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Chakravarti Thirumagan

by C. Rajagopalachari

Students of English literature do not seem to be generally aware of the significant contributions made by the early English scientists to the development of modern English prose. It may come as a surprise to some of them that the "divers worthy persons inquisitive into natural philosophy and other parts of human learning, and particularly of what hath been called the *New Philosophy or Experimental Philosophy*," who constituted themselves, almost exactly three hundred years ago, as the founder members of the Royal Society, had in their programme, among many worthy objectives for promoting natural knowledge, "the development of the philosophy of the English language" tool. Though the Society had some plans for achieving the latter objective, its actual achievement, however, came about more naturally, namely through their publications, which were characterized by a certain directness and simplicity, and precision and clarity of expression which were not so common then. Having occasion to write about this aspect of the Society's work Professor Elton remarks "The activities of the newly founded Society told directly upon literature, and counted powerfully on the organization of a clear, uniform prose—the 'close, naked, natural way of speaking' which the historian of the Society, Sprat, cites as part of its programme." Warden Wilkins, in whose rooms in Wadham College in Oxford, some of these philosophers used to meet before the founding of the Society, was himself a great pioneer in the development of this new prose style, unadorned, precise, and simple. Edmund Gosse mentions him as "the first man in England to write commonly in this new kind of prose," and adds the comment "His style deserves great praise. His sentences are short, pointed and exact. . . . Justice has never been done him as a pioneer in English prose."¹ Similarly Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* (1667), which was referred to just now—and which, significantly, was prefaced by an Ode by Abraham Cowley—was named by Dean Swift as "the

¹ Quoted by Dorothy Stimson: *Scientists and Amateurs*, London, Sigma Books (1949).

best book in the English language," which is high praise indeed, especially as coming from one who did not view with favour the activities of the Society. There were other publications too from this school, with fair claims to literary distinction.

Indeed a recent critic, while commending the prose style of these early scientific writers, confesses to the "ironic thought that this prose style proved infectious and was to affect the styles of Swift, Addison and Steele, all three of whom indulged in some biting satire at the expense of the early Fellows of the Royal Society." This possible influence apart, there is certainly much in common between the prose styles of these early scientific writers and of the great prose writers who followed them and who wrote on non-scientific subjects. The special merits of their prose style arise primarily from the clear logical thinking and the broad scientific outlook which they brought to their respective subjects.

Rajaji's Tamil prose, simple, austere, pointed and exact, reminds me of the prose of some of these early English writers, and the merits of his prose style arise from just the same background of clear, logical thinking and the broad scientific outlook. Whether he writes on *Kural* or *Kamban*, on the *Gita* or the *Upanishads*, on the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*, on Ramakrishna or Marcus Aurelius, on physics or on politics, on the coining of technical words or on BCG vaccination, whether he tells a parable or a short story, one cannot help being impressed by the precision and clarity of his thought and expression. There is a certain purposiveness pervading his writings and the parts cohere logically with the main theme. Indeed the logical sequence of thought is almost compelling, and reminds one of the sequence of propositions in a book on geometry.

I sometimes allow myself the thought that these qualities of Rajaji's prose style can be traced in some measure to the background of his early scientific discipline. It is possible that he owes this chaste and austere style to the author of the *Kural*, of whom he is more than an admirer, but his English style, which has some of these merits, had acquired its distinctiveness be-

fore he started serious writing in Tamil.

The need for the development of such a prose style in the Indian languages is as great today as it was in the English language nearly three hundred years ago, when the early scientists who had a deep and abiding interest in the new philosophy, namely experimental philosophy, tried to convey in plain unambiguous language, to their colleagues, and to the general public, the precise details of their experiments and observations, the many novel conclusions which they drew from them, and the subtle hypotheses which they propounded to explain them. The need for the development of such prose in the Indian languages exists not only for scientific writing but for *any* writing since the virtues of such a style are not the peculiar need of science alone.

The problem here is not merely one of developing an appropriate vocabulary of new words, which naturally has also to be done when attempting to express new thought, but of being able to think clearly and logically and of being able to express without ambiguity, and without overstatement, or understatement, precisely what the author desires to communicate. The latter is much more difficult of achievement than the coining of appropriate new words for expressing new thought.

I am tempted to emphasize this since there seems to be a feeling, almost amounting to faith, among some of our enthusiasts, that when a dictionary of all the necessary technical words in the Indian languages has been compiled, there will flow out a continuous stream of original scientific and other literature! The coining of appropriate technical words is only a minor step, though a necessary one, in our attempt to express new thought in the Indian languages.

I may hasten to add that the prose style that I have been commending is not new to some of our languages, certainly not new either to Sanskrit or to Tamil. Many of the early Tamil commentators, in particular, Nachinarkiniyar, Nampillai, Parimelagar, handled such prose very effectively, and they are models of their kind. This tradition, has been maintained in a sense till

today. The tradition, however, has been confined almost exclusively to literary and philosophical subjects. The need is to develop such a prose style for general use, for expressing to a modern audience both traditional and modern thought, and this need is being met in some measure by Rajaji's writings in Tamil, which extend over a wide variety of subjects.

Some of these writings would find a permanent place in modern Tamil literature. He would probably be remembered specially for having introduced to modern Tamil, the clear, simple, exact prose which could handle effectively almost any subject, whether traditional or modern. This again illustrates my major thesis, that it is the clear, simple, and compelling logic of the thinking behind that accounts primarily for the precision and clarity of the style. I cannot think of a more convincing illustration of the adage that 'the style is the man' than Rajaji. That the nature of the subject or even the language he writes in, whether it is Tamil or English, is of secondary importance in determining his style, need not therefore occasion surprise.

I mentioned earlier that the clear forceful and compelling logic underlying some of Rajaji's writings, and particularly the logical sequence of thought, remind one of the sequence of propositions in a book on geometry. Fontenelle once compared mathematicians to lovers: "Grant a mathematician the least principle. He will draw from it a consequence which also you must grant him, and from this consequence another." The point in this comparison is that the conclusion in the former case is as inevitable as in the latter, though of course for very different reasons. In one case it is the convincing logic of the thesis. In the other it is the unstinting cooperation of the listener, who is willing not merely to be convinced, but is almost prepared to go the long way with the author. To use a well-known phrase of Pascal, it is a case of the heart's having its reasons which the mind may not comprehend. In such a fortunate position, if one can also invoke the convincing logic of the former, i.e., if the heart's reasons are also comprehensible by the mind, then the logical presentation is seen to its best advantage.

This is somewhat the case when Rajaji writes on the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*, where the themes are of perennial human interest, and the average reader is a confirmed lover, if not exactly of the author, as in Fontenelle's simile, certainly of these themes.

Rajaji himself remarks somewhere that he greatly enjoyed writing these two books, and regards, with a certain justifiable pride, his writing them as the best service he had rendered to his countrymen. Both the books have had generous reception from the reading public, and have been translated into English¹ and into some other languages too.

I shall hereafter confine myself to his Tamil *Ramayana*, entitled *Chakravarti Thirumagan*, which received the Sahitya Akademi Award recently, and which it is my main purpose here to review.¹ In the history of literature there have been few human documents that have inspired and moved such large masses of people, and over such long time, as the *Ramayana*. In Rajaji's book, at the end of a very touching scene, namely after Jatayu had fought an unequal battle trying to rescue Sita from the hands of Ravana, like the gallant knights of the romances, and had been mortally wounded, Rajaji pauses for one of his usual asides. I give it in his English translation, which has not, however, quite the flavour of the Tamil original: "To millions of men, women and children in India, the *Ramayana* is not a mere tale. It has more truth and meaning than the events in one's own life. Just as plants grow under the influence of sunlight, the people of India grow in mental strength and culture by absorbing the glowing inspiration of the *Ramayana*."

This being so, any readable book on such an intensely human theme would naturally find appreciative response. There

¹ A review in English of a book written in a different language has naturally some handicaps. When I started writing this review I did the translations myself of the portions from the Tamil text which I wanted to quote. Then I remembered that Rajaji himself had done the translation to English. I have now adopted his wording in all the quotations.

is a tradition that wherever Rama's praises are sung, Hanuman is present there with reverently folded arms enjoying the song and deeply moved by it. It should be remembered that Hanuman is a great connoisseur, and the tradition prefers, significantly, to remain silent as to who the singer is, or how well he sings. It is a way of paying tribute to the universality of the appeal of this intensely human story.

When such a moving story is retold by one of our leading prose writers, and one of our best storytellers, the appeal is naturally very wide.

The story originally appeared as a series of articles in the Tamil weekly 'Kalki,' and concluded with a feeling epilogue, which reveals, even more than his many interludes in the book, the very human side of Rajaji, with which many of us may not be familiar. The epilogue begins with a casual, but very appropriate remark by Mahatmaji on the *Ramayana*. "On one occasion," writes Rajaji, "Gandhiji and I were talking about a girl very dear to both of us. I said 'How did she get all these ideas and phrases of love without having read any of present day love stories?' Gandhiji said in answer, 'But has she not read the *Ramayana*? Is the *Ramayana* not a love story too?' This struck me as profound."

In this epilogue Rajaji mentions the kind of audience he had in view when he wrote the book: "A word to the children who read these chapters. I have told the story of the Prince of Ayodhya mainly for your sake. Grown up people may read Valmiki and Kamban. Those who know to sing can render with joy the sweet songs on Rama given to us by Thyagaraja¹. But this story that I have told can be read direct by you, children, without anyone's help.

"You should look upon Rama, Lakshmana and Hanuman like

¹ Though in the epilogue Thyagaraja figures along with the immortal trio, Valmiki, Kamban and Tulsidas, I have not come across any references to Thyagaraja in the body of the book.

your own fathers and elder brothers who are by your side ever eager to help you. Grow to be like Bharata, Lakshmana and Hanuman, good and brave souls, full of love and strength.

"Mothers too, I know, have been reading this story with joy. This has been a great encouragement to me. They can understand why I have told the story in simple words and short sentences for the sake of our children. Everything we do, we do for the sake of our children, do we not? Only women can realize and re-live the experiences and feelings of Sita. The story of Sita as told by Valmiki and Kamban can be fully appreciated only by women. Only they can fully appreciate the courage of Jatayu and the prowess of Hanuman. Sita's sorrows have not ended with the *Ramayana*. They go on, still, in the lives of our women."

A page later in the same epilogue appears the following significant paragraph: "Rain falling from the heavens flows into the rivers and flows down to join the sea. Again from the sea the water is sucked up by the sun and rises to the sky, whence it descends again as rain and flows down as rivers. Even so, feelings and values rise from the people, and touching the poet's heart, are transformed into poem which, in turn, enlightens and inspires the people. Thus in every land the poets and their people continuously reinforce each other. . . . Whether the epics and songs of a nation spring from the faith and ideas of the common folk, or whether a nation's faith and ideas are produced by its literature, is a question which one is free to answer as one likes. Does a plant spring from the seed or does seed issue from the plant? Was the bird or the egg the first cause? Did clouds rise from the sea or was the sea filled by the waters in the sky? All such inquiries take us to the feet of God transcending speech and thought."

India has probably been the fountainhead from which some of the best classic stories have been drawn, and these stories almost always carry a moral. The many episodes in the *Ramayana* are treated similarly by Rajaji, and he frequently pauses, either to make some relevant and pointed comments, or to draw a parallel,

or more frequently to draw a moral. Since he follows closely Valmiki, some of these pauses may be to introduce a variant from Kamban or Tulsidas, and to offer comments on the appropriateness of the variant, and to pull out a moral too. "In every episode of the *Ramayana*," writes Rajaji in one of his asides, "some lesson which we should learn for our daily life is taught. The meaning is in some places plain, in others it may be hidden. If we read with reverence and deeply, we can always see the moral."

In another context, after the memorable meeting of Bharata and Rama, Rajaji makes again a similar comment: "In this episode, when Bharata meets Rama, we read in Valmiki a long lecture on the art of government, delivered by Rama to his brother. Often in our epics, we come across such long dissertations on politics or morality. Modern fiction gives high priority to narrative vigour, dramatic suspense and surprise. In old works, in addition to plenty of these qualities, there were generous doses of didacticism."

Thus even in this practice of pausing frequently to make some pertinent comments, Rajaji can claim precedent in Valmiki, though naturally the comments in most places are his own, and not reproductions of Valmiki's.

I should like to quote here a few typical ones:

"The Devas are generally good; and those among them who swerved from the path of righteousness paid the price for it. There was no separate code of conduct for the Devas;

"Wedded to virtue as the Devas generally were, lapses on their part appear big to us like stains on white cloth. The Rakshasas' evil deeds are taken for granted and do not attract much attention, like stains on black cloth."

"The lesson of the Ahalya episode is that, however deadly one's sin, one may hope to be freed from its consequence by penitence and punishment. Instead of condemning others for their sins,

we should look within our own hearts and try to purify them of every evil thought. The best of us have need for eternal vigilance, if we would escape sin."

"Viswamitra may be said to be the foundation of the grand temple of Rama's story. After Rama's wedding in Mithila, we do not see him again. It should be noted that characters who play a leading role in one canto of Valmiki almost fade out in subsequent cantos. Viswamitra who dominates the *Bala Kanda* does not appear again. Similarly Kaikeyi and Guha are prominent only in *Ayodhya Kanda*. The same thing can be said of Bharata, whom we do not come across in the chapters intervening between the Chitrakuta meeting and Rama's return to Ayodhya. The poet hardly brings Bharata before our eyes during the period of Rama's distress. The characters in Valmiki *Ramayana* (unlike those in the *Mahabharata* and in ordinary plays and novels) do not present themselves off and on. Critics should bear this general characteristic of Valmiki's epic in mind."

"In the *Ramayana* Sumitra is a woman of few words and mature wisdom and great tact and infinite courage, full of faith, in whom 'hope shines like a flame when it has gone out in all others.' The tradition is that Sumitra knew Rama's divinity and the purpose of his incarnation and that this enabled her not only to comfort Kausalya but to see a holy ministration in Lakshmana's sharing Rama's exile."

"From this we can understand the meaning of what the *Shastras* and the *Kural* say about Truth. Truthfulness should be such that it needlessly hurts no being in the world. The test for right conduct including truthfulness is harmlessness. This does not mean that truth is underrated."

"In those days as now it was hard for a son to prove that he knew nothing of a scheme carried out by his mother for his benefit."

"Here, Kamban beautifully sings how Kausalya shed tears of joy over Bharata and embraced him imagining that Rama himself had returned from the forest. Kausalya said amidst her sobs:

'Many were your ancestors who attained fame. You have surpassed them all in glory by renouncing the kingship that has come to you. You are indeed King among Kings!'

"The Kausalya and Bharata portrayed by Kamban embody a culture. May these heroic figures and that culture live forever in the land of Bharata."

"The story of Bharata in the *Ramayana* portraying a character of unrivalled purity and sublime selflessness is something more than an episode, and stands out by itself even in that noble epic as holy shrines do on the banks of the Ganga. It uplifts the heart, and gives one a glimpse of the heights to which human nature can rise when cleansed by love and devotion. Whether Rama and Bharata were incarnations of the Deity or merely supreme creations of a nation's imagination this episode is among the masterpieces of the world's literature."

"We bring with us into this world as our inborn gifts some wisdom and reverence. This gift is always in us and though sometimes obscured by prejudice or passion it keeps alive the divine in man which prevents him from reeling back into the beast."

"If one observes a cow guarding her calf and scattering a whole crowd of men, one can realize the power of love. Love is a supreme quality which according to occasion manifests itself in diverse heroic forms—such as valour and self-sacrifice, just like gold which can be changed for silver or goods or other things of value. When God assumes human form and is engaged in fulfilling His promise to save the helpless, His limitless power comes into play."

"All the women in our land who suffer sorrow in any way are so many replicas of Sita. May all the men be, like Hanuman, pure and heroic helpers of such suffering women!"

"On such occasions, when a character has to recapitulate past events, we can see Valmiki's skill in re-telling the story in beautiful words. This is a source of special pleasure to those who read

the *Ramayana*. . . . They do not dislike such repetitions. Indeed it is one of the special charms in a large epic."

"I am subject to the laws of nature," says the Ocean, "like the earth, the air, space, light and all constituents of the Universe. How can I depart from my nature, which is to be vast, deep, wave-filled, impassable?"

"Valmiki puts into the mouth of the Ocean," comments Rajaji, "a fundamental of our religious philosophy. He explains the primordial relationship between God and Nature. God's law operates in and through Nature. The laws of Nature were created so that the Universe may proceed by itself. . . . The five elements, all objects without life, as well as all living creatures, must follow their own permanent laws.

"Nature itself is a witness to God: He is not proved by a suspension of the laws of Nature."

"But the most impressive character in the great epic (Milton's *Paradise Lost*) is Satan, who rebelled against God and brought sin and death into this world. Critics of English poetry admire Milton's wonderful success in the characterization of Satan. Similarly, the great dramatic poet Shakespeare had created a wonderful character in Shylock, the usurer and miser. Even such embodiments of despicable qualities are presented by the poets as possessing courage, determination, energy and other good qualities which attract us and serve as a bright background to their blackness. In Valmiki's portraits of Ravana and Kumbhakarṇa too, we notice the same artistic skill."

"Ravana's self-indulgent vanity would not let him admit his error or retrace his steps. Very rarely does one who has committed a sin confess defeat. It requires some courage of a bad sort to commit a sin; but it requires much greater courage of a noble kind to confess it.

"It was this nobler courage that Ravana lacked. When an evil is being perpetrated, the friends of the evil-doer face a difficult

problem. Some are constrained against their better judgement to espouse the wrong cause through gratitude for past kindness, a sense of loyalty, or affinities of blood. Others think it their duty to try and reform the sinner, regardless of his anger and hatred and consequent danger to themselves, and if their efforts fail, they part company from the sinner, rather than abandon *dharma* and give their support to the sinner who persists in his crime. . . .

"In the *Ramayana*, Kumbhakarna and Vibhishana represent these two different types."

"In the Vaishnava tradition, this episode, in which Vibhishana is taken by the Prince into his camp and innermost council, is held to be as important as the *Bhagavad Gita* episode in the *Mahabharata*.

"It illustrates the doctrine that the Lord accepts all who in absolute surrender seek shelter at His feet, regardless of their merits or defects. Their sins are burnt out by the mere act of surrender. This is a message of hope to erring humanity. It is the heart of the Vaishnava faith that there is hope for the worst of us if only we surrender ourselves to the Lord."

When I was reading this paragraph in Rajaji's book, I was provoked to ask "Why such a restriction? Is it not the faith that Valmiki expounds? Does he not make his hero affirm in unambiguous language¹: 'I cannot reject anyone who comes to me for protection. This is my *dharma*. If Ravana himself came to me I could not reject him.'?"

I was soon to regret this hasty interruption of mine, and felt greatly relieved and indeed happy when I read the next paragraph, which took me off my feet, and whose wording is as though in answer to my hasty query. The paragraph reads thus: "But why should I restrict this doctrine to the Vaishnava tradition? Is not this the heart of all the religious tradition in our

¹This quotation also is in Rajaji's words.

land, yes, and of all the religions in the world? Every world teacher stresses this certainty of relief and redemption. It is not to Arjuna only that Krishna said: 'Have no fear, cast off all doubt, I shall destroy all your sins.' Wherever in the world God has spoken to mankind in a human voice, He has given this assurance...."

Nay, more is to follow in this strain. On a later page we find Sita remonstrating with Hanuman on behalf of the Rakshasis: "No, my son, who in the world is blameless? It is the part of noble souls to be compassionate towards all sinners as well as good people."

"These words of Sita," adds Rajaji with some feeling, "are treasured like nectar by generations of pious men."

As I mentioned earlier, Rajaji follows closely Valmiki, and where he chooses a variant from either Kamban or Tulsidas, he does so explicitly and generally explains his choice. There is a chapter on Surpanakha, which is based wholly on Kamban, and there are short references throughout the book to both Kamban and Tulsidas.

In a greatly condensed book like the present, one naturally expects many omissions from the original. Most of the readers would warmly endorse Rajaji's omission of the whole of the *Uttara Kanda*, and of almost all the battle scenes in the *Yuddha Kanda*. Most of the other omissions too are unavoidable in such an abridged version.

There are, however, a few exceptions. I personally miss for example the *Kapothopakhya* in the *Yuddha Kanda*, which is told by Rama in just two verses. It is a complete poem by itself and is a model of short, crisp, condensed writing, and it reveals Rama's humane personality much more effectively than chapters about him. When Rama proceeds to affirm with sincere humility that since it has not been given to him to emulate the distinguished example of the Kapotha (the pigeon in the story), he would at least try to follow the precepts of the great *Rishi Kandu*, one

sees both Rama and Valmiki at their best. This is an episode which will linger long in one's memory and which in course of time will come to occupy a good part of the canvas. I wish it had been included in the book.

Similarly Sita's confession to Anasuya, namely that her husband happened to have all the desirable human virtues, and her embarrassment that she would never be able, for that reason, to convince others that she would have loved him equally well even if he had none of these virtues, are sentiments which I am sure Rajaji would have loved to elaborate.

I wish also to refer here, but not without hesitation, to a frequently recurring theme in Rajaji's book, whether Valmiki intended his reader to be aware of Rama's being an *avatar*. In both Kamban and Tulsidas, the authors rarely miss a chance to emphasize it. Indeed they highlight it in almost every chapter. To any dispassionate reader, there is hardly any doubt that Valmiki too did intend his hero to be taken as a divine incarnation. Rajaji concedes this, but frequently expresses sentiments like these: "In Valmiki's work Rama is portrayed as a great and unique man and not as an incarnation of God. True, in some chapters there are references to him as an *avatar* of God, but in the body of the narrative Rama pictured by Sage Valmiki is not God Himself, but a great prince endowed with divine qualities."

"Valmiki delineates Rama as a hero rather than as an *avatar*."

"All Valmiki's characters are human beings, with heightened human qualities. It is only under great stress or in exceptional circumstances that divinity shines faintly through the human nature."

These are typical quotations, where distinction is sought to be made by Rajaji between Rama as an incarnation of God and Rama as "a human being with heightened human qualities." In the background of the distinction that is sought to be made between these two pictures it should be remembered that both

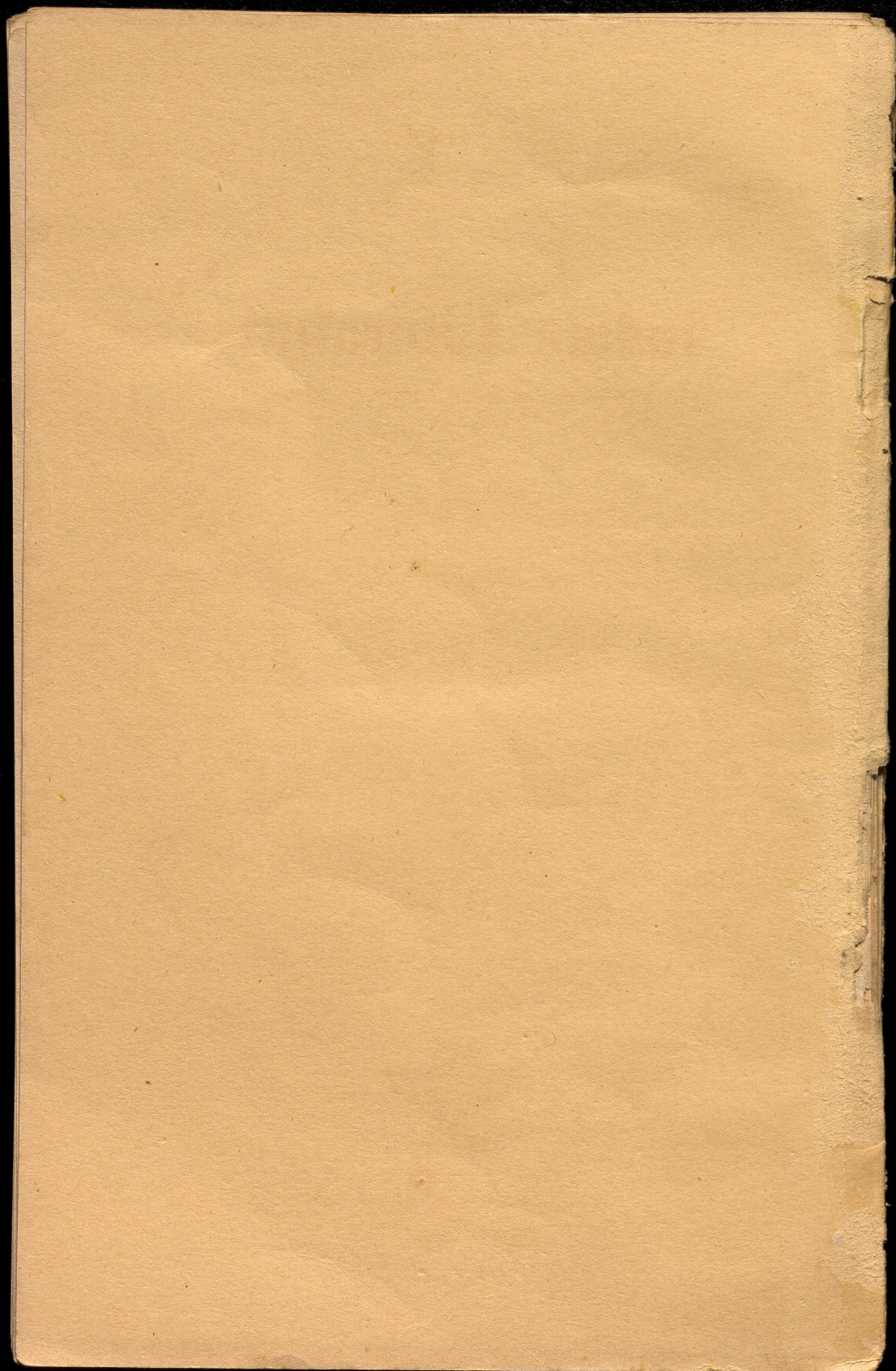
these pictures are Valmiki's and they both depict the same person, namely the hero of the *Ramayana*. The obvious moral that I would draw therefrom is that according to Valmiki, it is the very human qualities that are supposed to embellish the latter picture, that justify the former. Rama fulfils himself as an incarnation of God by being human among the humans. His divinity is only heightened by his choosing to be born among men; *Sa u shreyaan bhavati jaayamaanah*. The human qualities for which Rama is held in high esteem are also the attributes of divinity. In this context one may recall that Hanuman preferred to stay back in this world to be able to recapture the memories of Rama's sojourn among men, and confesses "*Bhavo naanyathra gachhathi*; even if my body were to be transported elsewhere, my mind would always stay here."

The two pictures would need reconciling only when divinity is conceived in the abstract, as devoid of all attributes, and therefore of human attributes too; hence the conclusion I would draw from the two pictures of Valmiki is that this is not Valmiki's concept of divinity. To him the two pictures would harmonize naturally, and the question of reconciling them would not arise. They are both pictures of one and the same Rama who is divine and who fulfils his divinity by his choosing to sojourn among men on earth. Divinity has its obligations too, and justifies itself only by fulfilling them, and an *avatar* is pre-eminently a way of fulfilling them.

Before I conclude I may mention in passing that the choice of the title for the Tamil book, namely *Chakravarti Thirumagan* is a felicitous one. It is the name by which Rama would himself have liked to be remembered, out of gratitude to his great father, who without knowing it, or meaning it, helped Rama to fulfil himself. For the same reason, Sita frequently introduces herself in Valmiki by this relationship to Dasaratha, *Snusha Dasarathasyaaham*. Valmiki, with commendable delicacy, respects this sentiment of his hero, and proceeds to compare him with Dasaratha, *gunair dasarathopamah!* There is a story told of a great teacher throwing up his hands in despair when he had to get this across to a student, who was distinguished but had no

sense of humour. The readers too cherish this name for its many associations, and the *mangala sloka* also chooses to refer to him by this cherished name: *Chakravarthi thanujaaya saarva-bhaumaaya mangalam.*

K. S. Krishnan



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