

Unlearn what is not in Valmiki?

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Abstract

The notion of "human race superiority" does not appear in Valmiki's original *Ramayana*. In his work, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari argues that this idea was absent in the early human era. This raises the question: could the *Ramayana* be reflective of such an era? Harari suggests that the notion of human race superiority only emerged later, as did the concept of class or caste inferiority. If this is true, it raises a crucial question: how can the *Ramayana*, which predates the idea of human race superiority, contain references to class inferiority? In fact, the *Ramayana* does not depict any human class or caste as inferior in Valmiki's original narrative.

Harari's passages

Just as there is no barrier between humans and other beings, neither is there a strict hierarchy. Non-human entities do not exist merely to provide for the needs of man....The world does not revolve around humans or around any other particular group of beings. (page no.44)

When animism was the dominant belief system human norms and values had to take into consideration the outlook and interests of a multitude of other beings such as animals, plants, fairies and ghosts. For example, a forager band in the Ganges Valley may have established a rule forbidding people to cut down a particularly large fig tree, lest the fig tree spirit become angry and take revenge. Another forager band living in the Indus Valley may have forbidden people white-tailed foxes because a white-tailed fox once revealed to a wise old woman where the band might find precious obsidian.

Hunter-gatherers picked and pursued wild plants and animals, which could be seen as equal in status to Homo sapiens. The fact that man hunted sheep did not make sheep inferior to man, just as the fact that tigers hunted man did not make man inferior to tigers. Being communicated with one another directly and negotiated the rules governing their shared habitat. In contrast, farmers owned and manipulated plants and animals and could hardly degrade themselves by negotiating with their positions. Hence the first religious effect of the agricultural evolution was to turn plants and animals from equal members of a spiritual round table into property (page no. 151).

(Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens, A Brief History of Humankind*, McClelland & Stewart, a division of Random House of Canada Limited, a Penguin Random House Company, 2014).

MRYS society

When I went through these passages, I could easily connect the Vedic Mantras with these passages. Nowhere does the MRYS (Mantras of Rig-Yajus-Sama-Vedas) say humans are superior to other species. Only as a penalty to this notion of human-race-superiority, humans developed gradually the 'notion of class inferiority' which means considering one human class as superior or inferior to another human class. Considering any human class as ugly idiotic or immoral is a prejudice. I see MRYS as the prejudice-free literature. MRYS is predominantly animistic where rivers, plants, mortar, plough, furrows, forest, rain, thunder, sun and moon are worshipped. Thus, it almost matches with Harari's observations.

But MRYS does not reflect an entirely tribal society. It talks about cultivation though it does not have huge landlords. It talks about 'Rajanyas' (chiefs). "Let all the people wish you so that you don't fall from kingship. (10.173.1)." This Rig Vedic passage shows that kingship can be sustained only if the people wish it. This is a democratic element in the kingship of Rig Veda.

Strikingly MRYS, a huge literature that runs approximately 26,000 lines does not mention the name of any city town or village, though it gives the names of rivers and mountains. Since the names of villages and towns are absolutely absent in society-reflecting literature, it indicates that they were not named at all. This shows two things: The notions of ownership of the lands were not strong in the MRYS. The society that MRYS reflects is a semi-agricultural society where the people lived happily with Mother Nature without having strong prejudices and rigid hierarchies which were going to victimize the human race.

Misconceptions regarding MRYS

Some scholars misunderstand some Vedic passages to show how the MRYS has prejudices. I have detailed this in my book 'Veda, My Passion' (Webolim, 2021) and established their views as misinterpretations. So, let me not go into it in detail now. Here I take only two examples.

1. Dasyus which means thieves in any Sanskrit literature are misinterpreted as Indian Aborigines to show that the Veda suppresses Indian Aborigines when the Veda talks of the subjugation of Dasyus. Please understand that Dasyu is not a separate race or a separate ethnic group or community in the Veda. It just means thief in Veda or any Sanskrit literature.

2. The famous Purusha Sukta (Rig Veda, 10.90.12.) describes the Shudra as the feet of the cosmic being. This is the only place which appears to look down on a particular human class in the whole of MRYS. Therefore Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his work 'Who were the Shudras?' (Thacker & co., Ltd. Bombay) wonders how this comes in a literature which stands for the peaceful co-existence of different carriers. He observes it as a later addition. In one way he is correct because Purusha Sukta in Sama Veda is devoid of the identity of Shudra with feet. This portion of Sama Veda is older than the tenth book of Rig Veda where Purusha Sukta occurs. This means that the tenth book of Rig Veda takes this Purusha Sukta from Sama Veda and adds the Shudra-passage into it.

But with all these, we need a better explanation. It has to be understood that the feet were not at all considered inferior anywhere in the MRYS. We should not see MRYS from the standards and notions of our world. In another Mantra, the word 'Mula,' which means foundation, is used for denoting feet (10.87.10.). त्रेधा मूलं यातुधानस्य वृश्च । Thus calling Shudra as feet means describing Shudra as the foundation.

Thus it becomes clear to me that the MRYS is a prejudice-free literature.

Absence of the prejudice of class-superiority in Ramayana

Now, when we come to Ramayana of Valmiki, it reflects a more urbanized society, which has the names of cities, villages and even kingdoms like Kosala, likely to have strong prejudices and strict hierarchies. Let us examine.

Surprisingly Valmiki's Ramayana never expresses any kind of prejudice to any human community or class. (Through Ramayana here, I mean only the epic that runs from its II-VI books which are its original. My translation of the epic has several research articles regarding how they are original and this is the view of many researchers.).

The epic calls Rakshasas as cruel in general. One may say that this can be viewed as prejudice. But Valmiki never describes Rakshasas as a class found in humans or sapiens. He considers it as a separate group, perhaps something like Neanderthals. Neanderthals were cruel. This is a fact. Rakshasas also have to be perceived in this way. Tigers are cruel or wild. This is not a prejudice. It is a fact. The same

applies to Neanderthals and Rakshasas. I am not saying that Neanderthals and Rakshasas are one. But I took it just for a comparison.

In the same way calling Vanaras as Chapalas (quick and fickle-minded) also cannot be called as a prejudice as they were not taken in sapiens group at all. They are taken to be a separate group. This has to be viewed as describing Erectus or apes as Chapalas. Again, I am not making all the three one here. it is just a comparison.

Valmiki never stamps any sapien- groups like the people of Anga-kingdom or Shudras or Nishadas as cunning or fickle-minded etc. This is what I intended to say. It is highly interesting to note that the epic which runs for some 40,000 lines does not have human-class prejudice despite its urbanisation. However, Ramayana-society certainly was not as urbanised as the later Mahabharata or Gupta Era.

Solution for the problems found in urbanisation

This indicates the possibility of the near absence of these kinds of prejudices even when a society can get urbanised. What I feel is that the increases in suppression and further prejudices can be found only when urbanisation is quick. The absence of prejudices in Ramayana society may suggest that if urbanisation is gradual, slow, and caring the development for all around, then we may avoid the risk of facing high prejudices. Development for all around is called Abhyudaya in Shastras. 'Abhi' means around. 'Ut' means upward. 'Aya' means movement. Abhyudaya means development around. This Abhyudaya is considered to be one of the two dimensions of Dharma in early Shastras.

Absence of the prejudice of human-race-superiority in Ramayana

Another interesting thing is that the epic does not have even the notion or prejudice of human-race-superiority. Nowhere in the epic, do we see a direct proclamation that animals and birds are inferior to humans. Sita says, 'The difference between Rama and Ravana is the difference between a lion and a dog; an elephant and a cat.....' Even here the comparison is based on might. A lion is mightier than a dog; an elephant is mightier than a cat..... this is an objective fact. Sita does not add any notion here.

Seeing some animals like apes, donkeys or pigs in dreams is considered to be a bad omen in three places of epic. This seems to be the only place where few animals are looked down. But even here I feel generally in our culture not all bad omen-indicating beings are looked down upon. For example, when we start a journey, it is inauspicious when a Brahmin comes. This is a belief. This does not put a Brahmin down. But owls and donkeys are believed to be good omens in India, though they are looked down upon in general in the same India.

If a person is to be ridiculed, he is called a dog or piggy. These kinds of expressions are common in the literary works which we come across. But they are absent in Ramayana.

Below given are the two exceptions.

1. Kumbhakarna says to Ravana, 'without knowing the meaning of Shastras, some persons having animal-intelligence.....' (6.63.14.)
2. यान्ति राजर्षयश्चात्र मृगयां धर्मकोविदाः । तस्मात्त्वं निहतो युद्धे मया बाणेन वानर । अयुध्यन्प्रतियुध्यन्वा यस्माच्छाखामृगो ह्यसि
Men capture beasts, either covertly or overtly, with snares and contrivances. The meat-seeking men in general kill beasts, even if the beasts are speedily sprinting or standing steadily, fully dismayed or undismayed, vigilant or unvigilant and even if they are facing away. This is not considered as wrong. Even the great kings who are experts in Dharma go hunting. Therefore,

I killed you in Yuddha (war/combat) through an arrow. Since you are a Vanara I killed you whether you fight with me or not (4.18.40-42.).

The first one is by Kumbhakarna who is a Rakshasa. Rakshasas looked down on even humans. Therefore, there is no surprise if this comes to Rakshasa's lips. But the same cannot be expected from a Sapien in the epic. But the next one (only one) is from a sapien.

The verses are a little complicated. It seems that Rama takes advantage of Vali to be an animal to hunt him. He seems to convey this. Still, the verses are not clear. It first talks about hunting in various ways. Then it talks about killing Vali in a fight. The word Yuddha has to denote the involvement of both the parties. But here Vali is not involved in the fight with Rama. Can it be called Yuddha at all? Is it not just a hitting? Shri Sitarama Shastri in his Shrimad Valmiki muni hrudaya tattva sara prakashika (Trichinopoly united printers ltd, 1943) raises this question.

Then Rama identifies Vali with an animal to justify his act. Though Vali is a Vanara, can he be taken as an animal in the context of giving justice? When we closely read the epic, we understand Vanaras to be a group which are eloquent. They are scholars. They perform Vedic rituals. They had their cities and kingdoms. They cannot be merely called animals. Rarely Valmiki does do it only to make the reader feel some symbiotic relationship to establish his idea of universal welfare. Otherwise, in the context of justice, it is not good to take him as an animal. He does not have animal features except a tail and the name 'Vanara' which can mean monkey literally.

Therefore, I go here by the Western (i.e. Gujarati-Marati) reading/recension of Valmiki's Ramayana.

तस्मात्त्वं निहतो वध्यो मया बाणेन वानर । अवध्यमानो युद्धेसौ सौम्य शाखामृगो ह्यसि ॥

“Even the great kings who are expert in Dharma go for hunting. Therefore, you are killed through an arrow, since you deserve capital punishment. You are a Vanara, indestructible in war....”

This means that due to his crimes of adultery, rape and incest, he deserves capital punishment. Since Vali is indestructible in war Rama took the method of hunting which is adopted for some uncontrollable beasts that harm the people. The Western reading's expression here is highly convincing in the epic where no sapien especially Rama-like-character looks down on animals.

Vali's destruction is controversial. With any controversial issue, generally, interpolations in arguments are expected to happen in a lofty way. E.g. In Mahabharata, the marriage of Draupadi (which is taken as controversial) has different elements added in different recensions or readings, getting overloaded with many unnecessary explanations. But the same story which occurs later in Aranya Parva is not only short but also gives a convincing answer precisely (to me). In the context of answering Vali, the Western recension is short, sharp, and precise.

In the same way, Rama's words in the Gauda reading appear better than in north-south readings in the below context. कपोतो वानरश्रेष्ठ किं पुनर्मद्विधो जनः. If even a dove gave refuge to the hunter who hunted its wife, why can't the one like me? (Northern-southern readings, 6.18.25.) कपोतो वानरश्रेष्ठ किमुताहं विभीषणम्। ॥ If the dove gave refuge even to the hunter who hunted the dove's Love, then why cannot I give refuge to Vibhishana who surrendered in the true sense (Gauda or Bengali reading, 5.91.5.)?

Thus, in Ramayana, the notions of human race superiority and class inferiority are absent.

Valmiki and Darwin

In fact, Valmiki paints, sometimes as we mentioned already, Vanaras as animals only to make the reader to feel the symbiotic relationship through which the universal welfare can be well established. In fact, Valmiki is the one who brings for the first time different living creatures into one family tree (3.14.). This is later echoed in Mahabharata and several other Puranas.

An attempt to bring all species in a single-family-tree is brilliant, though it is just a literary masterpiece without getting couched in a scientific language just like Darwin's one. The common spirit that we need to understand here in the ancient literary Valmiki and new scientific Darwin is the single-family tree of all species in the world. Somehow, we all belong to the same family. Apes, dogs, birds and fish are only our distant relations. This is the quintessential conveyed.

Women-related-prejudice in Ramayana?

But the literature which is free of several other prejudices appears to have some women-related prejudices. Women are called Chapalas in a few places. Rakshasas especially Ravana describes women like this in several places. This need not come in to account since prejudices and judgmental approaches are not new to Rakshasas in the epic. Sita calls herself as Chapala. Though this can be taken as prejudice, this is a sign of Sita's humbleness. Responding to the harsh words of Sita, while Rama went to catch the deer, Lakshmana describes women in general as Chapalas since he was in high rage getting provoked. These are the very few places where women-related prejudices are found in the epic.

It is a great surprise in such a huge epic that has around 36,000 lines, only five to six places have women-related prejudices while the world literature of the medieval world is filled everywhere with the same.

Some viewed the story of Kaikeyi and Shurpanakha as misleading to the huge catastrophe revealed women-prejudice of Ramayana. This is wrong as Ramayana also talks about Vali and Ravana who faced catastrophe due to turning deaf ears to their wives. The former is not to put down the women. Neither the latter is to glorify them. Valmiki records the story as it is, in which good and bad are there in both genders.

Dasharatha in his catastrophe caused by Kaikeyi, says in Ramayana, "All women are not Kaikeyis in the world (2.12.103)."

Less interpolated

The absence of prejudices in such a huge epic suggests that the epic is less interpolated. If there are many interpolations, the interpolators will definitely add various foul prejudices in the epic. We see this in Ramayana-re-makers who add so many of their strong prejudices of their times in their retellings. We need to thank our ancestors for preserving Valmiki's Ramayana in its pristine form only with less interpolation, unlike Mahabharata.

Vedic maturity of Ramayana

What is called maturity? Whom do we call immature? Generally, whomever we see deciding and acting based on the above prejudices, we call him immature. Wherever we feel something as uncourteous, we can find someone calling another to insult him by name of some caste or race or animal or sect like catlike, dog, piggy, womanly, paganish, Jewish, Shudra-like, Brahmin-like or German-like or Bengali-like or Malayali-like.

An ideology or even religion may indeed influence sometimes a group of people, a state or even a nation to some extent. In such a case, a group of people can have some features based on it. But

without closely examining, a person stamping another as bad merely because he is a Jew or German, Bengali or Bihari is severely wrong. This is uncourteous and the decision based on this is immaturity.

Unfortunately, many masterpieces we read, especially those of the medieval age, related to literature, history and religion contain this feature. As the Veda and Ramayana are free of all these prejudices, they are the fittest ones in guiding us in Dharma.

Final word

The scripture which is absolutely free of all prejudices alone deserves the highest honour regarding being Pramana (instrument of knowledge) for Dharma.