

WHERE FUSION CANNOT WORK — FAITH AND HISTORY

Romila Thapar on the Ram (Setu) Bridge Controversy

If there is strong religious faith among millions of people, it does not require to be proven, as though massive political demonstrations and the killing of innocent persons. Nor do archaeology and history have to be brought in to keep that faith intact. Faith finds its own place and function, as do archaeology and history. And the place and function of each is separate.

Faith and history have been brought into conflict once again by being forced to jointly occupy the same public space in contemporary India. In effect, there should be no conflict if it is recognized that the two are irreconcilable and that they cannot be fused together. They are independent of each other. Their premises, their methods of enquiry, and their formulations are dissimilar. So instead of trying to conflate them, it might be better to concede the difference and maintain the distance.

When historians speak of the historicity of person, place, or event, they require evidence — singular or plural — that proves the existence of any of these and this evidence is based on data relating to space and time. The two important spaces in the Valmiki *Ramayana* are Ayodhya and Lanka, on the location of which scholarly opinion differs.

The location of Lanka, for example, has been disputed by Indian scholars for the past century and remains unidentified with any certainty. Some have located it in the Vindhyas — in Amarkantak or in Chota Nagpur — and others in the Mahanadi delta. The identification with present day Sri Lanka is problematic. The earliest name for Ceylon judging by Indian, Greek and Latin references of the Mauryan and post-Mauryan period was Tamraparni (Taprobane in Greek). Ashoka in the third century BC, in one of his edicts, mentions Tamraparni as on the frontier. Later, the more commonly used name was Sinhala or Sinhala-dvipa (Silan or Sialadib in Greek). It would seem that the name Lanka was a later adoption of the centuries AD.

This becomes puzzling for the historian. If Valmiki was referring to Ceylon, then the name should have been the one by which the island was known, either Tamraparni or else Sinhala, at the time of his composition. But since the name used is Lanka, which at this time appears not to have been the name for Ceylon, then perhaps Lanka was located elsewhere. The location of the Ram Setu would have to be reconsidered. This has been suggested by scholars who have argued that the *setu* was more likely located in a small expanse of water in central India and not in the Palk Straits. Nor is the *setu* referred to in every version of the story. Alternatively, if Lanka in the text is a reference to Ceylon, then the composition of the Valmiki poem would have to be dated to a later period when the island came to be called Lanka. All this uncertainty is quite apart from the question of the technical viability of building a bridge across a wide stretch of sea in the centuries BC.

It is said that the Ram Setu is a cultural heritage and therefore cannot be destroyed even if it is a natural geological formation and not man-made. Has the idea become the heritage? To search for a non-existent man-made structure takes away from the imaginative leap of a fantasy and denies the fascinating layering of folklore. It would be more appropriate to recognize the undersea formations in the Palk Straits as a natural heritage and protect the relevant areas. We pay no attention to the fact that such marine parks are as important to our ecological future as those visible on the landscape.

That Rama is central to variant versions of the story is, in itself, not evidence of historicity. If the variants contradict each other as they do, this may create problems for those who believe that only one of the variants is true. But multiple variants enrich the interest of historical and comparative analyses in assessing the degree to which each approximates, if at all, to the historical past or what the divergence symbolizes.

The two closest in time to the Valmiki are the Buddhist and Jaina variants. The Buddhist version in the *Dasarahtha Jataka* differs entirely from the Valmiki. Rama is the son of the raja

of Varanasi; exile is to the Himalayas; and there is no kidnapping of Sita by Ravana.

The earliest of many Jaina versions, the *Padmacharita* of Vimalasuri, dating to the centuries AD, contradicts all earlier versions and states that it is doing so in order to present the correct version of what happened. It differs substantially from the Valmiki narrative. Ravana is not a demonic villain but a human counter-hero. It presents the story in the conceptual framework of Jainism.

These other versions might be objected to or dismissed by the person who has faith in the Valmiki version since the other versions differ. What is of interest to the historian is not the number of variant versions, which is impressively large, but why major changes were introduced into these.

This does not happen with the biographies of those who were known to be historical figures and who founded belief systems: the Buddha, Jesus Christ, Mohammad. Their biographies adhere largely to a single storyline and this helps to endorse the 'official' narrative of their life. Their existence is recorded in other sources as well that are not just narratives of their lives but have diverse associations. The historicity of the Buddha, for example, is established, among other things, by the fact that a couple of centuries after he died, the emperor Ashoka on a visit to Lumbini had a pillar erected to commemorate the Buddha's place of birth. This is recorded in an inscription on the pillar.

If the current debate had grown from a genuine sense of enquiry, historians might have participated. Human activity has a historical context and this is open to historical comment. But it is only too evident that the issue of the Ram Setu has become a matter of political strategy on the part of those who are mobilizing in the name of faith, and on the part of those who are reacting to the mobilization. From the point of view of archaeology and history, the Archaeological Survey of India was correct in stating that there is to date no evidence to conclusively prove the historicity of Rama. The annulling of this statement was also a political act. Reliably proven evidence is of the utmost significance to history but not so to faith. Blasphemy does not lie in doubting historicity. The historian is not required to pronounce on the legitimacy of faith. But the historian can try and explain the historical

context to why, in a particular space and time, a particular faith acquires support. And we need to remind ourselves that our heritage has been constantly enriched not just by those of faith but also by those who contend with faith.

If there is a strong faith — in the religious sense — among millions of people, then it does not require to be protected through massive demonstrations and the killing of innocent persons, through political mobilization. Nor do archaeology and history have to be brought in to keep that faith intact. Faith finds its own place and function, as do archaeology and history. And the place and function of each is separate. To say that the partial removal of an underwater formation in the Palk Straits is going to hurt the faith of millions is not giving faith its due. Is faith so fragile that it requires the support of an underwater geological formation believed to have been constructed by a deity? Making faith into a political issue in order to win elections is surely offensive to faith?

What is at issue is not whether Rama existed or not, or whether the underwater formation or a part of it was originally a bridge constructed at his behest. What is at issue is a different and crucial set of questions that require neither faith nor archaeology but intelligent expertise: questions that are being wilfully diverted by bringing in faith. Will the removal of a part of the natural formation eventually cause immense ecological damage and leave the coasts of south India and Sri Lanka open to catastrophes, to potential tsunamis in the future? Or can it be so planned that such a potentiality is avoided?

What would be the economic benefits of such a scheme in enhancing communication and exchange? Would the benefits reach out to local communities and, if so, how? Equally important, one would like to know precisely what role will be played by the multinational corporations and their associates in India. Who will finance and control the various segments of such an immense project? It is only when such details are made transparent that we will also get some clues to the subterranean activities that are doubtless already simmering. These are the questions that should be asked of this project and that at this point in time should be occupying public space. ■

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