

RĀMĀYAṆA TRADITION IN SOUTH-WEST INDIA:  
A CULTURAL OVERVIEW

1. Vālmīki is often termed as *Ādikavi* and his *Rāmāyaṇa* is considered as *Ādikāvya*. These terms need not be taken to mean the first though one may state that these suggest the sense of being the 'foremost'. The legend built around the stanza beginning with "*Mā niṣāda*" may be considered as of later origin to uphold the sense of being the 'shower of the path'. Anyway the classical period of the Sanskrit literature as against the Vedic period was inaugurated by the epic of Vālmīki.

2. The universal appeal of the epic is suggested by the prophecy noted in the opening of the epic itself. It goes to say that the *Rāmāyaṇa* will be current on earth as long as the hills and the rivers flow. True to the prophecy the story crossed the limits of the country and brought under its spell the whole of Greater India from Cambodia to Java and influenced the various aspects of human life including art and literature of the people down to the common masses.

3. The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition stands at the core of Indian culture which is complex and diverse with varied manifestations in the regional sub-cultures and native literatures. *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa* forms the main source of inspiration though it is true that there are several variations of the Rāma theme which are popular in different regions.

4. *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition is a unifying factor of Indian culture. Vālmīki upheld truth and honesty above all virtues. He firmly believed that fame and prosperity will embrace only such people who are endowed with the quality of truthfulness. According to him honesty elevates man to a higher plane. It is only natural that such an epic had a universal appeal and popularity in every nook and corner of the Indian subcontinent.

5. South-West India despite being Dravidian in its ethnic identity was greatly influenced by the Āryans and a composite culture took shape in this part. The land of Kerala and parts of Konkan lying towards the south-west part of India have been enjoying a relatively secluded existence. The geographical position contributed to this seclusion. Protected by the ranges of the Sahya mountain on the east and washed by the waters of the Arabian sea on the west, Kerala enjoyed a relatively quiet existence but for the contacts of the seafaring merchants of Greece and other parts. It was only through the Aryanisation of the region that the place became an integral part of the cultural scene of India. *Rāmāyaṇa* played its part in the movement towards Aryanisation of the southern region towered over by the Vindhyan ranges which stood like a wall waiting for an Agastya to surmount it. The conflict between Rāma and Rāvaṇa symbolises in a way the clash between the Aryan and Dravidian and subsequent assimilation between the two cultures.

6. A unique feature of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is that there is not a single vernacular of India which has not got its own *Rāmāyaṇa*. The existence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in some form of literature was taken as a standard to distinguish between a fullfledged language and a tribal dialect. The native Dravidian language and culture were largely influenced and even superceded by the Sanskrit influence which generally represented the Aryan influence. Three versions may be pointed out to show the value of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story in the standardisation of the regional languages and culture. The *Rāmāyaṇa* versions of Kambar in Tamil, of Ezhuthacchan in Malayālam and of Tulasīdas in Hindi are even now worshipped as poems and scriptures by millions of the masses. In his hero Rāma the sage not only depicted a national hero but a divinity

that came to uplift the humanity. Naturally *Rāmāyaṇa* soon attained canonical authority as a gospel of devotion, bringing up around it several minor texts of the nature of Upaniṣads. Both in the original and the vernacular it was used to be sung and explained to the masses.

7. *Rāmāyaṇa* permeated into the life and culture of the people from very early period due to several factors. From the earliest period we notice endowments attached to religious centres for the exposition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* almost everyday. Scholars were attached to religious institutions to popularise the story among the devotees. Numerous references can be found in early literatures and inscriptions regarding the provisions for the popularisation of the epic. In the Kerala context certain month was set apart for the recital of *Rāmāyaṇa* on a daily basis and this practice is still continued unabated in spite of the presence of the modern audio-visual media on the cultural and social life of people.

8. It is said that starting from a little Vedic nucleus and coursing through ballads sung by minstrels the saga of Rāma swelled into its present dimension with a total of 24,000 verses divided into seven books. Historians of literature have enumerated the various theories regarding the different stages of growth of the epic of *Rāmāyaṇa* – a fate assigned to the other epic of India viz., *Mahābhārata* too. But the size of the material considerably changes in the various translations and adaptations in the regional languages.

9. The foremost vernacular current in the south-west part of India is Malayāḷam – an offshoot of the Dravidian tongue. In the present paper the thrust is to point out the contribution of the vernacular poets towards the popularisation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* theme through the different media.

10. The first version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is represented by the *Rāmacarita* composed in the second half of the twelfth century by a poet whose name happens to be Cīrāma – a variant of the name of the epic hero. The language represents a heavy influence of Tamil and for sometime people doubted that it is a Tamil work. The work is divided

into 164 sections called *Paṭalas* each of which contains about 11 songs at an average. There are a total of 1814 songs set in the Dravidian style of *Pāṭṭu* exhibiting the embellishment of the sound known as 'Etukā' and 'Mōna' which form a variety of *Anuprāsa* of the Sanskrit rhetoricians. The poet promises to narrate a portion of the epic with an avowed interest in kindling the feeling of courage among the soldiers. Naturally much attention is paid to the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* of the epic with portions of *Ayōdhyākāṇḍa* and *Sundarakāṇḍa* to give a completeness to the theme. Naturally the work is based on the version of Vālmīki though it could never claim to be an exact and faithful translation of the Sanskrit original. The author of the vernacular version has also borrowed from other regional versions of the story. A novel feature of the work is that the sentiment of valour is given predominance and portions delineating this emotion are described in detail while keeping paths is a low-key summarising the situations. The poet has often introduced minor innovations in the course of the story.

11. The *Rāmakatha Pāṭṭu* of Ayyippillai Āśān composed at the beginning of the 15th century is termed as an oral epic by its editor late Dr. P. K. Nārāyaṇa Piḷḷai who discovered the manuscript and published it with an exhaustive commentary. In it, the language is more Malayāḷam compared to the first version mentioned earlier. The voluminous poem has 280 sections with average of 11 songs in each. The total songs comes to 3163 though a few are missing in the available version. The author follows closely the version of Vālmīki though he has added the story of *Pātālarāmāyaṇa* in five sections to highlight the importance of valour in describing the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. The style is racy and the editor calls the work as a composition done in haste. The epic version is considered as a milestone as far as the vernacular literature is concerned.

12. The version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* popularly known as *Kaṇṇaśśarāmāyaṇa* was composed in the latter half of the 15th century A.D. by Rāma Paṇikkar of Niraṇam where several distinguished poets lived almost simultaneously in the same family. His brother Mādhava Paṇikkar is credited with the translation of *Bhārata* and

*Bhagavadgītā*. The story of *Rāmāyaṇa* is epitomised by Paṇikkar in a span of 3057 stanzas in the Dravidian style without seriously affecting the course of the story or its aesthetic appeal. *Ayodhyakāṇḍa* and *Yuddhakāṇḍa* of Vālmīki come in for consideration. The language is somewhat under the strong influence of Tamil.

13. The *Rāmāyaṇa Campū* of Punam Nampūtiri of the 16th century deals with the entire *Rāmāyaṇa* story in 20 *Prabandhas*. Though conceived as a Malayāḷam work it contains numerous Sanskrit stanzas quoted from works dealing with the Rāma theme in Sanskrit literature. The work consists of 1900 verses, 100 prose passages in Sanskrit and Malayāḷam and more than 30 *Daṇḍakas* and naturally it is one of the biggest versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* theme in the vernacular. The work represents a mixture of language pattern having Sanskrit, Malayāḷam, Maṇipravālam, Prakrit, etc.

14. The *Rāmāyaṇa* version of the great spiritualist Tuṅcattu Ezhuthachan (since 16th century A.D.) is known as *Adhyātmarāmāyaṇam Kilippāṭṭu* which is by far the most popular version of the Rāma saga in Malayāḷam. This epoch-making version is based on the *Adhyātmarāmāyaṇa* which is more philosophic and generative of devotion to God. It is a composition purported to revive Hinduism which was facing a challenge at that time. This suited to the condition of Kerala where several foreign powers like the Dutch, the Portuguese and others were influencing the life of the local people causing a threat to the religious fervour. Naturally Ezhuthachan infused devotion in his theme a large extent and as a result the hero is identified with Viṣṇu and the heroine with his consort Lakṣmī. People liked the work so much so that it became a part of their life. Numerous editions appeared and a copy is available almost in every home.

15. There is a ballad called *Uttararāmāyaṇam Kilippāṭṭu* by the same poet based on the *Adhyātmarāmāyaṇa*. This completes the story.

16. The last work which is conceived by a Kerala poet as an independent adaptation of *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa* is the version by Koṭṭayam Kerala Varma which is called *Keralavarmarāmāyaṇa*. This is in the style of a ballad. The main importance of deviation when compared to

the original of Vālmiki is that the vernacular poet has tried to make Rāma an incarnation.

17. The literal translation of the work in Malayālam was successfully attempted by Vallattol Nārāyaṇa Menon of the 20th century. This is a faithful translation into the modern Malayālam idiom though it is not as popular as the other versions mentioned above.

18. In Kerala the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition is dominant in various art forms too. In about the 10th century A. D. Sanskrit dramas were adapted to the Kerala stage as *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* for which stage-manuals were composed to assist the professional actors called Cākyaṛ. Rāma plays were profusely adapted for this temple stage and for this portions from *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* were quoted in the stage-manuals to help the actor to cover the story portion upto the incident portrayed.

19. Another popular version on stage is called *Rāmanāṭṭam*, a form of Kathakali which is a development based on *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. Fresh ballads called Kathakali songs were composed for the staging of the theme. Rāma theme appeared profusely and in most cases they were adaptations based on the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa*.

20. The Rāma theme appeared in many folk forms of Kerala. Different stories were adapted in Malayālam. Some of the important folk arts in which the story appeared may be mentioned here.

(i) *Tiruvātirappāṭṭu*

Song used by women in a group dance on certain festive occasions. The festival is celebrated on a day when the star 'Ārdra' occurs.

(ii) *Ūññālpāṭṭu*

Song employed in playful swinging. On the occasion of Oṇam festival a swing is made in almost every house in Kerala and people enjoy swinging.

(iii) *Ammānappāṭṭu*

Song used in a game of keeping a number of balls in the air tossing them up repeatedly.

(iv) *Pattuvṛttam*

A poem generally composed in ten different metres. Only Dravidian metres occur in such compositions.

(v) *Añcuvṛttam*

A poem generally set in five varieties of metres of the Dravidian language.

(vi) *Āṭṭakkathā*

A peculiar kind of classical dramatic composition in Malayālam also known as Kathakali. Occasionally Sanskrit verses are also employed in such works.

(vii) *Kaikōṭṭikkalippāṭṭu*

A poem sung to the tune of the playful clapping of hands by women folk in Kerala.

(viii) *Kilippāṭṭu*

A poem composed in certain Dravidian metres. Tuñcattu Eluttacchan is credited with the popularisation of this variety.

(ix) *Kurattippāṭṭu*

A poem sung by the females of the wandering tribe of basket makers or one set to the tune of such a song.

(x) *Maṇipravālam*

The mixed languages of Sanskrit and Malayālam extensively used by the medieval poets of Kerala.

(xi) *Oṭṭan Tullal*

A kind of rapidly flowing verse, one of the three types of Tullal poetry generally believed to have been originated by Kuñcan Nampyār – the greatest humorist in Malayālam (18th century).

(xii) *Pāna*

A variety of folk song generally set in 'Sarpini' metre.

(xiii) *Patinnāluvṛttam*

A poem employing fourteen different metres.

(xiv) *Ranṭuvṛttam*

A poem consisting of two different metres.

(xv) *Vātilturappāṭṭu*

A folk song or ballad in the form of a narrative asking the new bride to open the door of the bedchamber following her nuptials.

(xvi) *Vaṅcippāṭṭu*

A variety of song generally used by men in boat race on festive occasions.

(xvii) *Kolkalippāṭṭu*

A folk song used in playing with short sticks. A group of men take part in this game.

The Rāma theme based on the *Vālmiki-Rāmāyaṇa* was dealt with in the above mentioned varieties of folk songs by Kerala authors. Many other varieties were popular in the region for several centuries.

21. The epic retains its influence in the daily life of the people through the many cultural and literary media. The literature of Malayāḷam is permeated with these through all kinds of literary forms. This helped as a motivating factor in their cultural advancement.