

Why is Valmiki Jayanti Celebrated?

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Valmiki Jayanti is a government holiday and many institutions are shut down, but very few people know why. Some say, quite vaguely, that it celebrates the great composer of the Ramayan, Maharshi Valmiki and they are officially correct. What we miss out is that it is not as a general public festival like Vijaya Dashami or Ganesh Chaturthi. and that its biggest celebrations are held in areas dominated by certain so-called lower castes. Why?

A few days ago, on Vijaya Dashami, Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS supremo noted that “Our diversity has reached a point where we have even divided our saints and deities. Why is Valmiki Jayanti celebrated only in Valmiki colonies?”. He went on to say “Valmiki wrote the Ramayana for the entire Hindu society, so everyone should celebrate Valmiki Jayanti and Ravidas Jayanti together. All festivals should be celebrated collectively by the entire Hindu society. We will take this message to the community,”.

This brings us to the moot point. Was Valmiki a Sudra or a Brahman? Hindu saints and sages have repeatedly assured all that a Sudra can also become a Brahman by sheer dint of his scholarship and merit. The best example is how Ratnakar, a low class dacoit, transformed himself into the most revered Sanskrit poet, the Adi Kavi Valmiki — through the blessings of Narada Muni and his extraordinary will power and quest for knowledge. This is why the Valmiki Sampraday, consisting of the so-called lower orders and once-untouchable castes, hold him up as their own special god.

It is not that only different sections or occupations of Hindus have their very own gods or saints. Christianity thrives on hundreds of such sectarian saints. Blacksmiths worship Saint Dunstan, carpenters pray to Saint Joseph, pastoralists and animal-based workers like cobblers worship saint Thomas of Assisi, while fishermen revere two apostles, Saint Andrew and Saint Peter, and St. Catherine of Bologna is for Liberal Arts. In eastern Bengal, both Muslim and Hindu sailors pray to Pir Badar before setting out on sea voyages.

But why is it that other Sudras do not worship Valmiki? The definition of who is a Sudra is as wide as an ocean and in many states, everyone other than a Brahman — say 97 percent of the population was deemed to be Sudra. It really does not matter in progressive states like Bengal, but Valmiki Jayanti is held mostly in the North and the West, and parts of the South, where ‘Dalits’ are still treated most contemptuously. Valmikis bring out Shobha Yatras, processions carrying with an idol of Valmiki and

sing devotional songs. We must understand that every public procession is actually an assertion of the identity, unity and power of those who participate.

Others recite the Ramayana in remembrance of Valmiki, while many pay tributes by praying in the temples of Valmiki across the country. These are decorated with flowers and lights and free food is offered. Perhaps the most famous Valmiki temple is in Amritsar, known as Bhagwan Valmiki Tirath Sthal, in the midst of a lake. It is believed to be the place of Valmiki's residence and the place where he provided shelter to Sita, who gave birth to Luv and Kush here. Incidentally, the Valmiki community of Punjab launched the Adi-Dharam Samaj, an anti-caste reformist movement — that calls for a separate religious identity for Dalits, especially Valmikis, as distinct from Hindus and Sikhs. It has also adopted a planned path to ensure Dalit social mobility — without following the dominant modes like Sanskritization and conversion.

From Gandhi to Mohan Bhagwat, no one has wanted to lose the Dalits, as their numbers added strength to the Hindu bloc. Hence, both made fervent pleas to break down caste barriers. One wishes Bhagwat's giant organisation carried out his desire and celebrated this Valmiki Jayanti in general public spaces, with all castes and classes participating, in being physically together and sharing the same food and water. This did not happen — maybe, it will happen next year.