

ABOUT THE RĀMĀYAṆA STRUCTURE. EPICS AND FABLE

*Nijasvarūpabodhakaṃ kṛpākaraṃ bhayāpaham /  
samaṃ śivaṃ nirañjanam bhaje ha rāmam advayam //*

An inquiry into the texture of Rāma's story by comparing it to specific models of non-Indian narrations may be advisable both in order to ascertain its effective age and to throw some light in the *andhatāmīśra* enveloping the ancient dispute about the relative priority of such texts as Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Rāmopakhyāna* in *Mahābhārata* and *Dasarathajātaka* in Buddhist pāli Canon<sup>1</sup>.

In *Mahābhārata* itself Rāma is presented as a personage of the utmost antiquity in respect of the heroes of the epic: when in *Vanaparvan* Bhīma encounters his half-brother Hanūmān and asks for the privilege of a vision of the powerful form in which he leaped across the sea to reach Laṅkā - an episode which anticipates in some way the vision of the Cosmic Form in *Bhagavadgītā* -, Hanūmān hints that it all happened in another *yuga*, so that contemplating that form

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1. Cfr. for all *The Mahābhārata*. 2 *The Book of the Assembly Hall*. 3 *The Book of the Forest*. Translated and Edited by J.A. van Buitenen, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1975, pp. 207-214; FRANK WHALIN, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rāma*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1980 - Hence abbreviated *Rise* -; *Many Rāmāyaṇas. The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Edited by Paula Richman, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles-Oxford, 1991.

of his is presently impossible; besides, he speaks of a duration of eleven thousand years of the golden age of Rāma's reign<sup>2</sup>. Such talk seems to point out a very remote age for Rāma. But in his story, as recounted by Mārkaṇḍeya following - at least in general outlines - the same plot that is to be found in Vālmīki<sup>3</sup>, we meet - in the role of Sītā's father - king Janaka of the Videhas; as it is well-known, in *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*<sup>4</sup> this same Janaka figures as a patron of the great sage Yājñavalkya, who, during a tournament of enigms, is asked about the final outcome of Parikṣit's descendants. From the way in which this question is formulated, it is apparent that these kings were then already felt to be pretty ancient. Since Parikṣit himself was still to be born at the time of the *Mahābhārata* war, the ingenuous critic is brought to suspect that something must have gone wrong with the datation of Rāma's adventure and final triumph, possibly because his whereabouts were not always easy to situate in terms of Vedic references. The introducing by the poet of *Bālakāṇḍa* of famous Vedic seers as Vāsiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra as contemporaries of Janaka only manages to complicate the issue. In fact, if we take into account the relative paucity of Vedic references - at least in the admittedly more ancient portions of the narrations dealing with Rāma -, as compared with the great wealth of them to be found in the main story of *Mahābhārata*, we shall be under the impression that we are here confronted with a more recent, well-plotted and linear creation of Indian genius in respect of the vast, frequently cumbrous and archaic structure of the older *itihāsa*. The fact that we have archeological proof of the actual existence of at least one king Daśaratha (Dasalatha) of the Maurya dynasty, bearing the very title of *devānām priya* of his great praedecessor Aśoka, would suggest that Rāma's story was originally connected with that dynasty instead of Ikṣvāku's one. Besides, where the *Mahābhārata* war appears to be - at least in its main plot and in some important digressions - the adaptation to Indian political and geographical context of a very antique Indoeuropean saga, similarly adapted elsewhere, as in the war of the Seven Kings against Thebes in

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2. 148, 5 ff. and 147, 38.

3. 258,1.

4. 3,1,1 and 3, 31f..

pre-Homeric Greece<sup>5</sup> and of the battle of Brávellir in ancient Sweden<sup>6</sup>, the South Indian and Singhalese background of Rāma's wandering seemingly hints at a much later age for the elaboration of that saga. If, notwithstanding these facts, the examining of Rāma's story plot could point out a respectable antiquity, the usefulness of our task would be vindicated; even the presence or absence in the afore-said plot of such relevant episodes as Sītā's abduction and the fight against Rāvaṇa would in this context constitute an element of date-tion, for instance in the case of *Dasarathajātaka*, where they are conspicuously missing.

A useful instrument for our inquiry is still to be found in the typification of Fairy Tales Motives as "Functions" in *Morfologija skazki* by Vladimir Propp<sup>7</sup>, whose heuristic value in regard of the analysis of unilliterate societies' narrative products is well-known, to be read with the complementary study *Istoričeskie korni volšebnoj skazki*<sup>8</sup>, while a richer typological classification is furnished by Stith Thompson in his comprehensive treaty *The Folk-Tale*<sup>9</sup>, which puts to contribution his former works *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*<sup>10</sup> and *The Types of Folk-Tale*<sup>11</sup>. Of course, a mere typological analysis of Rāma's saga in strict phenomenological perspective is here out of question: its analogy to narrations pertaining to traditions that could not possibly have had

5. Cfr. MARIO PIANTELLI, *Alcuni paralleli indiani ai mitologemi collegati alla figura di Edipo*, in *Atti delle giornate di studio su Edipo*, a cura di Renato Uglione, Regione Piemonte, Assessorato alla Cultura, Torino, 11-12-13 aprile 1983, pp. 157-167.

6. Cfr. GEORGES DUMÉZIL, *Mythe et épopée. L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens*. Gallimard, Paris<sup>3</sup>, 1968, pp. 255-257.

7. Leningrad, 1928; English tr. (by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson) *Morphology of the Folktale*, Mouton, The Hague, 1958; Italian tr. (by Gian Luigi Bravo) *Morfologia della fiaba. Con un intervento di Claude Lévi-Strauss e una replica dell'autore*, Einaudi, Torino, 1966. Hence abbreviated *Morf*.

8. Leningrad, 1946; Italian tr. (by Clara Coisson) *Le radici storiche dei racconti di fate*, Einaudi, Torino, 1949. Hence abbreviated *Ist*.

9. Rinehart & Winston, Holt, 1946; Italian tr. (by Quirino Maffi) *La fiaba nella tradizione popolare*, Il Saggiatore, Milano<sup>2</sup>, 1979. Hence abbreviated *Tale*.

10. VI voll. in "FF Communications" nn. 106-109, 116-117 e *Indiana University Studies*, nn. 96-97, 100-101, 105-106; 108-110; 111-112, Helsinki-Bloomington, 1932-1936.

11. In "FF Communications" n. 74, Helsinki, 1928, based on A. Aarne, *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen*, in "FF Communications" n. 3, Helsinki, 1910.

any contact with India or to pieces and portions of folk literature out of the pale of the general framework relevant to our saga would be scarcely, if at all, meaningful. Only the so-called Hero Tales and/or Märchen (Fairy Tales) should therefore be taken into account, and only in so far as they are susceptible to be put into a sound context of historical and cultural relations within ancient Indoeuropean world: that is, mainly Northern European and Russian Fairy Tales, with Greek and Latin mythological materials. It may be judged somewhat reductive in respect of the admittedly deep spiritual and ethical significance of the story of a much-beloved Avatāra as Rāma to confine our analysis to the “fabulous” aspects thereof. Yet should such an analysis enable us better to understand the pre-history of that story, if one is passed the pun, it would indeed prove worthy to be undertaken. After all, the greater part of truly important stories in the traditions and holy scriptures of humanity *does* display a “fabulous” background, without appearing in a worse predicament because of that.

#### A) The Structure of *Bālakāṇḍa*.

The first book of Vālmiki's poem, by general agreement a later addition to it<sup>12</sup> - albeit entirely functional to its development -, when analysed proves to be a classical instance of Fairy Tale, so that Rāma's voyages as a teenager and as an adult may be regarded as two versions of the same plot. Such a redoublement of the main story is in fact a literary device frequently encountered in this kind of narrative, where even occasional triplications are to be found<sup>13</sup>.

##### 1) Prodigious Birth<sup>14</sup>.

In a typical variant of Fairy Tale, after a prolonged and much suffered state of childlessness of his parents, the Hero is miraculously conceived through the ingestion on the part of his mother of some peculiar food or drink, e. g. a pea, a fish etc., that can be explicitly related to a dead personage, who will thereby come back to life, evidently a very ancient form of “neutral” *punarjanma* enjoying some popularity in India too before the diffusion of the notion of retribution

12. Cfr. *Rise*, p.15 n.4

13. *Morf.* Ch.IX, A, 4 and 6.

14. *Morf.* Appendix I, table I, 3, 4-5 and 6; *Tale*, Index, E 607.2; T 511.

through *karman*<sup>15</sup>; such is the case with Celtic idea of rebirth in the case of very important characters: witness the Irish story of Túan mac Cairill<sup>16</sup>, whose last non-human birth as a salmon is followed by the ingestion on the part of king Carell's queen of the body of the fish. The feature of the Miraculous Conception by ingestion is present in the form of the episode of the divine *pāyasa*<sup>17</sup>, which *Rāmopakhyaṇa* in *Mahābhārata* fails to report, due to its being an abridgement - either of Vālmiki or, more probably, of a closely related lost version of the saga. Sītā's no-less miraculous emerging from Earth is clearly a redoublement of this motive. This kind of birth is to be found in Indoeuropean cultures west of India, usually for male personages, as it is in India the case for Bhaumāśura in *Harivaṃśa*<sup>18</sup>: witness e.g. the case of the First Ancestor of humanity, the divine figure of Tuisto in Tacitus' report of Germanic belief<sup>19</sup>, or that of Gaia's sons like Antaios in Greek mythology, razionalised by Empedocles<sup>20</sup> and later by Epicurean thinkers<sup>21</sup> in a theory of the origin from Mother Earth of humanity - and more in general of all living beings - at the beginning of the Cosmos.

## 2) Going Away<sup>22</sup>.

The Hero is made to leave his home, in a voyage that brings him in a wilderness, for instance a forest, where he is to undergo one or more trials. This is usually the starting point of the main body of the Fairy Tale. Typically, the Going Away is forced on the Hero by some command and/or request of help<sup>23</sup>, here on the part of the royal seer Viśvāmitra. The Hero's trials may be in the form of one or several

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15. Cfr. WENDY DONIGER O'FLAHERTY, *Karma and Rebirth in the Vedas and Purāṇas*, in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. by the same, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980, pp. 6 ff. and 18 ff.

16. Mss Rawlinson B.512.

17. I, XV, 17 ff.

18. II, 63; cfr. U.P. ARORA, *Motifs in Indian Mythology. Their Greek and Other Parallels*, Indika, New Delhi, 1981, pp. 55 ff. Hence abbreviated *Motifs*.

19. *Germania*, II.

20. Cfr. Aelianus, *De natura animalium*, XVI, 29 - where there is a bisexuality of the beings so born as probably in Tuisto himself, given the idea of duality in his name, and Aetius, *De placitis philosophorum*, V, 19, 5 and V, 26, 4.

21. Cfr. Lucretius, *De rerum natura* V, 783 ff. and 925 ff.

22. *Morf.* Ch. 3, III, I (e), 3 and IX (Y).

23. *Ibidem*, Y<sup>1</sup>.

encounters, which respond to a rich typology. Anthropophagous female personages, monsters, giants etc. are commonly part of it. As a result of the trials, the Hero gains *inter alia* some unusual artifacts or weapons. This is exactly what happens in the episode of the killing of Tāṭakā and the consequent gaining of *divyāstra*-s by Rāma<sup>24</sup>.

### 3) Difficult Task<sup>25</sup>.

The Hero is to win the hand of the King's Daughter by resolving or proposing difficult enigms, by showing his courage and strenght or by succeeding in some apparently impossible undertaking, as fetching a magic object. Frequently there is a public proclamation to the effect that whomsoever will accomplish the given task shall receive the princess from her father. This is precisely the case with the bending of Rudra's bow in Sītā's *svayamvara*<sup>26</sup>; beside being found elsewhere in Indian context, e.g. in *Janakajātaka* and in the episode of the winning of Draupadī in *Ādiparvan* of *Mahābhārata*, this is a well-known nuptial proof in Greek myths, as we find in *Odyssey* or in the winning of Iole on the part of Heracles<sup>27</sup>.

### 4) Marriage and Triumph<sup>28</sup>.

This is the classical ending of the tale; normally, the winning of the bride and of the kingdom go together; here, obviously, since the main story is still waiting to begin, the conclusion is but provisional<sup>29</sup>. In this connection, it is in many instances observed a victory against the Antagonist of the Hero<sup>30</sup>, which as a rule precedes the wedding. Paraśurāma's defy follows it, but otherwise conforms itself to the motif, even at the point of the pardon of the Antagonist, a duly classified variant<sup>31</sup>.

The whole *Bālakāṇḍa* is so seen to answer, leaving aside the collateral episodes, to a Proppian structure like <Y<sup>1</sup> ↑ D<sup>8</sup> E<sup>9</sup> Z<sup>1</sup> R<sup>2</sup> C A N\* Pu neg ↓>. Its pattern can be regarded as a classical instance of

24. I, 25-26.

25. *Morf.* Ch. 3, XXV (C); *Ist.* IX, 2, A 3 ff.

26. I, 65-66

27. Cfr. *Motifs*, pp. 157 ff.

28. *Morf.* Ch. 3, XXXI (N).

29. In Propp typology, we have so a case of N' instead of N\*.

30. *Morf.* Ch.3, XXX (Pu).

31. As (Pu neg).

“Simple Tale of a Single Movement”, as in countless humbler Russian or German examples. Even the specific features of the episodes are well framed within the ideas and themes of Indoeuropean ascendance.

If such is the result of the analysis of our artefact, we can now confidently deal with the main - and older - part of the narration.

## B) The Structure of Main Plot in Rāma's Story.

The somewhat composite structure of the main plot of Rāma's story in Proppian form would appear more or less like  $\langle i Y^5 \uparrow v^3 w^1 j^3 y^3 j^1 X^1 X^{14} X^{16}/ X^{17} \uparrow D^8 E^9 Z^2 D^6/D^7 E^7 Z^1 Rm^5 M^2 CR^2 L^1 Rm^9 V^1 Rm^4 C \downarrow \rangle$ . Here the central event is, of course, Sītā's abduction on the part of Rāvaṇa and Rāma's quest of his lost wife, which brings to the confrontation between the Hero and the Villain and the victory of the former. The instances of such a plot are nearly numberless in the tales analyzed by Propp.

### 1) Preliminaries.

Rāma's exile in the wilderness due to the intervention of an hostile Step-Mother is a typical variant of the Starting Situation<sup>32</sup> in a Hero Tale's texture. The wilderness is not necessarily the place in which the abduction takes place, but it is a distinctive element of the quest: leaving the normal human habitat and entering into the Other World represented by the woods and/or the mountains is usually accompanied by a peculiar Equipment of the Hero<sup>33</sup> that singles him out as a voyager in the Land of the Dead; such an Equipment frequently includes weapons and/or powerful magical artifacts, when these items are not procured later to him in the wilderness itself. Some interdict or tabu imposed to the Hero is also commonly found: for instance, he should not cut his beard and hairs, change his dress or wash himself, he should wear a bear skin, cover his body with ashes and/or clay, make his face black with coke or white with flour, he should make himself unobscure so as to become invisible to everybody, as it were, etc.<sup>34</sup> In the classical figure of the king or prince exiled in the

32. Indicated as “i”: *Morf.* Ch.3, beginning, and IX-XI; *Ist.* Ch.2, I,1. For the Step-Mother's role, cfr. *Morf.*, Ch.3, IX,5 ( $Y^5$ ).

33. *Ist.* Ch.2, II,9.

34. *Ist.* Ch.4, I,13

wilderness of the Indian narrations, the ascetic garb and such observances as are connected with the wandering existence of a warrior-hunter are exactly paralleled to the aforesaid features. For the duration of his exile, Rāma is not to enter a town, he is dressed with bark, and so on. Albeit very alive, he is like a walking dead; his terribility as a peerless fighter is certainly enhanced by his otherworldly appearance and behaviour.

## 2) Abduction<sup>35</sup>.

The abduction of a woman, quite often a princess, by the Antagonist of the Hero is the typical form of the event that Propp classifies as Loss or Damage, the central moment of the main plot. The Antagonist is informed in some way about his potential victim<sup>36</sup>, he investigates her whereabouts or sends some follower of his to spy her<sup>37</sup>, then proceeds to change aspect in order to trick her: the Dragon takes the appearance of a Golden Eagle or of a Beautiful Youth, the Priest Magician wears the hide of a goat, the Evil Witch of a Good Old Lady, of a Poor She-Beggar, etc.<sup>38</sup>. The victim is usually protected by the observation of some interdiction, but when she is tricked into disobeying, the abduction can take place<sup>39</sup>. In the course of the abduction, a Murder may be committed<sup>40</sup>. The figure of the Antagonist may vary a lot (Dragon/Serpent, Ogre, Devil, Death, Wind, Fire Bird, etc.), but some traits of its, besides this polymorphous ability, seem to be widely diffused: its avidity, in the form of sexual appetites and/or anthropophagy - its victim being gulped down whole and living<sup>41</sup>, its polycephaly - three, five, six, seven, nine, twelve heads are reckoned<sup>42</sup>, sometimes susceptible of being re-attached to the body even when cut<sup>43</sup> -, its capacity to fly away with the victim, a form of quasi-invulnerability - with some kind of

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35. *Morf.* Ch.3, VIII (X<sup>1</sup>); *Ist.* Ch.2, II.

36. *Morf.* Ch.3, V (w).

37. *Morf.* Ch.3, IV (v).

38. *Morf.* Ch.3, VI (j).

39. *Morf.* Ch.3, VI and VII (y).

40. *Morf.* Ch.3, VIII (X<sup>14</sup>).

41. *Ist.* Ch.7, VI, 29 ff.

42. *Ist.* Ch.7, I, 1

43. *Ist.* Ch.7, I, 10.



Achilles' heel, like the fact of keeping its life or heart inside an egg<sup>44</sup>, so that only to the Hero is given to kill it<sup>45</sup>- are the most conspicuous. Rāvana's personality and ways strictly conform to this typology: not only his Rākṣasa nature, but his polycephaly and quasi-invulnerability are well-known traits of this Villain. The reader will recall the actual narration of the abduction in Vālmīki, where *two* changes of form are employed, on the part of Rāvana and his uncle Mārīca respectively, the second one doubled again in a vocal trick apt to induce Sītā to countermand Rāma's instructions and send away Lakṣmaṇa, with the result of forfeiting the very protection set by her husband. The killing of the poor Jaṭāyu and the flying away with Sītā are also within the pale of the typical situation of the abduction. Here we find also a classic motif of Northern European tales: to wit, the Chase of the elusive Magical Stag, a white animal which comes directly from the realm of the Other World and brings there the Hero hopelessly intent to follow its traces.

### 3) Quest.

The typical search of the Fairy Tale culminates into the all-important meeting of the Donor of a Magical Means or Helper<sup>46</sup>, usually got thanks to some service<sup>47</sup> through which the gratitude of the personage (a Dead Person, an Animal, a Hag, a Prisoner, etc.) is obtained. Alternatively, he can be tricked or killed on the part of the Hero. Frequently this happens in connection with a fight or contest between two or more rivals, in which the Hero manages to get the Magical Artifact object of the dispute and to overcome through it both the rivals<sup>48</sup>. Other times, the Hero simply wins or kills an adversary to reach his end<sup>49</sup>. The episode of Kabandha is introduced as a preliminary to the gaining of Sugrīva's support falls in this latter case, whereas the killing of Bālin in order to gain it seems a mixage of the service and the rivals motives. Anyway, through Sugrīva Rāma eventually has a whole army of Magical Helpers at his orders, namely the

44. *Tale 2, II* (type 302).

45. *Ist. Ch.7, I, 9*.

46. *Morf. Ch.3, XII-XIV* (D,E and Z).

47. *Morf. Ch.3, XII, 3* (D<sup>3</sup>) and *XIII, 3* (E<sup>3</sup>) and *7* (E<sup>7</sup>).

48. *Morf. Ch.3, XII, 6* (D<sup>6</sup>) and *XIII, 6* (E<sup>6</sup>).

49. *Morf. Ch.3, XII, 8-9* (D<sup>8</sup> and D<sup>9</sup>) and *XIII, 9* (E<sup>9</sup>).

Vānaras, an exact counterpart to the Silvens of Northern European Fairy Tales, and the most important of them all, Hanūmān. A Magical Animal which, as Donor, procures to the Hero other Magical Animals of the same kind is an acknowledged variant of this feature of the plot<sup>50</sup>. The task of the Magical Helper often consists in procuring the object of the quest<sup>51</sup> - a Ring is in many instances given to the Hero<sup>52</sup>; alternatively, we find this personage flying with the Hero to the place of the Antagonist - either as a Magical Horse, or as a Bird, Giant, Spirit, etc.<sup>53</sup>; in some instances the Helper substitutes the Hero in his final fight with the Antagonist or gives him a decisive advantage in the course thereof<sup>54</sup>. It can happen that a Dead - the Hero or somebody connected with him - be resurrected recurring to magical means (the Water of Life, etc.)<sup>55</sup>. A considerate perusal of Rama's story will show how well Hanūmān's role as a Magical Helper is responding to these topical features<sup>56</sup>. Other classical elements of the Fairy Tale plot, which structurally dispense with the Magical Helper figure, are to be found in the texture of Rāma's Quest: so it is quite common that the Hero need a Passing of Water or Fire to reach the object of his Quest, the Antagonist being a Serpent sleeping at the center of the black sea, or some other personage as the King of the sea<sup>57</sup>; on the other hand, a task commonly imposed to the Hero is the building in a very short time of a Palace or Castle and a Bridge bringing to it<sup>58</sup>.

The confrontation with the Antagonist quite often takes the form of a duel or fight, which can be against a whole army, and terminates with the victory of the Hero<sup>59</sup>.

It is at this point clear enough that a tentative analysis of the structure of Rāma's story in terms of Northern European or Russian

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50. *Morf.* Ch.3, XIV, 9 (Z<sup>9</sup>).

51. *Morf.* Ch.3, XIX, 5 (Rm<sup>5</sup>).

52. *Morf.* Ch.3, XVII, 2 (M<sup>2</sup>).

53. *Morf.* Ch.3, XV, 1 (R<sup>1</sup>).

54. *Ist.* Ch.5, I, 1ff. *Tale 2*, II, 3.

55. *Morf.* Ch.3, XIX, 9 (Rm<sup>9</sup>).

56. Cfr. JOGINDER NARULA, *Hanuman, God and Epic Hero. The Origin and Growth of Hanuman in Indian Literary and Folk Tradition*, Manohara, Delhi, 1991.

57. *Morf.* Ch.3, XV, 2 (R<sup>2</sup>); *Ist.* Ch.7, 2.

58. *Ist.* Ch.9, 13.

59. *Morf.* Ch.3, XVI, 1 (L<sup>1</sup>); XVIII, 1 (V<sup>1</sup>); XXX (Pu).

Fairy Tale has many a rewarding surprise for the researcher: in point of fact, the principal "Functions" individuated in a typical fable plot by Propp are discovered here forming the very core of the Indian epic's main action as well as of the roles played in regards of it by several important characters, beginning with Rāma himself, his Antagonist Rāvaṇa and his Helper Hanumat. The treatment of such roles, in their accounts furnished by Indian materials, stands out as more or less intimately connected with their economy in the general framework of the Fairy Tale. Even Sītā's trials and abandonment in the last part of the tale fall within the pale of such pattern. Such an unsuspected correspondence of Rāma's saga to a structure worked out as a device of analysis of un-Indian materials points out the possibility of a great antiquity of it. The hypothesis of an ancient Indo-european origin for the wonderful "Journey of Rama" (whose very name, by the way, is a mark of such origin: confront the Latin Rēmus) seems, after all, worthy of being taken into account.