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VĀLMĪKI RĀMĀYAṆA AND SANSKRIT PLAYWRIGHTS

Sanskrit playwrights have been basing their plays on material derived from the two great epics of India, the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki and the *Mahābhārata* of Vyāsa; they also took their plots from the episodes in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* of Somadeva as stated in the first verse of the *Daśarūpaka*. Quite a number of Sanskrit plays are based on Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, using the whole story or parts thereof. Some like the *Udāttarāghava* and *Chhalitarāghava* have been lost. We have now 14 printed plays based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This study is based on all these plays which were available to the present writer at the Royal Asiatic Library, Bombay, in the years 1964-67.

The popularity of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* as source material is explained by at least three reasons: the tremendous, continuing hold of the *Rāmāyaṇa* culture over the Indian psyche, the matchless qualities of Rāma, the hero and the attraction of a perfectly moulded story hailed by many as the best in the world. The constant movement, the long travels, the many battles all centred around a fascinating tale of love have held the hearts of men in the east and in the west for millennia as the ultimate in the design and presentation of a story. And apart from its great appeal as a religious book, its cultural impact is widespread, overleaping the bounds of religion.

The first thing that strikes the reader of these plays is the fact that in several respects the story and even the characterisation as presented in them are different from Vālmīki's. These deviations are interesting in themselves and are worth a study. Further they owe to various fac-

tors like differences in the time of composition between Vālmīki's epic and the plays and the social, cultural and literary changes that have taken place during this vast interval of time. These merit a detailed study on account of these actuating factors. Moreover, when an epic is converted into a play that is meant to be staged, certain changes become necessary and a study of these can be revealing. Another factor making for deviations is the personal predilection of these playwrights, their literary idiosyncrasies, their own individual viewpoint and emphasis. Critics have not been wanting who have expressed dissatisfaction over certain aspects of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. And some playwrights have sought to correct these in their works by adopting variations in the story. It is proposed to discuss and assess the major deviations found in these plays within the brief compass of this paper. It would require a book to catalogue and discuss all the deviations of any importance noticeable in these 14 plays.

Let us take up the problem of adapting an epic to conform to the framework of a stageable play which has prompted the most significant deviations of all. Many playwrights who were attracted to the *Rāmāyaṇa* as source material seem to be mostly unaware of the pitfalls in its adaptation to the stage. For one thing, the size of the epic, the inordinate length of the story is very much of a hurdle to the playwright who undertakes its dramatisation. Even assuming that the Hindu spectator of those early days was very patient, who thought nothing of a night-long dramatic performance at the annual festival at the temple, the *Rāmāyaṇa* story so eminently suitable for an epic is embarrassingly unwieldy for a play.

Apart from its length, it has the typical loose structure of an epic. The first part of the story ending with Rāma's banishment is not organically related to the second part from the point of view of the prime mover: the banishment is the result of a palace coup where the villain's role is played by Queen Kaikeyī, urged on by her wicked maid Mantharā, while over the later part towers the commanding personality of Rāvaṇa. The astute Bhavabhūti must have sensed this for he makes Mālyavān, minister of Rāvaṇa, contrive the palace coup, thereby introducing a substantial degree of cohesiveness and unity of purpose in the play.

From the stand-point of cohesiveness, the story of the *Bālakāṇḍa*

should be regarded as a separate and quite dispensable part: and if a dramatist begins his play with the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* he can hammer out quite a cohesive piece with all the episodes naturally running into one another. And the story of the wedding of Rāma and Sītā can separately be turned out into quite a good play, ending with the Paraśurāma-episode. As these are unconnected parts, some of the playwrights have attempted to bind them together by introducing Rāvaṇa at the scene of the breaking of the bow. Further connections are provided by others by showing Paraśurāma as instigated by Mālyavān, minister to Rāvaṇa. These are, however, very tenuous chords which cannot organically unite the two distinct portions of the epic. Indeed there are quite a few critics who assert that Vālmīki began his epic with the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* and that some other hand added the *Bālakāṇḍa* on to it much later. For a proof they point to the fact that the divinity of Rāma is explicitly set down only in the *Bālakāṇḍa* and in the opening *sarga* of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* and nowhere else till the coronation of Rāma. Further evidence, according to them, lies in the first *sarga* of *Bālakāṇḍa* where sage Nārada summarises the Rāma-story for the benefit of Vālmīki. In this summary of *Rāmāyaṇa*, the story starts at the point of Daśaratha's decision to crown Rāma, prince. The story of the breaking of the bow and the marriage with Sītā does not find a mention there.

Hence good dramatists like Bhāsa and Śaktibhadra have not encumbered the play with the wedding scene. This has the incidental advantage of keeping off the noisy Paraśurāma who was the pet character of the poetasters. Arm-chair playwrights like Murāri and Rājaśekhara are unable to see this point: they have started with the incident of Sītā's marriage and have gone on to the story of the palace conspiracy without sensing the lack of an organic unity between these two episodes. They have taken Bhavabhūti as their model and what looked proper to the master was all right to them. They did not possess that kind of critical acumen by which they could adopt ideas of others selectively, avoiding blind imitation. Bhavabhūti's judgment in having begun his play at the very outset is itself questionable, though even in his faults he was original and was not imitating any other writer. One thing can however be urged in favour of Bhavabhūti's decision to start his play with the story of Sītā's marriage: the domi-

nant sentiment of *Mahāvīracarita* is the heroic and Bhavabhūti could thereby show Rāma's valour in breaking the formidable bow of the Lord and in vanquishing Paraśurāma, one of the mightiest warriors of the time. This reason did not exist in the case of the other playwrights who did not choose heroism as the dominant sentiment of their plays.

The two turning points

The epic story, therefore, if shorn of the *Bālakāṇḍa*, becomes a fairly well-knit narrative fit for dramatisation, except, of course for its epic size. And it hinges on two turning points, both of which, strangely enough, are based on accidental happenings. Vālmīki has very appropriately used the word *yadṛcchayā* in introducing both the passages. The earlier one is where Manthará is described as ascending the stairs leading to the balcony, purely by happenstance. From the balcony she sees the whole city in a festive mood, makes enquiries and is told of the forthcoming coronation of Rāma. She then makes up her wicked plot and poisons the mind of Queen Kaikeyī and Rāma is banished to the distant forest. The second is where Śūrpaṇakhā happens to cross the path of Rāma in the jungle known as Janasthāna. We know the results of this fateful meeting: the demoness loses her heart to Rāma and tries to flirt and is punished grievously by the impetuous Lakṣmaṇa; she wends her wrathful way to Laṅkā and plants the seeds of love for Sītā in the fertile soil of Rāvaṇa's heart. The Greeks would ascribe these accidents to purposeless fate but the Hindus interpret them as part of the gigantic fabric of God's will which has, as its purpose, the extirpation of the evil forces. And Vālmīki shows in his handling of these two passages, his great sense of drama and his ability to assess the relative importance of individual episodes and their relevance to the *grand denouement.*

Two examples of how astute dramatists have seized upon these turning points with significant advantage are the *Pratimānāṭaka* of Bhāsa and the *Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi* of Śaktibhadra, which later deserves to be better known and appreciated. Bhāsa ignores the bow-breaking episode and begins his play with the tension-laden scene of Rāma going to the forests: the play gets a flying start, building up a high

tempo within minutes of the singing of the Nāndi verse: the latecomer to the theatre will have missed a great deal of meaningful drama where Rāma scales the heights of self-sacrifice and Sītā sets a shining example. Śaktibhadra begins his play with the second turning point. The playwright clearly intended to highlight the part played by the miraculous *cūḍāmaṇi* (a head ornament) which Sītā hands over to Hanumān: in order to secure emphasis on the later part of the epic story, he rightly ignores the earlier events and begins with the (second) turning point where Śūrpaṇakhā accidentally meets Rāma. The judgment of this good dramatist is triumphantly vindicated as a high tempo is secured from the first Act and the first rumbles of the thundering drama of the later Acts are enticingly heard even as the last echoes of the Nāndi verse die down.

Hindus dislike tragedies and convention forbids anything but a happy ending. No playwright has been able to break this convention; indeed, some have had to go to extreme lengths, ruining the quality of their play, in securing conformity with it. Bhāsa's main purpose in writing the *Pratimānāṭaka* is to portray the events of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* with Bharata as the central figure. But he dare not end the play with the scene where he receives the sandals of Rāma in the sign of which he shall rule for fourteen years, even though this would be quite a natural ending. The playwright feels it necessary, on account of the convention, to go over the rest of the story hurriedly, ending with the coronation of Rāma. Bhāsa must have felt dissatisfied with this cursory treatment of the later part of the epic story and as a consequence undertaken to write the colourless *Abhiṣekanāṭaka*: still we should bear in mind that Bhāsa decided to conform, by prolonging what would have been otherwise a crisp play featuring the devotion of Bharata to his brother.

This anxious desire to conform to the tradition creates serious handicaps for the writers of one-Act plays. The one-Act play stands in the same relation to the full-length play as a short story to the novel: while a full-length play can be many-faceted, an one-Act play has to emphasise a single episode or aspect or a single trait of character. Thus the *Dūtaṅgada* of Subhaṭa focuses on the diplomatic mission of Aṅgada to the court of Rāvaṇa. The two one-Act plays of the same name, *Unmattarāghava* (composed by two different poets Bhāskara and

Virūpākṣa Deva) have, as their purpose, the depiction of Rāma getting nearly mad on account of separation from Sītā. These authors rightly devote the bulk of their short works to the delineation of their limited subject, but considerably ruin the pointed effect of this by taking the spectators quickly through the rest of the story so that the play may end with the coronation. The only exception to this is Bhāskara Kavi who wisely took an imaginary episode as the central pivot so that he was able to restore Sītā to Rāma at the end of the play without having to go through the story of three *kāṇḍas*. Of the others, Subhaṭa was in a more favourable position as he had only to epitomise the story of the great war of Laṅkā to bring the play to a happy ending. Virūpākṣa Deva then, is the Cinderella of the group. For, in the *Unmattarāghava* he has had to traverse three *kāṇḍas* within the space of a single Act to be able to conform to the popular tradition of having a happy ending for all dramas. And in encompassing this, he executes an astonishing *tour de force*. For he is naturally unwilling to make Rāma who is steeped in love-madness, be up and doing, as it will create a break in the development of sentiment. So, while Rāma is wallowing in self-pity, Lakṣmaṇa sallies forth, kills Vālin, throws a bridge across the ocean and at the head of the monkey-army marches on Laṅkā, killing Rāvaṇa and Kumbhakarṇa and triumphantly returns with Sītā to a grateful but feckless Rāma! The playwright is willing to ruin the character portrait of Rāma rather than close the play without showing the restoration of Sītā. The *Daśarūpaka* lays down that the story selected for dramatisation should be so adopted that neither the characterisation nor the development of the sentiment suffers as a result.

> *yattatrānucitaṃ kiṃcid*
> *nāyakasya rasasya vā /*
> *viruddhaṃ tat parityājyam*
> *anyathà và prakalpayet //* [*Daśarūpaka* III – 24]

That Virūpākṣa Deva was prepared to break this specific and important injunction of *Daśarūpaka* in order to contrive a happy ending for his play shows the extent of the hold of tradition on the men of letters of that time.

Problems for the playwright who selects the Rāma theme

Some of the characteristic and distinguishing qualities of an epic make it a particularly difficult source-material for a play, despite the prescription in the *Daśarūpaka* in favour of epics. There is an air of leisure about an epic which is intended to be read over a protracted period of time, sometimes as much as a year: generally only parts of it are read or lectured upon at a single session. The play is a very different matter: the longest play should end at daybreak and that means a maximum duration of about ten hours. The characters in an epic are invested with many good qualities which can be delineated in a number of episodes, while the playwright is much cramped for time and has to exercise great care in selecting incidents which will throw a flood of light on the relevant traits of a character, taking up the least possible time. The epic introduces a great number of characters prolifically while the playwright with a watchful eye on the budget has to cut down the *dramatis personae* drastically if he wants his play to be produced. More than one sentiment gets delineated in an epic: usually, *vīra, śṛṅgāra* and *karuṇa* will have a big role to play in any epic and these three have been well developed in *Rāmāyaṇa*. A playwright has to make one sentiment dominant in his play in accord with the dictum of the dramaturgist *eko rasoṅgīkartavyaḥ*, relegating other sentiments to the background. The epic, generally speaking, is cast on too large a mould to fit into the circumscribed pattern of the play: it has to be pruned, cut down to size.

Further, while there is no prohibition against showing any thing in an epic, there are very definite rules banning the exhibition of death and any form of violence and, curiously, of long journeys on the stage. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is full of battles and slayings of the rākṣasas; it is a saga of a journey incredibly long for that epoch, undertaken on foot over hill and dale and forest. And if they are not shown on the stage but described by two observers (as is usually the case in these plays) considerable emotional impact and a sense of realism are lost thereby and the play is all the poorer for it.

Certain difficulties attendant upon the dramatisation of Vālmīki's epic have been examined hitherto. Now we proceed to discuss certain points which can loosely be termed defects in the epic story itself, that

we may assess how far these imperfections have been set right by the playwrights who have written on the Rāma theme. For instance, after Bharata takes leave of Rāma on the Citrakūṭa mountain, Vālmīki ignores him altogether until the very end of the story when the considerate Rāma despatches Hanumān to convey to Bharata the good news of his return. Bharata's doings are nowhere taken up for narration in the three long *kāṇḍas* following the Citrakūṭa episode and in the major part of the last *kāṇḍa*: Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa talk about the noble brother but Vālmīki does not sing about him, epic fashion, in the major part of this great work.

Rāma undergoes untold sufferings in the jungle. Sītā is carried away by the King of Laṅkā and kept prisoner and the ocean has to be bridged and the mighty army of rākṣasas defeated in a terrible war. But Bharata is not kept informed of all this: he makes no move to find out how Rāma is faring in the forests. The imperial army of Ayodhyā sits idle in the barracks while Rāma fights the greatest war ever seen, with the monkeys as his only allies!

Good story-tellers always keep track of the doings of the major characters, even if they are writing an epic but Vālmīki, the greatest of them all, surprisingly shuts out any mention of this important character, in this decisive fashion. It is, of course, possible to offer an interesting reason in explanation of this defect in this great story. Vālmīki was so overwhelmingly preoccupied with Rāma, he totters behind him all over the jungle and follows him in abject devotion to the country of the monkeys and over the bridge to the country of the rākṣasas: he stands by Rāma's side through all the stress and fury of the greatest war the world has ever known: his fierce, fanatical attachment to Rāma makes him forget everyone else except those who have immediately to do with his hero. Thus this apparent defect of Vālmīki really springs from the quality which has made him the greatest biographer in the history of literature.

But even if this defect is explicable in terms of Vālmīki's single-minded devotion to his hero, it is still an imperfection and some playwrights have noticed it and attempted to set it right. In his *Pratimānāṭaka*, Bhāsa makes Bharata the hero and consequently he brings him on the stage in every Act and never allows his spectators to forget him. Bharata is kept informed of all the happenings in the

forest by the loyal Sumantrā. When Sītā is carried away, the tidings reach Bharata who is so affected by them that he swoons away forthwith and has to be restored. He collects a great army and marches at its head all the way south to render assistance to Rāma. In the meantime Rāma had accounted for Rāvaṇa and recrossed the ocean back to the mainland where he meets the devoted Bharata. Thus the poet had neatly solved the problem posed above: Bharata hurries to the help of Rāma, displaying great brotherly affection but the credit of defeating the rākṣasa army and killing the mighty Rāvaṇa belongs to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa with their monkey army, unaided by the imperial army of Ayodhyā. This certainly marks an improvement over the epic version by removing the blemish of neglecting Bharata over a large part of the story and redeeming Bharata from the charge of neglect of Rāma's interests. And the appreciative reader feels grateful to the playwright for such a sensible handling of a difficult situation.

Another playwright who may be credited with an appreciation of this point is Dāmodara Miśra, the author of *Hanumannāṭaka*. Lakṣmaṇa lies near to death felled by the foe and on the advice of the army physician, Hanumān is deputed to bring the Sañjīvinī herb from the Himālayas, flying at his fastest. But Rāma decides to burden the faithful factotum with the responsibility of apprising Bharata of the happenings relating to Sītā. Hanumān, on his return journey from the Himālayas alights at Ayodhyā and is almost killed by a suspicious Bharata. Hanumān, on recovery, narrates all that has happened to Bharata, and leaves for the battlefield in Laṅkā after a considerable delay.

This deviation, while having the doubtful merit of bringing Bharata into the picture raises the serious problem of why Bharata does nothing to help Rāma out of the terrible situation. His indifference is critical and suggests he desired Rāma out of the way so that he could enjoy the kingdom till his death. This deviation reflects little credit on the playwright's judgment; the remedy is clearly worse than the disease.

A second problem in Vālmīki is one of psychology and involves Rāvaṇa, the villain. Consider the circumstances of his falling headlong into a hopeless passion for Sītā which provides the motive force for the later part of the epic. Sūrpaṇakhā with her face all bloody, walks into Rāvaṇa's court determined that her assailants should come

to no good. Naturally Rāvaṇa, much concerned, shoots questions at her and she narrates the story of how she came by her grief. In doing this, her plan is to emphasise the bewitching beauty of Sītā so that her brother, of known easy morals, should get interested in her. But look at what happens! Her own hopeless infatuation for Rāma makes it difficult for her to think of anyone else. Hence, without her knowing it, her narrative turns out to be a glowing description of the two handsome hermits who have captivated her heart.

But this half-hearted description of Sītā proves more than adequate, for Rāvaṇa leaps headlong into the disastrous project of carrying off Sītā and marrying her. It is true that he talks more of punishing the kṣatriya hermits who have done so much harm to the rākṣasas, while conspiring with Mārīca. But, if revenge on them was Rāvaṇa's prime motive, he would have gone about it in a very different manner. For, arrogance is an important trait of his character and inspite of the growing evidence of the might of the hermit brothers, he believed fully and sincerely in his own invincibility. So, if revenge had been the foremost idea in his mind, the course of action he would have adopted would have been a straight-forward duel with Rāma or something that would involve an immediate clash of arms with the offenders. Cast in the mould of a *dhīroddhata* type, he cannot think, Montecristo-like, of slow devices for wreaking vengeance by separating Sītā from Rāma and leaving the latter to languish and fade away. That would be wholly out of character for him. He carried off Sītā because of infatuation and this was fanned up in him by Śūrpaṇakhā describing her to him – Śūrpaṇakhā who was thinking avidly, with demoniac passion, all the time, of Rāma! And if we remember that Rāvaṇa was not exactly starved of feminine beauty, that he had systematically stocked his harem with the choicest women of the three worlds in conformity with the dictum *ratnahārī ca pārthivaḥ*, his reaction to his sister's narrative appears somewhat queer.

The story of Rāma as panegyrised by Vālmīki must have been lovingly retold numberless times by bards in the courts of kings, by mothers to children and by thoughtful men to one another. And it is not unlikely that the more reflective among them conceived certain misgivings regarding the manner in which Rāvaṇa's passion for Sītā gets a start. The more inventive among these reciters may have intro-

duced a deviation in the epic story bringing Rāvaṇa earlier on, in the narrative; Rāvaṇa is attracted by the peerless beauty of Sītā and becomes a suitor for her hand, in the episode of Śiva's bow. Thus popular versions of a more natural course of love in the villain may have been circulating in the country before Bhavabhūti flourished. These conjectures are encouraged by the universal preference by all the post-Bhāsa poets for this version of the villain's course of love for the heroine. One cannot, of course, dismiss the other alternative that Bhavabhūti thought up and adopted this deviation and owing to the high prestige he enjoyed among the poets who came after him, this deviation came to be universally accepted by them. But personally I would prefer the former: poets sometimes originate versions by themselves but it is often seen that they take up popular ideas current in their time and give them a lasting poetic shape.

Deviation from the epic story

This inadequacy or defect in Vālmīki is sought to be corrected in two slightly different ways by the playwrights. One version introduced by Bhavabhūti shows Rāvaṇa quite deeply interested in the hand of Sītā but does not bring him to Mithilā to woo her personally. The wooing is done by proxy, Rāvaṇa deputing his priest to press his suit with Janaka's brother. As the latter had left for Viśvāmitra's hermitage with Sītā and Urmilā, the priest from Laṅkā follows him there and their meeting takes place in the presence of not only the tough sage but of the devastatingly attractive princes of Ayodhyā. In this highly uncongenial atmosphere Rāvaṇa's case is presented and is lost. The priest is witness to Rāma's two acts of incredible valour, the killing of Tāṭakā and the breaking of the bow. He returns highly impressed with the newest star in the sky of bravery and the menace it spells for his master. Rāvaṇa presumably gets a detailed report of all this from the priest. He is seized of the new rival that is rising and the challenge he spells for supremacy among the heroes of the world. And henceforward, Rāvaṇa shall work for the fulfillment of not one but two objectives, not only the acquisition of Sītā but the extirpation of Rāma, the greatest rival he has had to face in all his career. This

deviation makes Rāvaṇa's villainy more understandable, more pointedly purposive.

It is not surprising that Murāri who is a great admirer of Bhavabhūti has copied this deviation almost wholly from him. The *Hanumannāṭaka* also features this priest of Rāvaṇa trying to intercede on his disciple's behalf. But little use is made by Dāmodara Miśra of this deviation, in motivating Rāvaṇa to act the thorough-going villain in the rest of the play as his more gifted predecessors have been able to do. It would appear that Dāmodara Miśra merely copied the episode of Rāvaṇa's courting by proxy from his illustrious forebears but did not possess the necessary sense of the stage to seize and exploit its dramatic advantages in unifying the two unrelated portions of the play as well as in investing the actions of the villain with a clearly-defined purpose.

Some dramatists have gilded the lily by improving on this deviation: they actually bring in Rāvaṇa, in person, to the scene of Sītā's marriage instead of his being represented by his priest. Probably this trend was started by Rājaśekhara in the *Bālarāmāyaṇa*. Rāvaṇa accompanied by Prahasta, the minister, strides into Janaka's court full of a vaulting conceit. He commits himself to several boastful utterances all of which raise the expectations of the spectators. But Rāvaṇa's reputation suffers a sudden and ignominious fall when he fails to break the bow, the more because of his manifest arrogance and boastful display, moments before. He tries to explain away his failure by stating that Śiva's bow is an old, worn-out weapon and it was below the dignity of a man of his calibre to be asked to break it as a hero's test. But few are taken in by this and Rāvaṇa's loss of face becomes now a recognised fact. When Rāma does break the bow and secures the fair hand of Sītā, Rāvaṇa's envy and malice now have an excellent target of attack. Listen to Rāvaṇa whose injured self-esteem sets the edge on his bitter hate towards the prince who has so gloriously succeeded where he himself has so patently failed:

rājñaṃ vṛthā sadasi rāmayaśā prakīrṇam
tūrṇaṃ mudhā mukulitā ca pināka kīrtiḥ /
dīrṇena jīrṇadhanuṣā giriśojjhitena
yātaḥ padam mama ruṣāṃ ca mṛṣaiva rāmaḥ //

[*Bālarāmāyaṇa* – Act IV]

This, then, is the dramatic advantage gained by bringing in Rāvaṇa to the bow-breaking scene. Rather than conceive anger against Rāma on the basis of his priest's report, this deviation makes Rāvaṇa see his rival succeed before his very eyes: the degree of his frustration which turns to hate is very much enhanced in this deviation as Rāvaṇa personally has seen and suffered. The surprising thing is that Rājaśekhara, a poor dramatist by all critical opinion, has seen the dramatic advantage of this modified version of the deviation: perhaps he stumbled on it quite accidentally; but the benefits accruing to his play in the shape of a sharpened purposiveness in the villain's operations are very real, nevertheless.

The next notable playwright who exploits this modified deviation is Jayadeva, the author of *Prasannarāghava*. Indeed Jayadeva makes the bow-breaking scene the *pièce de resistance* of the earlier part of his play. Not only Rāvaṇa but two other famous heroes of the Puranic Age, Kārtavīrya and Bāṇāsura, try their hand at breaking the bow. And when even these celebrated heroes fail, a courtier of Janaka is tempted to exclaim: «How bereft of heroes the world has become!».

Rāvaṇa now is trying to find an excuse to leave Janaka's court with as little loss of face as can be managed. Fortunately for him, shouts of agony are heard emanating from Mārīca who is tormented by an arrow from Rāma. Rāvaṇa decides to go and investigate: and before leaving he makes a vow that if anyone breaks the bow and marries Sītā, he (Rāvaṇa) would carry her off by main force to Laṇkā and make her his own. We assume that subsequently he finds out the identity of Mārīca's tormentor. Now he is moved by two primordial passions: a lust for Sītā and a hatred of Rāma; together they constitute a powerful motive for Rāvaṇa to initiate and carry through the evil schemes which form the flesh and blood of the Rāma-story.

The third author who adopts a similarly modified deviation is Rāmabhadra Dīkṣita who composed the *Jānakīpariṇaya*. Dīkṣita weaves a complex web of impersonations which make his play very dramatic. He brings in Rāvaṇa to Janaka's court in the disguise of Rāma. The impersonator almost succeeds in winning the hand of Sītā when the real Rāma is announced, coming in the company of sage Viśvāmitra and his own brother Lakṣmaṇa. Even then Janaka is not certain to whom to give away Sītā! This Hamlet of the classical Age

institutes the Lord's bow at that stage as the acid test of valour. Rāvaṇa shies away from this, realising he cannot take it on and expect to succeed. And he wonders whether the boy from Ayodhyā hopes to succeed where he himself has so notably failed!

Madbhujairdhṛtakailāsairapi yadduskaram dhanuḥ /
tadāropayituṃ śambhoḥ śaknoti kimayaṃ vaṭuḥ //
[*Jānakīpariṇaya* – Act IV]

From a concealed position Rāvaṇa and his associates watch, with dismay, the feat of breaking the bow of the Lord, performed by Rāma with effortless ease. Rāvaṇa is stirred to the depths of his being; and he swears to kill Rāma, the chief offender, punish Janaka for his faults and carry off Sītā, whatever the cost. Thus a powerful motivation for Rāvaṇa's subsequent misdeeds has been secured by the playwright and Rāvaṇa's conduct becomes thoroughly natural and plausible.

There is yet another point which may be regarded as an inadequacy in the original which many of the playwrights have tried to fill up. Rāma goes with the sage Viśvāmitra on his father's instructions, breaks the Lord's bow on the sage's orders and marries Sītā in conformity with Janaka's stipulation. There is no element of pre-marital love in Rāma's marriage with Sītā. The epic poet actually states in a passage that Rāma loves Sītā because his marriage with her was arranged by his father!

priyā tu sītā rāmasya dārāḥ pitṛkṛtā iti // [VRā. – *Bālakāṇḍa* – 77-26]

Later writers did not like this at all. It is possible that the institution of arranged marriages was part of the Aryan tradition and that after thousands of years of the Aryans' living in close contact with the natives, especially with the Dravidians who believed firmly in the custom of young people choosing their own mates, the society began to veer away from the custom of arranged marriages. It is certainly likely that creative writers of these later epochs preferred pre-marital love as more attractive in lyrical poems and plays. Whatever the reason, they all felt that Rāma and Sītā should meet earlier and fall in love, the only minor differences being where they meet and whether

the scene of their meeting is short, or long-drawn-out. Playwrights like Jayadeva make them meet in a garden away from prying eyes, the staunch brother Lakṣmaṇa alone being permitted to come. In the *Mahāvīracarita*, they meet when King Kuśadhvaja, the brother of Janaka and Viśvāmitra are present and love develops under the watchful eyes of these elders. In the *Hanumannāṭaka* Sītā feels such a surge of love for Rāma that she rebukes her father mentally for having stipulated that the bow which is hard as a tortoise-shell should be broken by the fragile-looking Rāma before they can marry. Whatever considerations prompted the writer of *Bālakāṇḍa* to make their marriage an arranged matter, these playwrights have rightly perceived that a little of pre-marital love would look well in a play, even where heroism and not love is the dominant sentiment, as in the *Mahāvīracarita.*

One passage in Vālmīki's epic which can genuinely be termed controversial is where Rāma kills Vālin from a concealed position. The fact that Rāma marshalls a number of powerful arguments in his reply to Vālin and even the fact that the dying monkey-warrior forgives him, have not set at rest the polemical exercises on the ethics of Rāma's action. Some playwrights must have felt uneasy on this account. And to refute this imputation of a stigma on the Rāma escutcheon, they have adopted one of two kinds of deviation. Some playwrights like Bhāsa have made them fight a straightforward duel where Rāma kills Vālin in a blemishless manner. Others like Bhavabhūti and his imitators have made Vālin an ally of Rāvaṇa and a pawn in the hands of the master-strategist, Mālyavān. On the advice of Mālyavān, Vālin confronts Rāma with intent to destroy him, even though it should be said to the credit of Vālin that he dislikes the job and has a high opinion of Rāma. A battle ensues in which Rāma kills the redoubtable fighter, purely in self-defence. Dāmodara Miśra goes so far as to make Vālin a crafty schemer who sets up seven demons, transformed by magic into seven *śāla* trees to kill Rāma. But Miśra displays such a poor sense of character portrayal, he makes even Rāvaṇa a coward, who resorts to ineffective scheming, to have Rāma killed while asleep and who finally sues for peace by posing a condition which Rāma is unable to accept!

There are other instances, too, of deviations from Vālmīki's character portrayals. Rāmabhadra Dīkṣita brings in the animus between

the followers of Śiva and Viṣṇu (a phenomenon that flared up in the south after the advent of Christ) to justify the Śaiva Janaka's reluctance (as pictured by him) to give his daughter in marriage to Rāma, a Vaiṣṇava, while Rāvaṇa a fanatical devotee of Śiva was so desirous of her hand! Mahādeva's portrayal of Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa as vengeful and cruel in his play, the *Adbhutadarpaṇa*, is quite unacceptable and constitutes an inartistic deviation. Rāma's own majestic nobility has suffered a certain undermining in many of the plays. Hanumān appears a braggart in the play attributed to him, though obviously it is the work of Dāmodara Miśra. Indeed no character-portrayal in these Rāma plays represents an improvement over that seen in Vālmīki's immortal epic.

It is also a sad truth that the moral elevation we see in the epic is nowhere attained to in any of the Rāma plays except in Bhāsa's *Pratimānāṭaka*. If, as has been demonstrated earlier, it was the matchless set of qualities of Rāma which persuaded these playwrights to take up his story for dramatisation, we should then expect that their products will portray the heights of moral grandeur achieved by Rāma and, incidentally, by the other characters. A careful study of the fourteen plays on Rāma, however, reveals a notable deficiency in the portrayal of moral values. With the exception of Bhāsa, none of the other playwrights has been able to achieve a reasonable level of moral elevation in his play.

One of the reasons for this may be that none of them appears to have a gift for characterisation. Vālmīki has been able to portray ideal interpersonal relationships in his epic and Indian society has always regarded this work as the source book that lays down the highest norms in this vital field of life. These playwrights with their incapacity for or indifference to characterisation could not achieve a modicum of success in portraying nobility of mien in their characters.

Again, even a casual student of Vālmīki's epic would realise that the work reaches dizzy heights of moral grandeur in the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* where Rāma cheerfully goes to the forests on being denied the greatest throne in the world which was his by rights, and again, in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* where he admits the rākṣasa prince Vibhīṣaṇa to his camp as his ally, adding that he would so admit even Rāvaṇa if he asks for it. There are few parallels to these in the unsa-

voury annals of man since history began. And, yet, none of the playwrights (except Bhāsa who exploits the first of these two episodes) has chosen to portray them in his play. When we contemplate how dramatic, how emotion-filled these episodes are, we are unable to comprehend why these playwrights denied themselves this great opportunty to heighten not only the moral level but the dramatic intensity of their works.

To sum up, it is sad but true that despite a certain dexterity in turning out verses, the playwrights who wrote on the Rāma theme have not been able to achieve even a part of either the literary excellence or the moral elevation of Vālmīki's immortal work.

LIST OF RĀMA PLAYS DISCUSSED

S.No.	Name of play	Name of playwright
1.	*Pratimānāṭaka*	Bhāsa
2.	*Abhiṣekanāṭaka*	Bhāsa
3.	*Mahāvīracarita*	Bhavabhūti
4.	*Anargharāghava*	Murāri
5.	*Bālarāmāyaṇa*	Rājaśekhara
6.	*Āścaryacūḍāmaṇi*	Śaktibhadra
7.	*Prasannarāghava*	Jayadeva
8.	*Hanumannāṭaka*	Dāmodara Miśra
9.	*Jānakīpariṇaya*	Rāmabhadradīkṣita
10.	*Dūtāṅgada*	Subhaṭa
11.	*Unmattarāghava I*	Bhāskara
12.	*Unmattarāghava II*	Virūpākṣa Deva
13.	*Adbhutadarpaṇa*	Mahādeva
14.	*Sītārāghava*	Rāmapāṇivāda