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All The Myriad Ways

Ramanujan's essay on the many Ramayanas argues for a truer scholarship

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AK Ramanujan's essay elaborated on a relationship between the many tellings of the Ramayana.

“And as nothing in India occurs uniquely, even this motif appears in more than one Ramayana.”

—Ramanujan, ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’

WHEN YOU CONSIDER the great value placed in a democracy, both normatively and nominally, on diversity and on multiculturalism, to hear that diversity threatens, that multiplicity taunts, or that multitudes are unruly, unknowable and unpredictable sounds strange. We're told to believe in the will of “the people” and are made to listen to paeans about our differently cut, brightly hued diverse clothing.

Except, that is, when the people gather en masse in Tahrir Square, in Pearl Square, in Washington Square and Wall Street—and then the State loses its love for multiplicity. Think of the slogan that has emerged from the American protests: We are the 99 percent. There is no attempt by the State—whether in New York or in Washington DC—to stand alongside the 99 percent, even if they deny their alliance with the remaining 1. This is how multitudes threaten. With every fresh perspective, each new voice, each outcry where a silence may lie, or every reminder where something has been eluded.

It's no surprise, then, that so consistently we receive a singular history of the State, a composite account that tells an overwhelmingly familiar arc of progress towards the very moment in which you—the school child, the dutiful citizen—happen to be reading and accepting that history. That the United States is a melting pot, or that India contains multitudes is itself a

monolithic and singular account.

We, for whom the history of the State is a familiar battleground; we, who grew up in dictatorships, for whom history was the first and most potent weapon for warfare, know this intimately. In Pakistan, there is no multitude of narratives when it comes to our pasts. In Islam, there are no voices that interpret scripture in divergent ways. Notions like these are quickly labelled heretical and such voices are shunted off to the mortuary. Notice the fate of Punjab's governor, Salmaan Taseer, who dared to imagine a Constitution that might include another voice, admit to another living diversity.

The State, in this case Pakistan, is invested in articulating the past as a singularly specific series of events and thoughts, which lead inexorably to their particular present. Whether we speak of political history, of theology, of literature or of romance, it matters not. Doctrinally speaking, one only needs to recognise "the way it really was". The historical, when it favours diversity, falls victim to this single-minded teleology.

In matters of faith—though one can and should make a case for religion as state in our present times—such monomania is ever more acute.

Delhi University (DU) recently removed AK Ramanujan's essay, 'Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation', from recommended reading lists of various undergraduate courses. One expert consulted for the decision opined that the essay went against the "sacred character" of the Ramayana and was "almost blasphemous" for the "Indian psyche". The removal came after a case had been filed with the Supreme Court to ban the essay. In early 2008, a group affiliated with the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the Sangh Parivar, stormed a class—and later, the office of the History department chair—demanding the removal of the piece of writing. From the resulting melee, a committee was created to study the inclusion of Ramanujan's essay in DU's curriculum, and their verdict came down hard.

Ramanujan, who went from Mysore to Chicago, traversed the roles of poet and scholar, and amassed an intellectual archive that has very few rivals. In the world of South Asian studies, his is a hallowed name. And in his own archive, this theoretically rich, innovative and amazingly perceptive essay is a supreme example of the ways in which texts remain alive—of the importance of reading, of listening. The essay lifted Valmiki's telling of the Ramayana out of its dusty chamber and held it up to converse with South Indian (Kannada and Tamil), Jain and Thai tellings—and in this conversation, Ramanujan opened vistas of comprehensibility, of how stories act and operate, how belief preserves difference and how difference enables beauty. His essay, most significantly, elaborated on a relationship between the many tellings of the Ramayana, demonstrating where each telling enables a nested world of understanding of a text—creating multitudes of meanings out of the same, and therefore conveying to us something about India itself.

Ramanujan's 'Three Hundred Ramayanas' is as much an affirmation of the need to understand the power of multitudes as it is a threat to those for whom a nationalist or religious singularity remains paramount. The essay contains a profound methodology for reading and understanding text—whether oral, written or performed—across multiple geographies and viewpoints. It is, by any account, one of the finest examples of nuanced historical textual criticism in the field of South Asian Studies. Hence, the irony that this is the essay that is deemed offensive to the students of Delhi University.

Ramanujan, who died in 1993, was a poet. His poetry, akin to his scholarship and his translation, brims with sensitive wit and insight. In one poem, 'Elements of Composition', he writes of his own unique self, created from multiple sources, "composed as I am, like others,/of elements on certain well-known lists", which focuses on the appearance and disappearance of multitudes in the self:

I lose, decompose
 into my elements,
 into other names and forms,
 past, and passing, tenses
 without times,

caterpillar on a leaf, eating,
being eaten.

The many Ramayanas seemingly mimic this act of production and consumption—privileging the imaginative force of the languages, source materials and projections from diverse spaces of Indic existences. Each of these Ramayanas reflects a linguistic tradition, a cosmology of beliefs, a set of lived practices and a circulation of ideas tying an epic to a community. The many names, forms, past and passing, which Ramanujan reflects in his own self are the same forces which shape the many Ramayanas.

Yet, it is also the most historic of renderings. Ramanujan focuses not on some illusory sense of “the way it really was” but on a series of memories, of images, of understandings—he begins and ends the essay by telling a story of how the tale is received. The first makes us understand the act of writing, and the last, the act of listening. Each becomes a transformative act—and the texts, transformative texts.

The idea of singular history, whether championed by State, or Right, cannot bear such scholarly scrutiny. The historians privileged by the State make a point to ignore such multitudes. Ramanujan’s ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’ ought to be read out loud in Delhi University, so that the act of listening to it can create new multitudes—ones who are invested in true diversity, and true scholarship.