

The Concept of Public Opinion in Uttararamacharitam

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ABSTRACT

Uttararamacharitam, composed by Bhavabhuti, is based on the Uttara Kanda of Valmiki's Ramayana. In this play, the heart-wrenching incident of Sita's exile was the direct result of Lokapavada (public scandal/censure). Rama declares that for the happiness and satisfaction of his subjects, he would feel no grief even if he had to renounce affection, mercy, happiness, or even Janaki (Sita) herself:

**'Sneham dayām cha saukhyam cha yadi vā Jānakīmapi.
Ārādhānāya lokasya muñchato nāsti me vyathā.'**

After Sita's Agni-Pariksha (ordeal by fire), her purity becomes beyond doubt. However, when Rama receives information regarding the public scandal (Lokapavada) concerning Sita, he is forced to bow before public opinion. Consequently, Rama must sacrifice his most beloved person at the altar of Rajadharma (royal duty).

Bhavabhuti has not only glorified the majesty of Rajadharma but has also criticized its harsh consequences. Vasanti, the forest deity, condemns Rama's cruel behavior toward Sita, representing a moral stance against public scandal. The exile of Sita due to Lokapavada causes Rama intense inner agony, which highlights his spirit of sacrifice. This proves that Rama's action was not voluntary, but was performed solely to uphold his royal duty under the pressure of public opinion.

At the end of the play, the Garbhanka (play-within-a-play) is designed, through which Sita's purity is publicly proven before the subjects. This satisfies the masses that Sita is indeed pure. Adhering to truth and righteousness (Dharma), Rama accepts Sita once again..

KEYWORDS: Public censure, public acceptance, royal duty, public opinion.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Mahakavi Bhavabhuti:- The original name of the great poet is Bhavabhuti, and he was honored with the title 'Shrikantha'. He was born in the city of Padmapura in the Vidarbha (Berar) region of South India. He belonged to a Brahmin family of the Kashyapa Gotra, following the Taittiriya school of the Krishna Yajurveda. Bhavabhuti's grandfather was Bhatta Gopala, his father was Nilakantha, and his mother's name was Jatukarni. His teacher's (Guru) name was Gyananidhi. Regarding his era, it is estimated that he lived between the first half of the 7th century and the first half of the 8th century. In the prologue (Sutradhara) of Uttararamacharitam, Bhavabhuti is described as 'Padavakyapramanagya'—meaning an expert in Vyakarana (Grammar), Nyaya (Logic), and Mimamsa (Philosophy):

'Asti khalu tatrābhavān Kāśyapaḥ Śrīkaṅṭhapadalāñchanaḥ padavākyapramāṇa -jño Bhavabhūtirnāma Jātūkarnīputraḥ.'

The Dramatic Masterpieces of Bhavabhuti:- Mahakavi Bhavabhuti has authored three dramatic gems: Malatimadhava, Mahaviracharitam, and Uttararamacharitam. The Acharya's fame is primarily established through these works. A unique feature of Bhavabhuti's play, Uttararamacharitam, is that although it is a Sukhantha (a play with a happy ending), the Karuna Rasa (the sentiment of pathos/tragedy) remains predominant throughout. Uttararamacharitam consists of seven acts, which are: Chitra-darshana (The View of the Paintings), Panchavati-pravesha (Entry into Panchavati), Chhaya (The Shadow Act), Kausalya-Janaka-yoga (The Meeting of Kausalya and Janaka), Kumara-vikrama (The Valor of the Prince), Kumara-pratyabhijana (The Recognition of the Princes), Sammelana (The Reunion). The play is based on the Uttara Kanda of Valmiki's Ramayana.

The Concept of Public Opinion in Indian Tradition:- Since the Vedic period, public opinion (Lokamat) has played a significant role in the social and political systems of India. The concept of collective public opinion is visible even in the hymns of the Rigveda:

‘Saṅgacchadhvaṃ saṃvadadhvaṃ saṃ vo manāṃsi jānatām.’

This mantra is a proclamation of collective public consciousness. The Manusmriti, Ramayana, and Mahabharata all state that the primary duty of a king is to keep his subjects satisfied. In the Valmiki Ramayana, King Rama abandons the innocent Sita solely for the satisfaction of his people. Similarly, in the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna inspires one to perform actions for the sake of Loka-Sangraha (the welfare and solidarity of the world):

‘Lokasaṅgrahamevāpi sampaṣyankartumarhasi.’

In the Kautilya Arthashastra, the Acharya (Chanakya), while outlining the duties of a king, states that a ruler should not pursue only what is personally pleasing to him. Instead, a king should find his happiness in the happiness of his subjects and his sorrow in their sorrow. Whatever is dear to the subjects should also be dear to the king:

**‘Prajāsukhe sukhaṃ rājñah prajānām ca hite hitam,
Nātmapriyaṃ hitaṃ rājñah prajānām tu priyaṃ hitam.’**

The Concept of Public Opinion in Uttararamacharitam:-

Uttararamacharitam, composed by the great poet Bhavabhuti, is an unparalleled masterpiece of the Sanskrit dramatic tradition. Based on the Uttara Kanda of Valmiki's Ramayana, it is a play where Karuna Rasa (the sentiment of pathos) is predominant. In this play, the “King” renounces his personal happiness due to the moral boundaries of social decorum (Loka-Maryada) and royal duty (Rajadharma). Because of public scandal (Lokapavada), Rama abandons the innocent Sita.

In the conflict between royal duty and personal dharma, Rajadharma proves more powerful; even though it tears Rama's heart apart, it does not allow him to deviate from the path of righteousness. Fulfilling the responsibilities of a king is akin to performing penance (Tapasya). King Rama fulfills his royal duties in the form of a Rajarshi (a royal sage). The injustice done to Sita in Uttararamacharitam is the result of the power of public opinion. Through the medium of Karuna Rasa, the play provides a vision of the king's performance of duty and the unbearable agony inherent in that performance.

In Uttararamacharitam, the dialogue between the Sutradhara (narrator) and the Nata (actor) reveals the public scandal circulating among the masses regarding Sita. The world is often skeptical regarding the chastity of women. The public mind doubts Sita's purity. Although Sita's purity had been proven through the Agni-Pariksha (ordeal by fire) after her stay in Ravana's house, a scandal concerning her character has spread among the residents of Ayodhya:

**‘Devyāmapi hi Vaidehyām sāpavādo yato janaḥ,
Rakṣogṛhasthitirmūlamagniśuddhau tvaṇīścayaḥ.’**

In the message from Maharishi Vashistha, brought by the sage Ashtavakra, it is also explicitly emphasized that the king must keep his subjects happy and satisfied:

**Jāmāṭṛyajñena vayaṃ niruddhāstvaṃ bāla evāsi navaṃ ca rājyam,
Yuktaḥ prajānāmanurañjane syāstasmādyāśo yat paramaṃ dhanam vaḥ.**

In the presented verse, Maharishi Vashistha sends a message saying, “O Rama! You are still a youth and have only recently assumed the responsibilities of the kingdom. The foremost duty of a king is to keep his subjects happy. Through the satisfaction of the subjects, a king's glory (Yasha) increases. Indeed, the attainment of glory is a king's supreme wealth.” He advises that a king must keep his people pleased while fulfilling his moral obligations. In response, Lord Rama declares that while discharging his duties to satisfy his subjects, he is willing to renounce all of his personal comforts and happiness:

**‘Snehaṃ dayāṃ ca saukhyaṃ ca yadi vā Jānakīmapi,
Ārādhanaḥ lokānām muñcato nāsti me vyathā.’**

Rama declares that for the welfare and satisfaction of his subjects, he would feel no pain in renouncing affection, compassion, happiness, or even Sita herself. This statement of Rama reflects his unwavering commitment to Rajadharma (royal duty), before which personal joy and suffering appear insignificant. This demonstrates Rama's spirit of Loka-aradhana (devotion to the service of the people). Shri Rama is prepared to sacrifice his everything for the sake of Loka-ranjana (pleasing the people). Supporting this spirit of devotion in Rama, Sita says, “O Aryaputra (Noble Prince)! It is for this very reason that you are the most eminent in the Raghuvansh (the lineage of Raghu)”:

Ata eva Rāghavakuladhurandhara Āryaputraḥ.

Shri Rama's spy, named Durmukha, arrives with the news of the inauspicious and painful public scandal regarding Sita. He agonizes over how to report such an unthinkable slander to the Maharaja. However, fulfilling his duty as a spy, Durmukha presents the public outcry concerning Sita before Shri Rama. This public scandal strikes Shri Rama like a Vajra (thunderbolt); it is unbearable for him, and he faints.

Upon regaining consciousness, Shri Rama laments that the alleged "stain" of Sita staying in another's house had been pacified by the Ordeal of Fire (Agni-pariksha). Yet now, due to the ill-effects of fate, it has spread everywhere like the venom of a rabid dog. Although he is fully aware of Sita's absolute purity, he cries out: "O Sita! This entire world is purified by you, yet regarding you, there is this unholy public slander."

**“Hā hā dhik! Paragr̥havāsa-duṣaṇaṃ yad-Vaidehyāḥ praśamitam-adbhutair-upāyaiḥ,
Etat-tat-punarapi daiva-durvipākād-ālarkaṃ viśamiva sarvataḥ prasaktam.”
“Tvayā jaganti puṇyāni tvayyapunya janoktayaḥ”**

While Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana are viewing the murals in the Chitra-vithi (picture gallery), the episode of Sita's Agni-shuddhi (purification by fire) appears. At that moment, Shri Rama speaks regarding the purity of Mother Sita, stating that she is inherently pure from birth. She has no need for purification from other sanctifying elements, such as the holy waters of pilgrimage (Tirtha-jala) or fire (Agni):

**“Utpattiparipūtāyāḥ kimasyāḥ pāvanāntaraiḥ,
Tirthodakaṃ ca vahniśca nānyataḥ śuddhim-arhataḥ.”**

Shri Rama states that Loka-ranjana (pleasing and serving the subjects) is the primary duty of a king. He says that his father, too, while upholding the sacred vow of Loka-ranjana, sacrificed his very life:

**“Satāṃ kenāpi kāryeṇa lokasyārādhanam vratham,
Yatpūrītam hi tātena māṃ ca prāṇāṃśca muñcatā.”**

Shri Rama's implication here is that the service and propitiation of the people (Loka-aradhana) is the sacred vow of the virtuous. This very vow was fulfilled by his father, who sent his son—dearer to him than his own life—into exile, and subsequently gave up his life due to the unbearable agony caused by that separation. Therefore, Rama feels that he, too, must now strive to satisfy his subjects.

In the face of this public scandal, Lord Rama does not blame the people; instead, he reflects upon his own duty. He finds it a matter of profound sorrow that the glorious Solar Dynasty (Suryavansha) should face humiliation or a "vile reputation" because of him. The Ikshvaku lineage has always been beloved by the subjects, yet due to misfortune, this scandal has spread among them. The blemish caused by her stay in another's house was indeed eradicated by the extraordinary act of the Agni-pariksha (Ordeal by Fire); however, that purification took place in the distant land of Lanka. Consequently, the people of Ayodhya do not place their faith in a miraculous event that occurred in such a remote region:

**“Ikṣvākuvaṃśoabhimataḥ prajānāṃ jātāṃ ca daivādvacanīyabījāṃ,
Yaccādbhutam karma viśuddhikāle pratyetu kastadyadi dūravṛttam.”**

Shri Rama abandoned Sita out of duty to the public, accepting the mandate of Janamat (public opinion) as his primary responsibility. However, the resulting remorse (Atmaglani) kept him burning incessantly in the furnace of agony. Even in the episode of the sage Shambuka, he was forced—at the request of a celestial voice and for the sake of public service—to perform the dreadful act of killing a Shudra who had become a sage, in order to revive a deceased Brahmin's son. To uphold Rajadharma, he had to sacrifice both mercy and compassion.

At this moment, his self-reproach reaches its peak. Driven by mental anguish, he rebukes his own right hand with sarcastic words to vent his internal suffering. Shri Rama says: "O my right hand! Strike the Shudra-sage to restore the life of the Brahmin's son. After all, you are an organ of that 'merciless' Rama, who showed no consideration for right or wrong when abandoning a pregnant Sita":

**“Re hasta dakṣiṇa mṛtasya śiśordvijasya
jīvātave viṣṭja śūdrāmunau kṛpāṇam,
Rāmasya gātrāmasi nirbharagarbhakhinna-
sītāvivāsanapaṭoḥ karuṇā kutaste.”**

Thus, we see that the position of a king demands the sacrifice of personal desires and affections. In this context, fulfilling Janamat (public opinion) ceases to be an act of love; instead, it becomes an inevitable and harsh necessity, much like the welfare of the nation itself. It is this very sacrifice that establishes Shri Rama's character as 'Maryada Purushottama' (the Supreme Man of Restraint).

While residing in the capital, Rama's inner turmoil remains controlled as he stays occupied with tasks dedicated to the prosperity of his people. However, upon returning to the Dandaka forest, the sorrows hidden deep within his heart cause him to fall into a swoon.

The forest deity Vasanti, an old friend of both Rama and Sita, criticizes the harsh impact of Rajadharma. She rebukes Rama for his perceived cruelty, questioning him: "O Rama! Why are you so heartless? Why did you commit this injustice against Sita? O pitiless Rama! It is said that glory (Yasha) is dear to you—but what could be a more horrific infamy (Apayasha) than this? What became of the fawn-eyed Sita in the wilderness? Tell me, O Lord! Do you view this act of yours as a matter of glory or as one of disgrace?" :

“Ayi kaṭhōra yaśaḥ kila te priyaṃ

**kimayaśo nanu ghoramataḥ param,
Kimabhavadvipine hariṇīdṛśaḥ
kathaya nātha katham bata manyase.'**

The forest deity's (Vasanti's) implication here is that while those who aspire for glory have historically sacrificed their very lives for the sake of others, you (Rama) likely believed that by abandoning Sita—who is dearer to you than life itself—to please the subjects, you were following the vow of those great souls and earning magnificent glory. However, in the eyes of the world, your actions have only proven you to be heartless and a recipient of infamy.

Vasanti's dialogue with Rama represents the voice of personal morality and conscience standing against public opinion (Janamat/Lokapavada). It suggests that public acceptance is not always synonymous with Truth. Due to a flawed public consensus, both Sita and Rama were forced to endure unbearable suffering. Sita's sacrifice, too, is a silent collaboration by an ideal wife and queen to fulfill her husband's Rajadharma. Through her renunciation, she provides indirect support to the King, enabling him to remain steadfast on the path of his royal duty. In the seventh act, a Garbha-nataka (play-within-a-play) is staged, through which the subjects finally regain their faith in Sita's purity and in Shri Rama. Rama himself never harbored any doubt regarding Sita's sanctity; he considered her even purer than the waters of a holy pilgrimage. It was the subjects who had cast false allegations upon Sita and forced her into exile. At the conclusion of the play, Mother Arundhati poses a direct question to the citizens: "O townspeople! Ganga and Prithvi (the Earth) have praised her and entrusted her into my hands. Even before this, Lord Agni himself had attested to the purity of her character, and all the gods, including Brahma, have lauded her immensely. This Sita—born from the sacrificial ground and the daughter-in-law of the Solar Dynasty—should now be accepted by Ramabhadra. What is your opinion on this matter?"

Upon being questioned by Mother Arundhati in this manner, all the townspeople and every living being offer their salutations to Mother Sita, giving their formal consent that Shri Rama should indeed accept her.

'...evamāryayārundhatyā nirbharitsitāḥ pauraṅjanapadāḥ kṛtsnaśca bhūtagrāma āryāṃ namaskurvanti.'

The planning of the Garbhanka (play-within-a-play) in the seventh act plays a crucial role in securing public acceptance. The subjects come to realize that Sita is innocent and that her sons, Lava and Kusha, are indeed the descendants of Rama. As a result of this dramatic design, the public scandal is publicly refuted, and Janamat (public opinion) ultimately turns in favor of truth and justice. The harsh path of Rajadharma finally succeeds in completely satisfying the people.

Through the play Uttararamacharitam, Bhavabhuti establishes that while a King must respect public opinion, public opinion itself must eventually bow before Satya (Truth) and Dharma (Righteousness).

Bhavabhuti's play conveys the message that governing power is not merely a collection of rights, but rather the pinnacle of responsibility and sacrifice. The concept of Janamat (public opinion) in Uttararamacharitam remains just as relevant in today's democratic era; it teaches that leadership must always prove its worth on the touchstone of public trust.

In the Indian tradition, a King is considered "indebted" to the people (Loka). For Bhavabhuti's Rama, public opinion is not a form of political pressure, but a 'Vrata' (a sacred vow). When Rama declares that for the satisfaction of his subjects, he can renounce his mercy, his affection, and even Sita herself, he proves that a ruler's personal life is entirely dedicated to society.

The play also demonstrates that public opinion is sometimes based purely on rumors (Kivandantis) and hearsay, without any logic or evidence. Even though the Agni-pariksha (Ordeal by Fire) of Sita was conducted by the Fire God himself, the subjects of Ayodhya did not believe in it. Here, Bhavabhuti portrays the "cruelty of public opinion," where the overwhelming power of social scandal (Lokapavada) forces an innocent woman to endure immense suffering.

The final part of the play is the most significant. Bhavabhuti does not merely bow before public opinion; rather, he educates and refines it. In the seventh act, when esteemed figures like Ganga, Prithvi (the Earth), and Arundhati appear before the subjects, the people finally realize their mistake. This symbolizes that when society is presented with a direct vision of the Truth, Janamat (public opinion) corrects its errors and stands on the side of justice.

In Bhavabhuti's work, "Janamat" is not just the voice of a crowd; it is the touchstone of Rajadharma. By satisfying the public, Rama proves that he is a superior king, and by ultimately proving Sita's purity, he demonstrates that public opinion must eventually bow before Satya (Truth) and Dharma (Righteousness).

Conclusion:-

Based on the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that the great poet Bhavabhuti, in Uttararamacharitam, has presented an extremely complex and poignant conflict between Rajadharma (royal duty) and personal emotions. Here, the supremacy of Rajadharma is emphasized. Bhavabhuti establishes Rama as an ideal king for whom 'Loka-aradhana' (the satisfaction of the subjects) is the supreme religion. Rama's abandonment of Sita is not an indication of a cruel heart, but rather a testament to his unwavering commitment to public opinion.

The play demonstrates both the power and the limitations of Janamat (public opinion)—it shows that public opinion is so immensely powerful that it can compel even a king to take the most agonizing decisions. However, through the character of Vasanti, Bhavabhuti also suggests that public opinion can sometimes be blind and unjust, necessitating correction and refinement.

Uttararamacharitam is not merely the story of Sita's abandonment; it is the story of the silent penance (mūka tapasyā) of both Rama and Sita. While Rama, as a King, offers his personal happiness as a sacrifice, Sita cheerfully accepts

her humiliation and exile to protect the sanctity of Rajadharma. Here, we witness a profound synthesis of sacrifice and penance.

The design of the Garbhanka (play-within-a-play) at the end of the drama proves that, ultimately, Truth triumphs. Bhavabhuti demonstrates that when direct evidence and divine testimony are presented before the subjects, that very same public opinion—which was previously clouded by doubt—accepts Sita with complete faith and devotion

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