

A FEW NOTES ON THE RĀMA-KATHĀ
IN THE MAHĀPURĀṆA-S

It is well-known that there are many purāṇic versions of the Rāma story. In this short paper I shall refer to just a couple of interesting details I met with in my purāṇic readings, without undertaking the great task of giving a complete account of the different *Rāma-kathā*-s contained in the *Mahāpurāṇa*-s¹ as well as in the widest purāṇic work

1. While talking about the *Mahā-purāṇa*-s, I mean the 18 *Purāṇa*-s of the so-called "canonical" list, with the addition of the *Śiva-purāṇa*, that replaces the *Vāyu-purāṇa* in many lists and is of great importance for the *śaiva*-s, and the *Devī-bhāgavata-purāṇa*, which is considered as "canonical" by the followers of the Devī. Among the main versions or short summaries of the *Rāma-kathā* contained in this literature at least the following texts deserve to be mentioned (references are made to the Venkateśvar Press edition, Bombay): *Agni-purāṇa* 5-11 (see also A.N. KRISHNA AIYANGAR, "Agnipurāṇa and the Rāmāyaṇa", in Bhv., 25, 1-2, 1965, pp. 9-17); *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* II, 7, 23-25 and IX, 10-11; *Brahma-purāṇa* I, 67, 48-62; 100, 58-63; 104, 117-151; II, *Gautamī-māhātmya* 53, 84, 87; *Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa* II, 3, 63, 192-197; *Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa* II, 14; IV, 56 and 62; *Devībhāgavata-purāṇa* III, 28-30; IX, 16 and 25, 10-21; *Gāruḍa-purāṇa* I, 142f; II, 10, 32-50; *Kūrma-purāṇa* I, 21, 16-55 and II, 34, 112-140; *Liṅga-purāṇa* I, 66, 35f; *Nārada-purāṇa* I, 79 (The story of Hanumat) and II, 75; *Padma-purāṇa*, I, *Sṛṣṭi-khaṇḍa*, 33; 35-38; V. *Pātāla-khaṇḍa*, 1-68; 104; 114 and 116; VI. *Utara-khaṇḍa*, 44; 242-244; VII. *Kriyāyogasāra-khaṇḍa* 15; *Śiva-purāṇa*, *Koṭirudra-saṃhitā* 31, 2-41; *Umā-saṃhitā* 39, 17f; *Skanda-purāṇa* I, 1, 8; II, iv, 25; vii 21; viii, 2 and 6; III, i (*Setu-māhātmya*), particularly chapters 2; 7; 11; 22; 27; 30; 44-47; III, ii, 30-35; V, i, 21; 24; 27; 31; 61; V, ii, 79; V, iii, 83; 136; VI, 20; 96-103; 124; 208; VII, i, 111-113; 123; 171; *Varāha-purāṇa* 12 and 45 (Rāma as God); *Vāyu-purāṇa* II, 26, 183 and 190-199 and II, 36, 91; *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* I, 12, 4 (nothing more than a hint to Śatrughna); IV, 4; V, 4, 28 (origin of Sītā).

related to the story of Rāma, namely the *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa* (The *Rāmāyaṇa* in which Rāma is the Supreme *Ātman*)², and without taking into consideration the voluminous treatise dealing with the principles of Vedānta philosophy bearing the title of *Yogavāsiṣṭha* or *Vāsiṣṭha-mahā-rāmāyaṇa*³, although it is certainly worthy of a better attention than that it has till now received from scholars in Indology.

In the outlook of purāṇic texts the story of Rāma is interwoven with a long series of religious topics this kind of literature very often deals with, concerning such subjects as expiatory rites (like the *prāyaścitta* Rāma had to perform in order to purify himself of the sin of *brahmahatyā*⁴ he had soiled himself by killing the brahmin Rāvaṇa), ceremonies for installing various *liṅga*-s in honour of Śiva (like the very famous *liṅga* of Rāmeśvaram, which is still considered as one of the most important sanctuaries of hinduism)⁵, penances and vows (*vrata*) – like the one made by Daśaratha in order to get children –, celebrations of various *Rāma-tīrtha*-s and of other *tīrtha*-s connected with the earth life of Rāma, and so on. The Rāma story is therefore included in the *Purāṇa*-s as a means and chance to teach the most important religious practices and observances of tantric hindui-

About the *Rāma-kathā* in the *Mahā-purāṇa*-s one may refer to the voluminous book by C. BULCKE, *Rāmakathā (utpatti aura vikāsa)*, Hindi Pariṣad Prakāśana, Prayāga (Ilāhābāda), Prayāga Viśvavidyālaya, 1950; II ed. 1962; III rev. ed. 1971, especially pp. 154-165. See also RĀMAPRASĀDA ŚARMĀ, *Paurāṇika Kośa*, Vārāṇasī, Jñānamaṇḍala Limited, *saṃvat* 2028, II ed. 1986, under the items *Rāma*, *Rāmacandra*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Sītā*, etc.; SADASHIV AMBADAS DANGE, *Encyclopaedia of Puranic Beliefs and Practices*, vol. IV, Delhi, Navrang, 1989, under the item *Rāmāyaṇa* (pp. 1154 ff.).

2. In this text which, like *Tantra*-s, is in form of a dialogue between Śiva and Umā, Rāma is Viṣṇu himself and Sītā an *avatāra* of Lakṣmī and, at the same time, of the *Prakṛti*. The *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa* is divided into 7 books or *kāṇḍa*-s, that have the same titles as in the VRā; it is traditionally considered as a part of the *Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa*, and it teaches the Advaita doctrine and *Rāma-bhakti* as a means for salvation. The figure of Rāma in the *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa* is analysed by FRANK WHALING in his essay *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rāma*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1980.

3. See the edition with the commentary *Vāsiṣṭha-mahā-rāmāyaṇa-tātparyā-prakāśa*, by Vāsudeva Lakṣmaṇa Śarman Paṇaśikara, Bombay, Nimaya Sagar Press, 1918; III ed. 1937; reprint, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1984.

4. Cf. *Skanda-purāṇa* III, i, 27 and 44; V, iii, 83.

5 Cf. *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa* VI, 4, 1.

sm, or to remind and celebrate the many places particularly sanctified by the visit of the supreme God Viṣṇu in the form of Rāma.

From this immense and rich harvest of informations, I just picked up a few details of the *Rāma-kathā*, which may be of some interest, at least as regards the comparison with other cultures.

1. *Chāyā-Sītā* or *Māyā-maya-Sītā* ⁶.

As far as the shadows theme is concerned, it must be reminded that Rāma and Sītā are considered in the *Mahāpurāṇa-s* as *pūrnāvatāra-s* of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī⁷. The superhuman character of Sītā is revealed by her miraculous birth, thanks to which she has been called *ayonijā*, and by her exceptional qualities; she is called *jatismarā* ⁸ and, at the end of her life, she returns to the Earth that generated her⁹. Consequently, we should not be amazed at the fact that the purāṇic texts introduce the story of *Māyā-maya-Sītā* or *Chāyā-Sītā* in order to maintain that the woman abducted by Rāvaṇa was not the real Sītā and therefore the problem of her chastity did not exist nor was there any reason to subject her to the *agni-parīkṣā*.

According to the *Devībhāgavata-purāṇa* the god Agni in the form of a brahmin approaches Rāma during his exile and takes the true Sītā with him, after replacing her by a *Chāyā-Sītā* and promising to give the true Sītā back to her husband when the *agni-parīkṣā* will take place. This thing is kept secret by Agni and Rāma. At the end¹⁰, when the real Sītā is delivered back by Agni into the hands of Rāma, the *Chāyā-Sītā* or *Māyā-Sītā*, advised by Rāma, goes to Puṣkara in order to perform *tapasyā* in that sacred place and finally becomes *Māyā-*

6. I thank my pupil Alberto Pelissero for his suggestions on this subject.

7. See, for instance, *Garuḍa-purāṇa* III, 16,12 and *Padma-purāṇa*, *Uttara-khaṇḍa* 269-271. Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Śatrughna are considered *aṃśāvatāra-s* of Ananta, Sudarśana and Pāñcājanya respectively.

8. Cf. *Devībhāgavata-purāṇa* IX, 16, 1-30. The text specifies that Māyā-Lakṣmī was formerly Vedavati, the daughter of Kuśadhvaja, in Satya-yuga, then Sītā, daughter of Janaka and wife of Rāma, in Tretā-yuga, then Draupadī, daughter of Drupada and wife of the Pāṇḍava-s, in Dvāpara-yuga: this is the reason why she is also called Trihāyaṇī; cf. also *Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa*, *Prakṛti-khaṇḍa* 14, 10ff.

9. Cf. *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* IX, 11, 15. At the same time Rāma goes back to heaven, whence he came (cf. *ibidem*, 19 and *Skanda-purāṇa* II, viii, 6; VI, 99): the divine couple therefore represents heaven and earth in purāṇic mythology.

10. Cf. *Devībhāgavata-purāṇa* IX, 16, 49ff.

Lakṣmī, who will later take a new bodily form as Draupadī¹¹. The story given in the *Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa* essentially agrees with the one in the *Devībhāgavata-purāṇa*, but the *Kūrma-purāṇa* (where the story of Sītā is introduced in connection with an eulogy of chaste women) gives an interesting variant¹²: according to this text, Rāma comes to know the secret of the two Sītā-s (the true one and the one “made of shadow”, or “of illusion”) only at the end of the story itself. The *Kūrma-purāṇa* says that Sītā prays the Āvasathya Fire (the domestic fire) to protect her against Rāvaṇa, who, after assuming the appearance of an ascetic, is planning to abduct her. The domestic fire appears to her in the form of Maheśvara and carries her away, after producing an unreal Sītā (*māyāmayī Sītā*), who is abducted by Rāvaṇa. At the end, when the unreal Sītā enters the fire, it burns her and gives the real Sītā – who, in the meanwhile, had been committed to the care of Pārvatī – back to Rāma, explaining to him what happened.

This particular treatment of the story of Sītā, which is also followed by the *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa*¹³, cannot but remind of a greek myth which presents an analogous situation: it is Helen who, according to some greek sources, is abducted by Hermes by order of Zeus and committed to the care of Proteus, King of Egypt, while a phantasm of her (produced by Hera or Proteus), is sent to Troy with Paris in order to cause war¹⁴.

II. *Setu*.

Not only in the stories narrated in the *Mahā-purāṇa*-s, but also in the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* itself, the description of the building of a *setu* between India and Laṅkā in order to enable Rāma and his allies to cross the sea together with their armies clearly shows that what is

11. See footnote 8.

12. Cf. *Kūrma-purāṇa* II, 34, 112-140 and P.E. DUMONT, “The legend of Sītā in the *Kūrma-purāṇa*”, in *Siddha-bhāratī*... in honour of Dr. Siddheshwar Varma, part I, Hoshiarpur, V.V.R. Institute, 1950, pp. 236-238.

13. In the *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa* Rāma himself suggests his wife she should enter the fire, from which she will come out again after one year; cf. *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa* (Gītā Press edition) III, 7, 2 f. See also FRANK WHALING, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

14. See ROBERT GRAVES, *The Greek Myths*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1955, pp. 274f and 276f; for more details on this subject and particularly on some tamil versions of the shadow Sītā story see WENDY DONIGER O’FLAHERTY, *Dreams, Illusion and other Realities*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1987, pp. 92ff.

built is not a “bridge”, but rather an “embankment”, or a “dyke”; as a matter of fact, this is the first meaning of the word *setu*, and certainly all scholars are perfectly aware of it; I would suggest that also adopt, in their writings, unmistakable translations of the word *setu*, particularly as far as higher popularization of Indian cultural themes is concerned¹⁵. But the *Mahā-purāṇa*-s give us also a few hints that seem to refer not to the building of a dam or embankment, but rather to a subsiding of the sea, which, “trembling with fear, immediately gave passage” to Rāma and its army to cross it.

The mythical theme of the sea¹⁶, i.e. Sāgara, “giving the permission to cross over” – which is also found in the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* (VI, 211f) – is a common purāṇic topic¹⁷. It is a question of *dharma*. According to *dharma*, it is not allowed to plough the sea¹⁸, and Rāma, being himself an incarnation of *dharma*, couldn't but follow this rule¹⁹. In order to cross the sea it was therefore necessary to jump over it, flying as Hanumat, the son of the Wind, did, or to change the way into a land path or land bridge in order to “walk”²⁰ on it; of course the land bridge could be obtained by filling up the sea²¹.

15. It is a fact that not only between Mandapam and Rāmeśvram, but also further, towards the island of Ceylon the sea, scattered with rocks, looks like a lagoon it is possible to fill up, as the myth says, with stones, earth and trees.

16. The “sea”, Sāgara, has the name of a large group of Rāma's ancestors, burnt to ashes by the wrath of the *muni* Kapila and later “purified” by the waters of the holy Gaṅgā, descended from heaven just to fill up the sea, which had been dried up by Agastya (cf. Mbh. III, 105).

17. See, for instance, *Skanda-purāṇa* III, i, 2 and *Nārada-purāṇa* II, 75, 43, where it is stated that the embankment towards Laṅkā was built “with the permission of the ocean” (*sāgarānumatena*).

18. *Samudra-saṅgyāna* or *samudra-yātrā* is one of the practices which are considered *patanīya* and must be avoided, particularly in the Kali age (*kali-varjya*). The main sources for this rule are *Baudhāyana-dharma-sūtra* I, 1, 22 and II, 1, 51; *Manu-smṛiti* III, 153-167 and *Nārada-purāṇa* I, 24, 13-16; the problem of the crossing of the sea in a vessel is discussed by P.V. KANE, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, 2nd edition, vol. III, Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1973, pp. 610 and 933-938 (see also vol. IV, p. 393).

19. Furthermore, Rāma is going to perform that great “sacrifice” which is the killing of Rāvaṇa and represents the very task of the *avatāra*; he must, therefore, be perfectly pure.

20. *Sāgaram śoṣayīṣyāmi padbhyāṃ yāntu plavaṅgamāḥ* (VRā. VI, 21, 23cd); *param te 'dya gamiṣyanti padbhir eva plavaṅgamāḥ* (VRā. VI, 22, 3cd); cf. also *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa* VI, 3, 63: *pādenaiva gamiṣyanti vānarāḥ*.

21. *Harīṇām tarāṇe rāma kariṣyāmi yathā sthalam*, VRā. VI, 22, 28.

Nevertheless one more possibility should not be excluded. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, in a three *śloka*-s summary of the Rāma story, states that “the sea, with the limbs of its body trembling with fear, immediately gave passage” to Rāma so that he could cross it²². Nothing more is stated by the text and, although it is said elsewhere that the sea gave the permission to build a land bridge, the words *mārgam adāt* cannot but remind of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrew people guided by Moses as it is described in the *Exodus*²³. The two tales show no doubt some common meaningful details – as the one relating to the “drying” of the sea²⁴, or even the one of the sand column²⁵. It is a mythical theme we can find out in different ancient cultures and the Indian culture, represented in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the purāṇic versions of the *Rāmākathā*, has given its original contribution to it in the particular perspective of *dharma*.

As far as Indian tradition is concerned, I would finally mention two passages in which the idea of the subsiding of the waters is expressed. The first one²⁶ is found in a famous Rāma-play by Bhāsa, namely the *Abhiṣeka-nāṭaka*: Varuṇa himself, requested by Rāma (*mārgam dātum arhati bhavān*) gives passage to him (*eṣa mārgaḥ*), who shows to Lakṣmaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa his great wonder in seeing the secrets of the sea²⁷. The second one is a passage of the *Bhāgavata-*

22. See *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* II, 7, 24: *yasmā adād udadhir ūḍhabhayāṅgaveṣo* (or °vepo) *mārgam*. Cf. also IX, 10, 13-16, where the text, however, adds that the ocean gives to Rāma the permission to build the embankment; see also *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa* VI, 3, 84, *Narasimha-purāṇa* (Delhi, Nāg Publishers, 1987) 52, 16f (*mārgo datto mayā te 'dya*) and G. BORSANI SCALABRINO, *La storia di Rāma nel Narasimhapurāṇa*, Milano, 1953, p. 70. The *Śiva-purāṇa*, *Koṭirudra-saṃhitā* 31, 41 says that “it was by Śiva’s miraculous power (*prabhāvāt*) that Rāma crossed the Ocean soon”.

23. Cf. *Exodus* 14, 21f.

24. *Adya tvāṃ śoṣayiṣyāmi sapātālaṃ mahārmava* (VRā. VI, 21, 1cd); *adya yuddhena mahatā samudraṃ pariśoṣaye* (*ibidem*, 20cd); cf. also *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa* VI, 3, 62.

25. *Pāṃsur utpadyate mahān*, VRā. VI, 22, 2d.

26. I owe this reference to J.M. Verpoorten, who suggested it to me during the discussion which followed the reading of my paper.

27. Cf. *Abhiṣeka-nāṭaka*, Act IV, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1974, pp. 138-140 and *Thirteen plays of Bhāsa*, transl. into English by A. C. Woolner and Lakshman Sarup, reprint, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1985, p. 166.

purāṇa, where the waters of the Yamunā subside for giving way to Vasudeva carrying the little boy Kṛṣṇa, the episode being connected by the text itself to the crossing of the sea by Lord Rāma:

...*nadī mārgaṃ dadau sindhur iva śriyaḥ pateḥ*²⁸.

28. Cf. *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* X, 3, 50.