

Shedding the Mortal Coil: Unusual Death of the Embodied Divinities in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata

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Abstract: *Intriguing means of death are employed by the poets of the two mytho-epics, mainly the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, for the avatars such as Sita (avatar of Lakshmi) along with the three brothers of Rama, who were part-incarnations of Vishnu, mainly Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna in the Ramayana. These great personalities were said to be born to change the destiny of the earth and restore faith and dharma. Despite being central characters of these epics, the death of all these avatars is not natural or accidental. Their role in the narrative is brought to an end in an unusual manner, resulting from a curse or self-inflicted harm/death/ accident or departure. All the avatars are described as returning to their original heavenly abodes using varied and peculiar methods of death. The poets Valmiki and Vyasa of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, respectively, also used certain curses, boons or vows to create the narratives of these deaths. The paper analyses the discourse surrounding the impact of the mortal ending of embodied immortal beings in the mytho-epic narrative.*

Keywords: Unnatural Death, Avatar, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Mortality

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Introduction

Avatar is a concept of embodiment of a god in a mortal body on earth. A god descends on the earth in a human or an animal form with a divine purpose and leads to restoring *dharma* on the earth, chastises the earth, imparts wisdom for the upcoming times and returns to his heavenly abode after accomplishing the given purpose. The incarnation of a god in a humanly or in the form of an animal as per the requirement of the descent is known as *avatar*. According to Roy, “Avatāra, literally, means descent and, by connotation, implies descent of the Godhead into perceptible form in the human world” (2). The doctrine of *avatar* is an essential concept wherein the god descends on earth as a protector of the morally upright beings from all the evil and malicious forces defiling the earth and as a preceptor who directs all the beings on the path of *dharma*. *Avatars* take birth on the earth like mortal beings with an intent as per the divine plan which they execute throughout their period on the earth to fulfil their objective, mainly to prevent humanity from further degradation, and act as a saviour for the virtuous soul. The *avatar* of Vishnu is a recurring divine form in the Hindu scriptures such as Ramayana and the Mahabharata in which one of the Gods from the trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) mainly Vishnu had embodied as a mortal being in order to re-establish the balance in the world. *Avatars* of Vishnu have been a popular figure in the sacred texts mostly known for his *Dashavatar*, which means the ten *avatars* or incarnations of Vishnu. “Dashavtar are the ten primary incarnations of Vishnu. Out of the ten Rama and Krishna avatars are most important” (Zimmer 124). Whenever humanity faces any crisis, Vishnu descends on the earth to re-establish ethics and humanity. Simultaneously, the *avatar* also prepares society for the next yuga, which will present more challenges. As per a quote from Bhagavat Gita, Roy states the basic purposes of *avatars*,

Firstly, the God descends into the world to protect the righteous. Secondly, He comes down to destroy the wicked. Thirdly, He appears to establish *dharma*, by which righteousness and ethical orders are obviously meant. (4)

The ten *avatars* of Vishnu include Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki. All these *avatars* of Vishnu came down on earth in different *yuga* to perform different duties, but the ultimate purpose was to fight evil and establish *dharma*. Out of the ten incarnations, Vishnu took forms of human beings, animals, as well as, a hybrid of human and animal Narsimha which was half human and half lion. The inclusivity of animals, fishes and other beings was a part of forming an *avatar* as per the needs of the task.

The *avatars* came down on earth through astonishing means of *yagna*, boons or natural birth in extraordinary situations such as Rama and his brothers (part incarnation of Vishnu) and Krishna respectively, but this study sets out to explore the death of all these *avatars*, which is equally strange and unexpected. Death is a means for these mortal beings i.e., *avatars* to return to their original form and home, which is heaven after finishing their tasks for the betterment of the world. Death is an inevitable reality which cannot be avoided after taking birth in the humanly world. The natural order or law of nature also known as ‘*rta*’ cannot be broken

or even be disturbed by the divinities. It is closely associated with the doctrine of *dharma*. The *avatars* suffer the harsh reality of death in a welcoming manner, considering it to be the ultimate truth.

Hindus have specific beliefs in common that influence their attitudes to death. These beliefs relate not to the end-of- life period, but to transition to another life, whether by reincarnation, life in heaven with God, or absorption into Brahman (the ultimate reality). (Firth 682)

Although these deaths are not natural for many *avatars*, in the following study we will mainly focus on the unusual deaths of Rama and Krishna. Death according to the Hindu belief is predetermined for every individual. Death does not kill the soul, but it kills the physical body. The soul is immortal and the journey of the soul is from one form of life to another. “Reincarnation is the phenomenon through which the immortal soul is continuously born and reborn in any of the life forms until it attains moksha or truth.” (Vijayakumar 23). A soul undergoes multiple births from an insect to a human form depending upon one’s *karma* i.e., actions. The *karma* of one’s previous life determines one’s state in the next life depending upon whether one will be re-born or attain *moksha* i.e., salvation. Similar is the concept of death for the divinities when they descend as humans on earth. As long as they are in heaven as gods the *rita* doesn’t pertain to them, but when a part of their divine soul embodies into a mortal being they are bound by the cosmic laws. Their soul incarnates into a mortal body and after performing actions the soul is destined to leave the body and since these are divine souls, they return to heaven instead of being reborn.

Death of these *avatars*, mainly Rama and Krishna, are predestined as part of the divine plan. Exceptional methods are used in the two narratives for the return of Vishnu *avatars* i.e., Rama and Krishna to *Vaikuntha* which is the heavenly abode of Vishnu.

Discussion and Analysis

Lord Ram was born to King Dasharath who had observed sincere and fierce austerities to be divinely blessed with children. Rama and his three half-brothers, Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrughna were born as result of a ‘*putrakameshtiyagna*’ performed by sage Rishyashringa for the welfare of Dasharatha and the entire mankind. The *yagna* was followed by a horse being sacrificed and grand donations being given to the priests in order to fulfil Dasharatha’s desire to beget a son. Pleased by the devotion, determination and the success of the oblations and sacrifice, Brahma granted the wish of Dasharatha and gave him a boon of progeny. Soon Dasharatha had four sons who were the *avatars* of Vishnu and his part incarnations. As Kim states, “Vishnu divided himself into four parts and was incarnated in the four sons of Dasaratha: Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana, and Satrugna.”(104). Rama and his brothers were born with the objective of liberating the earth from the *rakshasa* named Ravana. The birth of the protagonists in mytho-epics as an *avatar* has always been portrayed in a mystical manner wherein they are not born as usual human beings are. In order to make their entry grand on the earth they exercise methods of boons, mystic prophecy, which marks the superiority of the *avatars* and

distinguishes them from the other general human characters. Rama and his brothers were born with grandeur because of the divine plan intended by all the divinities,

O Vishnu! For the sake of the welfare of the worlds, we wish to invoke you. The lord King Dasharatha is the king of Ayodhya. He knows about dharma and is talked about. His energy is like that of a maharshi. His three wives are virtuous, prosperous and famous. O Vishnu! Divide yourself into four parts and become their sons. You will be born as men. The gods find him to be invincible. He is like a growing thorn that the worlds face. Defeat Ravana in a battle (Debroy 38).

So Vishnu descended on the earth in the human form for the sake of the betterment of the world to vanquish Ravana who looked down upon humans and considered them to be inferior in contrast to his own valour and mystical powers. Thus, Vishnu had to assume a human form in order to counter Ravana as no god was capable of killing him.

Rama's birth is a renowned storyline, but his manner of death is rarely known to people. Rama and his part incarnations did not die a glorious death like a *kshatriya* in a warfare or die due to poor health or disease. Rama's death was a self-inflicted death i.e., *samadhi*. After having lived his allotted time on the earth Rama decided to end his term on the earth and return to *Vaikuntha*. Rama performed a '*jalsamadhi*' which according to western understanding is suicide by drowning in water, but as per the Indian philosophy, *jalsamadhi* is a conscious practice followed by divine souls; wherein their soul can leave the mortal body, voluntarily. Rama opted for *jalsamadhi* in which he decided to leave his human body in the water and return to heaven. Wilkins states,

After this Rāma grows tired of life, and Time comes to inform him that his work is done. Hearing this, the good king goes to the banks of the sacred stream, and forsaking his body ascends to his home in heaven. (81).

As discussed above, death is based upon the *karmic* cycle of a living being on earth. Depending upon the actions one has performed in the past life and present life one's death and after life is decided. However, the death of the *avatars* was predestined, considering their descent on the earth was for a given purpose. As soon as the purpose was met the divinity had to shed the mortal coil by dying because even the *avatars* could not go beyond *rta* i.e., law of the universe.

The interesting thing to note here is the means of death employed for Rama which was simple- death in complete silence. In Ramayana, Valmiki has given a very plain ending to the character of Rama who has been portrayed from beginning in a legendary style. Throughout the narrative, Rama in particular has lived a life full of adventure, unforeseen events such as exile and battle. He fought many rigorous battles and killed numerous demons and demonesses. Rama lived a life of glory and resplendence even though he was made to suffer all the worldly problems of separation, agony, enmity and ultimately: Death.

The death of Rama in Valmiki Ramayana implies the pre-information of Rama's death along with his part incarnations. Once *kala* or destiny in the form an ascetic came to the palace of Rama. He was none other

than a messenger of Brahma who had been sent with a message for Rama from heaven. “The illustrious grandfather, the lord and master of all the worlds, has said that it is time for you to protect your own world” (Debroy 483). Brahma wanted Rama or Vishnu to return to *Vaikuntha* now that he had achieved his goal. The messenger repeats Brahma’s words,

O supreme in the universe! Terrified and desiring Ravana’s death, they came to you and you made up your mind to become human. You have resided here for eleven thousand years. Now destiny requires you to return to your own ancient city. It is only because of your mental powers that you became the son of a human and have spent a full lifespan. O best among excellent men! It is time for you to return to our presence. (Debroy 483)

In this manner, Rama’s death was predetermined by the deities and Rama being an *avatar* had the supremacy to choose the method of leaving the mortal coil. When Rama was asked to return to the presence of all the divinities after having ruled on earth for eleven thousand years, he opted for an unusual death which was quite unlikely for a *kshatriya* and an individual of such grandeur. Destiny asked God to come to heaven and die on earth. The death of Rama is described by Debroy:

On foot, Rama approached the waters of the Sarayu. From the sky, the grandfather spoke these words. ‘O Vishnu! O fortunate one! O Raghava! Come. It is good fortune that I have met you. Enter with your brothers and with the gods, in your own bodies. In his own body and with his younger brothers, he entered his Vaishnava energy. When the god assumed his form of Vishnu, the gods, the Sadhyas and the large number of Maruts, with Indra and Agni at the forefront, worshipped him (491).

After entering the waters of the Sarayu River, Rama and his brothers left their bodies and transformed into Vishnu. Rama had left behind his mortal human form and regained his real form of Vishnu as soon as he entered heaven.

Krishna was the eighth *avatar* of Vishnu and he descended on earth in an uncommon way; his birth and his intentions were prophesised a long time ago. Vishnu reincarnated in the form of Krishna. Krishna was born to Devaki and Vasudeva in a prison, but through mystical manners Vasudeva exchanged Krishna with the daughter of Yashoda and Nanda. So, Krishna’s biological parents were different from his foster parents. Krishna’s maternal uncle Kamsa, was an oppressor and a cruel, tyrant king. In order to kill him and other evil forces on earth, Vishnu reincarnated as Krishna. Krishna killed the demons like Putana, Bakasura, Shakatasura etc. As an incarnation of Vishnu, Krishna possessed immense strength and valour. Although he carried himself as an ordinary young and charming boy, his characteristic features as an *avatar* of Vishnu were evident to all occasionally. “An Avatār is generally seen to be a great scholar of religious literature or holy scriptures and a virtuoso or a creative artist” (Roy 70).

Krishna was also one of the central and the most diplomatic characters in Mahabharata. In Mahabharata he taught the doctrines of life and maxims of *dharma*. As an *avatar*, he again established the triumph of righteousness over evil, likewise killing of all the demons and the enemies proved the superiority

of *dharma* over *adharma*. Krishna prepared the world for the upcoming yuga which was Kaliyuga which would be more corrupt and unethical. The character of Krishna was revered and held high in the narrative as Vishnu himself was manifested in Krishna. According to Wilkins in his book of Hindu mythology, Goldstücker has commented on the Krishna *avatar* and said,

this is the most interesting incarnation of Vishnu, both on account of the opportunity which it affords to trace in Hindu antiquity the gradual transformation of mortal heroes into representatives of a god; and on account of the numerous legends connected with it, as well as the influence which it exercised on the Vaishnava cult. (81)

Krishna's character role was brought to an end in the narrative in an exceptional manner. Unlike the kind of appealing impression that was created around Krishna's character in BhagavatPurana and Mahabharata, his death was non-heroic and ordinary. Krishna's death was a consequence of a curse which resulted in his dull and stark death. After the ruthless battle of Mahabharata, Dhritarashtra and Gandhari were mourning over the death of their hundred sons. They were desolate and dejected, mad with grief. Krishna, although was an ally of the Pandavas, after the end of the battle came to console the parents of Kauravas mainly Gandhari. But in accordance with one's destiny, Krishna was doomed with a curse pronounced by Gandhari. Gandhari was furious at Krishna for not preventing the battle between Pandavas and Kauravas instead being biased towards his cousins-Pandavas. Gandhari held Krishna responsible for the ruin of the Kuru dynasty. Gandhari's curse was,

You have ruined the Kurus, Krishna. I, Gandhari, curse you that thirty-six years from today your clan will also perish. The Yadavas will fight among themselves and kill one another, every man of you. And your women will weep then, even as we do today! As for you, you will wander the earth, friendless and alone and you will die a common death, without glory. I curse you, Krishna, I curse you for the deaths of my sons!" (Menon 564)

Gandhari's curse pre-informed Krishna as well as the reader about the kind of death Krishna would encounter further in the narrative. The curse clearly stated the dull and common death of Krishna. As the *avatar's* time on earth was coming close to an end, the medium of curse was used to end his stay on earth and return to his original abode in *Vaikuntha*. Gandhari pronounced the curse of death and destruction not only for Krishna, but for the entire Yadava clan in order to make Krishna suffer without a kin just like Gandhari did. She extended her curse up to the annihilation of Krishna's clan. However, Krishna was not stunned or agitated at the prospect of receiving such a brutal curse for no mistake of his own. Krishna happily received the curse considering it to be the ploy of fate and as a blessing from a mother. Krishna's standpoint towards the curse suggests the pre-determination of death and hints of desire to return to heaven. Parallel to the pre-information of death received by Rama, Krishna was also informed about his end of stay on earth in a mortal body. Wilkins asserts, "A messenger from the gods now visited Krishna, telling him that, as his work was done, he should ascend to his home. This he was quite willing to do" (87).

Subsequently, the curse took effect and after thirty-six years the entire Yadava clan finished themselves in fit of rage in intoxication. Whereas, Krishna was killed by a hunter named Jara with a sharp arrow in the jungle. Krishna was roaming alone in the jungle and the hunter shot an arrow at Krishna mistaking him to be a deer. Menon writes,

The old hunter thinks he is seeing a red hind and he stalks the crimsoned feet. When he is within range, he raises his rough bow and taking careful aim, looses his fateful arrow. The arrowhead made from the sliver of the accursed club flares into the sole of the Dark One's foot, piercing the base of the thumb toe. Krishna roars in shock, as fate's shaft plunges agony through him. Jara comes running to hear that cry. Gasping to see Krishna, four-armed, knowing him at once from rumor, the hunter falls on his face before the dying Avatara. (654)

Gandhari's curse took effect and Krishna died a non-heroic death without any glory like a common man. He was all alone and died a trivial and dull death at the hands of a hunter who was an extremely subordinate being than Krishna in power, status, wisdom and divinity. This was pre-arranged to call back the *avatar* to heaven, so that Vishnu can resume his duties after he had accomplished his aims on earth and leave his mortal body,

Krishna places his hand on the wild man's head and tells him, "It is only as I willed it and, my friend, you have set me free. Greeting them, he ascends beyond, as Vishnu Narayana, into his own, most exalted realm." (Menon 654)

Krishna regained his original form after experiencing an ordinary death as planned by destiny. Krishna's death also marks the end of the *Dwaparyuga* and the beginning of the *yuga* of darkness and evil which is *Kaliyuga*.

All *avatars*' proximate goal was to kill all the demons and demonesses and liberate the people from the tyranny of the corrupt, whereas their ultimate goal was to establish dharma and restore the cosmic balance which certain evil forces had distorted. As Pattanaik describes,

The descents of Vishnu from Vaikuntha to earth are his avatars or incarnations. The form in each descent is different because the demands of the world each time are different. The different avatars thus reinforce the idea that rules and regulations that maintain order are not static by nature. (119)

Both the divinities descended on earth in an extra-ordinary manner because of a boon or a prophecy and left their mortal bodies in an un-heroic manner as opposed to their nature and grandeur in the narrative. This is in contrast to the lifestyle and accomplishments of the two characters which have been depicted in the plot. One reason for such an unusual death could be the ultimate supremacy of all the characters. Rama and Krishna were no ordinary characters but *avatars* as discussed above. They possessed the magnificence of the entire universe and were prodigies in their respective narratives. To conclude the two texts mainly Ramayana and Mahabharata, ending the role of the protagonists was important. Rama and Krishna in the two mytho-epics have been depicted with such eminence that they could neither be victims of any disease nor become a target

of an enemy's arrow. Dying, even though is inevitable as per *rta*, but the poets have chosen varied methods to execute the death of the hero in a contrasting way. Other than they themselves, no one could even harm the two *avatars* of Vishnu. It was only after the divine plan was achieved that the *avatars* decided to return, they themselves prepared to leave the earth and their mortal coil. Methods of *samadhi* and curse were used to execute the conclusion of the protagonist which would although be unusual for their eminence, but still suits the purpose of *avatars*.

Rama and Krishna accepted their fate and or one can say they were bound by their *karmic* cycle and acknowledged the same. Because they were *avatars*, they attained *moksha* i.e., salvation after their death. But the cycle of re-incarnation continues for the *avatars* as well. The *Dashavatar* of Vishnu re-emerges at the time of crisis on earth and this upholds the maxim of rebirth and reincarnation on earth. Moreover, death signifies a new beginning for the *avatars*. "Everything in the Hindu world is reborn. Men die and are reborn. Societies die and are reborn. The cosmos dies and is reborn. Everything goes and comes back" (Pattanaik 140).

Other *avatars* such as Sita, "Rama Chandra lived with his wife Sita (frequently regarded as an incarnation of Lakshmi)" (Carus 470), Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna are also revered as the *avatars* and a part of Vishnu's incarnation. They led a life similar to that of the protagonists following *dharma*. Even these characters succumbed to unusual death and disappeared from the narratives in an unexpected manner. So, there is a constant pattern of unusual deaths of the *avatars* emerging in the narrative suggesting a deeper meaning associated with such methods of ascending to heaven. The characters have aided the journey of the hero and assisted in accomplishing the divine plan. Sita as an *avatar* of Lakshmi though faced great trials throughout her life, contradictory to her nature of resilience and faith, she decides to give up her life by descending into the earth after getting aggravated from confirming her chastity multiple times. She prayed for her mother earth to split open and engulf her in order to prove her chastity.

She joined her hands in salutation and said, 'If I have not thought of anyone other than Raghava in my mind, then let the goddess earth open up a chasm for me. When Vaidehi took this pledge, something extraordinary occurred. A divine and excellent throne arose from the middle of the earth. Infinitely valiant serpents held it up on their hoods. It was divine, with a celestial form, and was ornamented with every kind of jewel. The goddess earth was seated on it and engulfed Maithilee in her arms. Welcoming and honouring her, she made her sit on that throne. Seated on that throne, without any kind of obstruction, Sita started to enter the earth and a downpour of flowers showered down from the sky. (Debroy 476)

Thus, even Sita met a tragic end wherein she was made to surrender in front of fate and die an unusual death similar to that of the other *avatars*. It is believed that Vishnu before leaving the earth and his mortal body behind sent back all his companions to heaven prior to his own departure. The death of Lakshmana was a result of a punishment which can be categorised as *jalsamadhior iccha- mrtyu* similar to that of Rama. Firth classifies different types of death as good and bad according to the Hindu belief, such as, "A good death should be prepared for throughout life, and entered into consciously and willingly (*iccha-mrtyu*)" (683). Once Lakshmana was asked to guard the gates of Rama's royal chamber when Rama was privately conversing with

a messenger sent by Prajapati i.e., Brahma. The messenger informed Rama, “This can only be uttered between the two of us. Anyone who witnesses these words has to be killed” (Debroy 482). Rama had sternly instructed Lakshmana not to let anyone enter his chamber or disturb them. It would result in the death of the person who overheard their private conversation. Rishi Durvasa arrived at the same moment and desired to meet Rama, Lakshmana struggled to hold back Durvasa from entering the chamber, but the rishi was furious and presented Lakshmana with two options of either informing Rama about his arrival or be responsible for the curse which he would confer upon the entire kingdom. Lakshmana entered the chamber and sacrificed his own life for the welfare of the kingdom and its people. Now Lakshmana had to endure the punishment of death and Rama had to fulfil his pledge. Thus, Lakshmana entered the Sarayu river and returned to the original abode i.e., heaven. He ended his life by inflicting self-harm upon himself and committing suicide by entering initially Rama’s chamber and thereafter the river. Debroy depicts the scene as,

He went to the Sarayu, joined his hands in salutation and touched the water. He controlled all the flows in his body and did not release his breaths. When he stopped breathing, Shakra, large numbers of apsaras, the gods and large numbers of rishis showered down flowers. Unseen by all men, Shakra seized the immensely strong Lakshmana and made him enter heaven in his physical body. The supreme among the gods were delighted that Vishnu’s fourth part had arrived. Happy and full of joy, with the rishis, they worshipped him. (486)

Lakshmana is represented as a part of Vishnu’s incarnation which was welcomed by the divinities in heaven. As per Lutgendorf, “Lakshman is considered by many Vaishnavas to be an incarnation of Vishnu’s cosmic serpent, Sheshnag” (228). Lakshmana became immortal and entered heaven where he was worshipped because he was an *avatar*. Similarly, the other parts of Vishnu mainly Bharata and Shatrughna also left their mortal body to ascend to heaven along with Rama. As Bharata and Shatrughna were also parts of Vishnu’s incarnation, Rama ensured their return to *Vaikuntha*. Bharata and Shatrughna entered the Sarayu river along with Rama and left their mortal coils to enter heaven with Rama. The two brothers could not bear another separation from their revered brother Rama and so they yet again followed his footsteps and conducted a *jalsamadhi*. “Leaving Ayodhya empty, Bharata intended to follow Raghava. He reported all this to the great-souled Shatrughna. O king! Know that I have made up my mind about following you” (Debroy 488).

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to determine the reason and purpose of the unusual death of the embodied divinities. Their death or in a more literal sense their leaving of the mortal world i.e., the earth has been quite peculiar. In comparison to the depiction of their life in the two narratives they have been subjected to death in an extraordinary manner which has stirred a discussion. This study has identified how all the *avatars* are introduced in the narrative in a grand and mystical manner. Through the medium of boons from deities or mystical prophecy the protagonists of the two narratives mainly Rama and Krishna ascended on earth. They led a life full of adventure, glory, abundance and magnificence but their death was dull. The departure of the

avatars was pre-destined and pre-informed to them, after completing their divine tasks the *avatars* regained their immortal form and started dwelling in their real abode until for the next yuga and *avatar*. For the reason that the *avatars* are superior to all the other beings and possessed immense strength, ending their part in the narrative by killing or dying of old age or disease would have defiled their divinity and their persona of heroic figure. So, an alternate method of ending their role in the narrative was used to maintain the mystical element of their personality. Death due to a curse and as a result of being hunted down by a *nishada* or *jalsamadhi* wherein the hero and his parts intentionally leave the human world to go back to their divine world are medium used for concluding these characters' role. Not only the heroes, but characters such as Sita, Lakshmana and others were also subjected to similar unusual deaths as they were also *avatars*.

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