

## Revisiting Ramayana through Oppositional Telling of Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012)

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**ABSTRACT**—The Ramayana is a well-known epic in India. It is also widely recognized in many other regions around the world. The myriad forms of presentation of this epic allow for a collective audience's imagination to thrive and rise. Oppositional tellings of the original storyline make the epic even more intriguing as it caters to the 'other voices', who have alternative opinions of Rama and who happen to perceive the epic from differing ideological positions that are in contrast to the original version. Through the Ramayana's oppositional telling, this article is an attempt to represent the identity of Asura (the Deva's enemy) and also to demystify Rama's goodness by analyzing the portrayals of the two main characters, Ravana and Bhadra, in Anand Neelakantan's popular novel, *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012). Employing a subaltern studies approach and concepts of autonomy and lack of, the study reveals that Rama's goodness is in question as it merely reflects a Brahminical worldview that actually stands in contrast with those of the Asuras and other non-Brahmin-Hindu believers.

Keywords: Ramayana, oppositional telling, subaltern studies, autonomy

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## **Introduction**

In mythical tales, the idea of good versus evil is often portrayed to teach moral lessons. Through times, these lessons have come to define and formulate social and cultural identities of a particular society. In the epic Ramayana, the good versus evil dichotomy is markedly featured and is not only a literary device that is being employed to convey an allegorical message to the audience; indeed, it has an important influence on the moral and political perceptions of people as well (Polluck 1993). The goodness or virtue of Rama, a hero-God in Ramayana, for instance, is highly upheld, and is a quality that is aspired to by a large majority of Hindus. Ramayana is the source of “Rama Dharma” or the righteousness of Rama, which has become the foundation of social order and moral values in Brahman-Hindu religious societies. Rama and Sita are both held up as role models of Hindu virtue. Rama has become an archetype of the righteous king and an ideal man/husband, whereas Sita has become the embodiment of a good, loyal and chaste woman/wife.

Similar to the Christian Bible, Ramayana serves as a religious text. On the one hand, reading certain key passages of the epic is believed to be meritorious and a blessing upon the audience (Sethirakoset 1972). On the other hand, it has also played an important role in promulgating key existential concepts to its audience. To give one example, the concept of Varnadharma (Brockington 2004), which helped to establish casteism in Indian society. This concept is still relevant among the Indian even though the notion of equality has been promoted as a value of modern Indian secularism. When such a concept is concretely practiced by Brahmins, both their mastery in Sanskrit and their ability to perform rituals allow for the propagation of a Brahminical worldview. As a result, their sanskritized ideology has emerged as a mainstream social norm given that Brahmins actually only represent a minority of the Indian population (Brahminpedia 2015). This process, thus, is viewed by some, especially those in intellectual and political groups, as legitimizing the supremacy of Brahminism.

One of the Indian performance traditions that has been testified to and has strengthened the influence of the Brahminical worldview is a stage performance of the traditional Ramayana story. Such a performance is referred to as Ramlila or Ramleela, which is shown as part of a celebration of the annual autumn festival called Dussehra<sup>2</sup>. The play that dramatizes the life of Rama is quite popular in the Northern region of India, where it is performed on the last night of the festival. The story is based on the well-known narrative of the lord Rama's victory over the demon Ravana. The thematic message of good winning over evil is usually signified in the grand and spectacular ending which culminates in the literal burning of an effigy of Ravana. The series of plays, which is part of the evening festivities, is considered the heart of the festival due to its moral significance and the theatrical experience it offers to the audience. Thus, when any Indian Hindus are asked what Dussehra is all about, the most likely response they would give is that it is a celebration of the triumph of good over evil. Here Rama represents good and Ravana, whose effigy is burnt, represents evil. However, despite the cultural appeal of the Ramlila, it has become an object of political criticism. The main reason for this is that India is a pluralistic society, the members of which follow a diverse range of religions, meaning that there are millions who do not identify as followers of mainstream Hinduism. Those people are followers of other religious faiths such as Islam, Christianity, and non-established beliefs like animism (Rashid 2015). Consequently, they may not regard Rama's righteousness as being superior or ideal. Promoting one model of goodness (of Rama) can be viewed as anti-secular and unhealthy to the development of Indian democracy.

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<sup>2</sup> Dussehra, or Vijayadashami in Hinduism, is a public holiday marking the victory of Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, over the 10-headed demon. King Ravana kidnapped Sita, Rama's wife. The festival's name is derived from the Sanskrit words *dasha* ("ten") and *hara* ("defeat"). Symbolizing the victory of good over evil, Dussehra is celebrated on the 10th day of the seventh month (September–October) on the Hindu calendar, during the full moon. Dussehra coincides with the culmination of the nine-day Navratri festival (Encyclopedia Britannica Online).

This is the main reason why the concept of Asura, a demonic figure who is the Deva's enemy in the Ramayana epic, has come to the fore in the modern context of Indian culture and politics. On the one hand, it is used as a strategic response to counter the rising influence of Hindu nationalism. On the other hand, where art and literature are concerned, the appropriation of the Asura concept is supportive to Ramayana tradition as it allows for practice of retelling and creating adaptations of Ramayana, which have emerged in a variety of art forms. Through a popular novel entitled "Asura: Tale of the Vanquished (2012)", which is Anand Neelakantan's oppositional telling of Ramayana, this article aims to discuss how the main characters, representing subaltern figures, are portrayed and how the traditional dichotomy of good versus evil is presented. Here, it is useful that we take a look the definition of oppositional tellings.

## **Ramayana and Oppositional Tellings**

The diversity of the different tellings of Ramayana, both within and outside the Indian subcontinent has resulted in the development of the presentation of this epic in two separate directions (Damrhung 2006). The first direction refers to the tellings that have been influenced by Vaishnavism<sup>3</sup>, where the prevailing message seems to highlight the greatness of Vishnu. Vishnu is perceived as the supreme god and is worshipped by Vaishnavite's followers and his avatars, of which Rama is one. These tellings conform to the traditional Hindu version in terms of the structure of the plot, the main events and the main characters, even though some details may differ or are enmeshed with other local materials that are pertinent to each particular location where the story

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3 Vaishnavism or Vishnuism is one of the major sects of modern Hinduism. It is characterized by the worship of and devotion to the god Vishnu and his different forms of incarnation (avatars). Vedic and puranic texts are the main sources of the beliefs and practices of Vaishnavism. Another major sect that is widely practiced by Hindus is Shaivism, which acknowledges the god Shiva as a supreme deity. For more information, see <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Vaishnavism>.

is being retold. The main purpose of this tradition of telling the epic is to glorify Rama and popularize his goodness. Examples of this kind of telling include those popularly known versions in Hindi by Tulsidas, in Tamil by Kampan and in Bengali by Krittibas Ojha. The Thai Ramakien and Lao Phra Lak Phra Lam also belong to this category.

Another direction in the Ramayana tellings is the oppositional approach which refers to a way of telling a story that seeks to contest the traditional depiction of the characters, values and thematic messages of the traditional story. Those tellings that oppose influential Hindu tellings can be called “oppositional tellings” (Richman 1991, 11). Drawing from different elements of Ramayana literature, three reasons can be attributed to the development of oppositional tellings.

Firstly, given that Rama, in the Hindu Ramayana, acts as the embodiment of righteousness, some of his actions can be viewed as questionably morally ambiguous. The most notorious examples of this include his setting for Sita’s trial by fire (akni pariksha) after she returns from Lanka and his approval of the mutilation of Surapanakha by his brother, Lakshmana, due to her boldness and sexual advancement. Another issue concerning the projection of Rama as a just and virtuous warrior monarch is his stealth killing of Bali, which is done without giving the latter a chance to either defend himself or fight back. These incidents challenge the pious image of Rama in terms of being both an ideal husband and a moral king. These are traits that are aspired to by all Hindu men. This is the case in point when Rama’s ideology has been normalized and politicized by a group associated with a powerful political party. Accordingly, there have emerged various renditions and commentaries to investigate and comment on those controversial aspects.

Secondly, some oppositional tellings have stemmed from a colonial context as in the case of the popular Myanmar novel, *Lin-gar Di Pa Chit*. This telling, as examined by Faktong (2015), appears to reverse the role of the main characters by making Ravana a hero who protects his motherland from Rama’s invasion. Ravana’s

death at the end of the novel connotes the native people's great sacrifice and struggle in their fight against the British colonizers. In addition, the telling by Michael Madhusudan Dutt entitled "Meghanadavadha Kavya" reflects the complicated nature of the contact the Indians had with the colonial culture (Richman 1991). Dutt wrote his Ramayana in Bengali prose and based the plot on Krittivasa's Bengali version. He then subverted the image of Rama by integrating three additional stories that identify Ravana with Rama. Out of the reader's expectations, this technique engenders the reader's admiration and sympathy for the villain. Dutt cited his contempt for the Hindu values as the reason for his change of character portrayals (Richman 1991). Similar reasons seem to be shared by other religious minorities who embrace Ravana as their hero. The last reason gives rise to the oppositional tellings that reflect the socio-cultural identities of those belonging to non-Hindu communities who make use of Ramayana retellings as a way better to understand their own attitudes toward power and as a way of making sense of their own realities. These people usually come from lower caste Dravidian groups or people of less privileged social positions, or those who are members of certain disenfranchised gender groups.

Whereas the mainstream tellings of Ramayana speak for the dominant male within Hindu culture, the richness of Ramayana tradition makes it possible for oppositional tellings to allow other members of society to identify with specific female characters including Sita and Surapanakha, or even the villain and his tribe such as with Ravana and the Asuras.

### **Subaltern Studies, Autonomy and Lack**

In this paper, I hope to complement the Ramayana scholarship by analyzing a popular novel entitled "Asura: Tale of the Vanquished (2012)" by Anand Neelakantan. In so doing, a subaltern studies approach (Guha 1982, 1996) and the psychoanalytic concepts of autonomy and lack of (Mansfield 2000) are used. Briefly to explain these concepts, subaltern studies was developed

as an approach to the study of history that emerged in the 1980s by a group of Indian intellectuals including Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sumit Sarkar, Gayatri Spivak and Gyanendra Pandey, among others. It was developed to contest the mainstream historiographical approach that has been acknowledged as the preferred mode of historical writing of the elite. It is believed that the mainstream historiography, despite being premised upon the Enlightenment rationalism that gives privilege to the narrative of modernity and democracy, fails to take the 'subaltern' or the 'people' into account (Guha 1982). Accordingly, the Indian history of nationalism was merely written as an achievement of the elite class. For this reason, the main aim of subaltern studies is to produce "historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subject of history" (Chakrabarty 2004, 7).

Using Antonio Gramsci's account of how the Italian peasants under Mussolini freed themselves from the capitalist bourgeoisie hegemony as a starting point, Guha (1982) believes that there was a kind of an autonomous domain that allowed the subaltern to play their politics (in the sphere of political society), in parallel with the constitutionalist-oriented style of elite politics. Even though the subalterns were scattered and un-unified in character, their commonly shared ideology was a notion of resistance to the elite domination. For this purpose, they were able to rise against the Raj in the form of a peasant insurgency during the colonial period.

Borrowing from the Marxist tradition, Guha proposes two concepts of subaltern subjects. In "The Small Voice of History" (1996), he presents a humanist concept of the subaltern subject. He argues that traditional historiography fails to recognize the agency of the subaltern subject, not as 'principal actors' on their own but as instruments. That is, they are only acting as a complement to the middle class' leadership or as a subset of that middle class. Therefore, the history of colonial India is equivalent to statism or state discourse, in which the subaltern movements were not included. This suggests that on the one hand, history has neglected both the agency and autonomy of the subaltern. On the other hand, history has recognized only the middle class

ideology and their simplified version of social contradiction. On the contrary, Guha believes that the subaltern occupied the domain of autonomy which was independent from elitist politics. However, subaltern politics relied on the traditional organization of kinship and territoriality or on class associations rather than colonial adaptations of the British parliamentary institution and the residual notions of the old feudal political strategies. Hence, the subaltern is actually both an active and independent agent of history. Guha maintains that there is a subaltern consciousness to recover; like a positivist object which exists outside history. Therefore, one of the objectives of the subaltern studies is to rewrite history.

Another kind of subaltern subject is premised on a constructionist concept that holds that meaning is not produced by the subject but comes from the outcome of structural contradictions. Based on the work by Louis Althusser, the subject is the effect of structure and it is the structure that determines the course of history. Following this, the subaltern consciousness is not there to be recovered, but rather, it is constituted in the same fashion that the state is constituted. This concept has marked a shift in the position of subaltern studies from the Gramscian Marxist to the Althusserian overdetermination, which is predicated on the premise that there were multiple contradictions within various classes which could not be reduced to impacts of the economy. As such, given the British's success in having dominance over the Indian, it failed to exercise hegemony over the latter.

The constructive concept seems to be supported by Gayatri Spivak (1988), a major critic of subaltern studies methodologies, who holds that the subaltern cannot speak for themselves due to first, the inability of the Western oppressor/colonizer to listen to other utterances different from theirs and second, the subalterns being caught up within hegemonic structures of the Western discursive institutions, be it law, political economy or academic, which inherently contain traces of "epistemic violence" (Spivak 1988, 24). Thus, they failed to be constituted as a normative subject in the colonist historiography. This emphasizes that subaltern



agency is lost in the process of representation. Spivak (1985) also observes that self-determining consciousness of the subaltern, as suggested by Guha, could never be fully retrieved from colonial or nationalist archives. Therefore, in trying to restore the 'agency' of peasants and tribal people of colonial India from multiple documents, the subaltern studies group was actually in danger of, in an essentialist manner, objectifying them in the same way earlier historians had done. Having dismissed subaltern consciousness, what Spivak (1985, 341) suggests is a deconstructive approach which is reading the work of subaltern studies from within but against the grain particularly when it concerns women issues as women are often absent from the history, or being used as part of men's instrumentality. To do justice to women, it is important to shift functions of woman in discursive systems, widely present in historical texts, such as being inscribed as man-eating goddesses among subaltern insurgents in one occasion or being secular daughters and widows denied from taking up a leading position in another occasion. In so doing, women are to be prevented from being seen as sexed object and as lacking subjectivity. Moreover, in reading historical documents, Spivak stresses that 'self-consciousness' should be realized rather than class-consciousness because the latter has 'self-alienating' overtone which cannot act by its own self-determination but only as instrumentality.

Regarding the psychoanalytic concepts of autonomy and lack, autonomy is a contentious concept which can be defined differently in various contexts. For example, the political autonomy is the ability to have one's voices heard and respected within a political context. Personal autonomy can be defined as an individual's capacity to decide for oneself and to pursue one's own course of action (Dryden 2017). For the concept of lack, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, when the subject enters the symbolic order, it has to sacrifice the feeling of oneness it once had in the imaginary realm where the subject had no distinction between itself and others. When the subject enters into the symbolic order, the subject experiences a sense of lacking and starts longing for self-completion (Mansfield 2000). In other words, it is the process of the child's entry into the social world in which

s/he is subjected to language, conventions, and law. The child's relationship with such systematic bodies deprives her/him of the feeling of completion s/he once had, causing her/him to experience a sense of lacking. The sensation of lacking instigates desire, which propels the subject into the symbolic world where we all exist. Humans are drawn endlessly toward desire, which is insatiable.

Worth noting, is that despite the seemingly contrasting views of the two kinds of subject in subaltern studies propounded by Ranajit Guha as outlined above, they are quite relevant and effective, as a method, in reading the two major subaltern figures, Ravana and Bhadra, in the novel of this study. Propelled by autonomy and a sense of lack, the two subaltern characters have their fair share of opportunities and limitations. While both are conscious of and restricted by their subalternity, it is the upper class status of Ravana that is supportive of his agency and elevates him to the position of power. Bhadra, who belongs to the lower class, cannot escape from structural subjugation he was born with. Hence, he remains a powerless, voiceless subaltern. Suffice to say is the application of Guha's concepts of humanist and constructionist subjects of subalternity are useful in helping us to understand firstly, how the subaltern subject plays active roles in history making<sup>4</sup> and secondly, how he is, as Spivak points out, repressed by hegemonic structures in one way or another. Hence, as in myths and in social realities alike, the subaltern's story is far from having a happy, victorious end.

## **The Author, the Novel and Its Significance**

*Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* was written in 2012 by Anand Neelakantan, an author from Kerala, a southern state in

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<sup>4</sup> Spivak's criticism on the irretrievable nature of subaltern consciousness is poignant and relevant concerning circumstances the colonial female subjects had to undergo. However, I choose to ally with Guha's Marxist humanist position when it comes to understanding Ravana as he rises from a half-caste, oppressed man to be a powerful despot of Lanka. Hence, this approach is used to analyze his character.

India. Neelakantan grew up in a small village called Thripoonithura in Cochin, which is a center of art and music schools and a site of a hundred or so temples and so he has been exposed to artistic and religious ambience since his childhood, Neelakantan has developed fascination and affinity with the magical worlds of myths and especially the Ramayana. However, it is the story of the villain, Ravana that has captivated him the most. He was deeply inspired and even “haunted”, in his own word, by Ravana. Neelakantan recounts his divine vision which made possible his first mythical tale as follows.

The Asura emperor would not leave me alone. For six years he haunted my dreams, walked with me, and urged me to write his version of the story. He was not the only one who wanted his version of the story to be told. One by one, irrelevant and minor characters of the Ramayana kept coming up with their own versions. Bhadra, who was one of the many common Asuras who were inspired, led and betrayed by Ravana, also had a remarkable story to tell, different from that of his king.

(Goodreads Webpage 2012)

*Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* is Neelakantan’s debut novel which became the best seller of Crossword (Indian leading bookstore) and CNN-IBN (Indian English language TV channel) in 2012. The commercial success of the novel has not only motivated Neelakantan to create subsequent novels of the same mythological genre including *Ajaya: The Roll of the Dice* (2013), *Rise of Kali: Duryodhana’s Mahabharata* (2015), *The Rise of Sivagami* (2017) and *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara* (2018) (Authors Webpage 2020), it has also catered to the widening readership of the Ramayana, which concomitantly attracts academic attention. Worth mentioning are two works by Indian research scholars: Dais Maria James (2015)’s Master of Philosophy dissertation entitled “A Subaltern Reading of Anand Neelakantan’s *Asura Tale of the Vanquished*” and Geethu Lekshmi R. and Beena S. Nair (2017)’s “Ravanayana: Negotiating

the Political and Cultural Discourse of the Vanquished in Anand Neelakantan's *Asura Tale of the Vanquished: The Story of Ravana and His People* (2012).”

The two studies mainly employ a postcolonial approach in their analysis of Ravana. In Dais Maria James's dissertation, Spivak's perspective of the colonist subject who is oppressed by the system and Edward Said's notion of the Occident's other are used. James' focused discussion is thus on Ravana's deprivation and oppression. Viewing Ravana and Asura civilians as an inferior race which is weak, poor and uncivilized, the Devas, led by Rama, representing the colonizers feel the need to uplift them through introducing caste system and Brahminical rituals. The rule of the Devas over the Asuras after the former's conquest brings about significant structural changes in the Asura's society the same way the colonist has done. The result of such a disruption is perpetuating subjugation of the Asuras and their paralysis with “caste based subalternity” (James 2015, 53).

For Lekshmi R. and Nair (2017), Ravana, in the same novel, is seen as a hybrid figure who is a result of negotiation between the colonized and the colonizer. The figure of Ravana is analyzed on a twofold level: the level of a ruled subaltern when he is a common man and the level of a ruling elite when he becomes king. In the first part of the article, Lekshmi R. and Nair (2017) draws on Edward Said's Orientalism concerning binary oppositions between the Orient and the Occident by which the Devas are the Occidental colonizers who treat the Asuras as the colonized others. As such, the Asuras are maltreated and marginalized in the caste ridden society. Here, Lekshmi R. and Nair's analysis resonates with that of James. However, what gives this study a more nuanced touch is how the researchers shed light on Ravana's cultural and political identity which is reflective of his belief systems on issues of castes, women, Brahmin rituals, marriage and God worship.

In this study, given that a subaltern studies approach is similarly deployed, entailing that the two main characters, Ravana and Bhadra, are viewed as subaltern subjects, I seek to focus, as previously mentioned, on Ranajit Guha's concepts of humanist

and constructionist subjects rather than Said's Orientalism or Spivak's voiceless subaltern. On the one hand, I am supportive of the idea of agency/autonomy that is a constitutive factor of an individual subjectivity and playing a critical role in guiding one's action or defining one's destiny. On the other hand, structural power of institutions, or different sovereigns, can take a heavy toll on anyone in a particular society. Thus, while subalterns have agency and are self-conscious, they are never completely free. This is especially the case in point for the subalterns under colonization.

The story of *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* is based on Valmiki's *Ramayana*, however, the author employed an oppositional telling approach, as has been discussed above, in rewriting the story. The novel follows the same plot structure and most characters of the original text are used to tell the same story, albeit from a totally different perspective. Neelakantan did not simply reverse the roles of the main characters. Rather, he let the villain, Ravana, narrate the main events so that we, the audience, can see things the way he sees them. This does not depict Ravana as a hero in place of Rama. He may actually appear as villainous as he is seen through the author's oppositional technique. Consequently, we come to understand what makes him the way he is. Ravana himself made an interesting point about why his tale has to be told:

For thousands of years, I have been vilified and my death is celebrated year after year in every corner of India. Why? Was it because I challenged the Gods for the sake of my daughter? Was it because I freed a race from the yoke of caste-based Deva rule? You have heard the victor's tale, the *Ramayana*. Now hear the *Ravanayana*, for I am Ravana, the Asura, and my story is the tale of the vanquished. I am a non-entity, invisible, powerless and negligible. No epics will ever be written about me.

(as appears on the back cover of the novel)

Another character who narrated the story is Bhadra, who is

a new character created by the author to represent a common man from a lower class among the Asuras. Bhadra is a village man who fights bravely for the survival of his tribe, but he is later betrayed by Ravana. Despite his struggles to get out of destitution and hardship, hailing from the lowest stratum of society hinders any progress he attempts to make. Thus, the stories of the two Asura figures account for a brief historicity of the “Asurayana” (James 2015, 12) along with their respective classes that are certainly worthy of our exploration.

Neelakantan's Asura is a symbolic tale of the subaltern in the sense that it lets the mythical defeated king of the Asura, the Hindu other, speak. Asura allows Ravana's humanized sides to be exposed for the public reconsideration of his notoriously demonic image. The act of representation here is critical as it suggests the autonomy or agency one can exercise for one's own self-determination. One who represents himself and makes his/her own voice heard, makes a political assertion for his/her own end. In effect, the public are given alternative views that allow them to take into account and reflect upon their perceptions.

### **Analysis of *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (Anand Neelakantan 2012)**

*Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (Asura) is a novel based on Valmiki's Ramayana story. It is divided into 65 chapters. Each chapter contains events in the story narrated by two main characters, Ravana and Bhadra. Ravana, in this telling, is not painted as a flat black character, not as an absolute villain, but rather as a fallen hero. The author attempts to portray his humanized sides so that the reader can see him in a different light; as the king of the Asura and not as the enemy of the Deva's king, Rama.

The character of Bhadra is not present in the traditional Ramayana version. He has been created to represent downtrodden Asura people. Each character takes its turn narrating important events occurring to the Asura and how they experience them.

Ravana is born as a mixed caste Dravidian but later rises to power and becomes the king of Lanka. Bhadra is born a lower-caste, common man, who is, throughout his life, devoted to his clan. Despite his sacrifice and devotion to the freedom of the Asura, however, Bhadra's social condition has deprived him of being someone other than a marginalized subaltern. Whereas Ravana has had his fair share of glorious and gloomy days, Bhadra remains destitute throughout his life. Given their differing conditions, difficulties and destinies, both figures reveal to us how they have fought against the powerful others in their respective terms. The following analyses concern portrayals of Ravana and Bhadra, respectively. Drawing on the two concepts of subaltern subjects: the humanist and the constructionist, and the psychoanalytic concepts of autonomy and lacking that has been discussed above, we shall see how Ravana and Bhadra speak of different portrayals of subaltern subjects.

## **The Portrayal of Ravana**

The novel's first chapter is entitled "The End". In this chapter, Ravana narrates the last moment in his life after he was defeated and left to die along with the bodies of his slain cousins. In subsequent chapters he begins to reminisce about his past, which then sparks memories of his childhood, youth and adulthood when he rose to be the emperor of Lanka. These recollections are ingrained with moments of conflict in the palace, his emotional turmoil and some larger than life experiences of Ravana himself. It all begins when he is a poor boy, raised inadequately along with three other siblings, Kumbakarna, Soorpanakha<sup>5</sup>, and Vibhishana, by an Asura mother. Being born to a Brahmin father and an Asura mother makes Ravana a mixed caste boy, who is subjugated in a

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<sup>5</sup> Soorpanakha is Ravana's younger sister. She sees Rama in the forest and feels a strong affection for him, and to whom she expresses her feeling directly. However, her advance is denied. After some exchange of conversation with both Rama and Lakshmana she turns to her Rakshasa form and poses some threat toward Sita. Then Lakshmana cuts off her nose and ears. In other versions, her name is spelled "Surapanakha".

caste-ridden society as a result of Brahmin ascendancy. Because such a social position is coupled with poverty and his father's negligence, Ravana and his siblings are not given access to education. "My brothers and I never had access to education to speak of. No Brahmin was ready to take us for free even if we worked for them," (16) deploras Ravana of his childhood deprivation. These limitations subject him to a place of subalternity if we are to follow the basic concept of the subaltern in the sense that they are excluded from the domain of the socio-economic structure.

Ironically, Ravana has a stepbrother, Kubera, who is a prince of Lanka. Kubera's wealth and social privileges are anything but lacking in Ravana's early life. Kubera's superiority, his contemptuous nature, and his unkind expressions towards Ravana and his family become a point for his collective angst and vengeful desire toward the former. These suppressions are eventually translated into the dethroning of his step-brother and the making of himself king of Lanka. However, an ill relationship with his father and various forms of childhood marginalization take a great toll on Ravana's psychological condition. On the one hand, these situations cause him to be a repressive subject who incessantly grapples with a fear of castration. Such a fear cause Ravana to develop an inferiority complex which is reflected in his cynicism, self-contradictory attitude, and even in his psychopathic inclinations that appear on several occasions throughout the novel. It also makes him loathe his father and the institution his father stands for— Brahminism. On the other hand, the same fear also equips him with a strong sense of ambition, not only to achieve something great in life but also to reform the social conditions he feels do not serve the Asura's ideas of good and justice.

The angst and suppression that Ravana feels for the Asura race is sublimated into constant criticism towards the dominant other, the Deva. Ravana feels that the Deva's most powerful tool is their religious texts, the Vedas, which are the source of all traditions and belief systems. The Deva's way of life is governed by the texts, which are regarded as sacred and not to be challenged. As such, he often uses questions as a method to challenge the Brah-



min hegemony of his time. These questions resonate with social issues of the present day where casteism along with other forms of oppression are still relevant. The reader is then invited to participate in pondering over the meaning of those posed questions.

But wherever I looked, I only saw oppression. Money, caste, rituals, traditions, beliefs and superstitions, all conspired to crush together the humble majority. Why couldn't there be a more just way of living (19).

The silent hatred for his father makes him a hard critic of Brahminism and anything associated with it. Criticizing Brahmin rituals and its scriptures becomes his common habit.

I thought the Vedas were a load of humbug and it didn't matter which way you recited them. Some jobless Brahmin like my father, created them a thousand years ago. Instead of making themselves useful, the Brahmins prayed to Gods they themselves invented for the rain, the sun, horses, cows and money and many other things.

Therefore, what Ravana does is not only to lay bare what he sees as being objectionable and unfair. He also redefines certain norms and concepts which reclaim his Asura identity. Take one example of a moral principle that is strongly upheld by the Asura. In this instance, Ravana asserts:

Our dharma was based on simple things: a man should be true to his word; he should speak from his heart and shouldn't do anything he considered wrong. One should not cheat even if one was sure to fail. One should honour women and not insult anyone. If there was injustice, we had to fight at all costs (17).

According to the quotation, Ravana redefines the notion of righteousness, the value readily attached to Rama's image. Here, he makes references to Rama's mistreatment of Sita and Sooparnakha in the traditional Ramayana. He also questions the way Rama has shot Bali to death from behind, while the latter is fighting with Sugriva. Invoking a warrior's principle (yuddha), Ravana affirms

that “[o]ne should not cheat even if one is sure to fail.” Such criticism of Rama’s actions, which is commonly practiced in the oppositional tellings of The Ramayana, is reiterated in Asura for two interesting reasons.

First and foremost, the legitimacy of Rama dharma is exposed for our revision, and is challenged by the alternative Asura dharma, which is not properly represented. This suggests that one supreme type of dharma is irrelevant and no longer valid. Referring to the warfare strategy that is deployed by Rama’s army when they attack Lanka at night time while people are asleep, Ravana remarks “[w]e are dealing with an enemy who has no scruples, no sense of fair play and dharma. They are ruthless barbarians who will stoop to any levels to achieve their goals” (365). Aversion caused by unfair techniques is similarly shared by Bhadra, a common Asura man who witnesses what his king (Ravana) is up against, “[a]t the same time, he faced a sly and ruthless enemy who did not care even when civilians were killed and burnt enemy cities through arson and treachery” (367). Bhadra’s objection to Rama’s warfare has a two-fold effect here. First, it directly brings Rama’s heroic embodiment, in particular an aspect of his righteousness or Dharmavira, into question. Here, if we, as a reader, identify with Bhadra, what Rama’s army does is questionable. He states that it was “the sudden attack in the dead of night, flamed-tipped arrows were shot towards the marketplace” (355) and goes on to say “people ran out. Screams rang through the sky. Flesh burned. Houses were gutted and thick, black smoke swirled upwards. It was like being in hell” (355). This unfair play, as described by Bhadra while he was running for his life, casts a shadow on Rama’s reputation of compassion.

Another question that arises is to ask if he is such a compassionate figure, why is the notion of the possibility of civilian deaths not considered before starting a war. What his army does to the common Asura people seems to undermine this Dharmavira stature, as it is contrary to how one website advocating Rama<sup>6</sup> describes his quality. It is described in the following way: “Shri

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<sup>6</sup> See website “Rama”, <http://lordrama.co.in/index.html>.

Ram is full of mercy, care and compassion. He had mercy towards the meek. He knew what was to be done (righteous). He always has self-control and he is always pure (in conduct)".

Another reason why Rama's Dharmavira is being brought up is that it is pertinent to the ancient history, or say, the mythical history concerning the Deva versus the Asura conflicts. The relevant questions concerning who the Aryan are and how they are connected with the Indus Valley Civilization are still debatable today. From what is presented in the novel *Asura*, it is clear where the author stands. Anand Neelakantan believes that the Asuras were the civilized people of the Harappa who had lived peacefully until the invasion by the Deva or Aryan that was led by their supreme god Indra. The unfair strategic attack of Rama's army on the Asura kingdom is used comparatively as a point of reference in explaining the cause of the decline of the Indus valley civilization. Identifying himself with the Asura, the tribe that settled by the river banks and were civilized, Ravana recounts that the Asura civilization was at its peak before the Aryan's invasion, and the society was much more culture-oriented as there was no efficient leadership or plan for national defense. This makes the city an easy target for the invaders. Ravana reminds himself of the ancient history of his Asura tribe as if he wants to suggest that the history is now repeating itself when the same group of people resort to the same tactic in conquering the other's land. Lanka is now brutally attacked by the Deva army in exactly the same fashion as how things had happened to the Harappa. What arises in Ravana's mind is the memory of the horse-riding nomad tribes invading the Asura (people of the Harappa), which ultimately led to the decline and destruction of their civilization.

The mighty Asura army met the horse-riding savage tribes near the river Jhelum. The leader of the plunderers was named Indra....Thousands were slain; women irrespective of age, were gang-raped, children burned alive and granaries plundered. Magnificent cities crumbled (22).

By connotation, Ravana means to stress that the Deva/

Aryan tribe, to which Rama belonged, is uncivilized and the way that they invade the Asura (comparatively, the Harappan) in order to usurp the city is blatantly barbaric. Therefore, the badge of righteousness (Dharmavira) attached to Rama is questionable.

It is quite obvious from the above discussion that Ravana is a subaltern subject who can speak clearly of his dissent and desire. What enables him to speak? is the question that will be dealt with shortly. For my attempted answer, I have to follow Guha's concept of the humanist subject, which holds that the subaltern is not merely an instrument of the bourgeoisie's political project. Actually, they occupy the domain of autonomy which is independent from elitist politics and, thus, they can realize their political goals on their own. However, the subaltern has to ally with traditional organizations and manoeuvre through class associations effectively for their own gain. When Ravana's struggle to represent his tribe (alternatively, his race) is seen within this conceptual framework, it is not difficult to determine how his autonomy takes effect. Given that Ravana is mixed caste and disadvantaged, as he describes how difficult his early life was economically and socially, he is not totally left out of many socio-economic institutions. Even if it seemed so in his early life, he has managed to resume access to his powerful network of social contacts later on. Ravana is linked to a learned Brahmin father, a rich and royal step-brother (Kubera), and a powerful, spiritual guru who was a former king (Mahabali). These three people play important roles in shaping his personality and making him king at last. Neglected by his biological father, Ravana finds a paternal figure in Mahabali, who teaches him useful lessons on life and war. He consols Ravana over his fear of being castrated by his estranged Brahmin father who views him as a "good-for-nothing evil-spirited loser who is a burden to the world" (31). Mahabali inspires Ravana to achieve his dreams and assures him of his potential within.

I can see a spark, a small one perhaps, but a spark indeed, which with the right breeze can be blown into a raging fire. I do not know, whether you are a promise of our miserable people or their curse. You could be both and

many things beyond (29).

Having spent time with Mahabali, Ravana becomes an educated man and a skilled warrior. What he lacked in his childhood, is somehow compensated for later in life, and his long subjugated subaltern consciousness is resurrected accordingly. Psychoanalytically speaking, he is now in control to pursue the phallus a symbol of totality and power. Mahabali is instrumental in helping Ravana recover such autonomy, which then enables him to harness it for the good of himself and his tribe. Kubera is not only Ravana's step-brother, he is also his rival—the threat to Ravana's quest of the phallus. As such, he has to be eliminated. Ravana allies himself with his siblings and cousins, including Maricha, Prahastha, Sumali and Jambumali, who has connections with official authorities. The support from Rudraka, a former commando who used to serve the previous king, Mahabali and the loyal, devoted Asura soldiers, is the key to his victorious mission.

To add to Ravana's fortune, his maternal uncle Maricha is willing to die for him and he sacrifices his life when he accompanies Ravana to abduct Sita. In short, Ravana is successful in mobilizing his allies, and together, the collective Asura consciousness is strengthened by invocations of historical discourses regarding the war of the ten Asura kings who fought against the Deva army. Unfortunately, the last war against the Devas was a failure and brought about the notorious defeat of the Asuras. The main cause of this was the abduction of Sita, as a personal affair, rather than a racially or politically motivated one. As a consequence, the Asura collective strength failed to sustain. The Asura consciousness which was once held together solidly, expired and broke into fragments, mainly as a result of Maricha's death and Vibhishana's alliance with the enemy. The tragic loss of the Asura lives and the downfall of the empire are thus inevitable.

### **Portrayal of Bhadra**

Bhadra is depicted as a poor, common Asura man whose

life is affected by the wars that took place with the Devas in much the same way that Ravana has been affected. However, unlike Ravana, his voice is never heard. Bhadra, an untouchable, represents a subaltern who was doubly-marginalized by caste and class. He is underprivileged in both social and economic ways, having been once a peasant who lived a simple farm life with his wife and young daughter in a peaceful, self-sufficient village.

My village was small but it has everything- the sacred grove, a small shrine for Shiva, a toddy shop and a small school...I live like my father, who had lived like his father. My children would also live like me, growing up in the same street, bathing in the same pond, falling in love with dusty beauties of the village (43).

Bhadra never suffers from a feeling of lacking or from a sense of inadequacy the way Ravana did. He is satisfied with whatever life offers to him. However, the war with the Deva has caused a radical change in his life when the village is ravaged; at this time, his wife is raped and killed along with his daughter. This traumatic experience leads Bhadra to undertake a vengeful mission to reclaim the Asura's pride and freedom from the Devas. Such determination brings Bhadra to serve under Ravana's command in his revolutionary army as a loyal soldier. This is where the uncanny relationship forms between the two Asura men who come from two different classes. According to Ravana, Bhadra is the last person who comes to his side just before his last breath. Bhadra holds Ravana's badly injured body close and says to him, "I will complete your work, your highness. Do not worry. Go in peace. I will do it for our race" (13). Bhadra embodies a lower-class nationalist persona who is relentlessly devoted to his superior and to the idea of living for the purpose of the Asura's glory.

Given his marginalized background, Bhadra, who has fought under Mahabali, manifested military prowess and intelligence. Surprisingly, when such qualities are coupled with his honest and unafraid expressions of his own thoughts and feelings, it disturbs Ravana. "I was surprised and irritable to find the man

show no fear of my authority and who did not act humbly. It was absurd. It was absurd; the very notion that he was my equal was absurd” (65). As such, Ravana never recognizes Bhadra’s capability but sees him as an inferior individual who should always be subjected to his authority. Bhadra becomes the object of Ravana’s anxiety; someone he wishes to get rid of but, ironically, someone he cannot live without. Once Ravana presents Bhadra’s idea to his army council as if it were his own and the idea is approved. Bhadra suggests that some soldiers should disguise themselves as traders and pretend to exchange goods with Lanka. This way, the troops can set up a guild and have weapons transported into their areas inside the city. Nevertheless, on no reasonable grounds, Ravana considers Bhadra a traitor and has him detained.

Later on in the story, we come to see that Bhadra’s dedication and sacrifice to the fight for his race are never recognized by the powerful Asura elites. He is exploited and then expended again and again, but Bhadra does not have the power to protest or revolt. He continues to fight the enemy on his own terms, for all he wants is “to see the Devas ruined” (100). Once he disguises himself and goes to work as an employee for the enemy and is caught up in some trouble. He wants Ravana to help him but is dismissed and scolded nonchalantly “You traitor, son of a scoundrel! Go rot in hell!” (101) Ravana also kicks him hard in the face, but it is those words that hurt him the most.

The ill treatment Bhadra receives never affects the fierce loyalty he has for his Asura clan. The contempt toward him is fleeting, but Asura has to be liberated. Accordingly, Bhadra’s pain is quickly brushed off as he often reminds himself that he “was too small for kings and the relatives of kings to be bothered about” (196). Given the subsequent unfortunate events that he experiences in his later life, such as his wife being raped by Ravana, having to raise Ravana’s son as his own, and his son not publicly respecting him as a father, Bhadra is not agonized by these misfortunes as he gradually comes to terms with a sense of normalcy about his own destitution and oppression. He once reveals the joy he feels at Maricha’s funeral because it means that poor people like him

can be fed and new clothes can be supplied to them.

Drawing from the concept of autonomy, we can see that Bhadra's autonomy is always at work. His Asura consciousness propels him toward living his life for the purpose of Asura's progress. However, despite all the odds he faces, becoming a revolutionary soldier, an efficient army man of Lanka under Ravana's rule, a foster father of Ravana's son, Bhadra is a constructionist subject of the subaltern if we rightly follow Guha. His voice is unheard and his action is unnoticed. He laments that "[n]o bards will ever sing paeans to the selfless acts that are done by common people like us" (334). Bhadra's important role in the history of Asurayana is never mentioned. For one reason, the personal autonomy he exercises lacks the sufficient force to develop itself as a form of political autonomy, which is one's ability to have his voice heard and respected within a political context (Dryden 2017). Bhadra's significant contribution is relegated to being an instrument of the Asura elite's political project. As such, unlike Ravana and other Asura elites, his political voice is muted and his subaltern consciousness is never resurrected.

Another reason for Bhadra's historical misrecognition is that he has no linkage to the dominant group—the Brahmins. Ravana, despite his mixed caste origin, has a Brahmin father and is well connected to a formidable king like Mahabali, as well as with other powerful figures of the old regime who have made his rise to power possible. Bhadra, on the other hand, is a poor untouchable individual who remains marginalized throughout his life. Although he has sacrificed his life to the rise of Ravana and the victory of the Asura, Bhadra will not be remembered or misrecognized in the history. In his later years, Bhadra comes to learn that no matter how many wars the Asura lose or win, the battle of a common man like him will continue as he grumbles "millions like me would continue to wage their little wars in the different corners of the earth, for food, water, air, shelter, and a little dignity" (378).



## Conclusion

The richness of the Ramayana tradition has generated countless tellings and retellings of Ramayana stories that cater to diverse groups of people with different social positions and ideologies. Each telling, be it mainstream, or a local alternative, has its own literary value and offers certain issues for the audience to reflect upon. Oppositional tellings, which seek to defy the dominant Hindu tellings, are the focus of this article as they are relevant to our questions concerning certain modern values and conditions.

One critical question deals with the Hindu 'other', as in the case of the Asuras. In traditional tellings, the Asuras are represented as evils or demons, or anything related to those forces which are in opposition to Rama's goodness. These representations, however, fail to do justice to the Asuras, who are in this case the subalterns in society, who practice different traditions and who have different stories to tell. However, their stories are often misrepresented or underrepresented. Accordingly, the Asuras remain second class citizens who have to struggle hard to offer different definitions of goodness and righteousness, among other definitions. It is the conceptual framework of subaltern studies that allows the Asuras to speak. When the subaltern subject is located in *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) by Anand Neelakantan, the oppositional telling of Ramayana, we come to see two subaltern figures who represent the Asura identity in a relative manner, yet in different ways. Ravana, an Asura king, represents the ideological aspects of the Asura, which involve advocating for an equal, casteless society that has its own version of justice and virtue and functions independently from the Brahmin hegemony.

Another subaltern subject representing Asura identity is Bhadra, who is a common, low-caste man. Bhadra speaks of the realistic material conditions that any common Asura people have to confront on a regular basis. His autonomy, which stems from his strong nationalist sentiment, is always displayed in a proactive mode, but he is never able to achieve his highest potential for two reasons. Firstly, the lack of access to a powerful network limits Bhadra's autonomy to a personal level, which is not forceful

enough to revolutionize the conditions of his own being or to shift the course of his destiny. Secondly, there are no 'overdetermined' occurrences that are critical enough to lift Bhadra out of a domain of servitude. As such, given his bravery, loyalty and sacrifices to his race and kings, Bhadra remains a subservient subaltern of the higher-class Asuras.

In addition, the portrayal of the two main characters serves to reflect the Asura identity, which is markedly distinct from that of the Devas, who are the dominant group. It also presents two different kinds of subaltern consciousness, which equally contribute to the historical position of the subaltern. However, it is only the performances of the higher-class or the elitist subalterns that are recognized as true historical facts. The contributions of a lower-class subaltern like Bhadra are seen as little more than a personal memory

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