

On and Off the *Rāmāyaṇa* Narrative Paths

An Introduction

This book brings together contributions from some of the leading as well as new scholars in the *Rāmāyaṇa* field in the form of a thematically arranged collection of articles. They were originally presented in a panel at the 25th European Conference on South Asian Studies (Paris, 24–27 July 2018), hosted at the EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales) with the CEIAS (Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud, CNRS/EHESS) as the main institutional organizer. The Paris ECSAS gave all the panel participants an opportunity to meet and exchange their views in person, not only among themselves but also during discussions with a captivated conference audience.

The volume, like the panel from which it results, draws from the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition well known for an inexhaustible variety of forms and narrative structures transmitted by different media. Contributions, based on written, oral and visual *Rāmāyaṇa* materials from classical, early modern and contemporary India, despite a plethora of research devoted to the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition that nevertheless does not exhaust the topic of the Rāma story, have attempted to offer a new contribution to its understanding. The book focuses on the narrative strategies adopted in Sanskrit and vernacular texts, tellings, performances and sculpture, taking into consideration their socio-cultural milieu understood as an interpretive framework for further analysis. The authors seek to examine some of the essential forms in which the Rāma story has functioned in Indian literature and arts and to investigate the techniques used to transform the *Rāmāyaṇa* narratives. The volume addresses a variety of questions. For example, how do diverse narratives become vehicles for different ideologies that are expressive of sectarian concerns, literary conventions or cultural values? What is the interrelation between the narratives and their surroundings? To what extent do they influence each other and what is their interdependence?

Ten out of eleven articles were presented at the Paris ECSAS, with the only exception of Paula Richman's contribution that is different from her paper given during the conference panel. Bearing in mind the main object of this volume's interest—the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative(s)—the editor has tried to arrange its chapters, considering both a period and cultural milieu they pertain to as well as their com-

mon thematic and/or methodological traits. Nevertheless, in view of the broad spectrum of analyses, neither strict chronological nor thematic sequence could become its ultimate frame. As a result of all this, the first to appear are three chapters referring, in different ways, to the earlier *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition and/or such source materials as philosophical works by a seventh-century Mīmāṃsā author Kumārila Bhaṭṭa (Monika Nowakowska), programmes of sculptural reliefs on temple walls from the Gupta period onwards in North India and from the Pallava period in South India (John Brockington), and the sixteenth-century Braj Bhāṣā poetic works by Keśavdās (Stefania Cavaliere). Next comes a group of six contributions concerned with multifarious aspects of the past and present dramatical and performing traditions (Mary Brockington, Bożena Śliweczyńska, Paula Richman, Alexander Dubyanskiy, Danielle Feller, Sohini Pillai), with three papers based entirely on South Indian material. The volume closes with two chapters focusing on the Jain milieu, of early modern up to contemporary times, and their uses of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition (Adrian Plau and Danuta Stasik).

The first chapter, ‘Rāmavat Bhīṣma: Epic Narratives as a Source of Illustrations for Hermeneutical Discussions on *dharma*’ by Monika Nowakowska, is the only article in the collection based on purely philosophical material. Its author deals with Mīmāṃsā, the specialized tradition of Vedic ritual hermeneutics to a great extent concerned with the question of the sources of knowledge of *dharma*, focusing on one of the main Mīmāṃsā authors, Kumārila-bhaṭṭa. In his *Tantravārttika*, Kumārila discussed sources of *dharma*, among them the so-called *sad-ācāras*, i.e. practices and customs of persons considered exemplary. In his list of figures who at some point deviated from the path of *dharma*, Kumārila includes Rāma together with Bhīṣma; their alleged misdemeanour is that they performed a sacrifice without their wives being present with them. In her discussion, Nowakowska foregrounds the functioning and moral framing of the epic narratives in the hermeneutical discussions by Kumārila and his commentator Someśvara. She points out the criteria of selection and presentation of narrative elements and offers a richly illustrated examination of a traditional Brahmanical perspective on the actions of Rāma, especially towards his wife Sītā.

‘Stories in Stone: Sculptural Representations of the Rāma Narrative’ by John Brockington forms part of an ongoing project, conducted with Mary Brockington, in which they survey presentations of the Rama story as it developed from its origin in the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* up to approximately the end of the eighteenth century (the results of their project have been deposited in the Oxford Research Archive and made available for others). In his article, Brockington examines narrative representations of the Rāma story contained in programmes of sculptural reliefs on temple walls in order to examine the relative popularity over time and in different regions of the various components of the narrative. Noting the regional distribution of these programmes, the author offers an

appraisal of the factors involved in this. Brockington also draws attention to the particularly interesting interrelationship between visual and verbal representations of some episodes—whereas many earlier series basically follow the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, later ones either reflect the influence of vernacular retellings or may have even generated them.

Stefania Cavaliere, in her article ‘*Dhārmik Kings in Courtly Agendas: The Figure of Rāma in the Works of Keśavdās*’, explores two works by Keśavdās, *Rāmcaṇḍrakā* (1601) and *Vijñāṅgītā* (1610), in which, in a different way, he interprets the figure of Rāma and his story, thus contributing interesting material for the understanding of the dynamics of adaptation of Sanskrit classical models into the new Braj Bhāṣā classical tradition that started developing in North India from the sixteenth century. Analysing both works, Cavaliere argues that Keśavdās, thanks to the polysemic figure of Rāma (a god, a *dhārmik* king and the exemplary seeker of salvation), creatively adapts the classical tradition to the new historical, cultural and linguistic context. By combining classical patterns and new historical claims, the poet is able to embody a model of sovereignty adapted to the modernity and acceptable to the addressee of the work—Keśavdās’s patron Vīr Siṃh, King of Orcha.

The next contribution, ‘Showing What Is Not: The Use of Illusion in the Classical Sanskrit Rāma Plays’ by Mary Brockington, is the first to consider the multifarious aspects of the past and present of dramatical and performing traditions. The main argument of Brockington’s article is based on two absolute requirements governing the *nāṭya* tradition. Firstly, the very essence of theatre is the acceptance by the audience of a visual illusion which has also lain at the heart of the Rāma narrative from its earliest form. The second absolute was the requirement for novelty, which was met by the dramatists with elaboration of a narrative by resorting to illusions and counterfeits. In the course of her analysis, Brockington explores the effect of illusion on the characters already established in the epics, finding that Rāma, Sītā and Rāvaṇa are all diminished in stature in the *nāṭyas* under discussion. She also observes that these plays, though primarily secular, reflect the evolution of Rāma as divine without seeking either to propagate or to deny it. An invaluable section closing this chapter is the Appendix that systematizes the foregoing analysis of illusions in *nāṭyas* by providing their ample illustrations with bibliographical references.

With the chapter ‘The Rāmāyaṇa Story in the Cākyār Kūttu Format’ by Bożena Śliweczyńska, we move to the South. Here, the author deals with the *Rāmāyaṇa* Cākyār Kūttu format of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam theatre that over the centuries has functioned as a temple ritual. This theatre tradition as such concentrates on presenting Sanskrit dramas that also include works relating to the *Rāmāyaṇa* story—the *Abhiṣekanāṭaka* and the *Pratimānāṭaka* of Bhāsa, and the *Āscar-yacūḍamaṇi* of Śaktibhadra. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is also present in this tradition in a

specific stage form of Cākyār Kūttu—a solo performance dominated by Vidūṣaka who is the master storyteller here. In her article, Śliweczyńska focuses on this form, the *Rāmāyaṇa* Kūttu, in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* story is presented in consecutive episodes and the complete performance takes about 160–170 days. Though the *Rāmāyaṇa* Kūttu narrates the story of Rāma and extolls his name frequently, his figure does not dominate the stage presentation. Nevertheless, as Śliweczyńska observes, in fact the whole multilevel narrative structure is subdued to glorify Bhagavān Śrī Rāmacandra who is to be praised at the performance conclusion.

Kerala, albeit of an entirely different milieu, is also the focus of Paula Richman's article 'Sreekantan Nair's Rāvaṇa in *Laṅkālakṣmi*' that examines *Laṅkālakṣmi* (*Lakshmi of Lanka*), the last play in the *Rāmāyaṇa* trilogy by C.N. Sreekantan Nair (1928–1976), a pioneering modern Malayalam playwright. As Richman notes, the play that has been performed multiple times since its debut and quickly acclaimed as one of most innovative and probing retellings of the last *Rāmāyaṇa* book, the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, performed in modern India is also considered as one of the most eloquent and compelling modern plays in Malayalam. By presenting the events of the Laṅkā war entirely through *rākṣasa* eyes, it offers a fresh perspective with Rāvaṇa portrayed as a stalwart and art-loving king, devoted to his family and lineage, proud of its uniqueness, history and ideals. In order to create such a picture, Nair resorted to modernist theatrical ideas, while anchoring his play in what he saw as Kerala's cultural ethos.

In a chapter entitled 'Specific Features of the Tamil Ballad *Kucalavaṇ katai*', Alexander Dubyanskiy addresses a genre popular in folk literature that is performed orally by singers and storytellers (*villicai*) with the accompaniment of a string of a bow (*vil*) as well as of bells and small drums. Dubyanskiy in his analysis refers to the story of Kusalavaṇ as presented in two published manuscripts. The story is based on the *Uttarakāṇḍa* but here the context and the course of events leading to Sītā's exile and its aftermath are changed considerably. Dubyanskiy's analysis points up one of the key problems of *Kusalavaṇ katai*, i.e. feminine chastity so important for the traditional Tamil culture, that seems to be responsible for blaming Rāma for his mistreatment of Sītā. And Rāma is also represented differently—he is the *avatār* of Viṣṇu but human features and weaknesses dominate, although the nameless authors of the story make Rāma deny his faults and accuse his brother Lakṣmaṇa of all the misfortunes.

Danielle Feller's contribution 'Rivers of *rasa* and Hearts of Stone: The Female Voice of Pathos in Bhavabhūti's *Uttararāmacarita*' deals with Bhavabhūti's *Uttararāmacarita*, in which its author, unlike many others who base their plays on the *Rāmakathā*, addressed the tragic events of the traditional *Uttarakāṇḍa* in his drama. However, Bhavabhūti, bound by the laws of the dramatic genre, introduced such plot twists that the play ends happily with Rāma and

Sītā's reunion. Feller is concerned with the way in which Bhavabhūti 'feminizes' the story, introducing a large number of female characters (some of them play very little or no role at all in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*), and with the reasons for this narrative strategy of 'feminization'. Feller also observes that Bhavabhūti was especially interested in the aesthetic experience, and promoting *karuṇa*, the primary *rasa* in his play, was crucial to this work. He achieves this end thanks to the many female voices that not only allow themselves to manifest grief (*śoka*), but also because they allow the emergence of grief in the male characters, including Rāma himself.

The starting point of the article 'From Villainess to Victim: Contemporary Representations of Śūrpaṅkhā' by Sohini Pillai is that in all authoritative Indian *Rāmāyaṇas*, both of the past and of the present—including those by Vālmīki, Kampan, Tulsīdās, and Ramanand Sagar—the firmly established image of Śūrpaṅkhā as a dangerous and promiscuous monster, licentious 'Other' woman and a villainess is well established. However, examining several present-day *Rāmāyaṇas* in Hindi, Tamil, and English from the realms of film, television, and performance, Pillai demonstrates that a new, highly sympathetic representation of Śūrpaṅkhā as a victim of sexual violence has emerged in modern India. Basing her argument on ample illustrations, she asserts that this new Śūrpaṅkhā reflects changing perceptions towards rape and sexual violence in contemporary India.

As already mentioned, the volume closes with two chapters focusing on the Jain perspective in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. In the first of them, 'Vernacular Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* as *satī-kathās*: Familiar Structure, Innovative Narrative', Adrian Plau investigates how shifts in narrative emphasis generate new *Rāmāyaṇa* tellings, although not necessarily changing elements of the traditional story. He is particularly interested in new tellings emerging in the early modern period in vernacular languages across North India, which—in conformity with the rise of popular *satī-kathās*—give special importance to Sītā's virtues and represent her as a *satī*, an ideal Jain laywoman. Plau investigates the spread of this mode of tellings, dividing them into three distinct waves, beginning with *satī-kathās* as episodes within larger works until their final evolution into independent works. A prime example of such a *satī-kathā* is the mid-seventeenth century Braj Bhāṣā work *Sītācarit* by Rāmcand Bālak, which refers to itself as a '*kathā* of the heroic *satī*'. In his analysis, drawing on Bakhtin and Genette, Plau contends that subtle shifts in chronological arrangement allow *satī-kathās* to stay within the familiar Jain Purāṇic superstructure and yet they emphasize the virtues of *satīs*, characters that are not amongst the Great Men (*śalākāpuruṣa*) of Jainism.

As the last one comes 'On Fire Ordeal: Who and Why? Ācārya Tulsī's *Agni-parīkṣā* or a Modern Jain Telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*', a contribution by Danuta Stasik that deals with *Agni-parīkṣā*, a Hindi poem rooted in the Jain *Rā-*

māyaṇa tradition, published for the first time in 1961. Its author, Ācārya Tulsī, a famous Jain leader, features Sītā as the main character of the story and truly sympathizes with her as the epitome of women let down by their men and society. In 1970, the poem provoked agitation among *sanātani* Hindus. The ensuing court judgement found some passages of the poem to be offensive and eventually all its copies were confiscated by the State Government of Madhya Pradesh. After court battles, also defending the poem, its revised version was published in 1972. In her paper, Stasik firstly offers a contextualized analysis of the poem's narrative and its characteristic features drawing on Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*. Secondly, she discusses the relevant passages of *Agni-parīkṣā*'s 1961 and 1972 versions, seeking an answer to the question why and how this telling composed by Ācārya Tulsī, who did not intend to insult anyone's feelings by his poem, was found offensive by traditionalist circles of contemporary Indian society.

This book could not have materialized in its present shape without the help of a number of people. Firstly, I would like to express my deepest thanks to the reviewers for their positive response to the request to peer review chapters of the volume, taking their time to read and comment on them. Secondly, sincere gratitude is due to Dr. Jacek Woźniak (Chair of South Asian Studies, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw) for proofreading texts in Dravidian languages, and last but not least, I also offer a vote of thanks to Steven Jones for proofreading and correcting English of the entire volume.

Danuta Stasik
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