

The Ascetics, Food practices, and Society presented in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa

Km. Rakhi* and Shweta Verma**

**Research Scholar, **Assistant Professor in Ancient Indian History*

Department of History including Ancient Indian History, Culture, and Archaeology

Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal (A Central University) University, Srinagar, Garhwal, Uttarakhand-246174, India

Corresponding Author E-mail: Sehchari98@gmail.com

Received : 19 March 2025 • **Revised :** 22 April 2025 • **Accepted :** 05 May 2025 • **Published :** 30 December 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Km. Rakhi & Shweta Verma 2025. The Ascetics, Food practices, and Society presented in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa. *Journal of Historical, Archaeological and Anthropological Studies*, 3: 1-2, pp. 79-83.

Abstract: Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa being part of ancient Indian Sanskrit epical literature is a medium to know many themes practiced in early Indian society. Food practices presented in the epic is also one of them. Food and Religion both are interrelated concepts which in its whole legitimized the political agencies in early period of Indian society. Ascetics, one of the forest dwellers make their presence in the epic who are different from man in the world (living in the main stream society) and their different identity can be looked through their food related practices and habits. King Rama met many ascetics during his exile period. This paper looks at the food practices associated with ascetics along with other habitants of forests which makes them different from royal households mentioned in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa. Also, the transactions of food by them with the king Rama was symbolic of karma and dharma of the giver and receiver and together it is crucial to look at the philosophical ideas, religious values, all traditions with a distinct moral order, and caste customs. Further it examines the forest dwellers and the hospitality they showed to King Rama during the exile period, and looking and locating the role of King Rama while being in forest as a householder, forest dweller and a kshatriya via the foodways adopted or rejected by him.

Keywords: Ascetics, Epic, Food, Hinduism, Ideal King, Renouncers

Introduction

Valmiki Ramayana share and perform the functions of both normative and narrative literature of early period of Indian history as a part of the plethora of Brahmanical literature which offers help to scholars in reconstructing early history in India. Ramayana literally means journey of

Rama. Valmiki presents Rama to an ideal king to an ideal householder, popularly known as *maryadapurushottam* which still influence the moral and religious life of a Hindu residing in every corner of the world. The geographical and temporal contexts of the text is largely based in the eastern Ganga Valley; dating the text has been a subject of debate, with their period of composition, compilation and transmission spreading over a vast time range from the mid first millennium BCE to the early centuries CE. From various geographical locations such as the city and the forest to kingship, rites and rituals, the figure of the king, food and the foodways are also one of the major theme which runs in the epic where King Rama's idealness as a king and householder is being verified by the author.

Ascetics, part of the renunciation tradition, mentioned in the epic is helpful to know the society and religious norms and tradition related to early India. Food related practices performed by the ascetics residing in the forest when come in the contact of King Rama in his journey can tell a lot about the structure of the classical Hindu society. Historiography on ancient renunciation has largely been dominated by theoretical frameworks on the relationship of it with the man living in the world. Dumont's binary opposition between the renouncer and man-in-the-world, and Veena Das's tripartite structure including king, Brahmin, and renouncer is helpful to understand the critical scholarly attention given to the structure of the renunciation tradition.

Scholars have made the attempt to describe the food and drinks by invigilating ancient texts like epics and dharmasastras. By very few have made the effort to look at the ideas behind these dietary practices adopted by people as epics like Ramayana provides rich diversity of various kinds of people living in the society. Corrie E. Norman shows his concern over the little guidance given to 'making sense of foodways', by theorists while working on the food related topics¹ in his article. Similarly, R.S. Khare, a prominent scholar whose work is focused on the Hindu food traditions in Ancient India has observed in his famous work *The Eternal Food*, Food in early Indian society never simply a material substance; it is never only what the eyes see. The unseen karma and dharma of the giver and receiver energize it, circulate it, and color it.² Further R.S. Khare observed the vastness of the food and the meaning behind it in Hinduism by stating that '*anna*(food) in Hinduism, is all-encompassing. It weaves together crucial philosophical ideas, religious values, all traditions with a distinct moral order, moral economy, caste customs and ritual schemes'. Ramayana is one of the major epics written in Sanskrit language by Sage Valmiki. This Revisiting Valmiki Ramayana in terms of food practices presented in it a very challenging task as the narrative text by nature it lacks historicity but have historical consciousness embedded in it.

In this paper an attempt is made examine the forest dwellers and the hospitality they showed to King Rama during the exile period, and looking and locating the role of King Rama while being in forest as a householder, forest dweller and a kshatriya via the foodways adopted by him.

Forest: A home for various kinds of ascetics

Rama's meeting with various ascetics distinguished by the consumption practices at the asrama of Sarabhangā³ including- 1) *Vaikhānasa* 2) *Vālakhilyāh* , 3) *Sampraksālā*, 4) *Marīcipāh*. All these ascetics greeted the royal princes, Rama and Lakshmana, and paid their due respects with offerings of fruit, roots, and wildflowers, and other sorts of food (*phalair mulaih puspair vanyais ca... vividharaih*), which was courteously accepted by the two brothers.

Ravana as an itinerant Brāhmaṇa

An itinerant ascetic/Brahmana was living alone in the forest unlike other forest dweller ascetics living in a group. Although only instance of routinised alms giving to ascetic is mentioned in Ramayana when Ravana as a disguised brahmana as *dvijativesena* (literally to mean dressed as a twice born) came to the hermitage of King Rama and ask for the alms from Sita in *Daṇḍaka Forest*⁴. Thus, presence of an itinerant ascetic in the Ramayana tells us that forest dwellers also had other forms as well on the basis of food related practices they were adherent to.

Royal Palace and Food Habits in Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa

Before Rāma departed for his exile, Kausalya, lamenting the strenuous conditions of the exile, wondered how when his own servants and slaves were eating various kinds of delicacies (*mrstany annani*)⁵, could then Rāma subsist on a modest fare of fruits and roots in exile. Similarly, once Rama had departed for exile, Kausalyan again bemoaned how Sītā, used to eating fine well-seasoned dishes (*supadamsanvitam subham*), would fare in exile with forest food and wild rice.⁶ Also, in *Suṇdarkāṇḍa* when Hanumān met Sītā he described Rāma as living with a restricted diet, neither eating any meat or any honey-wine (*na mamsam bhunkte...na capi madhusevate*). Instead Rāma limited himself to an austere diet of boiled rice and other foods prescribed for forest ascetics.⁷ On the one hand was Ayodhyā, the moral righteousness of whose citizens was reiterated from statements stating that no resident of Ayodhyā consumed ‘unclean Food’ (*na amrstabhoji*).⁸ This morality with regard to food is described in conjunction with the four varṇas dutifully performing their respective duties and not indulging in any *saṃkara*, i.e., the missing of social classes.⁹ Royal extravagance as a trope was used to highlight a sense of excessive indulgence, and hence associated with kings and modes of kingship that were antagonistic to the normative views. When Hanumān in his search for Sītā in laṅkā breached the raksasa king Ravana’s palace, one of the first indicators of royalty was the intense aroma of food, drinks and rice.¹⁰ For Hanumān, this aroma was an indication of Rāvana’s presence in those quarters, and was moreover, an inviting essence.

This is the first of many descriptions of raksasa opulence, overtly or subtly marked with excess consumption, either of food and drink or sexual pleasures. Hanumān’s first visuals of Rāvana, for example, the moral other to Rama, describe him in deep sleep, with the strong fragrance of savory foods mixed with alcohol still on his breath.¹¹

Interaction with Niṣāda king Guha

Food practices in the Brahmanical; normative universe were thus intrinsically tied to maintaining and displaying varna-order. *Niṣāda* king interestingly was the first person to meet King Rama as he left behind the city of Ayodhya and began his exile in the forest. Guha as a chieftain was a political subordinate to king Rama as he declared to Rama that ‘This entire land belongs to you. We are servants, you the master (*taveyamakhilamahivayampresyabhavanbharata*)’.¹² We see change in the behavior of King Rama as he refused to take the food and hospitality offered by *Niṣāda* King Guha to him. This behavior is legitimized by the brahmanical sastric literature like *Manavdharmasastra* by Manu as it prohibits a brahmana from accepting food given by nisada¹³ and hunters (*mrgaya*).¹⁴

Rama's refusal to accept food from Guha was also in line with brahmanical injunctions against accepting food from nisada in particular, and against accepting cooked food in general. Yet, Guha's identity as a nisada did not impede other royals from availing his hospitality. Upon King Dasaratha's death, Bharata went to the forest in pursuit of Rama, accompanied by a whole royal retinue. Following the same route taken by Rama, Bharata too encountered Guha upon entering the forest. As with Rama, Guha greeted Bharata and his accompanying retinue with gifts and fish, meat, and wine (*matsyamamsamadhuni*)¹⁵, of which the itself was of two varieties, fresh and dried (*ardram camamsam suskam*), along with forest fare which included fruits and roots.¹⁶ All of it was graciously accepted by Bharata on behalf of his family and army. None of the concerns raised earlier, regarding caste hierarchies, ksatriya code or the impurity of cooked foods were associated with this transaction. Instead Bharata was delighted by the generosity of nisada king Guha. The ideal king and protagonist, Rama observed brahmanical norms of purity under the tripartite disguise of the ksatriya code, ascetic living and impurity of cooked food, while Bharata was exempted from the same standards in order to maintain and cement political loyalties.

Conclusion

Thus, we see that the depiction of food practices in Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa was medium to demarcate Rama as an ideal king preserving his caste identities against the forest dwellers like various ascetics, *rāksasas*, and 'other' people living in the forest like *Niṣāda* king Guha. Depiction of food related practices worked at two levels. First, the king Rama was setting the highest example of ideal householder, upholding the *dharma*, the ideal socio-moral order, in his everyday life and practice in forest, particular place. Second, his actions also determined the relationship between the ascetics and others as a various subjects in his realm.

Notes

1. Corrie E. Norman, 'Food and Religion' in *Oxford Handbook of food History*, Edited by Jeffery M. Pilcher, 2012, OUP. p.411
2. Khare., R.S. The eternal food, p.6
3. Ram. III.5.2.
4. Ram. III.44.31.
5. Ram. II.21.3.
6. Ram. II.55.5.
7. Ram. V.34.39.
8. Ram. I.6.11.
9. Ram. I.6.12.
10. Ram. 5.7.16-17
11. Ibid., 5.8.21-2
12. Ram. II.44.14.
13. Manavadharmasastra IV.215., p.163
14. Ibid.,4.212

15. Ibid., II.78.9.

16. Ibid., II.78.16.

Bibliography/References

Primary Sources

All references of Valmiki Ramayana are taken from Robert Goldman (ed-several translators), (1984-2018), *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India*. Vols. 1-7. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Goldman, Robert. (trans.). (1986). *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India*. Vol.I . *Balakanda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Pollock, Sheldon. (trans.). (1991). In Robert Goldman (ed.), *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India*. Vol. II, *Ayodhyakanda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Pollock, Sheldon. (trans.). (1999). In Robert Goldman (ed.), *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India*. Vol. III. *Aranyakanda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Lefeber, Rosalind.(trans.).(2002). In Robert Goldman (ed.), *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India*. Vol. IV, *Kiskindakanda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Goldman P. Robert and Sally J. Sutherland (trans.). (2008). In Robert Goldman (ed.), *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India*. Vol.V. *Sunderkanda*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Goldman P. Robert and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman and Barend A. Van Nooten (trans.). (2018). In Robert Goldman (ed.), *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India*. Vol.V. *Yuddhakanda* . Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Johann Georg Bühler's (tran.), (1886), *The Laws of Manu*, part of the *Sacred Books of the East* series.

Secondary Sources

Khare, R.S. (1992). *The eternal food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists*. New York Press.

Norman, E. Corrie.(2012). Food and Religion. In Jeffery Piltcher (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Food History* (pp. 409-414). Oxford University Press.

Olivelle, Patrick. (2012). Kings, Ascetics, and Brahmins: the socio-political context of Ancient Indian Religions. In Volkard Krech and Marion Steinick (ed.), *Dynamiken der Religionsgeschichte zwischen Asian and Europa*. Brill.