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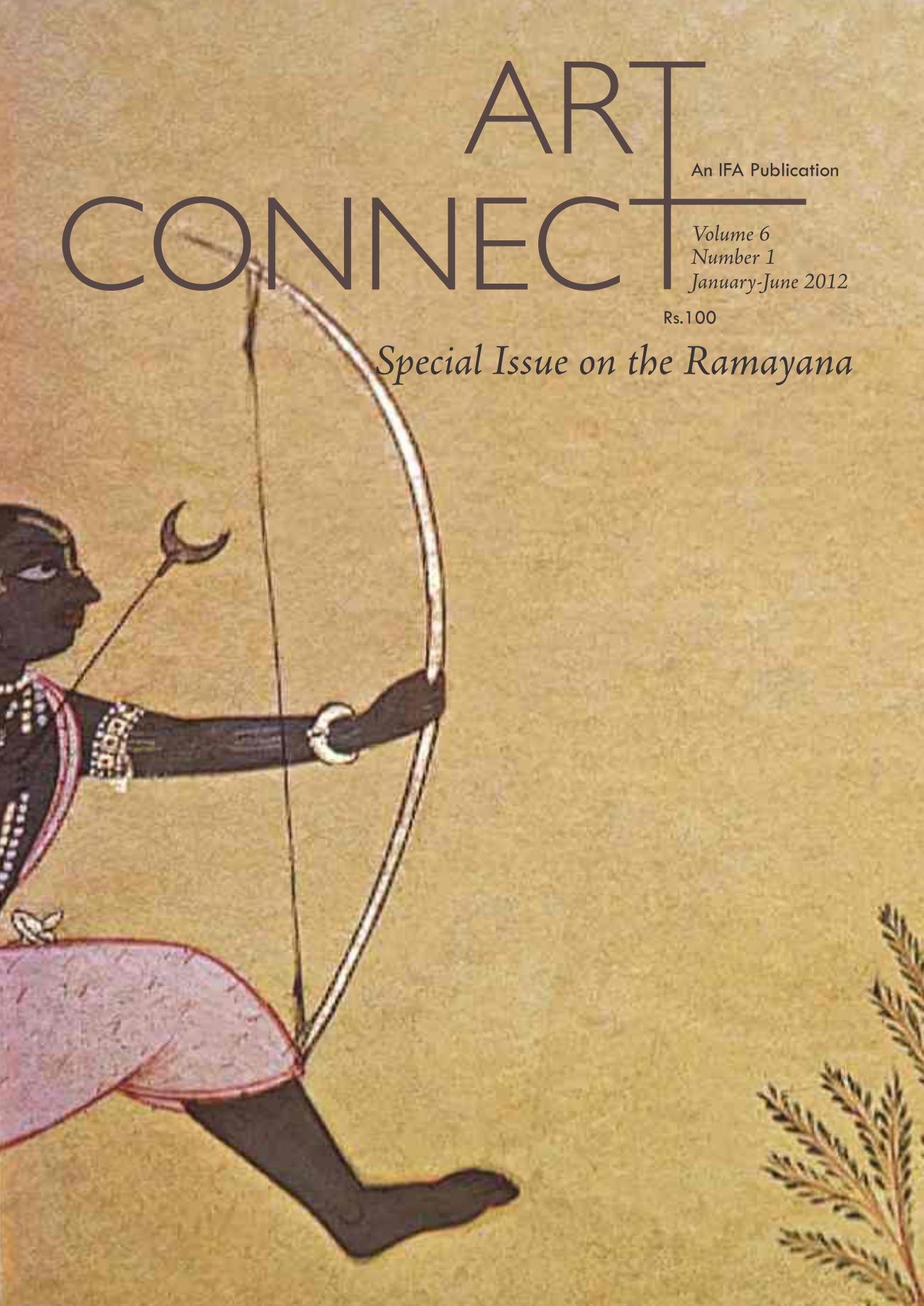
Special Issue on the Ramayana



Contents

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Cover Image

Maricha Hunt (detail) from the Shangri *Ramayana*,
Kulu, c. 1710, courtesy the National Museum, New Delhi.

Editorial

IFA has collaborated with Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts Research to bring you this special issue of *ArtConnect*, which examines, as the poet and scholar A.K. Ramanujan did so magnificently in his critical essay "Three Hundred *Ramayana*s: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation", the multiple ways in which the Ramayana is transmitted and received. The issue is based on edited excerpts of some talks delivered at the Adishakti Ramayana Festival 2011 (16 to 23 February) in Puducherry, which was the third and last in an annual series exploring the pluralistic dimensions of the epic. The Festival was largely supported by the Ford Foundation. Southeast Asia was the focus last year, and the dialogue among artists and scholars from India, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia at the Festival underlined what Ramanujan had observed in his essay: "...how these hundreds of tellings of a story in different cultures, languages, and religious traditions relate to each other: what gets translated, transplanted, transposed".

An arresting example of a transplanted myth is the Malaysian *Ramayana*, the Hikayat Maharaja Wana. Scholar and translator Eddin Khoo provides the background to its shadow-puppetry version, the Wayang Kulit Siam specific to the state of Kelantan, which foregrounds Ravana and is rooted in the oral tradition. Political forces have been hard at work, says Khoo, to codify and 'cleanse' the free-flowing and eccentric Wayang as part of their attempts to censor and even deny Malaysia's pre-Islamic past.

Social psychologist Ashis Nandy calls our culture an epic culture, one that is predicated on plurality. As he points out in his essay on epic heroes, we have been, over the centuries, not only writing new versions of our epics but also relocating them in new cultural spaces according to the needs of communities, castes, sects, religions and language groups. Nandy speaks about ways of looking at the past that are beyond and outside history, an approach that counters that of historian Romila Thapar who, with logical precision, analyses the trajectory of the myth through history. By focussing on the Buddhist and Jaina variants of the Rama story, Thapar illustrates how variants of myths often indicate historical and ideological changes through the perspectives they present.

Artist Gulammohammed Sheikh has delved into the countless illustrated manuscripts of the Ramayana and he does a close reading of three of them, the oldest being the Mughal *Ramayana* that emperor Akbar commissioned. Author C.S. Lakshmi strikes a different note from the other contributors to this issue as she gives us a deeply personal account of the tellings of the Ramayana that she remembers from her childhood. The epic holds different meanings at different stages of one's life, she says.

But the last word hasn't yet been spoken on this enduring epic that defies every man-made boundary and has universally awakened the stupendous power of the human imagination.

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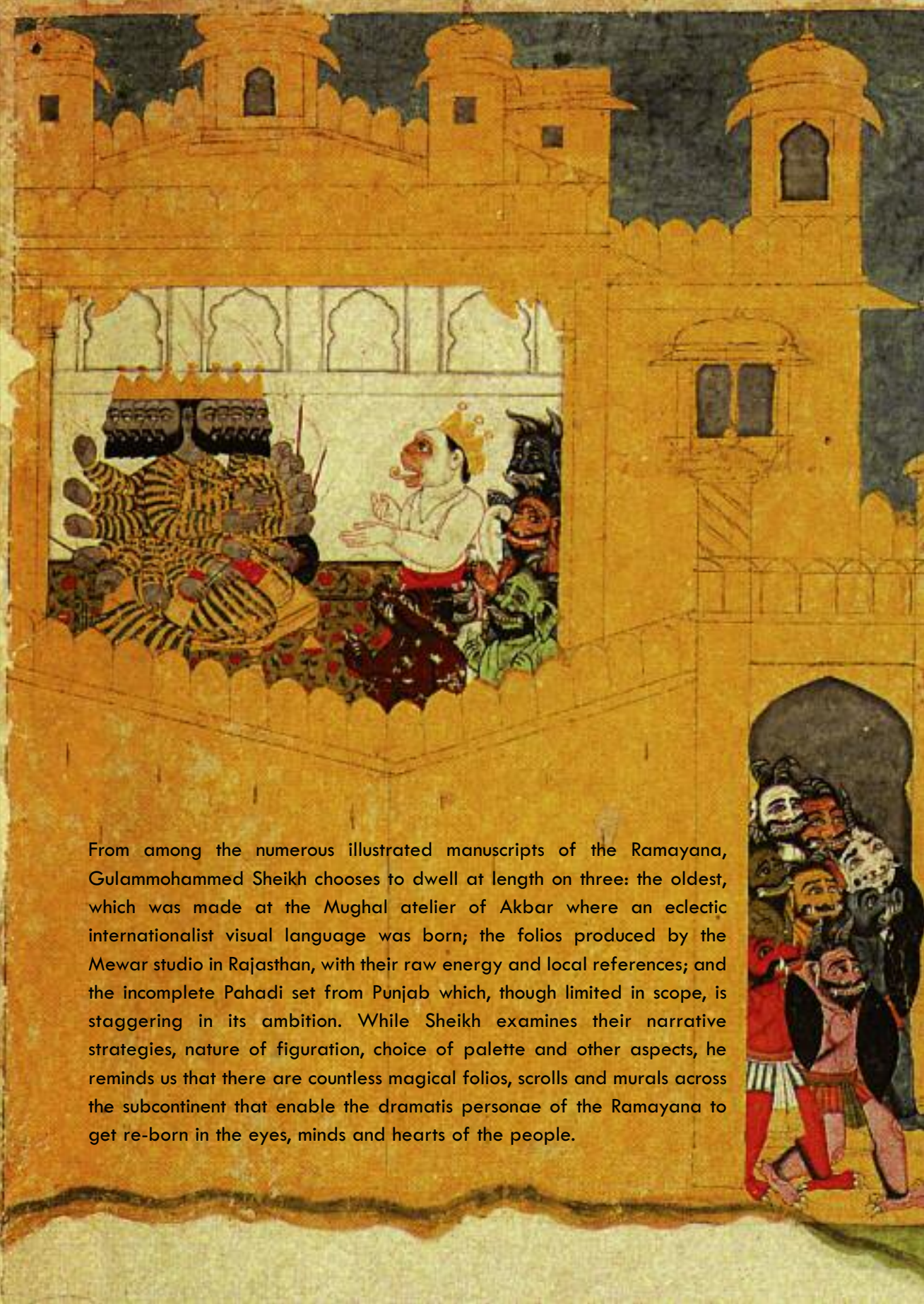
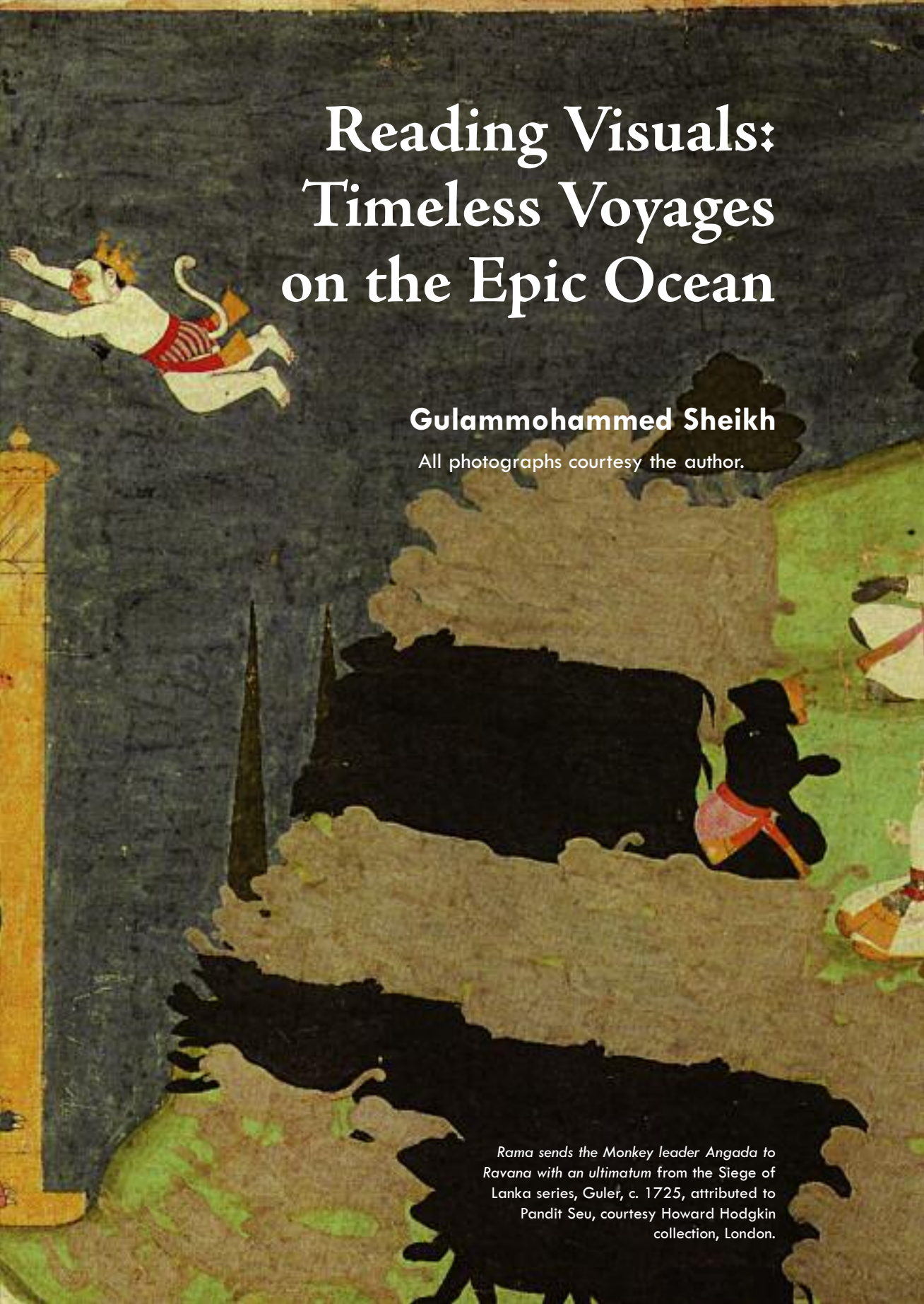


From among the numerous illustrated manuscripts of the Ramayana, Gulammohammed Sheikh chooses to dwell at length on three: the oldest, which was made at the Mughal atelier of Akbar where an eclectic internationalist visual language was born; the folios produced by the Mewar studio in Rajasthan, with their raw energy and local references; and the incomplete Pahadi set from Punjab which, though limited in scope, is staggering in its ambition. While Sheikh examines their narrative strategies, nature of figuration, choice of palette and other aspects, he reminds us that there are countless magical folios, scrolls and murals across the subcontinent that enable the dramatis personae of the Ramayana to get re-born in the eyes, minds and hearts of the people.

Reading Visuals: Timeless Voyages on the Epic Ocean

Gulammohammed Sheikh

All photographs courtesy the author.



Rama sends the Monkey leader Angada to Ravana with an ultimatum from the Siege of Lanka series, Guler, c. 1725, attributed to Pandit Seu, courtesy Howard Hodgkin collection, London.

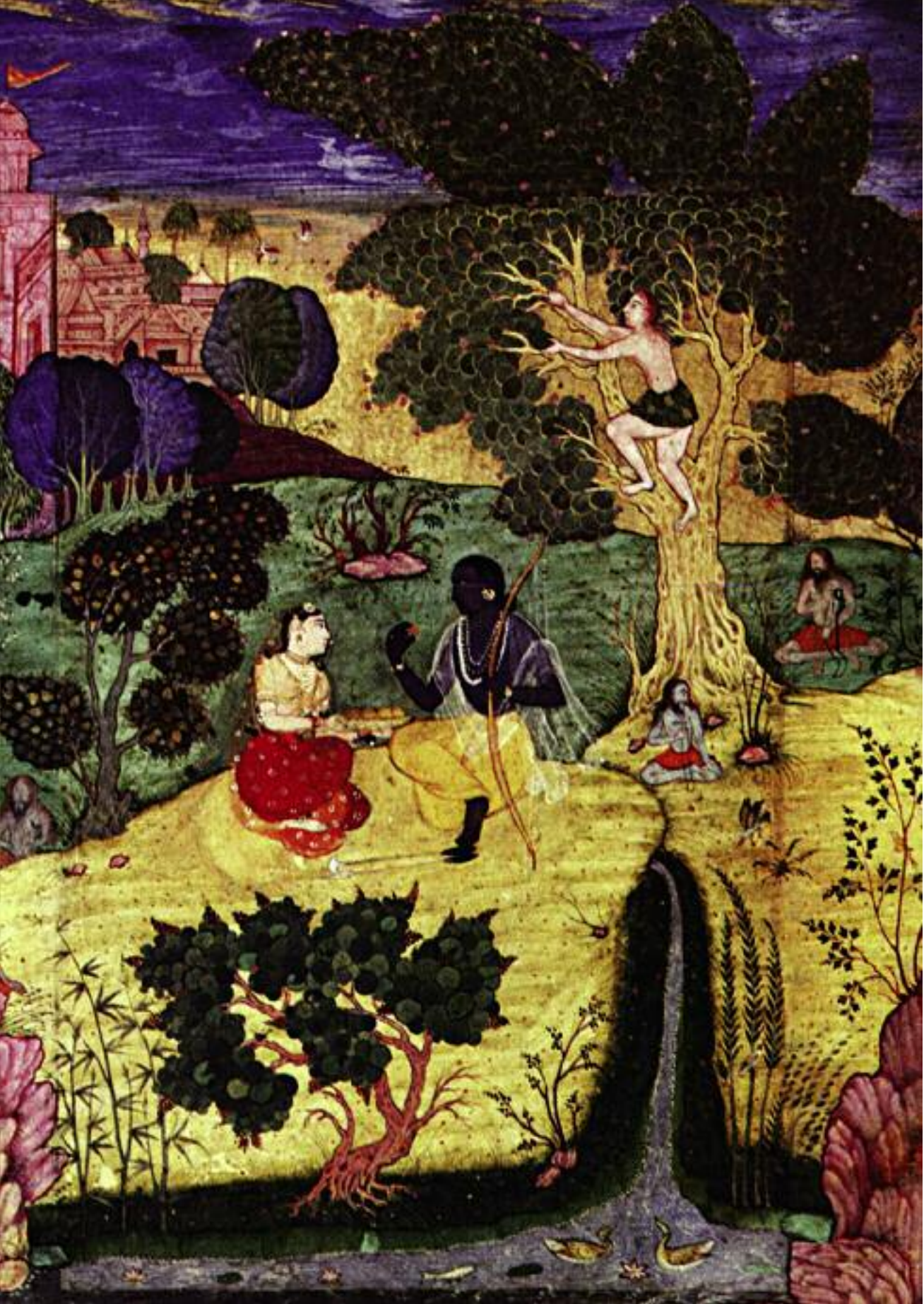
Few narratives have continued to fire Indian or Asian imagination over the centuries as have the stories of the Ramayana. They have been painted scores of times in every possible medium and form with an amazing range of interpretations. Among the huge corpus of illustrated manuscripts, three sets from the Mughal, Mewar and Pahadi *qalams* stand out to provide me enough ground for inquiring into various aspects of the Ramayana's visualisation, but I have added some images from other schools to expand the scope of reading the visuals.

Significantly, the oldest of these sets is a translated (most likely) prose version in Persian made at the Mughal atelier of Akbar (1588). In the absence of existing examples of earlier prototypes (possibly destroyed in the Mughal campaigns of Gwalior and Chittaur in 1558) it is safe to assume that the attempt was to visualise the epic quite afresh, barring some iconographic details. In other words, improvisation served as a basis for conceptualising and executing the image through the use of some available prototypes. The eclectic internationalist visual language that evolved at the Mughal workshop combined aspects of Persian picture-making with a variety of regional Indian modes and elements of illusionism drawn from European prints, and the complexity of the project was compounded by the task of having to visualise a multi-layered text. Added to such unprecedented challenges was the question of illustrating a sacred text although its sanctity was somewhat diluted because it was a Persian translation, which was not necessarily painted by or meant for believers alone.

Nonetheless the illustrated text had a special appeal for the target audience. We are told that the second imperial version of the Ramayana (1594) was "owned by Akbar's mother Hamida Banu Begum, who had the manuscript brought to her on her deathbed. It has been plausibly suggested that she felt a particular affinity with the suffering of Sita, for she and her husband Humayun were driven into exile by rebellions in 1540 and endured great hardship…".[1] At another level it served the political purpose of appropriating a mythical legacy—if the overlap between the characters of Dasharatha and Akbar, in a sub-imperial Ramayana with a blue-skinned prince Rama in front of his three brothers seated before an ageing king, is any indication.

The principal change from preceding practices that the Mughal visualisation

King Dasharatha with his sons and wives, Mughal, c. 1600, courtesy the National Museum, New Delhi.



The divine messenger (Agnipurusha) rises from the sacrificial fire to bear vessel of celestial food by Nadim, sub-Imperial Mughal, c. 1597-1605, courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

seems to effect is the emphasis on devising believable imagery, both in figuration and in the mise-en-scene. In that sense it is an attempt to physicalise the narrative or bring it into the realm of the 'real'. (Did the re-telling of the narrative in Persian influence this direction?) The eclectic naturalism that was evolved, refined and adopted at the atelier as an imperial *lingua franca* to illustrate historical chronicles such as the *Akbarnama* (probably a prime catalyst), the mythical tale of Hamza, and fables such as the *Anwar-i-Suhayli*, a Persian version of the *Panchatantra*, actualised this desire for materialising the lived. The story of the life of Akbar came to be depicted as an eyewitness account, conveying the message of his might in the detailed portrayals of battles he fought and won. The oral tales of Hamza, bringing to life the adventures of an Arab hero portrayed in a recognisable Indian environment, tangentially invoked the exploits of Akbar. The fables brought animals to life.

However, to apply such a visualisation to a non-Islamic 'religious' narrative such as the Ramayana (or the Mahabharata, the Yogavashishtha etc.) brings in complex dimensions and challenges: the contentious question is whether their naturalistic representation would pave the way for historicising a mythical narrative. While the naturalistic articulation of human characters and the setting up of scenes of action in recognisable terrains brought about a change in the mode of viewing, it does not arguably seem to have effected a fundamental change in the basic content of the

Rama and Sita in the forest, sub-Imperial Mughal, c. 1600, courtesy the National Museum, New Delhi.

Emergence of the Agnipurusha from the Pyre, designed by Basawan, coloured by Husayn Naqqash, c. 1589, Mughal, courtesy the Maharaja Sawai Mansingh II Museum, Jaipur.

narrative. This remains a tentative observation based upon limited accessibility and reading of the image and text of imperial manuscripts. Yet there are identifiable changes in the nature of the narrative caused by its mode of representation. Most prominent of these mutations is the exclusion of continuous narration, which was a clear departure from the practice of preceding Indian traditions and was surely prompted by the invention of an indigenous naturalism. Other changes discussed below also include a change of format—vertical in place of horizontal, hence a revised vantage.

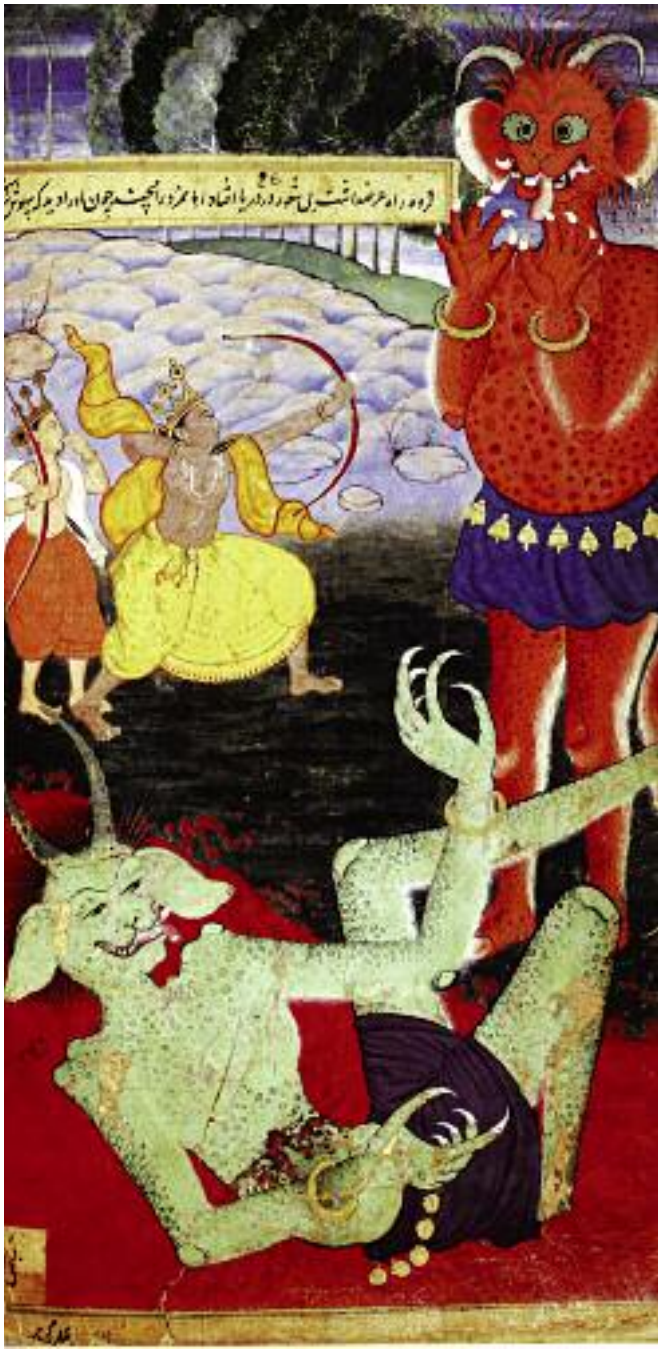
New Narrative Strategy

Continuous narration was devised as a narrative strategy to inject temporality into the medium of painting. Used extensively in both pre- and post-Mughal visualisations, it involved a series of animated portrayals of the protagonist in successive movements played out against the relatively static presence of the other figures. The sequence of events woven as an integral element of pictorialisation and elaborated through a repetitive figuration expands the pictorial space to encourage the reading of the narrative in sequential time. In the portrayal of the banished Rama being told of his father's death in the Mewar *Ramayana*, "the four brothers and Sita are shown seven times (or rather six in the case of Sita and Lakshmana) as they first meet each other, and then the action proceeds in an anti-clockwise direction chronicling their reactions…, their trip down to the river to perform the required funeral rites, and their return to the hut where

they sit in mournful contemplation".[2] Elsewhere, the triple actions of Rama lifting, stretching and aiming the bow stretches the scope of the dramatic moment in rhythmic stages of time, in the manner of repeating a stanza in a poetic recitation.

Quite often, this repeated representation of the supra-heroic or the miraculous feats of the protagonist increases his iconicity manifold. The absence of continuous narration, on the other hand, makes him a mortal human hero; the poetic narrative is restrained by a quest for plausibility within a one-action-one-frame constraint. In pre-Mughal practice, the opening of horizontal folios held by loose strings necessitated the turning of the page upwards by both hands for a lateral reading of images. In comparison the vertically bound book held in one hand with the page turned by the other involved a reading 'into' the page to access the vista of landscape tended by a locally grown naturalism. It changed the way of 'looking' and 'reading'. In the preceding practices the mise-en-scene was construed through props charged with synoptic motifs of the environment: like the sun or the moon to denote the time of day or night, or the tree, monument, lake or river to define locations. These motifs alongside the equally potent and abbreviated figuration were meant to be projected upon the space of the stage and animate it rather than recede into the distance as in other pictorialisations of the idea of landscape.

Interestingly, however, the episodic nature of visual narrative held within the vertical folio seems to avoid climactic dramatisation (although arguably it may contain that potential) without losing its focus on the narrative that holds the individual events. The formal incorporation of the device of the *hashiya* or margin as a parallel pictorial register outside the frame opens up a potentially alternative visual zone to extend the narrative. A full-scale illusionism that takes naturalism into the ambivalent territory of realism, which Ravi Varma attempted, did not enter Indian painting for another three centuries. The portrayal of action swings tantalisingly between the static and the animated and refuses to be cast into binaries. In that sense the new naturalism is self-assured and based upon local prerogatives. Despite employing some relativity in the proportions of figures and backgrounds and drawing upon some aspects of European landscape, it



Rama and Lakshmana confront Marica and Subahu by Mohan, sub-Imperial Mughal, c. 1597-1605, courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

ruled out the use of chiaroscuro, shadows, and most often even dark nights. Foreshortening and facial contortions to delineate anguish or emotional stress, for instance, were missing from its repertory of devices. The overlap of history and myth is the preferred alternative for this eclectic new naturalism, which is primarily structured upon Asian prototypes. It uses opportunities to draw from multiple options, thus keeping the doors open for a play of the fantastic with the factual, for conflating the 'real' with the 'fabulous' in colouration and spatial constructs. By appending the older practice of the projected and generalised body form with close observation and emotional insight, and through lessons learnt from naturalistic practices as well as the continued use of the metaphoric to intensify emotionality, the emergent eclecticism was given a new meaning and purpose—in the use of colour, for instance. So in the end the visualisation was centred upon a sense of wonder rather than on the exigencies of realism. An artist such as Daswanth would turn a simple forest scene into a poetic reverie with a blue-skinned Rama resting with Sita inlaid upon a green backdrop, his deep yellow garment simmering within a golden yellow ground as pink monuments and deep green trees rise

upon a blue–gold sky. Or elsewhere the massive body forms of demons Maricha and Subahu in luminous hues of viridian and scarlet would, despite the reference to a pool of blood, elevate the scene of combat into a delightful apparition.

Most ingenious are the devices of multiple-perspective, a by-product of the advent of naturalism, which offer unprecedented opportunities of exploration. An invention born out of experimenting with the idea of combining diverse space constructs, multiple-perspective gave naturalism a new form and identity. Unlike a bird's eye-view, often cited to rationalise a space construct viewed from above,[3] the image is construed in the process of drawing so that it compels an independent view of every figure or form: a building, a tree or an object from its own 'ideal' perspective. The rationale of linking these diverse-looking 'views' is found in how the painter structures space so as to enable the eye of the viewer to move from image to image, tracking them individually and in continuity. Therefore temporality, woven into the process of constructing the visual image, seems to return by the back door. The infusion of intricate details drawn partly from Persian precedents adds to the excitement of the journey of 'reading' every surface from close proximity. The process of structural experimentation allows for ways to extend the narrative onto the opposite page by configuring two verticals into a horizontal spread.

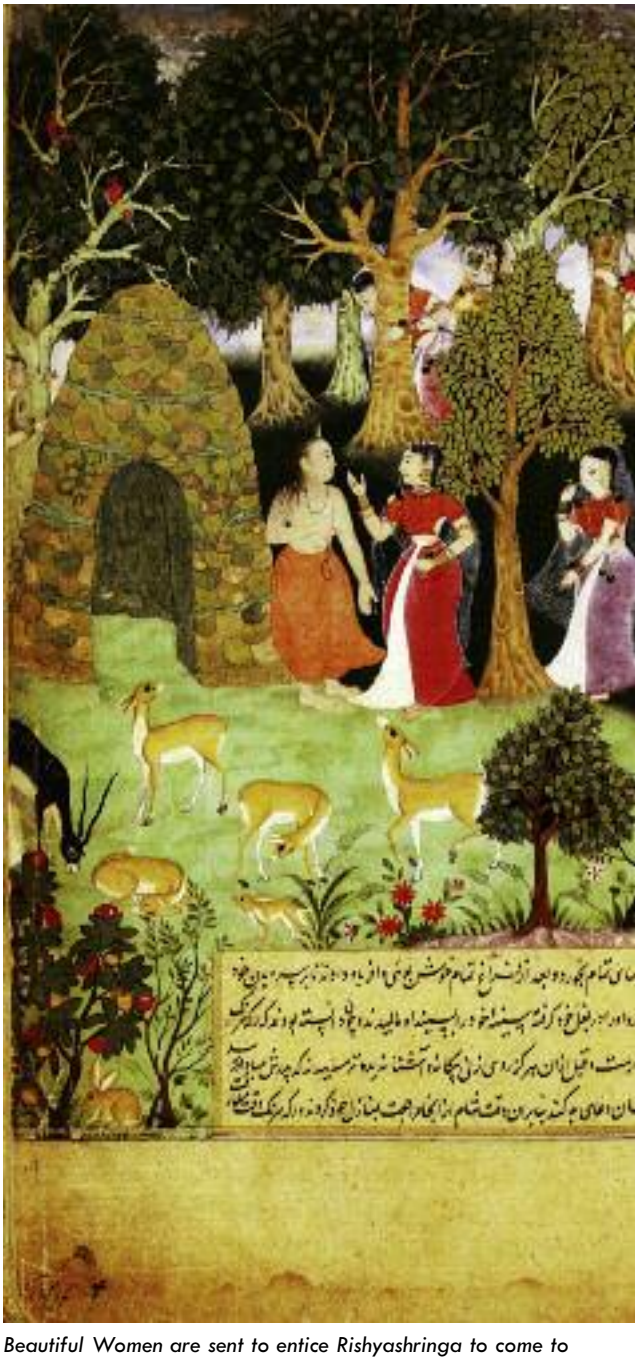
Dealing with the fantastic is often fraught with unknown challenges. The problem of making the fabulous believable might lead to confusion. For instance, the attempt to embody the ten-armed and ten-headed figure of Ravana could turn him into a clumsy creature unable to handle his excessive physical attributes. In a sub-imperial folio, Ravana's multiple arms sprouting like sticks at his elbows seem to have been viewed in terms of their fitting the garment he wore; instead of eliciting awe it looks a bit comic (or was that intentional?). The casual placing of demonic figures in soft hues renders them ineffective, even amateurish. In the consummate hands of artists of the imperial copy referred to earlier, the naturalistic denomination achieves a rationale for balance in the portrayal of the fantastic persona of Ravana: his heads are compressed to a smaller but proportionate scale to sit balanced upon his shoulders. In portraying the fantastic in a naturalistic manner the most amazing results seem to be in the play with scale, especially in the

figuration of giants and demons. In the awe-inspiring image of a colossal Agnipurusha emerging from the sacrificial fire and literally touching the sky, in the imperial folio as well as in a sub-imperial version of it in the Khankhanan, inventive means of naturalism reach magical heights. Interestingly, the sub-imperial version, designed to emulate the imperial example, changes the visage: whereas Basawan's dramatic figuration of a darkened man with golden locks with hands clasping the golden pot matches the colours of fires and embers, the softly drawn giant of Nadim's, clad in animal skin offering the bowl while standing against a mineral-green background, appears gentle in comparison. It seems as if the demonic figures aroused a greater sense of wonder than the human heroes did. Did the fixed iconography for depicting heroes limit the artist's flight of imagination, as opposed to the freedom he had to devise his own demons by unleashing his hand and mind across unknown realms? Could this be the source of the practice of making and burning colossal effigies of Ravana?

Who are these demons? The kind that attack the hermitages or disturb sages in their meditations are perhaps demonised forms of spirits of earth or forest, whereas the demons in the fleet of Ravana are demonic forms of soldiers devised from the variety of physical types that the artists may have observed. Visualised as incredible creatures—part-human with spotted or pockmarked bodies of bright green, deep blue or blazing red; part-animal with horns, sharp teeth, fangs, nails and tails, and elephant ears—they are images of unadulterated fantasy. Improvisatory instincts seem to have run amuck, letting loose a variety of permutations to produce an amazing play with deviance, which is often grotesque or comic rather than evil or diabolic in the satanic sense.

The Mughal workshop also seems to bring about a change in the representation of sexuality, which takes a somewhat subtle or understated tone. There are exceptions, though, as in the story of Rishyashringa, the sage with a horn on his head, which appears in the preamble of the Ramayana. King Lomapada, on learning that his kingdom could be alleviated of the successive droughts it had suffered if the celibate sage Rishyashringa could be enticed to visit it, devises and executes a plan of sending beautiful damsels to lure him from his forest retreat into worldly pleasures. As the presence of Rishyashringa brings rains to the kingdom, Lomapada offers him

his daughter in marriage. Dasharatha, on learning of the miraculous powers of Rishyashringa, invites him to visit Ayodhya to conduct the *putrakameshti yagna* (ritual to fulfill the desire for male progeny). In a scene of enticement, in the sub-imperial Mughal *Ramayana*, the damsels surrounding the sage's cottage are portrayed in seductive postures. In a Pahadi folio the visit of Rishyashringa is set on the vast landscape of a hill slope on a riverbank. The tiny figures of the entourage of the sage with three damsels and a porter are shown as they disembark from a luxurious vessel, then half way up the hill as their journey proceeds, as if in continuous narration. Here, the handsome youth of the Mughal version is portrayed as a bearded sadhu with a loincloth. While Rishyashringa serves as a conduit for the birth of Rama, the story of his own birth is an incredible one. It can be seen in a Mewar folio which portrays the representation of love between man and animal (referred to as an apsara born as a doe in one textual version). Depicted in transparent visuals is the story of the love between sage Vibhandaka and a doe, the parents of Rishyashringa (who, being an offspring of their union, carries a horn on his head). Narrated in thirteen episodes is the



Beautiful Women are sent to entice Rishyashringa to come to Lomapada's city by Govardhana, sub-Imperial Mughal, c. 1597-1605, courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

tender tale of the meeting, wooing, caressing and 'marrying' of the 'lovers' before the doe departs. Expanded temporality, seamlessly woven into visuals, breaks the bounds of a 'frame'. Like the incredible story depicted, it marries the fantastic and the real in a tender union. And who could have achieved such a feat but the Mewar master Sahibdin?

The Mewar Studio

The master painter Sahibdin, who was assigned to conduct the project, had tried his hand at naturalistic figuration in a portrait of Emperor Jehangir earlier (1605-27) besides continuing with the comparatively abbreviated Mewar mode of figuration and the use of a bright palette in the Rasikpriya folios (1620-25). What emerges in the Ramayana project at the Mewar studio seems to combine as well as challenge the new naturalism. A unique vision is evolved by reconfiguring and expanding the devices of the Chawand (c. 1605) and Rasikpriya models. The typical code of using architectural motifs to divide spaces now gives way to continuous and flowing spaces to open up a wider panorama of action while linking the folios in a continuum. The evocation of ambience, referencing features of various terrains and landscapes, creates a panorama much grander than the initial prototypes. It is immaterial whether Sahibdin was conversant with Sanskrit or not; he must have shared the local Mewari dialect with the scribe when reaching out to the story in the original. So by implication the visualisation too can be described as being in a Mewari dialect. Here too the basis of visualisation in the absence of a precedent is improvisatory but, enclosed within a unified code of a local model and with fewer hands, it retains a linguistic unity. The individual hands are visible in the sections painted by Sahibdin, Manohar and some other unnamed associates but, unlike the individual and often diverse perceptions of various hands in the Mughal version, there are fewer anomalies. But the project, despite the reversion of the text to the original Sanskrit and the horizontal format, remains undoubtedly multi-layered: inscribed by a Jaina scribe with a Muslim painter Sahibdin at the helm aided by his associates, including Manohar. The nature of the narrative takes a different course in the Mewar *Ramayana*. Here the question of making the narrative believable does not arise because the narrative is part of an established belief. The dispositions for employing naturalistic

The assault on Lanka by Sahibdin, Ramayana, Mewar, c. 1649-53, courtesy the British Library, London.

devices to bring historical chronicles to life do not exist, or else they appear alien. Attempts to incorporate aspects of naturalism drawn from the Mughal example are visible, but such features are part of the premise of using devices from existing practices. In the same sense, local linguistic devices serve the purpose of contextualising the narrative in the land of Mewar. With traditional antecedents steeped in poetic narratives, any naturalistic options of engaging with the fabulous would have seemed too remote. Instead of the detailed characterisation of figures and landscape in the mode of the Mughal atelier, a raw energy pervades the bold and often robust figuration. Charged images spring out of the page to draw the viewer's eyes and mind and effortlessly enter the narrative. The deployment of continuous narration serves to replay action and accentuate rhythmic progression in the tenor of a flowing verse, like balladry sung in a high pitch. The painted epic set in the rugged and colourful terrain of Mewar necessitates a hotter palette. Whereas the metaphoric colouration in the Mughal pictorialisation involved metallic or mineral tones, the hues in Sahibdin's *Ramayana* are drawn from sources of nature and evoke physical sensations such as temperature and taste. Bound by broad borders of deep scarlet or crimson, the folios set the theatre of action upon 'flat' grounds of turmeric- or mustard-yellow, wildflower vermilions or foliage

Rama and Lakshmana astride monkeys charging towards Lanka, Ramayana, Mewar, c. 1649-53, courtesy the British Library, London.

greens. A rich fare of spiced sensations, whether of tranquility or of turbulence, continues to suffuse the mise-en-scene, whether it shows life in the forest or on the battleground. The grand project, which chapterises the epic narrative in a series of folios, deals with everything from the most mundane and domestic to the most dramatic with equal care and concern. There are delightful vignettes of typical Rajasthani customs in the ritual blessing of the married couples by the grooms' mothers. In the chapter on Exile, life in the forest is depicted with Rama building a cottage, Lakshmana hunting a deer or roasting venison on spits, Sita cooking or waiting in the cottage while the brothers eat, Rama shooting the crow that had pecked Sita's breast, and so on. In the Kishkindha chapter, the monkey king Sugriva entertains Rama and Lakshmana by offering them betel leaves (*paan*) as his army spreads out to locate the whereabouts of the kidnapped Sita. Similarly in the Yuddha-kanda, in the story of Indrajit's yagna to attain invisibility, the wounding of the heroic brothers followed by a remarkable depiction of Hanuman tearing off a mountain peak for the life-saving herbs is portrayed with the flowing continuity of a poetic narrative.

It is difficult to summarise the nature of the figuration but in essence it is performative: crowd scenes are choreographed or individual action articulated and imbued with a collective animation or with an actor's poise. The characterisation is derived from the customary with a greater emphasis on animation than on individual features. Often the human and animal bodies exchange physical traits to form a collective body language, which is characterised by the actions of monkeys, bears, soldiers and demons choreographed in the scenes of war. In fact the combat of Rama's army of monkeys and bears with the quasi-animal army of demons from Ravana's fleet emerges as an enormous chorus of bestiary, deeply empathic of the animal world. Hanuman is visualised in a fully animal form without reference to human physiognomy or clothing (an exception is made in the case of Vaali who, dressed as a ruler and standing like a human king, has the features of a monkey; likewise his courtiers). In an oblique way the actions of the multi-limbed Ravana, too, provide opportunities to formulate a unique compendium of multiple bodies. The portrayal of violence defines the nature of the narrative. Compared to Mughal depictions of demons torn to pieces and rent asunder with splatters of blood (in the Hamza folios or in the Narakasura folio referred to earlier) the killing of Kumbhakarna in the Mewar epic and even the severance of his chopped limbs are handled with performative acumen and stylisation, creating a restraint of action. This is very different from Mughal theatricality which was expected to contain the propensity for horror. The portrayal of Ravana, who is viewed more as a 'faulted hero' than as a devil, invokes pathos as he falls from his chariot and is mourned by his wives as his body is laid on the funeral pyre at a cremation attended by his adversaries. In the war scenes Sahibdin stages a total theatre with dramatic action choreographed in rhythmic crescendo rising and falling as the viewer partakes of the pervasive *rasa* of the tragic, partly sublimated by the acuity of theatric gesture and humanist considerations. Should we say the nature of the narrative refers to older archetypes or that it internalises and incorporates the effects of naturalism into a new perspective?

The variation in figuration occurs when different hands, Sahibdin and Manohar or their associates, try out individualised versions. Unusually, they also choose to depict the passage of time spent in banishment by showing the protagonists with stubbly

beards and moustaches unlike the standard practice of representing them with clean-shaven faces. The heroic characters are drawn with a degree of reverence and discernible relish, especially in combat scenes. The image of Rama with an outstretched bow standing on the ground or upon a chariot is imbued with incredible grace, and yet the images of demonic characters, especially those of Ravana and Kumbhakarna, continue to entrance the artists. Ravana's body is conceived as an organic unit with multiple arms springing from his shoulders and spreading from his torso in a circular form with five heads structured into two rows. The vision of such a fantastic persona forms an uncanny sight. In the army of demons we encounter some individuals, but it is difficult to spot individualised features of bears or monkeys, whether of Vaali, Sugriva or even Hanuman, all of whom are distinguishable only when shown with royal garments. What takes one's breath away, however, is the image of the giant Kumbhakarna. To watch a series of folios with this mountainous man sleeping, rising, gobbling up whole animals, crushing masses of monkeys and bears, battling heroes, falling as his limbs scatter when chopped by Rama's arrows, and finally succumbing to his injuries is the sight of an epic drama.

Rama and Lakshmana attack Kumbhakarna, Ramayana, Mewar, c. 1649-53, courtesy the British Library, London.

There are numerous other sights that hold our attention. The movements of monkeys set against a dark backdrop diving in multiple directions in search of Sita are simply electric. To see Hanuman in his fully-monkey form rising in majestic scale in a war scene or carrying a mountain peak across the skies to bring the life-saving herb to Lakshmana has magical import. The monkey army with Rama and Lakshmana astride Hanuman and Angad respectively against a blazing red ground is at once a matter of loric simplicity and charisma. It is difficult to describe in a brief discourse the host of images that Sahibdin painted, but the most powerful portrayal is undoubtedly the sequential views of the final stages of war. These folios chronicling daily events gradually accelerate into the final assault on the fortress of Ravana and eventually in his face-to- face fight with Rama. The animation reaches its peak in the scenes of assault. Monkeys and bears breaking the boundaries of the golden fortress of Ravana cross the borders of the folio and spill out. The image of the besieged Ravana, taking a bath in preparation for the final fight, advancing in his chariot in war-gear, and facing Rama in a frontal combat portrayed in dual or triple actions till his final fall when he is mourned by his widows is the vision of an unforgettable saga.

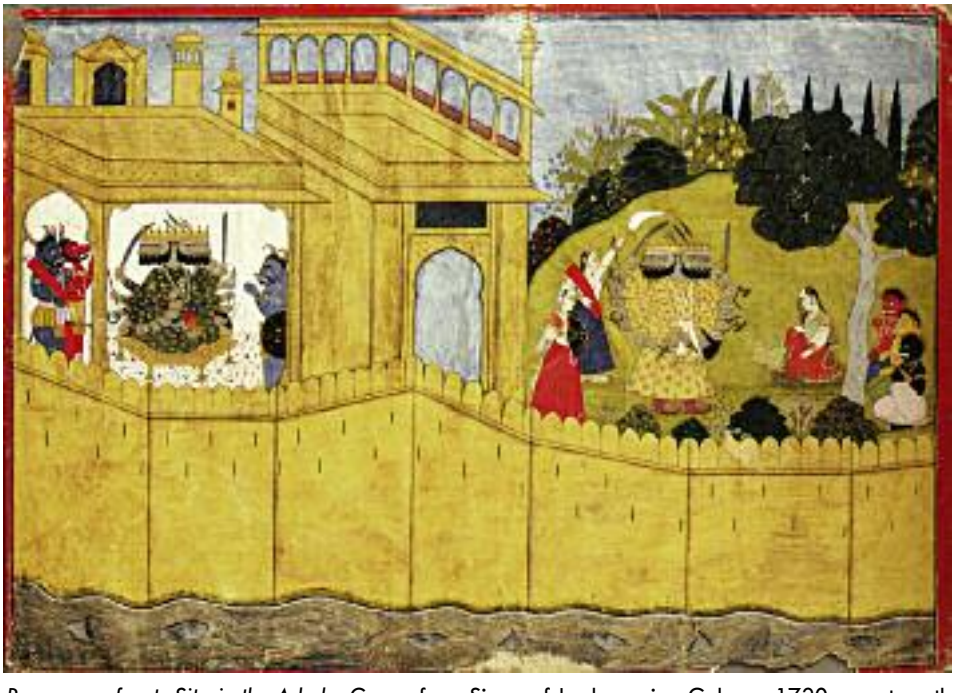
The Idiom of the Hills

The scope of the third, unfinished set of Ramayana folios from the Punjab Hills dealing exclusively with the Yuddha-kanda or Siege of Lanka is somewhat limited in the number of pages but the scale of its ambition is staggering. The forty large, horizontal folios are reminiscent in size of the pages of the *Hamzanama* but are painted on paper and not cloth. There are eight complete pictures, four or five half-complete images and twenty-eight drawings which appear to have been visualised as part of a grand narrative. Like Mewar, the Hill states too had a contentious relationship with the Mughal overlords, so the commissioning of such a project by the court of Guler could also be seen as an act of political assertion. Unlike Mewar, however, the impact of Mughal culture was received directly and willingly, gauging from the practice of young princes being sent out to be groomed at the Mughal court (perhaps as an act of allegiance), and so was integrated into the lifestyle of the Hill courts. The folios do, however, hint discreetly at the similarities between the court of Ravana and that of the Mughal in the portrayal of architecture with turrets, minarets and balconies, or in dressing

the demon king in luxurious Mughal *jama*s or arranging the landscape into designed gardens.

In its initial phase, the local Pahadi idiom entrenched in older traditions produced a remarkable array of highly charged imagery with bold figuration in a vibrant palette, not unlike that of early Mewar. The Siege of Lanka folios seem to open the sluice-gate to another stream that, catalysed by the refined Mughal *qalam*, evolved into a highly sophisticated visual language rooted in the sensibility of life in the hills. Commenced by the indubitable master Pandit Seu and assisted by his eldest son Manaku, the Siege of Lanka folios rest between the two streams: the earlier form of robust animation and the subsequent one of immense delicacy. Designed on the scale of an arm's length, in contrast to the Mughal and Mewar folios of *Ramayana* envisaged as hand-held, these folio paintings could be viewed in reference to scrolls, *thangka*s or murals.

Not unlike the Mewar example, the visualisation is based upon Sanskrit text inscribed at the back of folios; its makers and target audience appear to be believers. Using means of continuous narration, combined with a deep and simultaneous engagement with the fabulous and the believable, it



Ravana confronts Sita in the Ashoka Grove, from Siege of Lanka series, Guler, c. 1720s, courtesy the Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of George P. Bickford, Former Commaraswamy Collection.

produces a rare form of intimate yet numinous realism. Set in the climate of the hills, the visualisation is marked by a limpid palette, clarity of detail and an overall sense of ease. There is a tenderness that is difficult to define but it permeates every character, including the demonic. The bears and monkeys, the most endearing of all, are drawn in loving likenesses. They spread themselves out in disciplined groups of light brown or black, in contrast to the demon army, which is often in a chaotic yet colourful melee. Unlike the projective figural conglomeration and animation of the Mewar Yuddha-kanda, Pandit Seu conjures his *Ramayana* on rolling green grounds with a golden fortress accentuated with turrets and balconies and magical gardens laid out in broad expanses of colour over the wide spatial field.

The figures located in expansive fields of colour are restrained, more personalised and delineated with an affectionate intimacy compared to the Mewar bravura. The characters are individualised: Ravana's spies Suka and Sarana or equally Rama's emissary Angad fly over the ramparts. Grotesquerie in the crowds of demon soldiers is redeemed by the comic. The individualised images of Hanuman and Angad, following the Mughal example, are shown suitably dressed with human bodies, monkey faces and tails but with an unusual kind of grace. Even though the heroic characters are portrayed with reverential care, the handsome image of Ravana with his exquisite facial characterisation and luxurious designer *jama*s outshines them all. Where do we go from here? We have traversed from the terrains of north India mapped by the artists of the Mughal ateliers, to the rugged lands of the Mewar countryside, finally scaling the hills that the Ramayana took us to. Hundreds of other 'sets' located in different times take us across lands and waters of the subcontinent, traversing the epic narrative in varied interpretations of familiar chapters. Or else they take us into uncharted territories by inventing new themes to enable the dramatis personae of the Ramayana to get re-born in the eyes, minds and hearts of the populace. In the hinterlands of India, the painter-performers of Bengal and Maharashtra in their *pata*s (scrolls) and folios of *chitrakathi* have boldly woven local tales and atypical perceptions into the epic narrative. Likewise, the leather puppeteers of Andhra and Karnataka have enacted extraordinary visualisations of Ayodhya, Kishkindha and Lanka in the bylanes of villages. In the siege of

Lanka, created inside a Chhatri in Parashuramapura of the Shekhawati region, the mural on the circular wall of the dome leaves the viewer dizzy, circling to grasp the movements of monkeys and bears played out across the interior of the dome. In a similarly circulating movement, in the murals of the late-eighteenth-century Kashivishwanath temple of Chandod in Gujarat, the soldiers of Ravana are slyly cast into the garb of *firangi*s (foreigners) and Hanuman is shown urinating upon the *yagna* conducted by Indrajit while flinging the demons into a knotty puzzle. In the pages of the Andhra *Ramayana*, you are enticed to watch with wonder as Hanuman jumps into the jaws of the female demon Surasa to come out of her ears; or join him in his mischief when he peeks into the harem of Ravana to find the multi-limbed demon in bed with his female companions.

This oceanic narrative touches every aspect of life, from birth to death. There is no parallel in the portrayal of the majesty of motherhood seen in the Mattancheri palace mural of Cochin, where the three queens of Dasharatha give simultaneous birth. In the tenderest of scenes in the Mewar *Ramayana*, the three queens, set in separate niches, are seen feeding their infant sons. Scenes of death, especially those of Dasharatha, Jatayu and Ravana, can be deeply poignant. The Mewar *Ramayana* brings forth unprecedented aspects of the tragic in the successive images of grieving Dasharatha before he passes away. As the exiles prepare to leave, the mounting grief of Dasharatha in a continuous series of folios reads like a dirge. Here, he turns his face away as Kaikeyi pronounces the banishment of Rama on his behalf, and there, he takes Rama, Sita and Lakshmana on his lap like infants and then, with outstretched arms bids farewell to them, before breaking down and falling. In an unexpectedly naturalistic portrayal in a Kangra hillscape of the funeral procession of Dasharatha, the lament of the city of Ayodhya is inscribed on the faces of hundreds of shaven mourners.

Jatayu's death figures in a number of folios: in the Shangri *Ramayana* pages, he stands regally challenging the demon in front of the chariot he has destroyed; or is engaged in a fierce fight with the twenty-armed Ravana carrying a weapon in every hand. In a page from a Kangra set, the mangled limbs of the bird lie scattered against the remnants of Ravana's chariot and the mules he has crushed to pieces after a valiant fight. In a Chitrakathi page, he stares like a celestial bird into

Wives of Dasharatha giving birth, eighteenth century (?) Mattancheri palace, Cochin.

Jatayu & Ravana, from Chitrakathi, Maharashtra, early twentieth century, courtesy Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum, Pune.

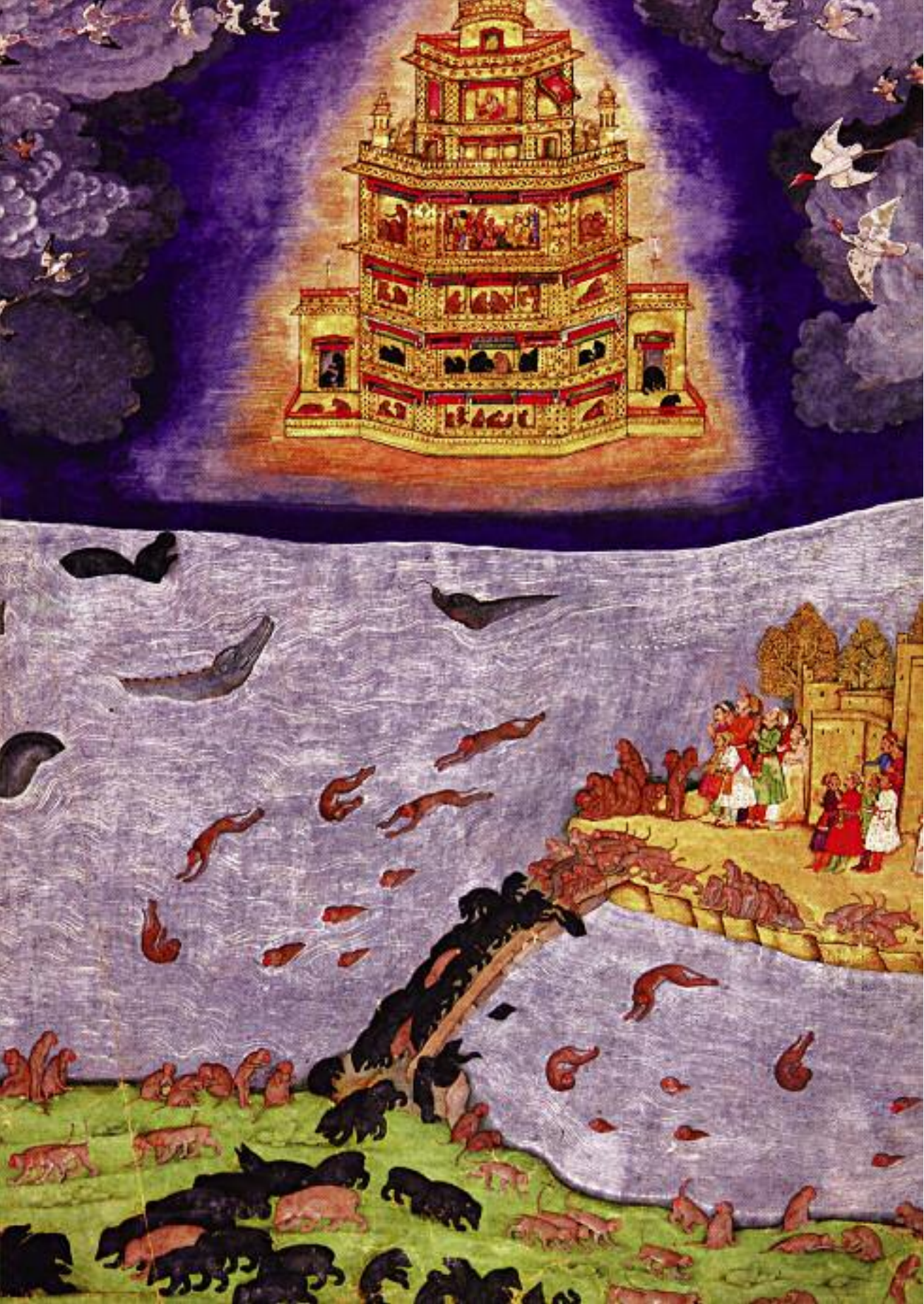
Monkeys and Bears fighting/carousing in the Madhuvana grove, ascribed to Pandit Seu, c. 1720, courtesy Museum Rietberg, Zurich.

the eyes of the fake sadhu abducting Sita, whereas in the Andhra version the wounded bird falls as the demon rushes past. In all these versions, Jatayu remains unforgettable.

There are two registers of mourning and cremation in the Andhra *Ramayana*. In the upper half, pathos gets accentuated in the darkened drawing of weeping wives of Ravana as they fall in a heap over his body slipping from their grasp. In the lower register red flames and vapours rising from the body upon the pyre appear to singe its borders. In the Mewar folio, cremation is consigned to one of the three registers. On the upper horizontal band in scorching yellow, preparations for the cremation are afoot with monkeys carrying firewood etc, while in the left bottom space, Rama converses with an assembly of men and monkeys led by Vibhishana

set upon a luminous red ground. In the lower right, grieving wives of Ravana circle around his body with twenty arms and a single head sprawled on a dark ground; they are depicted in varied states of disbelief and lament, their bright costumes and the golden war-gear of the fallen warrior notwithstanding.

The vignettes of life in exile in the Kangra paintings exude a deep empathy with nature while hosting the exiles in the idyllic setting of hills with luxuriant trees on the bank of a diagonally placed river flowing out of its pages. In a river cruising scene where Rama, aided by Lakshmana, gently pulls the raft Sita is resting upon, the travails of banishment seem to have dissolved in the serene, sublimating backdrop. The set of paintings culminates in an essence of intrinsic realism, intimately internalised. They absorb a sense of place by invoking the atmosphere without being over-descriptive or sentimental: watch the delightful cavorting and carousing of



inebriated monkeys and bears in a pleasure garden after the victory in Lanka, painted by Pandit Seu of Guler. An utter sense of delight and wonder which lifts the fantastic image of the Pushpak Viman (celestial aircraft) like a multi-story palace in flight from the island of Lanka is shared by the monkeys jumping into the sea and swimming to celebrate victory. There is no end to such wonders and delights everywhere in the countless magical folios, scrolls and murals, no matter where you look.

A page in the Shangri *Ramayana* sums up how the magic of these visuals draws the viewer inside the story, just as it did to the dolt who dived into the Ramayana, in the story that A.K. Ramanujan once narrated.[4] In a small hand-held folio of the Maricha hunt, the pale, metallic gold of the fleeing deer set against an identically pale, matte, mustard-yellow ground melts as the two colours fuse, and the deer is camouflaged, but it shines suddenly like a veritable revelation as the folio shifts in one's hand. Entranced by the mirages of Maricha materialising and disappearing, the viewer is left sharing the golden space of the pursuer.

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ENDNOTES

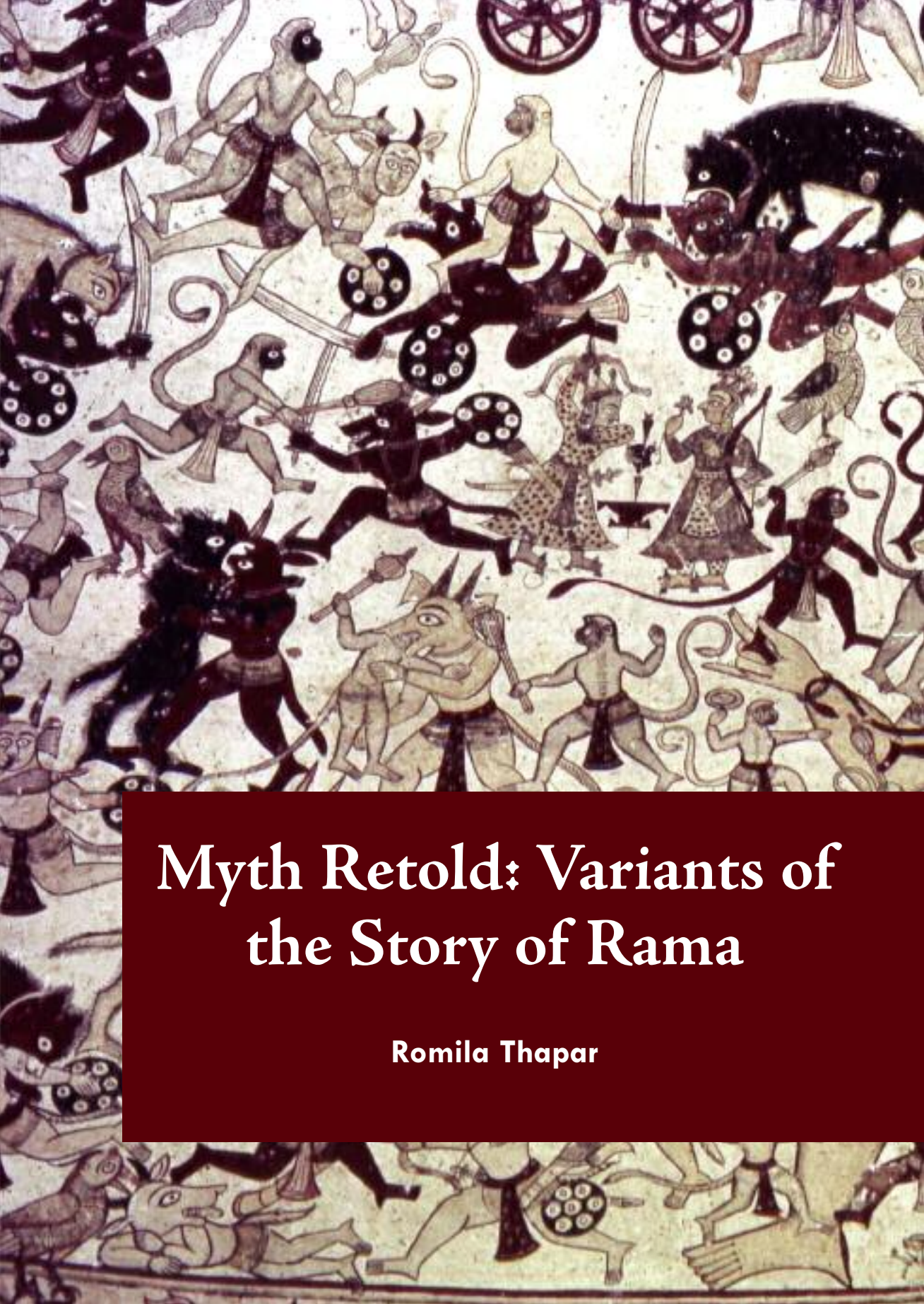
1. J.P. Losty, *The Ramayana, Love and Valour in India's Great Epic, The Mewar Ramayana Manuscripts*, (British Library, London, 2008).

2. Ibid.

3. The bird doesn't always see from above, apart from its vision covering a larger diametric space because of the location of its eyes. The phrase coined by filmmaker Mani Kaul 'seen from nowhere' defines the composite view of multiple perspectives in an imaginative manner.

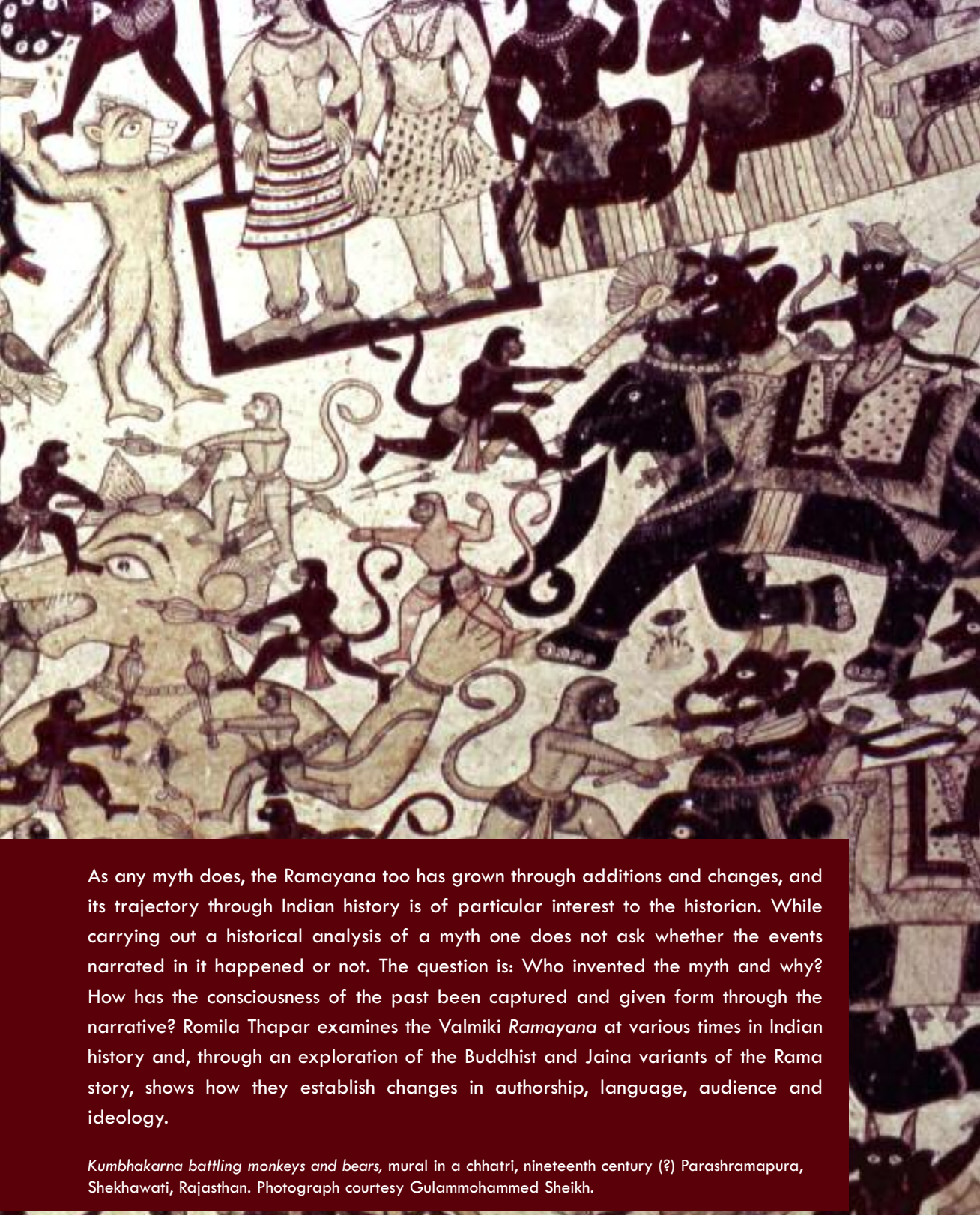
4. The story of the village dolt married to a cultured woman recounts how he, persuaded by his wife to listen to the Ramayana story, falls asleep for three successive nights until his wife accompanies him to the recitation. Sitting in the front row, he listens with rapt attention to the tale of Hanuman dropping Rama's signet ring meant to be delivered to Sita in the ocean he is flying over. As the reciter describes the confused state of Hanuman who is wringing his hands the dolt says, 'Hanuman, don't worry, I will get it for you' and dives into the ocean and returns with the ring. Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas, The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, (OUP, 1991).

Pushpak Viman, Mandi, c. 1650, courtesy San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego.



Myth Retold: Variants of the Story of Rama

Romila Thapar



As any myth does, the Ramayana too has grown through additions and changes, and its trajectory through Indian history is of particular interest to the historian. While carrying out a historical analysis of a myth one does not ask whether the events narrated in it happened or not. The question is: Who invented the myth and why? How has the consciousness of the past been captured and given form through the narrative? Romila Thapar examines the Valmiki *Ramayana* at various times in Indian history and, through an exploration of the Buddhist and Jaina variants of the Rama story, shows how they establish changes in authorship, language, audience and ideology.

Kumbhakarna battling monkeys and bears, mural in a chhatri, nineteenth century (?) Parashramapura, Shekhawati, Rajasthan. Photograph courtesy Gulammohammed Sheikh.

I remember some years ago how people in every locality of a city such as Delhi would gather to watch the Ramlila being performed. (This was before the television serial version killed such performances.) The Kumaonis, the Garhwalis, the Jats, all had their separate Ramlilas. They would ad lib the verses and bring in a lot of fascinating contemporary comment. I would make it a point of going there simply to listen to the commentary and literally hear, from year to year, the story unfold in its own way.

The creation of an epic is generally part of the oral tradition. At the root of the epic is a collection of fragmented stories recited by bards and poets. One of the ways in which epics are composed is by picking up narrative fragments and stringing them together resulting in a long story with little episodes coming in from here and there. This is very clearly demonstrated in the Mahabharata where there is what is called the 'boxing in' of stories: X is telling a story to Y and Y says, "Oh, this is exactly as it was in the case of Z," and X asks, "What was that?" and so the story of Z is brought in. And in the story of Z, someone is reminded about the story of A, which is then brought in. And so box after box slides into the original story.

Since the oral traditions on which the ancient epics are based are no longer with us, we historians have to rely on contemporary studies of oral history, where history can in some cases be reconstructed from such traditions using a specialised methodology. One can make out indications of how oral composers compose a story, the techniques and formulaic portions they use, how they construct the story in particular ways using recurring metaphors that have a certain meaning, and so on. This methodology can be applied more successfully to medieval Indian epics because they are relatively recent and there are still people and families that recite them and claim to know how the composition came about. But even if one applies these methods to, for example, the Mahabharata, the elements of the oral tradition come through and one can spot the points in time when something that was oral was taken over and converted into a literary form.

A historical analysis of myth does not mean asking whether the events narrated in it happened or not, but instead asking who is inventing that

A myth grows through additions and changes. So we have to ask what the trajectory was of the Valmiki *Ramayana* at various times in Indian history.

myth and why. I would argue that these texts do not claim historicity but reflect a historical consciousness, a consciousness that what they are narrating may have happened in the past. This would suggest that we investigate not the historicity of events narrated in the texts, but how the consciousness of the past itself has been captured and given form through the narrative. To me this seems to be the way in which one has to analyse what, for example, is being said in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. A myth grows through additions and changes. So we have to ask what the trajectory was of the Valmiki *Ramayana* at various times in Indian history. Why did this particular story, articulated in this particular form, capture popular imagination? When and why was it converted into a sacred text for the Vaishnava Bhagavata sect by representing Rama as an avatara of Vishnu?

Passing reference is made to what seems to have been an oral *rama-katha*, which was converted into a written *kavya* by Valmiki possibly during the fourth or third century BC, and then this was added to in the later periods. The Valmiki *Ramayana* became a hegemonic text from the late first millennium AD. It consists of seven books, and most Ramayana scholars accept that the first and the last book, the Bala-kanda and the Uttara-kanda, were later additions. It is in these additions that the emphasis is on Rama being an avatara. So when one talks about the original Valmiki *Ramayana* one is referring to books Two to Six. Current scholarship assumes that the Ramayana that Valmiki composed, and which was added to, was written over a period that stretched from 400 BC to 400 AD.

This chronological span of 800 years would include the two variants that I wish to discuss: the Buddhist version of the Rama story, a very short version known as the *Dasaratha Jataka* put together in possibly the second century BC; and the first of many

Jaina renderings of the story, the *Paumachariya*, composed by Vimala Suri in the early centuries AD. Variants of myths are the articulations of particular communities and reflect alternative perceptions. They not only give another version of the same story but also often indicate historical and ideological changes through the perspectives they present. Therefore they are, for the historian, absolutely crucial in understanding what both they and the original text were about. The original *rama-katha* does not survive, but going by the variants we can postulate that there must have been some kind of story involving these characters that was popular and was widely narrated.

Here I must point out that historians, who are concerned primarily with the twin dimensions of space and time, have doubts about some of what is popularly taken these days as given. For instance, is the present-day Ayodhya the same as the Ayodhya of the Valmiki *Ramayana*? Early Buddhist Pali texts refer to two towns where the Buddha preached frequently: Ayodhya and Saket. Ayodhya is consistently placed on the Ganges and not on the Sarayu. In the seventh century AD when the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang came to India he visited Ayodhya on the Sarayu and wrote about it as being a major Buddhist centre with many monasteries and Buddhist places of worship. No mention is made of a connection with the Rama story.

The location of Lanka is even more complicated, with earlier scholars placing it in the Vindhyan region, or in the upper Narmada valley towards Orissa, or in the Mahanadi delta. Those who have done detailed studies of the geography of the Valmiki *Ramayana* are not agreed on the exact location but are agreed that the general area was that of eastern UP—the region of Kosala and down to the Vindhyas and the Narmada, extending to the Mahanadi delta. But the identification of the Lanka of the Ramayana with the Sri Lanka of today remains popular, although there is no evidence of any such connection in traditional Sri Lankan sources. Had there been such a connection then at the very least, some mention would have been made of the rule of Ravana, but this is absent. The other problem with the Sri Lanka identification is that the earliest name of what we know as Sri Lanka is Tamraparni, which ancient Greek navigators called Taprobane, a 'Greek-isation' as it were, of Tamraparni. In Sri Lankan sources

of the early period, the island is referred to as Sinhala, the land of the lion. It is only after the fourth century AD that the name of the island is changed to Lanka. So the problem for historians is that the place names and dates don't match.

Getting back to the two variants, they establish a change of authorship, language, audience and ideology (a term I am using in the universal sense to mean the world of ideas that shapes a text), switching as they do from Buddhist to Brahmana /Vaishnavite to Jaina, and from Pali to Sanskrit to Prakrit. We tend to forget that all texts are written for a very specific audience. The Valmiki version was meant for the literati, people who knew Sanskrit well enough to appreciate poetry; the *Dasaratha Jataka* was open to a broader range of people such as urban householders and to monks, as also was the Jaina text. These were groups among whom Buddhism and Jainism had a substantial following.

Epics, by their very nature, are texts of nostalgia. The nostalgia is for a society that belongs to the past. This comes through in the writing and composition of the text. I would like to argue that these texts are actually trying to capture the essence of the society or various kinds of societies from the past, rather than the historicity of person and event.

I would also like to argue that they encapsulate the transition from clan-based societies to the emergence of kingdoms. Apart from the story in the Valmiki *Ramayana* there is another underlying theme, that of the clash between clan society and kingship—between Lanka's *rakshasa*s and the kingship of Ayodhya. The *atavika*s, primitive forest-dwelling people, or

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There were periods when clan societies and kingdoms existed side-by-side, and the transition from one to the other was gradual. Epics record this transition, nostalgically trying to recall a society that has changed.

else sophisticated city-dwelling *gana-sangha*s, assemblies, could both be organised as clan societies. Essentially the clan society is one that has no king. It has also been called an oligarchy, the rule of the best, and more recently it has been referred to as a chiefship because each clan has a chief, and the chiefs sit together in the assembly and take decisions. Membership of the clan is by birth and there are no castes. This ensures a degree of egalitarianism. Women too are more equal and have relatively more freedom. Essential to the functioning of the clan society are kin relations; there is a strong dependence on brothers, nephews, uncles, cousins and so on. But there are two categories of non-kin functionaries. One is the priest, who is seldom a member of the same clan and is either a Shaman or a regular priest performing *puja*s and other rituals of worship. The other is the labourer; and when a clan becomes wealthy it employs labour—men they seize as prisoners during raids on neighbouring clans—to cultivate its fields and help in production.

Kingship by contrast, is characterised by the centralisation of power in one family. The king owns the land, unlike in clan society where land and produce are commonly owned. Since the land is the king's private property it makes a significant difference to the way the society functions because there is a sharp difference between those that have access to power—the royal family, the ministers and the administrators—and those that don't. Ministers and administrators are usually not kinsfolk; they are picked for their expertise. Caste is an essential factor in the system of kingship—the *varna-ashrama* Dharma with its four *varna*s, and many *jati*s, the latter often closely tied to occupational groups. Kingship,

therefore, is a later development in terms of the evolution of societies. There were periods when clan societies and kingdoms existed side-by-side, and the transition from one to the other was gradual. Epics in particular record this transition, nostalgically trying to recall a society that has changed.

The Buddhist Variant

The Jataka stories are a compendium of birth stories that claim to be narrating the earlier lives of the Buddha in various ways at various times. The central character is an earlier avatara of the Buddha. In one of these, called the *Dasaratha Jataka*, Dasaratha, the raja of Banaras has three children by his senior wife: Rama Pandita, Lakkhana and Sita Devi. On the death of his senior wife, a junior wife is raised to the senior status. She is the mother of Bharata and she begins to assert herself. The father is a little worried that she might harm the children of the elder wife and he suggests to the children that they go into exile. They agree on a twelve-year exile to the Himalaya, not south India (exile in many Buddhist exile stories take people to the Himalaya). Nine years after this, Dasaratha dies. Bharata refuses to succeed him because he believes his elder brother should do so. After much wandering in the Himalaya he finds the three exiles. He breaks the news to them of Dasaratha's death. Lakkhana and Sita Devi faint with grief. And then Rama Pandita preaches to them on the impermanence of life and the inevitability of death. This is the crux of the story, illustrating Buddhist teaching. Rama Pandita refuses to go back because he had vowed to his father that he would stay away for twelve years. He gives his chappals to Bharata and says, "Put them on the throne and they'll guide you." After twelve years are up, Rama, Lakkhana and Sita return to Banaras. Rama and Sita rule for 16,000 years.

What is clear from the story is that the idea of primogeniture is very important in early kingship. The eldest son is always the successor to the ruler. The term 'raja' is ambiguous. Given the context of the story it is not referring to kingship but to a situation that is prior to kingship. 'Raja' is derived from the root '*raj*' meaning one who shines, the one who is the best, who is in the forefront. It can therefore mean a chief. Later on, kings picked up the term and expanded it into fancier terms like *maharaja*,

maharaja-adhiraja, and so on. In the Buddhist context, a raja is generally the chief of a clan. There is another famous Jataka story which refers to 60,000 Chedi Khattiya rajas. So if there are 60,000 rajas they can only be clan members or possibly the heads of clans. *Khattiya*, the Pali word for *kshatriya*, means 'lord of the fields' whereas in Sanskrit the word is derived from *kshatra* or power.

The heroes in Valmiki's *Ramayana* are ideal *kshatriyas*. Ayodhya is the ideal kingdom—this is repeated again and again particularly in the *Ayodhya-kanda*. It aligns closely with the description of the model kingdom in a text of around the same period, the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya. The *Arthashastra* describes the characteristics of a kingdom: it must have a king, ministers, administrators, a well-defined territory and a capital city; its revenue, which is largely agricultural and commercial, is brought to the treasury that is located in the capital city ; it must also have an army to defend its borders and allies to help when needed.

These requirements of a kingdom, or a state, are all there in the Valmiki *Ramayana* but not in the *Dasaratha Jataka*. Thus on the third day of their travel the three exiles come to the border of Kosala, which they cross, and then Rama turns to Sita and Lakshmana and says, that they have left Kosala. So the territory is clearly defined. The kingdom's capital is Ayodhya. Its basic economy is agrarian and there is constant mention of *dhanadhanya* and shops in the market are replete with grain. Mention is also made of *pura* and *nagara* (towns and townships) in the kingdom. As I said earlier, kingship requires the implementation and practice of the *varna-ashrama* Dharma, and caste is vital to the society of Ayodhya. Caste obligations are strongly reiterated:

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kshatriya values of conquest and protection must be defended and *brahmana*s shown deference; the use of violence is called for whenever the Brahmanical Dharma is in danger and needs to be protected.

There are some traces, though, of earlier forms of society, for example when the king is about to hold the *ashvamedha* and other ceremonies he consults with the elders, both of his family and others. In the clan society, typically, elders are always consulted if any serious decision is to be made or action taken. The *praja*, the subjects, try to hold back Rama, Sita and Lakshmana from going into exile despite their knowing there is a royal order—once again, a remnant of the old clan society. We are constantly reminded that *arajya*, the absence of kingship, is a state of chaos. The exile arises out of a crisis of primogeniture; if primogeniture had been observed there would have been no crisis because Rama would automatically have become the king.

I would like to argue that the society of the *rakshasa* in Valmiki's *Ramayana* is a clan-based society and therefore inherently the enemy of the kingdom of Ayodhya. (Not all clans are enemies, though; the Vanaras, although a clan society, are allies.) In its organisation and functioning, the *rakshasa* society is more like the *gana-sangha* and conforms little to the Kautilyan model. Ravana is the chief who, in a crisis, always consults his main support who are his kinsmen. The *rakshasas* have no territorial boundaries; they wander freely everywhere. Access to large forested areas was of course essential to the basic occupation of clan societies: hunting and gathering, pastoralism, shifting cultivation, and tapping mineral wealth and forest produce. Therefore, since the forest was crucial to their society and their economy, people encroaching into the forest were to be resisted. So it was natural that Rama entering the forest would be resisted by the forest dwellers, the *rakshasas*.

Lanka is described as resplendent but little is said about the source of this wealth. One suspects that this is the poet's fantasy coming into play. The fabulous wealth of the city of Lanka is doubtless an attempt to show that this was an extraordinary enemy that Rama was contesting. The *rakshasa*s do not observe caste, or the rules of commensality, pollution or marriage, which are crucial to caste societies, and they attack Brahmanical rites.

The *Paumachariya* retells the skeletal story of the Valmiki *Ramayana* but from another perspective. The characters in the various variants are all Jainas, and this includes Ravana.

They dress like forest dwellers and the epithet that is commonly used for them is *nilanjana*, antimony, associating them with a dark colour. They are also connected with sorcery. Their form of worship is strange, and is conducted sometimes in *chaitya*s, local, non-Vedic shrines, which subsequently became the name for Buddhist halls of worship.

The Jaina Variant

Now I'll come to the third variant, the *Paumachariya*, which reads like a Jain commentary on Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Vimala Suri simply says, the existing versions of the Rama story are untrue and I will now tell you the story as it actually happened. And the *Paumachariya* in fact retells the skeletal story of the Valmiki *Ramayana* but from another perspective. The characters in the various variants are all Jainas, and this includes Ravana. There is a pre-determined hostility between Rama and Ravana: Rama is what in cosmography is called Vasudeva, and Ravana, the Prativasudeva, is his opposite.

There are no *rakshasa*s in the *Paumachariya* as in the Valmiki version. The main characters belong to four major lineages: the Ikshvaku and the Somavamsa, known to the earlier work; and then the two other lineages Harivamsha and the Vidyadhara. The Harivamsha has to do with the Vrishnis and Krishna neither of which have a presence in the Paumachariya. The Vidyadhara lineage acquires the maximum respect because it is associated with learning. Of the Ikshvakus, Sagara is remembered as a great hero, as he also is in the Valmiki *Ramayana*. The major clan associated with the Vidyadhara is the Meghavahana—literally, the cloud vehicle, and it migrated to Lanka under the leadership of its chief,

Ravana. So Ravana is a human, not a *rakshasa*; he is a Meghavahana belonging to the Vidyadhara lineage. The lesser line is the Vanaravamsha, who are humans and not monkeys, and are settled in Kishkindha.

There are, in the *Paumachariya*, a series of what one might call rationalisations of Valmiki's fantasies. To give you a couple of examples, the Vanaras were not monkeys but humans who carried a monkey emblem; the monkey was their totem. Vimala Suri tells us that Ravana was not ten-headed but had a superb necklace of nine large gemstones, beautifully polished, and each gem reflected his head. Therefore he was called Dashagriva. He is also called Akashamargi because he has access to an aerial chariot, which is, of course, the *pushpakavimana* in which he kidnaps Sita in the Valmiki version. The exile of Rama, in this version, is through the Vindhya forests. Vimala Suri is writing in the early centuries AD, when much of these forested areas were being cleared and cultivated which allowed the establishing of kingdoms.

We should give serious attention to the variants because they are the articulation of those who have a different version of the story and we have to ask ourselves why there are these differences. They were not just casual changes made to the narrative but statements incorporating diverse views over the representation of the past. There is bound to be some seepage between the earlier and the later texts, and from one version to another. This seepage introduces a different perspective. And I think that the *Paumachariya* is doing precisely that: introducing an alternative perspective.

Historically these are not of course the only variants. The essential human sensitivities that the story touches has resulted in multiple variants all over the Indian sub-continent and beyond to south-east Asia. In each case the

We should give serious attention to the variants because they are the articulation of those who have a different version of the story.

change in narrative has to do with a local situation or custom. In this manner the story gets appropriated by a local community. The Ramlilas performed by various local communities were merely continuing a tradition going back many centuries.

The Germ of a Conflict?

But to return to the three variants that I have discussed, I am puzzled by the changes in each. Among other things, they seem to involve the politics of early clans, which may be a possible reason for the elaboration of the *rama-katha* into the Valmiki *Ramayana* and the counter epic, the *Paumachariya*. A statement is made—and this is where my speculation comes in—in the Ramayana, more or less as an aside, and briefly in the Mahabharata, as also in the Puranas, that certain clans descended from Yadu and coming largely from western India, attacked Ayodhya at some point and devastated it. These clans were the Haihayas, the Talajanghas who were referred to as *rakshasa*s very often, and also the Chedis. The Chedis had a very high status since their much revered ancestor Uparichara, had been given an aerial chariot by Indra himself, and was therefore referred to as Akashamargi, the traveller in the sky.

Sagara, in the Ikshvaku line, an ancestor of Rama, sought revenge for this attack. He fought the Chedis and the Haihaya clans and drove them back to the region of Mahishmati—now known as a famous archaeological site south of Ujjain on the river Narmada.

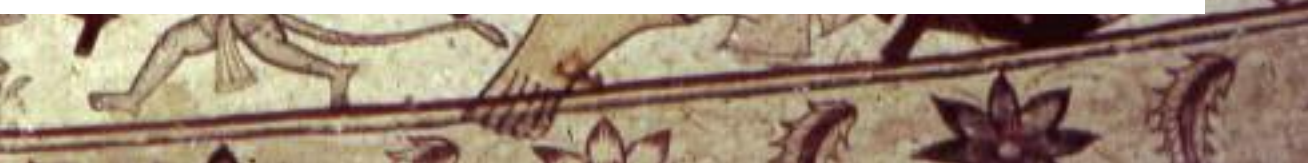
Could this have been the germ of the epic conflict: the two major clans confronting each other, the Ikshvakus of whom Rama is a descendent, and the Chedis? Was Ravana linked to the Chedis? The Ikshvakus are very familiar to us from the lineage of Rama, what was later called the Suryavamsha. The Chedis and the Haihayas were then assigned to the other lineage called the Chandravamsha. Both lineages were named after the major planets, the sun and the moon, and were thus both antagonistic and complementary. The Chedis are a very important clan in the Buddhist texts—I mentioned the reference to 60,000 Chedi rajas. The *Paumachariya* tells us that Ravana was of the Meghavahana line and opposed to the Ikshvakus. Given all this information we could ask, not necessarily if the attack on Ayodhya and the retaliation actually happened, but more simply whether there is historical reference to the

Meghavahanas. Fortunately there is an early inscription that provides a clue to their identity. A king called Kharavela ruling in Orissa in about the first century BC issued a long inscription, which is somewhat autobiographical. His provides data on his birth, his upbringing, where he went, what he did, his conquests and campaigns and the usual narrative of a king's life. He also claims to be an ardent Jaina. All royal inscriptions begin by giving the identity of the king. The dynasty he belongs to, his lineage and its origins are stated. Therefore, Kharavela begins his inscription by stating his identity as Chedi and belonging to the Meghavahana lineage.

Many dynasties claiming Haihaya and Chedi ancestry established kingdoms all along the Vindhyas and the river Narmada in the early centuries AD. They even used their own calculation of time-reckoning that came to be called the Chedi era beginning in the equivalent of 248 AD. A number of them were also patrons of the Jaina sects. Dynasties claiming a Chedi connection were a major political presence in the region. This is the same area where some of us have been locating Lanka. A hint of this connection between Ravana and the Chedis comes in indirect ways. Ravana in Valmiki's *Ramayana* is frequently described as being like a dark rain-laden thundercloud, like a Meghavahana. One of Ravana's claims to fame was his aerial chariot. And this was the boast of the Chedis, referring to Indra's gift to their ancestor Uparichara.

Was Valmiki then retelling the story of the conflict with Rama instead of Sagara and Ravana instead of the leader of the Haihayas and the Chedis, demonising the latter into *rakshasas*? Vimala Suri would have had two reasons for writing a counter-epic. One was to de-demonise, as it were, the *rakshasa*s and show them as part of the Meghavahana lineage of the Chedi rulers who were patrons of the Jainas; and the other was to convert the popular *rama-katha* into a narrative supporting Jaina teaching in the same way as it had been converted to the worship of Vishnu.

This period was the beginning of the propagation of Vaishnavism by the Bhagavata sect. It was a politically important ideology because it introduced the idea of the king being an avatara of a deity. This is not the same as the concept of divine will; it is simply the belief that the king also has



deity in him and this enhances his position. It is in complete opposition to the clan societies that did not have avataras. The Bhagavatas used the epics to reiterate the centrality of the worship of Vishnu, of caste in the form of *varna-ashrama* Dharma and of *brahmana* status. The ethic of social egalitarianism of the Buddhists and Jainas was opposed to the social inequality of caste. Hierarchy and social stratification were not important to the social ethics and practice of these and other heterodox sects.

We are told that the Bhrigus were originally the priests of the Chedis and the Haihayas, but they quarrelled and the priests left the clans to migrate to other patrons. Were the Bhrigus responsible for adding the two later books, the Bala-kanda and Ayodhya-kanda, converting Valmiki's *Ramayana* into a text of the Bhagavata sect for the worship of Vishnu? Were the Bhagavata group in competition for patronage with the Buddhists and Jainas, particularly the former, and were they perhaps trying to convert this highly popular secular text, the *rama-katha*, into a religious text? This would have been a parallel to Buddhist authors writing about the Buddha. And the Jainas may have thought that if the Bhagavatas could convert the text then so could they.

The puzzle is that if this was the story behind the writing of the Valmiki *Ramayana*, why was this not referred to directly in either of the other texts, or in later commentaries on the texts? Or have we not noticed such references? Is our negligence in making this observation due to the Bhagavatisation of the epics being extremely successful? And if so, then we have to concede that the Bhrigus, who perhaps introduced the changes, were undoubtedly clever scholars.

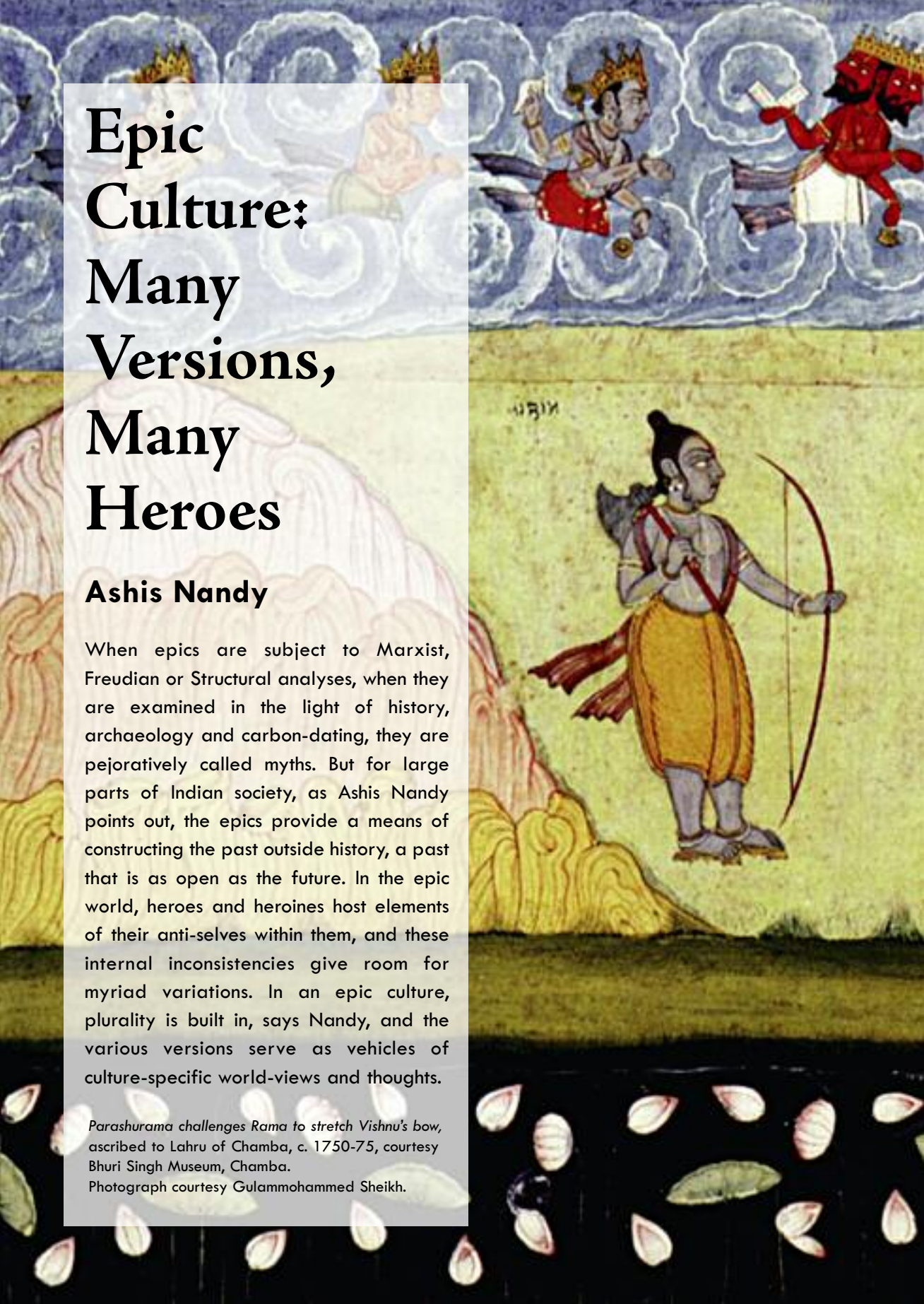
In comparing the three versions, however, it seems that the popular *rama-katha* was being re-told in different ways. The question that we then need to ask is whether we should insist that only one of these, the *Ramayana* of Valmiki was the authentic story? Can we seek its roots in history and treat all other versions as variants, or do we have to treat all versions as variants of a now-lost original?

Romila Thapar enjoys researching and writing on early Indian history.

Epic Culture: Many Versions, Many Heroes

Ashis Nandy

When epics are subject to Marxist, Freudian or Structural analyses, when they are examined in the light of history, archaeology and carbon-dating, they are pejoratively called myths. But for large parts of Indian society, as Ashis Nandy points out, the epics provide a means of constructing the past outside history, a past that is as open as the future. In the epic world, heroes and heroines host elements of their anti-selves within them, and these internal inconsistencies give room for myriad variations. In an epic culture, plurality is built in, says Nandy, and the various versions serve as vehicles of culture-specific world-views and thoughts.



Parashurama challenges Rama to stretch Vishnu's bow, ascribed to Lahru of Chamba, c. 1750-75, courtesy Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba.
Photograph courtesy Gulammohammed Sheikh.

Before I come to the tradition of epics in Indic civilisation, while not restricting myself to the Ramayana, let me start with an apparent digression that has to do with the unique role that epics or *purana*s continue to play in South- and Southeast-Asian cultures. That role cannot be fully captured by the English term 'epic'.

It is customary to trace the beginning of the Indic civilisation in canonical texts like the Vedas and Upanishads and see them as the unifying threads of the civilisation. That is what the nineteenth-century reform movements affirmed and that is what modern India and modern Hinduism, born in the first half of the nineteenth century, uncritically swallowed. Strangely, of the few persons who openly dissented from this way of looking at India, one is our national poet—an anti-nationalist national poet, but a national poet all the same. (This part of the world seems to specialise in such inner contradictions.) Rabindranath Tagore not only wrote and scored the Indian national anthem but also scored India's second national anthem written by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Bande Mataram*. He also wrote and scored the national anthem of Bangladesh, which has not always been on the best of terms with India, and scored the national anthem of Sri Lanka, which is at the moment experiencing a paroxysm of nationalism. This is a record unparalleled in the known history of nation-states and unlikely to be matched in the future. It is interesting that although Bangladesh has experienced some fundamentalist stirrings and Sri Lanka has had problems with India, there has been no movement in either country to change its national anthem. This is worth remembering on the 150th anniversary of Tagore this year.

Now, Tagore came to believe that the clues to India's civilisational unity lay not in the Vedas and the Upanishads but in the medieval *sant*s and mystics and in the Bhakti and Sufi movements. It must not have been easy for him to arrive at this position. It negated the fundamentals of the reformist Brahmo sect to which he and his family belonged. The Brahmos, like the other major reform movements born in colonial times, believed that Hinduism, with its myriad local variations and highly diverse popular cultures, had to be radically reformed on the basis of the Vedas and the Upanishads and cleansed of its myriad superstitions,

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ritual excesses and pagan practices. For Tagore to give so much importance to the domain of consciousness defined by the Bhakti and Sufi movements—albeit led by great mystics and creative minds like Nanak, Kabir and Lalan—must have been both a radical departure and a form of self-defiance. More so because, though the domain did not exclusively belong to any particular region, language or religion, it looked like a cauldron of diversity that paradoxically celebrated another kind of social unity—one that lacked a politically usable centre of gravity.

This was also, more or less, the position of the official father of the nation Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Understandably so, for while Gandhi belonged to the Bhakti tradition, his mother belonged to the Pranami or Parnami sect, which at least one scholar, Dominique Khan, has recently called a lost sect of Shia Islam. (All this has become controversial today and the Parnamis, I am told, have become more secretive about their sacred text because it includes long extracts from the Koran. Their temples were earlier architecturally Indo-Islamic, a mix of temple and mosque. Some might even identify them as instances of Indo-Saracenic architecture. Now, after the experiences of the community during Partition—the Parnamis were victims of a major massacre at Bhawalpur in West Punjab—they build with a vengeance temples that replicate the look of what they believe is a proper, standardised, Hindu temple.)

Why did both the father of the nation and the national poet think this way? I suspect that both recognised that it was in the shared spirituality of medieval India that the real clues to India's unity and uniqueness lay strewn. And this spirituality, in turn, was primarily defined by the priority given to the major Indian epics, particularly

the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and to South Asia's diverse but nonetheless shared musical, literary and other artistic traditions inspired by a popular spirituality that transcended the borders of religions, denominations, castes and creeds. The entire tradition has been deeply participatory. The finest example is probably the Mahabharata, which originally began as a *gatha* of some 10,000 *shlokas* and ended up as an epic of roughly 100,000 *shlokas*. These 90,000 couplets were added—the more Westernised among us might say 'interpolated'—over the centuries and one suspects that the epic perhaps attained some kind of completion by the beginning of the medieval times.

I now move to my second proposition. One of the crucial components of this popular consciousness, which I call epic culture, is the tendency to bypass history and sometimes become explicitly anti-historical. This is partly because in South Asia, as in some other African and Asian societies, not only is the future open but so also is the past. (Once, in the West too, utopias could be located in the past. The Biblical Garden of Eden was a utopia and time began with it. But those days are long past.) In the modern West, of which Africans and Asians today are in awe, the future now tends to be open and the past increasingly closed by the expanding reach of history. At the same time, the past and the present are seen to have the capacity to shape the future. In practical terms this means that the future is less open than it at first seems. As a result, in many contemporary ideologies, utopianism, as a means of generating visions of the future, remains a pejorative term. It invokes the impractical, the romantic and the far-fetched.

These developments parallel the efforts in the last two centuries to historicise the past and the epic culture itself to make them amenable to centralised control. Where successful, such attempts have reduced epics to texts waiting to be examined in the harsh light of history, political economy, archaeology and carbon dating.

When Epics Turn Myths

Epics can also be interpreted in terms of analytic categories popularised by the major ideological schools of our times. When you do so, epics become

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myths in a pejorative sense. They become targets of demystification, which is usually guided by the belief that once the secrets of myths have been unravelled, the myths no longer remain mystifying. For the last 150 years all these schools, whether pushing for Marxist analyses in terms of class or production relations, Freudian analyses in terms of psychosexuality and psychopathology, or Structural analyses a là Levi Strauss and Michel Foucault, make the same tacit claim: where there were myths there would now be philosophy or, even better, the certitudes born of hard, empirical knowledge. Sadly, the wide use and popularity of such specialised interpretations have not given the ideologues the certitude and cognitive security they have sought. After so many decades, they still expect the same triumphant demystification of the same myths, accompanied often by the same slogans. As if the ideologues were never fully convinced by their own rhetoric. As if they believed that there still persisted some dark mystery in the decoded myths that did not allow them to relax their guard against the seductive power of the myths.

This dilemma dogs the practitioners of many contemporary knowledge systems. They are afraid of recognising the inner strengths of a civilisation organised around a dense network of myths, at the heart of which are a few eponymous epics, accompanied by their myriad lowbrow, local or regional variations cutting across innumerable social divisions. Modern knowledge seems oblivious of the partiality towards the classical and the canonical over the non-classical and the non-canonical in a national state. The classics allow the state to claim access to the heart of a culture and to establish a quid pro quo with it. Once you move into the more amorphous, multivalent products of human imagination and try to make sense of them, it is like grappling with a noisy,

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boisterous democracy as opposed to a quiet, disciplined meritocracy. Even the rulers of democracies that are large, diverse and unruly like to have despotic regimes around their borders; they are easier to manage or manipulate. Democracy is a dirty, messy affair that involves coping with a whole range of political forces, many of them unmanageable. Epics and their myriad variations represent that diversity, chaos and resistance to the ambitious projects of the state. No regime, however deeply committed to multiculturalism, likes to further complicate matters for itself by entering the domain of popular culture and dealing with the inner diversity of religions, castes and the countless customary practices with their tacit normative frames (*lokachara*).

In sum, it is written into the processes of state formation and nation-building that the ruling culture of the state is more comfortable with the classical and the canonical. Accepting the plural, the decentralised, and the local is to negotiate the non-negotiable. Hence the frantic attempts in India, too, to locate the source of Indian identity and unity in the Vedas and Upanishads, despite what the two tallest Indians of our times insisted: namely, that the unifying principle of Indianness can be found in the Bhakti and Sufi movements of medieval India. Hence also the struggle to disown the awareness that, unlike in Europe, the medieval period has been culturally and spiritually one of the most creative in our past.

Here, I am not supplying a critique of the classics but situating them in the contemporary politics of culture. Sourcing the cultural unity of India from its medieval traditions—from the multi-vocal spiritual figures, mystics, theologians, poets, musicians and composers—becomes a clumsy affair and demands a different set of political skills. This strand of tradition

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cannot be that easily controlled or monitored through the state's existing reward-punishment system and put to the service of the state. Indeed, the plurality of the spiritual and the cultural is even more difficult to 'manage' than the plurality of politics, for you cannot even hierarchise, re-order or retool revealed texts or strains of spirituality associated with them. Through the *puranas*, which have been at the centre of the popular culture that has kept the lifestyles and potentialities of our communities alive, that disorder paradoxically acts as the binding cement of an invisible confederation of our cultures.

It is no accident that Gandhi, knowing that he had to work within a tradition primarily built on orality, also believed history to be of secondary importance. I am not inviting you to junk history. I am speaking of the modern love for history that often borders on the obsessive. In this love affair, it is obligatory not to recognise that there are other ways of constructing the past, even though many societies, including large parts of Indian society, have lived with pasts constructed outside history and observing other principles.

Historiography depends heavily on archives and on empirical data that can be certified as reliable and verifiable. Once under their spell, one learns to live by them. That is the unacknowledged, tacit theory of memory in history; there is no place in that theory for memory work. The theory admits no cultivated forgetfulness or anti-memories—memories which are unforgettable but which one must struggle to forget on grounds of compassion, ethics, psychological health and ideas of a good life. I have been studying for the last fifteen years the violence that accompanied the partitioning of British India into India

and Pakistan. The study has surprised me not only by the extent to which human beings can be cruel, bloodthirsty and greedy but also by the extent to which they can be magnanimous, brave, self-sacrificing and ethical. Two-fifth of the survivors we interviewed told us that someone from the opposition helped them to survive and/or knew of someone else who received such help. Unfortunately, almost all our interviews were done in India and the respondents were mostly Hindus and Sikhs. For Pakistan and Bangladesh, all we have are a few scattered cases and the highly suggestive work of Ahmed Saleem, the Pakistani writer and human rights activist. They show a similar trend. I doubt if any other genocide in the last 100 years can match this record.

That is why I am not particularly surprised that, without the help of psychiatrists and psychotherapists, the survivors we interviewed had not done badly. And most of them have done so by locating their experiences outside normal life. A Pakistani friend told me about her grandmother who saw her family being butchered by Sikhs. The event had haunted her throughout life; she used to have nightmares and wake up screaming. Towards the end of her life she was once asked by my friend, "You must be very bitter about the Sikhs?" She said, "No. At that time they had gone mad and so had we." She coped with her memories by locating them outside the sphere of the normal and the rational.

In such extreme conditions, the epics come in handy as ethical frames, pegs of memory and, ultimately, as metaphors of life. If you have the means of constructing the past outside history, you have other manoeuvres that allow you to inject into the past, subjectivities exiled from history and from other neatly controlled disciplinary pockets such as psychoanalytic case histories and ethnographies. These manoeuvres allow for an expanded space for ethics and compassion. They do not deliver judgements the way a court or a tribunal does, but they do deliver them nonetheless. With one exception I have not found a single killer from our study of Partition who is at peace with himself in his old age. When some say that Partition memories constitute the greatest unwritten epic of India, they

perhaps have these issues in mind. And that is also perhaps why, while talking of epics, I have unwittingly arrived at these odd examples.

Room for All Versions

In an epic culture, there is no authoritative, sanctioned hierarchy of epics. In it, Valmiki's *Ramayana*, because it is in Sanskrit, may technically enjoy more respect than the *Ramayana* of Tulsidas but only technically. Few will claim for Valmiki automatic priority over Tulsidas. People love Tulsidas and enjoy the right to believe that his *Ramayana* is the one to live by. The answer to Tulsidas, in turn, is both Valmiki and the other *Ramayana*s which one may or may not acknowledge as one's own but which one knows exist. Nobody in Bengal has read Tulsidas but they have read Krittibas Ojha, in whose *Ramayana* Rama eats, on festive occasions, Bengali sweets. If you ask readers of Tulsi they will claim primacy for their *Ramayana* over that of Krittibas, though they might not have read a word of Krittibas or even heard of him. The readers of Krittibas return the compliment. Without having read a word of Tulsi they believe that their *Ramayana* is better. But they are reconciled to the existence of both.

I sometimes feel that this attitude towards others' epics is a necessary part of the culture of epics. The heart of the Ramayana is not its distinctive story line but the ability of the different *Ramayana*s to carry our burden of everyday sorrows, disappointments, anxieties and fears and give them a bearable meaning. That is what makes the Ramayana an epic. An epic has to be a flexible metaphor of life. As experiences change, its meaning has to change, too.

The different *Ramayana*s, *Mahabharata*s and sometimes *Vishnupurana*s of the different language groups and regional cultures of India are a second line of

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*jatipurana*s of the various communities that populate this subcontinent. They serve not only as tools of self-interpretation but also as vehicles of culture-specific worldviews and thought. In a society composed of living communities, the local epics endorse the belief of each community that it is unique and surrounded by lesser mortals. However, each community also knows that other communities, too, have their private 'histories' or *jatipurana*s, in which others do not fare well either. And they have learnt to live with that. This is also a part of what I have called an epic culture and a marker of another culture of cosmopolitanism. In this culture, the good and the evil, the gods and the demons, coexist; they are both necessary for the completion of the story.

The readers and listeners of the *purana*s participate in that worldview and even intervene in it. Every *kathakar* has his or her distinctive recital of a *purana*. No scholar can lay down the rule of how a character or an event should be interpreted by a person or a community. Hence there are temples in Himachal Pradesh dedicated to unlikely gods drawn from the Mahabharata, such as the evil king Duryodhana and his friend and ally Karna, the disowned eldest brother of the Pandavas; there are tens of thousands of devotees of Ravana, the ultimate demon or Brahmarakshasa, in North Bengal, and there is a temple of Ravana's more benign brother, Vibhishana, in Sri Lanka. No demon is entirely ungodly, no god fully god-like. A. Sashikanth's film[1] *Kelai Draupadi* beautifully captures the extent of the 'play' that might be available in a *purana*. If Michael Madhusudan Dutt reaffirmed that even gods were not immune to 'demonisation', Sashikanth's modest documentary reaffirms that, even today, no epic character is immune to deification either.

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In an epic culture, plurality is built in. More than a thousand miles away from Mathura in north India is Madurai in Tamil Nadu. The residents of Madurai will not be thrilled if you call Madurai a copy of Mathura. To them, Madurai is at least as sacred as Mathura, if not more. They can offer elaborate arguments and a mythic past to support their position. Likewise, the Ayudhya (Ayutthaya), which occupies an especial place in Thai history, certainly does not look to the Thais like an inferior version or copy of Ayodhya in north India. This 'strange' plurality, too, is a vital component of the epic culture.

I have given you a few clues to the cultural location of epics in the Indic civilisation. I now turn to the other part of my story—to the heroic, un-heroic and anti-heroic heroes in these epics. Epics are defined by their heroes, even when the heroines are the more powerful figures in them and shape the flow of events and determine the fate of the heroes. The Mahabharata is the prime example of this. Why this is so is a question that has not been seriously asked.

Psychologically speaking, the character traits and formative life-experiences of the epic heroes tend to be more universal than the narrative principles of the epics they populate, which differ from culture to culture. For instance, you cannot add to or modify Homer's work (though some changes might have entered in the earlier centuries) but we have, over the centuries, added to and subtracted from the *purana*s, mostly the former. Even re-writing epics as epics will be difficult or impossible in many cultures, unless one attempts it as a stylised creative venture. Usually, in modern societies, you can re-write an epic only as a novel, opera, play, movie or other standardised art forms so that your creation is clearly separated from the actual epic, which is seen as a reservoir of cultural values, memories and subjectivities, and as a doorway to a people's cultural self. The latter must stand apart from you in its pristine form, almost like a grand mausoleum. In our part of the world, rewriting the Mahabharata or Ramayana is an ongoing process even today, though it is being made more difficult as we modernise. (The sources of the recent hostility shown to A.K. Ramanujan's essay on the plurality of the Ramayana lie here.)

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Incidentally, on a more humble scale, we are also producing, editing or discarding *jatipurana*s to keep pace with the changing socioeconomic status and political fate of communities.

Not only have we been writing new versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata but we have also been relocating them in new cultural spaces, according to the needs of communities, castes, sects, religions and language groups. Over the centuries, even Vyasa's *Mahabharata* has changed in many recognisable and unrecognisable ways. Visibly, it has expanded to something like ten times its original size. Let us not forget that part of the story either. On the other hand, it is fairly certain that the sacred status of the Mahabharata of the Meos of Rajasthan, about which Shail Mayaram has written so elegantly, will attenuate. The community has been the victim of a number of major anti-Muslim riots and is learning, some Meos say, not to ride two boats at the same time. Many of the odd controversies we confront today are partly a result of the freedoms that we Indians and many non-Indians have taken for granted.

We should not nurture the illusion that those who seek to censor such use of our epics are fanatics, irrational and antediluvian, trying to defend the 'purity' of sacred texts. These censorship-mongers are usually direct products of European colonial concepts of a 'proper' religion and their goal is nothing less than 'protecting' India's epics, and the gods and goddesses figuring in them, from insults from modern readers. They are, therefore, particularly hard on interpolations of the fantastic or supernatural kind or anything that looks even vaguely erotic. For these have been the stigmata of our gods and goddesses since colonial times. Many of them are keen to end up with

a proud cache of classical texts cleansed of their 'absurdities' and 'eroticism' and boast of an official list of classics and an official concept of the divine. They want an unambiguous, manageable and predictable high culture of religion. The Indian state's demand is not much different. (The religious cultures of South Asians—and Southeast and West Asians—are changing. Previously most believers felt that their gods and goddesses protected them; now they feel that they have to protect their gods and goddesses. Can it be that deeper doubts and scepticism underlie their faith in these godless times? Is their arrogant belief that they have to protect the divine from indignities heaped on it by the nonbelievers a way of protecting themselves from an awareness of the cracks in their own beliefs?)

Here there is a difference between *shruti* and *smarta* texts. Nobody dares to write another Veda or an Upanishad but the *smarta* texts are another matter. People do sometimes have the ambition of writing another *Ramayana* or at least a small, humble *purana*. Elsewhere I have told the story of a Muslim writer in Hyderabad whose life's ambition was to write a new Telugu *Ramayana*; he was killed in a communal riot and the *Ramayana* remained incomplete. I found the story particularly moving because he was killed at a time when the Ramayana itself had become a source of religious violence and communal tension.

No Fixed Heroes

Like epics elsewhere, Indian epics too sometimes have one hero, sometimes more than one. However, to complicate matters, they can also have different heroes in different versions. The storylines, too, can vary over regions, languages and social divisions, turning heroes into minor characters and villains into heroes. Years ago, when I told literary theorist D.R. Nagaraj how Karna had emerged as a hero in late-nineteenth century Bengal, he immediately told me that in some older, lesser known *Mahabharata*s in south India, Karna was already the hero. I stuck to my ground because Karna had emerged a hero in Bengal mainly because modern traits were attributed to him and he was seen as living a besieged life in a traditional society. He emerged not through new versions of the epic but through new readings of the existing *Mahabharata*s. And these readings had something in common.

I must also recount my encounter with the pioneering scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose who, 100 years ago, in a letter to his friend Rabindranath Tagore, argued that by modern criteria—individualism, irrepressible achievement drive, emphasis on acquired rather than on inherited social status, and defiance of social hierarchy—the real hero of the Mahabharata was Karna, and that the poet should therefore take the initiative to identify Karna as the modern hero of an ancient epic. For Karna, all said, was a self-made man who rose from the bottom of society, defying an entrenched aristocracy keen to humiliate him and deny him his due. In response, Tagore wrote his brief verse play, *Karna-Kunti Samvad*, perhaps the first modern reading of the story of Karna, in the first decade of the twentieth century. (Tagore's rendering was not as one-dimensional as Bose might have wished. That, however, is another story.)

Everyone did not agree with that reading; some sought to deny Karna his new heroic status. Irawati Karve's essay on Karna in her book[2] *Yuganta* is one of the more impressive, last-ditch efforts to fight the tendency to find a hero in Karna. She did not live to see the full impact of the influential, highly imaginative Marathi novel *Mrutyunjay* by Shivaji Sawant. But she probably anticipated the emergence of Karna as the new hero of the Mahabharata in modernising India.

Irawati Karve's 'dissent' did not go far. Hundred years after Tagore wrote *Karna-Kunti Samvad*, as if in reply to her, things have gone farther. In popular Indian cinema one finds how the discovery of Karna as a modern hero with modern qualities has been pushed to its logical conclusion. His story no longer ends in tragedy: he is triumphant, and wins his mother's acceptance, too. In popular cinema, in films such as Maniratnam's *Dalapathi* and Rakesh Roshan's *Karan Arjun*, the life of Karna has a happy ending. The tragic has been erased.

The aggressive, martial qualities Rama has acquired in recent times are also new and, by now, well known. The Ramjanmabhumi movement went to town with the new image of Rama, forgetting that Ayodhya, where the grand Ram Mandir was to be located after vandalising the Babri Masjid, was a Vaishnava city and its reigning deity was not Rama the king but Rama the incarnation of Vishnu. The latter had

If a hero is aggressively masculine, he must display a touch of femininity, and if a great warrior, he must display at an appropriate moment his non-martial self, too.

seemed too weak and effeminate to Michael Madhusudan Dutt, too. But then, his *Meghnadbadh Kavya* can also serve as another *Ramayana* for the large community of Ravana worshippers in northern Bengal, a community which still observes Ramnavami, a festival that celebrates Rama's triumph over Ravana, as a day of mourning.

The legitimacy for such dissent often derives from a major feature of the *puranas*, which the likes of Madhusudan Dutt never fully appreciated: our epic heroes and heroines host elements of their anti-selves within themselves. If a hero is aggressively masculine, he must display a touch of femininity, and if a great warrior, he must display at an appropriate moment his non-martial self, too. (The ideal woman, too, must transcend gender boundaries to have within her a clear trace of masculinity, and a touch of what the popular culture of sport nowadays calls the killer instinct.) That allows the protagonists to cross the boundaries of their self and also access its negation. If you take away that play with not-self or anti-self, you diminish the psychological range of the protagonists. One suspects this to be part of a larger philosophy of life. (As it happens, cross-cultural studies of creativity among scientists and artists have consistently shown a significant correlation between creativity and the ability to cross gender boundaries. And even without such studies, many in this part of the world noticed the link between this ability and some forms of spiritual attainment.)

Bankimchandra tried to turn Krishna into a proper Semitic god, all perfect and omnipotent. It did not catch on. Everyone remembers the effort as an intellectual feat, but it has little influence on the religious life of Indians and has not altered their expectations from the *puranic* heroes. The

heroes continue to be their recalcitrant, internally inconsistent selves. In recent times, some scholars have tried to identify and edit out the 'inconsistencies' as interpolations. They too have been ineffective. Some of them know what they are doing but have nonetheless given in to the temptation to make the epics a more respectable enterprise of our forefathers, ignoring reasons why the inconsistencies might have been accepted by generations of Indians. In the *puranic* world, perfection must include within it a touch of imperfection. Even gods and demons mark out not a clean dichotomy but two ends of a continuum. Many modern scholars might agree that the Mahabharata should have no space for dying Duryodhana's majestic chastisement of Krishna, towards the fag end of the last battle. But in the popular consciousness, that Krishna too has his space. People know how to balance this part of the story by granting greater sacredness to the child Krishna, Balakrishna, than to Krishna the king. Krishna's story is not complete without his last encounter with Duryodhana. Certainly his humble death, which he accepts as the consequence of a curse, and the destruction of his entire community are also essential parts of his life.

But even that idea of the death of a god has become less acceptable now to many educated Hindus. The life-story of a god, with a beginning and an end, looks like the attribution of human imperfections to a god—a blasphemy and an obvious interpolation. But, as I have already mentioned, there is a temple for Duryodhana in Himachal Pradesh, as there is one for Karna not far away from that of his loyal friend and benefactor. They were deified much before the moderns thought of them as possible modern heroes. The diversity of Hinduism takes good care of not only the epics but also of many ideological sects and reform movements that have sought to re-engineer Hinduism and its sacred texts featuring innumerable gods and goddesses during the last two centuries.

Qualities of Epic Heroes

Despite manifest differences, there are some common qualities in epic heroes the world over, and these perhaps make the epics identifiable as epics even outside their cultures of

origin. First, time-transcending heroes in the major epics of the world usually have a deviant or mysterious history of birth. Sigmund Freud, writing on Moses as the emancipator of the Jews from slavery in Egypt and their supreme lawgiver, finds enough clues in the texts to propose that Moses was a prince belonging to the Egyptian nobility who rebelled against his own kind. He was an outsider who became an insider. From the writings of Otto Rank and Joseph Campbell, too, one learns that there has to be some play of alien selves within epic heroes to account for the ever-intriguing mix in them of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the earthly and the unearthly, and the intimate and the distant. Perhaps that also is a reason why they are open-ended enough to make sense to diverse communities and cultures and concurrently stand diverse interpretations and uses. They cannot be owned by any community or culture; nor can any interpretation of them be frozen or clinched.

A record of exile or a momentous journey is another crucial feature of epic heroes. In this respect, too, Indian epics are not different. The exile can be direct or indirect, territorial or psychological, realistic or mythic. The journey, too, is critical to the making of the hero and often ends up defining him. He is tempered by his experience and reintroduced to himself by his trials and tribulations. Both his successes and his failures contribute to the expansion of his self-definition and this redefinition prepares him for his larger-than-life role. It is during an exile or a journey through a series of events that he gets glimpses of his extraordinariness by battling his own ordinariness and human frailties. He has to conquer his fears, anxiety and cowardice, on the one hand, and his numerous temptations on the other. Sometimes he succumbs or falters.

After going through his unique experiences, a hero's heroic self emerges but its connection with his own mortality, too, is also

A record of exile or a momentous journey is another crucial feature of epic heroes. The exile can be direct or indirect, territorial or psychological, realistic or mythic.

underscored. He becomes a greater hero by battling and transcending his weaknesses, not by sidestepping them. In this sense, an exile is never only a physical challenge; it is also a psychological one, for it sharpens one's awareness and mobilises one's potentialities. Neither challenge is easy; both push one to learn to go into exile *within* oneself. Small events and simple questions acquire significance from the way they trigger deeper self-confrontations. Rama has to look within when Sita asks him, in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, why, when going into exile, he has to carry his weapons. "The forest dwellers have done us no harm," she says. As a city-dweller and a Kshatriya, Rama has presumably been socialised to avoid going unarmed into a forest and its unknown dangers. Sita, the Ramayana tells us, comes from the earth and, perhaps predictably, makes an earthy point. Does Rama's exile begin with a self- confrontation right in the city of Ayodhya? Does the question carry other associations and become relevant to the contemporary reader? Does an epic's continuous relevance rest on such oscillations between text and life? Could the yaksha's philosophical questions to Yudhishtira have taken place outside the context of an exile and a journey? It is doubtful. Exile and journey in our epics are the appropriate moments at which one can ponder the fundamental questions of life. The answers have to come from the self when it is temporarily at some distance from the normal and the mundane.

Notice that I have not spoken of the heroines in the epics till now, except tangentially. Not because I did not want to but because, unlike in the case of the heroes, the women in Indian epics have more distinctive cultural features and deserve a longer and separate discussion. Briefly, the most conspicuous of these features is the central role that women play in shaping the course of events in the epics and the way the fate of the heroes depends frequently on the women. In the Mahabharata, the women are obviously more powerful than the men. The epic can be read as a celebration of femininity, including the feminine capacity to preside over the fate of the heroes, and as a reaffirmation of the close symbolic links of women with power, activism and the principle of reproduction in nature and society. (It is a principle of sustainability that, I believe, negates the principle of unbridled productivity).

Both exile and journey have to frequently include life-altering encounters with powerful women, directly representing nature and natural forces, and the heroes themselves have to strike cross-gender postures.

Women are also identified with fate and are depicted as ambitious, decisive and uncompromising, ready to use their sexuality instrumentally, and possessing an inner core of violence that sometimes verges on bloodlust. In the Ramayana, despite appearances, there is no dearth of strong, ambitious, uncompromising women. In A. Sashikanth's marvellously intriguing film *Kelai Draupadi*, which documents the worship of Draupadi as a powerful mother goddess in a community, she is simultaneously demanding and caring, strong and vulnerable. There is acceptance in the community of her capacity as a protective mother who symbolises ideas and principles of reproduction, nurture and continuity.

By maintaining continuity with nature and its unpredictability, women also shape the events through which an epic moves. It was as if the epics, as the binding cement of everyday religiosity, have to reaffirm for society the bonding among femininity, power and intervention. In South Asia there is a potent linkage between creativity and androgyny. Both exile and journey have to frequently include life-altering encounters with powerful women, directly representing nature and natural forces, and the heroes themselves have to strike cross-gender postures, either as a temporary identity or as a means of self-transcendence. During his exile, Arjuna becomes a dance teacher and a eunuch and meets Chitrangada; Bhima becomes a cook, visits *patal* and marries a *rakshasi*. The experiences enrich both.

Finally, there is the matter of hermeneutic rights and hermeneutic distance. Epics everywhere grant their readers, listeners and admirers hermeneutic rights. If you do not grant the right, people living with the epic will exercise the right in any case, unless you can police their thoughts. One important right is the

freedom to take sides on behalf of the persons, families and communities that feature in the epic. For centuries this right was not challenged. Even as late as in the nineteenth century, when the first serious modern reinterpretation took place in the *Meghnad Badh Kavya*, it was fully acceptable to contemporary pundits and ordinary readers, including the orthodox Hindus. The work was called a *mahakavya* and none dubbed it as a sacrilege that hurt the sentiments of the Hindus, even though the writer was a Christian.

Hermeneutic rights in such cases have been very nearly absolute because epics in this part of the world are not just meant to be read, recited, painted or performed. Epics are also tools for thinking, self-reflection, therapeutic intervention, and debates on ethics. Bijoyketu Bose once published a book on how psychoanalytic use can be made of the Mahabharata, a possibility with which his uncle, the first non-western psychoanalyst Girindrasekhar Bose, had also toyed. In everyday life, too, one learns to think through an epic and that personal reading of the epic and that ability to use the epic to navigate one's inner life become a means of self-expression, a part of one's identity.

Epics, unlike many of their contemporary admirers, can also sometimes maintain an ironic distance from themselves. U.R. Ananthamurthy, using A.K. Ramanujan, told me a lovely story from a Kannada *Ramayana* in which Rama, as in other *Ramayana*s, tries to dissuade Sita from accompanying him to the forest when he is exiled, and Sita resists. After exhausting all her standard arguments, Sita deploys a clinching argument—if in all other *Ramayana*s Sita goes to the forest with Rama, how could he leave her behind in the Kannada *Ramayana*?

One suspects that this Brechtian distance allows us to link up with the multiple constructions of the past in which epics play a key role. One can even reconstruct the past for one's own autonomous use by re-entering an epic creatively and locating oneself within it. Girindrasekhar Bose believed that the epics were our history. Frankly, we do not have to call them history; they are sufficient in themselves by being another way of constructing our past outside history. Like folktales, legends and shared public memories transmitted from one generation to another, our epics too keep the past open. Gulammohammed Sheikh's majestic

installation, "City: Memory, Dreams, Desire, Statues and Ghosts: Return of Hiuen Tsang", has the iconic sixth-century Chinese peripatetic Buddhist monk, Hiuen Tsang, as a spectator—this time of a partly burnt-out, mythic city in Gujarat. The work splits time to offer a living past that cannot be captured by social history, cultural anthropology, art history or, for that matter, by well-intentioned investigative journalism or human rights activism. It is a past that can be accessed only as an imagined contemporary city. Sheikh tries to locate his city directly in human sensitivity, in that nether land of emotions and awareness where the bonding between a work of art and its viewers bypasses the existing categories of art. It is a way of keeping open the past and the future by affirming the timelessness of living ethics not encoded in tired, hollowed-out, overused expressions like tolerance, secularism and syncretism, which probably sound doubly hollow to victims of violence who have to renegotiate life after their life-altering experiences of violence. Sheikh's work, in this instance, is squarely located within South Asia's epic culture and should be able to touch victims, perpetrators and spectators if they have any access to that culture. The job of our epics now is probably to facilitate another mode of human conversation and self-negotiation.

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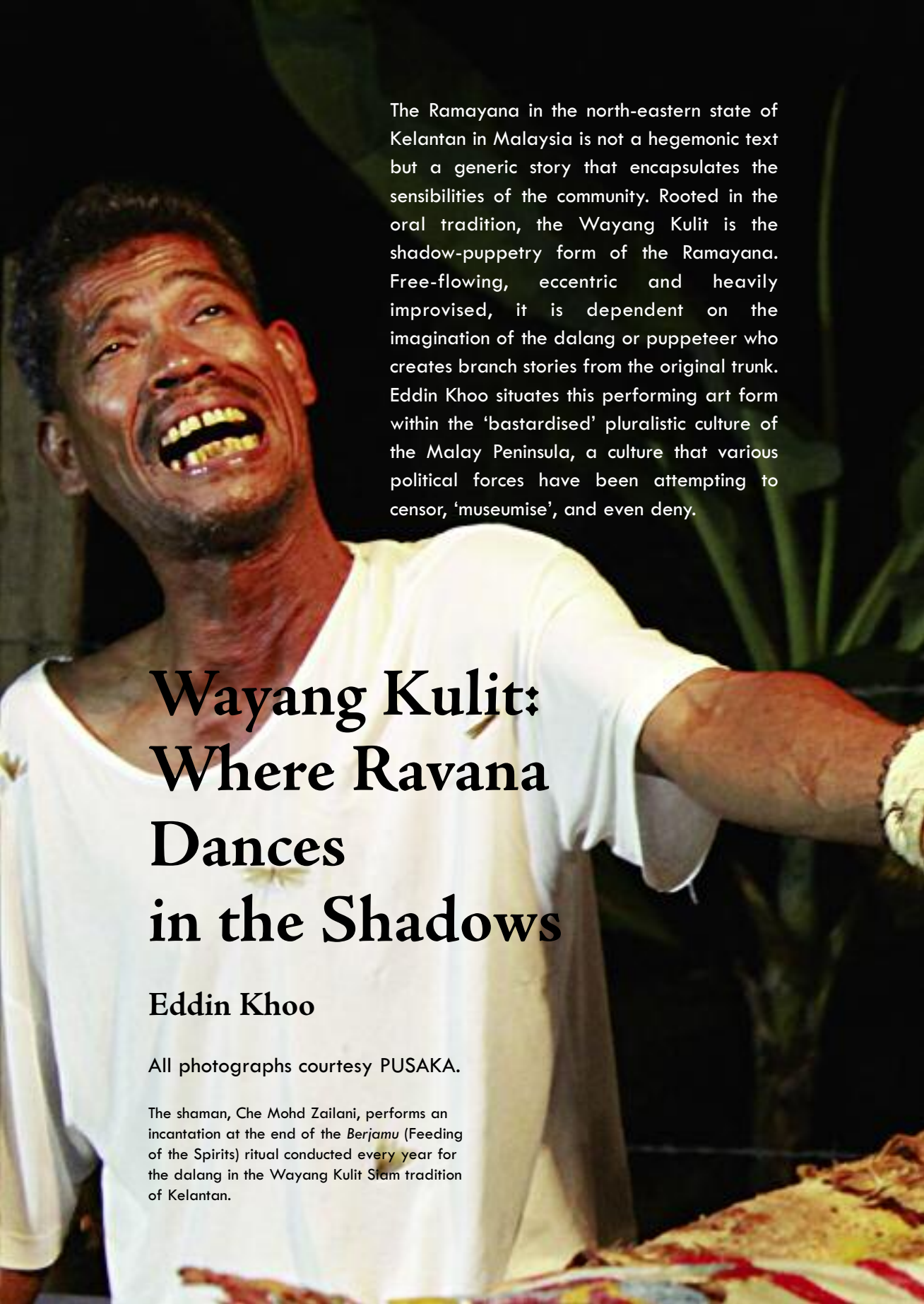
ENDNOTES

1. Sashikanth Ananthachari from Chennai received an IFA grant in 2008-09 for the making of a film on the Draupadi Amman Mahabharata Koothu festival that is celebrated in 200 villages in Tamil Nadu every year.

2. *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, Irawati Karve (Orient Longman, 2010).



The Ramayana in the north-eastern state of Kelantan in Malaysia is not a hegemonic text but a generic story that encapsulates the sensibilities of the community. Rooted in the oral tradition, the Wayang Kulit is the shadow-puppetry form of the Ramayana. Free-flowing, eccentric and heavily improvised, it is dependent on the imagination of the dalang or puppeteer who creates branch stories from the original trunk. Eddin Khoo situates this performing art form within the 'bastardised' pluralistic culture of the Malay Peninsula, a culture that various political forces have been attempting to censor, 'museumise', and even deny.

Wayang Kulit: Where Ravana Dances in the Shadows

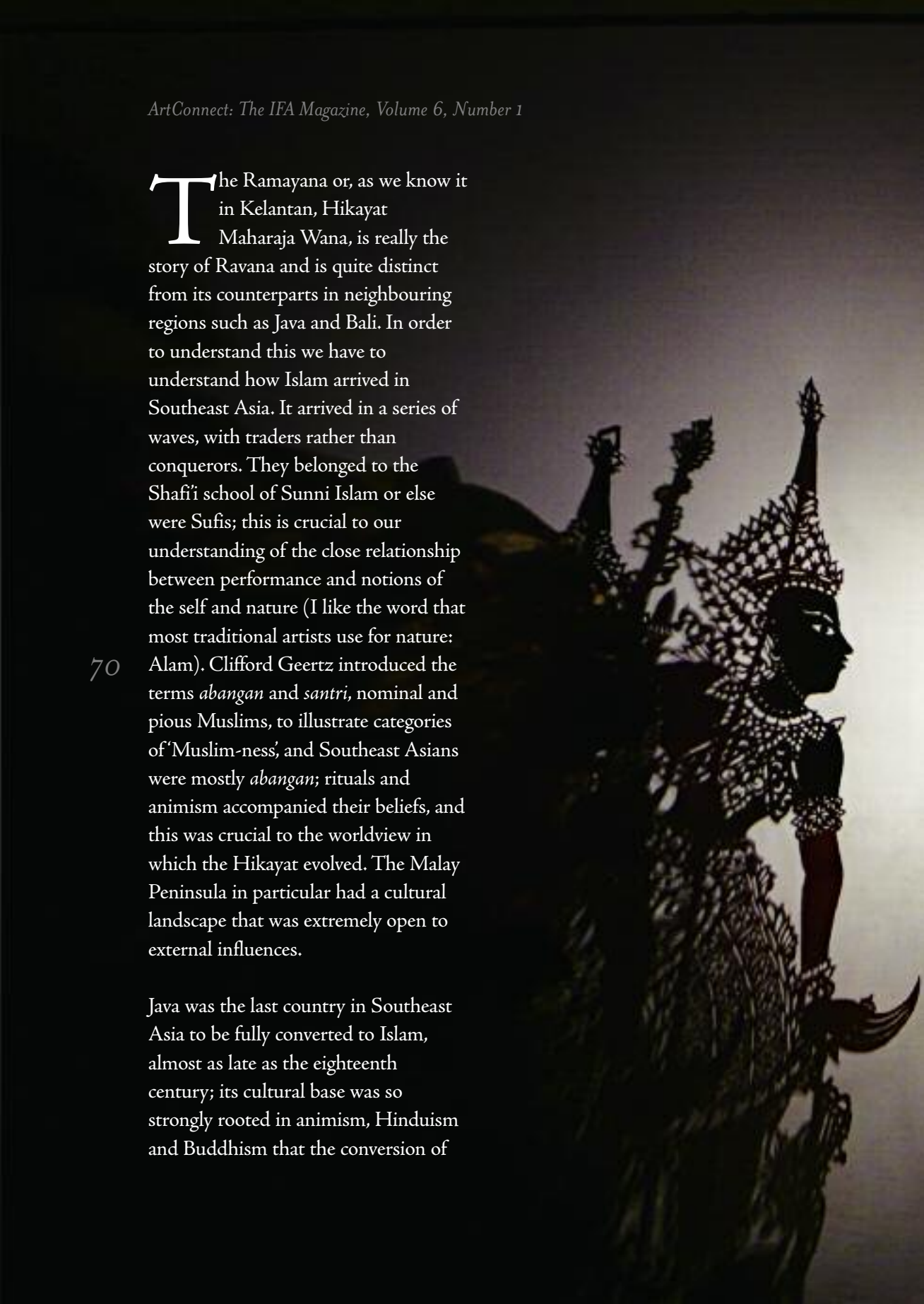
Eddin Khoo

All photographs courtesy PUSAKA.

The shaman, Che Mohd Zailani, performs an incantation at the end of the *Berjamu* (Feeding of the Spirits) ritual conducted every year for the dalang in the Wayang Kulit Siam tradition of Kelantan.

The Ramayana or, as we know it in Kelantan, Hikayat Maharaja Wana, is really the story of Ravana and is quite distinct from its counterparts in neighbouring regions such as Java and Bali. In order to understand this we have to understand how Islam arrived in Southeast Asia. It arrived in a series of waves, with traders rather than conquerors. They belonged to the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam or else were Sufis; this is crucial to our understanding of the close relationship between performance and notions of the self and nature (I like the word that most traditional artists use for nature: Alam). Clifford Geertz introduced the terms *abangan* and *santri*, nominal and pious Muslims, to illustrate categories of 'Muslim-ness', and Southeast Asians were mostly *abangan*; rituals and animism accompanied their beliefs, and this was crucial to the worldview in which the Hikayat evolved. The Malay Peninsula in particular had a cultural landscape that was extremely open to external influences.

Java was the last country in Southeast Asia to be fully converted to Islam, almost as late as the eighteenth century; its cultural base was so strongly rooted in animism, Hinduism and Buddhism that the conversion of



the Javanese to Islam had to take on traditional cultural forms. The stories of Krishna, of Ravana, Rama and Sita, the stories of the nine saints of Java called the *Wali Songo* and so on were used to draw people into the Muslim faith. But while Bali (which, of course, is Hindu) and Java have powerful textual references to the Ramayana, Kelantan has none. The idea of a hegemonic text determining the course of storytelling does not exist in the Kelantan tradition, and so the Ramayana here is a generic story that encapsulates the sensibilities of the community. Therefore I will speak not from any kind of textual authority but from the authority of one single individual, a man by the name of Abdullah Ibrahim otherwise known as Dollah Baju Merah or Uncle Red Shirt who was, until five years ago when he passed away, Malaysia's leading dalang or traditional puppeteer, a vast reservoir of knowledge and a keeper of the oral tradition that, in his case, stretched back some nine generations.

Malaysia is a country on the periphery, and the notion of marginality is something that I have had to deal with in the course of my 20-year engagement with traditional theatre, particularly puppetry, in Kelantan. Our region has a totally bastardised culture.

Seri Rama (left), one of the principal characters of the Wayang Kulit Siam, in consultation with Hanuman inside the Istana (Palace).

I could explain what Malaysia is, culturally, by speaking of myself. I was raised by a Malay nanny till I was fourteen. My mother is Tamil and my father belongs to a community of Chinese known as the Peranakan, people who migrated to the Malay Peninsula very early in the sixteenth century and adopted all Malay ways except their religion, Islam. My father was an important historian, one of the nation builders; he drafted the national policy and the pledge to the nation. It was interesting growing up in his household because we were not allowed to learn Chinese. It was believed that we needed to shed our immigrant experience and adopt the language and ways of the dominant culture.

Malaysia is highly racialised; political parties are delineated according to race. It is difficult for modern Malaysians to remember what preceded racial consciousness. I am grappling with and living through James Joyce's wonderful line: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to wake, over and over again."

Dalang Abdullah was a master of Wayang Kulit, the shadow puppetry form of the Hikayat Maharaja Wana, of which Wayang Kulit Siam is specific to Kelantan. Story does not have as crucial a function in puppetry as does the notion of performance—the individual's place in it and community's support for it. The genealogies of some of the principal characters can be very problematic because they come from the wellsprings of the dalang's imagination. There can be characters with no past or future, or with an eccentric past and future. Essentially the performance space is what you would call, for want of a better word, a 'healing space'. And the function of performance is to bring about the restitution of the 'self'.

There are two major concepts that operate in Kelantanese theatre: Semangat or 'spirit', the life force that motivates you, and Angin or 'wind', which determines the temperament and sensibility of every single individual. There are ninety-nine winds. Your well-being depends on how well you engage with every spirit

The renowned Dalang Saupi bin Isa of the Wayang Kulit Siam receives a blessing at the culmination of the *Berjamu* ritual.

of the natural world. The flow of winds determines your character and personality and through them your interaction with the community. So if any one of these winds is wayward, it will prove very disruptive to you as an individual and hence to the community as a whole. The term 'amok' in the American vernacular is a specifically Malay term. 'To run amok' is based on the idea of suppressed winds that eventually explode into a madness in which the individual has no sense of his self. And 'amok' often occurs when a teenager or a young man suffering from great depression suddenly goes berserk and kills members of his own family. In order to pre-empt or treat such behaviour the performance space becomes very important.

In Kelantan we have five major performance traditions:

- The Wayang Kulit Siam, an exalted form
- The Mak yong, an all-female ritual drama, also rooted in ritual and therapy, where all roles are performed by women including the male roles, but female comic roles are performed by effeminate men, often transvestites, who are often encouraged to come to the stage and lend their fortune to the space because transvestites are believed to have healing qualities
- The Main Puteri, the play of the princess, rooted in the memory and notion of the self, where you are able to restore yourself the moment you are able to remember your lineage and where you came from
- Menora, a Thai-Malay dance drama rooted in the Jataka tales and performed in the southern Thai state of Pattani (it's interesting how Malay Muslim traditions and Thai Buddhist traditions coalesce and confluence)
- The musical tradition Dikir Barat, the only tradition that is predominantly male, where sixty-odd youths gather around in circles and enter a musical duel in an attempt to release Angin

Within these ritualistic traditions, known as earthly traditions, the Wayang Kulit, because of its association with Rama and Ravana, is known as a celestial form. The Ramayana in a Muslim context obviously cannot be regarded as a sacred text, so it is regarded as a celestial one. One of the reasons that dalang Abdullah gave for the existence of a celestial realm was that this was the space in which pre-Islamic Kelantan society could negotiate its past and present.

A performance may be occasioned

when a member of your family is suffering from depression or 'madness', or when you wish to ward off black magic and evil that has been thrust upon your family. Sometimes you take on a vow and if the vow is granted, you thank Allah by organising a feast and a chanting of the name of the Prophet. But you also have, following that, a performance in which two chairs are put right in front of the stage, and nobody can occupy them because they are meant for the celestial beings Ravana and his clan. The performance becomes therapeutic when a patient is somehow inspired or brought back into his own sense of self through a particular episode that especially stirs his memory. This often leads to a state of trance in which the patient with the

The *Jin*, one the emissaries of the Maharaja Wana (Ravana), brings a message to the *dayang* (ladies-in-waiting) of Sita Dewi.

help of a dalang actually performs the story. There is a restitution of the winds and the spirit, and the patient is treated 'for now'. There is always a condition, a qualification, at the end of the ritual in which they tap you, beat you and push you into awakening and then they cleanse the ritual stage by tearing down every single object there so that all the bad stuff scuttles away. The patient is brought back to his original condition, that condition being 'for now'; the audience is quite aware that it will happen again and again.

Training the Dalang

So where does the Rama story or the Ravana story fit into this consciousness? It is a very important aspect in the training of a dalang. Not just anybody can be a puppeteer. You need to have the Angin, the wind, you need to have the Semangat or the spirit of a puppeteer. This is how a potential dalang is identified: A child of about five or six would have an obsession with Wayang. He would go for every single performance, try to get onto the stage, and so on. All this is observed by the dalang, and if he sees the child often enough he would get a sense that this child could be a dalang. Or else the child might display a passion for the form by making puppets with leaves and paper. When that happens, the family brings the child to a master puppeteer. They build a shed in which the boy can be trained, give offerings to the puppeteer in the form of tobacco, rice, biscuits

Hanuman Kera Putih (the White Hanuman) returns after a battle bearing news for Seri Rama about the fate of Sita Dewi. The candles and offerings in front of the screen are there at all ritual performances of the Wayang Kulit Siam.

Dalang Saupi bin Isa and shaman Che Mohd Zailani conduct a cleansing ritual using incense as part of the *Berjamu* ritual.

Wayang Kulit – Eddin Khoo

and tea, and then present him with a cane. Then the boy is left in the care of the dalang for as many years as it takes.

The novice dalang will first begin to learn the story. And somehow the story becomes most important in the training of the dalang rather than in the actual performance. He will have to learn the Cerita Pokok or what is called the trunk story of the Wayang tradition, which is the Hikayat Maharaja Wana, everything from the birth of Rama and the penance of Ravana right up to the exile. Stories don't end because new stories are created. The novice then learns the aspects of narration, voice, movement and music (the dalang conducts the entire orchestra). Improvisation is hugely important in a Wayang performance. The Wayang has a stylised beginning that lasts for about twenty minutes, followed by the consecration of the stage and the introduction of the tree of life, Pohon Beringin, which brings you back to your point of origin. Then there is the introduction of the characters, beginning with the sons of Rama.

The story is narrated for about two hours and after that the dalang is in what they call an elevated state, *naik nafsu*; basically your lust, your desires, are heightened. And then the dalang takes the story anywhere he wants. The music becomes very interesting—there could be Bollywood songs, and other popular songs—until the end of the performance in which the dalang pulls back the story and consecrates the stage in the final act. During those two hours, literally anything can happen for the dalang and for the audience; the audience sometimes gets into a state of trance and ecstasy and they dance, so that it becomes a highly communal occasion. In fact, in the Kelantan setting, if you perform the traditional story of the Ramayana, audiences are not enticed. The virtue of a dalang is in his ability to lift off stories from the original trunk, the Cerita Pokok, and perform what are called branch stories, Cerita Ranting. There is a very interesting relationship between the individuality of the dalang and the kind of stories he performs, the episodes that he selects and so on.

In the course of training, the elder dalang will come to identify what are the salient and most powerful aspects of the younger dalang's personality. He will then ascribe to him what is called a sacred puppet. If you are of the spirit of Rama you will be bequeathed a sacred or ritualised puppet of Rama, and similarly if you are of the spirit of

Ravana or Sita you will be given a puppet of Ravana or Sita. In the Kelantan tradition you have five major comic characters led by Pak Dogol, a grotesque and exaggerative character with a huge stomach, bald head and long neck. Now, Pak Dogol has emerged from the earth. He is essentially Adam made from clay and he has strong healing powers but he's extremely naughty, bawdy and rowdy. This was the spirit of my master puppeteer Abdullah who was known as the Hooligan dalang. The status that is bestowed upon the ritual artist in Kelantan is very distinctive and special. They are even allowed considerable liberty in their personal conduct. My master Abdullah was designated to be a puppeteer at the age of nine. He first performed in public at the age of fourteen, and after that he literally had to adhere to the life and standards required of the puppeteer, which proved quite beneficial in his case: he was allowed more than four wives, allowed to seduce, allowed conduct that would be forbidden in others.

In one of my very early questions to dalang Abdullah I asked him, "Why shadows?" And in a typically esoteric fashion he said, because in a shadow play what is closest to me is the most distant to the audience, and what is

The opening sequence of the Wayang Kulit Siam features the sage Maharisi urging the sons of Rama and Ravana to conduct a duel-dance as part of the *Gerak Angin* (Moving of the Winds) ritual.

closest to the audience is the most distant to me, and the world is like that—complex. It is in a constant state of play, and so there are no war-scenes—the dalang insists that the great war-scene between the armies of Hanuman and Ravana is a dance scene. They are creating balance, the balance between good and evil, the balance between desires.

The dalang will lift off stories from the generic cult stories according to the stronger aspects of his personality. And the characters will get completely different names. For instance the character of Sita will be given a localised name like Bunga Mawar, 'rose', and the stories develop from there. These characters have firm points of origin but they become very eccentric. Many of them may have been the fancies of the dalang's teacher that the dalang inherited.

I'll give you the story of Hanuman in the Kelantan Wayang. The first character to come on stage is someone called the Maharisi. He is a shaman but he's the incarnation of Shiva. He is also the father of Sita and was once her lover. Now, he is basically the wise man of the story. This is the story of the birth of Hanuman. Once, Sita is wracked by fever and Rama, Sita and Lakshmana are advised to go into the forests and find a particular kind of leaf—a neem leaf, basically—and as they depart the Maharisi says, you will have to travel for ten or fourteen days but during all of that time, do not drink water, not even a drop. They proceed, and after seven or eight days Rama and Sita get very thirsty, and so does Lakshmana but he has self control. They come across a lake and immediately Rama and Sita rush to it. Lakshmana holds them back and says, "Remember what the Maharisi said? So don't drink." But they drink anyway and immediately both are transformed into monkeys. It's a curse. And what the monkeys do, of course, is frolic, run up trees, and fornicate. Lakshmana finds some device in which he can trap them and bring them down from the tree, and then he utters a mantra (in Malay too it's called a 'mantra') which returns them to human form. Then they proceed and finally get back home. But at the moment of communion up on the trees, she was impregnated. Rama being very glorious and egotistical cannot bear the thought of having a monkey son. Therefore he summons a handmaiden of Sita's and they reach Sita's chamber where he tells her, "Please abort the child." The child comes out of her in the form of a betel nut. He is overcome by regret. He

Dalang Saupi bin Isa wields his puppet.

doesn't have the heart to throw away the betel nut and so he feeds it to the handmaiden who, nine months later, delivers a baby monkey who is essentially Rama and Sita's son. This explains the loyalty that Hanuman has to Rama and Sita because within the Kelantan Muslim context you cannot conceive of divine forms of loyalty and fidelity; the only form of fidelity that makes sense is the biological one. Now, where does this story come from? No one really knows. It is the story the dalang knows. And you accept it as an inherited story.

Another imagined story based on the prejudices of the individual dalang relates to the killing of Ravana. Ravana is a sympathetic character in Kelantan. He underwent a penance of being suspended from the celestial realms for 240,000 years, and he prayed to Brahma, but he does not have ten heads, although he has very strong thighs: that is how he is described in the Kelantan Wayang. He is also the father of the story because he is the most human in the sense that he possesses all the sensual qualities; his methods may be wrong but he is sincere. My dalang had a deep erotic attachment towards Sita and a great fondness for Ravana who, he believes, has the right intentions despite being in the wrong circumstances. And so he gives Ravana great strength, so much so that Ravana actually defeats Rama and Sita is taken away. She is taken to Ravana's chamber and he professes his love in very eloquent terms in Malay quatrains. For just a short while her sense of faithfulness is shaken because she is overcome by the beauty, romanticism and sincerity of this ugly man. In the next moment she is brought back to her senses and she takes out her hairpin and stabs him in the back, killing him. This I know is a completely imagined story but it is the way the dalang wants it to end, and this is the way he ends it.

So what you get, really, are emotional archetypes, a story with which a community can empathise and, more importantly, experience a sort of release and legitimisation of their individual, intimate feelings. Dalangs talk constantly not about morality and ethics but about feeling and emotion; the performance is not centred on didacticism but on empathy.

Political Pressures

This is how the Wayang Kulit Siam continues to be performed (even if under great pressure) in the traditional setting. What happened to the

Wayang Kulit during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s is a sign of the insecurities that emerge from a nation state that is essentially born out of a bastardised culture. The quest for purity is the great Malaysian affliction of the past thirty years. There are two approaches to addressing cultural insecurity. One is the Mahathir way (former prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohammed) of completely forgetting your culture and adopting the notion of a modern Muslim country based on economic progress and nothing else. The other approach is to reconstruct an imagined and glorified past.

In 1969 we had major racial riots in Malaysia in which several thousands died. The authorities concluded that the reason for the conflict was that we did not have a hegemonic culture to which the entire nation could aspire. So they convened the National Cultural Congress in 1971, where a dominant culture was to be agreed upon with particular characteristics that the entire nation would have to aspire to. There were three principles that came out of this Congress: that the Malay culture would be the dominant culture of the Malaysian nation; that Islam would be a key feature of Malaysian culture; and that other cultures may be practised if they

A view of the shadow screen.

do not conflict with the first two principles.

But what was meant by Malay culture? The authorities did not take into account that Malay culture is extremely polyglot and pluralist. 'Malay' is an anthropological term that extends all the way to people of the Fiji islands and the Philippines. It was a term introduced by British administrators in the 1920s. In fact, an entire study was done by R.J. Wilkinson and R.O. Winstedt called 'Papers on Malay Subjects' in an attempt to homogenise the indigenous peoples as they were being confronted by large waves of migrants from China and India, people who worked in tin mines and rubber plantations. And this term Malay or Melayu and the concept of a dominant culture in this heterogeneous landscape were adopted in the 1970s to provide a hegemonic culture for the nation state.

The wonderful thing about the Malay Peninsula is that it has a culture with great nuance and subtlety, and not a monumental culture. We have no Borobudur, no Angkor Wat, no Bagan. What we have, in the state of Kedah, is a small but very refined and beautiful enclave called the Bujang Valley, which was a small temple site but in which you can see the eccentricities of an essentially Malay sensibility, lovely little dancing Ganeshas with unique features that you don't find in the great Jayavarman structures of Cambodia. What we've seen in the Malaysian nation over the past several years is an aspiring to that monumental culture. And on realising that it did not exist, we decided to create one.

First of all, institutions were constructed: universities and art schools in urban Kuala Lumpur. The authorities began to import traditional musicians from villages in Malaysia and house them in an institution called the National Cultural Complex. Apart from instituting policy, they basically classicised traditions. Ours are folk and community traditions based on improvisation, ritual, and eccentric approaches to storytelling. We remain tied to oral traditions. But in the 1970s there were efforts to codify these traditions, which essentially meant censoring them and cleansing them of anything that did not fit into the archetype of what Malay culture had to be. So ritual vanished, Angin and Semangat vanished, and a story known as the Hikayat Seri Rama, the story of Rama, replaced the story of Ravana as the canonical text! This was done in collaboration with many scholars, and

Winged insects descend upon the shadow screen.

the aim was to 'museumise' this culture.

Now, after a while, Malay culture became very problematic for the Malay body politic. They couldn't deal with its diversity and plurality and it was also a time of Islamic awakening and a strong Wahabi influence. In the 1970s there emerged a group called the Muslim Youth Movement led by Anwar Ibrahim, who has now emerged as the major democratic voice in Malaysia. The movement was rooted in a certain understanding of Malay and Southeast Asian culture—that it was inferior and that it lacked an intellectual tradition. In 1979, Anwar Ibrahim was one of the few people invited to visit Ayatollah Khomeini in Khom, two weeks after the Iranian revolution. The revolution was treated with a great deal of joy in the Muslim world, but it also caused much anxiety among those who were threatened by the rise of Shia Islam. They turned to Saudi Arabia and to the Wahabi school. What you see in Malaysia over the past 30 years is the result of Wahabi conditioning. A very important tract has been written in Malaysia by a well-known Muslim scholar by the name of Sayed Najib al-Attas. It denounces pre-Islamic Malay culture and creates new historical points as cultural references for the Malays. So there is no more a sense of continuity but very clear breaks in the Malay Muslim consciousness about how their history has evolved. Before the coming of Islam you had no culture: this is the standard argument now for the Malay Muslim body politic.

In Kelantan today, religious pluralism is under threat. In the past five years, segregation of communities has increased. There is a witch-hunt going on of those practising so-called deviant traditions. One doesn't know what will happen to the Rama and Ravana stories, ritual and puppet traditions, in the next 20 or 30 years. I began by quoting an Irishman and I will end with an Irishman. One is constantly trying to glean an independent history from a history on which the shutters are being drawn. I keep thinking of what Eugene Onegin said, "There is no future. There is only a past happening over and over and over again, now."

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The Maharisi Kala Api, believed by some Wayang practitioners to be the incarnation of Shiva, is the keeper of secrets and presiding spirit of the Wayang Kulit Siam tradition.

Imagining Rama: From Grandma's Tales to Multiple Texts

C.S. Lakshmi

The wonderful thing about a text is that it assumes different meanings at different stages of one's life, says C.S. Lakshmi as she describes her personal encounters with the Ramayana: listening as a child to her mother's story of Rama's birth while getting an oil massage, attending grand public narrations by eminent exponents of the epic, watching popular film versions, and finally approaching the text as a lover of Tamil, as a reader and as an author. Each of her experiences has created its own images, memories and meanings, just as it has allowed for multiple interpretations and retellings. What we can discern from this epic text, says Lakshmi, is that a text, like everything else, can be seen from multiple positions of age, gender, language and perspective.

As children we grow up listening to stories narrated by mothers and grandmothers. While putting children to sleep, while bathing them or, on a hot afternoon, sitting on the *thinnai*, a raised platform outside the house near the front door, stories would be told. Folk stories and epic stories are first heard in the voice of a narrator before they are read. It is through these narrations that one later enters into an epic text to read about Rama.

My memory of Ramayana narration goes back to my early childhood. I was a very thin and weak child and so, to make me strong, my mother used to apply cod liver oil on my body and massage me and give me oil baths. And she used to tell me the Ramayana to divert my mind from the pain of massaging. I remember she always told the story of how Dasaratha gave his three wives payasam (milk pudding), and of how Rama and his brothers were born. Oil baths always meant the story of Rama's birth.

My mother conceived me towards the end of the Second World War. My parents lived in Bombay then. Those were difficult times. Food grains were available only through a rationing system. My mother had to carry bags of wheat to her Punjabi neighbours on the third floor to exchange the wheat for rice. It was not a good time to have a third child. My mother took some local medicines to get rid of the foetus. But it was a stubborn foetus. And so I have survived to write this.

Whenever I heard the story of Rama's birth I imagined that my mother also would have taken payasam and conceived me. She had actually taken not payasam but spurious medicines. Maybe she felt a sense of guilt and she wanted me to be strong and that is why she told me that part of the Ramayana which had to do with birth after consuming sweet pudding. It was her way of making up for what she had done. The smell of the cod liver oil, the story of Rama's birth, and my mother's soft voice narrating the story while massaging my body with oil have remained memories linked with the narration of the Ramayana for me.

There are also other associated memories of Ramayana narration. An interesting aspect is that a child in India can listen to stories about *rakshasas* and *rakshasis* (male and female demons) with absolutely no fear. A ten-headed Ravana evokes no fear. During my student days I was staying with an American family. I

used to babysit the family's three- or four-year-old boy. I once narrated the Ramayana to the child when I put him to sleep. His mother came and asked me the next morning if I had told him a horror story. I told her I hadn't. She told me, "But you told him about a ten-headed demon. He had nightmares." I replied, "I only told him the Ramayana, our epic. The ten-headed demon is Ravana. He is a nice person."

While the ten-headed Ravana is casually accepted by children when the Ramayana is narrated, there are also other elements in the narration which we don't question as children. The narrations glorify Rama and present him as an exemplary man, a superhuman. But there is a silence about Sita. Apart from her being found as a child in the field and being named Sita (the furrow) and the Sita *swayamvar* when she marries Rama, there is nothing more to Sita as a person in the narration. She was Rama's wife and she followed him and she had told him, "Wherever you are, that is my Ayodhya." What was emphasised was that Sita was a chaste woman.

The a*gni pariksha* where Sita had to enter the fire to prove her chastity was always glossed over in these narrations. The Uttara-kanda where Sita is banished to the forest and becomes the mother of Lava and Kusha was almost never part of the narrations. A few stories of Lava and Kusha were narrated now and then. The climax of Sita entering the earth became incidental; Rama was the one who was glorified in the narrations. But at times, some folk elements used to be added.

In one such narration there is a beautiful story about Sita. She is the daughter of a tribal chieftain. There is a bow in the family which is kept in one corner of the house. It is Sita's job to smear cow dung on the floor and one day as she is doing it she lifts the bow effortlessly and then places it back. Her mother sees it and tells the father how their daughter had lifted a bow which could not be lifted by anyone. Apart from this there was a silence about Sita. Chastity was the only thing one associated with her.

There were also public narrations of the Ramayana called *Katha Kalakshepam*. These were also grand narrations very similar to the narrations done at home. My mother always took us for these *Katha Kalakshepam* events, which were regularly held. These grand narrations and their narrative techniques and other elements associated with them remain deeply imprinted on my mind.

In public Ramayana narrations there was always an empty wooden plank placed on the dais. It was reserved for Hanuman. It was believed that wherever the Ramayana was narrated Hanuman would come to listen to the narration and the wooden plank was for him to sit on. It was said that every time he listened to Rama's story, his eyes became wet.

Yatra yatra raghunatha kirtanam
Tatra tatra kritha masthakanjalim
Bhaspavaari paripurna lochanam
Maarutim namata raakshasanthakam

(We bow to Maruti, who stands with his palms folded above his forehead, with a torrent of tears flowing down his eyes wherever the names of Lord Rama are sung.)

The empty wooden plank, the verse and the image of Hanuman with his hands folded above his head with tears in his eyes became an indelible memory associated with Ramayana narrations. Even musical narrations by eminent Harikatha artists such as Embar Vijayaraghavachariar based on Thyagaraja's compositions were very moving, as one got drawn into the world of bhakti. When he sang '*Nagumomu ganaleni na jali telisi*' in Abheri raga, where Thyagaraja begs Rama to come and alleviate his suffering, the utter surrender and devotion used to spread a silence in the audience and only his voice and the sound of the *chipalakattai*, a castanet-like instrument that marked time, used to resonate through the big hall. And with the lyrics '*Khagaraju ni yanati vini vega canaledo*' when he asks if his mount Garuda, the eagle, did not hasten to his bidding, so absorbed would one be in the song that one could almost hear the flapping wings of a big bird.

Occasionally other composers' songs were also interspersed with those of Thyagaraja's. Set in the same mode of surrender was Patnam Subramania Iyer's composition in Sahana raga, '*Rama, ika nannu brova raadha, dhaya ledha?*' which asked Rama in a plaintive tone if he did not have the

mercy to come and offer protection. This also would transport the audience to the universe of devotion.

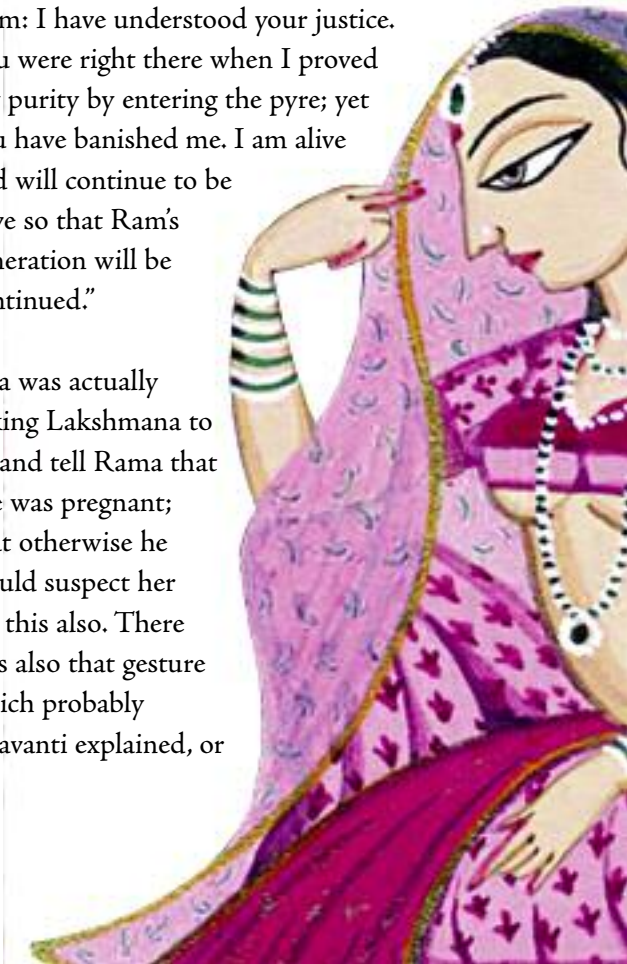
These musical narrations sang the glory of Rama. They heaped praises on him as the '*Oka mata, oka banamu, oka pathni viruthuu*' (a man of one word, one arrow, one wife). Sita was like a shadow behind Rama, the wife who walked behind.

There was, however, one Ramayana public narration where the speaker chose to elaborate on the *agni pariksha* incident. The entire evening changed with the choice of the subject. There were more women in the audience than usual. One could feel an emotional tension in the air. And as the speaker began to describe the details, I saw all around me women in tears. Some were sobbing openly and others let the tears flow without wiping them. It was the first time I had seen such a public display of emotion in a Ramayana lecture. The speaker's voice broke when Sita asked Lakshmana to light the pyre. It seemed as if at that moment all the women became Sita who was entering the fire to prove her chastity. It was an emotion-packed moment that sent a current through one's body.

Except for that one narration there was a general silence about Sita in the grand narrations. On one occasion, we got together for a dance programme. My dance masters U.S. Krishna Rao and his wife Chandrabhaga Devi liked to relax after a programme.

Chandrabhaga Devi's sister Jayavanti who was a singer had accompanied us. We asked her to sing for us. And she sang a Marathi song '*Jaa saang Lakshmana, saang Rama raja la*' from *Geet Ramayan*. The song revealed to us an angry Sita. She tells Lakshmana, "Please convey my message to King Ram: I have understood your justice. You were right there when I proved my purity by entering the pyre; yet you have banished me. I am alive and will continue to be alive so that Ram's generation will be continued."

Sita was actually asking Lakshmana to go and tell Rama that she was pregnant; that otherwise he would suspect her for this also. There was also that gesture which probably Jayavanti explained, or



a gesture we associated with the song, of her pushing aside her sari to reveal her stomach to Lakshmana to tell him to see that she was pregnant. Those angry words of Sita were electrifying. It was a Sita we did not know, a Sita seething with anger about the injustice meted out to her.

For those of us who have grown up in the post-Independence years, the nation, sacrifice and service were terms that had become very much a part of our lives. The body was never mentioned either at home or outside. We grew up in a kind of bodiless space. So while we knew that chastity was very important we did not quite understand what it meant. The chastity aspect that Sita represented had always remained an enigma to me until that incident. Now it seemed it resided in the body that I had not understood as yet. And the gesture of revealing her stomach which I associated with the song and the earlier memory of women weeping when the *agni pariksha* incident was narrated, raised many complex questions about the body.

Then came the film *Sampoorna Ramayanam*. Rama was played by N.T. Rama Rao who at that time played all the important mythological roles. Imagining a Rama while listening to the narrations was interesting. However, seeing NTR as Rama was a great disappointment. What lingered in the mind after the film was the great theatre actor T.K. Bhagawathi, who played the role of Ravana in the film. Here, he was Ravana the artist. He played the veena, and the raga he loved was Kambodhi. In the scene where he is shorn of all his weapons and Rama tells him generously, '*Indru poi naalai vaaraay*' (go now and come back tomorrow), he sings with head bowed in shame saying how could a man tell him to come back another day to fight. It was a haunting song and one did not want T.K. Bhagawathi to lose to N.T. Rama Rao.

One carried these words, sounds, images and memories when one began to study the Ramayana text. But the experience of the text is a completely different one. It is not the story but the language that draws one into the text. When one loves the Tamil language it is difficult not to love Kamban. Even reading parts of Kamban can be an exhilarating experience. His descriptions of the river Sarayu and nature are captivating. His play with words and their sound and rhythms can be

fascinating to a student of Tamil. Here is how Guhan describes Bharathan who is coming to meet Rama and beg him to come back to Ayodhya:

thaay uraikontu thaathai uthaviya
tharanithannai
thiivinai enna niithu sinthanai
mukaththil thekki
poyinai endra pozthu pukazinoy
thanmai kantal
aayiram iraamar nin kez aavaro
theriyin amma

(Oh famous one! You shunned as evil the kingdom given to you by your father who listened to your mother's words. And with a grief-stricken face you came to the forest. If both of you are compared, will a thousand Ramas be equal to you? I don't know.)

He ends the verse with the exclamatory word '*Amma*' (*theriyin amma*) peculiar to Tamil which adds wonder and an intimacy to the exclamation.
Kamban plays with the number five when he describes Hanuman. He uses the number five to mean the five elements:

anjile ondru petraan
anjile ondrai thaavi
anjile ondru aaraaga
aariyarkaaga yegi
anjile ondrana anangaik
kantu ayalaar ooril
anjile ondrai vaithaan
avan nammai alithu kappaan

(He who is born of one of the five elements [wind] crossed one of the five elements [water] and with one of the five elements forming his way [the sky] he went for the sake of the Aryans, and met one of the five elements [Sita, who is born of the earth and also known as the earth] and in a foreign land he placed one of the five elements [fire; he set fire to Lanka]. He will bless us and protect us.)

While the language of Kamban throughout the epic keeps one close to the texture of the text, where one is overwhelmed by the language is when Ravana describes Sita. Reading the text one understands the love Rama feels for Sita and Sita's love for him. After the abduction of Sita, Rama wanders in the forest saying he can't live without her. It is moving to see

such emotion in Rama. But when Ravana describes Sita there is passion throbbing in his description. Sita takes a different form in one's imagination. She is not the Sita we see in Ravi Varma's painting—docile, supportive and gentle. She is the one who kindles desire and lust.

ambum analum nuzaiyaak
kana anthakaarathu
umbar mazai kondu ayal
oppu arithu aaya thuppin
kombar kurumpaik kulam
kondathu thingal thaangi
vembum thamiyen mun
vilakku enath thondrum anre
marul oodu vantha mayakko!

(In this darkness so thick no fire or arrow could pierce it, she appears, with a thundercloud for her hair, her body an utterly incomparable branch of fine coral, with her breasts like a pair of young coconuts and her face like the moon, a lamp that she raises before me burning here alone.)

In yet another verse Ravana is overwhelmed by Sita's beauty.

mathi matrum undoe!
therulaathu ithu ennoe?
thini mai izaithaalum ovvaa
iruluudu iru kundalam
kondum irunda niilach
churulodum vanthu oer
sudar maa mathi thondrum anre!

(Am I confused because of my delusion or is there another moon? What is this that I can't understand? Through this darkness blacker than when thick collyrium is mixed, with two earrings and her deep black hair, a full moon coming up now she appears, shining!)

And then Ravana describes Sita's body:

pudai kondu ezum kongaiyum
alkulum pulki nirkum
idai kantilam allathu

ellaa uruvum therinthaam
vidam nungiya kann udaiyaar
ivar mella mella
madam mangaiyaraay en
manaththavar aayinaare

(I cannot see a waist between her hips and the breast that rise from their wide base. Otherwise I have seen all her forms and with her eyes that have swallowed poison, this young woman, step by step, has entered my heart.)

Ravana has seen many women. But he has not seen one like Sita. So he cannot help exclaiming:

pande ulaku ezinum ulla
padaik kanaaraik
kanden ithu polvathu oer
penn uruk kantinelnaal
unde enin veru ini
engai unarthi nindra
vandu eru kothai madavaal
ival aakum andre

(Before this, I have seen all of them with eyes like swords throughout the seven worlds but never before I have seen any woman formed like this. If she is so different it can only be she my sister told of, this young woman whose hair swarms with bees!)[1]

These descriptions of Sita give an entirely different dimension to love. They make lust and desire very much a part of love. Someone who has eyes that look like they have swallowed poison and hair swarming with bees because it is so fragrant is certainly not the docile Sita we are used to. The descriptions make her look like a wild beauty.

Sita is also someone who can speak her mind. When asked to prove her chastity, she says that even the gods, who can see everything as clearly as a gooseberry placed on the palm, are not capable of knowing a woman's mind. Kamban uses the word *mana nilai* which can simply mean the state of mind but it can also be expanded to mean the depths of a woman's being, which even gods cannot fathom.

The text brings a depth to the story through its language. But in order to feel the text one needs the experience of the narrations. The silences in the narrations are filled by the text—by its descriptions and the beauty of its language. When you enter the text through Sita, it becomes a dense and impenetrable forest. You can enter a dense forest and choose your trees and flowers and be happy. You can read the Bala-kanda and go deep into its beauty and not go further. You can

also go deeper into the forest and follow its mysterious and expanding paths. An epic text offers all these possibilities.

A text allows several interpretations and retellings. The text blends with the mind of the readers and assumes a thousand different meanings. Different life experiences can add and remove parts of the text. Since a text allows such liberties I did a retelling of my own in one of my stories called *Forest*. The last section of the story reads as follows:

Nobody was willing to accept Sita's decision. They said it was not proper to refuse to go when the king of Ayodhya himself had come to take her back. What was her goal, after all? What was she seeking? Then there were Hanuman's long appeals. The denunciations of the rest of them. She could not recover from her sense of having gone somewhere beneath the earth, somewhere so deep that nobody could reach her.

She rose to her feet and looked around the cottage. This time it would be a total renunciation. A lone journey which left behind all those who were known to her, those who spoke lovingly, who dispensed advice. A journey that would be long, that went very deep.

The more she walked, the more the forest seemed to extend. She crossed the river, went past a waterfall, and walked on; saw the deer drinking at a small stream, was shocked by deer-eating tigers, delighted in the sight of baby elephants running alongside the herd, encountered nights through which owls' eyes glowed, observed the shimmering of green leaves as the sun's rays fell upon them, was surprised by the leaping of monkeys from branch to branch, their young clinging to their bellies. She walked on. Eagerly. Wearily. She rested.

And again she walked.

Their meeting took place early one morning. A time when not even the sound of birds was to be heard. The sun was hidden, secretive in the skies. Far away she saw a small hut. The dim light of a lamp flickered through it. The sound of a musical instrument came to her, tearing the darkness. As she came nearer and nearer, she recognized it as vinai music. A tune

that she had surely heard at some time. As she came yet nearer, the music held her bound in its melody. The door of the hut was open. She looked inside. Someone who looked like a tapasvi, living a life of austerities, was playing the vinai. When she asked whether she was disturbing his practice, he said no. He had been waiting for her, he said. 'Don't you know me? I am Ravana.'

Startled, she stepped back.

'I thought you died in the war...'

'This life is full of magic, is it not? When Rama demolished everyone in my palace, there was one bodyguard left. He pleaded with Rama to spare his life. And he then prayed that a friend of his should be returned to life. Rama did so, and told them both to flee before Lakshmana appeared. When they said they no longer had the strength to run, he gave them wings. They changed respectively into a kite and a parrot and flew away. This is a story that people tell. Could I not be that parrot that has been flying about in these forests? A parrot waiting for that moment when he would meet Sita once more. A tired old parrot.'

'Even now, this infatuation? I have seen so many tragedies. My life has been like a game of dice in which I am a pawn. I am tired. I am weary. I am more than forty years old.'

'It is then a woman needs a friend. To support her when she is distressed by her changing body. To serve her. To encourage her. To stand at a distance and give her hope.'

Sita sat down on the floor.

Ravana went on, 'I have never refused to give my friendship to anyone. Before the battle began, Rama wanted to make a puja. There were only two people in the world who could have conducted the puja for him. One was Vali. The other, myself. Rama had killed Vali with his own hands. So I was the only one left. He sent an invitation to me. I went to him. I did the puja as he desired. I blessed him and invoked his victory.'

Sita addressed him by name for the first time. 'Ravana, words make me tired. Language leaves me crippled. I am fettered by my body.'

Ravana smiled. 'The body is a prison. The body is a means of freedom,' he said. 'Look,' he said, showing her his rudravinai. 'A musical instrument that was created by imagining what wonderful music would sound if Parvati's breasts, as she lay on her back, turned into gourds, and their nipples were attached by strings. It is an extension of Devi's body. You lifted Shiva's bow with one hand. You should be able to conquer this instrument easily. Will you try?'

'Will you teach me?'

'I did battle for you once, and lost. Would I deny you music? I will be your guru and give you lessons every day. Let the music break out of the vinai and flow everywhere in the forest. Don't think of it as an ordinary musical instrument. Think of it as your life, and play on it. Here.'

He lifted the rudravinai from his lap and stretched it out towards her.

'Leave it there on the ground,' said Sita.

'Why?'

'It is my life, isn't it? A life that many hands have tossed about, like a ball. Now let me take hold of it; take it into my hands.' So saying, Sita lifted the rudravinai and laid it on her lap.[2]

Kamban's text itself is a retelling of Valmiki's text. But the final part of banishment of Sita, the Uttara-kanda, Kamban cannot bring himself to write. Uttara-kanda raises so many questions about Rama the man and the epic itself that many believe that it was not written by Valmiki and that it is a later addition by another author. Many houses do not even keep the last volume Uttara-kanda.

The wonderful thing about a text is that it assumes different meanings at different stages of one's life. Time ages a text differently. It develops layers. Layers keep getting added to a text in every reading. As one ages the text gets transformed with new meanings. At some point, the body becomes a text and the text begins to resemble one's body. Like language one feels that the body too has layers. One suddenly asks oneself: Is this my body that has so many layers or is it the text? The body and the text become one, open to new meanings and new definitions and new readings and re-readings.

One can see the text as a defined one and not look beyond its surface meanings. Or it can become a text with several layers, one hidden beneath the other, and be beyond definition. At a certain stage of this body-text merging, one tells oneself: I don't have to limit my body. I can redefine it the way I want. It is my body. I give it the meaning I want.

The epic text finally tells one what one has been searching for: that nothing is unifocal and that a text, like everything else, can be seen from multiple positions of age, gender, language and perspective. It can assume the darkness of a forest and become complex and dense, forcing one to make one's own way. It can also become simple and open like a forest filled with light. It can be dark at times and full of light at other times depending on who is reading it and when. It can also be both dark and full of light at the same time as if it is constantly playing hide and seek with one throughout one's life. We carry the text with us like we carry our body. Like the body it can lie with deadweight heavily on the ground or like the body become light and rise like musical notes. We create texts like we create our body. In different forms and shapes. To each her own.

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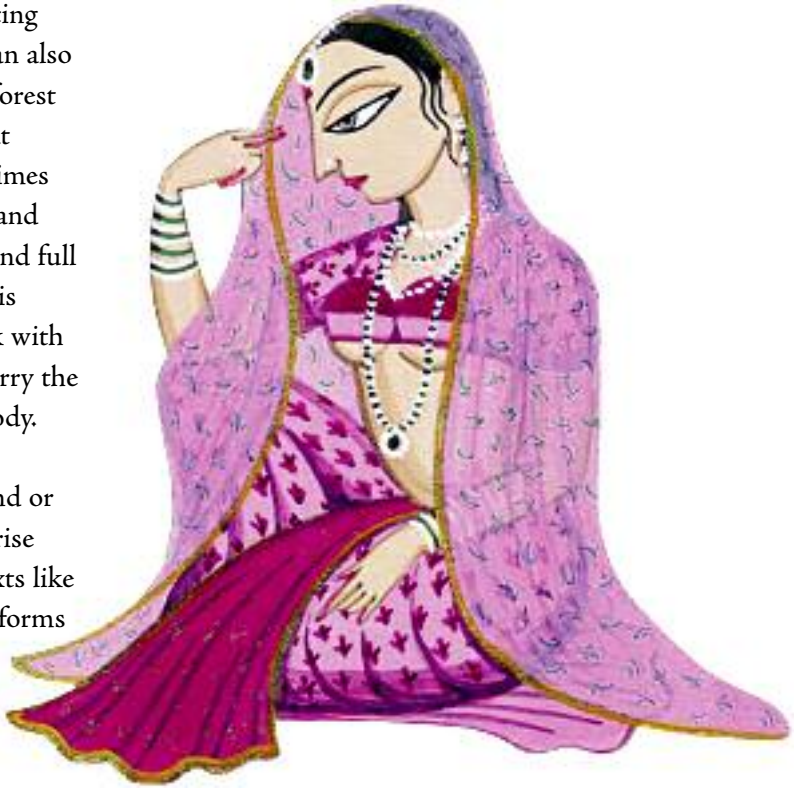
ENDNOTES

1. George L Hart and Hank Heifetz, *The Forest Book of Ramayana of Kamban* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

2. Translated from the Tamil original *Adavi* by Lakshmi Holmström.



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