

Historical Memory without History

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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 39 (Sep. 29 - Oct. 5, 2007), pp. 3903-3905

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40276461>

Accessed: 10-05-2020 13:40 UTC

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## Historical Memory without History

*Questions of identifying location and chronology do bother archaeologists and historians, but they need not be of consequence to those whose concern is only with faith, and the distinction has to be reiterated. What is at issue in the Setusamudram project, however, is not whether Rama existed or not, or whether the underwater formation was originally a bridge constructed at his behest, but a different and crucial set of questions relating to the environmental and economic impact of the project that require neither faith nor archaeology. They require far greater discussion if we are to understand what the project might achieve and what it might destroy.*

ROMILA THAPAR

Faith and history have been brought into conflict once again by being forced to jointly occupy public space in contemporary India. In effect there should be no conflict if it is recognised 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. The location of both is uncertain.

It has been argued that the present-day location of Ayodhya may not have been the same as in early times. Buddhist sources locate it on the Ganga and some argue for a different Ayodhya on the Sarayu. When excavations at Ayodhya were started as part of the project on “*Ramayana Archaeology*” this question was raised and there was some discussion among archaeologists. Was it a confusion on the part of the authors? Could it have been another place with the same name?

Site names are often relocated in history sometimes as a wish to retain a memory and sometimes to legitimise a new settlement. Or even sometimes when it is ecologically necessary to move elsewhere and the name accompanies the migration. This difference in locating Ayodhya was pointed out by historians at the time of the Ramjanmabhumi movement, but it was dismissed as the distortion of Marxist historians! One does not have to be a Marxist to see common sense.

The location of Lanka has been disputed by scholars for the past century and remains unidentified with any certainty. For a variety of reasons many scholars such as Hiralal, Raikrishandas, Paramasiva Iyer, U P Shah and H D Sankalia, locate it in the Vindhya – in Amarkantak or in Chhota Nagpur – and others locate it in the lower Mahanadi valley in Orissa. The identification with present-day Sri Lanka is problematic – as has often been pointed out – since Lanka was not the early name for Ceylon.

One of the chronicles of the island, the *Mahavamsa*, written in the mid-first millennium AD lists a number of early names, possibly imaginary, such as Ojadipa, Varadipa, Mandadipa. But the names more commonly used in a variety of sources are different. The earliest name of the island judging by Indian and Greek and Latin references of the Mauryan and post-Mauryan period was Tamraparni/

Tambapanni (Taprobane in Greek). Ashoka in the third century BC in one of his edicts mentions Tamraparni as being at the frontier. Most scholars have identified this with Ceylon as it comes together with a reference to the Cholas, Pandyas and Keralaputtas of south India. A few have suggested that it might refer to the river Tamraparni in the extreme south.

Subsequent to this, the name Sinhala or Sinhala-dvipa was more frequent and rendered in Greco-Latin sources as Silam or Sieledib. The island is also frequently referred to in these sources as Palai Simoundou, the derivation of which is unclear. These references continue into the first millennium AD. At this early stage the name Lanka seems not to be associated with Ceylon. Perhaps the name Lanka came into usage later.

This is puzzling for the historian. If Valmiki was referring to Ceylon then the name should be the one by which the island was known at the time of the composition of the text, that is, either Tamraparni or else Sinhala or Sinhala-dvipa. Since the name used is Lanka which at this time appears not to have been the name for Ceylon, it could mean that Lanka was located elsewhere. In that case the location of the Ramsetu has also to be reconsidered. This has been suggested by some of the above-mentioned scholars. Some have argued that the “setu” was more likely located in a small expanse of water in central India or linked to an island in the Mahanadi delta and not located in the sea of the Palk Straits. Another view holds that the focus on the setu grew in the time of the Cholas when they were developing their naval power and conquered part of Ceylon. Nor is the setu an essential part of every version. There are other ways of reaching Lanka described in other versions of the story, some of which are quite fanciful.

### Dating of Epic

If Lanka in the text is a reference to Ceylon, then the date of the composition of the Valmiki poem would have to be reconsidered. It would date to a period when the island came to be called Lanka, which was later than the date popularly accepted for the text. The date of the

currency of the name Lanka becomes a significant question. All this is quite apart from the technical viability of building a bridge across a wide stretch of sea in the centuries BC.

It is said that the Ramsetu is a cultural heritage and therefore cannot be destroyed even if it is a natural geological formation. More likely it is the idea of such a structure that has become a 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 recognise the undersea formations of 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.

Questions of identifying location and chronology do bother archaeologists and historians, but they need not be of consequence to those whose concern is only with faith, and the distinction has to be reiterated.

Keeping the distance might help in defending historical research. The notion of questioning what is believed is not alien to Indian tradition. When we assess our cultural heritage we often tend to forget or we downplay the fact that rationality and scepticism were very much a part of early Indian thought. This was not limited to the Carvaka/Lokayata thinkers but is also clear from some other schools of philosophy, as indeed it is noticeable in Buddhist and Jaina thought. We have inherited a tradition of questioning, which was not limited to philosophical thought but is apparent in popular literature as well. It would be as well to nurture that tradition.

The description of Ayodhya in the Valmiki *Ramayana* as an opulent, well-developed, extensive urban centre would suggest to the historian a comparison with the urban centres of the Ganga plain in about the sixth-fifth centuries BC, known from texts and from archaeology. The extensive excavations at Ayodhya carried out on different occasions in the last 40 years make it clear that Ayodhya as a city cannot go back much earlier than the mid-first millennium BC. Unlike the textual description, the archaeological evidence does not suggest opulence. This contrast is apparent at more than one site. But allowance has to be made for poetic licence in a text that is acclaimed, and rightly so, as the 'adi-kavya', the first of the great poems. The first urban experience

of settlements in the Ganga plain doubtless evoked a new vision of the world, certainly one that brought in ideas and activities very different from the previous village settlements. Why poets exaggerated this experience has to be understood. Other kinds of pre-urban habitation in the area go back by a few centuries, but do not reflect the urban life of the Ayodhya of the text.

The existence of habitation by itself is not enough to argue that such locations, occupied by hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and peasants, is evidence enough to identify the site with a city-centre of an epic, even allowing for the normal fantasies of epic poetry. There has to be a detailed co-relation between the textual description and what is excavated – although many archaeologists and historians would still hesitate to accept this as the basis for identification. The co-relation can only be clinched when inscribed objects are found common to both textual and archaeological sources. This is one reason why despite extensive excavation, so much of Homer still remains uncertain.

### Variants of Rama

That Rama is central to variant versions of the story is in itself, not evidence of historicity. There can be infinite variants

some of which are way beyond the horizon of any original location and chronology, such as the Javanese and Malaysian versions. If the variants contradict each other as they do even in the Indian versions, this may create problems for those who believe that only one of the variants is true. But multiple variants enrich the interest in historical and comparative analyses and in assessing thereby the degree to which each approximates, if at all, the historical past or for that matter what the divergence signifies.

The Buddhist version of the story in the *Dasaratha Jataka* is entirely different from the Valmiki although it is probably contemporary. Rama-pandit as he is called, is the son of the raja of Varanasi; the exile is to the Himalayas and not the Vindhya; Rama and Sita are siblings which is a strikingly different relationship from the Valmiki version and is actually a prestigious one in the Buddhist tradition; and the kidnapping of Sita by Ravana does not form part of the story. The story is limited to the exile and the eventual return of Rama.

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

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what happened. It differs substantially from the Valmiki narrative. Ravana is not depicted as a demonic villain but as a human counter-hero. It presents the story in the conceptual framework of the Jaina tradition and therefore not unexpectedly, it is not accepted outside this tradition.

These other versions might be objected to or dismissed by the person who has faith in the Valmiki version since the other versions are questioning what is said by Valmiki. What is of interest to the historian on the other hand is not the number of variant versions from all over India and Asia which is impressively large, but the question of why such major changes were introduced into the story, which make variant versions distinctively different. This assumes that there was freedom to reformulate the projection of Rama in accordance with local needs. Such a range of diverse presentations is hardly conducive to defining a historical person.

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, Guru Nanak. Their biographies adhere largely to a single story-line and this helps to endorse the "official" narratives of their lives. 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. In celebration of Lumbini being the birthplace of the Buddha, the emperor reduced the taxes due from the village.

### Political Strategy

If the current debate had grown from a genuine sense of enquiry, historians might have participated. But it is only too evident that the issue is a matter of political strategy on the part of those who are mobilising in the name of faith, and on the part of those who are reacting to the mobilisation. From the point of view of archaeology and history, the Archaeological Survey of India was correct in stating that there is to-date no conclusive evidence to prove the historicity of Rama. The annulling of this statement was also a political act. But this lack of historical

evidence is relevant to history and the historical construction of the past; it is hardly relevant to belief and faith. Reliably proven evidence is of the utmost significance to history but not to faith. Accepting the existence of an 'avatara' is a matter of faith, it cannot by definition be a matter of history. Doubting historicity is not blasphemy. The historian may not question the legitimacy of a particular faith but the historian does have to explain its historical context and why, in a particular space and time, a particular faith acquires a following.

If there is a strong faith – faith in the religious sense – among millions of people then it does not require to be protected through massive demonstrations, violence and the killing of innocent persons, all geared towards political mobilisation. Nor do archaeology and history have to be inducted 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.

Those that claim to speak in the name of faith in order to confront and beat down knowledge have so far been careful in India not to tangle with scientists. Scientific knowledge is beyond the ken of politicians. Yet scientists in their work do confront issues tied to questions of faith. Where does Indian society stand in relation to these confrontations? Other times and other places have seen fierce conflict as for example, between the Catholic Church and Galileo, and more currently between Darwinism and Intelligent Design. Political lobbies elsewhere opposing scientists have been and are extremely powerful, but nevertheless they do fall short – although only just – of seriously damaging scientific knowledge through seeking the sanction of the state to oppose this knowledge. Part of the reason for this can be attributed to some societies allowing the relative independence of knowledge systems, be it archaeology, history or astrophysics. That this does not seem to be so in India is a qualitative disadvantage.

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 formation believed to have been constructed by a supernatural power? At the same time, formulating faith as a political issue in order to win elections is surely offensive to faith? Pitting it against history feeds the formulation.

The intention is doubtless to make both faith and history helpless pawns in political chess.

Setting up a confrontation between faith and knowledge has at least two purposes. One is to convert the confrontation into a mechanism to help with political mobilisation and this is always useful just prior to elections. The pattern and objectives are familiar from 20 years ago. The other purpose is to permit a deviation from the essential questions that need to be addressed in ascertaining the viability of what is now called the Ramsetu project, apart from diverting attention from more essential concerns that should be occupying us.

Even within the definition of the project, 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, but a different and crucial set of questions that require neither faith nor archaeology. They require far greater discussion involving intelligent expertise if we are to understand what the project might achieve and what it might destroy. 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 can be avoided?

Some detailed discussion is necessary as to what would be the economic benefits of such a scheme in enhancing communication and exchange. Such benefits should also be seen in terms of the future of local livelihoods in case they are negatively affected. Are there plans for the occupational relocation of local communities that may at the end be at a disadvantage? We have become a society so impressed with figures and graphs that we tend to forget that each number is actually a human being. The benefits are mentioned by politicians and the media but rarely explained in terms of the nitty-gritty. 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 issues connected to this project which at this point in time should be occupying public space. ❏