the mortal world.

The tone of this chapter in *Aranya Kanda* resonates with themes of freedom, equality, and respect, particularly in the way Rama interacts with Shabari, the tribal *tapasvi*. His humility in this exchange emphasizes that spiritual wisdom and devotion are not bound by social status but are accessible to all who seek them with sincerity and dedication.

She says to Rama that she would reach her Gurus who she served, and who stay in the eternal worlds. AY 74.29¹³. Rama rejoices hearing her with Lakshmana and exclaims it as “astonishing!” in his own words. AY 74.30¹⁴ Rama himself tells her that. He is honored by her through her devotion. Rama endowed her with his saying that she would go to the

⁸ कच्चित् ते नियमाः प्राप्ताः कच्चित् ते मनसः सुखम् ।

कच्चित् ते गुरु शुश्रूषा सफला चारु भाषिणि ॥

⁹ अद्य प्राप्ता तपः सिद्धिः तव संदर्शनात् मया ।

अद्य मे सफलम् जन्म गुरवः च सुपूजिताः ॥

¹⁰ अद्य मे सफलम् तप्तम् स्वर्गः चैव भविष्यति ।

त्वयि देव वरे राम पूजिते पुरुषर्षभ ॥

¹¹ एवम् उक्तः स धर्मात्मा शबर्या शबरीम् इदम् ॥

राघवः प्राह विज्ञाने ताम् नित्यम् अबहिष्कृताम् ।

¹² दनोः सकाशात् तत्त्वेन प्रभावम् ते महात्मनः ॥

श्रुतम् प्रत्यक्षम् इच्छामि संद्रष्टुम् यदि मन्यसे ।

¹³ तेषाम् इच्छामि अहम् गन्तुम् समीपम् भावित आत्मनाम् ।

मुनीनाम् आश्रमो येषाम् अहम् च परिचारिणी ॥

¹⁴ धर्मिष्ठम् तु वचः श्रुत्वा राघवः सह लक्ष्मणः ।

प्रहर्षम् अतुलम् लेभे आश्चर्यम् इदम् च अब्रवीत् ॥

cherished worlds, where she could be in peace with her Gurus. AY 74.31¹⁵. Taking leave from Rama, Shabari cast herself into the sacred fire which she created out of her own austerity, attaining divine liberation in front of Rama. Like a flaring fire, she ascends to heavens, alone. AK 74.33¹⁶. She appears as an angel decorated with celestial ornaments, garlands and robes. AK 74.34¹⁷. She resembles lightning and ascends to the realms where Gurus of virtuous deeds sport with the self. AK 74.35¹⁸. She goes there through her restful alertness of the self is what Valmiki describes here. Thus, she had executed her destiny in full control and the way she intended at the time she wanted to shed her body in front of the eyes of Rama, having Him as the witness.

Her departure signifies the ultimate reward of unwavering devotion to her Guru, illustrating that austerity and devotion, not caste or birth, determines one's spiritual destiny.

Rama's Philosophy of Equality

The *Valmiki Ramayana* portrays Shabari as an individual of great spiritual merit, not bound by societal labels. The conversation reflects an environment where spiritual worth is recognized over birth or status, reinforcing the theme that devotion and knowledge are accessible to all. Ramayana reflects a broader theme of equality embedded throughout the epic. Despite being a prince from the Ikshvaku lineage, Rama never distinguishes between high and low status. May it be His interactions with people of tribal origin like Guha and Shabari, the sages, and even Hanuman, a vanara, or Jatayu the bird, Rama demonstrate his **principle of universal respect and inclusion**.

It reveals Rama as a divine being who sees all beings as equal, regardless of their social standing. His acceptance of Shabari's devotion aligns with his larger mission of Dharma and equality of all.

Current day Relevance of Shabari's experience

In today's world, where discrimination and inequality persist, Shabari's spiritual experience holds immense relevance. This chapter unravels the truths as below:

1. **Devotion is Universal** – Spirituality is beyond caste, gender, or social status.

¹⁵ ताम् उवाच ततो रामः शबरी संश्रित व्रताम् ।
अर्चितो अहम् त्वया भद्रे गच्छ कामम् यथा सुखम् ॥
¹⁶ ज्वलत् पावक संकाशा स्वर्गम् एव जगाम सा ।
¹⁷ दिव्यम् आभरण संयुक्ता दिव्य माल्य अनुलेपना ॥
¹⁸ दिव्य अंबर धरा तत्र बभूव प्रिय दर्शन ।
विराजयन्ती तम् देशम् विद्युत् सौदामिनी यथा ॥
यत्र ते सुकृत आत्मानो विहरन्ति महर्षयः ।
तत् पुण्यम् शबरी स्थानम् जगाम आत्म समाधिना ॥

2. **True Equality Lies in Respect and** – Rama’s acceptance of Shabari’s offering exemplifies how **leaders should embrace inclusivity**.
3. **Patience and unconquerable perseverance Yield Divine’s Grace and makes one Divine by itself** – Shabari waited years for Rama, embodying perseverance and trust in the divine and controlled her destiny making the divine as the witness for her departure from the current world.

Conclusion

Shabari, the simple, old, tribal ascetic woman, remains an **eternal symbol of devotion, credence, and equality**. Her experience in the Ramayana is not merely a tale of an individual’s devotion but a **powerful statement on inclusivity**, reinforced by Lord Rama’s acceptance of her love. In a world often divided by social hierarchies, her story serves as a timeless reminder that the divine sees only the heart’s purity, not societal labels.

Through Shabari, Valmiki’s Ramayana throbs to deliver an apparent message—**true devotion and austerity transcends all barriers, and in the eyes of divine, all are equal**.