
Re-forming the *Rāmāyana*: The Source Text and its Cultural Transformation

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Abstract

This article discusses and elucidates the dynamics of intercultural textual traffic with particular reference to the Ramayana, the Indian epic. Tracing the journey of the epic through temporal and cultural space, the author examines the 're-forming' of the epic in languages of northern and eastern India (in Hindi and Bangla in particular), which she views as an inevitable and necessary function of changing cultural milieus.

Translation is not my area of work, but as a Sanskritist who has prepared critical editions of texts, I have to deal with the problems of translation throughout my research life. Translation is of course a necessary condition of all scholarly work but perhaps more urgently so for an Indian than, say, a Russian, since from childhood we Indians have had to learn how to move across the frontiers of our mother tongues and English. In my school days the translation of Bengali and Sanskrit passages into English and the oddly named reverse process known as "retranslation" were compulsory exercises. But language politics is not my subject here. Rather, let me focus on some of the issues that arise as we try to track the *Rāmāyana* through different domains of language and culture. The demands of intercultural textual traffic are particularly heavy, as I have discovered--like many others--in the course of making bilingual editions of old texts, one of which I have just completed. But even within a relatively homogenous cultural milieu, texts can become slippery as they travel across time and social domains. In my current

work on the *Rāmāyana* I constantly encounter such textual transformations, and in this paper I shall look at some instances from versions of the *Rāmāyana* and try to understand what they tell us about the travel of a major text across time and changing social milieus.¹

The earliest complete Rāma story is the *Rāmāyana* of *Vālmīki*, composed between 2nd century b.c.e. and 2nd century c.e. *Vālmīki's* story is generally taken to be the foundation of all subsequent versions and it has been retold many times in many languages. Leaving aside the complex matter of *Rāma* tales outside India, I shall talk mainly about versions in languages of northern and eastern India, that is to say, the region where *Vālmīki Rāmāyana* (*VR*) is thought to have originated. The narrative structure and the principal plot elements of the *VR* remain the same in these later versions, and their authors not only acknowledge their indebtedness to the *ādi kavi* (the primordial poet) but imply that their works are faithful renditions of *Vālmīki's* poem. Where they go off the *Vālmīki* script is in the details of some episodes, a few invented ones, and much more importantly, in their moral and religious assumptions. These assumptions reflect such far-reaching alterations in attitudes and ideology that despite their narrative alignment with the *VR*, they go beyond the extreme limits of translation. These conceptual changes are so deep-rooted and their dictates are so compulsive that they end up as narrative interventions, such as altered emphases and even altogether new episodes. In effect, they re-form the *Rāmāyana*. I am of course using the word "re-form" both with and without a hyphen.

Re-formation

I see three distinct movements in this process of re-formation. They are:

1. from righteous man to living god

2. from moral emulation to surrender
3. from elite to popular audience

1: From righteous man to living god

In Vālmīki's telling of the Rāma story, Rāma is the ultimate righteous man, even though he is part of Vishnu, who has taken this earthly form to purify the earth of evil demons and to bring justice and peace as the necessary conditions of *dharma*. This ethical purpose is evident in every act of Rāma and informs the narrative so unambiguously that Rāma's innate divinity recedes into the background after Vishnu's initial statement of purpose.

Valmīki's *Rāmāyana* asserts the virtue of *dharma* and its ultimate victory over evil. Rāma himself gives us this message on a number of occasions. For instance, in the *Ayodhyākānda*, Rāma says to Lakṣmana:

*dharmo hi paramo loke dharme satyam,
pratisthitam/
dharmaśamāhitam etac ca pitur vacanam
uttamam//*

Dharma is paramount in the world and truth is founded in *dharma*. This command of Father's is based on *dharma* and is absolute. (VR.2.18.34)

Again in the *Kishkindhākānda*, the entire episode of Rāma's killing of Vālī raises questions about right action. To exonerate Rāma, Vālmīki asserts that the principle of *dharma* is higher than that of a fair fight, which is accepted by Vālī himself:

*mām apy avagatam, dharmād
vyatikrāntapuraskṛtam, /*

dhramasamhitayā vācā dharmajñā paripālaya//

You understand *dharma*. Therefore, with words consonant with *dharma*, comfort even me, known to be a flagrant violator of *dharma*. (VR.4.18.44)²

A far more dramatic, indeed shocking, illustration of Rāma's commitment to *dharma* -- one is tempted to call it his servitude to *dharma* -- occurs at the end of the *Lankākānda*, when Sītā is brought to Rāma after her long captivity. At this point in the story the audience may be pardoned for expecting a joyous reunion. But all that Rāma has to say to Sītā is that he has done his duty as a warrior king and has fulfilled his *dharma* as a husband, but now as the ruler of Ayodhya he has to fulfill the *dharma* of casting out a wife who might be perceived as an unchaste woman. The necessities invoked here are unambiguously social and political, with no reference to some ulterior good hidden from mortal view.

These crucial episodes put Rāma centre stage as human hero. It is not till we reach medieval *Rāmāyanas* that the celebration of Rāma as god becomes the main burden of the narrative. The business of Vālmīki's story is not to assert that Rāma's action is integral to the divine scheme of creation, which is carried forward by Rāma as the living god. On the contrary, it is a battle story that illustrates and upholds absolute *dharma*, a term that is to be taken in its social and pragmatic dimensions. Rāma is of course idealized and his deeds are celebrated, but not because he is god; rather, he is the perfect man and his perfection is represented in terms of his absolute commitment to masculine might, soldierly resolution, dynastic pride and aristocratic duty. The key ideas are leadership qualities and a warrior ethic.

Rendering this story faithfully into other languages of India, complete with its conceptual underpinnings, should not have been

difficult. The fact, though, is that no such faithful translation was attempted until modern times even though there was no lack of poets who did undertake the vast labour of retelling Vālmīki's story. And as I have said before, they did tell the same story if we go just by the events, but their versions took on tones and colours different from Vālmīki's and constructed altogether different worldviews.

The most important difference is the apotheosis of Rāma from man to god, as we see in the explicit and insistent recognition of Rāma as Vishnu. While Vālmīki tells us that Vishnu took human form to combat evil, his Rāma is not worshipped as god. By contrast, in the two most influential north Indian retellings, Krittivāsa's 15th c. Bengali version and Tulsīdās's 16th c. Hindi one, Rāma's divinity is always at the forefront of the narrative. He is venerated as god, rather than as warrior prince and his deeds are celebrated as illustrations of divine power.

Still more striking is the shift from praise to devotion in recounting Rāma's deeds, to the extent that both in Tulsī and Krittivāsa the narrator assumes the posture of utter surrender to Rāma. The story is thereby situated inescapably within the *bhakti* culture. In that world view, the divinity celebrated is not merely the upholder of *dharma* but the source of such ecstasy that the worshipper has no option but to seek union with that divine being through total surrender. This is clearly not a position that promotes pragmatic and critical views on the doings of the object of devotion. Viewed from this position, issues of social relations and political necessities do not disappear but they exist primarily as opportunities for declaring the glory of the deity.

In both Tulsī and Krittivāsa, *bhakti* overtakes *dharma*. This reorientation calls for constant reminders that Rāma is god. For instance, as the royal parties take leave from one another at the conclusion of Rāma and Sītā's wedding, Tulsī puts a hymn of praise

in Janaka's mouth in the spirit of *bhakti* (RCM.1, 340.4b-342.3a). In Vālmīki's original, Janaka's concern is exclusively with social relations when he tells Rāma: “*iyam, Sītā mama sūtā sahadharmacārītava*” (VR.1.63.26b-27a). Here he is reminding Rāma of the responsibilities dictated by *dharma*. Interestingly enough, the best known remake of the *Rāmāyana* of our time, Ramanand Sagar's 1987 TV version, opts rather for the spirit of *bhakti* and *prapatti* or devotion and submission, and follows Tulsī, not Vālmīki. In Sāgar's *Rāmāyana*, Sītā tells Rāma “*ājñā kījiye, main āpkī dāsī huun*,” (Command me, I am your handmaiden) (TVR. II. 148), her rhetoric of submission reflecting the spiritual idiom of *bhakti* as aptly as the politics of gender that characterizes the world for which the film was made.

The culture of submission is not, however, quite homogenous and Tulsī's unquestioning *bhakti* is not always found in other poets in the *bhakti* tradition. His older contemporary, Krittivāsa of Bengal, takes equal pains to fix Rāma as god in the audience's mind, and yet he cannot keep uncomfortable questions from popping up. In some ways Krittivāsa pushes the *bhakti* line even farther than Tulsī. For instance, when his Rāvana lies dying on the battlefield, he confesses that he recognizes Rāma as the eternal Brahman (*Brahma sanātana*) at whose feet he seeks a place as a devotee (*ciradin āmi dās carane tomār*). Some of the *rākshasas* are devout *vaishnavas* who have chosen rebellion against virtue as the quickest way to get noticed by Rāma. Nevertheless, Krittivāsa's Sītā accuses Rāma of acting like a low-born, dishonorable man when he rejects her after his victory. True, her accusation comes to nothing but the fact that it is at all admitted into the text lends Krittivāsa's work a degree of ambivalence unthinkable in Tulsī.

This ambivalence within the *bhakti* tradition seems characteristic of *Rāmāyanas* from both eastern and southern India. A

near contemporary of Krittivāsa was Shankaradeva of Assam, whose Sīta says in the *uttarakānda*:

*sabe bole enuvārāmaka bhāla bhāla/
maito jāno mora rāmesa yamakāla/
svāmi hena nidāruna kaita āche suni/*

All speak well of Rāma but I know that for me he
is like Death itself. Tell me where there is so cruel
a husband.³

A much later poet, the immensely popular -- and populist --
Dasu Ray follows Krittivāsa and makes the *rākśasas* devotees of
Rāma. When Hanuman enters Lanka, he is struck with wonder and
he says,

*ki āścarya mari mari/
rākśasete bale Hari//*

How astonishing, upon my life! Demons utter the
name of the Lord.⁴

Yet, Dasu Ray injects a sharp note of doubt when he makes
Agni comment on Sīta's *agni pariksha* (fire ordeal) in these terms:

*dekhilam eito ā kārya,
je din habe rā marājya,
diner prati to emni bicār habel*

Now I see how it works:
The day Rāma's reign begins
This is the justice that the powerless will get!⁵

In general, these renderings in the *bhakti* mode replace Vālmīki's matter-of-fact representation of the ethical framework of a warrior culture with the values of a settled and conservative society. But at the same time, even within the apparently seamless belief system of *bhakti*, cracks do appear that suggest considerable discomfort with the brutalities of battle narratives and produce undercurrents of criticism against the dominance of *bhakti*. I leave it to social historians to comment on the fact that these elements appear in east and south Indian versions as against the moral and spiritual certitude that underpins Tulsī's total surrender to Rāma. If Rāma is god, what else can the devotee do?

2: From moral emulation to surrender

I have argued above that the translation of man into god replaces moral emulation with surrender as the conceptual core of the *Rāmāyana*. This is not the place to speculate why this should have happened but we may note that it is part of a larger movement. Compelling evidence can be cited from the *Bhagavadgītā*, which remains perhaps the most influential and certainly more direct, didactic work within that movement. When Krishna instructs Arjuna, “*sarvadharmān parityājya māmekam, βaraṣam, vraja,*”⁶ he is demanding from Arjuna *prapatti* or surrender and asking him to place *prapatti* above his understanding of *dharma*. Contemporary Hindu beliefs and practices prioritize for the devotee the ideal of *bhakti*, in which *prapatti* or surrender is the key concept and one that dominates the religious and social world of that time. Not only the re-formed *Rāmāyanas* but the proliferating *avatāra* fables establish Rāma as a full-fledged god in place of Vālmīki's warrior prince who is not God but god-like. One consequence of this development is that Rāma is seen as the absolute truth himself, and therefore, nothing he does can be questioned. For Tulsīdās, Rāma's infallibility and benevolence are so absolute that his Sīta is no longer the *sahadharminī* of Vālmīki's tale but a devotee of Rāma. Do we have

to go any further to seek the source of the veneration of husbands as gods enjoined upon Hindu wives?

3: From elite to popular audience

As my last comment suggests, the re-formation of the *Rāmāyana* has had deep social implications. An important one relates to readership and audience, which changes through time. Vālmīki composed in Sanskrit which reserved his work for an elite group who could follow the language of the privileged class. It was meant to be heard and understood by them. They received instructions on ethical and moral problems through this epic, by the example of Rāma's adherence to *dharma*. With the emergence of *bhakti* as a belief system particularly accessible to the masses in medieval times, the need for stories narrated in regional languages became paramount. The poets who took up the task of re-presenting Vālmīki's *Rāmāyana* were clearly aiming at making it accessible to mass audiences. They no longer tried to write "a warrior tale" preaching righteousness, and Rāma ceased to be described primarily as a righteous man. Rāma was established as "God" himself and advanced from being merely a part of Vishnu to full godhead by the time the first regional version was composed. People were encouraged to surrender to the God Rāma, who cannot be questioned. It was easier for people to identify with this mode of *bhakti*, which had fast achieved mass appeal. With the influence of a vast range of *bhakti* literature like *Harivamsha*, *Bhāgavatapurāna* and *Gītāgovinda* on the Vishnu/Krishna culture, and the influence of *Sivabhakti* and *Vishnubhakti* in Andhra, Tamilnadu, and Maharashtra, people were receptive to the concept of Rāma as Brahman. The appeal of the *Rāmāyana* as a tale of *bhakti* was then a necessary and obvious re-formation of a warrior tale into a dharmic tale.

The process I have been trying to describe is essentially one of literary as well as ethical translation. When you try to render into

your own idiom a narrative as massive as the *Rāmāyana* long after the social world that engendered it has passed away, its narrative structure remains much the same but its conceptual substance and ideological core are lost. They are replaced by concepts and ideologies that arise out of a different world and sustain a different world. The history of the *Rāmāyana* illustrates the ways in which the travels of a text through time, space and cultural forms test the limits of translation and impose upon that text new forms of thought, feeling and expression.

Notes

1. For extensive studies in versions of the *Rāmāyana*, see Paula Richman, ed. *Many Rāmāyanas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), and Mandakranta Bose, ed. *The Rāmāyana Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). A particularly interesting work on the Tulsi *Rāmāyana* is by Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
2. References are to: Tulsīdās, *Śrīrāmcaritmānas*, ed. H. Poddar (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, [1942] 1990), and Krittivāsa's *Rāmāyana*, ed. B. Sil (Calcutta: Akshay Library, 1954 [bangabda 1361]).
3. Quoted by William Smith, *The Rāmāyana Tradition in Eastern India* (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, (1988), p. 99.
4. *Dāṣarathī Rāyera Pāñcālī*, ed. A. Ray (Calcutta: Mahesh Library, 1997), p. 51, verse 137.
5. *Ibid.* p. 114, verse 194.
6. *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, ed. Shyamaprasad Bhattacharya (Calcutta: Nirmal Book Agency, n.d.), 18.66.

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