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F O R E W O R D

It is my sowbhagyam to write this Foreword. It is so for several reasons. First, the late author Shri Lakkaraju Ananta Rama Rao was a scholar in the classical mould. He was born in early 20th century. Although hailing from the small town of Tenali, now in Andhra Pradesh, he went to the Banaras Hindu University for a Law Degree. He has many sides to his rich personality. A traditional Hindu by upbringing, with exposure to classics, especially the three great epics --- Mahabharatam, Ramayanam and Bhagavatam, and also the Bhagwat Gita and Skanda Puranam; a professional practitioner of Law, moving to the High Court in Hyderabad; acquiring knowledge of Homeopathy, deep enough to prepare a Compendium of Homeopathic medicines; truly a polymath.

Second, he started writing this Commentary on Valmeeki Ramayana even while practising law. This huge work kept him absorbed for almost six decades of his life. It was not just writing a scholarly book, but a tapasya for him. Third, a unique feature is his innovative comparison and contrast of the Ramayana with the Greek epics Iliad and Odyssey. While acknowledging their merits, he stresses the divinity of Rama's avatar, incarnation, to demonstrate how a human should live a life of dharma. Fourth, it is not a word to word translation of the slokas of Ramayana, but a meaningful summary, and, more importantly, his extensive Commentary. Fifth, as a Ramayana scholar, he had read versions of it in other Indian languages also. He quotes some of them, including, especially, the beautiful Kamba Ramayanam, Kalidasa's Raghuvamsam, Adhyatma Ramayana, Bhaskaracharya's Ramayanam, Ramacharitmaanas by Tulsidas, Lectures on the Ramayana by The Right Honourable V. S. Srinivasa Sastri and others.

Sixth, belonging to the pre-Independence generation, he had benefitted from an intense exposure to classical English literature, like those of Milton, Shakespeare and Keats; and other Western Classical writers such as Dante, Virgil and Homer. These were all on his fingertips. He used this vast repertoire for insightful comparisons and contrasts with the Ramayanam. Both the content and the language are treats. He reminds me of my father, born in 1900, became a popular teacher of English at the P.S. High School, Madras (now, Chennai). He went on to become Headmaster of the Ramaseshier Higher Secondary School, Pattamadai, Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu and lifted the standards of English of generations of his students, and inspired several schools in the district.

The above paras were all about the great author. Now, I take up the remarkable journey of the manuscript, after his death. That journey gives me some more reasons to happily write this Foreword. Seventh, his three daughters and a son-in-law, without any prior editing or publishing experience, brought out the first edition in 2003. Understandably, there were some printer's devils. But, the important point is that they published it, and, thus, gave it a life, with a potential future. That future came through the author's grandson, Shri Tulluri Venkatesh, living and working in Switzerland. He took charge of the book, and decided to bring out a second, high quality edition. His ownership and support of the project is my eighth reason.

As the Gita says, good things happen when the Karta, Kaalam and Kaaranam, with Daiva Kripa (कृप) come together, and make (विविधा: चेष्टा:) vividhaah cheshtaah. This happened when Shri Mahadevan of Index International, a publisher from Ghaziabad, UP, accidentally met Shri Tulluri, in Switzerland, on a social call, while on holiday! This, apparently chance meeting, with Bhagavad sankalpam, is my ninth reason.

The karma nishtha of the Publisher Shri A. S. Mahadevan of Index is the tenth important reason. He has been extra thorough in his work. He went back to basics. He started with the handwritten manuscript of the author. With the help of the family, he connected the dots; and filled the gaps. His wife, Sowbhagyavati Bharati, formerly, Director News (English News), in Doordarshan, New Delhi, was of great help to him. Alas, tragedy struck. She died in January 2020. Dear Reader, you can imagine the devastation of bharyashokam on the young publisher. Still, after a few months, he resumed this sacred project. His daughter, Aayushmati Gayatri, took up the editing, with great devotion and skill. So, this second edition is the product of two families --- the author's, and the publishers. They have got the help of Sanskrit scholars and a high quality printer.

Above all, the book is in the millennia old Bharatiya sampradayam, of our great epics being told; and retold, for each generation. Many of us may have read a few versions of the Ramayana, basically faithful to the original Valmeeki Ramayanam, but with some added insights. This book is in that hoary tradition. Swargiya Lakkaraju Ananta Rama Rao further enriches our understanding of the Ramayanam. This Foreword is already longer than the traditional ones. So, we can sample only a few such instances. Homer was, indeed, a great poet. But, Valmiki, while being poetic, was a Rishi, as well, with a transcendental vision. The Ramayana is also called a Veda. He realizes that he is writing about an avataar, incarnation, but in human form. (मनुष्योहम् मन्थे) "Manushyoham manye", "I consider myself a human" says Rama, himself. The Greek epics are heroic stories, but, without much discourse on philosophy, which came later, in the eras of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and others.

Rama's avataar was to serve as a role model to humans on how to follow Dharma, even under the most trying circumstances; how to resolve acute dharma sankata, etc. Hence the saying,

(रामो विग्रहवान् धर्मः) “Ramo vigrahavan dharmah” --- Rama is an embodiment of dharma. He is another example of what Bhagawan Krishna says in the Gita --- I appear, in different Yugas, Ages, again and again, whenever there is a steep decline of dharma. The purpose of such avatars is “To protect the good; and to punish/destroy the wicked” - (“परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम्। धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे-युगे ॥) -paritranaaya sadhunam vinashaya cha dushkritam” dharma-samsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge-yuge. Dharma may be violated due to human obsession with artha, wealth; and kaama, desires. In Ravana’s case, it was Kama for Sita --- a dharma viruddhakaama, a desire in violation of dharma.

The author also brings out, in detail, how Valmeeki’s Ramayanam encapsulates the Gayatri Mantra and its 24 varnaas, syllables, covering the 24,000 slokas. He illustrates this by explaining connect of different varnaas with the six different Kaandas of the epic. He also gives Rama as a profound example of being a nimittam, an instrument or agent of Divine Purpose, just as Krishna guides Arjuna “Nimittamatram bhava, (सव्यसाचिन) Savyasachin” – Be just an instrument to destroy the Kauravas and their army, to protect dharma. The rescue of Sita Maa is the dharmic cause; and Rama is the nimittam. Devi Sita knows this. She refuses Hanuman’s entreaty to fly away with him. The author also underlines Rama’s divinity in liberating Ahalya, and others. Great souls like Shabari waited for his darshan, before proceeding to heaven. Shiva’s bow waited for Rama to break it.

The Ramayana is alive and well in India and abroad. Ram Katha is recited several times a year. Millions of families read the Ramacharitmaanas, Sundara Kaandam, etc. Millions recite the Hanuman Chalisa. This book is another dose of Rama Amritam, the Nectar of Rama.

I commend it to Indian and global readers. All good libraries must have a few copies of it. The publisher may consider bringing this out also as an eBook, on an app, for wider reach, especially to the busy younger generation.

My fervent hope is that reading this book and sharing it will strengthen dharma in our progress towards getting the benefits of Rama Rajyam, perfectly consistent with democracy, development, technology, etc.

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