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‘The Scion of Ikshvaku’: A Forum for Debate on Contemporary Issues

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Abstract:

Valmiki’s Ramayana and most other versions depict Ram as Lord Vishnu’s earthly incarnation. But, Amish in his “Scion of Ikshvaku” has completely humanised not merely Ram but also the environment in which he is born. Ayodhya is in shambles and is rife with court intrigues. Born to the displeasure of his own father, Dasharath, and disliked by both the elite and the masses of Ayodhya, Ram faces the hurt and humiliation stoically and yet wins over everyone’s hearts. He prepares himself for shouldering the responsibility that Guru Vasishtha predicts will ultimately fall on him. Amish exploits this milieu to provoke debate on current issues, ideologies, schools of thought and perspectives, challenges and dilemmas regarding political views, the role of the State, law, crime and punishment, the caste system, women’s empowerment and environmental conservation in a brilliant manoeuvre making it more relatable to contemporary times.

Keywords: Ram, law, crime, punishment, change, women’s empowerment, debate, ideology, State, man-woman relationship, environment.

INTRODUCTION:

Amish’s novel, ‘The Scion of Ikshvaku’ weaves its way through an Ayodhya that is shorn of its splendour and is ruled by a king who is a shadow of his former powerful self (Dasharath). Mired in superstition and manipulated by his favourite wife Kaikeyi, he emerges from the throes of the defeat at the hands of Raavan, the general of Lanka’s trader king, Kubaer, only in the concluding chapters of the novel. Neglecting his duties and his able son, Ram, he affords ample opportunity for court intrigues. The elite become powerful and crime rises sharply.

True, numerous retellings of the epic have viewed the main characters from different perspectives. However, nothing in this novel is an unravelling of the Grand Scheme of things. The fulfilment of Lord Ram’s destiny occurs through magical events and mythical figures. But, here, every event and decision is backed by either human logic or emotion. Each of his deftly-carved human characters plans, plots or manipulates. Ram is the lone being who strives to adhere to his guru’s principles of Truth, Duty and Honour. Undoubtedly, this is the highlight of this retold version.

However, Amish scores over other retellings in that modifications made to conventional narrations of a beloved saga transform it into a forum for discussion. He casts the characters in completely human moulds and tweaks the situations they find themselves in to render the narration more credible, logical and relatable to contemporary Indian society. Anthropogenic acts and thoughts play an important role in the unfolding of the course of events in this modern-day interpretation of an age-old saga. So, how is the whole schema designed to accommodate questions on ideology, schools of thought, challenges and present-day problems? This paper attempts to identify the questions and issues raised in this retelling of a popular epic.

DISCUSSION:

Humans as Gods:

Lord Ram was born with divine qualities in a supportive environment to slay demons, particularly Raavan, the demon-king of Lanka. All the forces of the Universe collaborated with Him to facilitate the fulfilment of this purpose. But, Amish's Ram is a mere man and suffers like an ordinary mortal right from his birth. All are humans here – the gods included. Here, Brahma is the Creator and a great scientist, whose disciples had evolved into the tribe of the Brahmins, dedicating their lives to the pursuit of knowledge and rendering selfless service to society.

The next is Lord Parshu Ram, worshipped as the sixth Vishnu. "Periodically, when a way of life became inefficient, corrupt or fanatical, a new leader emerged, who guided his people to an improved social order. Vishnu was an ancient title accorded to the greatest of leaders, idolised as the Propagators of Good. The Vishnus were worshipped like Gods." (37) When the Age of the Kshatriya had degenerated into vicious violence, Lord Parshu Ram, the previous Vishnu, had guided India out of it and established the Age of Brahmin, an age of knowledge. This is a deviation from the established myth of Lord Parshu Ram wreaking terrible vengeance on the Kshatriyas for their slaying of his father, *Rishi* Jamadagni. But, Amish's Parshu Ram, like the other Vishnus, is a human initiator of a new social order.

Lord Rudra is, here, the previous Mahadev. 'Mahadev' was a title conferred on the Destroyers of Evil rather than Lord Shiva in Hindu mythology. By identifying and weeding out the Evil, the Mahadev would make way for a new way of life based on the Good guided by the Vishnu. Intriguingly, to enable an objective perusal of the existing conditions and identification of evil, he had to be an outsider. So, Lord Rudra hailed from a land beyond the western borders of India: Pariha (ancient Persia or modern-day Iran).

This re-modelling of the Trinity into anthropoid forms signifies a realistic possibility – that of humans handling the tasks allocated to gods in mythology. Human beings can rise to the status of gods by becoming leaders who substitute anarchy with stability and order, by tapping the strength, potency and the potential for the so-called divine qualities within themselves. In

short, humans with extraordinary leadership qualities would direct society towards positive change and would, hence, be worshipped as gods. In fact, Amish mentions the belief that the *Paramatma* (the Supreme Being), inhabited every being, animate and inanimate. “Some men and women were able to awaken the *Paramatma* within, and thus become Gods”(35)

The Role of Faith and Enlightenment:

Thus arises the question – Is faith in a Super-human power not a causal factor in life? Is human effort all-important? Or again, is it a blend of the two that can eventually pave the path to personal and societal well-being? It could also signify that extraordinary personalities who eventually become leaders truly realise the *Upanishadic* goal of “*Aham Brahmasmi*” (I am Brahma). This is the realisation that the individual soul is a part of The Supreme Soul. The Hindu *Ashrama* system refers to the four stages of life –student, householder, withdrawal from social and familial life to indulge in contemplation in the hermitage and finally, renunciation by the homeless mendicant. When the above realisation occurs at the prime of life and not towards the end as prescribed by the Hindu *Ashrama* system, it paves the way for the achievement of the larger good and not merely for the emancipation of the individual soul from ‘*samsara*’ (worldly life). Isn’t assigning a higher priority to altruism rather than to individual enlightenment, then, more in tandem with the order of life set by the Universe? Rather than discovering the God within towards the end of life for personal benefit (attaining *moksha*), Amish’s exemplary leaders tap their potential for the Divine when they are still active in worldly life so that they may contribute towards the group’s welfare.

Religious Harmony:

A slight hint of harmony among the different sects of Hinduism surfaces when Amish turns Ram, a frontrunner in the race for the status of the next Vishnu, into a devotee of Lord Rudra. Though both Vishnu and Rudra are human here, yet one can infer from this reading that the converging of the two disparate beliefs in one’s mind leads to harmony.

Social Change, the Guiding Ideology and the Ideal Leadership:

Though, essentially, the reinterpretation of the nature of gods presupposes the age-old conflict between Good and Evil, Amish employs it to emphasise the importance of planned social change. The discussions between firstly, Ram and Guru Vasishtha, secondly, between Ram and Bharat and thirdly, between Sita and Bharat afford ample opportunity for debate regarding the particular stream of socio-political thought that should guide such engineering of social change. That Ayodhya is in a state of decline is beyond doubt. As Bharat points out, “We are a civilisation in an advanced state of decay.”(73)

India is in need of planned change to lift it from the morass it has sunk into. But, what should the new social order be based on? Which ideology shall guide the new establishment in

its endeavour to establish not merely a strong political unit but a more egalitarian society? Don't we sense resonances of contemporary dilemmas in these questions that haunt Ram?

Bharat contends, "We need a king who can create systems with which one can harness even selfish human nature for the betterment of society." (73) But, Ram believes that "We need a great leader, one who will lead by example" rather than one who will grant liberty to his people to act as they desire. But, Bharat reiterates that Indians are too free-spirited and cannot be bound by convention for long. Here again, we can recognise the two divergent ideas as being parallel to the two major streams of contemporary Indian political ideology.

Clearly, Bharat's solution is in direct contrast to Ram's. Ram contends that giving free rein to each person to realise his dreams will result in clashes where individual aims are in contradiction with one another. Bharat advocates government protection of the interests of the weak to prevent the strong from always winning. Guru Vasishtha feels that Shatrughan's prescription to allow the strong to compete and win will usher in the law of the jungle and wipe out the weak. Shatrughan argues that it's Nature's way of maintaining balance and that the government should not interfere with it. Instead, it "should merely establish systems that ensure the protection of the weak, giving them a fair chance of survival." Beyond that, it is every individual's responsibility to strive to achieve his/her dreams. (84) Are Bharat and Shatrughan for laissez-faire while Ram is for greater State control, a welfare State, one with socialist leanings, perhaps?

The 'masculine' vs. the 'feminine' way of life:

In the course of a discussion with Guru Vasishtha, Ram learns about the features of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' ways of life. The feminine guarantees "freedom, passion and beauty. At its best, it is compassionate, creative and especially nurturing towards the weak". On the other hand, "the masculine way of life is defined by truth, duty and honour. At its peak, masculine civilisations are "efficient, just and egalitarian". Ram discovers that both masculine and feminine ways of life are liable to decline. As masculine civilisations move towards decline, "they become fanatical, rigid and especially harsh towards the weak." But, "as feminine civilisations decline, they tend to become corrupt, irresponsible and decadent". (85) Though this is in the context of early Indian history, can't we relate this to the typical dilemma every Indian voter faces today?

In the course of training the four princes for donning the mantle for administration and governance of Ayodhya in the future, Guru Vasishtha raises the question of the merits and demerits of the 'masculine' and 'feminine' ways of thinking for debate. Guru Shukracharya had "transformed marginalised Indian royals into the greatest conquering force of all time". He firmly held that the "*Ekam*" was the only True God" and all other manifestations were false, leading people into 'maya, the illusion'. It worked initially, obliterating all divisions within the

asuras. Guru Vasishtha explains to Ram how the previous ‘masculine’ order adopted by the ‘*Asuras*’ under Guru Shukracharya (they aren’t the mythical ‘*Rakshasas*’ here) grew inflexible, eliminating the spirit of questioning and freedom. Anyone who refused to subscribe to their way of worship i.e., to the ‘*Ekam*’ (the One God) was persecuted. Here, we detect elements of modern-day fundamentalism. A particular group tends to literally interpret specific scriptures, dogmas or ideologies and expects these to be followed at any cost. It doesn’t tolerate change. As a result, strong feelings of in-group and out-group distinctions develop. “As their numbers grew, their storm troopers let loose a reign of terror, tearing down temples, smashing idols and shrines, slaughtering those who persisted with the practice of worshipping other Gods” (92)

This rigidity was unacceptable to even some among the *asuras*. So, finally, the ‘feminine’ way of thinking succeeded in eclipsing the ‘masculine’ and confining it to obscurity. This was in consonance with the law of nature, according to Guru Vasishtha, who subscribes to the cyclical theory of change. Ayodhya is, at that point of time, a feminine civilisation on the brink of decline. According to Vasishtha, the cyclical nature of change implies that the time is ripe for the re-emergence of the masculine way of life.

A modified ‘masculine’ ideology:

Interestingly, Ram contemplates a different solution - the way of the *Asuras* is a possible answer to India’s current problems. But, “the *Asura* way cannot and should not be replicated. Some improvements are necessary. Questioning must be encouraged. And, it has to be tailored to suit our current circumstances”.(93) Is this Amish’s suggestion for reforming and stabilising contemporary Indian polity and society? How viable is his model?

“.....exclusivist thought can easily lapse into intolerance and rigidity, especially in times of trouble” and the feminine way fails “to unite their own behind a larger cause”(93) besides releasing its supporters from accountability. Realising this, Ram proposes a modification of the masculine way of life. Once rid of its rigidity and fundamentalism, it could strengthen Ayodhya and restore it to its former glory. Here, we witness Ram’s efforts to stem the natural flow of change and channelise it in a specified direction – in other words, he is for planned social change, for engineering change to lend stability to the polity.

Resistance to change and a strong leadership:

He is Guru Vasishtha’s chosen candidate for the revolutionary change that the latter aims at ushering in. “...patriots are often called traitors by the very people they choose to serve, till history passes the final judgment.” (39) We are reminded that change elicits resistance and that the value of a leader’s pioneering policies and projects is appreciated only by posterity. For bringing about change, what is required is a leader’s foresight. People’s hindsight only vindicates him.

The normative system and maintenance of order:

Ram's insistence on adherence to law is the first step towards the creation of the new social order that he plans to construct on the basis of the rudimentary guiding principle of the masculine way of life. He is, however, denied the opportunity to handle foreign affairs which would have firmly established his candidature for kingship. Instead, he is charged with the relatively low-profile responsibility of maintaining law and order in Ayodhya. Nevertheless, he neither mopes nor conspires. Instead, like a true leader, he consolidates the laws that govern Ayodhya. First and foremost, he eliminates the confusion which the multiplicity of law-books (the different *Smritis*) have created through the contradictory laws accumulated over the centuries. He prepares a fresh law code by studying the *Smritis* and carefully selecting laws that are fair, coherent, simple and relevant to the times, rendering all the others obsolete. Besides, he erects stone tablets inscribed with these laws at all of Ayodhya's temples. Ignorance of law can't be a legitimate excuse for crime anymore (117).

When Guru Vasishtha mentions how the centuries-old distancing of the foresters (under Chief Varun) from the descendants of Ikshvaku is strictly followed, though bereft of purpose, does he want obsolete laws to be discarded? Ram implements this view as Custodian of Law in Ayodhya. Don't we also need to follow this advice today?

Don't Ram's reforms also reflect the importance of the normative system in maintaining order in society? Sociologist Emile Durkheim believed that the more one has, the more one needs. This human tendency is unlike that of animals that are satiated once their biological needs are fulfilled. So, the insatiability of human desires can be reined in only by "external controls, i.e., societal control. When social regulations break down, the controlling influence of society on individual propensities is no longer effective and individuals are left to their own devices. He labels this state of affairs 'anomie'. Isn't this similar to Bharat's perception of the state of Ayodhya? Are we headed towards the direction of 'anomie'? Is a restructured 'masculine' way the only escape-route?

Ram not only provides clarity to the laws but also takes measures to ensure impartial law-enforcement. "He gave the police force the power to implement the law without any fear or favour", for, he realises that he can instil respect for the police in people's minds only when they "unhesitatingly took action against any law-breaker, high and mighty though he may be..." (117) Besides, Ram demonstrates by personal example that the law applies equally to him. Isn't this a direct reference to the current situation where the elite, when found guilty escape "by exploiting the loopholes and contradictions" in the law? "What did get the elite into a tizzy was Ram's intervention in cases where members of the nobility attempted to browbeat the police when the law caught up with them. They were aghast that they were being brought to book, but soon understood that there would be no leniency." (118) Should our leaders summon the courage to lead by example even if it results in loss of support of the elite so vital for gaining or remaining

in power today? Enforcement of the law sans any discrimination in emulation of Ram will fulfil the egalitarian principles enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

Crime, justice and punishment:

Anyway, Ram's strategies succeed in ensuring justice. "Crime rates collapsed as criminals were either thrown in jail or speedily executed. Innocents were increasingly spared in a city that steadily became safer. Women began to venture out alone at night. Ram was rightfully credited with this dramatic improvement in their lives." (118) So, though Ram incurs the wrath of the elite, the masses begin to adore him which will stand him in good stead in the succession process. This accentuates how, to this day, disconnect with the masses is detrimental to a leader's success.

Yet, it is this very insistence on adherence to law that proves to be a thorn in the flesh for Ram. It prevents the securing of justice for the dead Roshni, his *rakhi*-sister and Manthara's daughter. Dhenuka, the son of the Isla village chief and the key criminal behind her brutal gang-rape and heinous murder can't be sentenced to death unlike the others, on the ground of his juvenile status. In intense agony over Roshni's grisly end, (a vivid resonance of the Nirbhaya gang-rape case of 2012), the hapless Ram can only inflict injury upon himself. He rues his impotency in getting the guiltiest punished owing to a legal technicality. In the process, he invites the fury of the masses baying for Dhenuka's blood, but still refuses to budge from his stand. This also builds up unquenchable vengeance against him in Manthara.

Compounding the importance of the crime was the fact that Roshni was respected by both the masses and the classes, having devoted her life to charity. "Many compared her to the fabled *Kanyakumari*, the Virgin Goddess. The rage that this crime generated was unprecedented. The city demanded retribution". (143) But, when the law fails to punish the offender, Manthara plots a cold-blooded murder, securing Kaikeyi's complicity. To avenge Roshni's inhuman murder, Bharat clandestinely gets Dhenuka out from prison and kills him in as brutal a manner as Dhenuka has in Roshni's case. As Shatrughan puts it, "This may be against the law, but it is just." (163) Should we deduce that law and justice are not co-travellers on a single path but have adopted divergent routes? Can this ensure societal well-being? Amish answers this question through Sita's words – "Remember, justice in terms of 'right' and 'wrong' is a man-made concept. It is entirely up to us to define justice in new terms of what is fair or unfair. It will be for the greater good." (291)

Punishment for Juvenile Offenders:

At the time of writing of the novel, the issue of the prime accused in the 2012 Delhi gang-rape case being relegated to a juvenile corrective institution for three years had caught the nation's attention. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 was passed to treat juveniles between 16 and 18 on par with an adult (but in the Children's Court) owing to the

startling spurt in heinous crimes by adolescents. Supporters of this move point out that the altered socio-cultural environment of today advances the onset of sexual awareness and ruthlessness and hence necessitates such a step.

Yet, arguments against it also exist. One is that the cerebral parts governing impulsivity, judgment, foresight of consequences, etc., that make people morally culpable, fully develop only by age 22 according to some neuropsychologists. Hence, any individual below this age can't be held responsible for a completely conscious perpetration of any crime, however heinous it may be. As a corollary, he can't be punished for it. Another highlights the complexities resulting from interconnectedness of laws. With the age of consent remaining unchanged, it comes into direct conflict with this change. How is elopement by a minor to be dealt with? Besides, the provision for a Juvenile Justice Board to decide every individual adolescent offender's eligibility for being tried as an adult may result in procedural arbitrariness.

Amish elucidates the pivotal role of laws in the foresters' community near Guru Vasistha's ashram when he explains how the foresters instil obedience to laws right from childhood. Vasishtha points out, "Their commitment to law ... is based on one of the most powerful impressions in a human being: the childhood memory of guilt. The first time a child breaks a law in their society, however inconsequential it may be, he's made to suffer; every child. Any recurrent breach of the law results in further shaming."(61-62). In the same breath, Vasishtha mentions that one may believe that there may be no harm in occasionally breaking a minor law, especially if it's for the Greater Good. So, doesn't Amish encourage us to ponder over these two contradictory principles, especially as we apply it to juveniles?

Perspectives and theories concerning the objective behind punishment:

How can they be applied to Dhenuka's case and in extension, to the juvenile accused in the 2012 Delhi case? Dhenuka's torturous death can be explained by all theories of punishment except the reformatory one. Even Ram doesn't vouch for the latter! Though deterrent and compensatory, it is primarily retributive. The latter curbs individual vengeance but gives vent to it through State effort in the form of punishment. It ignores the responsibility of removal of the crime's causes.

However, the reformatory theory of punishment believes that prison-stay must re-cast a criminal's character in a mould compatible with societal well-being. Yet, such punishment is ineffective in cases where crime is an ineradicable instinct. Advocates of this theory consider all modes of punishment other than imprisonment and probation as barbaric. Amish presents this perspective through the market-place episode which Ram and Lakshman witness, where Sita protects a boy-thief from mob fury only to allow law to take its course.

But, there are also critics of this theory, who state that in a country like India, the poverty-stricken may consider a comfortable prison-stay welcome! This is more likely to abet rather than abate crime! Amish's introduction of Roshni's character and her brutal gang-rape intends to provoke introspection and action regarding these factors.

Flexibility as a leader's attribute:

At the individual level, should Ram have shown flexibility in the application of law in Dhenuka's case, as the latter's atrocities exceed even the heinous? Or, should a leader be lauded for strict adherence to law even at the risk of losing his popularity and probably, his chances to bag the crown? Though the acts of Manthara and Bharat appear reasonable in view of the extent of the brutality and the heinousness of the crime against Roshni, can every citizen choose to follow the rule of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"? Does owing strict allegiance to the law make an individual an unfeeling person? How far can one bend the laws without shattering its spirit?

Individual Responsibility:

Bharat contends that the tendency of the Ayodhyans to hold Raavan responsible for their kingdom's ruin is inherent in human nature, for it reflects a reluctance to look inward and accept responsibility for the self-created chaos. Isn't it a pointer to our own current selves in unambiguous terms? If Ayodhyans are represented as hypocrites, criticising corruption in others, but blind to their own dishonesty, it's undoubtedly a mirror that Amish is holding up for contemporary Indian society and polity to look into.

Secularism:

Is a reference to the separation of the State and the Church also implicit in Amish's retelling? When Ram considers Law all-important, another facet emerges – that a polity/society built on laws eliminates the disadvantage of rigidity that is inherent in one based on faith. "...keeping the spiritual separate from the material..." makes it possible to amend laws in tandem with changing times. But, "when times change, as they inevitably do, one finds it impossible to give up on one's faith; in fact, one clings to it with renewed vigour." (207) So, a State based on faith will invariably be a rigid one. Isn't Amish advocating a separation of religion from the State to transform it into a truly secular one in the Western interpretation of the term?

Anti-War:

Amish's revised version of the demoness Tadaka's episode appears to be anti-war. *Rishi* Valmiki enlists Ram's services for the slaying of the *Asuras* under Tadaka. But, Ram convinces Tadaka and her son, Subahu, to migrate with the *Malayaputras'* assistance, to *Pariha*, the land far beyond India's western borders, the *Vayuputras'* abode. When Valmiki at first, resents this solution, Ram replies that "the laws of Ayodhya, which I always obey, clearly state that if the

weak have not broken any law, then it is the duty of the strong to protect them". Thereby, he establishes the value of "a practical, non-confrontational solution" to disputes and emphasises the value of peace. (201)

Role of Politics and Economics:

However, an extreme distancing from politics, alliances and intrigues is impractical. A total surrender to learning, as exemplified by the kingdom of Mithila, is untenable. In fact, Ram's marriage to Sita, the daughter of Mithila's king, Janaka, raises eyebrows. Shouldn't primary attention be paid to defence, infrastructure, consolidation of power through allies and economic development? When Ram ponders over the impoverishment of all the kingdoms of the Sapt Sindhu through trade with Lanka, isn't Amish hinting at the Achilles' heel of every State – the economy? (219) After all, isn't this reminiscent of the European conquest of India through trade from the 16th century onwards?

Sita's ideal State:

Sita's views are immensely contemporary. Unlike Ram, she felt that mere promotion of equality before the law would not solve society's problems. Granting freedom to every individual to choose his calling based on the unique talent that he is endowed with would make a significant difference. Ascribing his societal status on the basis of the caste that he is born into turns him into a disgruntled element. "If we don't destroy the caste system as it exists today, we will open ourselves to attacks from foreigners. They will use our divisions to conquer us". (289) Today, though insidious strategies like privatisation, capitalism, globalisation and monoculture have replaced direct conquest, Sita's stance remains equally relevant.

Solutions to eliminate the caste system:

Sita's prescription for the removal of the caste system's ills is futuristic. Incidentally, references to the caste system are scattered throughout the novel. One instance is King Dasharath's disdain for Kubaer, the obese trader from Lanka – "the classic effete Vaishya" (12). Delineating the ways in which ascription of socio-economic status to an individual can be obliterated, Sita explains that the State must compulsorily adopt all the children of the kingdom at the time of birth and equip them with education besides honing their natural skills. The State should, then, assign a caste to them at the age of fifteen, based on the results of an examination that would assess their physical, mental and psychological skills and impart specialised training to develop these innate skills. Subsequently, citizens of the same caste as the one assigned to them would adopt them. This would eliminate the parents' vicarious realisation of their ambition through their children – a tendency most closely related to modern times.

Despite the resemblance to the communal child-rearing and education at the early Israeli kibbutz, Sita's system differs from it radically in that the children's ties with their birth-parents are permanently severed from; they won't be returned to them. Like Ram, we are left with the

feeling that it's too harsh a solution though a fair one. In fact, in the case of the Israeli kibbutz, parents were even allowed to visit their children. In spite of this concession, most children were believed to be discontented with the early disconnect with parents. Is Amish offering his prescription for the scrapping of the inflexible caste rules through Sita? But, when communism has witnessed decline in the politico-economic sphere itself, how far will its intrusion into the familial sphere be tolerated?

Gender Sensitivity and Women's Empowerment:

How can one ignore the modern treatment of women in a novel with so wide a canvas?! Ram has reformed Ayodhya to such an extent that it has turned into a place where women can move about safely at night. Perhaps, Amish is questioning moral policing. When Amish refers to the women of Chief Varun's tribe being empowered in terms of sexual licence, does he intend to apply this implication of the term 'empowerment' to modern times too? Nevertheless, he speaks of how tradition binds the tribal women to marry within their community (77). Does he wish to highlight the resilience of endogamy and arranged marriages and the incompatibility of these with women's empowerment? Ironically however, despite all the talk about empowerment, he believes (through the words of the tribal girl, Radhika) – "Why would a girl not enjoy an elegant compliment to her beauty?" (76)

Ram was appalled at society not valuing capable women. For instance, though Kaikeyi was more capable than her brother, she wasn't handed over the reins of the administration (71-72). Isn't this a reflection of the predominantly patrilineal nature of Indian society? Her efforts at vicariously realising her ambitions through plotting to secure kingship for her son Bharat also mirrors the average Indian woman's predicament.

When Dhenuka wrongly surmises that the gallivanter Bharat empathises with him, Bharat utters in a menacing voice and gritted teeth – "Women are not meant to be used. They are meant to be loved" (162)

It is evident that Amish favours women's activism. Dhenuka's father, the chief of Isla, is "beaten black and blue by the women of his village" (143) when he attempts to protect his son in the wake of Roshni's fatal gang-rape.

A dreamlike man-woman relationship:

Ram's belief in woman's mental abilities being equal to that of men (Amish 213) and his idea of an ideal wife are stunning in impact! She should be one "who is better than I am; a woman who will compel me to bow my head in admiration". In an age of demands for equality in the man-woman relationship, Amish goes a step further and speaks of the man acknowledging and even appreciating a wife's superior qualities! Ram explains that "a relationship is not just for

fun, it is also about trust and the knowledge that you can depend on your partner. Relationships based on passion and excitement do not last” (79).

The journey of his admiration for Sita commences from the episode at Mithila’s marketplace where a mob is after a boy-thief’s blood and is in no mood to yield to the orders of even the Princess to hand him over to the law. Ram senses that Sita needs no chivalry from any man’s side, for he realises that she is capable of not mere self-defence but also mob-control. Don’t many modern women frown upon a man’s patronising attitude towards them?

Her adherence to law, her being a fellow Rudra-devotee, her courage in single-handedly dispersing the mob, not to speak of her perfectly feminine face contrasting with the battle-wounds on her warrior’s body – all conspire to inspire awe in him. Amish demonstrates how no ego hassles need crop up in acknowledging one’s life-partner’s superior qualities. Ram’s values are not expressed merely verbally; he translates them into action too. He publicly bows before her at the market-place, admiring her courage and warrior skills. Sita’s accompanying him in a meeting with General Mrigasya is also an example.

When Ram wins the archery test in Sita’s *swayamvar*, he smiles not because he has struck the target but because he has a sense of completion; he is no more alone. He whispers in his mind – “I have become alive. You have made me alive.” (262)

When Ram has fired the *asurastra* and sheds a solitary tear realising the implications of his actions, Sita holds him and assures him of her constant support. At that moment, Ram remembers the concept of the ‘*aryaputra*’ and ‘*aryaputri*’. Together, they represent “a prototypical human partnership of two strong individuals, who didn’t compete for exact equality, but were complementary, completing each other. Two souls that were dependent on each other, giving each other purpose; two halves of a whole”(284) In short, the ideal man-woman relationship is in consonance with the ‘*Ardhanarishwara*’ concept, wherein, the Divine Power is a unification of the female (Shakti) and male (Shiva).

In the course of the discussion about monogamy and polygamy, Ram shares with Sita that he will refrain from re-marriage because this will be an insult to her. When Dasharath feels that by marrying Sita, Ram has formed an alliance with a deeply spiritual but powerless kingdom and that he ought to marry again for political gain, Ram refuses. He is, in effect, foregoing the opportunity to align with a powerful king who will support him later when he stakes a claim to kingship. He is determined to not remarry even if his wife dies. To him, marriage must not be for material gain.

The environment:

Any commentary on modern times would be incomplete without a reference to the environment. Amish sprinkles them throughout the novel. For instance, Guru Vasishtha explains to his pupils, the Ayodhyan princes that humans had decades, even centuries of warning about the onset of the Ice-Age. Still, bad leadership prevented them from safeguarding themselves against the eventuality despite possessing the technology and the intelligence for it (66). Doesn't this appear to be a direct reference to today's world leaders' reluctance to sincerely work towards decelerating climate change and global warming? Also, Manu, who saved a few individuals and thereby averted the effacing of the human race from the face of the earth, wasn't the king, but only one of the younger princes. Certainly, this clearly illustrates that it's not just the leader who can take the initiative for preventing the annihilation of the human race stemming from large-scale environmental damage. Others can summon the courage and the wits to do so too.

Amish raises the issue of encroachment upon land rendered arid by the receding canal waters. Buildings mushroom in such lands consequent upon the burgeoning of the Ayodhyan population. This is obviously an allusion to another contemporary phenomenon (38)

Amish voices his opinion through Ram regarding compassion towards animals being sheer tall talk in our times. During the princes' regular forest expeditions to treat wounded animals as part of their education in Guru Vasishtha's ashram, he wonders if "..... we actually help these animals on our bi-weekly medical tour or are we just assuaging our conscience?" Bharat wryly answers – "We are assuaging our conscience....Nothing more, but at least we aren't ignoring our conscience"!(69)

Amish makes a scathing comment about modern civilisation's severing of ties with Nature when Guru Vasishtha explains the reason for endogamy in Chief Varun's tribe - it could be because "they considered city dwellers inferior for having moved away from Mother Nature." (77) The 1854 speech of Chief Seattle comes to mind when the princes enquire about the owners of the houses in Chief Varun's village; his assistant answers – "How can the land belong to any of us? We belong to the land!"(61)

CONCLUSION:

Thus, it is clear that the author Amish in his path-breaking retelling of the popular Indian epic, Ramayana, makes many implicit and explicit references to the problems, challenges and dilemmas of contemporary India. For a society and polity at the crossroads, the questions and issues he raises for debate regarding the State, political ideology, leadership, law, crime and punishment, faith, women's empowerment and environmental issues prod pondering over.

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