



## Valmiki Jayanti as A Socio-Cultural Performance in Delhi:

### A Study

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#### Abstract

Valmiki Jayanti is a celebration of the life and times of the great poet Valmiki, who is said to have written the *Ramayana*. The festival is said to be celebrated by the Valmiki community, who identify themselves as being the descendants of the poet himself. Even though they belong to the Dalit community, the socio-political importance of this festival cannot be underscored. This paper seeks to carry out a detailed critique of the celebrations held at one venue in Delhi in 2015, underlining the complexity of the celebrations and the performativity of the entire festival, as established by local social conventions.

**Keywords:** Valmiki, Delhi, Performance, Politics, Dalit

#### Introduction

India is a land of myriad festivals, celebrated by people belonging to different religions and classes. Among them, the *Ramlila* occupies pride of place as one of the biggest festivals celebrated in most parts of India. The performative retelling of the story of Ram, through a combination of song, dance and spectacle, has regaled audiences in India since the sixteenth century. However, there is another tradition of retelling this story, which does not find any place in mainstream discourses surrounding the *Ramlila*. Valmiki Jayanti is an enactment and celebration of the *Ramayana* that is traditionally celebrated by the Valmiki community (predominantly Dalit) in north India—namely Delhi, Punjab, Chandigarh, Rajasthan and parts of Uttar Pradesh. They claim to be the original descendants of the poet Valmiki, the author of the *Ramayana*. In this regard, this festival is quite similar to the *Ramlila*, since both these festivals base their recreation of the life of Ram on the *Ramayana*. However, both these festivals are distinct from each other in character and spirit. Class and caste distinctions play a huge role here, but the authorship, and therefore authenticity, of the *Ramayana*, is a key issue in this distinction. The *Ramlila* celebrations largely follow Tulsidas' Awadhi version of the *Ramayana*, or the *Ramacharitamans*, while the Valmiki Jayanti celebrations consider Valmiki's original version of the epic as paramount. It must be noted here that the *Ramlila* is traditionally celebrated by the upper classes of Hindu society, while the Valmiki Jayanti is traditionally celebrated by the Valmiki community, which is looked down upon as belonging to a low caste.

The Valmiki community in Delhi constitutes only 3.43% of its total population, as per the 2011 Census. Historically, this community has witnessed oppression for centuries. It is for this reason that the Valmiki Jayanti celebrations are unable to receive mainstream patronage from people who claim to belong to the upper castes. Yet, due

to the growing political influence of the Dalit communities in many parts of North India, these celebrations have assumed greater importance in the social calendar of Delhi. More often than not, these celebrations turn into a strategic public-relations exercise for various figures of political and administrative authority, who seek to reinforce their authority and power through the various performative aspects of the celebrations unfolding throughout the day. This paper seeks to study this phenomenon, using a detailed critique of the Valmiki Jayanti celebrations organized at a temple in the RK Puram area in south Delhi in 2015.

### **Preparations**

Victor Turner writes, "Ritual, unlike theatre, does not distinguish between audience and performers. Instead, there is a congregation whose leaders may be priests, party officials, or other religious or secular ritual specialists, but all share formally and informally the same set of beliefs and accept the same system of practices, the same set of rituals or liturgical actions." (112) Affirming a pattern or order of beliefs is the key idea at the heart of every festival, religious or otherwise, and these celebrations are no different.

As part of this study, a visit to the Srishtikarta Bhagwan Valmiki Mandir was undertaken on October 20 and 21, 2015. Located in the Indira Market in Sector-7 of the RK Puram area, the temple is obscured from view from the main street, because of the presence of numerous shops that sell mostly hardware and electrical goods. Yet this temple shares a close link with the Valmiki community in this locality, and is considered to be the nerve-centre for socio-cultural gatherings dedicated to keeping alive, the spirit of community welfare.



The trustees of the temple are democratically elected from amongst the community, and are therefore responsible for the conduct of the celebrations. They are engaged in various professions during the day. Yet, on the eve of the celebrations, all of them come to the temple to oversee the cleaning of the premises, the installation of the speakers for playing *bhajans* and other last-minute logistics. According to Ashok Diler, the vice-president of the trust, the real reason for the organizing of the Valmiki

Jayanti celebrations is to ensure that the forthcoming generations of the community should know about Valmiki's life and his contribution to Hindu culture.

When Ramanand Sagar's epic television serial based on the Ramayana was broadcast on Doordarshan in 1986, it became more than just a televised performance—it actually became imprinted in the collective cultural psyche of India. Yet, as Diler pointed out, it did more harm than good to the Dalit community in India. Instead of being based on Valmiki's original version of the *Ramayana*, the serial was based on the *Ramacharitamanas*, giving Tulsidas' version of the epic a greater cultural significance. This had huge ramifications for the presence of Dalit ideology in popular culture, and ultimately proved detrimental to Dalit discourse in the long-term. Valmiki's version thus remained in the background.

The attempt to correct this anomaly is prevalent throughout the space in which the celebrations occur. The mention of the word “*Srishtikarta*” in the name of the temple is significant. “*Srishtikarta*” means creator, and therefore it is a homage to the real creator of the Ramayana, Valmiki. It is also why, in a temple that has idols of Ram, Sita, Hanuman, Shiva and Kali, it is an idol of Valmiki that occupies the central place in the *sanctum sanctorum*.



### The Celebrations

On the day of Valmiki Jayanti (October 21, 2015), the entire locality gathers to pay their respects at the temple. The temple wears a festive look, and the *bhajans* start playing on the speakers early in the morning. The entire street is decorated with lights, conveying an air of festivity. The organizers see the occasion as a way to commemorate the life of Valmiki, and to educate the larger community about his life; the community, however, sees it as a break from the regular monotony of life.

In the attempt to keep the significance of Valmiki alive, the festivities seem like a compromise at first glance. Rustom Bharucha argues, “More often than not, when people ‘invent’ tradition (‘authentic’ or ‘spurious’, through acts of ‘cultural preservation’ or ‘subversion’), they unavoidably imply that they are no longer in

touch with its immediacies. Yet an illusion is often maintained whereby the ‘invention’ is placed within the mainstream of tradition itself.” (73) In this context, if the Doordarshan television serial seems like an invention of the idea of the supremacy of the *Ramacharitamanas*, the Valmiki Jayanti celebrations seek to establish the supremacy and uncontested authorship of Valmiki in the discourse related to the *Ramayana*. In order to look at this in detail, the celebrations can be loosely based into three segments—the social welfare activities; the presence of figures of authority, namely politicians and administrative officials; and the parade of tableaux.



The trustees of the temple pride themselves on keeping the legacy of Valmiki alive, and therefore they conduct various socio-cultural activities throughout the year. Books are distributed to school children on the occasion of Teacher’s Day, and warm clothes are given away to beggars and poor people during the winter. On the morning of Valmiki Jayanti, children of all ages are brought from all over the locality and made to sit in the temple compound. After having prayed in front of the idol of Valmiki, the distribution of *bhandara* (food) begins with them, gradually progressing to the adults present. Throughout this exercise, a local photographer hired by the trustees keeps taking photographs of this entire activity. This can be seen as a ritualizing of the granting of knowledge by the original “lowly” scholar Valmiki.

Various politicians and people in the administration come to pay their respects to Valmiki. However, an interesting phenomenon is observed. Instead of paying their respects, taking part in the *bhandara* and then leaving, these guests choreograph their homage in such a way so as to be recorded or captured for photographs and videos. The act of *registering* or *recording* their presence is more important than their presence itself. More often than not, such exercises turn a solemn occasion like this into a platform for public relations. Visibility in the mainstream political discourse thus becomes the issue here. Officials in the administration, especially from the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC), also frequent festivals like this, in order to interact with citizens, thereby providing a human face to the administration.



The ubiquitous nature of the camera-bearing smartphone also comes to the fore during the parade, when the tableaux, mounted on four different trucks, drives into the Indira Market. Ram, Sit and Lakshman are led by Valmiki, as people join in the procession and chant “*Valmiki Ki Jai*”. The procession is not choreographed, and therefore remains the only segment of the celebrations that still possesses an element of spontaneity. Yet, there is a desire amongst youngsters participating in the procession to take self-photographs (or ‘selfies’) with their friends and the tableaux in the background. The issue of visibility again takes centre-stage, as the *publicizing* of one’s presence at an event becomes more important than the *purpose* for which the presence is required.

#### **Political Significance**

In such a scenario, where visibility is sought by everyone, the power-equations are very interesting. One only needs to take a closer look at the celebrations to find out. During the *bhandara* at the temple, the guests who came from outside the community were given chairs to sit on while eating, but the people from the community who had gathered there were made to sit on the floor. Apart from the trustees of the temple, the guests were also not interested in interacting with other members of the community, preferring to eat and then leave immediately.



Two levels of power-equations can be observed here. Firstly, the politicians and administrative officials who turn up at the celebrations do so for the sake of political visibility, in the hope that this will provide some hope for their electoral and administrative fortunes. On the other hand, the role of the trustees of the temple must not be taken lightly. The trusteeship of the temple is a coveted position, not just in the locality, but also in the community. Being a trustee is a sign of holding considerable influence in the community, and thus the temple becomes a site for fostering political ambitions.



The important thing to note is that the temple enjoys a very complicated relationship with the politicians. The trustees are aware of the pitfalls of dealing with the hypocrisies of the political class in Delhi, that is dominated by upper-caste members, and yet they want to be visible in public next to the politicians, in the hope that circumstances could turn better for the community, and their individual political ambitions could get a significant boost. On the other hand, the political class uses this same visibility to consolidate their own hold over the locality, and present an ideal picture of being intimately connected to the desires and problems of the community. The community elders and the political class therefore share a very symbiotic relationship, as far as power-equations are concerned.

### **Conclusion**

The Valmiki Jayanti celebrations can be looked upon as an under-represented, but vibrant part of Delhi's social calendar. People from all walks of life try to attend these celebrations. But what started off as a humble homage to the poet Valmiki has now become a flourishing platform to talk about the growing socio-political-cultural influence of the Valmiki community in local and national politics. To this extent, a handful of elders have succeeded in refashioning past traditions in order to fit Valmiki's message of knowledge into the ongoing struggle of the Dalit community for a place in the mainstream socio-political discourse. Thus, the Valmiki Jayanti celebrations can be looked upon not just as a cultural marker, but also as a pragmatic political statement.

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