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RELG 213 – Hinduism

Response Paper 3 – On *Vali* (Ramayana)

R. K. Narayan writes of chapter 6, “Vali”*,* of the Ramayana, “this is one of the most controversial chapters” (90). And indeed, in my opinion, it is. In short, the chapter tells of Rama’s encounter with Sugreeva of the giant monkey race. Sugreeva tells Rama his story, in which his brother, Vali, unfairly chases him into exile. Rama is taken by the story and agrees to help Sugreeva vanquish his brother. In return, Sugreeva promises Rama an army to aid in the search for Sita.

For much of the Ramayana, Rama is presented as the ideal man. He is essentially perfection incarnate. In “The Grand Tormentor”, where Ravana takes Sita, the first sign of imperfection in Rama surfaces. Although he makes an honest mistake in ignoring his brother’s warning and falling for Ravana’s ruse, he blames himself fully. It is clear that the lesson here is that even gods, especially when in human form, are prone to err. In contrast, Rama’s actions in “Vali”, arguably, can be construed as dubious.

Upon first encounter, Sugreeva tells Rama a story of his life that may or may not be true. One may argue that Rama, being Vishnu, is able to discern fact from fiction immediately, but that is not explicitly stated in Narayan’s version of the Ramayana. Furthermore, Vali, at first shocked by Rama’s behavior, asks “when two persons are opposed to each other, how can you in support of one, hide and attack the other?” (101). It seems as though the prospect of finding help in his search for Sita makes him rashly side with Sugreeva and kill Vali. Rama does not seek an audience with Vali to get the other side of the story. He does not even face Vali when he kills him. Again, after being shot, Vali says, “if someone has carried away your wife, instead of battling with him face to face, you stand aside, hide, and use all your accomplishment as an archer against an unarmed stranger. Has all your training as a warrior been only for this end?”. Vali continues to express his disadvantage by saying “creatures like us test our worth and strength with out sinews and muscles and always fight barehanded, and never hold a weapon as you do” (102). Regardless of whether or not Sugreeva’s story is true, it appears that Rama did not fight honorably. He took a family conflict into his hands and ended it in a questionable sneak attack. However, this is not the only way to view the situation.

Narayan writes: “It may be less an actual error of commission on his part than a lack of understanding on ours; measured in Eternity, such an event might stand out differently” (90). That is to say, we are unable to suspend our attachment to the immediate appearance of the event in order to truly understand the ramifications of Rama’s action (or, conversely, an alternative, inaction). We can draw a connection from this point to the Bhagavad Gita, in which Arjuna is apprehensive to do battle with his kin. It immediately seems as though earthly attachment is what drives Rama to become involved in Vali and Sugreeva’s quarrel and a similar earthly attachment is the cause of Arjuna’s battle. But both the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana insist that the battles are necessary and righteous causes. Rama explains that Vali was at fault and that he is held to the same standard as any other being who is intelligent enough to worship (and enjoy the fruits of) the gods. Moreover, Lakshmana also addresses the the reason why Rama did not seek an audience with Vali and instead killed him from a hiding spot. Vali concedes, saying “now I understand your words differently from the way they sound. They are simple to hear but have inner strength and I feel assured that Rama has not committed an unrighteous act” (104). With this conclusion, and with Vali’s blessing, we are able to place full confidence in Rama once more. However, the Ramayana shows us that life is not always so clean cut. Despite the fact that Rama’s actions were deemed just, Vali’s wife and son mourn his death. Narayan mentions that it “make[’s] one’s heart grow heavy” (105). Even righteous action can result in pain and suffering. But, ultimately, they fare well.