Rāma’s Exile into the Woods: Using Valmiki’s Epic to Address Familial Conflicts

Abstract:

It is said, “Śāsti ca trāyate ca iti śāstram”. This common saying defines the śāstras as those things which govern and protect. These texts have governed and protected the tradition throughout the ages by passing its values – both spiritual and worldly – to succeeding generations. By relying on both parables and true stories to inspire readers to imbibe the faith’s tradition in their lives, these messages have been transferred. In this paper I discuss how, amongst these śāstras, the Rāmāyaṇa poetically and meaningfully lays out the foundations for ideal familial relationships. In particular, I do so by focusing on the character of Rāma as the ideal statesman, brother, friend and son. I analyze the circumstances surrounding Rāma’s exile – found in the 2nd sarga (chapter) of the Ayodhyākāṇḍa - to emphasize his filial deference, his emotional stability, and his spiritual understanding in the face of hardship. By doing so, Rāma’s conduct as that of the ideal son is established, and an ethical motif to inform intra-familial relationships is provided as well. I demonstrate this by contrasting Rāma’s temperament and behavior with present-day familial conflicts.

Keywords: Tradition, Śāstra, Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, Intra-familial relationships, Present-day familial conflicts

Introduction:

It is said, “Śāsti ca trāyate ca iti śāstram”. This common saying defines the śāstras as those things which govern and protect. These texts have governed and protected the tradition throughout the ages by passing its values – both spiritual and worldly – to succeeding generations. By relying on both parables and true stories to inspire readers to imbibe the faith’s tradition in their lives, these messages have been transferred. In this paper I discuss how, amongst these śāstras, the Rāmāyaṇa poetically and meaningfully lays out the foundations for ideal familial relationships. In particular, I do so by focusing on the character of Rāma as the ideal statesman, brother, friend and son. I analyze the circumstances surrounding Rāma’s exile – found in the 2nd sarga (chapter) of the Ayodhyākāṇḍa - to emphasize his filial deference, his emotional stability, and his spiritual understanding in the face of hardship. By doing so, Rāma’s conduct as that of the ideal son is established, and an ethical motif to inform intra-familial relationships is provided as well. I demonstrate this by contrasting Rāma’s temperament and behavior with present-day familial conflicts.

Rāma’s Filial Deference

In the interest of brevity, details of Rāma’s exile – already well known to most audiences – are not summarized with exhaustive detail in this paper. Touching on the first theme dealt with in the introduction, we see that the first aspect of Rāma’s representation as the ideal son is his filial deference. In the narrative, Rāma has every opportunity to deny the unjust exile. Both Ayodhyā’s citizens and Rāma’s own relatives dearly wish for Rāma to stay in Ayodhyā. Even Daśaratha wishes for Rāma to stay. However, the king is inextricably bound to his word. Realizing this, Rāma focuses solely on adhering to his father’s wish and enters the forest in a way reminiscent of Naciketā, who uttered, ‘बहूनामेमि प्रथमा’ (bahūnāmēmi prathama) as he eagerly entered the arms of death upon his father’s ordinance. Valmiki describes how Ayodhyā unequivocally lauded Daśaratha’s announcement of Rāma’s coronation. But just hours later, it was stricken with grief over the news that Rāma would be going into exile. Its citizens thought there and then to leave Ayodhyā in protest, for the city without Rāma was nothing more than a forest to them. The forest, on the other hand, would be as lovely as the city in
Rāma's presence. Ayodhyā's citizens thus clearly stood with Rāma. So boundless was their affection for him that the citizens later follow Rāma into the forest at his departure. Noticing this, Rāma decides to quietly leave the citizens in the middle of the night whilst all of the citizens are sleeping, thinking of their safety.

Rāma's own relatives also deeply wish for Rāma to stay in Ayodhyā. Accordingly, Rāma's younger brother and devoted companion Laksmana strongly advises Rāma to have Daśaratha imprisoned or even killed so that he could take the throne. He states:

यावदेव न जानाति कश्चिदथथममं नरः।
िावदेव मया सार्थमात्मस्थं कुरु शासनम्।।

Kauśalyā agrees with Laksmana's advice. Even Bharata, who comes to be coronate in Rāma's place, is deeply saddened when he comes to know of Rāma's exile. He was not present when the ordinance was given, but he goes to meet Rāma in the forest thereafter. He expresses his thoughts quite boldly, saying, "Sinner! She (Kaikeyī) should receive the severest punishment for this!" Rāma, quietly listening to this outburst, calmly tells his younger brother to calm down. Then, with loving, yet firm, words, he imparts to him the importance of receiving Kaikeyī with as much love as any son would have for a mother.

Even in the face of such opposition, Rāma's conviction to honor his father's word never wavers. Instead, he repeatedly articulates his loyalty to Daśaratha's word in front of Laksmana and Kauśalya: Daśaratha is the master, guru, king and the equivalent of god for the Raghu clan. Further, he proclaims that to follow Daśaratha's wishes is the entire family's duty and that is in itself the core of Sanātana dharma.

In addition to citizens and relatives, even Daśaratha himself urges Rāma to disobey his ordinance and instead stay in Ayodhyā. He boldly admits his flaw and goes as far as to tell Rāma to jail him and ascend to the throne. He states:

अहं राघव कैकय्या वरदानेन मोहहिः।
अयोध्यायां त्वमेवाद्य भव राजा लिङ्गस्थ माम्।।

Rāma, however, expresses the view that he is obliged to allow Daśaratha to honor his pledge to Kaikeyī.

Rāma thus had every opportunity to oppose the injustice perpetrated against him. The entire city, Rāma's own relatives and even Daśaratha oppose the event of Rāma's exile. Yet, Rāma sets aside all dissuasions and holds firm to his vow of obedience. His filial deference even amidst such testing circumstances is thus one facet of his representation by Vālmiki as the ideal son.

Rāma's Emotional Stability

Another aspect of Rāma's portrayal as the archetypical child is his emotional stability. His emotional state shines forth through his actions and words. Rāma's actions, particularly in terms of his facial expressions, show him to be stable despite being dealt with such harsh injustice. In fact, even those closest to him do not notice even the slightest unrest. Valmiki thus writes: उचििं महाबाहुनथ जहौ हर्थमात्मवान्।

On the same note, Tulasidāsa writes in the Rāmacharitamānasa,

Along with Rāma's actions, Rāma's words further reflect his stability. For instance, Kauśalyā tries to stop Rāma by using emotional appeals. She presents her affection for Rāma and argues that her life
would be miserable without him. As a subordinate queen, she says, she would be treated as a mere servant to Kaikeyī. Instead, it will be better for her to enter the forest with Rāma. Despite such entreaties, Rāma does not submit. Setting aside emotion, he tells Kauśalyā that her dharma was to support her husband.

He answers Daśaratha’s appeals in similar fashion. Upon Daśaratha's insistence for Rāma to ascend to Ayodhya’s throne, Rāma answers with a prayer that Daśaratha would stay on the throne for thousands of years. He then adds that he would be back from the forest in just a short period. Here, Rāma's ability to see the exile period as short lends proof to his stability. Leaving the city, he also tells the citizens to keep greater faith in Bharata, the new king, than they kept in him. He further mentions Bharata’s good qualities to show Bharata to be a more appropriate king than himself. Just as Rāma’s actions, Rāma’s words also reflect his stable emotional state.

Also, the way in which Rāma refers to Kaikeyī further reveals his stability. Rāma know well that Kaikeyī was the reason for his exile. Yet still, when Kaikeyī relates Daśaratha’s decree, Rāma does not blame her. Instead, he nobly replies: एवमस्िु गममष्यामम वनं वस्िुमहं श्त्विः। जटािीरर्रो प्रतिज्ञामनुिालयन्।।

Thus referring to her as ‘mother’, he expresses his unchanged affection for her. He then prays for her happiness, saying ‘अव सुप्रीिा’ (be happy). Even in exile, he asks Bharata about Kaikeyī’s well-being. Some versions of the Rāmāyaṇa also assert that Rāma first bowed to Kaikeyī upon returning from the forest and even thanked her for causing his exile. Rāma thus proclaims, in a verse attributed to the narrative of the Rāmāyaṇa:

वृष्णि  वायुसूनोः क्वापि सौममत्रभश्क्ि।

Rāma’s words thus reflect his spiritual understanding, a deeply held belief that the events that occurred were according to none other than God’s will. Such understanding thus allows him to follow his father’s ordinance and remain emotionally stable, thus fulfilling his role as the exemplary son.

Rāma’s Spiritual Nature

A third aspect of Valmiki’s characterization of Rāma as the ideal child is Rāma’s spiritual understanding. This characteristic itself can be construed be the cause for both Rāma’s obedience and stability. The prince’s spirituality shines forth in the way in which he describes Kaikeyī’s actions to Laksmana. Coming to know of Rāma’s exile, Laksmana expresses readiness to imprison or even assassinate Daśaratha. However, Rāma turns away from conflict by arguing that Kaikeyī’s decision was inspired by God. Otherwise, he argues, how could someone so virtuous make such a shameful decision? He says: बुद्धि: प्रपीता येनें मनश्च सुसमाहितम्। तं तु नाहामि संक्लेषु प्रब्रजिष्यामि मा चिरस्।। कथं प्रकृतिसम्मन्ना राजपुत्री तथागुर्ा। ब्रूयाि् सा प्राकृतेव स्त्री मत्पीड्यं भूतसंतनिधिः।।

Rāma’s words thus reflect his spiritual understanding, a deeply held belief that the events that occurred were according to none other than God’s will. Such understanding thus allows him to follow his father’s ordinance and remain emotionally stable, thus fulfilling his role as the exemplary son.

To reiterate, the central argument in this paper is that the Rāmāyaṇa and other classical texts can provide means by which individuals can resolve intra-personal and familial problems. Having discussed the various themes apparent in the circumstances of Rāma’s exile, the question regards the ways in which these themes can become lived practice. The first and perhaps most obvious point is that people must become aware of the Rāmāyaṇa’s story- either by reading the text themselves or by listening to it.

In addition to reading, writing about, listening, or speaking about the Ramayana, personal reflection (manana) on the events and themes of the story carry fundamental importance. The real Research is
where we start living the concepts in our life. For example, although I had written on and researched this portion of the story, it is not necessarily the case that I would be able to implement Rāma's spiritual outlook and emotional stability in a similar situation. Therefore, personal reflection on these themes is crucial to resolving one's own intra-personal problems. In an age when sons murder their families\textsuperscript{xii}, or when sons seize their father's assets\textsuperscript{xiii}, themes such as maintaining a spiritual outlook, emotional stability, and filial deference are sorely needed.

**Conclusion**

This paper analyzed Rāma’s exile through three key facets: his filial deference, his emotional stability and his spiritual understanding. In doing so, one hopes that it provide the modern individual with an ideal representation of how a true family member lives. From these efforts of Rāma, the main moral or foundational message that modern individuals can derive is how to resolve familial conflicts. Rāma’s story need not only exist as a spiritual or historical event, but, as evidenced through this paper, it can serve as a solution to all family-related problems.

However, what was explored in this paper doesn’t represent the full extent of what can be done regarding this topic. A further venture that could be pursued with this paper is to further examine these characteristics, exploring how they can be and have been applied in the modern world. This would further express the already evidenced relationship between the concepts presented in Hindu śāstras and the present-day world.

**Reference:**

III. Ibid. 33/22
IV. Ibid. – 46th Sarga
V. Ibid – 21/8, 12. Translation: Before anyone comes to know of this fact (of the king’s decision to send you into exile) take these (reins of) administration in your hands with my help (after duly installing yourself as Prince Regent. If pleased with Kaikeyī and instigated by her, our royal father, behaves as an enemy, let him be made captive or even gotten rid of without (the least) attachment. (All forthcoming translations are taken from: Vālmiki. (n.d.). Śrīmad Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa (with Sanskrit text and English Translation).
VII. Ibid. 106/9
VIII. Ibid. 24/16
IX. Ibid. 21/49
X. Ibid. 34/26. Translation: I have been deprived of my senses by Kaikeyī through a boon (granted by me in her favour), O scion of Raghu! Taking me captive, (therefore), be you the king of Ayodhyā today.
XI. Ibid. 19/37-38. Translation: The mighty-armed Sri Rāma (who was noted for his self-control) did not shed his characteristic and native joy any more than the autumnal moon with its intensity bright rays loses its natural splendour. Duly honouring all men with his suave speech, the highly illustrious Sri Rāma (whose mind was given to piety) entered the presence of his mother.
XII. Tulasīdāsa, G. (1985). Ayodhyākāṇḍa. In Śrīrāmacaritamānasā (Forty first, pp. 203–355). Govind Bhavan, Gitapress. Translation: In the time of coronation and when living in the forest, there was no difference upon Rāma’s face. Let my Raghunandan’s lotus-face perpetually create auspiciousness for me. (Translated by the Author)
XIV. Ibid. 34/28-29
XV. Ibid. 45/6-10
XVI. Ibid. 19/2. Translation: Amen! Honouring the promise made by the king and wearing matted locks and the bark of trees, I will undoubtedly proceed from Ayodhyā to the forest to take up my abode.
XVII. Ibid. 19/4
XVIII. Ibid. 100/10
XIX. Translation: Dear Mother! Due to your blessings I knew, the love of father towards me, the glory of Bharata, the strength of Hanumān, the devotion of Lakṣmaṇa, the purity of Śitā, the strength in my shoulders, and the enmity of enemies. (Translated by the Author)


XXI. Ibid. 22/14, 19. Translation: Surely I ought not to give offence to Providence (by crossing His purpose), as it is by him that this idea (of sending me away into exile to the forest) has been infused (into the mind of Kaikeyī through the machination of Mantharā) and her mind fully set at rest (on the question). I shall (accordingly) go into exile, let there be no delay. How (else) could she, a princess of gentle disposition and possessing such (rare) qualities (of head and heart) utter like a vulgar woman in the presence of her husband words intended to torment me.
