

21st Moortidevi Award ceremony – Bharatiya Jnanpith

(New Delhi – March 18, 2010)

Remarks by Hon'ble Mr. K.G. Balakrishnan, Chief Justice of India

Her Excellency Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil,

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar,

Dr. M. Veerappa Moily,

Other dignitaries present here,

And Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful for the invitation to attend the Twenty-First Moortidevi Award ceremony. The trustees of the 'Bharatiya Jnanpith' have very aptly chosen Dr. M. Veerappa Moily as the recipient of this award for the year 2007 in recognition of his work 'Shree Ramayana Mahanveshanam'.

In recent times, Dr. Moily has been frequently in the news since he has announced numerous initiatives in his capacity as the Union Minister for Law and Justice. However, today we have gathered here to honour his accomplishments in the field of literature. Most of you would know that Dr. Moily is an accomplished writer who has authored poems and novels in his native tongue Kannada. I have been made to understand that the 'Shree Ramayana Mahanveshanam' has been written in the form of a poem which is an imaginative re-telling of the epic. What is most significant about this work is that the author has engrafted analogies and metaphors to social problems in the present day. The different characters and incidents from the Ramayana have been re-created to reflect contemporary discussions about constitutional rights and values.

Like any other story which has been passed down several generations, we must be conscious of the fact that each story-teller also brings in a fresh perspective. References to the Ramayana are aplenty in our popular culture and we must also take note of the diverse traditions in which this story has been rendered. The descriptions of characters as well as plot details do vary in the different versions of the Ramayana. In our times, the story will hold more resonance if there is a direct comparison with contemporary social problems. This point was brought home in a note authored by Prof. C.N. Ramachandran who has read Dr. Moily's work and identified some of these metaphors.

For instance, there is a reference to an incident involving Sakalashwa, an Aryan commander, who was known to exploit the non-aryans and argued that since 'Aryavarta belonged to the Aryans, all the others have to live at their mercy'. This majoritarian stand is opposed by Rama who tries to convince Sakalashwa that the term 'Aryan' includes those described as 'Dasyus' and foreigners, thereby arguing for equal treatment for all. However, their disagreement escalates into an armed conflict which leads to Sakalashwa's demise. The contest over who is an Aryan is a clear parallel to today's debates about relations between the political majority and the minorities.

Similarly, there is an allusion to the rights of mine-workers and the protection of environmental resources in an episode where Rama stays in the Dandakaranya forest. After seeing the plight of the mine-workers who are being exploited, Rama frees them and vows to protect them in the future. Some foundational ideas about good governance find place in the narrative about Sugriva who after becoming the king of Kishkindha, wants to improve the lot of his subjects. He declares that 'all men and women, irrespective of their caste or creed or sex, should get free education'. When this declaration is opposed on the ground that it

will place an immense burden on the treasury, Sugriva responds by saying that the provision of education to all is an essential obligation on the state. This is clearly a comment on the present-day debates about improving the access and quality of education.

Works of fiction allow the author to transcend the limits of time and space. In this sense, popular epics such as the Ramayana have a massive influence on social mores, ways of thinking and even the ideas of citizenship. Mahatma Gandhi had also spoken about the aspirational stage of 'Rama Rajya'. While writers, artists and thinkers should be free to create and publish their imaginative interpretations and re-tellings of such popular epics, we must guard against those who seek to curtail their creative freedom. The inherent lessons of pluralism, tolerance and respect for diversity should be given the attention that they deserve.

With these words, I would like to offer my personal congratulations to Dr. M. Veerappa Moily and sincerely hope that he makes many more valuable contributions – both in the fields of politics and literature.

Thank You!
