



Mahesh Rangarajan

On Ramanujan's 300 Ramayanas and the Controversy

Mahesh Rangarajan, member of faculty of the Department of History, University of Delhi, speaks to Bhumika and Paresh, on Ramanujan's essay and the protest that followed the decision to include it in the syllabus of a BA Honors course.

Q1. Just to begin our discussion perhaps you can recount the sequence of events the way you know it?

A. There are certain distinct elements that are important in this entire episode and the discussions it has evoked. To lay out some of the facts, the essay called "300 Ramayanas" by AK Ramanujan (who was one of the greatest scholars of Indian languages, notably Sanskrit, Tamil and Kannada and also a very accomplished translator) was included in the syllabus of B.A. Honors second year concurrent course. In reaction to the inclusion of this essay there had been a build up of opposition since late 2007 which culminated in the protest which included an attack on the Department of History, in

which property was harmed and the Head of the Department was manhandled (by activists of the ABVP, which was the organization leading the protest against the essay's inclusion in the syllabus).

This incident was followed by a demonstration against the attack. The Academic

Council of the University also met a week later and issued a statement condemning the attack. The plaintiffs went to Court and the Court eventually decided to uphold the right of the University to decide the syllabus. I was a part of the protest, being a part of the Department of History. Faculty members and students from around the university also joined the protest. The Department of History has a fairly large faculty with roughly 350 faculty members from over 50 colleges. The protest had some effect—the groups that had indulged in violence conceded that their method of protest was not correct and there were no more incidences of violence though non-violent demonstrations continued for some time.

Q2. In sum, what is the text about? What is the leitmotif, if there is one?

A. AK Ramanujan says in this essay that the Ramayana has been written in twenty-five languages. In Sanskrit itself, there are many versions that differ from each other. There's a rich variety in the manner in which the Ramayana is told, written, sung and performed. He sees all this as testament to the great pluralism of this

tradition. Challenging many aspects of the Ramayana that we assume to be given, he describes it like all other epic narratives—as one containing great diversity and variety that we must appreciate.

Q3. Do you see this violent protest by the group in question against the inclusion of this text in the syllabus as an attack on academic freedom?

A. You know, what is interesting is that when you read the memorandum they submitted you realize how cleverly they negotiate the terrain. Academic freedom is never explicitly attacked. They specifically say that they have no problems with this reading being taught at the post-graduate level or with it being used in research. They are, however, worried that it might negatively influence the minds of young under-graduates. What is clear here is the lack of realization that an undergraduate is someone over the age of eighteen, is someone who can vote and who can be tried for crime. These are adult citizens you are dealing with and not school children. However implicit, their attempt to get the essay banned was an attack on academic freedom, especially when



seen in conjunction with the fact that the VHP objected to the entire collection called *Many Ramayanas* edited by the scholar Paula Richman of which this essay by Ramanujan was a part. In this sense, this case is not far removed from what happened to the *Satanic Verses*.

Q4. Two aspects of this issue are often hard to differentiate. One idea at stake is that of pluralism and their being many *Ramayanas* as opposed one “authentic” text. The other thing is that the text perhaps invokes certain images or episodes that might seem threatening to some people’s religious beliefs. To be seen in conjunction with this aspect is whether the discussion of this text entails questioning of the Hindu religion. The groups opposing the inclusion seem to be moved by both ideas.

A. This is an important distinction that needs to be made. Ramanujan says that there are versions of the *Ramayana* not only across South East but North Asia as well. As the epic traveled it changed form as well as content and to be able to appreciate this diversity we need to leave behind the desire for one subscribed truth and a single “authentic” text. There is no questioning the fact that there indeed are many *Ramayanas*.

For example, in one version of the *Ramayana*, Ravana does not actually lay hand on Sita, he lifts her with the earth where she was standing. In another version, Sita and Ram see each other before the *Swayamwar*; Sita is standing on the terrace when she sees the cavalcade passing by—this is actually a very well known version and you can find it even in RK Narayan’s book. In the Ramanand Sagar version on TV, the series ended with the return of Ram and Sita to Ayodhya after which they lived happily ever after. Following this there was a protest by the Dalits in Punjab who claimed that this version differed vastly from the Apoor version which includes the encounter of Luv and Kush with their father and the return of Sita and so on and so forth. Ramanand Sagar had to then add these parts to the version shown.

Anyone who is aware of this rich tradition would know that Ramanujan is someone very important in the study of the Indian epic. Not only was he an expert transcreator—I deliberately don’t say translator—but he also searched for universal truths in these epics, for these were essentially about ethical and moral dilemmas that are larger human questions. The essay titled “Is There An Indian Way of Thinking” is a very good example of that.

The second problem comes when people pick up passages and select interpolations (can this word be used in plural form?) of different *Ramayanas*—because there are interpolations that can contradict or go against some people’s religious beliefs. He says there are many *Ramayanas* but that does not mean that he is endorsing what these versions of the epic say. I don’t think any of it involves questioning of the Hindu religion. Here I speak only of myself—I have many students who come from very devout Hindu families, who felt very deeply against this incident that they rightly saw as deep disrespect to not only the teaching community but also the logic of education.

I can see certain groups using some people’s religious sentiments, the *Shradha* of those who might feel threatened by the text or something. But I don’t feel that the text actually interferes with any person’s belief. One must understand that here nothing is being imposed. It is not a text being taught by the liturgy in a classroom. You are not being given this text as the “truth”, you are being given Ramanujan’s description of the *Ramayanas* and you are free to disagree with it if you have logical reasons for it. There is no right answer.

Q5. Yes, one is free to disagree with it in theory but given how the system works, it is not always possible. Would you not say that the ABVP has every right to protest against the inclusion of Ramanujan’s essay, as long as their protest does not deteriorate into an assault? As “liberals”, our first reaction to any protest by a right-wing organization is to call it an assault on academic freedom etc. but as long this

“assault” isn’t literal (as it was in this case), the ABVP has, in theory, as much reason (and right) to protest against the syllabus as the people campaigning for the desaffronisation of our school history textbooks, no?

A. The creation of a liberal space is what we all need; the most illiberal of us need it the most. They are part of the space and they should be acted upon only when they violate the law. Otherwise they should have full freedom to articulate their view. This happens only when they recognize and respect the freedom of others as well. We know that regimes that believed that they had monopoly over the truth denied it to others. I can think of a popular Chinese story in which a courtier takes a horse to the emperor’s court. The emperor calls it a deer and all those who disagree have to part with their heads. And this is the story of all parties. Has there been a serious debate over why 1989 happened or why the Berlin Wall came down? Why did the USSR break up? Why did a Marxist regime produce a dynasty of rulers? Look at the situation where one of the founders of this country was a person who was against all technology—not that I agree with him— and in the same country, the same party cracked down on people who disagreed with the idea of having big dams!

Why are people so scared? I believe it comes from insecurity. First there is a belief that I know this corner of the wall and second there is the fear of the unknown. Furthermore there is the fear that someone would throw new light on what I knew and what I thought true would be falsified.

I genuinely believe in the Indian Constitution and its capacity to create a democracy because of the manner in which it came about. A part of people’s anger has always found legal expression in this country. To make sure that these potentialities actually emerge we must be alert and debate must



not stop. Debate is the only thing we have! This country has little resources, little land, a lot of people and not much fuel. The one thing it has to contribute is in terms of ideas. It is true that the argumentative Indian has had a long tradition but s/he is under attack. Where is s/he when we need him/her? When the question of reservations is being discussed? Or SEZs? Why just two groups of people throwing abuse at each other? Why exclude the others? Why can't the much larger section that is watching be a part of it all? The person who is openly intolerant is the least of our worries. The real issue at stake here is how we reach to this large, silent group? This will happen only when they think it is in their interest to join and that will not happen if this remains a slanging match between two groups.

Q6. (With reference to your earlier answer) "Hurting sentiment" is rather vague. Do you think the Indian Constitution, in its liberalism, allows such intolerance to creep in and find space in so far as unqualified assertions of injury to sentiments of a sect can be used to hamper people's freedom of expression?

A. No. I think the Indian constitution walks a fine line. While recognizing the basic rules of secularism like the right of people to propagate their religion, it also recognizes that there are certain situations which may require powerful state intervention. For instance, until the 1930s untouchability was legal; people had the right to practice it. The state in such cases should have the right to intervene even where religious matters are concerned to uphold a sense of dignity. It may not interfere with basic religious structures but it needs to ensure that the right to dignity is not denied. I would argue that the Indian Constitution achieves a very fine balance between individual rights and group rights. Of course there are imbalances and sometimes

the pendulum shifts one way and at other times it shifts the other way. It is hard to give a one-line answer—should the state be indifferent to questions of faith assuming that the empire of reason lies beyond it or should it recognize and respect such rights actively. In life, you will find we generally practice a mixture of the two.

Q7. So you think the problem is not inherent in the Indian Constitution. However in case some one does seek to misuse this clause, do you think the Indian judiciary will rule fairly? Or do you see the ruling of the Court in your favor as an exception? Is it not true that more often than not books are banned if seen as "controversial"?

A. You know, the Court's ruling depends on the judge and it depends on the case in particular. I think in most cases where there have been bans they have been a result of political or executive action, the court does not normally interfere. For instance a few years ago, a biography of Basava was published. According to the evidence given by the author, Basava had partial Dalit lineage. The Lingayata committee not only got it removed from universities, not only got it banned, they publicly beat up the author and the police did not do anything. The political parties competed against each other to uphold the case. In most cases the political leadership seems to decide such matters—Rajiv Gandhi banned Rushdie's book, BJP got the ban removed, and so on and so forth. Then there is this biography of Shivaji by an outstanding scholar, Y. D. Phadke. This biography has not only not been published, it has not even been disclosed. The political leadership in Maharashtra decided that this biography should never be published!

Q8. All discussions of the incident have taken to task the manner of protest and the violence the group indulged in. While the violence is easy to condemn, how do you put it in perspective? Is there a larger tendency in question, a lack of debate?

A. The problem with all such protests is that they start by asking the text in question to be banned. The archetyp-

al argument consists today of a statement, an assertion and a restatement, normally backed up by an anecdote. This is not a serious, philosophically sound way of argument! An argument need not agree with another point of view but it must have a logic to it.

You can see our point of view and differ with it. What is the use of an argument that is completely self-contained and doesn't even engage with another point of view? If the other person is not even ready to engage with the possibility of my being correct then how do I engage with him/her?

Most of those protestors were probably not aware of the richness of this tradition or the way in which Ramanujan, in very simple language articulates/describes this richness. To question the authenticity of an essay by a genius like Ramanujan in this fashion, without being aware of what he writes is certainly problematic—and mark what I say—it is the ignorance of those objecting about what they object to that is problematic. This ignorance does away with any chance of debate. The point of reading Ramanujan is not to agree with him. You can read him and completely disagree with him and say that you think there is only one way of looking at the Ramayana. And this argument would be perfectly understandable because for centuries there were only Sanskrit versions of the Ramayana; eventually other versions in other languages came up. But you must engage with what he says. This is where the problem lies, and this problem is not limited to any party. This inability to engage in debate, it cuts across ideological differences. Something is lacking in our civic society and our civic sense and there is a tendency to shy away from debate. If someone disagrees with Ramanujan then come and debate. Write a book! That is the best way! An attack like this one is directed at the very heart of the enterprise of the university. If one goes back into history one sees that whenever there has been an attack like this on the university, which is a center for the exchange of ideas, it reflects a larger repression of the culture of debate and enquiry in the society.

Q&A