

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL DISCOURSE IN AMISH TRIPATHI'S SCION OF IKSVAKU

Dr. Dushyant Nimavat
Associate Professor
Department of English
Gujarat University

Abstract

Modern Indian English literature in English has seen a lot of exploration in the field of mythology. In Indian culture, there are two powerful works that talk of varied aspects of politics- *The Mahabharat* and *The Ramayan*. Writers have always been fascinated by these two great works of India. They have tried to analyze mythology in various ways. The present paper focuses on the political and cultural discourse emerging in Amish Tripathi's *Scion of IKSVAKU*. Amish has a knack of reinterpreting mythology in reference to the current socio-political scenario. He does the same in *Scion of IKSVAKU* and brings in many political and cultural issues discussed in the course of a very well-known story of *The Ramayan*.

Key words: Mythology, Indian English Literature, Amish Tripathi, Politics, Cultural Discourse

Amish Tripathi is an Indian English author who won accolades for his 'Shiva Trilogy'. He has been a best seller with his *The Immortals of Meluha* and other two books – *The Secret of Nagas* and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*. Amish was born on 18th October 1974. He studied at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai and IIM Kolkata. He had received several awards as a young literary writer. The Shiva trilogy is a fantasy and reimagining of Lord Shiva and his adventures. Amish calls himself a devotee of Lord Shiva but his religious beliefs are liberal and secular.

Amish's works are marked by liberal thoughts on various aspects of society, religious and life in general. His retelling of Indian mythologies is quite original and fresh. It feeds and strengthens the secular, democratic spirit of India. For him, true religion is always tolerant and all inclusive. One of his recent works *Scion of IKSVAKU* retells the story of Ramchandra (Ram) in his own way deviating from *the Ramayan* of Valmiki and *Ramcharitmanas* by Tulsidas. He is aware of the fact that there are many Ramayanas with a lot of deviations and the story of Ram is not just limited to India but extends to several South Asian countries. The recensions of the Ramayana story is so astounding that it would be wrong to call anyone of the Ramayana the authentic one. This multiplicity is the proof of secular and liberal religious beliefs of the Indian people. Valmiki is called Adikavi as he was the first poet to compose the story of Ram. He has depicted Ram as Maryada Purshottam (an ideal man) rather than a divinity. It is true that Valmiki is the original source of the Ramkatha (the story of Ram) but there are hundreds of the stories of Ram not only in India but in other nations too.

Amish Tripathi's way of telling the story is quite different than the traditional one in the *Scion of IKSVAKU*. Pouring of wealth had made Ayodhya rich and prosperous with beautiful temples, market places and theatres. However, Dasarath was not an able king with vision and administrative abilities. Ayodhya began to decay quite rapidly under his rule. Bharat while discussing with Ram says,

"We are a civilization in advanced state of decay. We're the most hypocritical people on earth. We criticize corruption in others, but are blind to our own dishonesty" (SOI,73).

Bharat's remarks are poignantly applicable to present day Indian mentality with its snobbery and hypocrisy. Ayodhya's economy under Dasaratha's reign was deteriorating day by day resulting into 'peeling paint and fraying edges'. Even precious stones from throne were pulled out to pay the bills of the kingdom. The kingdom was under heavy debts and the king Dasarath was a slave to passions. The nobilities of the kingdom thought that they were above the laws of the state.

In Vashishta's gurukul Ram and his brothers lived not as princes but as ordinary students. They were given Gurukul names. Ram was called Sudas, Bharat Vasu, Lakshman Paurav and Shatrughan Malaturdak. They cooked food, cleaned ashram and served guru Vashishta. They discussed various philosophical issues and Guru Vashishta encouraged them in this scholastic discourses. Shatrughan was 'soft-spoken' and 'intellect-oriented' (50). Tam's slogan was 'Truth, Duty, Honour'. He stood for the Rule of Law. For him, withholding the truth or not revealing it was

synonymous with lying. Guru Vashishta told Ram that sometimes truth causes pain and suffering and therefore in such cases, silence should be preferred.

Once Guru Vashishta took the four brothers to Varun's village. Varun was a tribal warrior. These local versions of the Ramayana portray Indian liberalism in true sense.

Scion of IKSVAKU traces the journey of Ram from a tortured and ostracized prince to the founder of Ramrajya (an Ideal State). The book begins with abduction of Sita by Ravan and then takes us back into the past – the birth of Ram, his stay at Vashishta's Gurukul, his journey with Vishwamitra, marriage with Sita, defeating Ravan with Asurashtra and fourteen year of exile into the forest. IKSVAKU was the founder of Suryavanshi Dynasty to which Ram belonged. There is a fine blending of history and creative imagination of the author. The most remarkable thing about Amish's story of Ram is its demythologization. He diverts the story of mythological or legendary attributes giving it a modern outlook that makes it highly relevant in the modern times, particularly in India today.

What makes *Scion of IKSVAKU* relevant and effective is political and cultural discourse that runs throughout the book. The book is strewn with subtle philosophical discussions on various issues of life and society such as ideal life, ideal society, marriage, polygamy, law, freedom, justice, environment, caste system and so on. These socio-cultural contours are not only fine commentary on the contemporary society and traditions of the Ramayana times but also on the present day society and prevalent problems and issues.

Amish describes economic decay of Ayodhya under Dasarath who had an apparent dislike for trading class, the Vaishya. Kubaer was the pompous trader of Lanka who paid huge annual compensation to Ayodhya rulers. As a Sapta Sindhu royalty, Dasarath believed that wealth was the right of the conqueror. Kubaer reduced the commissions to Dasarath's kingdom taking unilateral decision. This angered Dasarath who threatened Kubaer to submit to his order or die. Even today, the military superiority of a country dominates economic freedom of another country.

People were able warriors and amicable hosts. Their town had around 50,000 people. It was well-organised and clean town with all basic amenities. The houses had no doors as the crime rate was zero. The children were raised by the elders of the town collectively. The princes talked with chief of the town who told them that no land belonged to anyone. He said, "we belong to the land." (61)

Ram was highly impressed by this idyllic village and their ideal life style. The people lived selflessly helping one another because they followed laws and verbatim. Guru Vashishta remarked that "laws are the foundation on which a fulfilling life is built for a community." Varuna's village reminds us of Amish people. Amish people are the settlements of peace loving, upright and religious group of people living in different parts of the USA and Canada. They disregard the modern way of life which is full of stress and din. They are simple, content and religious. They live the life of austerity and simplicity. Their life is governed by a specific set of rules based on the teachings of the Bible. They are self-reliant, hardworking and morally upright people. While depicting the ideal way of life it seems Amish Tripathi had Amish people in mind! The author drives home the truth that ideal way of life ultimately depends on obedience to the rule and laws framed for all.

Later, Ram and Sita discuss what an ideal society meant and how it should be governed. Tam said that an ideal state is one that treats all equally. Sita believed that just promoting equality before the law cannot solve the promoting equality before the law cannot solve the problems. True equality exists at the level of the soul but in the material world, people are diverse and unequal. There are people with high learning and knowledge, good warriors, skilled traders and artisans. All these people are differently skilled and they need to be appreciated and recognized. Sita said that a person's path of life must be determined by his Karma and not by his birth. She held that a society would be perfect if people were free to do what they want to do according to their inclination and expertise and not according to their parentage and birth. A brahmin's son is not necessarily a brahmin by karma and an untouchable low caste person can achieve the title of 'Brahmarshi'. Both Valmiki and Ved Vyas belonged to low caste birth and background but they are the torchbearers of Indian culture in true sense.

Amish Tripathi comments on the evils of caste system which was birth-based even in Ramayan times and till today. In earlier times, it was flexible and based on karma, not birth. He cites the example of Ved Vyas who compiled and edited Vedas. Sita vehemently says to Ram that the rulers should be harsh to destroy this caste-based system. It has weakened our dharma and our country (290). She further suggests that all the children of the kingdom must compulsorily be adopted by the state at the time of birth. And the king would raise them, educate them and hone their innate skills. (290). Sita's proposal aligns with Plato's views on education.

In chapter-8, there is a thought provoking debate on ideal way of life. Guru Vashishta asks Ram and his brothers what ideal way of life is. Bharat remarks that it is one where all people are healthy, wealthy and happy and they should be working in harmony with the purpose of life. He laid emphasis on freedom as the pre-requisite of happy, healthy life. Shatrughan remarked that the strongest survives and the weak dies out. It is the law of nature. It is nature's way of maintaining balance. He said that a society should not forget that it develops because of the talented people. A society that neglects its intellectuals and talent people declines in the long run.

Guru Vashishta tells his disciples that there are two ways of life – masculine and feminine. These two are indivisible aspects of the same consciousness. It can be compared to the one tree of life. The tree's masculine strength lies in its firmness, solidity, strength and unyielding nature. The tree's feminine strength lies in its softness, gentleness, and yielding suppleness. Both are important for the survival of the tree. (Jeff Foster)

Guru Vashishta says that the feminine way of life is governed by freedom, passion and beauty while the masculine way of life is compassionate and creative at its best but when feminine civilizations decline, they become corrupt and irresponsible. The masculine civilization on the other hand is efficient, just and egalitarian at its best but when it declines, it becomes fanatical, rigid and cruel towards the weak. Vashishta Muni says that when one declines, the other takes place in cyclical manner. He remarks, "Actually, India is a confused nation today. It does not understand its own nature, which seems to be a hotchpotch of the masculine and feminine way." (86)

He further added that Shukracharya taught the masculine way of life. He was the guru of the Asuras who were known as demonic fanatics. Later, they were defeated by Devas destroying the Asura Empire and expelling them from India. The Asuras were monotheist believing in Ekam-one God. Shukracharya taught them that all other forms of the Ekam were false and illusory. The belief of Asuras in Ekam obliterated all kinds of divisions among them. However, only those who believed in one God were equal. And those believed in many forms of God were considered enemies. They turned exclusionist demanding individual devotion. They grew utterly intolerant and fanatically rigid. They began to kill those who did not believe in Ekam (92-93). Even today religious fundamentalism and intolerance play havoc in the present day world resulting in terrorism and inhuman killings of innocent people.

The masculine way is often exclusivist, intolerant and rigid while feminine way is division, argumentative and incoherent. Very often, there is endless debate, analysis and paralysis. (94). Present day parliament of India and governance are the examples of paralytic aspect of feminine way of life. Ram had seen the inefficiencies and decisiveness of feminine way of life and he felt that Indian needed the masculine way to tackle these problems. However, it should be free from rigidity, intolerance and fanaticism. He firmly believed that questioning must be encouraged even in masculine order. Later Vishwamitra tells Ram that Shukracharya came from Egypt to India. India being large hearted and generous welcomed him and made him her own honouring him as a great rishi. He had lived in Ayodhya and therefore Asuras as an old code never attacked Ayodhyans.

Ram, Bharat and Shatrughan discussed the concepts of freedom, law and justice. Bharat was a bit cynical about human goodness. He remarked that greatness and goodness are the potential in major part of mankind but not a reality. (70). He said that human beings are primarily selfish by nature. They would follow rules and obey laws if they fulfill their self-interest. Ram stood for the law saying that it must be obeyed by all irrespective of the status or economic condition of the person concerned. He believed that a good leader would inspire people to discover their goodness. A good ruler can create system in which selfish human nature can be harnessed for the betterment of society. For Ram, the law was Dharma and Dharma was above everything, everybody, even above Gods themselves. The people of Ayodhya, particularly the rich nobility broke every law with impunity.

Ram was assigned the duty of a chief police which he handled very honestly and efficiently. He made certain reforms based on Smritis, the code book written by ancient thinkers and rishis. He studied these Smritis and selected fair, coherent, simple and relevant laws. These laws were inscribed on stone tablets and placed them in the temples. He gave the police force the power to implement laws fearlessly and without favour. He strongly believed that police deserved respect from society which they have been denied. The high and the mighty often intimidated and pressurized them. Ram's effective steps reduced crime rate in Ayodhya as criminals were thrown into the jail or executed without undue delay. Innocent people and women enjoyed safety and security. Women could now go out even at night. He said that no one would be spared by law. Mobility does not mean being above law; it is not about birth but about having greater responsibility.

Ram's concept of justice differed from Bharat and majority of people of Ayodhya. Roshni, Manthara's daughter whom Ram and his brother treated as a sister was gangraped. The main culprit Dhenuka was underage. Seven other rapists were executed according to prevalent law but Dhenuka escaped death sentence being a minor. Ram was quite firm that law must not be broken at any cost. Though he was utterly furious at the heinous crime of rape and murder of Roshni, he stood by the law. However, Bharat made a secret plan and punished Dhenuka with a cruel death. Even Ram remained unaware of how Dhenuka was killed.

Once at the gurukul of Vashista Muni, a discussion about origins of civilization took place. Shatrughan said that a once large area of the earth was covered by huge sheets of ice. As the large quantities of water were frozen in solid form, sea levels were quite lower than they are today. It was called Ice Age. As the sea levels were lower, the Indian landmass extended farther into the sea. The island of Lanka was thus joined to the Indian Landmass. Gujarat and Konkan also reached into the sea. (64-65)

There were two great civilizations in India during the Ice Age – one in South Eastern India called Sangamtamil and the other Dwarka spread across the large parts of the landmass off the coast of modern Gujarat and Konkan. At present, this lies submerged in the ocean. It was ruled by Yadav Dynasty. Both these civilizations were destroyed, now lying under the sea. The survivors led by Lord Manu, escaped up north and settled there. These people were the people of Vidya, Knowledge and learning known as the Vedic people. Guru Vashistha said that the Mother Earth gave repeated warnings but people did not heed them. Had the people heeded their warnings, they would have saved these two civilizations. As a result, a few survived under the leadership of Lord Manu while large number of people lost their lives. Guru Vashishtha suggested that ecological imbalance would result in a natural disaster if people did not protect wild life, forests and environment in general. (65-66)

Ram's views about marriage, women and monogamy are idealistic and lofty. When Ram heard that Sita was the prime-minister of Mithila, he said that women were equal to men in mental abilities. He respected women's mental capabilities and believed that if women were given equal opportunities, they would prove able leaders and administrators. In earlier times, marriages among Kshatriyas were looked upon as a means to build political alliances. Ram did not agree to this evil custom. He firmly believed that marriage was a sacred bond between man and woman. It should not be treated as a political alliance. He was true marriage as a sacred partnership between two souls. And that was the reason why, he favoured monogamy and opposed polygamy as an insult to women. Ram's views are free from gender discrimination. He said that polygamy was wrong because it favoured men and discriminated against women. He affirmed his vow that he would remain loyal to one woman all his life.

In his conversation with Sita, Ram said that there should be no compulsion in marriage. To marry the wrong person is the worst thing happens in one's life. One should marry the person one admires and one who would help one understand and fulfill one's purpose of life. Husband and wife reciprocally help each other fulfill the purpose of life. According to Ram, this is the true marriage. Like a modern philosopher, he thinks that love is not looking at each other but looking in the same direction. He believed that both husband and wife should respect each other's individuality.

Ram's concept of love and marriage reminds us of Khali Gibran's words:

"Love one another, but make not a bond of love."

"Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping."

(Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*)

Sita like Ram is intellectually matured. She adores Ram for his wisdom and cool, calm composure. She possessed remarkable knowledge of Indian scriptures. Sita told Lakshman that Lord Manu. Each age had its own Manu who framed laws in consonance with time and environment. When Ram, Lakshman and Sita reached on the Southern banks of the Narmada River, Sita said that according to scriptures, South is the direction of death, but death is not inauspicious. It is not an end but the beginning of regeneration. She remarked that no material ever escapes the universe. It only changes the form. Modern science agrees to this fact that no energy ever dies, it merely changes into another form. *The Bhagwad Gita* explicitly says,

"Na Hanyate, Hanyamane Sharire"

(Nothing is killed, only body dies) (Gita, 20)

The immortality of the soul is an important concept in the Hindu philosophy. In chapter-2 of *the Bhagwad Gita*, Lord Krishna says that the soul does not take birth or dies. It is eternal, birthless and imperishable. It only changes the garment of the body; it is simply changing of the attire. The Gita says.

“As a man abandons his worn-out clothes and acquires new ones, so when the body is worn out, a new one is acquired by the self who lives within”.

Thus, Amish’s *Scion of IKSHVAKU* has quite relevant comments on cultural, political and philosophical issues. The focal point of the book is what the characteristics of an ideal man and ideal society are. This is the first of the Ramchandra series that ends with abduction of Sita. We may expect at least three – four other books to deal with the story of Ram, the ideal king, the ideal husband, the ideal brother and the ideal son. It must always be remembered that human ideal never means perfect; it is more human and therefore fallible. Amish’s success lies in his fine narrative skill and relevant observations on various issues of life and society.

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