



Visions of Good Life and Leisure in Ancient India: Evidence from Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*

15

Óscar Figueroa

Abstract

Quality of life is a broad or umbrella concept (Rojas, The measurement of quality of life: Conceptualization comes first. A four-qualities-of-life conceptual framework and an illustration to Latin America, 7, 2009; Susniene and Jurkauskas, Inzinerine Ekonomika Eng Econ 3:58, 2009). As such, articulating a universally accepted definition is not an easy task. Although the tendency has been to privilege measurable criteria in contemporary contexts, the necessity of gaining a deeper theoretical and historical understanding cannot be overlooked. The study of original texts from ancient cultures may prove to be illuminating, in that they may give access to visions of the good life in different historical periods and cultural settings, deepening our understanding. In this context, more and more authors are taking into consideration the influence of culture upon the meaning we usually ascribe to a good life and a good society (Christopher, J Couns Dev 77:141–152, 1999; Skevington, Qual Life Res 11:135–144, 2002). Others have tried to extend the reflection to key historical sources, tracing the

development of the very ideas of happiness, well-being, etc. Yet, studies of such a kind mostly limit themselves to the history of Western thought. The approaches based on non-Western cultures are still rare (Iwasaki 2007, 233–235). Taking into consideration all this, in this paper I explore the specific case of the ancient Indian culture in all its social complexity, *i.e.* beyond the stereotyped vision of India as a pre-eminently spiritual culture, and therefore beyond the tendency to see its main contribution to the debate on quality of life also as a spiritual one. Ancient Indian advanced a number of ideas on what a good life should be like and be composed of.

15.1 By Way of Introduction: Quality of Life, Good Life, and the Indian Doctrine About the Objects of Human Pursuit

In the past two decades, the academic interest in the notion of quality of life has grown significantly, throwing much light on this notion's relationship with related concepts like happiness, leisure, subjective and objective well-being, along with other factors thought to contribute to experiencing a satisfactory life. In general, the

Ó. Figueroa (✉)
Regional Center for Multidisciplinary Research,
National Autonomous University of Mexico
(UNAM), Cuernavaca Campus, Cuernavaca, Mexico
e-mail: figueroa@correo.crim.unam.mx

concept “refers to a life which is considered as a good one, well-lived, and being of value” (Rojas 2009, 4). Of course, being such a broad or umbrella concept (Rojas 2009, 7; Susniene and Jurkauskas 2009, 58), articulating a universally accepted definition is not an easy task. In this regard, although the tendency has been to privilege measurable criteria in contemporary contexts, the necessity of gaining a deeper theoretical and historical understanding about the meaning of quality of life cannot be overlooked. Thus, it has been claimed that careful reflection should precede the urge to measure and prescribe (Rojas 2009, 5). As it may be expected, in the main this claim points to the importance of retrieving the comprehensive and multidimensional nature of the ideas of good life, well-being, and so on. In this context, many authors have taken into consideration the influence of culture upon the meaning we usually associate with a life of quality (Christopher 1999; Skevington 2002). Indeed, a number of contemporary definitions conceptualize quality of life as a socially and culturally constructed construct (Schalock et al. 2002). According to the influential definition of the World Health Organization, the concept of quality of life is inextricably linked to the “individuals’ perception of their position in life in the context of culture and value system and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (WHOQOL Group 1997, 1). The same applies to the related ideas of leisure and recreation, seen as decisive factors in the perception of life as a good one. Thus, some have not only explored the relevant place leisure occupies in a good life, but have also called attention upon the important role played by culture and value systems in shaping individual’s goals and expectations, and therefore in the meaning of leisure (Brajša-Zganec et al. 2011).

In this context, in order to get a better picture of the present situation, some have tried to extend the reflection to key historical sources, tracing the development of the relevant ideas of happiness, well-being, leisure, etc. Yet, as it may be expected, studies of such a kind mostly limit themselves to the history of Western thought, rooted in classical Greek and Latin values, and

the Judeo-Christian worldview. In fact, “a western domination is an apparent phenomenon in both leisure research and quality of life research” (Iwasaki 2007, 235). The approaches that take into consideration and enrich the discussion with models taken from non-Western cultures, for instance the ancient cultures of Asia, are still rare, and they are therefore a desideratum (Iwasaki 2007, 233). Still fewer are the studies that attempt to reflect critically on the complex relationship between past and present in those cultures. For instance, how past ideas about happiness and a good life shape the present emphasis on certain models of quality of life? And more importantly, how contemporary ideas on quality of life are projected, as a strategy of legitimation, upon the past, overlooking or misrepresenting an originally diverse and complex cultural heritage? What we have then is a triple lacuna, and therefore a triple challenge: the reflection on quality of life and the related notions of good life, well being, etc. should ideally take into account (1) the history of those notions as culturally constructed constructs, (2) the history of those notions in non-Western cultures, and (3) the complexity of the relation past-present with respect to those notions in non-Western cultures.

What follows is an attempt to examine the particular case of Indian culture according to such premises. In particular, the study of original texts from ancient India may prove to be illuminating, in that they may give access to past ideals and views about good life and leisure, that may help to understand more carefully, and beyond stereotypes, why today predominate certain ideals, and why not others, and therefore to learn in what would consist in this case a more encompassing, multidimensional, vision of the good life.

As any other culture, ancient Indian tradition advanced a number of ideas on what a good life should be like and be composed of. Among these outstands the concept of *puruṣārtha*, literally “human purpose or goal”, that is to say, the legitimate goals of life for high-caste Hindus. Originally envisioned as encompassing three major provinces of meaning, namely “moral responsibility and religious duty” (*dharma*), “material or worldly success” (*artha*), and

“enjoyment and pleasure” (*kāma*), the model attempted to codify the elements necessary for an integral and satisfactory human experience from a Brahmanical perspective. Moreover, the model was a way of structuring the very concept of human subject in Hindu discourse.

The important place the model has had in the history of Indian thought is not, however, free of tensions and conflicts. In particular, various textual testimonies indicate a tension between *dharma* and *kāma*, this latter encompassing the semantic fields we associate with the notions of pleasure, leisure, and recreation, for instance through activities such as literary gatherings and art expositions, music concerts and theatre performances, sports and games of chance, carousals, feasts and picnics, gardening and pet companionship, travelling, and of course a satisfactory sexual life (Lienhard 1984, 42).

In an important measure, the tension originates from the predominance normally attributed to *dharma* over any other goal. *Dharma* comes first because, conceived as the socio-cosmic order, it embraces appropriate belief and behaviour, and therefore is in charge of controlling any other object of human pursuit, including human proclivity towards pleasure. An authoritative text like the *Mānavadharmasāstra* summarizes well this hierarchical idealization—and thus the latent tension among their components—when it states: “The knowledge of *dharma* is prescribed for people who are unattached to wealth(*artha*) or pleasures(*kāma*)” (*Mānavadharmasāstra* 2.13).

In this view, pleasure and leisure are legitimate, but must always be constrained by *dharma*. Pursued alone, outside the domain of *dharma*, *kāma* may deviate the individual from the truth. In the popular discourse, this vision prevails today, projecting upon the past the stereotyped vision of India as a pre-eminently spiritual culture. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that the majority of studies devoted to quality of life in contemporary India from a cultural, non-quantitative perspective, focus on spirituality (notably, on the practices of meditation and yoga) as ancient India's main contribution to the concept of quality of life, overlooking other aspects or alternatives. A good example is the work of

Sharma (2002), who reduces India's contribution to quality of life to the Vedantic understanding of leisure as “state of being as against one of having or doing”, as a means to cleanse the mind from its impurities, or in connection with the practice of yoga, as a way to experience the “true self” and harmonising the body, mind, and consciousness (18–19). Moreover, in Sharma's dharmic-religious and orthodox oriented view, Vedic rituals provide a “high degree of leisure”, keeping people healthy and happy within the larger society (22).

Again, beyond the relevance of such contributions, the question remains open from a more critical perspective: Is this really all what ancient India has to offer to the debate on the ideas of good life, well-being, etc.? Or is it, instead, that this all what contemporary status quo India assumes ancient India has to offer, overlooking or even silencing other possibilities?

Back to the doctrine of the *puruṣārthas*, this certainly was a matter of debate in the ancient sources, and there arose various forms of resistance against the standard opinion, for instance by advocating not only interconnectedness and alternated predominance, but sometimes even the superiority of *kāma*.

Now, the earliest occurrences of the term *puruṣārtha* can be traced back to the Vedic period, especially in a number of normative treatises on ritual, where the emphasis seems to lie in the articulation of a sacrificial meaning for all human concerns and expectations. Therefore, in these texts, the meaning of the term *puruṣārtha* is circumscribed to the laws of sacrifice that govern the entire cosmos. Yet, some centuries later, the term started to have wider implications, less restricted to the impersonal sphere of ritual, and more proximate to human aspirations as such. It was in this context that it was articulated the system of three goals or “the group of three” (*trivarga*), as it is often called in the texts themselves. We are in the first centuries of the Common Era, a fact that should not be overlooked.

This period bore witness to a decisive change in Sanskrit intellectual tradition: the Brahmanical monopoly—to use Sheldon Pollock's expression (2006, cap. 5)—over the production of

authoritative knowledge gradually lost its strength. Paradoxically, this undermining brought an expansion of Sanskrit's expressive power from the purely religious domain to that of culture in general. Sanskrit language left to be used to articulate and legitimate religious truths only. Instead, new genres and language usages arose, among them treatises on various disciplines, grouped together under the term *śāstra*. More importantly, this expansion signalled the beginning of Sanskrit literature as a genre—called *kāvya*, and encompassing drama, poetry, literary prose, etc. (Figueroa 2014a, and b).

In this way, Sanskrit was used for the first time to tell stories before unthinkable, for instance to narrate the deeds of the princely class or to tell love stories; it began to pay attention to characters before absent, like merchants, Casanovas, and prostitutes; it was even used to mock at pretentious Brahmins and hypocrite religious mendicants. More specifically, all sorts of poems and dramas were composed to celebrate the pleasures of love, and strategies for seduction were compiled in texts like the famous *Kāmasūtra*. As one may expect, the old tension between *dharma* and *kāma* became more evident in such a novel atmosphere.

The greater emphasis on human aspirations per se, independently of any connection with ritual or religion, opened the door for affirming the legitimacy of *kāma* in itself. It is at this important juncture that exploring the concepts of good life and well-being in ancient India from a socio-historical perspective can become illuminating beyond contemporary normative expectations.

Back to history, it was of course necessary to articulate more complex strategies of interaction between *kāma* and *dharma*. Some of these strategies were thematised in the texts themselves. Two foundational texts offer a good example of this act of awareness: the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In the first pages of these two texts, we find frame stories that account for the origin respectively of dramatic art and poetry, the two principal domains of *kāvya*. In both cases, we come across with the same rationale: drama and poetry are meant not only to inculcate the Brahmanical ethos, but also to entertain, acknowl-

edging thus the importance of mere enjoyment and leisure activities as an integral component of a good life.

Thus, in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the gods approached the Creator God Brahma, asking for a new Veda. This should be edifying and able to produce religious merit (*pūṇya*), but also entertaining and captivating (*manorama*) (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 1.12-15). Brahma's response was the dramatic art. On the other hand, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s first chapters we find Brahma instructing the sage Vālmīki as follows: "Greatest of seers, you must now compose the entire history of Rāma [...] No utterance of yours in this poem shall be false. Now compose the story of Rāma fashioned into verses at the same time sacred and delightful" (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 1.2.31, 35).¹ In this way, against the Brahmanical monopoly over Sanskrit, with a life of almost a millennium, *kāvya* represented a kind of counterculture (Pollock 2006, cap. 5). Within that counterculture secular interests, including man's proclivity toward recreation and leisure, as well as other experiences associated with *kāma*, finally obtained literary legitimacy, as can be proved from the plot of countless dramas, poems, and narratives produced between the second and twelfth centuries CE, *i.e.*, throughout the classical period of the Sanskrit tradition.

Of course, we speak of a veiled way of introducing novelty. Indeed, it was a subtle way of emancipation, for it was necessary to avoid conflict with the canon. Therefore, the strategy cannot be reduced to the usual opposition between sacred and profane—think in classic authors like Émile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade. Again, as I will try to show using as example the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the strategy contradicts the stereotyped tendency to locate the Indian tradition exclusively on the side of religion and spirituality. Specifically, the episode I want to call attention to introduces a sort of poetics of leisurely life, in which both

¹All my translations from the *Rāmāyaṇa* reproduce the English version of R. Goldman, S. Sutherland, and Sh. Pollock (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*), with a few minor changes of my own. Translations from other Sanskrit texts are mine.

religious and secular elements are equally important as part of a more heterogeneous social *dynamics*. In this way, the study of the dilemma between *dharma* and *kāma* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* may give access to potentially illuminating ideals and visions of the good life, contributing thus to the topic of the present volume.

15.2 The *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmiki

Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, one of the two great epic poems written in the Sanskrit language, and one of the most influential texts in the construction of the Indian identity through a large number of renderings and new versions in other Indian languages, contains a number of illuminating testimonies about our theme here. In those passages we find literarily articulated a complex mechanism of interaction between religious life and secular life. Thus, in the following sections of this article my purpose will be to explore an important episode in the epic's fifth book. With this exploration, I try to throw light on the theme of this volume dedicated to well-being and quality of life from the perspective of the study of ancient cultures.

But in order to appreciate better the episode's relevance for our theme here, it may be useful to recall that the *Rāmāyaṇa*, or at least the version attributed to the legendary poet Vālmiki, was composed throughout almost a millennium, between the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and the fourth and fifth centuries CE, exactly the period that bore witness to the change in the Sanskrit intellectual tradition I mentioned before. Moreover, the fact that the tradition defines Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* as the first literary work, the "first poem" (*ādikāvya*),² is indicative of its centrality in this transformation, which, again, had a definitive impact upon the relationship between religious and secular life, between

dharma and *kāma*, and therefore it is indicative of a crucial change in the perception of what a good life should be like and be composed of.

Rāmāyaṇa's plot consists of two main narratives. On the one hand, the princely story about the intrigue at the court of Ayodhyā that prompted the abdication to the throne and a forced exile of king Daśaratha's eldest and most virtuous among his four sons—the hero Rāma, who is thus obliged to live in the forest during fourteen years accompanied by his wife, princess Sītā, and his loyal brother Lakṣmaṇa. On the other, the love story between the leading characters, Rāma and Sītā, a love truncated first by the lust of the demon king Rāvaṇa who kidnaps Sītā, and later on by the doubts of Rāma about the purity of his wife.

Again, the relationship between these two narratives, as well as the intrinsic tension among them, contains the necessary ingredients to reflect upon the tension between the religious and the secular in ancient India from a critical perspective. Both narratives attempted to respond to the dilemma of the period, *i.e.* the atmosphere of crisis around *dharma*. And yet, their respective answer was far from being definitive: at the centre of the discrepancy one finds again pleasure (*kāma*), an essential component of secular life and the main trait of the antagonist, the powerful Rāvaṇa. Thus, while from Rāma's point of view, it is necessary to purge *dharma* from *kāma*, and therefore the ideal life from leisure and enjoyment for the sake of an ascetic universal ethos; on the other hand, here and there the text seems to flirt with a more accommodating vision of human life, one in which leisure and pleasure can have a place side by side with *dharma*.

Thus, away from the paternal protective atmosphere associated with the city of Ayodhyā, the forest exile becomes for Rāma an experience of vindication and redemption. Rāma goes to the forest to purge *dharma*, the law, to his eyes corrupted by desire. To that end, he exposes himself to the ascetic wisdom of anchorites and sages, while repelling the permanent threat of febrile and lascivious creatures, the demons (*asura*, *rākṣasa*).

In the plot, this threat reaches a first crescendo with the appearance of the demon king Rāvaṇa,

²Already in the second century CE, the Buddhist writer Aśvaghōṣa celebrated: "Vālmiki was the first who created a verse" (*Buddhacarita* 1.43). On the basis of the celebrated passage of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s first book partially quoted above (1.2.31-35), all Sanskrit literary genealogies repeat the same idea.

who fell in love with princess Sītā, and concocted a successful scheme to kidnap her. From this point, the plot revolves around Rāma's efforts to recover Sītā and defeat Rāvaṇa. This involves an alliance with the monkey clan, in particular with the prodigious monkey minister Hanumān. Aided by the monkeys, Rāma travels to the South, up to the island of Laṅkā, the capital of the demons, where he fights the demon armies and Rāvaṇa, whom he kills—a death that symbolizes the victory of *dharma* over *kāma*. After this, Rāma returns to Ayodhyā, recovers the kingdom and governs justly for eras.

The episode I'm here concerned with is the description of the city of Laṅkā, the capital of Rāvaṇa. The description is part of the preliminary expedition undertaken by Hanumān, the loyal monkey ally of the hero Rāma, to recover princess Sītā.

Let us go into the details.

15.3 Dharma Versus Kāma: Rāma's Conflict with His Father, King Daśaratha

In order to understand the tension between *dharma* and *kāma* in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*—a tension symbolically represented through the open fight between the hero Rāma and the demon king Rāvaṇa—is necessary to go back to the conflict between Rāma and his father, king Daśaratha. This means that it is necessary to say something about the conflict that deprived the hero from the throne, and put him in the exile. Even though the popular reception of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has attempted to attenuate the discord between Rāma and his father, presenting Rāma's submission towards the paternal authority as a virtue and a sign of nobility, a number of textual passages in Vālmīki's version indicate a more ambivalent relationship. For instance, the first night the exiled hero spends at the other side of the Ganges River, that is to say, beyond the boundaries of Ayodhyā, and therefore beyond the boundaries of the paternal stability, he allows himself to bitterly complain about his situation.

In this context, he implicitly admits that the king's decision to send him into the exile is but an injustice. Moreover, Rāma joins his brother Lakṣmaṇa in a judgment that will come to the surface again and again: the injustice (*adharmā*) has its origin in a specific defect, namely Daśaratha's proclivity to pleasure (*kāma*). Specifically, the king's fault is connected with his second wife, Kaikeyī, the mother of Bharata, the prince who benefited from Rāma's exile by taking up the throne:

And being old and defenceless, and parted from me what will he do? Such is his desire for Kaikeyī that he is completely in her power. Reflecting on this calamity and how the king so utterly changed his mind; I have come to the conclusion that the urgings of *kāma* far outweigh both statecraft and *dharma*. For what man, even a fool, would forsake his own son—a son who ever bowed to his will—on account of a woman, as father forsook me, Lakṣmaṇa (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 2.47.8-10).

See also 2.28.3, where Rāma, still in Ayodhyā, complains about his father during a conversation with Lakṣmaṇa: "The mighty lord of the land, who used to shower his other wives with all they desired, as a rain showers the earth, is now caught up in the snare of *kāma* (*kāmapāśa*)".

Daśaratha's inability to dominate his appetites, submitting them to the demands of an impersonal *dharma*, helped Kaikeyī to eclipse the sense of justice of the old king, forcing him to banish his dear first-born son from the kingdom. It is useful to recall in this context, that Kaikeyī punishes sexually king Daśaratha in order to press him to concede the throne to her son Bharata and send Rāma into exile (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 2.9–12). Therefore, the punishment clearly was an attempt at capitalizing Daśaratha's proclivity to pleasure. And it worked. Instead of defending Rāma, Daśaratha ended up giving in to Kaikeyī's blackmail.

In this way, by identifying the fault of his father with *kāma*, Rāma set his agenda: to restore *dharma* not per se but against desire. In fact, from beginning to end, the greatness of the hero obsessed with the image of a perfect king rests in the attempt at purging monarchy from any insinuation of desire, regardless of how painful this

can be. At the same time, the legitimacy of a new, purer *dharma* demands the continuity of the paternal-royal figure. Therefore, it is necessary a moral and politically correct strategy. A direct confrontation with Daśaratha is ruled out from the beginning.

In the text, the alternative strategy acquires form first as the necessity to universalize *dharma*, that is to say, to rethink it according to wider criteria, away from the relativism and the utilitarianism to which, according to Rāma, desire condemns it. The solution can only be found in the religious world, embodied in the figure of the renouncer. Rāma's undertaking finds thus its inspiration in the image of a spiritualized king, an ascetic-prince. He was not alone in this. Rather, he simply reproduces a tendency of his time, as demonstrated from a number of historic and literary testimonies. Think, to name the most obvious examples, in the transformation of prince Siddhārta Gautama into the Buddha, or in that of prince Vardhamāna into the Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism; or in a literary context, in the teachings of Kṛṣṇa to prince Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā*, and in general in the forest exile of the Pāṇḍavas in the *Mahābhārata*. And there is no better place to experience the combination prince-ascetic than the forest. In this way, Rāma's exile acquires a new meaning.

On the other hand, it is necessary to expiate the fault of the father and this can only be achieved by punishing desire. Again, we deal here with a paternal figure, and therefore the punishment cannot be inflicted directly. It has to be inflicted symbolically. It is necessary to displace the problem to another figure. That is the role played by Rāvaṇa, the antagonist, the lord of Laṅkā, the city of pleasure and leisure.

This vision of *dharma* as excluding *kāma* is therefore constitutive of the idealized and normative concept of the good life in ancient India, and it has deeply influenced contemporary opinion about India's historical contribution to the study of quality of life. In what follows, I will try to show that what we can learn from ancient India for the study of quality of life is far more complex and illuminating.

15.4 Dharma Versus Kāma: Rāma's Conflict with Rāvaṇa

What cannot happen with the father—an open condemnation—can happen instead with Rāvaṇa. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the lord of Laṅkā is characterized in the text as the very incarnation of desire, as the hedonist par excellence, at the other extreme of the renouncer who defeats desire or the householder who legitimates desire through conjugal union only.

Again, by doing so, the *Rāmāyaṇa* did not introduce any novelty. It simply repeated an old consensus, now literarily enriched: if something defines *asuras*, *rākṣasas*, and many other similar creatures associated with the forces of chaos, is an incontinent proclivity towards pleasure. The motif appears already in the Vedic corpus. For instance, in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* we read that demons are the “masters of the amatory arts” (*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 3.2.1.40). In sum, through Rāvaṇa, the hero is able to revive the conflict with the father, but upon a morally correct fundament, namely, by means of a demonization of desire.

In this, I concord with those who question the tendency to see in such creatures the Other beyond Sanskrit culture (for example, an ethnic group at the periphery), and even consider idle such a predictable line of thought. In reality, the demonic is the Other—*kāma*—within the Identity—*dharma*—. What the demons represent has a profound resonance in the audience because demons direct our attention toward that which most seduces Brahmanical India insofar as it is prohibited.

In this sense, by translating routinely the terms *asura*, *rākṣasa*, and many others, as “demon”, it might be useful to have in mind the deepest sense of this word. Think in its connotations in Greek tradition and later, associated with figures like Luzbel (the Luminous one) and Satan (the Adversary), in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. More than simple evil entities, demons are supernatural beings who took the decision to oppose the cosmic and divine Order to the point of passing as rebels, despite their proximity—sometimes

even genealogical—to the gods. In this sense, demons embody not only an intrinsic element to reality, but in many cases a necessary component, in that they can act as a source of change and equilibrium.

Back to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, here the demons eat, drink, and love without any restriction whatsoever. And therefore, their behaviour violates the logic of the Brahmanical normative codes, articulated according to the basic opposition purity-impurity (*śuddhi-aśuddhi*). As such, demons represent the freedom to act by pleasure, in particular in delicate domains like those associated with diet and sexuality (Pollock 1985–1986). Unlike king Daśaratha, who lived with guilt his proclivity to pleasure, for he always felt himself “bound by the bond of *dharma*” (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 2.12.16), Rāvaṇa ennobled desire without regret or guilt. Rather, he displayed the powerful logic of desire to the point of raise it to the status of *dharma*. For example, in the episode where he reveals his true identity just before kidnapping princess Sītā, he openly declares:

Living with me, proud princess Sītā, you shall forget what it was like to have been a mortal woman. Enjoying not only the pleasures mortals enjoy, lovely lady, but divine pleasures, too, you shall soon forget that short-lived mortal, Rāma. So meagre is his power that King Daśaratha, in order to enthrone a favoured son, was able to drive him into the forest, firstborn though he was. What use is this witless Rāma to you, large-eyed woman, a miserable ascetic who lets himself be deposed from kingship? The lord of all demons has come here in person, because that was his desire (*kāmāt*) [...] Love me forever. I shall be a lover to win your praise, and never, my beauty, will I do anything to displease you (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 3.46.13–17 and 3.47.12).

His words are revealing. They do not only offer a negative judgment about Rāma’s attempt at integrating ascetic values into the princely *dharma*. Rather, they establish the limits of any search after a universal *dharma vis-à-vis kāma*. Rāma can only love in the name of duty, but not in the name of love itself. A true king, we read between the lines, is he who loves with the total freedom of his will, because he wants, not because he must.

Therefore, the matter goes beyond a mere opposition between religion and secular life. Rāvaṇa is much more than a monstrous creature, as the monkey Hanumān himself acknowledges when he sees him for the first time resting in his splendid palace in the walled city of Laṅkā:

Oh what beauty! What steadfastness! What strength! What splendour! Truly, the king of all demons is endowed with every virtue! If this mighty demon lord were not so unacquainted with *dharma*, he could be the guardian of the world of the gods, Indra included (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 5.47.17–18).

15.5 The Vision of Laṅkā

The admiration is of course extensible to the entire demonic kingdom, and in a concentrated way to Rāvaṇa’s majestic capital, the walled city of Laṅkā. Under this light, the view of the demonic universe as the Other within—not outside—Identity may prove to be illuminating in connection also with the socio-urban landscape of Laṅkā. Therefore, instead of speaking about a physical space, it may be more useful to speak about an imaginary space. This latter is associated with Brahmanical culture itself seen, once again, from the perspective of *kāma*.

Even though the geographical location of the island, in the antipodes of Ayodhyā, Rāma’s capital, may suggest that it is totally alien to the Brahmanical status quo, it suffices to follow the curious Hanumān crossing its ramparts, roaming around its parks and streets, peeping into its mansions and palaces to notice a strong similitude between Laṅkā and Ayodhyā. Laṅkā is at the same time proximate and remote—it is a kind of distorted mirror. On the one hand, the narrative insistently repeats the literary motifs introduced in the first book to describe Ayodhyā (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 1.5); on the other, however, while depicting the city’s opulence and the refined habits of its inhabitants, immersed in a permanent experience of sybaritic abandonment, the text seems to assert the importance of leisure and pleasure as key components for experiencing a good life. In this way, the censorious

tone seems to lose ground vis-à-vis the many compliments. This occurs to the point of projecting a very different image in comparison to what up to here had been said about the demonic universe, especially in the epic's third book. As part of this momentary literary truce, the otherwise fearsome and sanguinary *rākṣasas* start to resemble more the joyful Casanovas and bon vivants that fill the pages of Sanskrit classical poetry and didactic literature.

Furthermore, the very title of the book that contains the vision of Laṅkā, the epic's fifth book, surprises us with its positive spirit. Contrary to what we would expect, the title does not communicate aversion nor does it evoke something sinister. Rather, it is the "Book about Beauty" (*sundarakāṇḍa*). Even though among the scholars still persist the doubts as to the title's *raison d'être* and its exact meaning, most recent interpretations differ from the opinion of early Indologists like Hermann Jacobi (1893, 124) or Maurice Winternitz, (1927, vol. 1, 490), who favoured the idea of an aesthetical judgment on the literary quality of the book. As R. Goldman and S. Sutherland have stated in this regard: "To our knowledge no section of any Sanskrit literary work is given a name reflecting a critical judgment of its poetic merit" (1996, 76).

Instead, they think the title has more to do with the topics narrated, most of them connected with the events that lead to Rāma's victory and his reencounter with Sītā. Of course, as one may anticipate, such a point of view responds to a normative expectation, and therefore it has revolved around the heroes:

The traditional response to the question as to why the *Sundarakāṇḍa* is so named or, to phrase it differently, what is so beautiful about the book, is the recitation of a widely known verse: "In the *Sundarakāṇḍa* Rāma is beautiful. In the *Sundarakāṇḍa* the monkey is beautiful. In the *Sundarakāṇḍa* Sītā is beautiful. What is not beautiful in the *Sundarakāṇḍa*? (Goldman and Sutherland 1996, 77).

But might it be possible to stretch out this opinion to Laṅkā? Would the tradition have in mind the depiction of the city when it coined the title "Beauty"? Here, it may be important to

recall that three other books in the *Rāmāyaṇa*—the second, third, and fourth books—are named after the location in which the events take place, respectively in Ayodhyā (the capital of Rāma's dynasty), the Forest, and Kiṣkindhā (the capital of the monkey kingdom).

The question remains thus open. Let us limit ourselves therefore to the famous scene, which, as I said before, betrays a definitive yet unexpected turn in the way the text imagines the demonic world—offering thus an ideal literary testimony for peeping into the complex interaction between religious and secular life in ancient India. I have in mind the cantos five to twelve, in which Hanumān is depicted while going over the city, inspecting each corner in search of princess Sītā.

To begin with, it should be stressed the very fact that it is the look of a monkey, not a human look, the one which introduces the reader into this universe, at the same time repugnant and captivating. This simple narrative element should make us feel how unusual is the event. It would have been simply scandalous to put the hero Rāma in such a situation: amazed at the beauty of his rival's city. At the same time, however, that did not prevent the authors of the *Rāmāyaṇa* from composing and including the episode. What they did was simply to attenuate its implications by resorting narratively to an inferior figure—a monkey. Thus, the mechanism that underlies the entire episode can be summarized as follows: in the very act of disdain or belittling, there is affirmation and even praise.

The mechanism is particularly evident in the oscillating personality of Hanumān throughout the episode. At one moment he may look fascinated, and yet at the next, guilty and filled with doubts. Hence, while in the first cantos we observe the prodigious monkey making military calculations and moral judgments, a few stanzas later, as if he had forgotten its mission, we observe him strolling around, marvelled at the magnificent urban setting being displayed before his eyes. This sort of aesthetical surrender allows the reader to enter into the city, peeping through the windows, and knowing at first-hand the behaviour of its inhabitants.

What follows is a true explosion of voyeurism. This culminates in the exquisite vision of Rāvaṇa's harem, and finally in the vision of the very bedroom of the powerful lord of the demons (cantos 7–8). Seen in this light, Hanumān's doubts and moral retractions end up having the opposite effect. Although they are communicated in order to exculpate the humble monkey from any fault, at the same time they emphasize the greatness of the reality displayed before his entranced eyes.

In this way, again contrary to our expectations, the city of evil is depicted as a beautiful and elegantly dressed up woman (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 5.3.18), as a marvellous, incredible and worth of seeing place (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 5.2.52–54, 5.3.10), in which natural beauty, architectonic refinement, and artistic grace meet. Splendid lakes and delicate arboreal fragrances, beautiful terraces and sumptuous palaces, music and art of the highest quality captivate the five senses:

Then having leapt the vast ocean, Hanumān, foremost among the mighty and most eminent of leaping monkeys, proceeded swiftly to Laṅkā. He passed through deep blue meadows and fragrant woodlands filled with boulders and great trees. And Hanumān, powerful bull among monkeys, strode onward past thickly forested hills and groves of blossoming trees. Standing of that mountain, the son of the wind god spied woods and parks and the city of Laṅkā. The great monkey saw lovely parklands and all kinds of lakes and pleasure groves completely covered with every sort of tree that blossomed and bore fruit in all seasons [...] As Hanumān gazed all around him at the city of Laṅkā, his heart was filled with wonder. Its gateways were of gold; the enclosures within them were paved with emeralds. Those gateways were adorned with mosaics of gemstones, crystals, and pearls. And they were adorned with reliefs of refined gold and shone brightly with silver. Their floors and stairways were made of emerald. And their crystalline interiors were utterly spotless. They had beautiful courtyards. Their structures seemed almost to soar into the sky. They echoed with the sound of cranes and peacocks, and they were thronged by royal swans. The city resounded on every side with the sounds of musical instruments and ornaments[...] With its splendid mansions resounding with the sounds of laughter and musical instruments, marked with thunderbolts and elephant goods, and ornamented with diamond

fretwork, the city was as lovely as the sky with its great clouds [...] And here and there Hanumān heard the sound of hands clapping and the murmur of pleasant conversation (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 5.2.5–11 and 5.3.8–11, 21–22, 26; see also 5.4.7, 5.5.11–42, etc.).

This clearly suggests that the kind of leisure activities which were prevalent during *Rāmāyaṇa* era are mostly the same activities associated in later texts with the vindication of *kāma* as a central component for the notions of good life and well-being. This includes all kinds of artistic expressions, as well as sports and games of chance, carousals, feasts and picnics, gardening, etc. (Lienhard 1984, 42). The essence of all these activities is physical and intellectual cultivation, and the development of a sense of beauty. In this view, the province of meaning associated with *kāma* cannot be reduced to ordinary pleasure. Rather, it involves a highly aestheticized experience of daily life and a beautification of the person's surroundings and routines.

The final verdict is repeated again and again: Laṅkā resembles the city of all semi divine creatures (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 5.2.48), it is a celestial city (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 5.2.18, 5.3.12), a divine city (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 5.3.35). Particularly significant is the fact that the verdict allows there conciliation, right in the same space, between the horrendous aspects of secular life and the purity of religious life (see for instance *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 5.3.26, 5.3.28–29, and 5.5.12). Again, the hinge that reunites and harmonizes these extremes is daily life, with its natural proclivity towards pleasure and leisure (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki* 5.4.9–10, 5.4.14–19).

Again, the type of life Hanumān finds displayed in Laṅkā cannot be reduced to perverse hedonism. It is not the type of life condemned by religious puritanism. Rather, the episode's almost hypnotic cadence seems to evoke a sensuality of a higher order. It seems to introduce a sort of meta-category that accounts for the infinite variety of human experience, with leisure as a key component. It is therefore a life where the sacred and the profane, the portent and the ordinary coexist.

The narrative acquires greater intensity in the proximity of Rāvaṇa. Unable to wake up from his bewitchment, Hanumān penetrates into the area of palaces, and once there he reaches the main hall (*śālā*) of Rāvaṇa's palace, extolled on account of its divine nature, a place that "refreshed the spirit and brightened the complexion. It banished all sorrow. It was heavenly and like the very source of all splendour" (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki* 5.7.25). Excited, the monkey concludes: "This must be heaven! This must be the realm of the gods! This must be the citadel of Indra! Or perhaps, it is the highest goal of perfection!" (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki* 5.7.27). In this way, he introduces the tone for the treatment Rāvaṇa himself is going to receive. As I anticipated, this tone contrasts heavily with the image of a vulgar hedonist, the rapist of innocent women.

Not casually described here in his human form, with one head and two arms, Rāvaṇa is now a creature of dazzling beauty and immense vigour; someone whose countless virtues immediately make women fall in love, making unnecessary and almost unconceivable the resource of violence: "For these women were the daughters of royal seers and other divine beings. And they were all passionately in love with him. That immensely powerful warrior had, however, not taken a single one of the women there by force; rather, they had been won over by his virtues" (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki* 5.7.65–66).

At this point, the doubts, guilt, and the need to subdue the aesthetic impulse to the demands of *dharma*, sound almost ironical. The irony will reach the heroin herself, princess Sītā. The literary pattern can be summarized according to the formula I saw this, I saw that, and also that else, but did not see Sītā, "born in a royal family fixed in the path of righteousness" (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki* 5.4.21), that is to say, the woman who resists this vision of plenitude opposed to the Brahmanical order.

The irony behind this pattern emerges with all its power in the celebrated vision of the harem. Dominated by love, beautiful feminine bodies lie around a man who is vigour incarnated, the most concentrated expression of a life which has as its main value the here and now. From those bodies

emanates a state of placidity and intoxication. The scene is so powerful that Hanumān, in a lapse, compares those women with Sītā, introducing doubts in the audience, the doubts that will trouble Rāma up to the end of the story: "Suddenly, the pure-minded monkey lord was struck by this thought: 'If the lawful wife of Rāma is in any way like these wives of the demon king, then it is a lucky thing for him indeed'. Then, overwhelmed once more by sorrow, he thought, 'But surely Sītā's virtues make her unique'" (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki* 5.7.68–69).

But the feeling of remorse—the voice of *dharma*—is in reality fleeting and weak, for just a few steps ahead the experience of poetic redemption reappears in the vision of Mandodarī, Rāvaṇa's principal wife:

Then the monkey saw one extraordinarily beautiful woman sleeping on a magnificent bed that was set apart from those of the other women. She was beautifully adorned with jewellery studded with pearls; and she seemed to ornament that magnificent palace with her own radiant beauty. It was fair Mandodarī, the beautiful, golden-skinned, and deeply beloved queen of the inner apartments, that the monkey saw sleeping there. When he saw her so richly bejewelled, the great armed son of the wind god reasoned on the basis of her extraordinary beauty and youth: "This must be Sītā!" And filled with tremendous excitement, the leader of the monkey troops rejoiced. He clapped his upper arms and kissed his tail. He rejoiced, he frolicked, he sang, he capered about. He bounded up the columns and leapt back to the ground, all the while clearly showing his monkey nature.

But the great monkey dismissed that notion and, once more recovering his composure, took up another line of thought concerning Sītā: "That lovely lady would never sleep apart from Rāma, nor would she eat, drink, or adorn herself. Nor would she ever go near another man, even the lord of the gods. For Rāma has no peer, even among the thirty gods themselves. This must be someone else" (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki* 5.8.46–51, 9.1–2).

With all these innocent "mistakes" of perception, followed by timid exercises of contrition, clearly the poet plays at stretching the rope to the maximum, tempting thus the audience with the possibility that Sītā may belong to a world where *kāma* is not subordinated to *dharma*. Some have argued that this play seeks to satisfy certain liter-

ary expectations (Goldman-Sutherland: 69–70). Yet, the fact is that such an intention demands, in order to gain credibility, an image where the limits between the religious and the secular fade. The highest vision is not one which excludes or subordinates *kāma*'s province of meaning, but rather one which poetically emancipates it.

We find here an Indian vision of the good life that stays away from the more normative and today prevalent emphasis on *dharma* alone. As such, it constitutes a potentially illuminating Indian contribution to contemporary debate on the concept of quality of life from the historical perspective of a non-Western culture.

15.6 By Way of Conclusion

As it is well-known, the tension between *dharma* and *kāma* will reach negatively the protagonists: the price Rāma has to pay in order to affirm the sacredness of his ascetic *dharma* is Sītā herself, situated on the side of desire since the moment Rāvaṇa kidnapped her. The incompatibility between *dharma* and *kāma* has been gradually built by the plot: it appears first in the human realm (in Ayodhyā, through Rāma's conflict with his father), from there it migrates to the animal realm (in Kiṣkindhā, through the confrontation, also with sexual implications, between the monkey leaders Sugrīva and Vālī), and finally to the demonic or supernatural realm (in Laṅkā, through the conflict with Rāvaṇa). In this way, the incompatibility between *dharma* and *kāma* sets the conditions not only to legitimate, but also to anticipate the separation of Rāma and Sītā. But again, on the way to that normative outcome, even if only tangentially, the *Rāmāyaṇa* offers an alternative, conciliatory and more encompassing solution in the episode of the fifth book I have just examined.

Of course, in order to answer the question of how and when the purely *dharma*-oriented interpretation of our case here became dominant, one should need to analyse the process of reception of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, a process that transformed the protagonist into a divine avatar and the text itself into sacred scripture—most notoriously in the

extremely popular *Rāmcaritmanas*, written by Tulsidās in a dialectal variant of Hindi towards the year 1574. However, such analysis is beyond the scope of our reflection here.

Therefore, let us conclude by reiterating instead that the vision of Laṅkā in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, the earliest crystallization of the story of Rāma and Sītā, constitutes a significant literary testimony about the sociocultural complexity of ancient India. As I have tried to show, this particular episode acknowledges a plural social *dynamis*, in which religiosity and secular concerns coexist in equilibrium. In that *dynamis* the opposition sacred-profane is subordinated to a higher order, in which desire and daily life, leisure and man's proclivity to pleasure and beauty are affirmed and seem to get rid of the normative burden of orthodoxy. Moreover, the purely moral-religious view surrenders itself to a poetic-aesthetic view that calls into question the dichotomy religious life-secular life.

Does this narrative provide new insights into ancient India's contribution to contemporary debate on good life and quality of life? I think so. The episode is worth of attention for a number of reasons. First, it teaches how illuminating can be the study of original texts from ancient non-Western cultures, in that they may give access to ideals and views about good life that may deepen our understanding of quality of life beyond the dominant yet ultimately narrow emphasis on contemporary Western societies, and of course beyond merely measurable criteria. Also, in the wider context of the Indian doctrine of the objects of human pursuit (*puruṣārthas*), the relationship between *dharma* and *kāma* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* constitutes a rich resource upon which one can draw for contemporary reflection. More specifically, the episode calls into question the image of India as a purely religious culture, and presents us instead a more complex panorama. Retrieving the multi-layered visions of the good life in ancient India, even if these occur as literary testimonies, help to articulate a more balanced view of that which this culture regarded as a good life, avoiding thus the stereotyped image of India as a purely spiritual culture, and therefore avoiding the tendency to see its main contribution to the

debate on quality of life also as a spiritual one. Rather, the larger picture seems to corroborate the idea that *also in India* quality of life can be defined as personal satisfaction with the current life dimensions (here represented by *artha* and *kāma*) in comparison with the pursued or ideal quality of life (here represented by *dharma*). In particular, the vision of Lañkā in the *Rāmāyaṇa* may be relevant to contemporary debates on the possibility of articulating, *again also in India*, models of life designed not to constrain or exclude but to conciliate and include. In its implicit recognition of a plurality of social behaviours, human purposes and pursuits, ancient India has certainly much to offer to the concept of quality of life beyond the ideas of sacredness and spirituality, or the practice of yoga and meditation. Again, to appreciate such contribution more deeply, one needs to take history seriously, with critical awareness of the complex relationship between past and present.

References

- Aśvaghōṣa (1984). *Buddhacarita* (E. H. Johnston, Ed. & Trans.). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Brajša-Zganec, A., Merkas, M., & Sverko, I. (2011). Quality of life and leisure activities: How do leisure activities contribute to subjective well-being? *Social Indicators Research*, 102, 82–91.
- Christopher, J. C. (1999). Situating psychological well-being: Exploring the cultural roots of its theory and research. *Journal of Counselling and Development*, 77, 141–152.
- Figueroa, Ó. (2014a). Lo profano en lo sagrado: identidad religiosa y literaria en el *Rāmāyaṇa*. *Humania del Sur*, 17, 113–126.
- Figueroa, Ó. (2014b). Persuasión y mito en los orígenes del drama sánscrito. A propósito del primer libro del *Nāṭyaśāstra*. *Habis*, 45, 151–165.
- Goldman, R., y Sutherland, S. (1996). Introduction. In *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An epic of Ancient India*, Vol. 5: “*Sundarakāṇḍa*” (R. Goldman and S. Sutherland, Eds. & Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Iwasaki, Y. (2007). Leisure and quality of life in an international and multicultural context: what are major pathways linking leisure to quality of life? *Social Indicators Research*, 82, 233–264.
- Jacobi, H. (Trad.). (1893) *Das Rāmāyaṇa: Geschichte und Inhalt nebst Concordanz der gedruckten Recensionen*. Bonn: Friedrich Cohen.
- Lienhard, S. (1984). *A history of classical poetry: Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Mānavadharmasāstra. (2004). *Manu's code of law: A critical edition and translation* (P. Olivelle, Ed. & Trans.). Nueva York: Oxford University Press.
- Nāṭyaśāstra. (2014). (Book I) (Ó. Figueroa, Ed. & Trans.). *Nova Tellus*, 32–1: 155–182.
- Pollock, S. (1985–1986). Rākṣasas and others. *Indologica Taurinensia*, 13, 263–281.
- Pollock, S. (2006). *The language of the gods in the world of men. Sanskrit, culture, and power in premodern India*. Los Angeles/Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rojas, M. (2009). The measurement of quality of life: Conceptualization comes first. A four-qualities-of-life conceptual framework and an illustration to Latin America. *ISQOLS Conference: Measures and goals for the progress of societies*, Florence: 1–72.
- Śatapathabrāhmaṇa. (2008). (M. Deshpande, Ed. & Trans.). Delhi: New Bharatiya Book Corporation.
- Schalock, R. L., Brown, I., Brown, R., Cummins, R., Felce, D., Matikka, L., Keith, K., & Parmenter, T. (2002). Conceptualization, measurement, and application of quality of life for persons with intellectual disabilities: Report of an international panel of experts. *Mental Retardation*, 40, 457–470.
- Sharma, V. (2002). Leisure of the aged and social development: An Indian model. *World Leisure Journal*, 44-3, 16–23.
- Skevington, S. M. (2002). Advancing cross-cultural research on quality of life: Observations drawn from the WHOQOL development. *Quality of Life Research*, 11-2, 135–144.
- Susniene, D., & Jurkauskas, A. (2009). The concepts of quality of life and happiness—correlation and differences. *Inžinerine Ekonomika-Engineering Economics*, 3, 58–66.
- The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki*. (1985). Vol. 1 (R. Goldman, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki*. (1991). Vol. 3 (Sh. Pollock, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki*. (1996). Vol. 5. (R. Goldman and S. Sutherland, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Winternitz, M. (1927). *A history of Indian literature* (Vol. 2). Calcuta: University of Calcutta.
- World Health Organization, WHOQOL. (1997). *Measuring quality of life*. Geneva: WHO.