

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana: Osama Bin Laden's Salvation, or: Why we celebrate Diwali

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

On 15 November 2001, Hindus all over the world celebrate the festival of Diwali, the festival of lights. It is not only one of the most popular Hindu festivals but also one of the few that non-Hindus are aware of. Ashutosh Vardhana, a Hindu writer living in England, puts the ancient festival into a topical context.

Ashutosh Vardhana:

Osama Bin Laden's Salvation or: Why we celebrate Diwali

This year we celebrate Diwali (15 November 2001) in troubled times. Diwali is a celebration of victory, but we have not achieved victory yet, we do not know the enemy. The struggle, like the struggle between good and evil in our hearts, will continue forever. In the story there is victory: in reality, as long as we live there will always be battle.

All Hindus know the story of Lord Rama. Lord Vishnu, God, was born on this earth as Rama, son of a king, grew up as a prince, fought with demons as a young man, showed his valour, married Sita, the most beautiful and loyal woman on earth and was about to be made king when his father wanted to retire. Then because of an unwise unconditional promise the king had made to one of his wives, Rama's brother had to become king, and Rama and Sita, without batting an eyelid, went into exile for fourteen years so that their father could keep his promise and his honour.

While in exile, Sita was abducted by the demon Ravana and hidden in a grove in Lanka. Rama formed alliances, pursued the monster,

found Sita, fought a battle with Ravana and killed him. Rama and Sita returned to their capital Ayodhya.

On Diwali, the festival of lights, we, with the people of Ayodhya, celebrate that triumphant return and welcome Rama and Sita into our hearts.

These are the plain facts as written down (with many more details, adventures and teachings) a few thousand years ago and remembered from even long before that.

Now we can run through the story a second time since everything repeats itself.

On Diwali we celebrate the return of a beloved from exile. In the olden days it was a king. A king who was also God: Lord Rama and his wife Sita, the Goddess, an incarnation of Lakshmi Devi, goddess of wealth.

Rama had proved his strength and military skill when, still a boy, he defeated the demons in the Dandaka forest. He proved his humility, obedience, love for his parents and unselfish sense of honour, when he, without a murmur of protest, went into a fourteen-year exile and gave his kingdom to his brother, so that a promise made unwisely by his father could be honoured.

This sense of honour is one which is more concerned with one's duties than one's rights. When we admire Rama's military prowess, it is an incentive for us today to be exemplary in the pursuit of our professions, be it as window cleaners and factory workers, or as engineers, computer programmers, doctors, lawyers, teachers &c.

Rama showed his love for his wife Sita when she had been abducted by the Ten-headed Monster Ravana. Some of our politicians are convinced that that's what Bin Laden looks like and it was him who took Sita away and hid her in a cave in Afghanistan. So that's how we will continue the modern version of the story.

'I'll smoke the bastard out,' said Rama, 'even if it's the last thing I do on earth.' He was fully human, so he not only sobbed about the loss of his beloved Sita, but he also had to show that he knew how to be angry. A good soldier swears, even if he is a former American president, a king or a god.

A skilled diplomat, Lord Rama knew the value of loyal friends, he made alliances with many nations including a tribe of monkeys and their Prime Minister Sugriva, who spoke English with a British accent and offered to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with Lord Rama in this conflict.

General Hanuman with his bears and monkeys (a.k.a. paratroopers, special forces, and SAS [shoot-assess-shoot] troops) set out to find the monster in jungles and caves. The pigeons (a.k.a. Stealth Bombers) and other birds (a.k.a. spy planes) supported

him as well, especially the valiant king of the vultures, Jatayu, who died when trying to rescue Sita from Ravana.

Eventually Rama's secret agents (CIA and FBI) tracked her down to Lanka (a.k.a. Afghanistan). A terrible battle ensued, in which there were many civilian casualties, apart from the many soldiers who died.

When Hanuman was on a scouting mission in the holy city of Mazar-I-Sharif (a.k.a. Lanka), the demons arrested him as a spy (which he was), dipped his tail into tar and set it on fire. They thought that was a good joke. But it backfired on them. Hanuman freed himself and raced over the rooftops of the city vigorously wagging his tail, thus causing a firestorm (he was the son of the Windgod Vayu), which destroyed the beautiful city. This was called 'collateral damage'.

Well, we all have known the story from childhood. But today we can see it on our television screens, and it is not even called Ramayana as it used to be, it is called 'THE TEN O'CLOCK EVENING NEWS'. God is everywhere!

The story is ancient, and it is as modern as can be!

When Rama had had enough of fighting, he killed Ravana by shooting an Exocet Missile into his gigantic stomach because that is where, as in many of us, Ravana's soul resided.

But Ravana was a noble demon. He was obsessed with hatred of God (like some people are obsessed with hatred of America). He worshipped God as an enemy. Our scripture, the Shrimad Bhagavatam, says repeatedly that this is one of the accepted forms of worship.

We can worship God as our child (Bala Krishna), as our lover, as our friend, as our mother, as our father, and as our enemy: (S)HE is so great that (S)HE accepts us whichever way we approach him/her.

But worshipping God as an enemy is not for ordinary people. It is not the same as being lazy, selfish, greedy or criminal. So don't choose that road to God if you are nothing but a stupid lout! It'll get you straight to hell!

Worshipping God as an enemy is hard and implies a lot of effort and suffering for the person who takes it. The righteous and the self-righteous will punish him for what he does in his battle against God. That is **their** duty. The enemy of God has a duty of his own. He has to out-manoeuvre God. He has to put up with (and try to catch and counter, of course) the weapons God throws at him. And they are awful, as can be seen right now over Afghanistan.

Therefore we normal people (we ain't all saints or heroes) had better chose a simpler way of worshipping God, e.g. as mother,

father, lover, friend - by being 'good' rather than by being 'bad'.

However, Lord Rama respected Ravana's devotion to the battle. He considered Ravana a noble foe. As HE shot him in the stomach, Ravana's soul came out, Lord Rama breathed it in, Ravana was instantly united with God, he had obtained moksha, liberation. This is what Christians call 'salvation' or 'heaven' and Muslims call 'paradise'.

We celebrated the defeat of Ravana on the festival of Dashera (or Vijaya Dashmi; 26 October this year) on the day after the end of Navaratri.

Lord Rama needed nineteen days (in Afghanistan it will take much longer) to tidy up the battle field, bury the dead, pay compensation to widows and orphans, distribute humanitarian aid, and install a 'broadly based democratic government' in Lanka. Ravana's brother, a good demon, was made king.

Then Rama returned to his own capital, Ayodhya, where his people were eagerly waiting for him. His exile was over, after fourteen years the people were reunited with their beloved king.

This was the beginning of the golden age in the kingdom of Ayodhya, a reign of justice and freedom, of love and prosperity.

When we argue about politics, when we make our political decisions, even when we vote, which is as close to politics as most of us ever ever get, then these are some of the ideals we are trying to bring about. We never do it quite as perfectly as Lord Rama did in that golden age, but at least that is something to aim for.

When we see someone who is consumed with hatred for what we consider good, e.g. God (or 'God's Own Country'), then we can always think of Ravana and remember that **nobody** is purely bad, not even if he hurts us badly. On the contrary, all that hatred will have had a cause (nothing, except God, is without cause), and even extreme hatred may well be driven by a noble soul.

This does not mean that Ravana did not have to be killed. Sometimes even noble souls have to be killed, if they are too noble for this world. We may have to kill Ravana and his cohorts, dismantle his terrorist networks, but we can do so with compassion, and there is no need to be outraged or self-righteous when we do so.

NOTE

The story of Lord Rama was written down in Valmiki's Sanskrit epic 'Ramayana' and in the 15th century Hindi epic Ramayana by Tulsidas. Lengthy summaries (re-tellings) of these epics have been published in many western languages.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashutosh Vardhana grew up in Europe and lives in Yorkshire, England. He studied at London University. He is a keen student of comparative religion and now writes fiction, poetry and essays. He has produced many academic publications. His 'creative' work has been published in Dipika (London), Writers' Forum (Bournemouth, UK), Scavenger (Osage City, Kansas, USA), The World of English (Peking) and Pphoo Magazine (Calcutta).

Four of his stories on Hindu festivals can at present be found on the Web:

<http://www.tudo.co.uk/hindustories/index.html>
link to be up-dated