

Subverting Our Epics: Mani Ratnam's Retelling of the *Ramayana*

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Mani Ratnam's film *Raavan* depicts the contradiction between the adivasis and the State through the framework of the *Ramayana*. The film, however, deviates from the message of the *Ramayana*, and raises the disturbing possibility that our myths of morality and bravery are someone else's stories of rape and conquest. The recasting of Raavan as the wronged subaltern and Ram as the scheming agent of imperialism brings to mind similar reinterpretations of other Hindu legends by Phule, which completely subvert the orthodox interpretation. In the context of the ongoing struggle between the tribals and the State, one hopes that the movie *Raavan* might stir this debate up once again.

Mani Ratnam's *Raavan*, starring Abhishek Bachchan, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Vikram, Ravi Kishan and Govinda has received generally bad reviews and is a failure at the box office as well. There seems to be a consensus that apart from Santosh Sivan's cinematography there is not much in the movie to write home about. It also suffers from some common Bollywood flaws such as bad acting and complete lack of attention to details. Yet, from the social and political standpoint the film's grafting of the *Ramayana* on the current conflict between adivasis and the Indian state is well worth thinking about. In this review we explore this dimension of the movie.

Allusions to Maoism?

The opening sets the overall tenor with a montage showing police parties being attacked by adivasis even as Beera, the adivasi leader (Abhishek Bachchan) celebrates by playing on the drum. But the narrative really starts with the abduction of Ragini (Aishwarya) by Beera. Ragini is the wife of Dev Pratap Sharma (Vikram), a police officer who is posted as the superintendent of police (sp) to a place called Lal Mati to deal with the notorious adivasi outlaw, Beera Munda. One assumes that Lal Mati is a district town somewhere in India, since sps are not posted to villages, but the movie is not clear upon this point. Lal Mati is largely out of police or State control and is run by the writ of Beera, who is shown to be brutal and violent but at the same time to be loved and respected by the locals. One can only wonder if Lal Mati (Hindi for Red Soil) is a reference to the fact that the soil is controlled by the Maoist party. There is no other explicit reference to Maoism in the movie. The first half of the movie passes without the viewers knowing the reason behind Ragini's abduction. Rather there is some

shuttling back and forth between a purported adivasi village and the forest. One need not dwell too long on the authenticity of the adivasi village or for that matter the adivasi song and dance. Suffice to say that these affirm faithfully to a city-dweller's idea of what such villages may look like. Intriguingly the forest is the only substantial (and authentic?) location in the entire movie. No city, town or village is shown long enough to create an impression.

Thus the feeling is one of placelessness and this perception is complemented by the confused accents. Ravi Kishan, the Bhojpuri movie star who plays one of Beera's brothers of course does a good job with his Bhojpuri accented Hindi but Bachchan does not. Then again it is not even clear why Bhojpuri should be the relevant local language. Further, the relationship between Beera's adivasi village and the town of Lal Mati is never clarified. Confusion of place is compounded in the second half when Beera's sister is shown as getting ready for her wedding in a large rural dwelling which is certainly not in the adivasi village and the location of which is not made clear. Instead, most of the script is occupied in developing the relationship between Beera and his captive Ragini. The movie moves to a climax with the police getting the better of Beera and gunning him down to the protestations of Ragini who has begun to see Raavan's side of the story of the *Ramayana*.

A 'Human' Raavan

While the movie is mediocre apart from the stunning visuals, the socio-political resonances are strong and it is these I will now explore. As is obvious from the title of the movie itself the story recasts the highly politically relevant contradiction between the adivasis and the State, as represented by its police force, into the framework of the *Ramayana*. Almost all the main characters of the *Ramayana*, viz, Ram, Sita, Laxman, Hanuman, Vibhishan, Kumbhakarna, Shurpanakha and of course the eponymous Raavan, have their counterparts in the script. However the essential message of the *Ramayana* is turned if not on its head, then at least sideways. Ram is no longer *maryada purushottam* (the ideal man in complete control of his senses and actions),

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nor is Raavan the unreconstructed demoiacal figure of popular understanding burned every Dussehra. Conventionally Raavan has been humanised by citing his devotion to Shiva, his learning of the Vedas or his playing of the veena. Here he is human because he has suffered injustice and oppression at the hands of the State and has decided to fight back. His sister, an adivasi woman who dares to love and seeks to marry a brahmin boy is apprehended in a raid conducted by Ram even as she is getting married. She is later gang raped inside a police station. Laxman (also called Laxman in the movie), a cop, assists in this “cutting off of Shurpanakha’s nose”. She subsequently commits suicide. Raavan (Beera) who is already a force to reckon with in his community, a king for all practical purposes, seeks to avenge this act and abducts Sita. Independent of this particular aggravation at the hands of the police, Raavan is a rising threat to the State which Ram represents. Beera the adivasi is openly challenging the authority of the police in his neighbourhood. The brahmin, Dev Pratap Sharma, has been sent to quell this adivasi who is a Munda, the same tribe that claims the famous Birsa among its members. The symbolism is thus simply crammed into the script.

Good for One, Evil for Another

Despite, or perhaps because of its bluntness, the movie challenges some deeply held beliefs on the nature of good and evil in Hindu culture. Our epics, and in particular the *Ramayana* still occupy a place of prominence as fables of morality. The *Ramayana* in its popular version is free even of the moral ambiguities to be found in the *Mahabharata*. *Raavan* raises, in very clear terms, the disturbing possibility that our myths of morality and bravery are someone else’s stories of rape and conquest. Our heroes are villains in stories told in other places, not in faraway countries, but in our own heartland. And our villains might just have been good people whose only fault lay in not submitting to our rule.

The confusion that we are thrown into as a result of this reversal of viewpoint is clearly (and amusingly) on display in a brief review of the movie I read in the *Banaras Times* last week. The author of the

review describes Lal Mati as “A town where the word of law is not the police but Beera, a tribal who has, over the years, shifted the power equation of the place from the ruling to the have-nots of the area.” Further, the reviewer notes that the police seek primarily to bring order and not justice. Thus “Dev knows that the key to bringing order to any place is to vanquish the big fish; in this case – Beera.” At the end of the review, in describing the nature of the fight between Beera and the sp, the reviewer says it is a “fight between good and evil” with good being represented by the sp. The review of the movie’s Tamil version¹ does admit that the lines between good and evil get blurred. That part was left out in the newspaper review. Thus wittingly or unwittingly the reviewer has captured perfectly the dissonance that such a reinterpretation creates. The fight between Ram and Raavan must of course be a fight between good and evil, but it also cannot be denied that Raavan has made the have-nots stronger. The message is clear: it is evil to defend the poor and good to defend the rich and the ruling class.

Alternative Histories/Perceptions

This is of course not the first time that timeless tales have been retold from the opposite viewpoint. In reinterpreting history from the *rakshasa* point of view Mani Ratnam is in the august company of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, the anti-caste thinker and activist of the 19th century. A retelling of the *Ramayana* which casts Raavan as the wronged subaltern and Ram as the scheming agent of imperialism brings to mind similar reinterpretations of other Hindu legends by Phule. In his book *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) Phule takes the stories told around the various avatars of Vishnu, matsya (fish), kurma (tortoise), varah (boar), narasimha (man-lion), and vaman and reinterprets them from the shudra point of view. The “avatars” become scheming leaders of the *dwijas* (twice borns) who, in most instances successfully, defeat their shudra counterparts through deception and lies rather than open battle. Phule minces no words in making his historical (or mythical) inversions. For example, narasimha, the man-lion avatar of Vishnu who features in the story of Prahlad is described as duplicitous, greedy, treacherous,

heartless and cruel. Phule focuses at length on the story of Bali, the king who is killed by the priest Vaman, also an avatar of Vishnu. In Phule’s rendition, Bali is a just king loved by his subjects, but hated by the *dwijas* who seek to destroy him. Vaman is the *dwija* agent sent to eliminate Bali. Phule and later the farmer’s movement in Maharashtra have made King Bali an icon of the shudra liberation movement. As Gail Omvedt notes in her writings on the farmer’s movement (in her book *Reinventing Revolution*), even today *ida pida jaavo, Baliraja che raajya yevo* (may suffering be gone, may the rule of King Bali come) is a common saying in rural Maharashtra. The writers of the “Balijan Cultural Movement Manifesto” who see themselves in Phule’s tradition note that Phule “attempted to write an alternative history of India from the people’s perspective, which was utterly dismissive and derisive of the brahmanical version of India’s past and present”. They ask of the fable of Bali and Vaman: “Was the fable concocted to mask the fraudulent and violent means through which the Aryan brahmins destroyed the ancestors of the dalit-bahujans?”

Phule’s historical vision which completely subverts the orthodox interpretation is even today politically powerful and one hopes that the movie *Raavan* might stir this debate up once again. Of course to ask the same question of the *Ramayana* seems a more formidable task given its moral authority and immense popularity across the social spectrum. But this is essentially a political question, not a historical one and when the moment has arrived many such questions will be raised to be settled in the political and not the historical/scholarly domain. Every fight going on today in the jungles of Bastar, between a police officer and a tribal who picks up arms is a retelling of the *Ramayana*, raising the inevitable question, as Phule did so many years ago: Were the Hindu god-avatars, Ram, Vaman, merely enforcing the will of the imperial state against its hapless victims? Were the demons, rakshasas defenders of indigenous life and liberty?

NOTE

¹ This is available on, <http://movies.sulekha.com/tamil/ravan/default.htm>, from which the *Banaras Times*, seems to have taken its piece.