

The Prose Epic: A Comparative Analysis of Saraswathichandra and the Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa

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Abstract:

Today, it seems that Gujarat has forgotten the dual heritage of Govardhanram and Gandhi. One can only hope that the literary lovers and public servants of Gujarat will recognize their error and return to the path blazed by these two giants. Govardhanram's ambitious novel *Sarasvatichandra* has been evaluated as a "Puran," an "Epic," a "Comprehensive Tale," and a "Sacred Text." From one perspective, the central element is the "Human Element." The brilliance of Govardhanram's vision lies in capturing the creative deeds of a human soul without losing sight of cultural synthesis. While his novel contains many intellectual and cultural layers, the core is his intimate awareness of the human condition. In describing the "Poem of Renunciation" (Virah-ras), he reached the heights of modern literary art. As he noted in his own preface, he was aware that in creating this vast work.

I. Introduction: Sarasvatichandra as Prose Epic

The Gujarati poet Nhanalal, known as the father of Apadyagadya (free verse), had recognised *Sarasvatichandra* as a 'Mahanoval' (Great Novel). He included it among the great novels of the world to honor it, but this description is incomplete. *Sarasvatichandra* is not just a great novel; it is an epic in prose. There is a significant difference between the two. A novel is a story of individuals set against the backdrop of contemporary social life or a specific historical event. No matter how vast the social landscape, the center of the reader's attention remains the specific individual characters.

In contrast, an epic is the story of an entire people — a nation. It is a vision of their cultural history, of some revolutionary transformation, and of their internal insight or imaginative world; it is a vision of their soul. Such epics are very rare in World Literature. In the top tier, one can count Homer's *Iliad*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, along with our own *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. Only these four are counted globally in that category. *Sarasvatichandra* is such an epoch-making epic in prose.

Among the great novels of the West — Dickens, Balzac, Victor Hugo, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy — none possess the sublime manifestation of an epic. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* holds the highest position, yet it is a story of a few aristocratic families set against the backdrop of Napoleon's 1812 invasion. It is not an internal portrait of the Russian people as a whole. *Sarasvatichandra*, by contrast, is a multi-dimensional portrait of the epochal transformation that occurred in India during the last quarter of the 19th century. Its comparison can only be made with Valmiki's epoch-making *Ramayana*.

II. The Ramayana: Cultural and Spiritual Dawn

The Ramayana represents the dawn of the culture of the Vedic-origin Aryans. While the Vedas are the song of that culture's twilight, the Ramayana is the poetry of its morning. It is a wondrous, imaginative tale of ideals rising in an era where life revolved around the medium of sacrifice (yajña). It portrays a king who is a lover of Dharma, a lover of his kin, and devoted to his subjects — सर्वभूतहिते रताः (Devoted to the welfare of all beings).

In this atmosphere of brute-force worship, the people of Kosala established a new ideal of a restrained, Dharma-abiding, and justice-loving king. In the character of Rama, Valmiki gave the highest form to this ideal. Regarding the father-son relationship, there was once a sentiment known as the 'Oedipus Complex', which polluted all relationships of family life. In the character of Lakshmana, Valmiki has given a vivid picture of this sentiment of 'father-hatred'. When Dasharatha decides to exile Rama to fulfill the word given to Kaikeyi, Lakshmana roars in anger:

"The old king has become a slave to desire; his intellect has become perverted. He has become a child again. Any son who understands politics should ignore the words of such a father. One should abandon and even kill a father who has become an enemy under the influence of Kaikeyi."

Lakshmana's words were meant to hurt, but Rama remains calm. He calms Lakshmana with love. Anthropologists believe that in the primitive tribes of the prehistoric era, the authority of the elderly was so harsh and autocratic that young sons became independent only by killing them. The development of a family life based on restraint, mutual love, and cooperation out of such universal father-son hatred was a revolutionary transformation in human history. In the character of Rama, Valmiki imagined the manifestation of a consciousness that inspires this change.

III. The Dharmic Character of Rama and Sita

Rama and Sita have gained fame as the ideals of 'Dharma-conduct'. Rama's sense of Dharma is a natural, innate part of his character, while Sita's was nurtured by her parents. Yet both exhibit an effortless adherence to Dharma, free from the mental conflict that even Yudhishtira, considered the 'Son of Dharma' in the Mahabharata, experiences. To Kaikeyi, who asks Rama to fulfill the promise given by Dasharatha, Rama replies:

"O Queen, I do not wish to live in the world as a slave to Artha (material gain). Like the Rishis, I have accepted the path of pure Dharma. Rest assured, I would give up even my life to do something pleasing for my father."

When he goes from Kaikeyi's palace to his mother Kausalya's, he feels momentary pain thinking of her grief, but he does not let her laments stop him. He explains to her lovingly: 'Mother, I am unable to violate my father's command. I bow to you and beg you to be pleased. Give me your blessing for my well-being in the forest. I do not wish to gain the kingdom of the earth by taking shelter in Adharma (unrighteousness) for the sake of short-term happiness'.

Although Sita's sense of Dharma was cultivated by her parents, it became as natural to her as it was to Rama. She follows it with an effortless simplicity that perhaps even exceeds Rama's. When Rama tells her to stay in Ayodhya and describes her as 'one of small intellect' to dissuade her from the hardships of the forest, Sita replies:

"Rama, why are you saying this to me? It makes me laugh. My parents have given me full education on how and when I should behave. There is no need for you to tell me what I should do in this situation."

IV. The Spiritual Dimensions of Love: Rama and Sita

The union of Rama and Sita is like 'fragrance added to gold'. Sita's innate sense of Dharma meets Rama's loving heart. In the realm of love, the most beautiful relationship is the exclusive love between husband and wife. According to our ancient spiritual philosophy, the Supreme Universal Consciousness is in the form of Ardhanarishvara (the half-male, half-female form). Valmiki immortalized these spiritual values of the love between Rama and Sita in the Indian consciousness forever.

Valmiki makes the reader experience the extraordinary nature of Rama and Sita's love from the very beginning of their worldly life. Describing the happy days they spent in Ayodhya after their marriage, the poet writes: "Due to each other's beauty and virtues, their mutual love grew ever stronger. Rama's mind and heart were dedicated to Sita; in the same way, Rama was reflected in Sita's heart with double the love." Seeing a scene before him, Rama says to himself: "This goddess's mind is reflected in me, and mine in her."

It is as if two minds have become one. In the words of the English Romantic poet Shelley:

"One Spirit within two frames, One passion in twin hearts... One hope within two wills, One will beneath two overshadowing minds."

The love of Rama and Sita is not limited only to each other. Valmiki repeatedly calls Rama 'Devoted to the welfare of all beings' (सर्वभूतहिते रताः) and Sita 'One who speaks sweet words.' Their hearts remain free of malice even toward Kaikeyi or Ravana, who caused them the most harm.

V. Sita's Forgiveness and Non-Violence

Sita's power of non-violence becomes even clearer when compared with the vengefulness of Draupadi in the Mahabharata. After the Pandavas lose the second game of dice and go into exile, Krishna comes to visit them. Draupadi releases a torrent of grief and anger before him, crying: "I have no husband, no sons, no brothers, no father, and no other kin; even you, Krishna, are not mine, since you all tolerate the insult I suffered from those wretches." This was, and still is, the natural, primitive "animal instinct" of human nature. In Sita's behavior toward Ravana, there is not even a trace of this instinct.

Even during the ten months of unbearable daily harassment by the demonesses in Ravana's Ashoka Vatika, Sita did not utter a single word of criticism against Kaikeyi. She addresses Ravana in a low, humble voice, trying to turn him toward righteousness: "I am wedded to the Sati-dharma (the path of a devoted wife) and belong to another; I can never be your wife. Brother, understand true Dharma and follow it."

Sita's two greatest moments of forgiveness occur when Hanuman offers to kill the demonesses who tortured her and she declines, saying: "They were merely following the orders of their king, Ravana. Whether a person is sinful or virtuous, one should show compassion to all." And when Lakshmana, on Rama's orders, abandons her near Valmiki's ashram, she tells him: "Lakshmana, even though the King has abandoned me to a life of sorrow, do as he commands. Tell the citizens that they must always treat one another as brothers; that is their supreme Dharma."

Reading a scene from Shakespeare's King Lear, the 19th-century critic Coleridge felt like falling at Shakespeare's feet; a reader of the Ramayana feels a similar reverence for Valmiki upon reading these scenes of Sita's forgiveness.

VI. The Religion of Forgiveness and Its Social Context

The love and forgiveness displayed by Rama and Sita represented a significant "revolution" in the moral and spiritual journey of humanity. Before that era, the natural human tendency was of "revenge," as portrayed in Vyasa's character of Draupadi. However, the spiritual visions described in the Upanishads inspired a new "Human Religion" (Manav-dharma) in the hearts of the Rishis. Gautama Buddha later gave voice to this in his teachings: "Hatred is not ceased by hatred, but by love; this is the eternal law." Valmiki wrote the Ramayana to establish this new "Religion of Forgiveness."

This vision of the ancient Rishis toward Shakti (womanly power) changed during the era of the Smritis. Christianity considered woman the "weaker sex." Similarly, the writers of the Manusmriti expressed a lack of trust in the moral strength of women and created social

rules that restricted their independent personality. The reason for this distrust was the fear of Kama (Desire/Passion) and the hatred born from that fear. The authors of the Manusmriti gave the dictum “Ashtavarsha bhavet Gauri” — stating that a girl should be married by the age of eight — a rule that deprived the youth of a life-nourishing experience and made married life for women a burden of fear and misery.

VII. Saraswatichandra and the Parallel with Ramayana

Saraswatichandra is a “captivating and soul-filling” imaginative creation — an ultimate service to the Goddess of Speech, Saraswati, by a devotee like Govardhanram Tripathi. In it, he has given a profound, multi-layered picture of the “epochal transformation” occurring during his time — the meeting of Western and Indian cultures. He draws inspiration from our ancient spiritual tradition to create the light of a “Pure Sunrise” after the darkness of a “tragedy of character.”

The central theme of Govardhanram’s thought is the partnership of man and woman as “Dharma-sahachara” (co-practitioners of Dharma). In the ideal social system envisioned by ancient India, woman was given the dignified status of Sahadharmacharini (partner in Dharma) in the householder’s stage. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Maitreyi asks Yajnavalkya for the teaching of spiritual knowledge: “What shall I do with that wealth which will not make me immortal?” She became her husband’s companion even in the spiritual practice of the Vanaprastha (forest-dwelling) stage.

The “poison” in Kumud’s life was poured by the envy of Guman (the stepmother), who — much like Kaikeyi — was driven not by malice but by the greed to secure status for her own son, and the envy of the marital happiness of a daughter-in-law. This envy toward a daughter-in-law’s joy was a shadow living within many mothers in the Hindu society of that time. In the story of the Ramayana, the lust of Ravana took the life-sap of the “sweet-spoken” Sita as its victim. In the life-world of Saraswatichandra, it was the “dry” joint family system that sought a victim — and it found it in Kumud, who was like a modern literary incarnation of Sita.

VIII. The Characters of Saraswatichandra and Kumud

The one most responsible for the destruction of Kumud’s life-dream is Saraswatichandra himself. A scholar honored for his “Sattvic” and noble character, well-versed in both Sanskrit and English literature, he could not maintain a calm and steady mind in the face of his circumstances and took the impulsive step of leaving home. In this thought of Saraswatichandra, a tragic weakness of the Indian “Dharma-intellect” after the Smriti era is revealed. He tells Kumud, “All relationships, like father-son, are illusory, accidental, and transient.”

Kumud, with her subtle vision, analyzes the mental state of Saraswatichandra at the time he left home. She tells him: “A hidden, deep anger (Rosh) toward your father still exists in your heart; he is making you speak these words.” Govardhanram’s creative pen has drawn a picture of that crushed life that is filled with unbearable pain. A woman who has never experienced the first delightful spark of love with a young man might be able to endure a loveless marriage; countless women have done so. But Kumud had experienced that joy, and to be bound in a physical and social relationship with an uncultured man like Pramadadhan made her pain many times more unbearable than even the life-grievances of Sita.

Sita’s heart was eventually broken by the grievances of her life, and she was swallowed by the earth. Kumud, however, “drank” her life’s grievances with a sacrifice full of love. In return, she offered the “nectar” of her love not just to her kin, but to her entire homeland (Swadesh). In doing so, she became immortal, much like Maitreyi in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Kumud’s final words to her sister Kusum, “Take care of my Kusum,” are the only possible outcome for her worldly journey.

IX. Govardhanram’s Social and Political Vision

Govardhanram, through the character of the modern reformer Uddhatlal, gave a stinging description of the “premature old age” imposed on Indian society. In a letter to Chandrakant, Uddhatlal writes: “Our joint family system is the worst plague that destroys our countrymen all throughout the land and eats up all that is fair and fruitful in the world of our hopes.” Like the bird-symbol in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven,” Govardhanram drew a dark, ominous picture of this invisible shadow eroding the life of the common people.

In the novel, Govardhanram also provides a detailed discussion of “Rajadharma” (Statecraft) in the modern era. His brilliant intellect outlines a plan for a “Kalyan-gram” (Welfare Village), expanding the ancient ideal of the Dharma-protecting king into a modern context of social and cultural progress. It is a visionary glimpse into the future of a “Welfare State.”

However, there is one limitation in Govardhanram’s political thought: his focus remained primarily on the upliftment of the upper classes. That broader vision was later developed by Mahatma Gandhi, who drew similar inspiration from the cultural ideals of the Ramayana. Gandhi dedicated his life to the “Sarvodaya Yajna” (the sacrifice for the welfare of all), extending love and friendship to the Shudras, forest-dwellers, and even the “demons” (the metaphorical enemies).

X. Conclusion

This prose-epic is the reflection of Govardhanram's brilliant intellect and a soaring flight of high poetic imagination. In its parallel with the Ramayana, Saraswatichandra demonstrates that the highest literary art need not be confined to verse. Govardhanram used the values established by the story of Rama and Sita to purify the intellectual distortions of his time. The alchemy of Truth, Love, and Beauty present in Valmiki's forest-hermitage world finds its modern echo in the caves and peaks of Sundargiri.

Just as the Ramayana established a "Religion of Forgiveness" for its era, Saraswatichandra established a vision of renewal for 19th-century India. Both works endure because they hold up an ideal of human nature that transcends the specific circumstances of their composition and speaks to the universal aspirations of the human soul.

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