

## [A Storyteller Who Moves Us](#)

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Youth

### A Storyteller Who Moves Us

Young and old alike flock to hear Morari Bapu's magical preaching of Ramayana

By Punit Patel

I entered the cincinnati gardens arena in ohio on July 5, 2008, with great anticipation. This would be my first opportunity to attend a Ram katha presented by Morari Bapu, one of its great exponents.

Judging from previous kathas, I expected to be almost the only youth (I'm 23) among hundreds of middle-aged adults and their aged parents. Conventional wisdom in our community is that Hindu youth raised in America are just not interested in religion and are not about to sit for three hours a day for nine days, no matter how talented the kathakar might be. This belief conveniently focuses on our supposed disinterest in religion rather than on the monotonous manner in which Hindu tradition has been presented to us. I was fully prepared to encounter adults who would first praise me for attending, then tell me that more youth should have come, and finally launch into a speech on what is wrong with my generation, blaming the mass media, language barriers and American culture--but not themselves--for our perceived failings.

Entering the sports arena booked for the event, I removed my shoes and found a central seat, perfectly situated to see Bapu. Most seats were indeed filled with people of my parents' and grandparents' generation. However, a young girl in her mid-twenties sat near me--unwillingly dragged to the event, I assumed, by her parents. But as she began flipping through the pages of her personal copy of the Ramayana, I had to conclude she was there of her own volition. Suddenly a large group of youth arrived, nattily dressed in Indian clothes, their japa malas wrapped in shawls embroidered with the name "Ram" and their Ramayana copies clasped like treasures. They took up several rows in front, sitting cross-legged on the floor. It

was a space they had reserved, my new neighbor explained, by showing up several hours early. Now, this was exciting!

Ram katha, a series of discourses interspersed with music, is a popular religious event in North India. The kathakar, or storyteller, is an expert in the Ramayana, a central Hindu scripture which details the life of Lord Rama. Each katha deals with a single theme from the voluminous work. I had attended many others, but never one conducted by Morari Bapu. Typically, a katha is a nine-day event held during the evening. Bapu, however, conducted this one in the daytime--9:30 am to 1:00 pm--for the express purpose, he told us frankly, of making people devote the whole nine days to the katha and not just show up for an evening program after work or school.

Seated in front of an enormous portrait of a golden meditating Hanuman, Bapu softly said, "The topic of this katha will be Manas Mithilesh, the mind of King Mithilesh." The hundreds of youth responded with a roar of excitement and applause. Bapu outlined his theme: "Mithilesh, or King Janaka (Sita's father), is a great and powerful yogi, a spiritual adept, concealed in the form of a worldly bhogi, one who enjoys the world. There are seven key dimensions to his yoga: karma (action); gyan (knowledge); prem (love); dharma (duty); raj (royalness); brahma (creation); and viraha (longing)." Bapu explained how in performing his duties, King Janaka maintained self-control and decency and achieved a perfect balance between devotion and dispassion.

Bapu spoke mainly in Hindi, tossing in a bit of Gujarati for cultural context or humor and quoting Western philosophers in English. Occasionally he led the audience in singing bhajanas, folk songs, stanzas of Ramcharitramanasa or popular religious Bollywood songs. He preferred to call the katha "our discussion" rather than "my preaching," and took written questions from the audience each day to answer at the beginning of the next session. Everyone sat quietly as he told us, "I am not here to change any one of you. Rather, I am here to learn to embrace you all. My job is not to moralize to others but to maintain my own morality." He is himself constantly in the process of self-discovery, and presents Hinduism with the full freedom of his own interpretation. He invited each and every listener to do the same, encouraging the youth to take ownership of being a Hindu.

I was fascinated by Bapu's portrayal of Hinduism as a rich and universal religion--"as vast as the sky, as deep as the ocean and as high as the Himalayas." I

became convinced that I could be a part of something grand and larger than life. Bapu praises Hindu culture with pride and loyalty, while managing to encompass both Hindus and non-Hindus of all backgrounds and nationalities within the audience. Jigar Patel, a senior in college who has been listening to Bapu's katha for years, said, "Bapu is progressive by nature and forward thinking. That is why he encourages us to exercise our freedom to question beliefs and rituals so we come to better understand them." Bapu encouraged the youth to think about what was being said and, if we agreed with it, then and only then, should we accept it. However, if we decided to embrace the view, there should be no delay in incorporating it into our daily life. He advised us, "Keep the windows of your mind open. Wherever good comes from, let it in."

I had never before heard a katha like this, so vibrant and uplifting. I felt proud to be a Hindu. It seemed to me as though the Ramayana was fresh off the press. For example, Bapu presented a novel question, "Why is Ram so often portrayed with the bow and arrow and Hanuman with a mace?" Bapu said that our Hindu Gods are more than warriors. He pointed to the picture behind him of Hanuman in meditation. "The need of the hour," Bapu said, "is to put down our weapons of external warfare and begin an internal battle against our own vices."

There is a common belief that heaven is promised to those who hear the stories of the Gods at katha. But Bapu said right off, "I am making no promises of anyone reaching heaven after the ninth day of this katha. If you have come with such intentions, then get on a flight back home!" Instead, Bapu said that the best outcome from listening to katha is to maintain a peaceful atmosphere, whether at home, work or school.

Bapu explained, "The main ingredient in a gathering of the spiritually minded should be love. We also include poetry, songs, Sanskrit mantras and folk songs. Singing together helps us focus on God in the form of love, purity, duty and the ultimate truth." I enjoyed listening to the old Bollywood tunes, traditional Gujarati music, Hindi ghazals and the Sanskrit shlokas of Shankaracharya.

I asked Sita Sharan, an avid listener of Bapu's katha for years and someone who has studied the Ramayana since 1970, why she was there. She confided, "Bapu instills a longing, a renewed yearning, for us to do a better job at being ourselves." In calling us to tabulate our lives and assess where we are spiritually and how far we need to go, Bapu urges us, the younger generation, to act with conscience and

to put into practice the values we have learned. When dealing with conflict in our lives, for example, he said that though it is good to turn to God for forgiveness, we must first go to those whom we have wronged and humbly ask for their forgiveness.

With jokes and subtle humor, Bapu engaged each listener, from the oldest to the youngest. He taught how to deal with the sorrow and difficulties of life with firm resolve. He pointed out that everyone near Ram was defeated at least once in the story, regardless of how close they were to him. For example, in battle, Lakshman lost to Indrajit, Ravana's son, and Hanuman lost to Kumbhkarana, Ravana's brother. Bapu said to the youth, "For life to be complete, losing is important. Though winning is a blessing, losing is an invitation from God to remember Him."

I realized that despite what I had heard from past kathakaars and adults, I had never experienced actual improvement in the quality of my life by simply listening to katha or doing rituals. But at that moment, as Bapu offered his perspective on winning and losing, I recognized our Hindu dharma is meant to strengthen us in the face of difficulty so we may act with wisdom and manage our emotions through the waves of sorrow and happiness. I had finally understood the words of my guru Sri Sathya Sai Baba, when he said, "Happiness is an interval between sorrows, and sorrow is an interval between happiness." To think that even those who were so close to Ram had faced defeat in their lives, who are we to complain?

I am forever grateful to Bapu for introducing me to Hinduism, a large part of my own identity that otherwise would have been lost. Observing the other youth present, I saw their motivation to preserve Hindu culture by their religious activities. Bapu rejuvenated our religious beliefs.

Throughout the nine-day katha, I had asked myself, "What unique influence has drawn so many young people to devote nine days to attending long religious discourses?" My question was answered on the last day. Listening to Morari Bapu's closing message, my eyes welled with tears. I looked around and saw hundreds of youth, a generation of us, tears streaming from our eyes, enraptured by his inspired and loving words. The answer to my question was this charismatic man of sixty-two years, wearing a white lungi, banyan and black shawl, my precious Bapu.