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RĀMĀYAṆA

AND ITS IMPACT

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THE CHARACTER OF RĀMA IN BHĀSA’S ABHIŚEKA

Among the 13 plays attributed to Bhāsa (date uncertain, 3rd c. A.D.?), two are more directly inspired by the Rāmāyaṇa: 1. Pratimā, “The Statue”; 2. Abhiśeka, “The Coronation”. It is this latter we are now concerned with.

As a matter of fact, the coronation alluded to in the title takes place for three persons:

— Sugrīva the monkey, brother of the wicked king Vālin who deprived his younger brother of his rights and his wife. Sugrīva will be restored in his position by Rāma (act 1).

— Vibhīṣaṇa the rākṣasa (the demon) who endured the enmity of his brother Rāvana, but, after the death of this latter, was appointed by Rāma as the prince of Laṅkā (act 4).

— Rāma himself who, at the end of the drama (act 6), is acknowledged as the universal king of men and gods, because he actually is the supreme god Viśṇu-Nārāyaṇa embodied in the human form.

Act I

The first act of the Abhiśeka begins at the arrival of Rāma and Sugrīva in Kiṣkindhā, the capital city of the apes, where Vālin is exerting power. But Vālin is guilty of a severe misdeed: he has abducted the wife of Sugrīva, his younger brother. And the reproaches Rāma levels against him are the theme of the first of the two only meaningful debates put forward in the play (pp. 325-27)1. Rāma, as the defender of the Dharma, reminds Vālin his sin. It is forbidden for the elder (guru, āgraja) to take the wife of the younger (anuṣja), whereas the other way around is not condemned2. Vālin retorts that Rāma also is sinful because he has shot an arrow on him (= Vālin) while fighting against Sugrīva. Such a behaviour

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2 But the victim Sugrīva is not completely innocent. When he attacks his elder brother, he is blamed by Rāma’s brother Lākṣmaṇa, see act 1, sloka 14.
is not in keeping with the Dharma of a ksatriya, but is fitting with a man who conceals his warrior condition under the garment of an ermit (II st. 10).

This reproach of hypocrisy towards Rāma is present all over the play. The tricky mind of Rāma is more evidenced by the following contradiction: On the one hand he allegedly has the right of shooting Vālin by any means because this latter is a beast, and as such, liable to be killed even by guile (act 1, st. 19). On the other hand, he accuses Vālin to behave like a beast by taking over a brother’s wife. But, as Vālin puts it (pp. 425-26), it is the nature of a beast to act in such a way.

On the eve of the death, Vālin hands over the power to Sugrīva and Rāma, endorsing that decision, orders to organize the first coronation of the play.

Act II

In act 2 which takes place in Laṅkā, Rāma does not appear, but he is spoken of. While Hanumān the monkey, Rāma’s messenger, is hidden in a tree, Sītā, the wife of Rāma, arrives surrounded by the she-devils. Rāvana, prince of Laṅkā, joins her and invites her to love him “with all her limbs” (act 2, st. 14), because, as he puts it, Rāma is dying.

Disdainfully rejecting Rāvana’s proposal, Sītā even dooms him. Rāvana in anger leaves her and Hanumān realizes it is the right time to speak to Sītā. The queen is first of all sceptical about his statements, but gradually takes trust again.

Act III

Rāma does not appear on stage either during act 3. The first part of it is devoted to the threats spoken out by Rāvana against Hanumān who has smashed the royal woodhill. Finally Indrajit, Rāvana’s son, takes him prisoner. When Rāvana is going to decide on Hanumān’s fate, he is warned by his own brother Vibhīṣaṇa that the punishment is nearing.

To challenge Rāma who pledged himself to kill Rāvana, this latter enjoins to set ablaze the tail of his messenger (pp.344-45). As to Vibhīṣaṇa, he is ready to rally Rāma’s side and so, to be in position of warding the destruction off the Rākṣasas.

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Act IV

Soon after the beginning of act 4, Rāma steps in with his brother Lakṣmana and the monkeys Hanumān and Sugrīva. They are on the seashore opposite Laṅkā and, after crossing many other natural obstacles, Rāma is stopped by the ocean. Fortunately, Vibhīśaṇa who just left Laṅkā is lighting close by and he begs protection. Rāma welcomes him despite the fears of Sugrīva (p. 349), and even appoints him as the next king of Laṅkā. In gratitude, Vibhīśaṇa helps Rāma to solve the problem of reaching Laṅkā. He advises him to hit the ocean with his divine arrow.

In this passage, the solar symbolism clearly emerges for the first time in the play. Indeed, Rāma’s arrows turn out to be the beams of the sun that dry up the sea water. In that context⁴, Rāma is given his divine title of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, a name which arises at the end of the play again (act 6). To avoid the danger, Varuṇa, the god of ocean, appears in person and declares he is ready to divide his waters to let Rāma’s and Sugrīva’s army move on (pp. 350-51). So the crossing to Laṅkā over a bridge as described in the Rāmāyaṇa⁵ is replaced here by a passing by between two water walls. Before entering this unusual road, Rāma still has to decide on the fate of two demon-spies, Śuka and Sāraṇa, who infiltrate in his camp. He shows himself benevolent and enjoins them to be released, despite the fears of Vibhīśaṇa who emphasised their wickedness. Act 4 ends up with Rāma challenging Rāvana to a struggle.

Act V

Once more, we do not see Rāma on stage. It is Rāvana who comes in the foreground. Still hoping to marry Sītā, he is prepared to everything in order to reach his aim. He repeats therefore that Rāma is dead (act 5, st. 8), and to convince Sītā, he urges his magician Vidyujjihva to fabricate the heads of Rāma and Lakṣmana and to exhibit them in front of Sītā⁶. Of course Sītā starts by fainting, but soon comes back to herself whereas the Royal Fortune (Śṛi)⁷, who embodies and warrants the power of Rāvana, is going to abandon him (p. 359). It is at this very moment that, behind the

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⁴ In st. 13, Viṣṇu has been identified with the sun since the Veda, see e.g. J. GONDA, Les religions de l’Inde, I, Védisme et Hindousisme ancien, Paris Payot, 1962, pp. 113sv.
⁶ Cf. Rāmāyaṇa VI 22 (Baroda ed.) = VI 31 (French tr. A. Roussel).
⁷ On Śṛi as abode of the royal authority, see also Raghuvaṃśa XIV, 26, 63, 86.
scene, a voice is sounding “Rāma, Rāma!” And without seeing the hero, we are told that he has just killed Rāvana’s son Indrajit.

Having failed in his aims, Rāvana is so dismayed that he threatens to kill Śītā and to pull out her entrails. Such a statement is so shocking that a demon feels obliged to recall his king to more temper. Rāvana leaves the stage while claiming he will shoot Rāma dead.

*Act VI*

The last act is divided into three parts:

— the decisive struggle between Rāma and Rāvana. It is described in a set of stanzas put in the mouth of three fairies (Vidyādhara) who are watching at it,

— the ordeal of Śītā suspected of having been unfaithful,

— the glorification of Rāma after his victory and his manifestation as the supreme god Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa.

1. The combat. Rāvana, driving a chariot and equipped with a spear (named Śakti) and arrows, is called nairṛta “demonic” (st. 13). Rāma starts fighting on foot. Later he will be given a celestial vehicle led by Mātali, the charioteer of Indra. The solar symbolism emerges once again (see already act 4). Both adversaries are compared with the sun.

— Rāma is said to be the noonday sun (act 6, st. 16); his weapon (astra) is ablaze like the sun, and, like it, returns to its departure point after smiting down Rāvana (act 6, st. 17).

— Rāvana also is a sun wandering in the sky and burning the earth (act 6, st. 14). In act 3, st. 2, he was already the furious sun of the doomsday. In this fantastic duel, Rāma will obviously be the winner.

2. But he has hardly gained the victory that a doubt arises in his heart: has his wife kept her vow of faithfulness (p. 365)? In any case, by staying so long in Rāvana’s palace, Śītā got impure and is a stain for her husband’s family. Śītā, upset by that suspicion, is willing to mount the funeral pyre. She does it (act 6, st. 24), but goes down without damage. It is Vibhūvasu, i.e. Agni, the god of fire, who protected her and granted her salvation (p. 367). As a matter of fact, Śītā is nobody else than Lakṣmī, the divine bride of Viṣṇu (act 6, st. 28).

3. The miracle is the signal of the glorification of Rāma as Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa that concludes the play.
Conclusion

Here is the list of the various qualifications of Rāma throughout the play.

According to Rāvaṇa, Rāma is
— mānusa (II 12, 14; III 17; V 9) “just a human/mortal (being)”
— kṣudra (V 16) “a little creature”
— narādha (V 10) “the worst/lowest of the men”
— manujatāpasa (p. 358) “ascetic mortal”
— kutāpasa (V 16) “wicked ascetic”
— gatāyus (V 8, II 14) “whose life is departed” i.e. “moribund”
— kāmapathān nivṛtta (II 14) “averse from the ways of love”
— mṛga and śṛgāla (III 20) “deer” and “jackal”

According to Hanumān, Rāma is
— iksvākukuladīpa (II 20) “light of Iksvāku’s house”
— rāghava (III 15 etc.) “Raghu’s offspring”
— virāgragaṇya (III 21) “paragon of the heroes”
— atula (III 21) “peerless”
— tridāśendrakalpa (III 21) “equal to the-chief-of-the-30 (gods)/to Indra”
— bhuvanaikānātha (III 21) “One lord of the worlds”

According to Vibhīṣaṇa, Rāma is
— kamalalocana (III 27) “of lotus eyes”
— padmapatrāka (IV 11) “with eyes of lotus petals”
— ugracāpa (III 27) “equipped with a dreadful bow”
— saṃśritahitapraṇīta (III 27) “striving for his dependents’s good”
— drṣṭadharmarthatattva (IV 8) “versed in the very essence of the law”
— sādhu (IV 8) “good”
— saṃśrītavatsala (IV 8) “kindly to dependents”

According to a Vidyādharas, Rāma is
— sarvahita (p. 364) “universal benefactor”

According to Varuṇa, the god Ocean, Rāma is Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa (IV 14)
— mānusāṃ rūpam āsthāya “having taken on a human form”
— cakraśāṛṣṇāgadādhara “wielder of discuss, bow and mace”
— svayaṃ kāraṇabhūta “being the cause of himself”
— bhagavān (p.350) “blessed”

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