

Narrative of Nationhood: Exploring the Rāmāyaṇa's Influence on the Idea of Nationalism

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Abstract

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, an ancient Indian epic attributed to Sage Vālmīki, transcends its origins as a narrative of familial and ethical ideals to become a seminal cultural force that shapes the collective identity of the Indian subcontinent. This paper explores how the *Rāmāyaṇa* has contributed to constructing a shared notion of nationhood and nationalism within India, examining its impact on cultural, social, and political consciousness through the centuries. By analyzing the epic's narrative motifs and values such as duty, sacrifice, and the dharma of rulers the study illuminates how the *Rāmāyaṇa* has resonated with and influenced evolving concepts of unity, identity, and sovereignty. The paper also delves into the adaptive retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* across diverse regions and languages, observing how these variations have contributed to an integrative yet pluralistic vision of Indian nationalism. Through literature, art, and historical accounts, this analysis investigates the *Rāmāyaṇa's* enduring role in inspiring nationalist sentiment and fostering a unified cultural ethos that continues to inform contemporary discourses on Indian identity and nationalism.

Keywords

Rāmāyaṇa, nationalism, Indian identity, cultural heritage, nationhood, dharma, sovereignty, unity, Indian epics, cultural nationalism

Introduction:

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, one of the most revered and celebrated literary works in Indian culture, stands as a cornerstone of the nation's collective imagination. With its rich tapestry of characters, intricate plotlines, and profound philosophical themes, the epic has transcended its status as mere literature to become a cultural touchstone, embodying the ethos and values of Indian society. Beyond its literary merits, however, the *Rāmāyaṇa* holds a deeper significance in the realm of nationalism, exerting a powerful influence on the construction of the Indian national identity.

This research paper seeks to explore the intricate relationship between the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the idea of nationalism within the Indian subcontinent. By delving into the myriad retellings, adaptations, and interpretations of the epic throughout history, this study aims to unravel the ways in which the narrative elements of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have been instrumental in shaping nationalist ideologies. In doing so, it endeavours to shed light on the complex interplay between literature, mythology, and nationhood, and to uncover the enduring legacy of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the construction of the Indian nation.

The significance of this inquiry lies in its potential to deepen our understanding of the multifaceted nature of nationalism in India and its roots in indigenous cultural narratives. By examining the ways in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been appropriated to articulate and reinforce notions of national identity and unity, we can gain insights into the enduring power of literature to shape collective consciousness and mobilize political action. Moreover, this study seeks to contribute to broader discussions surrounding the

relationship between literature, ideology, and the construction of national imaginaries, thereby enriching our understanding of the complex dynamics of identity formation in the modern world.

In the following sections, we will delve into the historical origins and evolution of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a national epic in India, examining key themes and motifs that resonate with nationalist discourse. Through an analysis of characters such as Rāma, Sītā, and Rāvaṇa, we will explore how the epic has been appropriated to construct and reinforce nationalist ideals of kingship, womanhood, and national identity. Furthermore, we will examine the role of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the context of colonialism, tracing its resurgence as a symbol of resistance against foreign domination. Finally, we will turn our attention to contemporary perspectives on the *Rāmāyaṇa* and its continued relevance in shaping Indian national identity in the modern era.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* as a National Epic

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, often regarded as one of the greatest literary treasures of India, holds a unique position as a national epic within the Indian cultural landscape. Its origins trace back to ancient times, with its narrative evolving over centuries through oral traditions, written texts, and various regional adaptations. The epic's enduring popularity and widespread influence attest to its status as a cultural touchstone that transcends regional and linguistic boundaries, uniting diverse communities under a common narrative framework.

Historically, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has served as more than just a work of literature; it has been venerated as a sacred text and a moral guide, embodying the ideals of dharma (righteousness) and virtuous conduct. Its central protagonist, Rāma, is revered not only as a literary hero but also as an embodiment of ideal kingship, moral rectitude, and selfless devotion. Through Rāma's trials and triumphs, the *Rāmāyaṇa* imparts timeless lessons on duty, honor, and the eternal struggle between good and evil.

As a national epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa* plays a crucial role in shaping collective identity and fostering a sense of unity among diverse communities. Its universal themes of love, loyalty, and sacrifice resonate deeply with audiences across generations, transcending the boundaries of time and space. Moreover, the epic's portrayal of Rāma as a just and noble ruler has often been invoked by political leaders and social reformers as a model of governance and leadership, thereby reinforcing its significance as a cultural symbol of national unity.

Throughout history, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been adapted and reinterpreted in myriad ways to reflect the socio-cultural and political aspirations of different times and contexts. From the classical retellings of Vālmīki and Tulsidās to the vernacular renditions of Kamban and Ezhuthachan, the epic has been continuously reinvented to resonate with diverse audiences and address contemporary concerns. Its themes of heroism, sacrifice, and redemption have inspired countless artists, writers, and filmmakers, who have sought to capture its timeless appeal through various artistic mediums.

In the modern era, the *Rāmāyaṇa* continues to exert a profound influence on Indian society and culture, serving as a source of inspiration for nationalist movements and cultural revivalism. Its portrayal of Rāma as a righteous king who upholds the principles of dharma and defends his kingdom against external threats has been invoked by nationalist leaders to galvanize support for the cause of Indian independence. Moreover, the epic's emphasis on the ideals of unity, fraternity, and social harmony has been instrumental in fostering a sense of national identity and solidarity among the diverse communities of India.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* stands as a testament to the enduring power of literature to shape collective consciousness and foster a sense of belonging among diverse communities. As a national epic, it occupies a central place in the cultural imagination of India, embodying the nation's shared heritage and values. Its

timeless themes and universal appeal continue to resonate with audiences across the globe, reaffirming its status as a literary masterpiece and a symbol of national pride.

Patriotism and Collective Identity in the *Rāmāyaṇa*:

In every cultured society, there exist treasured works that blend national heritage, religious glory, and profound philosophical insights. These texts reflect the unbroken current of a nation's life force. Poets and writers who deeply cherish their homeland draw inspiration from such works, distilling their essence and using their own ideals and creative talents to craft literature that enriches the nation's cultural landscape. These creations nurture a sense of nationalism, encouraging love for the country, a sense of duty, pride in cultural heritage, and reverence for the land. Such values are essential for safeguarding a nation's freedom and fostering holistic growth. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Vālmīki captures the illustrious life of King Daśaratha with cultured, engaging language, presenting him as an exemplar of these ideals.

Principles of an Ideal State in Ancient Indian Thought:

The epic poet's keen awareness of national well-being is both insightful and indicative of a broader vision for the nation's prosperity. King Daśaratha, a descendant of Emperor Ikṣvāku of the Sūrya dynasty, reined in the kingdom of Kosala, along the Sarajā river. Ayodhyā, the capital of this dynasty located in the kingdom's north, stood unmatched in beauty and wealth. Named Ayodhyā because no enemy could conquer it, it was a city of enduring strength. Daśaratha, who resided in this city, was versed in the Vedas, exuded vitality, and was loved by both urban and rural subjects. He was capable of confronting ten thousand mighty charioteers single-handedly, dedicated to rituals and dharma, and disciplined in controlling his senses and passions. Comparable to the sages, a true Rājarsi, Daśaratha was renowned across earth, heaven, and the nether realms. He could vanquish many foes with ease and rivaled Indra and Kubera in wealth, both acquired and inherited. Daśaratha adhered to the threefold principles of Dharma-Artha-Kāma, ruling Ayodhyā with the same protective spirit as Indra governed Amarāvati.¹ Ayodhyā's residents were learned, devout, content, and free from greed. Like Manu, the protector of the world, Daśaratha guarded his kingdom and people.

Through this vivid depiction, Vālmīki presents an ideal state, serving as a timeless model for kings across the land. Readers are inspired by this portrayal to aspire towards a state that embodies well-being in all its forms. This vision of state welfare, the constructive actions taken to uphold it and every effort towards this ideal collectively express a deep-rooted nationalism, shared by both the ruler and the ruled.

Rāma and the Ideal King: Constructing Nationalist Ideals

Rāma, the central figure of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is often hailed as the epitome of ideal kingship, embodying virtues that resonate deeply with nationalist ideals. His portrayal in the epic serves as a blueprint for constructing and perpetuating nationalist narratives, reinforcing the image of a just and righteous ruler whose unwavering commitment to dharma (righteousness) inspires loyalty and devotion among his subjects.

Rāma's character is characterized by his adherence to moral principles, his sense of duty, and his selfless dedication to the welfare of his kingdom and its people. As the rightful heir to the throne of Ayodhyā, Rāma willingly accepts his responsibilities as a leader and remains steadfast in upholding the values of justice, integrity, and compassion. His unwavering commitment to his subjects, regardless of their social status or background, underscores his egalitarian ethos and his vision of a harmonious and inclusive society.

Furthermore, Rāma's portrayal as a noble warrior who defends his kingdom against external threats aligns closely with nationalist narratives of resistance and self-defense. His valor in battle and his willingness to confront adversity head-on symbolize the courage and resilience of the Indian nation in the

face of colonial oppression and external aggression. By lionizing Rāma as a fearless protector of dharma and a champion of righteous causes, nationalist leaders sought to rally support for the cause of Indian independence and galvanize public sentiment against foreign domination.

Moreover, Rāma's role as a unifying figure, capable of bridging divides and forging alliances, resonates deeply with nationalist aspirations of unity and solidarity. Throughout the epic, Rāma demonstrates his ability to bring together disparate communities and forge strong bonds of camaraderie and mutual respect. His marriage to Sītā, a princess from a neighboring kingdom, serves as a symbol of cross-cultural harmony and inter-community unity, thereby reinforcing his image as a unifier and a symbol of national integration.

In essence, Rāma's character in the Rāmāyaṇa serves as a potent symbol of nationalist ideals, embodying the virtues of courage, integrity, and selflessness that are central to the construction of a collective national identity. By venerating Rāma as the ideal king, nationalist narratives seek to instill a sense of pride and reverence for India's cultural heritage and traditions, while also inspiring citizens to emulate his example and work towards the greater good of the nation.

People's Welfare as the Foundation of Sovereignty:

Vālmīki describes the reigns of kings Daśaratha and Rāma as times of great prosperity and well-being, where subjects thrived spiritually, intellectually, and materially. The people of Ayodhyā, a city without immoral, rude, or miserly individuals, upheld values of religion and knowledge. There, no one consumed impure food, all were generous and adorned with armlets, and everyone possessed self-awareness.² There was a high respect for sacrifice, and ill-willed individuals or thieves were absent. Brahmins, revered for their mastery over their senses and loyalty to the state, performed duties with a strong sense of responsibility. These learned Brahmins devoted themselves to study and teaching, abstaining from greed. None were *nāstikas* (atheists) or liars, and all were highly educated, avoiding envy, weakness, or ignorance. Each Brahmin had proficiency in the six branches of the *Vedas*: *Śikṣā*, *Kalpa*, *Vyākaraṇa*, *Chanda*, *Jyotiṣa*, and *Nirukta*. No one avoided performing the 'bratas' or shrank from charity, and the populace was characterized by their religious devotion, longevity, and happiness.³ *Brahmins*, *Kṣatriyas*, *Vaiśyas*, and *Sūdras* fulfilled their respective roles, serving gods and guests, and harmoniously respected each other within their social hierarchy.

When Bharata journeyed to the forest to request Daśaratha's return to Ayodhyā, he questioned his brother about the kingdom's prosperity, asking whether people were content, whether mines and water sources were secure, and if cattle owners and farmers were well-protected and diligent in their work. Daśaratha advised Bharata to return to Ayodhyā and ensure the people's welfare through dedicated public service – *ayodhyām gaccha bharata prakṛtīr anurañjaya*.⁴ Vālmīki highlights that a nation comprises its people, with the state's progress closely tied to their ethical values and holistic development. The *Rāmāyaṇa* emphasizes that a nation is not merely land; true progress involves advancing the well-being of the people. In the *Ādikāṇḍa*, Vālmīki presents an idealized vision of Rāma's kingdom, free from hunger or theft, where cities and villages flourished with wealth and harvests, and all lived joyfully, as if in the *Satyayuga*. The king's dedication to his people's welfare as depicted in the *Rāmāyaṇa* reflects a deep sense of nationalism that motivated Ayodhyā's rulers to create policies for safety, security, prosperity, and moral growth.

Steadfast Commitment to National Defense:

King Daśaratha, like the moon governing the stars, was the vigilant protector of the world. True to its name, Ayodhyā's people never marched to war. Comparable to Indra, Daśaratha expertly managed state affairs, securing Ayodhyā as capably as Manu governed his own realm.⁵ Vālmīki stresses the king's

duty to protect the nation through a well-trained army, essential for both security and promoting a unified cultural identity, which strengthens nationalism. With national culture uniting the people, they develop a shared sense of purpose. Well-supplied soldiers were stationed in forts, provided with wealth, food, water, salt, molasses, and weapons. Ayodhyā, a hub of knowledge and culture, housed thousands of charioteers and infantry. The army, loyal to king and people, upheld honour and duty, avoiding dishonourable attacks. Vālmīki illustrates how Daśaratha's ministers, devoted to nationalistic ideals and expert in governance, operated with insight and a readiness to act for the public good. These ministers, reputed for piety and justice, gathered intelligence through agents, accumulated wealth for the treasury without coercion, and upheld peace throughout the land. Taking counsel from *Brahmarṣis* such as Suyajña, Jābāli, Kāśyapa, and Mārkaṇḍeya, they cultivated the welfare of the people, thus reflecting the strength of a united, moral state.

Virtuous Leadership: The Hallmarks of a Righteous Ruler:

Vālmīki portrays the council of ministers as vital to state safety and progress. Through intelligence, bravery, and covert information gathering, they ensured the integrity of governance, dealing justly with offenders and deterring dishonest or corrupt practices. Their wise policies fostered a tranquil, orderly society. Vālmīki suggests that succession planning also promotes the state's advancement. When Daśaratha decided to entrust Ayodhyā to Rāma, he declared that he had raised the kingdom as his own child, upholding the ancestral ways and dharma but now, after a long and just reign, he was weary and ready to pass the mantle.⁶ Convinced that Rāma's qualities would bring even greater security to the three worlds, he bestowed the throne upon him. With his virtues exceeding those of his forebears, Rāma was beloved for his power and devotion to truth. As Daśaratha said:

*divyaiḥ guṇaiḥ śakrasamo rāmaḥ satyaparākramaḥ |
ikṣvākubhyo 'pi sarvebhyo hy atirikto viśāmpate ||*⁷

Like the sun, Daśaratha shone with his ministers, esteemed for their control over passions and fair governance. Daśaratha, firm yet temperate, ruled with wisdom, rewarding only those deserving of punishment, and in his own incomparable qualities, he earned the people's deep respect. As a ruler, Daśaratha perfectly balanced virtue (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*), and pleasure (*kāma*), acting thoughtfully and vigilantly for the country's security. Thus, he embodied the ideal king, fostering the people's welfare and upholding the sense of nationalism that Vālmīki revered in his portrayal of Ayodhyā.

Ensuring the Security of the Capital and the Realm:

Vālmīki's depiction of Ayodhyā's security underscores meticulous planning. The city's length was twelve *yojanas*, and its width three *yojanas*. It was fortified with high walls on all four sides, water reservoirs, and inaccessible canals. Impenetrable iron gates fortified the city's entrance, capable of withstanding rocks and halting the advance of formidable enemy forces. Within the city, armaments and war machines were strategically stored.⁸ Ayodhyā housed an array of horses, elephants, cattle, camels, and donkeys, and was guarded by soldiers skilled in slaying fierce animals like lions and tigers, equipped with unerring, sharp weapons. King Daśaratha lived in this city, protected by thousands of elite warriors. The fortresses and citadels were built according to the principles outlined in ancient Arthasāstra texts, following Manu's instructions:

*dhanvadurgam mahādurgam avadurgam bārḥṣam eva vā |
ṇḍurgam giridurgam vā samāśritya vaset puram ||*⁹

The fortified city was well-stocked with wealth, provisions, weapons, water, machines, skilled artisans, and archers.¹⁰ The king's residence was at the heart of the fortress, complete with women's quarters, armories, temples, and surrounded by moats and rows of trees. Vālmīki's accounts of Ayodhyā

and Laṅkā's defenses reflect the era's royal concern for capital security, highlighting a deep sense of nationalism among the rulers, ensuring safety for *Brāhmins*, *Kṣatriyas*, *Vaiśyas*, and even lower classes like farmers and milkmen, who all lived peacefully under the king's protection. Traders, those pursuing their aspirations, and individuals who avoided harm to others also enjoyed the king's security. Vālmīki thus emphasizes how a high moral standard among citizens contributes to national development, subtly instilling patriotic pride in ancient Indian virtues and values.

Safeguarding and Nurturing Bhārata's People:

A deeper analysis of the *Rāmāyaṇa* reveals that the epic's conflicts are not merely personal but represent a clash of cultures humanity versus the *Rākṣasas*. At Rāvaṇa's command, *Rākṣasas* like Khara and Dūṣaṇa established a colony in Daṇḍakāraṇya, interfering with local worship, attacking hermitages, and killing sages. The *Rākṣasas*' continuous violations included disrupting *yajñas*, committing arson, and looting. However, they avoided powerful regions ruled by influential leaders like Vāli or respected sages such as Agastya. Leaders like Sugrīva, Hanumāna, and Aṅgada, often described as forest-dwellers (*vanaukasah*), rallied to defend South India, highlighting their resistance to foreign incursions and their dedication to protecting their homeland alongside Daśaratha.

Vālmīki portrays the conflict as a matter of national honor, as seen in the dialogue between Viśvāmitra and Daśaratha. Viśvāmitra requested Rāma's assistance to defeat the *Rākṣasas* like Mārīca, Suvāhu, and Tāḍakā, who threatened the peace and rites of the sages. Through this, the poet underscores that kings and heroes must resist foreign oppressors threatening public peace and security. Viśvāmitra's plea to Daśaratha to allow Rāma to fight against the demons stresses the duty of the ruler to uphold dharma. Despite initial hesitation, Daśaratha ultimately agrees, recognizing the duty to protect the kingdom.

Through this epic narrative, Vālmīki instills in the reader the notion that national security demands devotion to truth and virtue. When Viśvāmitra's *yajña* was disrupted by Mārīca and Suvāhu, he urged Daśaratha to confront the threat, declaring that adherence to dharma required strong action against the oppressors. Inspired by these words, Daśaratha ultimately complies for the welfare of his land and its people, symbolizing that, at times, a ruler must perform seemingly harsh acts for the greater good.

The Rāmāyaṇa War: A Cultural and Moral Confrontation:

In this tale, Viśvāmitra reveals to Daśaratha the *Rākṣasas*' ongoing coercion of humans and sages who pursued lives of peaceful meditation. Rāma's journey to the forest becomes a mission to eliminate the *Rākṣasas* and restore peace for the people. His vow to eradicate the *Rākṣasas* and defend the dignity of the nation embodies his nationalistic passion and commitment to liberating his people from Laṅkā's tyranny.

On the opposing side, Sūrpaṅkhā incites hostility against Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa by portraying them as enemies of the *Rākṣasa* race. Angered by Rāma's rejection and Lakṣmaṇa's punishment, she spurs Khara to seek revenge. Khara's assault on Daśaratha underscores the stakes of this cultural clash. Despite facing the *Rākṣasas*' formidable forces, Daśaratha prevails, representing the resilience of a ruler driven by the mission to ensure his people's safety.

Through these depictions, Vālmīki emphasizes Daśaratha's readiness to confront any threat, driven by his commitment to providing a secure and peaceful society. The enduring spirit of nationalism shines throughout this narrative, as Daśaratha's defense of his homeland exemplifies the values and responsibilities of true leadership.

Upholding and Protecting National Interests:

To protect Laṅkā from impending ruin, Rāvaṇa's wife, Dhānyamālinī, tried to dissuade him from

pursuing Sītā, emphasizing that she was merely a human woman. Meanwhile, the *Rākṣasa* maidservants urged Sītā to renounce her human identity and embrace life as Rāvaṇa's queen. However, Sītā resolutely rejected the idea, asserting that a human woman could not abandon her identity by becoming a *Rākṣasa*'s wife. This response illustrates Sītā's strong sense of self-respect, idealism, and national pride, empowering her to resist the pressures to accept Rāvaṇa as her husband.

Sītā also conveyed that even the wealthiest kingdom could face destruction if its king were corrupt and unwise. Despite Laṅkā's riches, she warned that it would fall due to Rāvaṇa's transgressions. Unmoved by his wealth, she declared herself inseparable from Daśaratha, likening their bond to the sun and its radiance. Another *Rākṣasī*, Vikaṭā, threatened her, demanding she become Rāvaṇa's wife or face death.

Rāvaṇa and most *Rākṣasas* displayed disdain for humans, striving to impede their progress and instill fear. Only Vibhīṣaṇa differed in perspective. Observing Laṅkā's state after Sītā's abduction, Kumbhakarṇa criticized Rāvaṇa for acting without counsel, pointing out that like the Yamunā river cannot return once it reaches the ocean, the consequences of his actions were irreversible. He added that a king guided by righteousness and justice would have no regrets, while immoral acts yield ruinous outcomes. Yet, out of loyalty, Kumbhakarṇa ultimately resolved to defend Rāvaṇa in battle, intending to bring victory for his king, despite disapproving of his actions. Here, Kumbhakarṇa's sense of national pride and commitment to national honor are evident.

In contrast, Vibhīṣaṇa advised Rāvaṇa openly, warning that neither Kumbhakarṇa, Indrajita, nor any other could prevail against Daśaratha. He likened the futility of seeking welfare through "*adharmā*" (unrighteousness) to trying to cross the sea in a mere boat. His counsel stemmed from his desire for the *Rākṣasas*' welfare. He noted that Rāvaṇa's ministers were false friends, encouraging him toward actions leading to ruin. Rāvaṇa's mother and a senior minister urged him to honorably return Sītā to Rāma for the kingdom's benefit. Nevertheless, Rāvaṇa ignored them.

Meanwhile, Hanumān located Sītā, and Daśaratha's army prepared to cross the sea, signifying the resolve of Daśaratha, who championed Indian unity, against Rāvaṇa. Rāvaṇa's grandfather Mālyavān also advised him to seek peace with Rāma, prioritizing the security of the *Rākṣasas*' culture and nation. He counseled that a king only engages in war if he is truly stronger than the enemy. Further, he argued that a king skilled in the fourteen branches of knowledge and adhering to principles of governance can command respect and endure with honor. Mālyavān's appeal underscores national welfare, urging Rāvaṇa to reconcile for the *Rākṣasas*' sake.

Despite well-meaning advice from Vibhīṣaṇa, Mālyavān, and others, Rāvaṇa chose to remain defiant. Their appeals reflect their genuine desire for the *Rākṣasas*' welfare, prioritizing national interest over blind allegiance to their king.

In Daśaratha's final message to Rāvaṇa, he demanded Sītā's return or face destruction. Here, Daśaratha's determination to eliminate threats to Indian sages and common folk is clear. He also instructed his ministers to ensure the safety of his own troops by limiting confusion in the battlefield, identifying seven human fighters Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Vibhīṣaṇa, and his four ministers to avoid accidental attacks among allies. The Vānara soldiers bore totemic marks, symbolizing their dedication to their land and race.

In battle, Vibhīṣaṇa faced the *Rākṣasa* Śatrughna, while Meghanāda tried to sway him by glorifying their race. Yet, Vibhīṣaṇa openly expressed his commitment to a universal Indian culture, transcending *Rākṣasa* customs. The climactic fight between Lakṣmaṇa and Indrajita was celebrated as a clash of valor between the finest human and *Rākṣasa* warriors. Amid relentless losses, the *Rākṣasa* women

feared total annihilation, with Mandodarī lamenting the impending fall of their people at the hands of humans.

The Rāmāyaṇa's Vision of Unity Across Bhārata:

The epic's poet presents the conflict between Daśaratha and Rāvaṇa as a national struggle. When Hanumān embarked on his journey across the sea, the gods and other celestial beings tested his resolve. Surasā, directed to block him, was won over when Hanumān identified himself as Daśaratha's envoy on a mission to Sītā, requesting her help as a fellow countrywoman

*tasyāḥ sakāśaṃ dūto'haṃ gamiṣye rāmaśāsanāt |
karturmahasi rāmasya sāhyaṃ viṣayavāsini ||¹¹*

Convinced, Surasā allowed him to continue, acknowledging Daśaratha's cause.

After Daśaratha defeated Vāli, Vāli lamented his stance against Daśaratha, who proclaimed,

*ikṣvākūṇāmiyaṃ bhūmiḥ saśaila-vana-kānanā |
mṛgapakṣimanuṣyāṇāṃ nigrāhānugraheṣvapi ||¹²*

This declaration, asserting that the Ikṣvāku kings governed all the land and beings within, exemplifies Daśaratha's nationalistic vision.

Rāmāyaṇa and Colonialism: Resurgence of Nationalist Consciousness

The colonial period in India, marked by British domination and cultural subjugation, witnessed a resurgence of nationalist consciousness that found expression in various forms of cultural revivalism and resistance. Central to this resurgence was the appropriation of indigenous narratives and symbols, including the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as a means of asserting Indian identity and challenging colonial hegemony.

The colonial encounter had a profound impact on Indian society and culture, disrupting traditional modes of governance, education, and social organization. British colonial policies, aimed at undermining indigenous institutions and erasing local cultural identities, sparked a renewed interest in India's rich literary and artistic heritage as a source of resistance and resilience. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, with its themes of valour, righteousness, and devotion to duty, emerged as a potent symbol of Indian cultural identity a bulwark against the encroachment of foreign influences.

One of the key strategies employed by Indian nationalists during the colonial period was the reinterpretation and revival of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a symbol of resistance against colonial oppression. Scholars and intellectuals sought to reclaim the epic from colonial interpretations and present it in its true cultural and historical context, emphasizing its relevance to contemporary struggles for independence and self-determination. Texts such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's "Ānandamath," which features a martial order inspired by the ideals of Rāma, and Rabindranath Tagore's critique of colonialism through his retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in "*Vālmīki Pratibhā*," exemplify the ways in which the epic was mobilized to galvanize nationalist sentiment and mobilize political action.

Moreover, the *Rāmāyaṇa* served as a unifying force that transcended regional, linguistic, and religious boundaries, bringing together diverse communities under a common cultural heritage. The epic's themes of heroism, sacrifice, and the struggle against injustice resonated with audiences across the subcontinent, inspiring collective action and solidarity against colonial rule. By invoking the memory of Rāma and his righteous quest to uphold dharma, Indian nationalists sought to rally support for the cause of independence and mobilize popular resistance against British oppression.

Furthermore, the colonial encounter prompted a reevaluation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s significance within

Indian society, leading to the emergence of new interpretations and adaptations that reflected contemporary concerns and aspirations. Artists, writers, and performers reimagined the epic through various artistic mediums, infusing it with fresh perspectives and insights that spoke to the realities of colonial-era India. The *Rāmāyaṇa* thus became not only a literary masterpiece but also a living cultural tradition one that continued to evolve and adapt in response to changing social and political contexts.

The colonial period in India witnessed a resurgence of nationalist consciousness that found expression in the appropriation and revival of indigenous narratives such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*. As a symbol of Indian cultural identity and resistance against colonial oppression, the epic played a central role in mobilizing nationalist sentiment and galvanizing popular resistance against British rule. Moreover, the reinterpretation and adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* reflected the dynamism and resilience of Indian culture, highlighting its ability to adapt and evolve in the face of external pressures.

Contemporary Perspectives: *Rāmāyaṇa* in the Modern Indian Nation

In the modern Indian nation, the *Rāmāyaṇa* continues to exert a profound influence on society, culture, and politics, serving as a source of inspiration, identity, and controversy. Its timeless themes and characters resonate across diverse segments of society, while its interpretations and adaptations reflect the complexities and contradictions of contemporary India.

One of the key aspects of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s contemporary relevance lies in its continued popularity as a cultural touchstone and a source of collective identity. Despite the passage of centuries, the epic remains a cherished part of India's literary and artistic heritage, with its stories and characters permeating popular culture through television, film, theater, and literature. The enduring popularity of televised adaptations such as Rāmānand Sāgar's "*Rāmāyaṇa*" and Rāmānuja's "*Sīyārām*" series attests to the epic's enduring appeal and its ability to captivate audiences across generations.

Moreover, the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s significance extends beyond the realm of entertainment to encompass broader socio-political issues, including debates surrounding religion, nationalism, and identity. In recent years, the epic has been the subject of intense scrutiny and controversy, with competing interpretations and ideological agendas shaping public discourse around its portrayal and significance. Debates over the historicity of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the portrayal of its characters, and its relevance to contemporary politics have sparked heated discussions and even legal disputes, highlighting the deep-seated emotions and attachments that the epic evokes in Indian society.

Furthermore, the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s role in shaping nationalist narratives and ideologies remains a subject of scholarly inquiry and political contention. While some view the epic as a foundational text that embodies the values and ideals of Indian civilization, others criticize its patriarchal norms, casteist undertones, and exclusionary portrayals of the other. The Rāma *Janmabhūmi* movement, cantered on the belief that the birthplace of Rāma in Ayodhyā should be reclaimed and restored as a Hindu temple, exemplifies the ways in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been mobilized to advance political agendas and assert cultural hegemony.

However, alongside these debates and controversies, the *Rāmāyaṇa* continues to inspire acts of creativity, activism, and social change within Indian society. Artists, writers, and activists draw upon its themes and motifs to address contemporary issues such as gender inequality, environmental degradation, and communal harmony, reimagining the epic for new audiences and contexts. From feminist retellings that challenge traditional gender roles to environmental allegories that emphasize the importance of ecological stewardship, the *Rāmāyaṇa* serves as a canvas for exploring pressing social concerns and envisioning alternative futures.

The *Rāmāyaṇa*'s significance in the modern Indian nation is multifaceted and dynamic, reflecting

the complexities and contradictions of contemporary India. As a cultural artefact, it continues to inspire and captivate audiences across diverse mediums and contexts, while its interpretations and adaptations reflect the evolving values and aspirations of Indian society. Whether as a source of entertainment, a subject of scholarly inquiry, or a catalyst for social change, the *Rāmāyaṇa* remains a potent symbol of India's rich cultural heritage and enduring resilience.

Conclusion:

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, beyond its significance as a spiritual and literary epic, emerges as a profound narrative shaping collective identity and fostering early conceptions of nationhood in India. Through its emphasis on an ideal state, ethical governance, and unwavering dedication to the welfare and security of its people, the *Rāmāyaṇa* presents a model of leadership and patriotism that resonates with core nationalistic values. The epic advocates for a ruler's responsibility to prioritize the well-being of citizens, maintain the security of the state, and exhibit virtues that serve as a moral compass for society. In its portrayal of the conflict between Rāma and Rāvaṇa, the *Rāmāyaṇa* transcends a simple dichotomy of good versus evil to reflect a deeper clash of cultural ideals, reinforcing a vision of unity and moral integrity across Bhārata.

The narrative underscores a pan-Indian unity, as Rāma's journey connects various regions, communities, and cultures within a common cause, reinforcing a sense of belonging that transcends local identities. Through its timeless portrayal of virtues like courage, sacrifice, and responsibility, the *Rāmāyaṇa* embodies a vision of cultural cohesion that parallels foundational ideals of nationhood. This enduring legacy has inspired generations, weaving its values into the fabric of Indian society and thought, and framing the *Rāmāyaṇa* as not just an epic of spiritual guidance, but as a source of national identity.

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1. *ikṣvākūṇāmatiratho yajvā dharmaparo vaśī* /
maharṣikalpo rājarṣitriṣu lokeṣu viśrutaḥ // *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, 1.6.2.
2. *yathā manurmahātejā lokasya parirakṣitā* /
tathā daśaratha rājā lokasya parirakṣitā // *Ibid*, 1. 6.4.
3. *nāstiko nāṅṛto vāpi na kaścidabahuśrutaḥ* /
nāsūyako na cāsakto nāvidvān vidyate kvacit // *Ibid*, 1. 6. 14.
4. *Ibid*, 2. 6. 18.
5. *yasyām daśaratho rājā vasan jagadapālayat* //
tām purīm sa mahātejā rājā daśaratho mahān /
śaśāsa śamitāmitro nakṣatrāṅīva candramāḥ // *Ibid*, 1. 6. 27.
6. *śucīnāmekavuddhīnām sarveṣām samprajānatām* /
nāsīt pure rāṣtre vā mṛṣāvādī naraḥ kvacit //
kaścinna duṣṭastatrāsīt paradāraratirnaraḥ /

praśāntaṃ sarvamevāsīd rāṣṭraṃ puravarañca tat // Ibid, 1. 7. 14-15.

7. *Ibid, 2. 2. 34.*

8. *kaccidarthena vā dharmamarthaṃ dharmeṇa vā punaḥ /*

ubhau vā prītilobhena kāmēna na vivādhase //

kaccidartañca kāmāñca dharmāñca jayatām vara /

vibhajya kāle kālajña sarvān varada sevase // Ibid, 2. 100.62-63.

9. *Ibid, 1. 5. 13.*

10. *tādṛśānāṃ sahasraistāmabhipūrṇā mahārathaiḥ /*

purīmāvāsāyāmāsa rājā daśarathastadā // Ibid, 1. 5. 22

11. *Ibid, 6. 87. 19.*

12. *Ibid, 5. 1. 171.*

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