



Ashok K Banker's *The Prince of Ayodhya: Chronicling the Events of the Ramayana*

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Abstract

The original *Ramayana*, a classic tale of war between absolute Good and Evil, written 3,000 years ago by Valmiki, has a simple, long and intriguing storyline, which still resonates. It is permeated with messages of life and also fantasy material which are appealing and irresistible in their own way. It is perhaps because of these quotients, the epic, *Ramayana* has inspired different versions at different times in its long life. Ashok K. Banker has also recreated the *Ramayana* in his books--*Prince of Ayodhya*, *Siege of Mithila*, *Demons of Chitrakut*, *Armies of Hanuman*, *Bridge of Rama*, *King of Ayodhya*, *Vengeance of Ravana*, *Sons of Sita*, *Prince of Dharma*, *Prince of Ayodhya*, *Prince in Exil: Demon of Chitrakut*, *Prince at War*, *King of Dharma: Vengeance of Ramayana of Sita*, *King of Ayodhya* in which he traces the journey of Rama's life from the Prince to King, his life as he grows from a prince to an exiled king-in-waiting to Maryada Purushottam Rama to a demi-god for all those around him. The present paper deals with Ashok Banker's attempt of a different kind of operation on the *Ramayana* with special reference to his first book *Prince of Ayodhya* where the centre is prediction about Ayodhya, legendary capital of warriors and seers, which will soon be a wasteland of ashes and blood and only Rama, Prince of Ayodhya, can be a hope to prevent the onslaught of darkness. The paper focuses on how Banker chronicles the events of the *Ramayana* in *Prince of Ayodhya*, improvising many scenes and adding new motivations to create a more straightforward fantasy epic tale for modern readers everywhere.

Keywords: *Prince of Ayodhya*, *Ramayana*, Valmiki, Ashok K. Banker

Introduction

Valmiki, Vyasa, Tulsidas, Kamban and many contemporary poets and writers have created the epics in their own words, based on their knowledge and observations of the events. In the majority of the narratives, there has been no personal observation or fact-checking done. They are not present in most of the events they have described in their retellings. Even Vyasa did not witness all the events and episodes as the main events had occurred long before his own birth. But all retellings, recensions and expansions passed from generation to generation have, a subjective point of view of how those events might have occurred and there is no absolute objective 'truth' in them like any literature. Every reteller, from Valmiki to Vyasa to Tulsidas to Kamban, has brought their own sensibility, milieu, cultural outlook, personal worldview, sense of morality, individualism, to bear on their retelling. The four versions of *Ramayana*, though impregnated with similarities, as given Valmiki, Vyasa (in the *Mahabharata*), Tulsidas and Kamban, are different versions of the same story.

Banker approaches his retelling against the background of two versions. On one hand the *Ramayana* was now regarded not as a Sanskrit epic of real events that occurred in ancient India, but as a moral fable of the actions of a human avatar of Vishnu. On the other hand, he felt the need to bring to life the magnificence to explore the drama as well as the divinity that drove it to show the nuances of word and action and choice rather than a black and white depiction of good versus evil. Banker in his disclaimer in the Prologue says that the contemporary response to the *Ramayana* is the dumbed-down version of the story, the original being in cryptic Sanskrit verses. For some Lord Rama is nothing more than a mister-goody-two-shoes who didn't stand up to

his evil step mother and promptly left for the wild, hence betraying an entire kingdom. For some, Ram was someone who was called Maryada Purushottam without deserving it, someone who fought an entire war to bring back his wife who was captured like a commodity and was suffering all because of him and his brother's "nosy" exploits in the first place, and who banished this very same wife at the first incident of some totally random person's vile comment about her character. For others, The *Ramayana* today is reduced to a mere "moral tale," as opposed to the actual story of Prince Rama, which is packed with amorous escapades of King Dasarath, grim details of the battles fought, detailed explanation of the way Ayodhya's seemingly unconquerable armed soldiers worked, physical description of the asuras, uncouth mannerisms of Queen Kaikeyi, astounding powers possessed by the great seers, and so on. *Prince of Ayodhya* is a mix of all the above with a novelty and as a result the ancient tale gets a modernized version.

Banker takes the classic *Ramayana* and casts it into the peculiar conventions of Western-style fantasy fiction. He does not provide just a retelling of the ancient epic. Rather he has taken liberties with the text in the novel. The novel opens with Rama having a nightmare with a voice calling out to him, "I am the Reaver of your people, Ravisher of your women, Destroyer of your cities, look upon me and tremble." (POA12) Ravana appears as epitome of evil on the next page, wielding swords and maces in his four hands, the ten faces contorted in rage, the half open mouth displaying fangs. In the background, cities burn while puny defenders quail before his might. Rama is portrayed not only as a brave warrior but also as a sagacious settler of disputes. He fends off an attack by poachers on animals in Ayodhya's

forests, warning them never to set foot there again. Entering the city and faced with a mob of tantriks bent upon revenge for the murder, he deftly manages to defuse the crisis, not by resorting to arms but "by appealing to their hearts"(POA14). Approaching the mob unarmed, he folds his hands together to recite the national anthem of Ayodhya. The tantriks are then told to "respect the curfew and disperse". Queen Kaikeyi's maid, Manthara, is portrayed as an agent of Ravana and also as one who murders a Tantrik to foment trouble for Ayodhya as the incident provokes the community members to riot, much like the present day caste and communal disturbances. (POA15). Then Rama and Lakshman start their journey back with Vishwamitra as their escort. All this while, Ravana is making preparations and readying a colossal army with the beings of the netherworld to attack kingdom of Kosala and its capital Ayodhya, the power center of the Aryan nations. Jatayu, the vulture king, who flies over Lanka, surveys the gathering navy. And in Ayodhya, the royal family sage, Vashishtha, Minister Sumantra and others of Kosala realize that their king Dashratha is dying slowly, and wonder whether there is someone close to the royal family working with the dark forces. The spirit of inevitability also comes through in the genre of Banker's book.

Banker's imagination works on his own experiences of life in n *Prince of Ayodhya*. He sets out to entertain today's readers with a modern version of the famed ancient Indian epic story. He uses Sanskrit and at times colloquial Hindustani in the dialogues like Dasaratha's court assembling with a call "*Maharaj Dasaratha Rajya Sabha mein padhar rahe hain*" and "*Khamosh! Adalat jari hai*", (the court is in session)." Then "*Rajkumaron! Aap hi kuch kijiye na*", *Hummay andar jaaney nahi de rahehain.*" (Princes do something. They're refusing us enter into the city.)"(POA151)

Admittedly, there are paragraphs in an otherwise magnificently rendered labour of love. There is a huge marital discord brewing in the royal palace shown in the book. When Maharaja of Kosala barging into the palace of his first queen, Rama's mother, Kausalya, she calls Maharaja Dasaratha "a royal fool" while the maid Manthara calling Kaikeyi "a slut" (POA 85) and "a whore" (POA85), tells her that "you must know, Dasaratha's second queen had gone to a bar the night before and had "let that lout at the inn pour all those cups of cheap wine down her throat last night" (POA 85). She continues, "Ah, but he was such a handsome, well-constructed lout. With an effort, she showed her companion of the night before out of her mind" (POA 85). The character of Dasaratha has been portrayed with a lot of fantasy material:

Meanwhile, the old king, who had gone to Kausalya's chamber after 15 years, had naked servant girls running after him and he had not even touched the breast of one of them. But this did not distract him from sorting out his problems with Kausalya, and he fell into bed with his queen, and, here mark Banker's eye for detail, after he had "unfastened and tossed aside his dhoti" and had "unravelling the last fold of her sari and covered her body with his own."(POA93) The poor man was so excited that Banker tells us that Dasaratha "was astonished to find himself weeping with pleasure and pain both at once." (POA93)

There is much more use of fantasy in the character of Dasaratha

He moved closer, close enough for her to feel his revived desire growing harder against her thigh. 'Kausalya,' he whispered in her ear, his breath hot against her cheek. Her knees buckled and gave way. She slipped down, her sari rustling, bangles clinking against each other. She crumpled in a heap at his feet, boneless, breathless. She buried her face in his thighs (POA95).

Like Western fantasy stories which have their imps, goblins, trolls, the *Ramayana* has its nagas, urugas, yakshis, rakshasas, bird men, The vanaras:

...“the blow-heat of rancid breath against his (Rama's) face, guttural whisper in his ear. He snapped awake. Sweat-drenched, fever-hot, bone chilled, springing from his satin bed, barefoot on the cool redstone floor. Sword, now.” (POA3)

“Soft rustle of the silken gold-embroidered loin-cloth around his tight abs. Naked feline grace. Taut young muscles, supple limbs, senses instantly attuned to the slightest hint of threat.” (POA3)

“Breathing in the pranayam style, he executed a martial asana that was part attack and part spiritual discipline. In three breathtakingly (the blasted word again!) graceful leaps, it took him to the veranda that ringed one side of the circular chamber. Sword slashing through the gossamer folds of the translucent drape that could conceal an assassin. Turn, turn, breathe, slice, follow-through, recover, resume stance.” (POA4)

The book is also full of horror caused by the description of "Rakshasas twice as tall as men, roaring with exultation as they impaled human soldiers on their enormous antlered horns, then using their curved yellow talons to tear open bellies and suck the steaming entrails into their hungry mouths." (POA169)

The author has given a lot of attention to main characters and they are beautifully sketched. He has taken liberties in the treatment of his characters but at the same time he shows the universality of certain characters. Rama and Lakshman, for instance, are teenagers and certain essential qualities remain the same – they are robust, playful and energetic. So, on the very first page in his description of Rama, he speaks of his 'tight abs, thus forming a contract with the reader. As far as Lakshman is concerned, his love and devotion for his elder brother is unmatched. From the very beginning, he is shown as a naughty, happy-go-lucky teenager with immense faith in Rama and as time progresses and events unfold, the same nonchalance to life manifests itself in the form of unrestrained anger and frustration arising from the helplessness he feels in the situation, from his inability to act in any way. His only solace is in following Rama to wherever he goes, whatever he does. When Rama is to go with Vishwamitra, Lakshman is the first who says: "Father, kneeling before Dasaratha. 'I beg your leave to go with my brother on his sacred mission' (POA258). Lakshman looks up at his father with an expression filled with all the sorrow and longing of youth. "Father, I have never asked you for

anything. But you know that from time I could stand, I stood beside Rama. When he would not eat, I starved. When he laughed, I was happy. We have never been separated for a moment, by any force. Do not separate us now” (POA 258). Banker also shows us the brotherly love among the four princes. The following account evidently unfolds this:

When Lakshman reminds Rama to go back to the city and play Holi, Rama frowns asking about practice and Lakshman sighs. He says: ‘What about it? You’re already the best in your class, Rama. Besides, in case you’ve forgotten, today’s a feast day! Everybody’s looking forward to a day of celebration, masthi, bhaang and roast meat! And it’s Holi! Our first Holi in Ayodhya in eight years! (POA136)

Now Rama grins, wiping a last stain of Kairee rasa from his chin. ‘it is, isn’t it?’ He paused, ‘Luck, do you think we’re too old to play Holi? (POA137). Lakshman chuckles and reminds Rama the stories told by their mother, father, and all his other three hundred and fifty wives about playing Holi. He reminds of the entire cabinet of ministers how they got drunk on bhaang and danced the bhangra with on another. He tells that Holi is created for even the old to act young, just for a day at least and so he (Rama) is never too old to play Holi. The conversation continues.

‘That’s good,’ Rama mused. ‘So if we act like little brats today, nobody would mind, right?’
Lakshman grinned. ‘What did you have in mind?’
Rama shrugged. ‘Oh, nothing much. Just thought we might find Bharat and Shatrugan and turn their faces as purple as monkeys!’
Lakshman clapped his hands. ‘Now you’re talking like a true Arya! Let’s do it!’
‘Okay!’ Rama yelled, rising to a half-crouch. ‘Come on, Kachua. Race you back to the horses!’ POA137

Lakshman laughs and races his brother. As they leap on their horses, startling the old stalwarts with their suddenness, they sing out together in perfect harmony: ‘‘Holi hai, Holi hai! Rang –birangi Holi hai!’’ Bharat and Shatrugan come on a gleaming gold-plated raths. Bharat muscular bulk and Shatrugan’s only slightly less develops physique becomes clearly visible. When Bharat’s voice rings out across the dusty highway Rama replies ‘What’s the matter, bhai? Impatient to get your face coloured?’ (POA138). Bharat grins back at him: ‘‘We’ll see who gets his face coloured first’’ (POA138).

To conclude, Ashok K. Banker’s *Prince of Ayodhya* is an elegant, robust and highly textured account of Rama’s heroic and provides the fascinating times of yore – their traditions, practices, social and moral dilemmas, and eventual decisions but checkered life, told with great taste, delicacy and imagination. The plot is gripping, the narration never falters, the subtle details of Dharma and Adharma keep the reader engrossed till the end. The action alternates between two main characters - Rama, the prince, and Dasaratha, the king who is overweight, old and tired of life. Banker’s style has a sharp audio-visual character and that makes for a delectable read as well. In a word the tale is imaginatively told, keeping the responses of the contemporary reader in view. Banker has an eye for detail and that serves him well during the narration. It helps him bring out the finer shades

in the characters and gives credibility to the incidents. From the transformation of Ravana to ‘The Dark Lord’ to Rama as ‘The Chosen One’, all the characters are neatly defined, and there never comes a point in the story where the narration is slack. The relationships -- the brotherly love the four brothers shares, the relationship King Dasaratha has with his queens, the respects the disciples have for their guru, the love and concern the queens have for their sons are dealt with creatively. For the average fantasy reader, there are enough thrills in the book to satisfy the simple need of the joy of reading, while for the more serious reader, the philosophy of the *Ramayana* is kept intact and in fact, at most times, the reader tends to get absorbed in the story and forgets that he is not reading one of the versions that have been doing rounds forever. The overall impression, this retelling seems to give, is of one of the great epic cycles of world mythology, strained through a filter till it accords with the stock style of modern, mainstream fantasy.

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