

MANI RATNAM'S 'RAAVAN'- A MARXIST INTERPRETATION OF THE RAMAYAN IN THE LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY NAXALISM

By Karmanye Thadani, Prahastha. M and Sooraj Sharma*

INTRODUCTION

Mani Ratnam, an acclaimed film-maker who has many hits to his credit like *Bombay*, *Roja*, *Yuva*, *Guru* and many more, must have been utterly disappointed to see his latest and much hyped project *Raavan* starring Abhishek Bachan, Aishwarya Rai and Vikram, fail miserably at the box office. Though the cinematography and music were appreciated, as regards the story, the popular perception about the movie has been well articulated by a critic in his blog in the following words –

“In a nutshell, the movie is all about a bad man kidnapping wife, husband comes looking for the wife and finally finds her and rescues her from the bad man. That’s all there is to the story.

Nothing unique about this story which is probably being enacted from the Ramayan days hence a little touch of the epic is put into the making of this film.”

He further goes on to say -

“Apart from this, the movie is as flat as flat can be. There is nothing much in the script nor is the characterization given much importance.

Coming out of the movie, I started to wonder who exactly is the bad man here. The whole take of portraying Abhishek Bachchan as the demon does not in any scene really come good.”

He sums it up saying -

“In all a confusing tale of good over evil or evil over good or ... As I said, I have no clue as to who actually is the good guy in this tale.”

However, the three of us who saw the movie in different cities of the country quite appreciated it.

One of us, Karmanye, saw it in Delhi. Owing to his keen interest in different schools of political thought, which have had tremendous influence on history-writing, he perceived the movie in a different light. For that very reason, he felt that Mani had done a remarkable job of

*BA, LLB (Hons.) students of Gujarat National Law University (GNLU), Gandhinagar. The authors are grateful to their faculty member Mr. Manan Dwivedi for his encouragement and support.

putting across an interpretation of the ancient epic and relating it to the contemporary class conflict manifesting itself in the form of the Naxal insurgency. He identifies himself as a Hindu but was not in the least offended by the movie portraying Ram in a somewhat negative light, the way members of radical organizations like the Bajrang Dal or Shri Ram Sene perhaps would (he, in any case, hates these groups for their hate propaganda, communal rioting and moral policing), because he believes, like many others do, that Hinduism as a religion (if at all it can be called one) is flexible and dynamic, and the messages conveyed by the literature commonly referred to as Hindu mythological literature are of significance rather than the historicity of those events. Indeed, the Valmiki Ramayan in its true form has never been found and multiple versions of it, all carrying interpolations, are available, which were written much later in the Gupta period in the early centuries of the Christian era. Not only that, numerous literary adaptations of the epic in different vernacular languages have their own modifications of or additions to the story and are also highly respected, like the one by Tulsidas in the Avadhi dialect of Hindi, Kamban in Tamil and Krittivyas in Bengali. While worshipping Ram in a temple, he bows before the Maryada Purshottam for the many good qualities attributed to him, caring little as to whether he was actually a great man in history or even whether he existed at all. Even in the Puranic lore, there are contradictory versions of events in different Puranas. Hinduism, unlike the Abrahamic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam (which he indeed also genuinely respects), is not based on a single book to be accepted as infallibly true and Hinduism has had many atheistic and agnostic philosophies in it as well).

Another one of us, Prahastha, saw the movie in Hyderabad a few weeks before joining GNLU with his friend who had similar views about what the movie was trying to convey, which he shared with him (Prahastha). Sooraj, who saw it in Pune, could also figure the concept of class divide and male chauvinism the movie was trying to portray. The three of us, over dinner in the GNLU hostel mess, happened to discuss the movie and were glad to see that we all shared a similar interpretation and hence similar opinion of the movie (it is noteworthy that we hardly came across elaborate interpretations of the movie on the Internet also, though there were web pages referring to the movie having a Marxist touch).

BACKGROUND

Before we delve into the intricacies of what the movie is trying to convey, it may be useful to understand briefly the Marxist school of thought, what a Marxist interpretation of the Ramayan can mean and the contemporary issue of Naxalism.

Marxism, to explain it in an oversimplified fashion, is a theory introduced by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, by virtue of which economics is the base of the social superstructure. Marxism diagnoses social problems as being a class conflict between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. As per the Marxist discourse, the have-nots are subjected to exploitation by the capitalists, and the State is also an institution that supports this class exploitation, leading the have-nots to organize an armed revolution to overthrow the existing order and establish their dictatorship (known as a communist regime), eventually giving way to a classless, stateless society.

Marxism is a very strongly atheistic ideology, according to which God and religion are creations of the privileged classes to exploit the underprivileged and keep them under control (we are not Marxists ourselves and not even atheists). Under the circumstances, it is understandable that Marxists and those strongly influenced by Marxist ideas (even if not wholly subscribing to the ideology) will try to dissect the scriptures of different religions and examine them using the yardstick of class conflict. In a certain sense, even women are regarded as a class economically dependent on men and Marxists are generally feminists, at least in the moderate sense of the term. The Ramayan, a text revered by Hindus, has been no exception in terms of undergoing Marxist dissection.

Ranganayakamma, a Marxist writer, in her book 'Ramayana – The Poisonous Tree' has elaborated about the concerned theme. Even otherwise, we feel that no one can deny many wonderful things in that epic which are relevant for all times to come. The author has pointed out that the Ramayan "supports the civilized non-tribal communities against primitive tribal communities" and "male chauvinism against women".

It is highly debatable as to whether the Ramayan has a historical core at all, unlike the other great Hindu epic, the Mahabharat, the historical core of which is widely accepted. However, assuming the Ramayan does have a historical core, the authenticity of Valmiki's account is questionable. There is a proverb that history is often written from the victors' perspective. It is well known that the Aryans, who hailed from Central Asia (there is a huge controversy regarding this as well), invaded what is today India and looked down upon the indigenous tribals, often enslaving them. They perceived themselves to be a superior race, with the term *arya* (Aryan) being a mark of respect and *das* (a term basically meant for indigenous tribals) came to mean 'slave'. It is often contended that the so-called demons in the Ramayan were actually powerful indigenous tribals who resisted Aryan suzerainty (there are references to the demons obstructing Aryan religious rites and rituals being conducted in the forests). People of this view claim that they were demonized merely because they wanted to retain their tribal culture in their forest-villages, without accepting the so-called civilized lifestyle and fought for their rights. The Vedas mention various acts of genocide of the tribals by the Aryans, referring to the killing as *dasyuhatya*, though the same Vedas also have verses in which some Aryans regret their wrongdoings and there are verses talking of a "unity of hearts" between the Aryans and non-Aryans as well.

Likewise, in contemporary times too, tribals have been displaced from their homelands owing to development projects being undertaken by the government without being duly compensated and their traditional rights of access to forests and over forest produce were not respected in the name of environmental conservation, though the government and not the tribals have been responsible for massive deforestation. Tribals have traditional knowledge of environmental conservation and would never do anything to destroy the forests, their life-base. At times, tribals have been subjected to rather inhuman atrocities when they have attempted to resist forced displacement or tried to access the forests. The forest officers, including the forest guards, have often been very brutal with the tribals. Their indigenous culture is destroyed once they are compelled to integrate in the mainstream society. Many non-tribals, particularly in urbanized societies, often look upon the tribals as backward,

inferior people, whose rights can be sacrificed. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest-Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, also known as the Forest Rights Act, has been passed to address the problems of the tribals, but it has not been implemented effectively yet.

Marxist radicals have made the tribals to fight against the government using violent methods, and this movement is called the Naxalite movement or Naxalism (Naxalism isn't only a tribal movement, but we are dealing with the issue in a very limited sense in this context). They have resorted to kidnappings, extortions and even attacks on innocent civilians by bombing election booths and derailing trains. The tribals may be crude and unsophisticated in our eyes, and taking up arms against the State and challenging the democratic framework may well be incorrect (we believe it is highly incorrect, particularly the killing of innocent civilians, and we believe that the merits of democracy outweigh its demerits), but they are fed up with the so-called civil society that is snatching away their livelihood from them and destroying their culture.

While combating Naxalism, the police personnel have been very inhuman in their approach, inflicting atrocities against innocent tribals, killing them in fake encounters and detaining them misusing anti-terrorism statutes. The tribals in today's Naxal areas are often in general stigmatized as terrorists the way, in the Vedic Age, perhaps the tribals were labelled as demons.

DISECTING THE MOVIE

Now, we shall examine the plot of the movie in some detail and elucidate with examples how Mani Ratnam indeed intended to showcase a Marxist version of the Ramayan relating it to Naxalism. The art of interpretation, hermeneutics, has two methods of functioning – by recovery and by suspicion. It is the latter that has been employed by Mani Ratnam while interpreting the movie here, where he is actually questioning the portrayal of good and evil in the Ramayan being a method of showcasing Aryan superiority. Mani Ratnam having Marxist leanings has perhaps amply demonstrated by the fact that his son wrote a book on Marxism.

The film opens with shots showing Beera (Abhishek Bachchan), a tribal leader, who is the equivalent of Ravan from the Ramayan in the movie, jumping off a cliff into the water in a forest. Meanwhile, the police have some tribals in their custody who are being harassed, while Beera's gang is busy distracting the police, the way the demons in the Ramayan are always a source of nuisance to the Aryans. Police vehicles are set ablaze and even some police personnel in the forest are burnt alive. Ragini Sharma (Aishwarya Rai), the equivalent of Sita, on a boating trip, is abducted by Beera (we all know that Ravan abducted Sita in the Ramayan). Dev Pratap Sharma (Vikram), the equivalent of Ram, her husband and a Superintendent of Police (SP), is informed.

Dev and his team enter the forests with the aid of Sanjeevani Kumar (Govinda), a forest guard (he has been one for the last 28 years), the equivalent of Hanuman, who initially

prohibits Dev from entering the forest, the way Hanuman initially had an altercation with Ram and Lakshman when they came to the forest zone. The name Sanjeevani Kumar (one may recall that Hanuman got the Sanjeevani herb in the Ramayan), and his monkey-like antics, besides his referring to himself as a *vaanar* (monkey) metaphorically make it evident right in his first scene that he is the equivalent of Hanuman in the movie. His being a forest guard is relevant, because forest guards are a part of the State machinery, who, as mentioned earlier, have stopped tribals from accessing the forests, owing to the prevailing legal system, and this denial of access by forest guards has been a major cause of Naxalism.

A brief montage of sorts showcases the story of Beera. He is seen as a local hero, who runs a parallel government in the forest-village in which he executes justice in a very crude fashion with punishments like chopping off a hand (indeed, the Naxalites do have such parallel governments in many districts across India), 32 years of age with numerous crimes to his credit, including attacks on police personnel and punishments awarded by him to tribals. Likewise, even in the Vedic Age, the tribals had their own governments with their chiefs, but the Aryans claimed sovereignty over them, using methods like the *ashwamedh yagya*. Even today, the tribals are often compelled to integrate in mainstream society with their traditional governance patterns fading away, though the Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples, to which India is a signatory, emphasizes protection of their culture and their right of political self-determination. Beera has two brothers - Mangal (Ravi Kishan) and Hari (Ajay Gehi). Though considered a criminal by the local police, Beera is respected and feared at the same time by the tribals who despise the police. Dev, while referring to Beera, clearly states that he perceives him to be like Ravan and says that Beera is, in a way, present at a number of places at the same time and has ten faces (metaphorically speaking) and he (Dev) resolves to kill him (Beera). This tribal region is called *Lal Maatee* (red soil) in the movie, and the colour red is a symbol of Marxism because it signifies a bloody revolution. Beera, through a person he had tied up to a tree, conveyed to Dev that police personnel can never find their way in the dense forests without some assistance, which is generally true and something the Naxals take great advantage of.

In a subsequent scene, Beera tries to shoot Ragini, but like a typical Aryan lady, she attempts suicide by jumping into the water to die an honourable death. Ragini deeply loves Dev and is a courageous woman, as has been shown time and again in the movie, and her fearlessness inspires awe for her in Beera's mind and he rescues her. She cries and hurls abuses at Beera, and he tells her that he prefers abuses to be hurled at him than see a woman cry. Indeed, the tribals have often had more respect for women in their cultures than the Aryans and many Naxals, owing to their Marxist indoctrination, are gender-sensitized and many women too are recruited in their cadres (though there actually have been at least some cases of their sexual exploitation by their male comrades). Indeed, in the Ramayan, Ravan never forced himself on Sita, though he asked her numerous times to accept him as her husband, and even in the movie, Beera does not do injustice to Ragini despite getting attracted to her and even asking her to forget her marriage with Dev and accept him as her husband later in the movie. Despite being crude and unsophisticated, Beera and his brother Mangal treat Ragini with respect.

Meanwhile, the tribals, on being questioned about Beera, describe him as a scholar (even Ravan was a great scholar as per the Ramayan) and a poet, despite being an illiterate one, with a calm temperament, and is a feared yet popular leader, though one woman did criticize him, perhaps the only one among the tribals questioned.

In a subsequent scene, Mangal asked Beera why he did not kill Ragini, Mangal humourously stated that Beera had no reason to fear the law and at the most, he may be detained in jail for a few years. The Naxal attitude towards the law can indeed be summed up in the following statement of Charles Dickens – “Law is an ass”!

Later, Beera gets a photograph of some of his fellow tribals clicked with Ragini in which they all were smeared to appear dangerous and Ragini too had a very fearful expression on her face (which was actually just because of a mild bop on her head by Beera’s brother Mangal before the photograph was clicked), which was sent to Dev along with a tape-recorded message of Beera, in which he articulates his views on the class conflict very clearly. He says – “*SP Sahab, kaise ho? Ummeed hai aachche naheen honge... kyunki ham bhee achche naheen hain! Tumharee vajah se... tumre jaise bare logon kee vajah se... ham Beera anpadh, gawar, gareeb... tumree jaisee oonch jaat naheen hai hamree... to ham tumre dusman... photo dekhee hai... Pehchana? Bahut tareeke se photo khichayee hai tumre liye... Isko sambhaalke kameej ke jeb mein rakhnaa... biwi vaapas naa aye to, kam se kam photo to rahegee paas mein... Ab samjhe dard ka hota hai? Namaste!*” (How are you, Mr. SP? I hope you are not doing too well, because even we are not in a good position either! And that is because of you, because of well off and powerful people like you! I, Beera, am uneducated and poor and I do not belong to a high caste like you; therefore, I am your enemy. Have you seen the photograph? Did you recognize your wife? We clicked the photograph after putting in some effort especially for you. Keep the photograph safely in your shirt pocket. If your wife doesn’t return, at least you can keep the photograph. Now do you understand how it feels when you yearn for someone you love?). The reference to caste is important, because in the times of the Vedic Age and even now, Hindus of so-called upper castes have regarded tribals to be of lower birth than themselves (of course, a blanket generalization for all Hindus of supposedly upper castes would be incorrect at least in today’s context and perhaps even for that period of history).

In a subsequent scene, it has been shown that one policeman who was from the tribe was actually Beera’s informer. Indeed, the Naxals have informers in the police. The policeman points out to Dev that senior officers like Dev seldom show up, but he has to live in the tribal village and cannot afford to be hostile to Beera.

Then, there is a song ‘Thok de Killi’ which has very meaningful lyrics. The tribals complain that rich non-tribals tease them as backward, that tribals have been massacred in such large numbers that there isn’t even place to bury them and that they will struggle to get a due share of the resources. They also indirectly say that the day is not far when India will be governed by a Communist government when they say “*door naheen hai, chalega dilli*” (Delhi is not far).

Subsequently, Beera eventually tells Ragini the story of his sister's death; Dev had led an encounter against Beera during the wedding of Beera’s sister Jamuni (the equivalent of Ravan’s sister Shoorpnakha from the Ramayan). Dev's shot grazed Beera in the neck. Beera escaped, but the police captured and serially raped Jamuni, when she refused to reveal Beera's whereabouts. Beera returns home to find Jamuni distraught and traumatized. The next day, she commits suicide by drowning in a nearby well. To avenge the injustice inflicted upon his sister, Beera abducted Ragini just the way Ravan abducted Sita to avenge the attack on his sister by Lakshman. Even while taking Valmiki’s text into account without doubting the authenticity, questions can indeed be raised as to why Ram and Lakshman kept making

her go from one brother to the other when she proposed to them for marriage, rather than respectfully telling her that neither of them was interested.

Ragini, on hearing the tragic story about Jamuni, feels very sorry for Beera and is nearly in tears. She goes to pray in front of a huge idol of a deity in the forest, and says the following addressing the Lord – “*main rona naheen chahti... mujhe gussa de do! Bas use kam mat karo! Mujhe in logon kee achchai, bholapan mat dikhao... main kamzor naheen hoon; mujhe kamzor mat banao!*” (I don’t want to cry... Let me remain angry! Don’t expose me to the innocence and simplicity of these tribals... I am not an emotionally weak person, please don’t make me one!). This portrayal of tribals as basically simple and innocent people who take up arms owing to frustration is a Marxist one. Sanjeevani Kumar somehow finds Ragini (Hanuman finds Sita in the Ramayan), and then just like Hanuman was dragged to Ravan’s court, Sanjeevani is dragged to a tribal assembly presided over by Beera in which he warns Beera to peacefully let Ragini go, otherwise, Beera and his men may have to pay for it with their lives, the way Hanuman asks Ravan to let Sita go in the Ramayan. Beera tells Sanjeevani when he mentions the threat to his life, referring to human rights violations by the police – “*hamaree maat tum logon ka khilwaad... tum sab ham logon to itnaa mare ho, itnaa mare ho, itnaa mare ho, ki khaag saalee motee ho gayee hai! Isliye haemin maat kee dhamkee mat do!*” (for you people, our lives are playthings... you people have killed so many of our men that we are no longer afraid of death! So your threat is meaningless for us!).

Unhappy that his brother is ready for war, Hari (the equivalent of Vibheeshan in the Ramayan) convinces Beera to allow Hari to offer a truce to Dev. However, when Hari goes to meet Dev, he (Dev) shoots him (Hari) to death. This is a major aberration from the story of the Ramayan. We feel that if hermeneutics by suspicion were to be applied in this case, Dev could have been portrayed as giving Hari a huge bribe so as to help him overpower Beera. For in the Ramayan, Ram, as the prince of Koshal legally recognized Vibheeshan as the King of Lanka despite Ravan being the one who had actual administrative control. When Ravan was killed, Ram had Vibheeshan coronated as the King of Lanka, making the *de jure* recognition by Ram a *de facto* one. A possible interpretation be that Vibheeshan joined Ram’s camp only to become the King of Lanka, but in that case, Valmiki’s version is sugar-coated because it is written with a bias in favour of Ram. And such an interpretation would make sense from a Marxist perspective where everything is understood in the light of a power struggle.

Continuing our discussion of the plot of the movie, Beera and Mangal are enraged after Hari was killed and attack Dev's camp and wipe it out. A final confrontation between Beera and Dev takes place on a rickety bridge, where Beera prevents Dev from falling to his death. Dev later finds Ragini bound and tied, with Beera leaving her. However, while riding a train back to their hometown, Dev accuses Ragini of infidelity and informs her that it was Beera who told him so, and asks her to undergo a polygraph test to prove her claim to the contrary (similar to the *agni pariksha* or fire ordeal Sita underwent in the Ramayan), which shows a male chauvinistic approach. Furious, Ragini leaves Dev to meet Beera. When she does, she asks him what Beera had told Dev. Beera replies that he had said he protected Ragini for all the fourteen days and not anything else. They quickly realize Dev lied, hoping Ragini would lead him to his hideout. Dev appears with a police team and confronts the duo. Ragini tries to save Beera, but he pushes her out of the line of fire. He is shot multiple times. Raagini's true feelings come to surface when she tries to save Beera with all her might. Content that Raagini has feelings for him, Beera falls off the cliff to his death with a smile.

In Retrospect.....

Irrespective of whether or not one is a Marxist or is inclined to accept the possibility of such a view about the Ramayan, Mani Ratnam displays his genius yet again by so creatively interpreting an epic in such an unconventional fashion and improvising it in the contemporary context, relating it to the Naxalite movement. The story, if understood in that context, coupled with the awesome cinematography and music of the film, can be regarded as a classic of sorts in our opinion. However, the average person's lack of understanding of what the movie was trying to convey prevented it from doing well at the box office.