

Rāmāyaṇa - An Ethical Treatise for Modern Political Leaders

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Abstract

The seventh chapter of Rāmāyaṇa narrates the qualities that the ministers should have. Rāma's father Daśratha, the king of Ayodhyā, had eight primary ministers in his cabinet (Rāmāyaṇa 7.3) who were well aware of the qualities of a minister. They could judge a person from his outer expressions, always thought of the welfare of the king and the kingdom, and followed simple living and pure thinking. These qualities made them respectable in society and loved by the king and made them famous worldwide. Always busy with the administrative work of the kingdom they took decisions only after discussing and analyzing the whole situation (Rāmāyaṇa 7-18). They led a disciplined life and ethics was their guiding force (Rāmāyaṇa 7.16). Secretive about political decisions they always uttered nice and positive things (Rāmāyaṇa 7-19). In fact, king Daśratha could rule so successfully only with the help of such ministers, ethical, dutiful, generous, and truthful and of high character (Rāmāyaṇa 7-20). Today's world abounds in turmoil, violence, unrest, unhappiness and dissatisfaction. The Rāmāyaṇa has an answer and a solution for each of these. Rāmāyaṇa not only provides solace but also gives us an insight to human relationships, be they between two countries, two individuals or groups and compares behavior exhibited in such situations as opposed to the behavior that should have occurred in the society's interest. If the ethics in politics as outlined by the Rāmāyaṇa is followed, it will help clean the whole system and establish global peace and harmony on the lines of Rāma Rājya where everyone was happy and content.

Full Paper

Frauds, scams, rapes, murders, slaughters and massacres have become quite common these days. In this context we can look up to our ancient Sanskrit literature for help. One of them is Ādikavi Valmīki's Rāmāyaṇa. The Rāmāyaṇa advocates appointments in politics of only those who are of high moral character and would not take bribes, are not fraudulent and have some work experience in the field (Rāmāyaṇa 2,100.26) Politics has been an integral part of our lives since ancient times. Even after thousands of years, the story of Rāmāyaṇa as told by Maharshi Valmīki has many ethical guidelines that are relevant today. With the declining state of politics and governance the world over, these guidelines ought to be followed by modern political leaders to maintain peace and harmony in the state, in the country and in the world.

In the Rāmāyaṇa, politics is of very high standards where ethics are to be followed not only by the king¹ but also by the ministers, by the chieftains of the king and also by the common public². In modern times we have the Prime-minister, the President, cabinet ministers, state-ministers who are our political leaders and are supposed to run govern country smoothly and honestly but for a multitude of reasons are unable to do so. In the Rāmāyaṇa period the king along with his ministers and army chiefs looked after his kingdom in the best possible way he could, even if he had to give up his worldly comforts and lay his life for the welfare of his people. These kings always consulted their ministers³. In Rāmāyaṇa, Daśratha, Rāma and Rāvaṇa are kings - all with several ministers to advise them. The seventh chapter of Rāmāyaṇa in Bālkāṇḍa narrates the qualities that the ministers should have. Rāma's father Daśratha, the king of Ayodhyā, had eight primary ministers: Dhṛishti, Jayant, Vijaya, Surashtra, Rashtravardhana, Akopa, Dharmapal and Sumantra⁴ - who were all well aware of the qualities of a minister. They could judge a person from his outer expressions; they always thought of the welfare of the king and the kingdom; and they followed simple living and pure thinking⁵ which most of our politicians need to follow today. All these ministers, apart from being very learned, were also very humble, able, composed, strong, alert, forgiving, had pleasing manners and lived in accordance with the king⁶. These qualities made them respectable in society and loved by the king and also made them famous worldwide. Always busy with

the administrative work of the kingdom they took decisions only after extensive discussion and in a broad context after analyzing the whole situation⁷. Such was the ability and integrity of ministers that the king consulted them not only in official matters but sometimes in their personal matters also.

The king in turn valued the advice he received. For instance, when king Daśratha wanted to perform *putreshti-yajñā* with a wish to have sons, first he consulted his ministers⁸. The king always gave them due respect⁹. They were aware of the weaknesses, the strengths and the activities of the enemy camp¹⁰. They never lied for their own gains. They were tactful and friendly and if the need be they would not hesitate punishing even their own sons¹¹. They would make efforts to increase the treasury and the army by fair means.¹² They would never harm or punish the enemy if not guilty. They were full of valor and enthusiasm and always followed ethics in doing their work. They protected the people of their kingdom and gave punishment to the culprits according to their personalities. Their thoughts were pure and they had unanimity in reaching a conclusion¹³. They maintained personal hygiene and cleanliness and wore good clothes¹⁴. Their eyes of justice always remained open.¹⁵ They were loyal to their king and the kingdom. For instance, when king Daśratha decided to make his eldest son Rāma the king of Ayodhyā, he sent for him to explain the ethics and code of conduct that the king or a leader of the country should have¹⁶. He tells him to always be humble and have command over his five senses (to be Jitendriya¹⁷). He asks him to totally win over the evils born of anger and desires and he asks him to indirectly find out about the correct status of the kingdom through spies and to find out about public opinion by seeing and listening to them directly in his court and by indulging in proper justice to them.¹⁸ He further adds that Rāma should always have his ministers, commanders and other officials motivated and in good spirits¹⁹. The king who is able to collect a good amount of treasury and weapons through good means and is able to use them for a noble cause; the king who looks after his ministers, chieftains, and the public as his own and has them being loyal and loving to him – such a king pleases them and his friends in the same way as the gods were happy after finding the nectar.²⁰ Daśratha said to his son, ‘you always follow the very best of everything particularly ethics of your character by having control over your five senses’²¹.

Rāma followed his father’s advice and always worked in accordance with his ministers. He sought their advice in the battlefield many times:

*Raghavaḥ sanniveśyaivam svasainyam rakshasām vadhe/
Sammantrya mantribhiḥ sārdham nishchitya ca punaḥ punaḥ//*²²

Later after consulting them and after reaching a decision by using all four *nitis* of *Sāma*, *Dāma*, *Daṇḍa* and *Bheda* and by following the *rājadharma*, he sent for the son of Vāli to king Rāvaṇa’s court,²³ Rāvaṇa, although a very strong headed and stubborn king kept his ministers along his side²⁴ and consulted them before doing anything²⁵. Mahodar, Prahasta, Maareech, Shuka, Sarana, and Dhoomraksha were some of his ministers²⁶. He requested them to give him correct advice:

*Kim karishyāmi bhadram vaḥ kim vo yuktamanantaram/
Uchyataam naḥ samarthm yat kṛtam ca sukṛtam bhavet//*²⁷

Ravana to his ministers says that all of you are very wise so you analyze the situation correctly and collectively and reach a decision. I will defer to that collective wisdom follow that decision as my duty:

*Tasmāat suminritam sādhu bhavanto matisattamāḥ/
Kāryam sampratipadyantametat kṛtyam matam mama//*²⁸

You should advise me for whatever is good for the city and the army:

*Hitam pure ca sainye ca sarvam sammantryatām mama //*²⁹

The ministers always discussed the situation before reaching any decision.³⁰

The Rāmāyaṇa further highlights that in dire situations also the leader should have his spirits high so that the enthusiasm of his people and the army does not do down. Even after losing so many members of his army and family Rāvaṇa declares how he is going to defeat the enemy³¹. This rejuvenates his army and his people. Leading from the front is yet another theme and there is a reference in Sunderkāṇḍa where Rāvaṇa sends seven sons of his minister in the battlefield and then he sends his army chiefs³². This shows not only the dedication and commitment of the leaders of the Rāmāyaṇa period but also the sacrifice of their families.

The leader in those days served the country with his full capacity including money, power, family and friends. He was sitting with his ministers when Rāma's messenger Aṅgada comes to his court and introduces himself and Rāvaṇa tells his ministers to have him captured³³. He categorically states that the wise men have said that the reason behind every victory is the correct advice given by the ministers which the leaders follow and that is the reason that he wants to consult them about Shri Rāma:

*Mantramūlam ca vijayam pravādanti manasvinaḥ /
Tasmād vai rochaye mantram Rāmam prati mahābalāḥ//*³⁴

Appointing ambassadors and spies was an integral part of politics then as it is now. In Rāmāyaṇa Hanuman and Angad were sent to Rāvaṇa's camp as Rāma's ambassadors. Ethics and an ethical frameworks were imperative and were always involved in such appointments. Ambassadors were sent then also and they are appointed now also who represent their country in distant places and try to have a dialogue between the two countries, if the need be, in congenial surroundings. In Rāmāyaṇa, Hanūmān is Rāma's ambassador in Rāvaṇa's court. Hanūmān was Sugrīva's minister and ministers or political leaders were supposed to be in the best of physical and mental health.³⁵ Ethics ought to be followed in such appointments as many lives come at stake at times. An ambassador should have the strength of character, should be educated and wise, have wit, commonsense and honesty; should have tact and ability to take quick and correct decisions. No partiality and personal favors should be taken in such appointments. Rāmāyaṇa says that if the ambassador is not strong and sensible then he can destroy everything like the sunrays destroy darkness.³⁶

An ambassador without sense can spoil the whole show.³⁷ Hanūmān, the ambassador of Shri Rāma weighs pros and cons of how he should present himself before Sītā and before Rāvaṇa so that the work, for which he has been sent, is accomplished successfully. In Sunderkāṇḍa there is a long description of his thoughts about the situation³⁸. To get the work done all four strategies called *Sāma*, *Dama*, *Danḍa* and *Bheda* ought to be applied.

When Hanūmān is in *Ashok Vāṭikā* and wants to gauge the power of Rāvaṇa, he says to himself that *Sāma* (getting the work done peacefully) is not possible with Rāvaṇa. He has abundant riches so *Dāna Nīti* has no meaning for him. He is very powerful so *Bhednīti* cannot be tried with him so the best would be here to apply the *Danḍa-Nīti* by showing my own strength.³⁹

Manu also talks at length about the ethics involved in the appointment of an ambassador⁴⁰. He also talks at length about the ethics that an ambassador should follow because an ambassador can make two countries friendly or can create a rift and thus have them fight.⁴¹

Spying has been an integral part of the political administrative system from time immemorial in ancient India. Spies were and are considered to be the eyes and ears of the king or leader who is expected to ensure the welfare of the people. In Rāmāyaṇa in Sunderkāṇḍa, Sītā tries to spy through the women who were sent by Rāvaṇa to guard her in order to gauge the strength of Rāvaṇa against her husband. Hanūmān also does not reveal his identity and spies in SriLankā about Rāvaṇa's strength and whereabouts. In order to keep himself in touch with whatever is happening in every part of the country

and also in the enemy territories, the leader has to maintain an efficient secret system through the spy network. This is similar to the clandestine and bureaucratic services in the modern political system. Kautilya deals with this age-old system in a very systematic manner by explaining various aspects of this unique institution. According to him the creation of a network of secret service is the prominent task of a leader and should be undertaken immediately after the appointment of counselors and ministers. He talks of two types of spies, the wandering spies and those who are stationed in a particular place and are employed. In Rāmāyaṇa in Sunderkāṇḍa - Hanūmān sees many spies in the middle of the city of Lankā⁴². There is an elaborate description of their shapes, appearances, work, weapons and mannerisms. All of them were very powerful and involved with their work⁴³. There was an interesting system of even spying upon spies which served as an effective deterrent against all spies. This system should be followed today as well to keep a check on the spies.

Manusmṛiti, which is written much later after the Rāmāyaṇa also speaks about *Rājadharmā* (the duties of the leaders). It is the duty of the leader to look after the public interests and justice⁴⁴. According to the need of the time and purpose of the king, the leader has to act in many ways⁴⁵. While punishing the guilty he has to follow justice⁴⁶ otherwise it harms him only.⁴⁷ In a country guilty are punished in accordance with the gravity of the offence, the people live a happy and content life⁴⁸ and the leader become rich and popular⁴⁹. In his country he should follow ethics in allotting punishments, in the land of enemy he should give harsh punishments and should forgive the Brahmins for minor offences⁵⁰. Punishments should always be given according to ethical norms, where it happens so the public is always happy there⁵¹. Even the easy work cannot be done by one person, thus a king cannot manage a huge kingdom alone without the help of his ministers⁵². The king should talk to his ministers collectively and individually⁵³. Apart from checking the individuals the king should also check their backgrounds⁵⁴.

Leaders of the Rāmāyaṇa period led a disciplined life and ethics was their guiding force⁵⁵. Secretive about political decisions they always uttered nice and positive things⁵⁶. In fact, king Daśratha could rule so successfully only with the help of such ministers who were ethical, dutiful, generous, and truthful and of high character.⁵⁷ Rāmāyaṇa also talks about the leaders ensuring the green surroundings which mean that they should be able to protect and look after the physical environment of the country⁵⁸.

Rāmāyaṇa also highlights that the leader should not leave things on his subordinates and inspect important things himself in person. The subordinates, in turn, should report to the leader after verifying the facts themselves and not leaving it to others. As evidence, the ministers of Rāvaṇa report to him about his son Indrajit's death only after verifying the facts themselves⁵⁹. A powerful king like Rāvaṇa sometimes went for inspections himself rather than sending his appointed men. During the war with Rāma he inspected the major points of Lankā himself⁶⁰.

Fast forward to the modern day and modern politics has become complicated, unethical and unsafe everywhere. Ambitions have paved way for bribery, hoardings and other dishonest means. Slaughters and massacres are commonplace. The lessons of the Rāmāyaṇa are needed now more than ever. The Rāmāyaṇa advocates appointments in politics of only those who are of high moral character and would not take bribes, are not fraudulent and have some work experience in the field.

*Amātyānupdhāteetaan pitrapāitāmahaanshucēena/
Shreshṭhānshreshṭheshu kaccit tvam niyojayasi karmasu//⁶¹*

A leader is supposed to be always thinking about the welfare of his people like a father. King Daśratha always looked after the interests of his people like a father would for his own sons⁶². People have the tendency to follow and copy their leaders so it is imperative for the leader to be non-greedy and content⁶³.

Today's world abounds in turmoil, violence, unrest, unhappiness and dissatisfaction. The Rāmāyaṇa has an answer and a solution for each of these. A leader should follow *Dharma, Artha, Kāma,*

Mokṣa. He should be such that his army and his people have confidence in him otherwise they will abandon him.

*Hīnam ratigunaiḥ sarvairabhantāramāhave/
Senā tyajati samvignā nṛpatim tama nareśvara //*⁶⁴

Rāmāyaṇa not only provides solace but also gives us and political leaders of today an insight to human relationships; be they between two countries, two individuals or groups. It also compares behavior exhibited in such situations as opposed to the behavior that should have occurred in the society's interest. If the ethics in politics as outlined by the Rāmāyaṇa are followed, it will help clean the whole system, help with higher standards of governance and accountability, and establish global peace and harmony on the lines of Rāma-Rājya where everyone was happy and content.

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