

The Ramayana and Sri Lanka

Kinship to Kingship

By Devika Dayal Misra

Is the famed city of Lanka cited in the Hindu epic the Ramayana actually today's Sri Lanka? Is the North Indian city of Ayodhya the 'real' birthplace of the Hindu god Rama? Apparently not not that is, according to eminent Indian historian Romila Thapar, who recently visited Singapore and has spent much of her life separating myth from historical fact.



Ramayana manuscript, Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu, Maratha period, 18th century, natural colours on paper; photo courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum

Hindus around the world have just finished celebrating Deepavali, the festival of lights and the traditional Hindu new year – a festival that is closely associated with the ancient Indian epic, the *Ramayana*.

Its familiar story has been adopted and adapted across Southeast Asia. 'Good King' Rama is banished into the forest for 14 years only to return to his rightful throne in Ayodhya after he has proven his worth. He encounters many challenges in the forest and conquers the evil demonic King of 'Lanka', the ten-headed demon, Ravana. As he returns to his kingdom after years in exile, it is believed that his path was lit up by the many small lamp lights or *diyas* that are symbolic of Deepavali.

But did this famed kingdom of Ayodhya actually exist? If so, where? And where did the actual battle take place?

These are just some of the questions that Dr Romila Thapar has raised. Arguably India's most distinguished authority on the ancient Indian era, she has studied Buddhist, Jain and Hindu versions of the *Ramayana* story to seek alternative interpretations of what is often blindly portrayed as 'history'.

Collating literary references in the *Ramayana* with archaeological evidence, she says, the facts simply don't match up. There is no evidence that Rama's birthplace is in today's Ayodhya.

Nor is there any archaeological evidence to suggest that there was a bridge from South India to modern-day Sri Lanka – allegedly built by a monkey army! Interestingly, this is a myth that Sri Lanka happily uses today as a tourist draw for its Indian visitors.

How then should we view the *Ramayana*? Do we toss it all out as mere myth?

Not at all. It is, in fact, a rich source of social and political history. Its richness lies not in the historical accuracy of its detail, but rather in the interpretation of why the details were offered up at all.

Dr Thapar interprets the ancient tale as an attempt to underscore the notion of kingship. Till then, clans and kinship ties had dominated society. Within a clan there was relative egalitarianism and women enjoyed a near equal status to their men. Political advice came from within the clan; there were no powerful outside administrators, bureaucrats and external power brokers. However, the simpler clan structure soon gave way to more complex political power structures. Power was consolidated around kingdoms and social divisions deepened. Caste came to be more important. In time, women were subjugated. External power brokers and bureaucrats with vested interests began to surround the king. This is the political and social transition that the Hindu version of the *Ramayana* documents and validates.

Rama represents the notion of an ideal king. His return to the throne is essential to establish the rule of primogeniture. Once the eldest son inherits the entire estate to the exclusion of other siblings, power can be clearly consolidated around one king and a direct vertical line of succession is established.

Ravana, on the other hand, can be seen as symbolic of a clan society. There is an attempt to portray him as lesser and evil – a forest dweller as opposed to a life in a more stratified complex kingdom.

Little surprise then that the women in the *Ramayana* are seen as playing a far more subservient role than those in the other famous Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata*, written in an earlier time, establishes the clan as its basic social structure.

Aah... but therein lies another saga...and one that we hope Romila Thapar will visit us again some time to explain.

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