

Jwala Rambarran: Paanch Kahani – five Ramayana stories of central banking

Opening remarks by Mr Jwala Rambarran, Governor of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago, at the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Divali Celebration Programme, Port-of-Spain, 5 October 2014.

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Sita Ram, good evening and a warm welcome to each and every one of you who graciously accepted our invitation to attend Central Bank's 2014 Divali celebrations. Let me also say Sita Ram and a good evening to those of you watching our Divali show on CNMG.

This is the third year Central Bank has opened its Divali celebrations to the public in this remarkable manner...and this year's public response was the best ever. We had close to one thousand requests for tickets to attend this evening's Divali program.

We are indeed overwhelmed and touched so many of you from all over Trinidad and Tobago expressed such eager interest in our show. It is truly Central Bank's honour to give this valuable gift of art and culture to our country during the festive Divali season.

I can't think of many other institutions that have the privilege of sharing this type of experience with the public. I sincerely thank everyone in Central Bank who worked towards making this evening possible, especially staff from the Strategic Communications Department.

I say thank you because the Bank has certainly come a long way in celebrating Divali. Many years ago when I was here as a young economist, I remember our humble Divali celebrations, some of which were held outside the Bank's Plaza entrance during the lunchtime hour.

In 2012, when Central Bank started these more engaging Divali celebrations we began with a very simple theme. We started with the story of Lakshmi who, in our open minded and culturally all-embracing country, is easily associated with Divali, as she is the Goddess of Light and Prosperity. Last year, we turned to the Ramayana, which has been a source of courage, strength and inspiration for the Hindu community here in Trinidad and Tobago for almost 170 years.

The Ramayana relates the story of Ram who was the eldest and favorite son of Dashrath, the king of Ayodhya. Dashrath reluctantly agrees to exile Ram to the forest for fourteen years with his beloved wife Sita and his devoted younger brother Lakshman.

The Ramayana tells the tale of how Ram, with the help of Hanuman, his loyal, humble but powerful emissary, defeated the evil king Ravan of Lanka and rescued his wife Sita who had been abducted by Ravan. Upon Ram's return from exile, the people of Ayodhya celebrated by lighting rows of deyas to welcome him back. This is perhaps the most common story of the origin of Divali.

Last year, instead of going with the obvious, we chose the character Hanuman for our Divali program. In selecting Hanuman, we realized there were themes and lessons in the Ramayana that were very applicable to the Central Bank.

We highlighted how like Hanuman, Central Bank is a faithful servant to the people of our country. We highlighted how we diligently ensure their financial protection, no matter the size and ferocity of the Ravans (demons) we take on.

This year, we decided to continue with our exploration of the Ramayana because it is my one intention that anyone attending our cultural programs should walk away with a greater appreciation and new found respect for whatever artform we are showcasing.

So tonight when you leave here, no matter where you come from, I hope you are inspired not to see the Ramayana as a deeply religious, complex Hindu holy book, but a story poetically written that has at its heart the universal triumph of good over evil.

Tonight's performance is entitled ***Paanch Kahani***. It is Hindi for five stories. We selected five stories from the Ramayana because Central Bank is celebrating its 50th anniversary this December, and each story represents a decade in the Bank's life.

The five stories to be performed by Nrityanjali Theatre are not the obvious Diwali stories with which many of us are familiar, but they are stories from the Ramayana with powerful messages for central banking.

The first story is about a lesser celebrated character in the Ramayana, but incidentally the entire reason the epic Ramayana was written. The first story is about Shравan Kumar. His life was one of devotion to his parents and this is what led to his death and triggered the chain of events that is the Ramayana. The second story is about King Dashrath whose karma and that of Shравan Kumar were inextricably linked. The third and fourth stories are about Ram's brothers, Bharat and Lakshman. The final story is about Ram's twin sons, Luv and Kush.

Shравan Kumar's story is applicable to Central Bank's own story, as you will soon see. In the Ramayana, the story goes that as a young prince, Dashrath during a hunt, mistaking the sound of a pot being immersed in water for the sound of a deer quenching its thirst, accidentally shot dead a young man called Shравan Kumar. Shравan Kumar was fetching water for his old, blind parents. When they found out about the terrible death of their son, Shравan Kumar's grief-stricken parents cursed Dashrath that just as they are dying due to separation from their beloved son, so too would Dashrath suffer and die due to loss of his son. This is the reason behind the exile of Ram to the forest.

Shравan Kumar epitomizes the dutiful son. His service to his parents cost him his life, but that was his fate, and his karma. Shравan Kumar's tragic death triggered the entire events of the Ramayana.

Over the past fifty years, Central Bank has been at the centre of three financial crises that were tragic and disruptive to our people's lives...from failure of several finance houses and trust companies in the mid-1980s to the collapse of the Hindu Credit Union in 2008 and to the CLICO meltdown in early 2009. This is our karma.

Just like good eventually came out of Shравan Kumar's death, so too we have been jolted into action to ensure good comes out from each financial crisis and to try and prevent similar tragedies from being repeated.

Just like Shравan Kumar is the dutiful son, Central Bank is the dutiful, national institution. Before 2008, the typical person with a savings account, a mortgage, or an insurance policy never quite cared about who was keeping an eye on the persons and institutions managing their money. Now Central Bank is more scrutinized than the financial players themselves. Like Shравan Kumar, we are honoured to accept the burden of our obligations, as we strive to protect our financial system beyond the next fifty years.

Our second story is about King Dashrath.

Dashrath who accidentally kills Shравan Kumar eventually becomes king. He had granted one of his three wives, Kaikeyi, two boons when she saved him during a battle. The day before Dashrath was to crown Rama as king, Kaikeyi demands that Dashrath grant her the two boons. Her first demand is to send Rama into exile in the forest for fourteen years. The second is to crown her son, Bharat, king in Ram's place. Bound by his rigid devotion to his word, a heartbroken Dashrath reluctantly orders Rama into exile.

After Rama's departure to the forest, Dashrath lies on his bed and suddenly remembers the curse of Shравan Kumar's parents. The curse has taken effect. Dashrath's karma has taken effect. Dashrath passes away in the night due to the pain and misery of his separation from Rama.

Just like Dashrath was duty bound to repay his wife Kaikeyi and keep his promise to her, Central Bank is duty bound by the people we are here to serve. Even if it means taking difficult but right actions, we will not back out of our responsibility to ensure your savings, pensions, insurance policies and hard earned money are not put at undue risk.

Like Dashrath's angst over his decision to exile Ram, sometimes we too endure our own pain when taking actions we know are right. As the country's primary financial regulator, the entity with the power to keep the mighty players in the financial system on their toes, we have no friends. In fact, we often make people unhappy with the hard decisions we must take.

Earlier, I told you I hope you leave here tonight perhaps inspired and eager to learn more about the poetic writings of the Ramayana. I would like to share a bit of the poetic stanza of the Ramayana with you as it pertains to King Dashrath, and I hope you get a sense of how great is the writing and you are moved to learn more.

I quote from the scene entitled "Dashrath's Visit"

*"Then Dashrath, best of those
Whose speech in graceful order flows,
With gathered saints on every side,
Thus to the lord of earth replied:
"A truth is this I long have known,
A favor is the giver's own.
What thou shalt bid, O good and true,
We, as our power permits, will do."*

We, as our power permits, will do. That is the essence of central banking. Central Bankers have a primordial responsibility to guarantee trust and confidence in the financial system. We carry out this responsibility with clear statutory objectives and with operational independence to pursue them.

But when we need more power we do not hesitate to go to the authorities to widen and strengthen our regulatory net to make sure we are equipped in every way to do our duty. We currently regulate the banking, insurance and private pensions sectors of the financial system...we are also preparing to supervise five systemically important financial institutions (UTC, NIB, HMB, TTMF and ADB) as well as credit unions.

That is a lot of power for a central bank. How do we wield such power?

This brings me to our third story, which is about Bharat.

As soon as the sad news of Dashrath's death reaches Bharat, he rushes back to Ayodhya. He reproaches his mother Kaikeyi for her wicked scheming ways and leaves for the forest in search of his brother Rama to offer him his rightful position as ruler of Ayodhya. So great was his devotion to Rama and so strong was his desire to be fair and just, that when Rama refused to return to Ayodhya before completing his fourteen years in exile, Bharat placed Rama's wooden sandals on the throne and ruled Ayodhya in the name of Rama – as Rama's emissary until Rama returned to regain his rightful position.

Bharat's action, in my view, is one of the most powerful lessons in the Ramayana for those of us who serve in Government. Bharat was given the honour of ruling the mighty kingdom of Ayodhya. He could have just accepted the throne and the absolute power and luxury that came with it. But Bharat's sense of right and wrong would not permit him to eagerly accept what most others would greedily take. Instead, he ruled Ayodhya in Ram's name.

As a central bank, we have the power to produce the public good called financial stability. Like Bharat, we recognize our power does not come from us, it comes from elsewhere. In the

case of Bharat, his power and authority to rule Ayodhya came from Ram. In the case of Central Bank, our power and authority to manage the financial system comes from the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We seek to exercise this power in a fair and just manner, without regard to race, class or creed but to what actions are best for the overall health of Trinidad and Tobago's economy.

In wielding this extensive power, what is our guide? What is our line in the sand?

The This brings me to our fourth story... is the story of Lakshman.

Soon after his birth, Lakshman kept crying until he was placed next to Ram. Since that day he was always beside Ram, accompanying him into exile in the forest. Such was his devotion to Ram that Lakshman even refused to sleep for fourteen years so that he could serve his brother, day and night.

In the fourteenth year of exile, Sita sees a golden deer and pleads with Rama to capture it. Rama chases the deer into the forest, leaving Lakshman behind to watch over Sita. Hours pass. There is no sign of Rama. Afraid that a mishap might have befallen her husband, Sita forces Lakshman to go and look for Rama. Before setting out, Lakshman traces a line – the Lakshman Rekha – around the hermitage with an arrowhead. He warns Sita never to cross the line or let anyone in.

No sooner does Lakshman leave than Ravan comes disguised as a beggar to the hermitage and asks Sita for food. Unaware of the devious plan of the beggar, Sita is tricked into crossing the Lakshman Rekha. To her horror, she discovers that the beggar is Ravan, king of the Rakshasas. Ravan grabs hold of Sita and forcibly carries her off to Lanka.

The Lakshman Rekha separates civilization from the jungle. Within the Lakshman Rekha, Sita is Rama's wife. Outside, Sita is at Ravan's mercy.

Central Bank's Lakshman Rekha is financial regulation. Within our Lakshman Rekha, our citizens have financial protection. Outside it, financial rakhshas are free to take away your wealth without mercy.

The collapse of CLICO and the HCU some five years ago showed there were financial rakhshas who through greed and avarice tempted our citizens to step outside the Lakshman Rekha and took what was not theirs to take, just like Ravan took Sita. That is why today we are building an even stronger regulatory and supervisory financial perimeter...we are strengthening our own Lakshman Rekha to prevent a reoccurrence of financial crises.

This brings us to the final and fifth story about Luv and Kush, the twin sons of Rama...the future.

According to legend, during Ram's period of ruling Ayodhya, he yielded to negative public sentiment about Sita's purity and banished Sita into exile in the forest for a second time. Sage Valmiki provided shelter to a pregnant Sita in his ashram (hermitage) where she delivered twin sons named Luv and Kush. Sage Valmiki trained Luv and Kush to be masters in archery so that no one on earth could defeat them in war. He also taught them about divine and celestial warfare.

Ram decided to perform Ashwamedha Yagna to enlarge his empire. The Ashwamedha Yagna is a ritual where an emperor sends out a horse accompanied by his army to various neighboring kingdoms. The local king has two options. He could either allow the horse to wander, signaling that his kingdom is annexed. Or, he could tie up the horse, indicating that he was ready to battle the emperor's army.

The horse wandered into the forest where Luv and Kush lived and the twins tied up the horse, not knowing its significance. Ram sent Hanuman to retrieve the horse. Hanuman recognized Luv and Kush as the sons of Ram. He let them capture him and tie him up. Worried, Ram sent his brothers and his army to look for the horse. As they saw Hanuman tied up and Luv and Kush guarding him, they thought the two boys had stolen the horse.

So Ram's brothers started attacking Luv and Kush who defeated them all. Eventually, Ram himself came to confront them in battle and eventually learned that Luv and Kush were his children. Once Sita witnessed the acceptance of her children by Ram, Sita sought final refuge in the arms of her mother Bhumi Devi (the goddess Earth), to receive her and as the ground opens, she vanishes into it.

If you want to learn how it is Ram did not know he had these two powerful sons, then I encourage you to read the Ramayana. For me, Luv and Kush represent the future of central banking... a strong approach of specialized, skills that can take on any force. At Central Bank, we are building capacity in specialized skills such as anti-money laundering, actuarial science, cyber security and operational risk. Demand is also picking up for expert skills in strategic communications, international relations, and behavioral psychology. A decade ago, these skill sets were nowhere on the radar of Central Bank.

Like Luv and Kush, our new breed of central bankers must not only come with specialized skills. Just like Luv and Kush, our new breed of central bankers must also come with the head and heart to ask the right questions, and the courage to look beyond the obvious to take on too-big-to fail entities like Ram's army.

Here at the Central Bank, more than 15 percent of our new hires in the past two years have been in financial supervision, many with experience from the private sector. Another 10 per cent of new hires are in economic research. Like Luv and Kush, most of these new Central Bankers are young, but experienced thinkers who are prepared to serve their country.

These are the five stories we have chosen to tell you this evening and while they are not traditional Divali stories, they come from the same source that gave birth to one commonly accepted story of Divali. Hopefully, you will leave here tonight with a greater appreciation as to why Hindus and non-Hindus remain so inspired by the epic story of the Ramayana.

Let me take this opportunity to wish you and your family Shubh Divali.

May your paths always be lit; may your minds always be illuminated.

I hope you enjoy Paanch Kahani.