

## **Social Etiquette and Politeness in Welcoming Guests in Ancient India: A Study of Chapter 50 in Valmiki's *Ramayana***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents the norms of social etiquette and politeness in welcoming guests in ancient India. For this purpose, chapter 50 of the first canto in Valmiki's *Ramayana* has been analysed using Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness. The *Ramayana* is considered to be the oldest existent epic in Sanskrit which was written down, according to Goldman (1984), between 700 BCE and 600 BCE after remaining in oral tradition for many centuries. The analysis suggests that a well codified and elaborate code of conduct and social etiquette was practiced in ancient India during the *Ramayana* era.

*Keywords: Politeness, ancient India, Ramayana, Indology, etiquette.*

### **Introduction**

India is the cradle of one of the most ancient civilizations in the history of humankind. Several thousand years ago when most human civilizations in many other corners of the world were still in their infancy living a nomadic life in darkness, human civilization was thriving on the Indian subcontinent. The glory of the ancient Indian civilization can be understood from the archaeological, scriptural, and literary proofs from India's ancient past. The remains of the ancient Indian universities of Takshashila and Nalanda, the description of educational, spiritual, and political practices given in the records of the foreign travelers, and other literary sources bear witness to India's glory in those old times. The written records from as early as 300-600 BCE suggest India's glorious past with gold thrones, silver canopies, metal weapons, professional armies, residential gurukuls in cities and forests, and big universities and Viharas.

Social etiquette and politeness were given high importance in the genteel society in ancient India. There were elaborate rules of polite conduct, which were ritualistically followed in society. This work studies the social practice of guest welcome during the *Ramayana* era in

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India. For this purpose, I studied Chapter 50 of the first book called Balakanda in Valmiki's Ramayana.

Sage Valmiki's Ramayana is considered to be the first epic in Sanskrit due to which Valmiki is hailed as the adikavi, the first epic poet. The epic is written in classical Sanskrit and shows rare poetic craftsmanship and structural finish, which shows Valmiki's excellent poetic sensibility and the prevailing poetic norms in the contemporary times. The epic comprises 24000 verses (shlokas) in seven books or cantos (kandas). According to European scholars, the Ramayana was composed between 700 BCE and 600 BCE (Goldman 1984) but many Indian sources consider it even more ancient as the epic remained in oral tradition before it was finally written down. Some scholars consider the opening four chapters of the first canto and the seventh canto as interpolation and the remaining parts as the ancient original text which remained in oral tradition for a very long period of time before it was written down.

The epic presents the life of Prince Rama who has been depicted as the ideal man with strong morals and social values. Rama undergoes a lot of turbulence in life but never loses perseverance and moral values that always guided him to glory. Due to his qualities, Rama is revered as an incarnation of Vishnu, the Godhead, by the Hindus. On reading this voluminous work, one can easily be impressed by the poet's wide range of knowledge of poetics, politics, social behaviour, ethics, and established values and etiquette in contemporary society. The model of Brown and Levinson (1987) has been used to analyse the data. This work sheds light on politeness and social etiquette as practiced in Indian society during the time of the composition of this epic.

### **Method of Analysis**

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory has been used to analyse the data. This theory is based on the concept of face. 'Face' may be defined as an individual's self-image. Every individual has two faces, a positive face and a negative face. An individual's desire of getting acceptability, respect and importance from others makes his/her positive face. The negative face wants include an individual's desire of not getting impeded and disturbed by others. On the basis of these two faces, Brown and Levinson (1987) classify politeness under two categories, namely— positive politeness and negative politeness.

### **Positive Politeness and Negative Politeness**

Positive politeness strategies satisfy positive face wants. An individual's positive face wants include his/her desire for getting respect, importance, appreciation and acceptability from others. The positive face of a hearer can be maintained, enhanced, or threatened through face-saving and face-threatening acts respectively. The positive face of a hearer can be maintained and enhanced by the use of strategies like showing respect, acceptability, and appreciation, and such acts are called face-saving acts (FSA). An act that impinges, violates or threatens an individual's face wants is called a face-threatening act (FTA). The hearer's positive face can be threatened if the speaker shows disregard, disrespect, rudeness, and disinterestedness to the hearer.

An FTA could be on-record or off-record. The on-record FTA involves an utterance that directly threatens the positive or the negative face of the hearer while the off-record FTA involves a speech or action that indirectly targets the hearer's positive or negative face and the hearer can choose to ignore it. An FTA could be bald or with a redressive act. A bald Face Threatening Act is direct and without any politeness strategy, while an FTA with a redressive act has politeness strategies and is hence considered more polite and tactful. The communication strategies such as formality, indirectness, concern for the hearer's time and things come under negative politeness.

### **Analysis**

The Balakanda, literally meaning the canto of youthful days, is the first and the longest canto in the epic. It narrates the story from Rama's birth to his marriage. An analysis of chapter 50 has been presented here. The chapter describes in 24 verses how King Janak welcomed Sage Vishwamitra with his disciples Rama and Lakshmana to the programme of Bow Yajna organized for the marriage of his daughter Sita. My analysis focuses on how the guest and the host behaved and interacted on the occasion. The chapter has numerous instances of positive politeness.

The chapter opens with a verse describing how Sage Vishwamitra with his disciples Rama and Lakshman entered the premises where the Yajna (Vedic ritual) was being held. Prince Rama and Laxman entered the premises respectfully following his guru Vishwamitra. According to the contemporary code of politeness in India, the elder and senior leads the retinue. Those who are junior in age, knowledge and position respectfully follow their senior. This behaviour was considered an important code of etiquette. The Guru was given the utmost respect by the

disciples. The poet very particularly mentioned the practice of such a code of conduct on multiple occasions in the Ramayana. Following the senior was considered a polite behaviour.

ततः प्राक् उत्तराम् गत्वा रामः सौमित्रिणा सह ।

विश्वामित्रम् पुरस्कृत्य यज्ञ वाटम् उपागमत् । (1.50.1)

Rama then traveled along with Lakshmana towards the northeast direction keeping Vishvamitra afore and neared the hall of Vedic ritual of Janaka in Mithila kingdom.

The polite behaviour also requires some basic etiquette on the part of the guest. Guests are supposed to appreciate the people, places, and actions of the host as much as possible. The guests should avoid hole-picking and criticizing the host and the things and persons associated with him/her. Rama and Lakshman, as they follow their Guru to enter the premises where the Yajna is to be held, appreciate the beauty and glory of the place. Rama and Laxman say to their guru Sage Vishvamitra, "the Vedic-ritual of noble-souled Janaka is excellent, indeed with bountifully garnered paraphernalia of the ritual" (1.50.2) and "the bountifully garnered things for the yajna and participation of numerous scholars show the glory of the occasion" (1.50.3-4).

रामः तु मुनि शार्दूलम् उवाच सह लक्ष्मणः ।

साध्वी यज्ञ समृद्धिः हि जनकस्य महात्मनः ॥ (1.50.2)

बहूनि इह सहस्राणि नाना देश निवासिनाम् ।

ब्राह्मणानाम् महाभाग वेद अध्ययन शालिनाम् ॥ (1.50.3)

ऋषि वाटाः च दृश्यन्ते शकटी शत संकुलाः ।

देशो विधीयताम् ब्रह्मन् यत्र वत्स्यामहे वयम् ॥ (1.50.4)

This appreciation is a part of positive politeness to enhance his Guru's positive face. Expression of happiness and gratitude to the hearer about some favour done by him makes him happy. The hearer feels rewarded and satisfied after getting appreciated for some action. Had Rama and Lakshman criticized the arrangements at Janaka's place and complained about discomfort, Guru's decision of having taken them there might look unwise, and thus could threaten his positive face. The act of appreciation also enhanced the host's positive face. Appreciation of the host and his things by the guest makes both positively disposed towards each other.

Janak did not go to welcome sage Vishvamitra alone but with other sages and scholars. The retinue was led by the senior-most sage, his priest Satananda. Valmiki writes thus:

विश्वामित्रम् अनुप्राप्तम् श्रुत्वा नृपवरः तदा ।  
शतानंदम् पुरस्कृत्य पुरोहितम् अनिन्दितम् ॥ १-५०-६  
प्रति उज्जगाम सहसा विनयेन समन्वितः ।

“On hearing that Vishvamitra has arrived in Mithila, then the best king Janaka instantly went towards Vishvamitra, keeping his unreprouvable priest Shataananda afore of the team, in deference to Vishvamitra” [1-50-6, 7a].

According to the royal etiquette of the time, quite a few people should come to give a warm welcome to the guest. It is always good if a person who knows the host and the guest is present on the occasion. A warm welcome is a part of positive politeness as it satisfies the guest’s positive face want of getting acceptance and appreciation from the host. People of like profession and nature feel comfortable in each other’s company and it is the host’s duty to make his guest as comfortable as possible. In this sense, Janakas’s arrival with a sage Satananda to welcome Vishwamitra is according to the royal etiquette of the times.

Janaka welcomes Vishwamitra and his disciples by offering them arghya (food and water) with ritualistic formality and respect that includes the washing of feet, and the offering of eatables and water with the utmost respect (1.50.7). These formalities are observed before any formal long conversation between the host and the guest. The purpose is to make the guest feel honoured and warmly received alongside taking care of the guest’s natural needs like ablution, food, and water.

ऋत्विजो अपि महात्मानः तु अर्घ्यम् आदाय स त्वरम् ॥१-५०-७  
विश्वामित्राय धर्मेण ददौ धर्मं पुरस्कृतम् ।

Even the Ritviks, the administrators of that Vedic ritual, of the great-souled king Janaka arrived with post-haste taking holy waters, and they have ritualistically offered that sanctified water to Vishwamitra. (1-50-7b, 8a)

The code of formality and etiquette required that a holy sage who came from a great distance with young boys should be offered refreshment and water with ritualistic respect and formal welcome talk to be done after refreshment.

After receiving veneration and a warm welcome from King Janak, the guest Sage Vishwamitra asked about his well-being and that of his Yajna. The polite code of conduct requires that the senior among the two (the guest and the host) should first ask about the well-being of the other person. He should show concern for the other person's health, family, prosperity, spiritual progress, and overall welfare in general. Since Vishwamitra was a great sage and in this sense senior to King Janak, he asked Janak about his well-being. He also asked Janak whether his Vedic ritual was progressing without any problem.

प्रतिगृह्य तु ताम् पूजाम् जनकस्य महात्मनः ॥ १-५०-८

पप्रच्छ कुशलम् राज्ञो यज्ञस्य च निरामयम् ।

On receiving that veneration from the great souled Janaka, Vishwamitra asked after the well-being of the king Janaka, as well about the unhindered proceedings of that Vedic-ritual. [1- 50-8b, 9a].

The etiquette required that the well-being of the main host be asked first and the well-being of other important people should be inquired about later in the order of their seniority and merit. Due to this reason, Vishwamitra asked about the well-being of Janak first and then of other important people with him.

स ताम् च अथ मुनीन् पृष्ट्वा स उपाध्याय पुरोधसः ॥ १-५०-९

यथा अर्हम् ऋषिभिः सर्वैः समागच्छत् प्रहृष्टवत् ।

Then Vishwamitra asked after the well-being of saints, mentors, clerics, as befitting to their order, and joined the company of all of the sages as a happy-souled sage. [1-50-9b, 10a]

After the brief formality of asking about the well-being of each other, the host offers the guest a seat. The height and comfort of the seat should be according to the guest's status. The host and his retinue should sit only after the guest has taken his seat. King Janak with palms joined in veneration politely requests Sage Vishwamitra to sit on a high seat. After the guest sits, the king and his retinue also take their respective seats.

अथ राजा मुनि श्रेष्ठम् कृत अंजलिः अभाषत ॥ १-५०-१०

आसने भगवान् आस्ताम् सह एभिः मुनि सतमैः ।

जनकस्य वचः श्रुत्वा निषसाद महामुनिः ॥ १-५०-११

पुरोधा ऋत्विजः चैव राजा च सह मंत्रिभिः ।

The king Janaka adjoining his palms then spoke to that eminent sage Vishvamitra, "oh, reverend sage, please be seated on this high seat, along with these eminent saints in their respective seats. On hearing the words of Janaka that great-sage Vishvamitra took his seat, and king Janaka also took a seat along with his royal priest Shatananda, and the administrators of that Vedic ritual, known as Ritviks, and along with his ministers. [1-50- 10b-12a]

The etiquette of the occasion requires that the host should express his happiness on the arrival of his guest. The communication for the purpose generally enhances the guest's face by highlighting his importance. King Janaka expresses immense happiness at the arrival of Sage Vishwamitra. He feels honoured to welcome such a great rishi.

आसनेषु यथा न्यायम् उपविष्टान् समन्ततः ॥ १-५०-१२

दृष्ट्वा स नृपतिः तत्र विश्वामित्रम् अथ अब्रवीत् ।

अद्य यज्ञ समृद्धिः मे सफला दैवतैः कृता ॥ १-५०-१३

अद्य यज्ञ फलम् प्राप्तम् भगवद् दर्शनात् मया ।

धन्यो अस्मि अनुगृहीतो अस्मि यस्य मे मुनि पुंगव ॥ १-५०-१४

यज्ञ उपसदनम् ब्रह्मन् प्राप्तो असि मुनिभिः सह ।

On beholding all of them seated all about in their respective seats as demanded by procedure king Janaka then spoke to Vishvamitra. "Today my Vedic ritual is enriched with your advent, whereby I deem that gods have fructified the ritual. Let the ritual be like that. I deem that I have obtained the fruit of the ritual just on seeing godlike you here today. "Oh, Brahman, at which Vedic-ritual hall you have arrived along with so many sages that happens to be mine, whereby, oh, eminent saint, I feel that I am honoured and humbled. [1-50-12b, 15a]

It enhances the positive face of the guest and he feels important when the host explains to him the development of affairs on his end. By doing so the guest is made an ingroup member and his guidance is sought. King Janaka explains to Sage Vishwamitra that only twelve days are left to the final ritual.

द्वादश अहम् तु ब्रह्मर्षे दीक्षाम् आहुः मनीषिणः ॥ १-५०-१५

ततो भाग अर्थिनो देवान् द्रष्टुम् अर्हसि कौशिक ।

"Oh, Brahma-sage, the scholarly Ritviks conducting my Vedic ritual are saying that only twelve more days are remaining to complete the observation of ritual pledge, and then oh,

Kaushika, it will be apt of you to see the gods who arrive at the conclusion of this Vedic-ritual expecting their due in the ritual." So said king Janaka to Vishvamitra. [1-50-15b, 16a].

After entertaining and venerating the main guest, the host should also take the introduction of those in his company. The host should be appreciative of the co-guests in doing so. Generally, the young are appreciated for their beauty and valour, and the old for their knowledge, experience, and fame. Having venerated Sage Vishwamitra properly, Janaka asks him about the two young men Rama and Lakshmana who accompany him. Janaka appreciates their youth, attitude, bravery, weapons, and beauty. In this way, he enhances their positive face and that of their Guru sage Vishwamitra. Janaka asks Sage Vishwamitra about Rama and Lakshmana thus:

इति उक्त्वा मुनि शार्दूलम् प्रहृष्ट वदनः तदा ॥ १-५०-१६

पुनः तम् परिपप्रच्छ प्रांजलिः प्रयतो नृपः ।

इमौ कुमारौ भद्रम् ते देव तुल्य पराक्रमौ ॥ १-५०-१७

गज तुल्य गती वीरौ शार्दूल वृषभ उपमौ ।

पद्म पत्र विशाल अक्षौ खड्ग तूणी धनुर् धरौ ।

अश्विनौ इव रूपेण समुपस्थित यौवनौ ॥ १-५०-१८

यदृच्छया एव गाम् प्राप्तौ देव लोकात् इव अमरौ ।

कथम् पद्भ्याम् इह प्राप्तौ किम् अर्थम् कस्य वा मुने ॥ १-५०-१९

वर आयुध धरौ वीरौ कस्य पुत्रौ महामुने ।

भूषयन्तौ इमम् देशम् चन्द्र सूर्यौ इव अंबरम् ॥ १-५०-२०

परस्परस्य सदृशौ प्रमाण इन्गित चेष्टितैः ।

काक पक्ष धरौ वीरौ श्रोतुम् इच्छामि तत्त्वतः ॥ १-५०-२१

On speaking to that tigerly sage Vishvamitra in this way, the king again asked the sage pointedly and inquisitively with adjoined palms and with a gladdened face. "These two youngsters, oh, sage, let safety betide you, striding like audacious elephants and arrogant lions, bearing a similitude to adventurous tigers and adamantine bulls, and wielding quivers, swords, and bows, are valorous with their valour matching that of Vishnu, and with their eyes broad like lotus-petals and with youthfulness in the offing they look like the exceptionally beautiful twin-gods, Ashwin-brothers, by their physique. How these two have footslogged and chanced here as though immortals have chanced on earth from the abode of gods at their pleasure? What



for they have come here, and whose scions are they? "Oh, great-saint, whose sons are these two valiant youngsters who are brandishing best weapons? They are embellishing this province as the Sun and Moon doeth the sky. Each to each they are clonal by postural-language, by facial-language and by body language. They appear valorous but boyish in their appearance, as their curls are still jet-black like crow-wings. Thus, whether they are immature by age though mature by their valour or so, I wish to listen about them in actuality. [1-50-16b- 21]

Sage Vishwamitra introduces Rama and Laxmana as the sons of King Dashrath. He described, in brief, all their acts of bravery, dedication to the guru, and youthful curiosity to see the Yajna of the Great Bow. The etiquette demands that the introduction of one's student or companion should be full of appreciation. It is good for everyone.

तस्य तत् वचनम् श्रुत्वा जनकस्य महात्मनः ।  
न्यवेदयत् अमेय आत्मा पुत्रौ दशरथस्य तौ ॥  
सिद्ध आश्रम निवासम् च राक्षसानाम् वधम् तथा ।  
तत्र आगमनम् अव्यग्रम् विशालायाः च दर्शनम् ॥ १-५०-२३  
अहल्या दर्शनम् चैव गौतमेन समागमम् ।  
महाधनुषि जिज्ञासाम् कर्तुम् आगमनम् तथा ॥ १-५०-२४  
एतत् सर्वम् महातेजा जनकाय महात्मने ।  
निवेद्य विरराम अथ विश्वामित्रो महामुनिः ॥ १-५०-२५

On hearing the words of great-souled Janaka, Vishvamitra whose anima is immense, has announced that those two as the sons of king Dasharatha. [1-50-22]. The highly resplendent great-saint Vishvamitra has informed the high souled Janaka about the coming of Rama and Lakshmana to the Hermitage of Accomplishment, their stopping over there and elimination of demons at that place, their indefatigable travel along with him, beholding City of Vishaala (1.50.23), seeing Ahalya, her reuniting with Sage Gautama, likewise their coming hitherward to gain a grasp of the great bow of Shiva (1.50.24). After informing all these incidents to Janaka as well as to Shatananda, who incidentally is the son of Ahalya, sage Vishvamitra paused. [ 25]

### Discussion

Good treatment of guests is one of the pillars of Indian culture. The other three pillars are devotional service to once's parents and self-study. In the "Shikshavalli" of Taittiriya

Upnishad, the teacher gives his last lessons to his disciples emphasizing upon following the code of traditional values of venerating mother, father, teacher and guest as God (Matri devobhava, pitri devo bhava, acharya devo bhava, atithi devo bhava). It is obligatory for every householder to welcome and treat guests in the best way possible. Veneration of the guests is like worship of God, and householders are dutybound to serve their guests. It is believed that disrespect to the guest is a sin. One who does not serve one's guest with sweet words, water, food, light and place to rest gets cursed and is not considered a good householder (Mahabharat, Shantiparva 191/12). A householder should serve his guest with the comforts of sweet conversation, food water and bed and a respectful valediction (Mahabharat, Anushashanparva 7/6). All these things highlight that guest worship has been a part of the Indian ethos since the time immemorial.

In the Ramayana era, all these values were practiced in society as evidenced by the Text of the Ramayana. Janaka, though a king himself, goes to welcome Sage Vishwamitra and his disciple and treats them with sweet words, food and water and offer them a respectful place to sit. A well-defined code of etiquette is followed by both guests and the host in their words and actions. Following the same code of etiquette, the host glorifies his old guest with praise of his knowledge, power and experience. Janaka praise the young guests Rama and Lakshmana for their youth, strength, beauty and bravery. The youngsters maintain the dignity of their elders by walking behind them, praising host's arrangements, expressing gratitude and speaking less with all politeness. The behaviour of Rama and Laxamana is exemplary in this regard.

The guest also needs to follow some rules of conduct. The guest should try to please the hosts by sweet words, by enquiring their well-being, by appreciating their efforts, and blessing them for their service. The welfare of the host is the duty of the guest during his stay. Sage Vishwamitra and his disciple follow these rules of etiquette. The appreciate Janaka's arrangements, inquire about his well-being and that of his people. The guest and the host treat one another with pleasing words and behaviour.

### **Conclusion**

When the above analysis is seen from the historical perspective, it can be argued that India had very rich and elaborate cultural practices during the Ramayana era. In society existed quite institutionalized elaborate practices and protocols of etiquette and politeness, which were observed during the welcome of the guests by the hosts. There were also equally important rules of etiquette for the guests to observe on such occasions. Most of these old practices in

social behaviour still exist in Indian society. Indian cultural ethos believes in the principle of “Atithi devo bhava” and “Acharya devo bhava” meaning “the guest is venerable like a god” and “our teacher is venerable like a god”. Politeness is considered the best jewel that adorns one’s personality. The fiftieth chapter in the Balkanda of Valmiki’s Ramayana comprises good instances of prevailing social etiquette and politeness practices in contemporary society.

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