

Ramayana as the Gateway to Hindu Religious Expression among South African Hindi Speakers

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ABSTRACT Hinduism was codified in scriptural works, the Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Shastras etc. Early in Hindu history the essence of the Hindu texts became crystallised in the Ramayana, whose Protagonist Rama was seen either as God, His Incarnation or God in human form (*Avatara*). This benign form of the Divine, descended to maintain Dharma, was adopted through various Ramayanas throughout India and South Asia. The nineteenth century indentured labourers, particularly the Sanatani (Smartha) Hindi speaking Hindus carried the heritage of Rama *bhakti* (Rama devotion) to South Africa. This article will provide an overview of the Ramayana and the Rama Ethos and endeavour to demonstrate how the Ramayana, and especially the Ramacharitmanas version, and Sri Rama constituted the religion and God of the South African Hindus, and continue to provide solace and succour through worship of Rama and His Divine Consort Sita as well as His devoted servant Hanuman.

INTRODUCTION: RAMAYANA AND SRI RAMA

The Ramayana and its Protagonist Rama of the Ikshvaku Solar Dynasty are inseparable from the life of Hindus generally, and South African Hindus in particular. Originating in the *ur-text* the Srimad Ramayana of Valmiki in Sanskrit, the life and acts of the Personality who embodies the 18 rare, desirable qualities postulated in Valmiki Ramayana (Balakanda:1:1-4) have invigorated Indians and peoples of South and South East Asia for millennia. The original story was made available in other authoritative and variant or derivative texts. The Ramacharitmanas of Goswami Tulasidas (16th century) and the Iramavataram in the Tamil language by Kamban (12th century) are two such authoritative texts in Indian languages (Richman 2001: 10).

The compelling appeal of the Ramayana with its morally uplifting and spiritually inspiring, heroic story is projected by the personality of the Protagonist Rama into the consciousness of all those who read, hear or see enactments of His Divine Play (Lila). The Hindu institution of Avatara (incarnation in flesh and blood or embodiment in stone etc. *-vighraha*) conceptualises the intervention of the Supreme in human affairs at stages when virtue is oppressed and evil abounds (Bhagavad Gita 4:7-8). Valmiki's Srimad Ramayana (Balakanda: XV: 6-34) and Tulasidas's Ramacharitmanas (Balakanda: 120d: 4-5) articulate this situation. Thus

Rama as the descent/manifestation/incarnation of the Supreme, Vishnu, is the object of devotion (*bhakti*) and/or admiration for character and conduct in the ancient Hindu diaspora of Asian countries, India, the nineteenth century phenomenon of the Indian indenture diaspora (Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa, Suriname, Fiji) and the entire world where Hindus and other receptive-hearted peoples reside today.

It would be profitable to enquire how and why a nation of people who have the Vedas, Smritis, Puranas and Darshanas (philosophies) sought out from their meditations and spiritual disciplines the Divine in human form! It is conceivable that people would be attracted to and emulate a leader or preceptor with amiable and infallible qualities, especially in times of distress and upheaval, when a more approachable or accessible God is required rather than one who just inhabits our minds. Ramachandra Shukla (1958: 56) whilst introducing the Bhakti (devotional) era of Hindi Literature, says that a figure or personality who could instil hope and pride in a Hindu nation whose "hearts had become devoid of pride, self-esteem and hope" following the establishment of Muslim rule in India was the need of the times. Thus in the Bhakti period (1318-1643) greater emphasis was placed on the personalised Divine forms of Krishna (Lila Purushottam - through precept) and Rama (Maryada Purushottam - Exemplar of decorum through example) who could rescue and uplift the despondent Hindus whose temples

and the divine images were vandalised and revered personalities abused. The total benign potencies of the Supreme were needed to rescue medieval Hindus. Thus Rama, who was acclaimed as the advent of the Supreme in human form, was invoked through the Ramacharitmanas and works of other savants and seers in the Bhakti period. This re-energised Hindu society and reminded them of past glories, much like Hanuman needs reminders of his prowess.

Even before the beginning of the Bhakti movement in North India, South India provided the template for Bhakti. The Tamil poet saint Kamban wrote the Iramavataram fashioned on the Valmiki Ramayana which is avidly studied by all. Richman (2001: 18) describes the wide appeal of the Ramayana of Kamban thus, referring to Hindus as well as Muslims:

Both in the twelfth century and in today's Tamil Nadu, poets and commentators of differing religious persuasions eloquently share poetic motifs and common understandings of ultimate concerns.

When Bhakti arrived in the North, it was nurtured by Ramanand whose tradition inspired Goswami Tulasidas, profound scholar and exponent of Ramakatha (story of Rama) based on Sanskrit sources (Valmiki Ramayana, Adhyatma Ramayana). Tulasidas applied his heart, mind and literary skills to craft his rendition of the Rama story, the Ramacharitmanas, which has become the Ramayana of the Hindus. Like Kamban's Iramavataram in Tamil Nadu, Tulasidas's Ramacharitmanas became a catalyst for transformation and religious tolerance in the North. At a time when Mughal rule was firmly established and Islam enjoyed the status of the state religion, Emperor Akbar's courtier Abdur Rahim Khankhana or "Rahim", Sufi, philanthropist and student of Hindu culture, admirer and friend of Tulasidas, described the Ramacharitmanas in words and sentiments which raised the Ramacharitmanas and its protagonist Sri Rama to the universal pathway to God:

Ramacharitmanas Bimal Santana Jivana Prana

Hinduan Ko Bedasama Jamanahi Pragata Kurana

The Ramacharitmanas is the very life-blood of the holy sages. It is akin to the Vedas for the Hindus, and is like the Quran to the Muslims (Shukla 2002: 35).

Rahim unequivocally asserts the authenticity and purity of the sacred Ramacharitmanas

for both Hindus and Muslims. The Vedas, regarded as the timeless and divine (Apaurusheya) word of God, which contain traces of the Rama story (Shukla 2002: 7), are described in terms of the Ramayana of Tulasidas; no greater acknowledgement of Rama or the work embodying His acts can be possible within the context of Hindu theology. This Hindu Theology is predicated on the Rigvedic dictum "The Truth is One: wise men call it by different names (Rgveda 1: 164: 46) and the Gita's promise of protection/redemption (Bhagavadgita 4: 7-8). Thus the Divine is both transcendent and immanent in Hinduism, with a strong "salvific transcendent entity" to guide devotees (words from Joris Gielen 2008: 184).

In the modern period, the indentured diaspora of Fiji became a battle ground for human freedom and dignity. The Ramacharitmanas was officially acknowledged as a scripture for the purposes of administering the oath in court (Kelly in Richman 2001: 337-338). Kelly (1991: 211) further cites the propagator of Sanatan Dharm Ram Chandra Sharma in Fiji, who said: The great Tulsi Ramayana (Ramacharitmanas) delivers the medicine of immortality to the foreign dwelling men and women The Ramayana is the Fifth Veda in the colonies, teaching Hindi and doing good for the people....

In Trinidad it is believed that the Ramayana is to Trinidad what the Vedas are to India (Shukla 2011: 181). The debates and discourse on Ramayana in Fiji occurred much later than the commencement of indentured settlement in Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa and Suriname. In these latter colonies there was a paucity of leadership at that time, particularly from India, since the Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Bharathendu and the modern period of Hindi as well as the Indian National Congress ("not yet a vehicle for politicised religion" – McDermott 2008: 145), all came into being and action when the majority of the indentured Indians had already arrived or settled in the colonies. The *girmityas* (labourers under agreement) were left to the mercies of the colonists.

What is constant in all the colonies is the indomitable will of the people insofar as the maintenance of their religion and culture was concerned. The Ramayana had flowed from India in three streams - cultural to South and South East Asia, literary to the West and spiritual to the Hindu diaspora throughout the world, beginning with the period of indenture.

South Africa received its batches of Hindi indentured labourers from 1860. These labourers were the descendants of people whom Tulasidas and other poet saints had inspired and filled with devotion. Amitav Ghosh, evaluating the contribution of poet saints such as Chaitanya, Mirabai, Tulasidas, Tukaram and Kshetranya during the Bhakti period observes that “it is a simple fact that Hinduism as a living practice would not be what it is if it were not for the devotional practices initiated under Mughal rule (Doniger 2010: 551).

The indentured labourers came to South Africa with few possessions; their spiritual and cultural wealth is what sustained them during the vicissitudes of indenture or “*gimit*”.

THE *GIRMITIYAS* AND THEIR HEREDITARY RAMA DEVOTION

The conditions under which Indians travelled to the “indenture diaspora” of the 19th century as labourers on cane and cotton fields, mines and railways differed from the “emigration” and “migration” of the mid-twentieth century based on “personal choice and voluntary movements of people from one country to another” (Singh 2009: 2). The *gimitiyas* left their motherland by a process which may be seen as “constructive” transportation or *Kalapani* (*Kalapani* = transportation, imprisonment) resulting from lack of employment opportunities or the “push” factor created by British policy in India. Hence, this movement can be classified under Singh’s alternate category of involuntary migration. The conditions of the 1860s world persisted until 1960s *vis-à-vis* communication and travel, which created a hiatus between people separated by migration. However, rapid developments in communications technology in the latter part of the 20th century have not only helped to keep the Indians of the 21st century diaspora in contact with one another; but the television and electronic media have brought religion, Ramayana and Rama into the homes and lives of Hindus in the remotest parts of the diaspora. The 19th century *gimitiyas* had only what they carried with them as companion and solace.

The first Hindis disembarked from the *Belvedere* in Durban on 26 November 1860 from Calcutta. Henning (1993: 38) states that of the 312 “active” or live passengers, 40 were Muslim. Hindus remained the majority of most ship-

ments of indentured labourers to South Africa. The Hindis who embarked at Calcutta made a transoceanic “journey to South Africa under oppressive conditions”; the *Belvedere*’s list shows 29 dead at sea, one was “not shipped” and 10 died before commencing work (Henning 1993: 38).

The indentured labourers/*gimitiyas* brought with them their religio-cultural knowledge and values acquired through the oral tradition were predominant amongst these. The Ramayana/Rama Ethos were found across the linguistic groups who had embarked at Calcutta and Madras. The Hindis had the influence of the Ramacharitmanas of Goswami Tulasidas, the Telugus were conversant with Ramayana through the Bhaskara and Ranganatha Ramayana and the Tamils had the Kamban Ramayana. The figure and divine potency of Sri Rama were assimilated into the religio-cultural and daily life of all Hindus who had access to Ramakatha through regional language variants/adaptations and the prolific oral tradition including music, dance and drama. Ramanuja had laid down the system of worship of the image of Vishnu, called Lord Venkatesvara or Balaji in the 11th century. Just as Rama was incarnate Divinity to the Hindis, Ramanuja attributed the same qualities to Lord Venkatesvara; and used the “*sloka*” (Valmiki, Balakanda 23.2),

Kausalya Supraja Rama Purva Sandhya Pravartate

Uttishtha Narashardula Kartavyam Daivamahanikam

a matin or rising song (*Prabhati*) sung to Rama in Valmiki Ramayana. This establishes the identity of Sri Rama and Lord Venkatesvara at Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh as the Supreme; one in human form and one in statue (*vigraha*) form. In the 20th-21st centuries Sai Baba was also awakened with the above *Sloka* with names modified. The foregoing demonstrates the inescapable fact that through the millennia and centuries Sri Rama has been the friend and protector as well as loving God of the Hindus.

In the Hindi belt of India the Rama story was heard, read, sung and narrated in various contexts with varying emphases. Usha Nilsson (Richman 2001: 137) discusses power and domination in Awadhi and Bhojpuri women’s songs using Sita as the subject. Nilsson’s interesting essay demonstrates how the Ramayana provides material as well spiritual sustenance to people

of all sections of society. The Rama Ethos and the Ramacharitmanas fostered unity and equality through the grace of Sri Rama, and accompanied the *girmitiyas* into far-off lands.

The Hindus travelled on their transoceanic journey into the unknown with thoughts of Sri Rama and His arduous journey into exile. The identification of the *girmitiyas* in their travails with Sri Rama, Sita and Lakshmana in their journey through the forests creates hope and solace; in that their vicissitudes too, like Rama's, will end, and also that even Sri Rama, "Lord of the Three Worlds" (Tihun Loka Ke Malik) had undergone hardship. The *Marga Geet* (Song of the Road) collected by Vidya Niwas Mishra (1999: 74) represents hundreds of similar outpourings of the suffering but God-loving heart. A sample:

Age Age Ram Chalet Hai, Pachhe Lachuman Bhai

Tekra Pachhe Matu Janki, Madhuban Letha Tikai

Rama walks in front, followed by Lakshmana
Mother Janaki brings up the rear. They halt
in the forest

(Transliterated and translated by Shukla in Shukla 2011: 142).

The extremely precarious life of exile and indenture can find no better expression. Bhavanidayal Sanyasi (1947: 3) also paints a disturbing picture of life in indenture for people who had no support from any of the colonists: they took recourse in suicide in the face of oppression, injustice and degradation. As far as education was concerned, most of the children who did receive education before the establishment of the Natal Education Department in 1894 attended school for one or two years at schools run by the Anglican, Methodist and Catholic Churches, and some by the Indian Immigration School Board (1878). Although there were some improvements after 1894, the state remained hostile towards educating Indians who were seen as temporary groups in South Africa or Natal (Henning 1993: 165).

The Hindus practised a range of rituals which were perceived as backward or morally depraved. J. S. Done, an Indian Christian, opposed the proselytisation of Hindus as being counter-productive, asserting that the Hindus did not need religious instruction or education on acceptance of evangelisation. Done expressed the belief that the conservative (Hindu) people

would be protected by their ancient tradition and unadulterated Hindu philosophy (Henning 1993: 157). The definitive view on this issue is provided in Shukla (2009: 30):

Since the Hindi labourers reached the colonies and until the present, Tulasi's Ramayana has become their inspiration and part of their consciousness. The Ramacharitmanas incarnated as Protector of Dharma and the Hindi language.

The image of Sri Rama and His unrelenting struggle against adversity and evil whilst upholding righteousness (Dharma) never deserted the *girmitiya* Hindus: indeed it led them to deeper reverence, greater enthusiasm for propagation and construction of institutions for the praise and worship of the Supreme, Vishnu, the Protector aspect of the Supreme, manifested on earth as Rama and Krishna.

TRADITIONAL PATTERNS OF HINDU WORSHIP

The Hindi *girmitiyas* practised diverse forms of ritualistic worship, emanating from folk traditions, Saivism, Vaisnavism, Saktism or the teachings of the Saints and Sages of the Bhakti period. Their discourse, however, centred on issues connected to the Mahabharata, Srimad Bhagavat Purana, or more commonly the Ramayana which was easily accessible through the Ramacharitmanas, written in melodious, easy to chant Awadhi verses.

Some of these practices may be mentioned here. Research carried out by Shukla (2002) outlines the observances which mark every aspect of Hindu life. It would be appropriate to view some practices within the Smartha Sanatan Dharma as represented by the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and Epics which constitute the evolution of Hindu thinking. The invocation commencing a popular Hindi text dedicated to the Divine Mother (Durga) in Her aspect as Liberator from bondage, *viz. Bandi Paath* runs thus:

Sada Bhavani Dahini, Sanmukha Rahe Ganesa

Panch Deo Mil Raksha Karahin, Brahma Vishnu Mahesa

The Divine Mother is always to the right, (meaning auspicious or favourable) with Sri Ganesha in front: together with Brahma, Vishnu and Siva (Five Devas) will protect the devotee.

The Divine Mother (Bhavani) is looked upon as a loving, protective mother by the majority of Hindus who may not have heard of philosophical terminology such as Prakriti, Energy Quanta etc. Ganesha's role is the first to be worshipped. In a bid to determine who amongst the gods should be invoked and worshipped first on any auspicious occasion, the condition was laid down by Brahma that whosoever could traverse the universe and return first would win. Ganesha, diffident because of his tiny vehicle, the mouse, wrote "RAMA" on the ground and circled it thereby circumambulating Sri Rama who was the universe as well as its Lord, on the advice of Narada (Soni 2011: 467). Tulasidas, in his Ramacharitmanas (Balakanda 18.4) states that Ganesha, knowing the glory of Rama, became the first to be worshipped by merely circumambulating His name written on the ground, hence the favoured place of Ganesha- people always say, "Sri Ganeshaya Namah" before praying. Thus Bhavani and Ganesha together introduce the salutation. This invocation casts light on the belief system of the Hindus and the place of Sri Rama therein.

Vishnu as the Preserver has the most arduous task to keep creation functioning according to Dharma or Divine Laws. Some specific interventions of Vishnu in physical form have become embedded in Hindu History as *Avataras* or Incarnations. Doniger (2010: 474) refers to "the first two human *Avataras* of Vishnu, Rama and Krishna, who became incarnate on earth to fight against antigods (asuras) ...and against ogres (rakshasas) who are the enemies of humans". Doniger also asserted that in the Bhakti period Rama was conceived of as a "God who combined the awesome powers of a Supreme deity with the compassion of an intimate friend...." (Doniger 2010: 222). The foregoing background to Sri Rama also helps to locate Sri Hanuman within the Vaisnava religious tradition and Ramabhakti. It is opportune to give some further testimony to the Divinity of Sri Rama before discussing the servants and devotees, as recorded in the Ramayana versions including the *ur-text*. The two relevant authoritative texts of the Rama story are the Srimad Ramayana of Valmiki and the Ramacharitmanas of Goswami Tulasidas. Valmiki does state at various points that Sri Rama is the manifestation of Vishnu; whereas Tulasidas infuses every line of his Ramacharitmanas with the Divinity

of Sri Rama. This was due to the predominant spirit of devotion of the Bhakti era particularly in the Mughal period when there were all kinds of pressures on India's Hindus.

Valmiki was a sage or Rishi who had attained higher knowledge through meditation and austerity. In the very first line of his Ramayana (Balakanda 1.1), Valmiki describes himself as *Munipungava* or ascetic. Tulasidas had received the appropriate training in Sanskrit, religion, philosophy and other sciences under Shesha Sanatana in Varanasi for 15 years, in order to equip himself as an exponent of the scriptures, the Ramayana in particular (Shukla 2002: 28). Tulasidas commenced his career as a *Kathakar* (exponent of the story of Rama) on the basis of Sanskrit versions of Ramayana. It was during this period that he felt the need to tell Rama's story in the people's language. The originators of both authoritative texts thus have superior qualifications.

Valmiki depicts the background of the descent of Vishnu as a human incarnation named Rama, at the behest of the gods (Balakanda XV: 6 and XV 19-21). The purpose was the elimination of Ravana. Maricha tells Ravana later (Aranyakanda 37:13) that Ravana should desist from seeking confrontation with Sri Rama because He is "virtue incarnate, pious and of unflinching prowess, and ruler of the entire humanity even as Indra is the ruler of gods".

Tulasidas's Ramacharitmanas is entirely dedicated to the divinity and worship of Sri Rama. He establishes firmly that Rama is the Redeemer who mercifully assumes different bodily forms to remove the suffering of god-fearing people. Sita is inseparable from Rama. Tulasi sees the world as Sita and Rama (Balakanda 7: 1).

The foregoing clarifies why scholars and sages eulogise Sri Rama as the powerful, merciful Supreme. In daily life, many rites and rituals are observed, including the life stages or *Sanskaras* (rites of passage). Sri Rama, moreover, pervades the spiritual, non-physical dimensions of our existence which we try to reach through the various practices, in which the human actors are also called Rama, such as a new born boy or bridegroom. Thus, He is the recipient of our prayers and supplications as well as the eternal witness and companion to our lives.

Hindu rites and religious practices go hand in hand with Sri Rama, Ramayana and associ-

ated celebrations. Characters and events are intertwined and explanations are provided within contexts rather than separately. Empirical research (qualitative) carried out by Usha Shukla towards higher degrees and published as (1) *Ramacharitmanas in South Africa*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi (2002) and (2) *Ramacharitmanas in the Diaspora* (2011), Star Publishers, Delhi, record the religious practices of Hindi-speaking Hindus as well as their perceptions of Sri Rama and the Ramayana. The thorough research elicited facts through questionnaires and interviews. As an “insider”, the author was able to use the ethno-methodological approach in the qualitative empirical process. Religio-cultural theory informed the theoretical approach (Shukla 2011: 10-12).

The foregoing detailed delineation of Sri Rama explicates how the Smartha Sanatani Hindus lived a religious life dominated by Rama and Ramayana. The Ramacharitmanas had become part of the “collective consciousness” and of the “eternal journey of the soul” (Mishra 1983: 101). Thus when the Hindi indentured workers came to South Africa, they brought with them all the knowledge and spirituality so solicitously imparted by personalities such as Tulasidas. It is a natural corollary of the foregoing that the Ramacharitmanas and Rama would wield similar influence over the Hindus in South Africa.

The research carried out into the various aspects of Hindu religious practices used questionnaires distributed to Hindi-speaking Hindus, the majority of whom were concentrated in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). There was considerable uniformity in their religious observances, particularly those of orthodox Sanatani extraction. This ethno-methodological research was able to elicit authentic data on the subject.

The Hindus carried out their routine religious practices in the traditional manner. In this context it would be appropriate to note that Sri Rama also carried out the daily rituals. These consisted of lighting the lamp (*Lakshmi* or *Chirag*), *Sandhya*, chanting *Mantras*, scripture reading or recital, and *Aarti*, or waving of lights around an image of Vishnu, Siva, Rama, Krishna, Lakshmi etc. (Shukla 2002: 107). The Ramacharitmanas itself was worshipped by many and handled with great reverence because of the sacredness of its subject matter. Observances of *Pitra Paksha*, *Sivaratri*, *Ramanaumi*, *Krishnashthami*, *Navaratri* and *Deepavali* and

Havan completed the religious scenario. The small number of literate people, generally learned priests, came to their assistance with more complex ritual observations for example *Sathyanaarain Vrat Kathas* and *Jhanda* offerings to Hanuman. These learned individuals also provided leadership through recitals and discourses on Ramayana. Prior to the erection of temples which began soon after arrival, the home shrine where a lamp was regularly lit and prayers offered to images of deities, constituted the religious centre of the indentured Hindus in South Africa (Shukla 2002: 107-108). Ramayana *Sabhas*, *satsangs*, temple worship and discourses etc. on Sri Rama and Ramayana began early in the indentured Hindus’ lives in South Africa. Temples dedicated to Vishnu/Rama emerged around the beginning of the 20th century, and continue to be built in the early 21st century.

As alluded to earlier, the indentured immigrants brought with them a variety of religious practices which they maintained - rites of passage (*inter alia*, birth, marriage, death), prayers for all new beginnings and auspicious occasions, offering of propitiation to local deities (*gramadevata*-the various Devis and Devatas), Hanuman worship, Ganesha worship at the beginning of every ritual act; and Sri Satyanarain *Vrat Katha* (Satyanarain = Vishnu = Rama). It is noteworthy that worship of Hanuman, devotee/servant *par excellence* of Rama, is performed together with Sri Rama (in His Vishnu or Satyanarain form) during the *Katha* and *Jhanda*. Hanuman, facetiously described as an ugly monkey by the Ramayana exponent Ramakinkara Upadhyaya, was nevertheless chosen by Rama to locate Sita in Lanka and deliver his message; an episode of beast conveying the message of the Divine to the epitome of Divine Beauty Mother Sita. Hanuman’s simian features and Sita’s beauty are compared thus by Upadhyaya (2006: 42):

If one has to criticize someone’s looks, it is compared with a monkey’s visage. Yet miraculously Hanumanji found Mother Sita.

All this was because of Hanuman’s Rama Bhakti and Vairagya (detachment). Indeed Hanuman’s prominence and universal adoration were known to him, as Hanuman says that He as servant of Rama is superior to Rama Himself:

My Heart, Lord, holds this conviction:
Greater than Rama is Rama’s servant.

(Ramacharitmanas Uttarakanda, 120k, 16 - translated by Lutgendorf 2007: facing Preface).

The foregoing establishes Hanuman's position in Ramakatha and Hinduism as Maruti, Pavan Suta and Avatara of Siva, and devotee of Sri Rama. Hanuman is worshipped throughout the Hindu world, increasingly in his "own right" and often together with Sri Rama. His strength is a hallmark of his personality as Vajrangbali (Bajrangbali) - one whose body is adamantine or steel-like. Sri Rama praised Hanuman's gentle aspect as Pavan Putra (son of the wind-god) because as Pavan he is mild, but in his terrible aspect he is called Prabhanjan - destructive like a cyclone (Ramkinkar Upadhyaya 2006: 105). Immense images of Hanuman have been erected in India, South Africa (Chatsworth) and Trinidad to commemorate Hanuman's personality. Ramayana conferences were held in South Africa (University of Durban-Westville, Department of Indian Languages in 2002 and Sri Vishnu Temple Trust in 2009). Discourses on Ramayana are contributed by local as well as international exponents. Following the 2002 International Ramayana Conference at the University of Durban-Westville; the Ramakrishna Centre and Divine Life Society in collaboration with Vishwa Sahitya Sanskriti Sansthan, Delhi, held a three-day Hanuman Conference in April 2003 (Shukla 2011: 164-165). The success of all these events in which Hindus of all linguistic groups participated, points to the convergence of modern technology-driven life and the rich spiritual gifts of Hinduism. Ramayana and Hanumanology are ancient sciences - we still find new gems in them. The Sri Vishnu Temple Trust held a Hanuman conference in May 2012. The Chinmaya Mission (South Africa) planned discourses on the Hanuman Chalisa (eulogy of 40 couplets for Hanuman) from 25-29 June 2012. The Hanuman Chalisa is emerging as a powerful mantra to people across linguistic and cultural variations. An episode of a modern "encounter" with Hanuman is recorded by Lutgendorf (2007: 296-297) which demonstrates Hanuman's response to devotees. The Chinmaya Mission also planned to have 5,000 people chant Hanuman Chalisa at Curries Fountain on 8 July 2012.

South African Hindus' religious lives were characterised by struggle and sacrifice - they depended on their own resources to provide the venues for Ramayana discussions (*satsangs*), for

temples, education and religious observances. Almost 100 years after their arrival, the apartheid regime's philosophy of separate development and group areas initiated massive dislocation of the Hindu communities and their religio-cultural institutions. This did not deter the *girmitiyas* from their divine socialising, as research has shown. Beginning from the earliest days of indenture, the Hindus gathered after a day's work to engage in listening, reciting and reading Ramayana, Mahabharata etc. (Nowbath, Chotai et al. 1960: 12 cited in Shukla 2002: 107). The Ramayana provided them with answers to all life's problems - Mr Andhee mentioned in an interview that the *panchayats* (council of elders) found solutions to problems through the *dohas* and *chaupais* of the Ramacharitmanas (Shukla 2002: 122). Other precepts of the Ramacharitmanas such as Ayodhyakanda 27, 2 about ethical conduct were regularly applied:

It has always been the rule of the Raghus that one's plighted word must be redeemed even at the cost of one's life.

The recognition of Sita and Rama, who are inseparable and essentially one as the All Pervasive Supreme, places Rama and the Ramayana at the centre of the devotional life of Hindus. Tulasidas confirms this in Balakanda 7: 1

Recognizing the entire creation as full of Sita and Rama, I make obeisance to them with joined palms.

Thus Hinduism in South Africa acquired stability and strength with the introduction of Ramayana Sabhas or groups, starting from the shelter of trees, to spare rooms or sheds, and much later "garages" and halls. These became focal points of community life in various areas just two years following arrival; and served not only for delving into Ramayana but also for learning Hindi and celebrating Diwali, Rama-naumi and Krishnashtami amongst others. Rituals and ceremonies underpinned Hindus' religious lives, not abstract contemplations (Shukla 2002: 110). Even the Ramayana Ethos took on an "applied" aspect with the enactments of birth scenes of Sri Rama and the staging of dramas and dances on the Ramayana theme (Richman 2001: 18-19). The improvement of both secular and cultural education, as well as the influx of neo-Hindu movements from India promoting the Rama Ethos, signalled a gradual transition to the philosophical aspects of

Ramayana. Spiritually, though, Rama and Ramayana have their assured place in South Africa. The Ramacharitmanas has examined every aspect of religious thought, the Absolutistic and Theistic Vedanta being chief amongst these. The overwhelming presence of the divine aura of Rama and Ramabhakti ensure the continued appeal of Ramayana.

The empirical research carried out by Shukla (2002) elicited responses from 3rd and 4th generation South African Hindus, which demonstrate the strong, unshakeable faith in Sri Rama and the Ramayana. The sublimity of Sri Rama's character, the irreproachable actions and unfailing compassion of God on earth in human form Who embodied the Vedas, 18 Puranas, six Sastras (systems of philosophy) and the essence of all the scriptures is the cure for all ills of Kaliyuga (Ramayana Arati by Tulasidas).

The most valuable part of the empirical research on Ramayana/Ramacharitmanas is the discovery of the extent of love and devotion for Sri Rama that subsists in the Hindu psyche in South Africa.

The responses to some key questions (Shukla 2002) were:

First Acquaintance with Ramayana: 19.5 percent of respondents had heard from grandparents, 63.2 percent heard from parents; other sources were friends, family, literature, films, Hindi Studies, satsangs (p. 162).

Attitude Towards Ramayana: 48.1 percent - veneration, 49.2 percent - great respect; Reasons – Ramacharitmanas is scripture, represents Sri Rama and must be worshipped (p. 164).

Innermost Feelings Towards Sri Rama: Responses included “One and only God”, “Voice I hear within”, “my all”, “my rescuer”, “The Absolute, Supreme Being Whom I worship”, “Ideal human being in every way”, “Rama is God Who appeared to teach man by example”, “He is a literary character symbolically representing God Almighty”, “Essence of the four Vedas”, “Maryada Purushottam” (Exemplar of Decorum/Propriety), “All Pervading Brahman” ...etc. (pp. 168-169).

The foregoing feelings towards Sri Rama are all valid: perceptions at different levels of viewing a text are represented here. Even the response “Ruthless” – (in Sita's test by fire) is appropriate to the reader who regards the Ramayana as literature.

How Rama is Viewed: This crucial question elicited two major views: 69.7 percent said Rama

is God, to 68.6 percent He is an Avatara, 21.1 percent feel He is a Great Man, 21.1 percent say He is a Hero and 26.5 percent regard Him as a Leader (p. 169).

There is no contradiction in the above perceptions. Such ambivalences attest to the multifaceted, multidimensional nature of both Ramayana/Ramacharitmanas and Sri Rama. Ramakinkar Upadhyaya (2006: 122) suggests that we embrace the Divine aspect of Sri Rama for *Shakti* (strength) and His humanity for *Prerna* (inspiration), thus benefitting from both.

Within a “diaspora” situation, amongst people born far from the source and separated by 80 - 100 years in time from the Mother country, the foregoing responses touching on a few major aspects of the Rama Ethos demonstrate the significant role of the Ramacharitmanas / Ramayana and Sri Rama in the life of Hindus in South Africa, which enabled and empowered them to transcend all the neglect, prohibitions, maltreatment and discrimination at the hands of their supposedly civilized masters in the days of colonial indenture, dominion South Africa and apartheid South Africa. The Hindus made their own transitions to religio-cultural victory with help only from their own inner resources and religio-cultural artefacts. As political animals they were counted amongst the victims of racism and apartheid: as spiritual beings Rama and Ramayana stood by them.

The Social Aspects of Rama and Ramayana: These were also canvassed in question 5.5 (pp. 170- 171) where responses such as “duty and service”, “offering hope and help in distress” were offered. Being deeds of the Ideal Man and Maryada Purushottam (Exemplar of propriety) all Rama's actions coincide with Dharma, justice and morality. This small segment of the original research highlights the potent role of the Rama Ethos which persists among South African Hindi-speaking Hindus until today, fostering social cohesion and solidarity.

Recent research by Paula Richman in Durban (2008, Vol. 2.2) recorded observation of Ramayana Week in greater Durban at Shree Ramayana Sabha in Overport, The Sree Venkatesvara Devasthanam and Cultural Centre in Chatsworth and the Durban Hindu Temple in Somtseu Road. Richman subtitled this last observation “Urban Commerce and Heritage” (2008: 120) and stated “That the temple holds its Main Ram Navami ritual at noon on a week-

day and the temple *still* fills with people illustrates the draw it continues to exert on Hindus in Durban". Shukla's observation at the same temple during the Ram Navami Celebration approximately 20 years previously recorded the same degree of meticulous procedures, dedication and interest (2002: 147).

CONCLUSION

Hindus are called *Amritasya Putra* – children of Immortality. They applied knowledge of the highest sciences of the Vedas, Upanishads and Shastras; yet they were treated as illiterate in the indenture colonies. Their "God" Sri Rama is characterised as Bhava Bhesaja - remedy for the ills of births and deaths. Rama and Sita, the Divine parents of humanity (Siya Ramamaya) are ideals of conjugal life; yet their children's religious marriage was not acknowledged in the South African colonial system. Such extreme contrarities and denials were encountered and surmounted by the settlers in the first 50-60 years of their sojourn, with faith and fortitude. This redounds to the credit of the Ramacharitmanas and Sri Rama as its chief subject:

The Ramacharitmanas with Rama and Hanuman therefore constitutes not only the Gita in action, but all the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas in action as well.

It is foreseen that the Ramayana and Rama Ethos will remain the religious and spiritual standard-bearers of the Hindus for a long time.

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