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MORAL VALUES OF THE RAMAYANA AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR GEN Z

KEY WORDS:

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The Ramayana, one of India's two great epics, has long served as a guide to moral conduct, social harmony, and personal integrity. Written millennia ago, its teachings remain remarkably relevant in today's fast-paced world especially for Gen Z, a generation navigating rapid technological advancement and evolving social norms.

While contemporary times differ vastly from the world of ancient India, the timeless values depicted in the Ramayana can help today's youth form a strong moral compass and a sense of responsibility. From simple customs such as rinsing one's mouth after relieving oneself to the fourfold course of conduct prescribed for a king, the Ramayana offers lessons on duty, respect, and community-mindedness that can address and remedy several contemporary challenges.

1. Cleanliness and Personal Discipline

One of the more curious lessons drawn from the Ramayana involves the practice of **rinsing one's mouth after evacuating the bladder**. One instance from Bala Kanda where Vishwamitra speaks to Sri Rama and instructs him to empower ogres born to Nirrti

न च सुप्तं प्रमत्तं वा धर्षयिष्यन्ति नेर्ऋताः ।

न बाह्वोः सदृशो वीर्ये पृथिव्यामस्ति कश्चन ॥ १४ ॥

Translation- "Nor will the ogres (born of Nirrti, the goddess of death and variously regarded as the wife of Adharma or as a daughter Adharma and Himsa) overpower you even when you are asleep or careless (**having omitted, for instance, to rinse your mouth, say, after evacuating your bladder**); none on earth will equal you in the prowess of arms. (Bala Kanda, Canto XXII, Verse 14, p134 – Srimad Valmiki Ramayana, VOL 1- Gitapress, Gorakhpur, India Publications)

On the surface, this might seem like a trivial or purely ritualistic activity. However, it underscores a broader theme of discipline and hygiene that is central to the epic. Lord Rama, who is revered not only for his royal heritage but also for his devotion to duty, practiced and promoted the highest standards of personal and communal cleanliness.

For Gen Z, bombarded daily by global events, media stimulation, and social media platforms, discipline often becomes challenging. Establishing small, meaningful routines, like washing or rinsing your mouth after restroom use, is not just an act of physical cleanliness, but also a mental reset. It trains the mind to be consistent, precise, and respectful toward one's surroundings. By instilling a sense of responsibility and attention to detail in small daily tasks, Gen Z can learn to apply the same mindfulness to bigger, more consequential decisions in life, from maintaining strong ethical boundaries online to managing finances responsibly.

2. Respect for Elders and the Symbolism of Circumambulation

Another custom mentioned in the Ramayana, and still practiced in many Hindu households, is **children going**

around their parents (circumambulating them) while taking leave. Often seen when departing for an important journey or task, this act symbolizes profound respect, gratitude, and acknowledgment of the parents' wisdom and sacrifice. In essence, it is a physical gesture meant to convey that one carries the blessings of elders. (Ayodhyakanda, Canto XIX, Verse 28-29, p363 – Srimad Valmiki Ramayana, VOL 1- Gitapress, Gorakhpur, India Publications)

वन्दिबा चरणौ राज्ञो विसंज्ञस्य पितुस्तदा ।

कैकेय्याश्चाप्यनार्याया निष्पपात महादुःखि ॥ २८ ॥

Bowing at the feet of his royal father, who was lying unconscious even then, as well as of the ignoble Kaikeyi, Sri Rama, who was possessed of immense glory, departed.

स रामः पितरं कृत्वा कैकेयीं च प्रदक्षिणम् ।

निष्क्रम्यन्तः पुरात् तस्मात् स्वं दर्शय सुहृज्जनम् ॥ २९ ॥

Going clockwise round his father as well as Kaikeyi and coming out of the said gynaeceum, the celebrated Sri Rama saw his friends standing at the gate.

Translating this act to a modern context, Gen Z can recognize the principle that success and maturity do not develop in a vacuum. Mentors, guardians, and parents often pave the way for youth with their love, sacrifices, and guidance. While the specific gesture of walking around elders may not fit into every cultural setting today, **its spirit remains vital-demonstrate gratitude**, acknowledge support, and seek blessings from those who have imparted knowledge and resources. Doing so fosters humility and forges intergenerational bonds.

In today's world, many young people grow up hearing that they can do anything they set their mind to, messages such as this breed a sense of entitlement if left unchecked. Remembering to appreciate the support systems around them can help ensure that they remain grounded and maintain a healthy balance between ambition and humility.

3. The Fourfold Course of Conduct for a King

At the heart of the Ramayana lies the concept of **Raja dharma**, or the king's duty, which can be seen as a comprehensive moral, ethical, and administrative framework for rulers. In traditional accounts, there is a **fourfold course of conduct** often described for a king and, by extension, anyone in a position of responsibility. (Balakanda, Canto LII, Verse 7-9, p214 – Srimad Valmiki Ramayana, VOL 1- Gitapress, Gorakhpur, India Publications)

कश्चित् कुशलं राजन् कश्चिद् धर्मेण रञ्जयन् ।

प्रजाः पालयसे राजन् राजवृत्तेन धार्मिक ॥ ७ ॥

"Is everything well with you, o monarch? Do you rule over the people, O pious king, according to the fourfold course of conduct prescribed for a king, delighting them with your love of righteousness? (7)

कश्चित् समुद्रा भूत्याः कश्चित् तिष्ठति शासने ।

कश्चित् विजिताः सर्वे रिपवो रिपसूदन ॥ ८ ॥

"Are servants duly maintained by you and do they ever stand at your beck and call? Have all your enemies been fully conquered, O destroyer of foes?"

कश्चिद् बलेषु कोशेषु मित्रेषु च परंतप ।

कुशलं ते नरव्याघ्र पुत्रपोत्रे तथानघ ॥ ९ ॥

Is all well with your forces treasuries and allies, O destroyer of foes, no less than with your sons and grandsons, do the pies your eyes provide you good intel, O tiger among men, divorced from sin as you are?"

It provides a concise summary of the fourfold conduct for a king or a leader, interwoven with the classic Ramayana questions such as whether the king delights his subjects with his love of righteousness, maintains his servants, conquers enemies, and secures alliances. The concluding section draws parallels to how these principles can guide Gen Z in embracing leadership roles.

1. Upholding Righteousness and Delighting Subjects

A fundamental question posed in the Ramayana is whether the king "delights his subjects with his love of righteousness." This highlights the monarch's duty to be a moral exemplar, prioritizing dharma (ethical conduct) above personal gain. When citizens witness their leader acting ethically, they feel protected and inspired.

In the present context with relevance for Gen Z:

In a world driven by social media and swift cultural shifts, Gen Z leaders who consistently do the right thing, even when it is inconvenient and comes at great costs or personal sacrifice, build trust in their teams and networks. Upholding integrity fosters a supportive environment where people feel respected and motivated.

2. Compassionate Maintenance of Subordinates

Another critical aspect is whether the king's servants are "duly maintained by him" and if they "stand at his beck and call." The Ramayana underscores a reciprocal relationship between leader and subordinates: servants remain loyal when treated with fairness, generosity, and kindness.

In the present context with relevance for Gen Z:

Effective leadership in corporate or community settings involves valuing team members, ensuring they have proper resources, and recognizing their contributions. When Gen Z leaders show genuine regard for employees' or volunteers' welfare, through fair compensation, mentorship, and emotional support they can foster loyalty and high performance.

3. Conquest of Enemies and Preservation of Security

A king's strength is gauged by his ability to "fully conquer his enemies" and maintain stability. This isn't merely about warfare; in the epic context, it includes safeguarding the kingdom from internal corruption, injustice, and discord. It also involves checking whether "forces, treasuries, and allies" remain robust.

In the present context with relevance for Gen Z Today, "enemies" may not be hostile armies but rather systemic challenges, ethical pitfalls, disinformation, organizational conflict, or project obstacles. Competent Gen Z leaders anticipate these threats, address them strategically, and ensure that resources (budgets, teams, technologies) are managed prudently. Maintaining good "allies" also translates to building strong professional networks and partnerships, reinforcing resilience against future uncertainties.

4. Vigilance and Strategic Intelligence

The Ramayana places importance on whether a king's "spies bring in good intel," reflecting the need for constant awareness. An effective ruler stays informed about internal matters, external threats, and emerging opportunities. This vigilance extends to personal well-being too: "Are all well with your sons and grandsons?" a metaphor for caring about the future generations' security and growth.

In the present context with relevance for Gen Z: In modern leadership, good intelligence equates to data-driven decisions and well-rounded research. Whether monitoring market trends, staying abreast of social issues, or gauging team morale, Gen Z leaders who remain informed and empathetic are best positioned to adapt quickly. Caring about future "sons and grandsons" highlights the importance of sustainability, ensuring that policies and strategies do not sacrifice long-term welfare for short-term gains.

These timeless questions and principles from the Ramayana frame an ideal leader, one who is righteous, compassionate, strong, and vigilant. Gen Z often faces stereotypes of disengagement or entitlement, yet the epic reminds us that genuine leadership emerges from a combination of moral clarity, empathy, strategic acumen, and future-focused thinking.

When young leaders act with integrity (delighting subjects with righteousness), build supportive teams (maintaining servants compassionately), tackle obstacles head-on (conquering enemies and managing resources), and stay well-informed (valuing good intelligence and the well-being of future generations), they create the foundations for lasting impact. In essence, the fourfold conduct ensures not merely personal success but collective well-being, an ethos especially urgent in our interconnected, rapidly changing world.

5. Combating Entitlement and Apathy

In the modern workplace, there is a perception that **Gen Z can be "easily bored," "quickly insulted," "entitled,"** or lacking the willingness to take on leadership responsibilities. The Ramayana offers numerous counterexamples of individuals who rose above their comfort zones and embraced responsibility when it was thrust upon them. Bharat, for instance, was deeply loyal and respectful toward Rama, despite suddenly finding himself in the centre of a political and familial crisis when Rama was exiled. Rather than seizing the kingdom for himself, he chose to rule only as Rama's representative, a testament to humility and selfless leadership.

For Gen Z, the real takeaway is that in times of moral dilemma or organizational uncertainty, stepping up to serve others, even when inconvenient, earns respect and creates unity. Such acts showcase resilience, a virtue in short supply amid the stress and anxiety that often accompany fast-paced modern life. By cultivating a sense of duty and leaning into one's responsibilities, young adults can discover how much more fulfilling it is to contribute meaningfully to a larger purpose.

Conclusion: The Ramayana's Guiding Light for Gen Z

The Ramayana remains a treasure trove of values, cleanliness as means to discipline, respect for elders, the fourfold course of leadership, and resilience in the face of hardship, that can serve as an antidote to many of the challenges faced by Gen Z. In an era characterized by hyper-connectivity, globalization, and rapid cultural shifts, these timeless lessons provide a framework for ethical living, personal discipline, and community orientation.

Even small acts rooted in Ramayana's ethos, such as a simple show of respect to parents or adhering to personal routines,

can ripple outward, shaping one's worldview and interactions. Rather than viewing discipline and respect as stifling traditions, Gen Z can embrace them as sources of identity, self-control, and responsibility. Indeed, the Ramayana offers pathways for cultivating humility in an age of self-promotion, genuine leadership in times of apathy, and the pursuit of moral excellence in a world that often praises shortcuts and quick gains.

In practical terms, adopting these values starts with daily mindfulness: valuing elders' wisdom, undertaking tasks with sincere dedication, and accepting personal responsibility rather than shunning it. The epic's narrative proves that leadership is not about position, but about service and sacrifice. As Gen Z navigates complex social and personal landscapes, the Ramayana's message serves as a guiding light. By upholding cleanliness, respect, and a sense of duty, the youth of today can find purpose and direction, just as Lord Rama's example has guided countless generations before them.

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