Leslie, Julia, *Authority and Meaning in Indian Religions. Hinduism and the Case of Vālmīki*


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The subtitle describes the book better than the main title: there is little to justify the plural ‘Indian religions’ (‘religious communities’ in the parlance of the book), and ‘authority’ features neither in the chapter titles nor in the index (being represented by ‘sacred text’). What Julia Leslie (JL) presents is a critical, text-historical study of the figure of Vālmīki. The ‘case of Vālmīki’ was indeed a ‘case’, a dispute with legal implications caused by a passing reference in a radio broadcast to the traditional narrative or mythological motif of Vālmīki having been a bandit before becoming a holy man, author of the Rāmāyaṇa and God for a community of *dalits* named after him. Given the fact that JL was asked (by the Bhagvan Valmiki Action Committee) for the report which led to this book only after February 2000 and that the book was published in 2003, one cannot but admire the breadth of JL’s approach (to which the bibliography, p. 205–236, testifies) and the balanced discernment and evaluation of primary and secondary sources.

Meaning as title word (and leitmotif) accentuates the perspective of a historian of religion. The adherents of a religion (the Valmikis in this case, but the Rāmaṇites or Kṛṣṇaites of earlier periods may have been operating with a comparable frame of mind) may refuse the meaning found and/or construed by the historian. Refusal of meaning is probably difficult to identify in historical sources (polemics against real or anticipated opponents and counter-arguments may provide a lead). And how is the historian to deal with meaninglessness? (That is to say, if we allow that the writing of, e.g., certain purāṇic Vālmīki-episodes was not motivated by a search for meaning but by other parameters of literary productivity, such as display of learnedness or literary skill, entertainment and distraction, attraction of ‘customers’ and the entailing pecuniary gain, etc. ‘Meaning’ becomes an embarrassingly vague term.)

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Chapter 1 (“Situating the Problem”, p. 1–23) identifies four critical issues, explains the choice of terminology and outlines Chaps. 2–5. The four critical issues are coordinated and connected by the search for meaning, the meaning of the sources, the meaning of the sources for those to whom they may be authoritative, and of course for the scholar the meaning of whose efforts and enterprise is not just to be identified with historical and factual correctness but has its contemporary academic (and biographical) context. The book is dedicated to JL’s students “who asked such good questions” and it attempts to answer questions which the Valmiki community of Great Britain must have had. (We learn nothing about how this report was received by the Valmiki community and how it influenced the decision of the case.)

The issue of caste identity and caste consciousness is contextualized in Chap. 2 (p. 25–76) by reviewing ‘untouchability’ in early Sanskrit texts, selected ethnographical studies (Northern India) and sociological analyses (Great Britain). This brief list of catchwords hardly does justice to the richness of the chapter which has the following thematic sections: Untouchability: Terms and Meanings; Self-Representations: Myths and Politics; The Valmikis of North India; Religion and Politics in Twentieth-Century Panjab; The Valmikis in Britain; Making Meaning.

The second issue concerns the (text-)historical facts about Vālmīki. As an academic scholar JL believes “that one kind of answer lies in the study of early Sanskrit texts” (p. 1). Chapter 3 (“Identifying ‘Vālmīki’ in Early Sanskrit Texts”, p. 77–113) consequently is a monograph on ‘Vālmīki’ in three key Sanskrit sources (Mahābhārata, Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Yogavāsiṣṭha) and one wonders why such a monograph had never been produced before by indological scholarship. Three motifs emerge as central: the ascetic in the termite mound, the dacoit turned devotee and the recitation of the marā-marā mantra, and they are traced in Sanskrit and vernacular texts in Chap. 4 (“Tracing Motifs in Sanskrit and Vernacular Texts”, p. 115–157).

The third and fourth issue (freedom of speech, and the role of the scholar and “his or her relationship to the religious community involved” (p. 2) are addressed in Chaps. 1 and 5 (Chap. 5 being entitled “Drawing Conclusions for Today”, p. 159–195). While on the abstract level freedom of expression and freedom of religion are in conflict, on the concrete level those who object to what somebody said about their religion are in conflict with the author of such statements. The purpose of the book is to provide evidence and arguments for dealing with this self-esteem and the truth(s) on which it is based and on which it can be based. “The tension between caste and salvation and the shifting relationship between sacred text and religious meaning” (p. 6) are called ‘issues’ (addressed in the final section of Chap. 5 and, thus, of the book). Granted that evidence and arguments, and reason as the means to connect them, are the scholar’s job, granted that JL did a very good job and indeed did her best, the book itself (another text with a claim to authority!) cannot overcome the uncertainty about the relevance of text-historical research to a contemporary socio-religious dispute (cf. p. 5).

The learnedness of the book and the wealth of sources presented may obliterate another limiting factor in the construction of meaning for those from inside the tradition: ignorance. Many Valmikis have probably never taken notice of the variations and ramifications of the literary and religious traditions featuring Vālmīki—until reading JL’s book. It will be a reconstructed tradition and a contemporary meaning. If the