

# Vernacular Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* as *Satī-Kathās*: Familiar Structure, Innovative Narrative<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introductory Notes

This paper shows how shifts in narrative emphasis generate new *Rāmāyaṇa* tellings without necessarily changing any of the traditional story elements. The received notion of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* is that they conform to the narrative structures of the wider Jain Purāṇa tradition, and especially to the notion of the sixty-three Great Men (*triṣaṣṭiśalākāpuruṣa*). But in the early modern period, concurrent with the rise of vernacular languages across North India, new tellings of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story emphasized Sītā's virtues and painted her as an ideal Jain laywoman, a *satī*, in conformity with the contemporary rise of popular *satī-kathās*. I trace the spread of this mode of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* from its early beginnings in Sanskrit and Prakrit predecessors and up to its perhaps most striking formulation in the mid-seventeenth century *Sītācarit* by the Digambara poet Rāmcand Bālak. Drawing on Bakhtin and Genette in analysing the narrative strategies that Bālak and his fellow poets employed, I argue that subtle shifts in chronological arrangement allow these early modern *Rāmāyaṇa* tellings to stay within the familiar, Purāṇic superstructure while emphasizing the virtues of the

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1 I am very grateful to Danuta Stasik for inviting me to join the Paris ECSAS panel. I first explored the argument in the present chapter in a previous paper of mine, “‘There Was a City Called Mithilā’: Are All Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* Really *Purāṇas*?”, currently in press for the forthcoming fifth volume of *Puṣpikā: Tracing Ancient India Through Texts and Traditions*, and sections of my PhD thesis at SOAS, University of London: *The Deeds of Sītā: A Critical Edition and Literary Contextual Analysis of the ‘Sītācarit’ by Rāmcand Bālak*, supervised by Francesca Orsini, Peter Flügel, and Rachel Dwyer. The present chapter builds on these earlier arguments to present a chronological framework and incorporates new, contemporary materials, shedding further light on the rise and prevalence of the *satī-kathā* branch of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*. All translations from Indian languages are mine.

characters who are not amongst the Great Men. In conclusion, I point towards some contemporary iterations of this mode of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Let me begin by admitting that the distinction between ‘familiar structure’ and ‘innovative narrative’ in this article’s title is slightly confusing. What I have in mind here is simply the dynamic between what we may call the superstructure of any given story and the story itself. To take an easy example, the Gospel of John as it appears in The New Testament tells a story from beginning to end, complete in itself, though it clearly operates under the wider firmament of the cosmological superstructure of the Christian Bible as a whole. This relation is, of course, obvious. Yet when we shift our gaze to the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, the relationship between superstructure and narrative grows more complex and, in the case of a certain branch of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*, sometimes faint to the point of invisibility.

These are the *satī-kathās*, stories of devout Jain women whose lives illuminate the fundamental Jain teachings of right insight, right wisdom, and right practice, even to the extent that the *satīs* become objects of veneration in their own right, and sometimes even outright worship. From at least the late medieval period and into the eighteenth century, North India saw the production and circulation of a number of Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* that primarily focused on the figure of Sītā as a great *satī*. To these Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*, Sītā’s steadfastness in the face of her forest exile and her ultimate renunciation following her fire ordeal illustrate her profound insight into the workings of *karma* and her radical embrace of the Jain doctrines of detachment from worldly affairs.<sup>2</sup>

Such *Rāmāyaṇa*-inflected *satī-kathās* were immensely popular. Tens of titles in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Maru-Gurjar and Braj Bhāṣā are recorded and many of these are still available in manuscript format, sometimes with dozens of extant copies of a single title spread across temple libraries and research archives across North India. Yet scholarly acknowledgment of and engagement with this branch of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* remain almost non-existent. This chapter is an attempt to fill this void. Beyond the fundamental task of identifying the distinct nature of a branch of Jain literature, I engage with the *satī-kathā* branch of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* so that we may better recognize that we have before us an unexplored source of material for the study of ideals of women’s devotional practice in early modern North India.

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<sup>2</sup> Note the *satī* figure of Jain discourse is distinct from the self-immolating *satī* of nineteenth century Hindu and British colonial discourse. As Mary Whitney Kelting notes (*Heroic Wives: Rituals, Stories, and the Virtues of Jain Wifehood*, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), the act of self-harm is unacceptable to the central Jain doctrine of *ahiṃsā* (‘non-violence’).

## 2. The Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*: Purāṇas and Transfocalizations

Every work on the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition will sooner or later refer to Ramanujan's<sup>3</sup> essay on the *Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas*, and here my moment comes already. Beyond its brilliant encapsulation of the mutability and diversity of the world's many *Rāmāyaṇas*, Ramanujan also details what for many are the defining ingredients of what he terms 'the Jaina tellings';<sup>4</sup> Rāvaṇ as a tragic figure and his ten heads referring to his necklace of nine gems, the monkeys reshaped as celestials under a *Vānara* ('monkey') banner, and an overall rationalistic outlook. We do, of course, also know that Ramanujan spoke of the dynamics of variation between the *Rāmāyaṇas* in terms of translation, stretching from the almost non-existent changes of the *iconic* translation via the contextual, but inessential, changes of the *indexical* to the radical transformation of the *symbolic*, where the source material has been reshaped to tell a completely different story. The Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*, Ramanujan argues, would then fall under the latter category, in that they represent a radical departure from the story as it appears in *Vālmīki*.

This is all well and good, but we must pause to consider whether the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, which after all contains countless iterations in multiple languages and spans two millennia, can be effectively studied simply by noting its level of variation vis-à-vis the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*. Indeed, one reason for the missing engagement with its strand of *satī-kathās* may be that the study of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* has at times been too occupied with asking question of how they differ from the *Vālmīki*-based *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, instead of how they differ from each other.

Kulkarni's<sup>5</sup> deep work on the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition does not fall into this trap, giving instead a detailed study of its defining iterations and their interrelations. We owe to Kulkarni the realization that the very first Jain *Rāmāyaṇa*, in all probability, is Vimalasūri's third-century Prakrit work *Paūma carīya*. Most of the elements Ramanujan highlighted are already present in Vimalasūri, and it lays down the narrative structure that later Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* follow or depart from.

The *Paūma carīya* also introduces the characteristic narrative framework, where the king Śreṇika asks Mahāvīra's disciple, Gautama, to ease his mind

3 A.K. Ramanujan, 'Three Hundred Ramayanas. Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation', in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, pp. 22–47

4 Ramanujan, 'Three Hundred Ramayanas', p. 33.

5 V.M. Kulkarni, *The Story of Rāma in Jain Literature: As Presented by the Śvetāmbara and Dīgambara Poets in the Prakrit, Sanskrit and Apabhraṃśa Languages*, Saraswati Oriental Studies, Ahmedabad: Saraswati Pustak Bhandar, 1990.

about the *Rāmāyaṇa* story. To Śreṇika, it all sounds a bit far-fetched. Indeed, Gautama assures, the others have got it wrong, and he proceeds to tell Śreṇika the story as it really is—that is, similar to the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* in its basic narrative structure, but with character motivations and actions transformed to adhere to a Jain outlook. Kulkarni shows that such an outlook was not too clear to Vimalasūri in its sectarian affiliations. The later *Padma Purāṇa*, however, composed in Sanskrit by Raviṣeṇa in the seventh century, is clearer in its Digambara affiliation. Yet Raviṣeṇa, as Kulkarni brilliantly shows, follows Vimalasūri’s framework most diligently, tracing his Prakrit predecessor from *parva* to *parva*. Raviṣeṇa’s additions, apart from his references to Digambara *munis*, is a tendency towards lengthened poetical descriptions. Very much a *kāvya*-inspired work, the *Padma Purāṇa* never misses a chance to muse poetically on a forest view or a battlefield. Should we use Ramanujan’s tripartite scheme of translations to describe them, we would perhaps say that the *Padma Purāṇa* holds an indexical relationship to the *Paūma carīya*. Together, they form the lodestars of most currents of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

In identifying the interrelations and importance of Vimalasūri and Raviṣeṇa’s compositions, Kulkarni’s study is an essential work for Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* studies. Yet Kulkarni has also left us with two statements that I believe have tended to cloud our approach to the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. The first is his observation, when referring to a few titles in vernacular languages, that these works ‘probably do not contain any new remarkable features but repeat in their own language what the older Jain writers have already said’.<sup>6</sup> Kulkarni’s study, though expansive, is limited to tellings in Prakrit, Sanskrit and Apabhraṃśa, and later works in early modern vernaculars, which will include most of the *satī-kathā* tellings, fall beyond his scope. However, in his statement on their probable lack of innovation, Kulkarni demonstrates the not infrequently encountered assumption within the field of classical Indology that vernacular versions of earlier compositions essentially are simplified translations and that the real cultural significance lies with the (preferably Sanskrit) originals. This is, in many cases, true, but yet we should not forget that innovation comes in many forms. As the *satī-kathās* show, the seemingly innocent act of reorganizing a narrative structure may yield an entirely new narrative, even without adding new elements.

And that leads me to Kulkarni’s second statement. At the very end of his study, Kulkarni<sup>7</sup> concludes that ‘the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*, as a rule, are essentially *Purāṇas*’. With this, Kulkarni refers to their didactic tone, their encyclopedic scope of stories and lore, but, most of all, the fact that they are structured accord-

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6 Kulkarni, *The Story of Rāma in Jain Literature*, p. 14.

7 Kulkarni, *The Story of Rāma in Jain Literature*, p. 248.

ing to the wider historical and cosmological structure of the Jain Purāṇas. This structure hinges on the essential concept of the sixty-three Great Men, *śalākāpuruṣas*, who are born throughout the cycles of human history as teachers, leaders and rulers. The sixty-three include a series of twenty-four *tīrthankaras*, establishers of the Jain order, followed by twelve *cakravartins*, or universal rulers, and, finally nine trios *ardha-cakravartins*, rulers of one third of the world, each trio containing heroic *baladevas*, *vāsudevas*, half-brothers of the *baladevas*, and finally, nine *prativāsudevas*, the *vāsudevas*' natural enemies. The Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* are then, in Kulkarni's phrase, 'essentially' the story of the eighth trio with Rām as *baladeva*, Lakṣmaṇ as *vasudeva* and Rāvaṇ as *prativāsudeva*.

We have now arrived at the superstructure of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*—the greater story in which they live—and the scholarly consensus towards the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition is to approach it through this lens.<sup>8</sup> I do not argue against applying this perspective when approaching works such as the *Paūma carīya*, but it does fail to account for the distinctive quality of the *satī-kathā* strand of Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*. The *satī-kathās* do, at times, refer to this overarching structure of the *śalākāpuruṣas*, yet that does not in itself mean that they are Purāṇas. The distinction is upheld within the material itself; the *Sītācarit*, a prime example of a Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* as *satī-kathā*, refers to itself as a '*kathā* of the heroic *satī*' (SC.11) and notes that it draws its inspiration from 'Raviṣeṇa's *Raghu Purāṇa*' (SC.2531).<sup>9</sup>

Before we turn to consider how exactly these *satī-kathās* achieve this distinct quality, we must acknowledge that we cannot adequately describe the transformative processes of narrative rearrangement within them by relying on Ramanujan's tripartite degree of translations. We may state that they probably fall somewhere between the indexical and the symbolical, but that does not really describe in any detail how this transformation comes to pass. To alert ourselves

8 Ramanujan, too, highlights the *śalākāpuruṣa* aspect, and John E. Cort ('An Overview of the Jaina Purāṇas', in *Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jaina Texts*, ed. Wendy Doniger, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993, pp. 185–206) engages with the question of what constitutes a Jain Purāṇa and arrives at a position that, like Kulkarni, emphasizes the *śalākāpuruṣas*. Finally, De Clercq ('*Paūmacarīya—Padmacarita—Paūmacariu: The Jain Ramāyaṇa-Purāṇa*', in *Epics, Khilas, And Puranas: Continuities and Ruptures*, Proceedings of the Third Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Puranas, September 2002, ed. Patteri Koskikallio, Zagreb: Academia Scientiarum et Artium Croatica, 2005, pp. 597–608) shows that the same underpins also the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition's Apabhraṃśa iterations.

9 All references to the hitherto unprinted *Sītācarit* refer to its critical edition in my PhD thesis, Adrian Plau, *The Deeds of Sita: A Critical Edition and Literary Contextual Analysis of the 'Sītācarit' by Rāmcaṇḍ Bālak*, PhD dissertation, SOAS, University of London, 2018, which draws on several of the eighteen available manuscripts.

to the full range of operations at work, I prefer to draw on the analytical toolset offered by Genette in his works on narrative and intertextuality or, as he coins it, hypertextuality.

From his study on narrative,<sup>10</sup> we have the helpful distinction between ‘story’, ‘narrative’, and ‘narrating’. By separating between any given story’s elements (‘story’), the manner in which they are put together as a ‘narrative’ in any given telling, and the act of ‘narrating’ that such a telling constitutes, we may more clearly differentiate between the different processes at work in the *satī-kathās*, and in the following I use these terms (story, narrative, narrating) according to Genette’s delineations.

For those processes, Genette’s work on hypertextuality<sup>11</sup> suggests separating between the inaugural hypotext and the following hypertext. According to Ramanujan, the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story would then be the hypertext to Vālmīki’s hypotext. Yet merely replacing one set of terms with another to describe the idea of differing degrees of variation does not in itself make any analytic difference. What makes Genette’s analysis helpful to us is the wealth of operations and techniques he identifies that can bring any given text from hypotext to hypertext. Through the operations of changing a narrative’s chronology (‘temporal order’), the relation between the narrative and its narrator (‘distance’), its pacing (‘duration and frequency’), or its focus (‘perspective’), a work’s ‘mode’ can be radically altered; characters within the narrative are seen in a new light, casual asides become revelations, and incidental episodes are lifted to central importance. This, Genette tells us, is the act of transfocalization, and it is what we see at work in the *satī-kathās*.

### 3. The Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*: The *Satī-Kathā* Strand

Jain *satī-kathās* are not unique to the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition and stories of devout Jain women can be traced almost to the very beginnings of narrative literature in Prakrit. Kelting,<sup>12</sup> in her studies of *satī* stories amongst modern Jains, identifies a number of *satī-kathās* across a variety of genres, from different for-

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10 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980.

11 Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, tr. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

12 Kelting, *Heroic Wives*, pp. 13–14; Whitney Kelting, *Singing to the Jinas: Jain Laywomen, Maṇḍal Singing, and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 38–40.

mats of epic and lyrical poetry to ritual songs and praise hymns, appearing from the twelfth century and continuing up to the present day.<sup>13</sup> The *satī* strand of Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* roughly corresponds to a similar chronological expanse, and I will here attempt to present them according to a historical scheme that sees them evolve from beginnings as elements of other works into new, freestanding works featuring novel variations, proceeding to take shape as a distinct format of Jain *Rāmāyaṇa*, crystallizing yet further on this path, before eventually shedding their superstructural ties entirely. This chronology is more of an analytic aid than an absolute framework; tendencies overlap, the archives await further exploration, and I only briefly touch on the modern period and the new materials that followed the introduction of print.

In the first instance, the *satī-kathās* appear as episodes within larger works. This is what we see in the *Bṛhatkathākośa* by the tenth-century Digambara Hariṣeṇa.<sup>14</sup> Here the *Rāmāyaṇa* story is divided into two shorter *kathānakas*, one depicting the story of Rām and the other that of Sītā after the return to Ayodhyā, including her forest exile, fire ordeal and eventual initiation into the Jain nunhood. Yet nothing about the *Bṛhatkathākośa*'s narrative is reported by Kulkarni to differ in any significant degree to what is present in Vimalasūri. What is new here is primarily the tendency to represent Sītā's story as distinct and, as Genette<sup>15</sup> comments, no transposition from hypotext to hypertext, though seemingly insignificant, is wholly innocent; in one way or the other, the hypotext's meaning is altered. By distinguishing between Rām's and Sītā's stories, the *Bṛhatkathākośa* indicates that though they may be both closely interlinked to each other and to a shared superstructure in the sixty-three Great Men narrative, they may also be told, and potentially thought of, as independent stories.

This tendency is then brought out with greater clarity in the next wave of works, which begins to appear from some point after the twelfth century and continues into the seventeenth century. Here we find titles such as an anonymous *Mahākāvya Sītācaritra*<sup>16</sup> in Sanskrit, Bhuvanatuṅgasūri's Prakrit *Sīyacariya*,<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> As far as I am aware, we lack a full study of the history of *satī-kathā* in Jain literature.

<sup>14</sup> Hariṣeṇa, *Bṛhat kathākośa*, ed. Ādināth Nemināth Upādhye, Bombay: Bhāratiya Vidyābhavan, 1943, pp. 208–209, 215.

<sup>15</sup> Genette, *Palimpsests*, p. 294.

<sup>16</sup> *Mahākāvya Sītācaritra*, manuscript, n.d., Bühler 301 (India Office Library), British Library.

<sup>17</sup> The *Sīyacariya* has not been available to me, but details in the Patan catalogue (C.D. Dalal and Lalchandra Bhagawandas Gandhi (eds), *A Descriptive Catalogue of Manu-*

Samaysundar's seventeenth-century Maru-Gurjar *Sītārāmcaupāī*<sup>18</sup>, Brahmajīta's sixteenth-century Sanskrit *Hanumaccaritra*,<sup>19</sup> and Brahma Rāymalla's sixteenth-century mixed Maru-Gurjar/Braj Bhāṣā *Hanumāncarita*.<sup>20</sup> These are all epic narratives telling the *Rāmāyaṇa* story, but what they also have in common is a marked change in what Genette calls 'perspective' and 'temporal order'. By restructuring the narrative of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story, they subtly shift its weight onto the sequences where Sītā or other devout Jain women appear and use this process of transfocalization to highlight their stature as *saītīs*.

Earlier Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* typically situate the *Rāmāyaṇa* story within the narrating framework of Śreṇika and Gautama and proceed to tell the stories of Rāvaṇ's former births, effectively situating the *Rāmāyaṇa* story within the superstructure of the sixty-three Great Men, before finally arriving at the births of Rām and Lakṣmaṇ. The *Mahākāvya Sītācaritra*, however, eschews the Śreṇika-Gautama narrating framework and begins instead by telling the story of the births of Sītā and Bhāmaṇḍala, her twin brother. Giving only the absolute minimum of context, it presumes that its audience is familiar with the story of Bhāmaṇḍala's former lives. And when Rām and Lakṣmaṇ finally enter into its narrative in the story where a 'barbarian' (*mleccha*) tribe invades Janaka's kingdom, leading to Rām and Lakṣmaṇ's triumph on the battlefield and Rām's betrothal to Sītā, the *Mahākāvya Sītācaritra* shifts from the tone of these remarkable opening passages to follow the *Paūma cariya* closely, at times even translating verse by verse.<sup>21</sup> With that, it has entered the wider stream of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story and there it stays till it reaches Sītā's forest exile and fire ordeal at

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*scripts in the Jain Bhandars at Pattan*, vol. 1, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1937, p. 136), Johannes Klatt (*Jaina-Onomasticon*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016, p. 895), and a discussion in Nāhtā and Nāhtā (Samaysundar, *Kavivar Samaysundar kṛt Sītārām Caupāī*, ed. Agarcand Nāhtā and Bhāvarlāl Nāhtā, Bikaner: Sādūl Rājasthānī Risarc Instītyūt, 1959) indicate that it is the direct inspiration to Samaysundar's *Sītārāmcaupāī*. Its dating is unknown, but the Patan manuscript is late sixteenth century.

18 Samaysundar, *Kavivar Samaysundar kṛt Sītārām Caupāī*.

19 Brahmajīta, *Hanumaccaritra*, manuscript, 1578, Or. 2129, British Library.

20 Rāymalla, *Hanumāncarita*, manuscript, n.d., 306, Nasiyā jī Jain Mandir, Bharatpur and *Hanumāncarita*, manuscript, n.d., 4335, Apabhraṃśa Sāhitya Akādamī, Jaipur.

21 Compare the following:

*tattheva atthi deso, ekko cciya addhababbaro nāmaṇ  
nissamaṇjama-nissīlo, bahumecchasamāulo ghorō  
tattha ya maūramāle, nayare parivasai mecchajaṇapaūre  
nāmeṇa āyaramgo, rāyā jamasarisadaḍhasatto*

And there was a land there named Addhababbaro,

Where lived many groups of *mlecchas*, undisciplined, ill-behaved and dreadful.

And there, in the town of Maūramāla, where many of the *mleccha* peoples reside,



the hands of Rām. Crucially, it ends after Sītā's passing of the fire ordeal, exalting her as a *mahāsati*<sup>22</sup> and, unlike the *Paūma cariya*, refraining to tell the stories of Rām and Lakṣmaṇ's former births.

Samaysundar's composition *Sītārāmcaupāi* (1631) is, at first sight, a more traditional Jain *Rāmāyaṇa*, in that it sets up the narrating framework of Śreṇika and Gautama. However, here Śreṇika is not worried about the weirdness of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story, but comes simply for 'advice'. Gautama obligingly lists causes of sins that one should be aware of and mentions, in passing, the 'sorrows of Sītā'. Śreṇika is intrigued, and Gautama promptly begins a narrative of the former births of Sītā and Bhāmaṇḍala, eventually arriving at the same general stream as the *Mahākāvya Sītācaritra* and following the *Paūma cariya* from there. The *Sītārāmcaupāi* continues further than the *Mahākāvya Sītācaritra*, following the *Paūma cariya* also through the final few episodes, but also inserts several songs of praise to Sītā as a *satī*.

This wave of *satī-kathās* does not substantially supplement or change any of the elements of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story. They do not state that the *śalākāpuruṣa* superstructure is not present in their narratives. But they do, through simple modifications of narrative structure and subtle omissions, shift the balance of the narrative to focus on the *satī* figures. They build on the simple distinction in the *Bṛhatkathākośa* and reframe the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story as partly the story of a *satī*. The superstructure is, like Bhāmaṇḍala's former lives, taken for granted or, at the very least, no longer the prime focus. We see a strikingly similar shift in the two Hanumān *caritras*, which both choose to begin by telling the story of Hanumān's mother, princess Añjanā, a *satī* in her own right.<sup>23</sup> All the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* of this wave invite us into the familiar story by first alerting us to the

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There king Āyaraṃga lives, firm and capable, resembling Yama.  
 Vimalasūri, *Paūmacariyaṃ: āyariyasirivimalasūriviraiyaṃ. hindāṇuvāyasahiyaṃ*, ed. Hermann Jacobi, Varanasi: Prākṛta Grantha Parishad, 1962 (2nd ed.), vv. 27.5–6.  
*asti vaiṭḍhya kailāsanagayoraṃtarālagah*  
*deśo 'rddhabarbaro nāmajanmabhūr iva pāpmanaḥ*  
*māyūramālanagare tasya deśasya maṃḍane*  
*ātaraṃgatamo nāma mlecha rājo 'sti dāruṇaḥ*  
 There was a land between the Vaiṭḍhya and Kailāsa mountains;  
 Called the Ardha-barbara, birthplace of sin.  
 In the ornament of this land, the city of Māyūramāla  
 The fearful Ātaraṃgatama was king of the *mlecchas*.  
*Mahākāvya Sītācaritra*, vv. 1.30–1.31.

<sup>22</sup> *Mahākāvya Sītācaritra*, v. 4.194.

<sup>23</sup> The Sanskrit *Hanumaccaritra* is even recorded under the alternative title *Añjanācaritra*; Hari Damodar Velankar, *Jinaratnakosa: An Alphabetical Register of Jain Works and Authors*, Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Series Research Institute, 1944, p. 459.

presence of *satīs* within it and implicitly to think of the story from that perspective.

Yet when these *satī-kathās* reframe the narrative structure of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story to begin with Sītā's birth, they face the issue that Sītā's iconic *satī* moment only arrives at the very end. The *Paūma carīya* and its successors are far more interested in telling the story of Bhāmaṇḍala's birth and upbringing than of Sītā's, and since there seems to be a reluctance towards adding completely new material to the story itself, these *satī-kathās*, even in their ingenious reordering of the narrating entry points, are forced to tell the bulk of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story in relatively conventional ways.

The third wave of *satī-kathās* solves this issue by taking the unprecedented step of reframing the majority of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story as a subplot to Sītā's forest exile. This wave is headed by the mid-seventeenth century Braj Bhāṣā composition *Sītācarit* by Rāmcand Bālak. I have not found other works that employ the same radical innovation and it is of course possible that the idea is unique to Rāmcand Bālak, but seeing how the manuscript archives of Jain narrative literature in Braj Bhāṣā remain dramatically unexplored, we should assume that new discoveries are waiting.

The first instance of narrating in the *Sītācarit*, following an introductory series of benedictions and prayers, simply states that 'Having defeated Rāvaṇ, Rām came to Ayodhyā with Sītā' (SC.12).<sup>24</sup> From this beginning, it proceeds to detail how gossip spreads amongst the citizens of Ayodhyā, their complaints to Rām, and his decision to send Sītā into forest exile. He orders an army commander to take her to the forest on the pretext of going to a Jain temple, and as Sītā and the commander arrive in the forest, an initially bewildered Sītā responds with a stoic speech on the essence of *dharmā*, the bonds of *karman* that ensnare all living beings, and how enlightened beings accept all these things and remain steadfast on the course of good actions. And this, she tells the commander, is how a *satī* acts:

So this is the good nature of the *satī*;  
she never blames another,  
but endures the bonds of her own actions  
and the fruits that arise from them.<sup>25</sup>

Sītā's speech to the commander leaves no doubt about her quality as a *satī*. And when King Vajrajaṅgha later finds her alone in the forest and one of his servants

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24 *Rāvana kūṃ jīti rāma sītā lai binītā āe.*

25 *Tātaiṃ satī subhāva iha dosa na kāhu dehi / vaṃdhai apa krama bhogavai udai āi phala jehi; Sītācarit, v. 71.*

whispers that ‘this is a stained woman’ (SC.92),<sup>26</sup> Vajrajaṅgha retorts that she ‘is a great *satī*! The blessed who enjoys her *darśan* immediately reaches the further shore!’ (SC.93).<sup>27</sup> From Sītā’s speech to Vajrajaṅgha’s devotion, this opening sequence illustrates the essential doctrines of Jainism, the virtue of the *satī* in her embrace of these, and the benefits lesser Jains attain through devotion towards the *satī*. It is an effective encapsulation of the potentially central position of the *satī* in popular Jain practices, but also an operation of narrating that effectively transfocalizes the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story into an explicitly *satī*-oriented outlook.

Sītā eventually gives birth to her twin sons, Lavaṇ and Aṅkuś. When they reach young adulthood, they accidentally meet the wandering sage Nārad, who comments that they remind him of Rām and Lakṣmaṇ. Lavaṇ and Aṅkuś, unknowing of their actual parentage, wonder who these are, and Nārad obligingly sits down to tell them, more or less, the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* (SC.146–153). The episode is not new to the *Sītācarit*; it also appears in its self-appointed hypotext, Raviṣeṇa’s *Padma Purāṇa*,<sup>28</sup> where Nārad gives the twins a summary of the story so far. What is new in the *Sītācarit*, is that Rāmcand Bālak seizes on this narrating instance in Raviṣeṇa to embed the entirety of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story within it.

For the following 2000 verses, out of a roughly 2550 verse total, Nārad tells the twins that story, with a variety of minor and major additions, reductions and rephrasings that are unique to the *Sītācarit*. It also takes care to note that several of the women whom Rām and Lakṣmaṇ meet throughout their adventures, in their own ways, are *satīs* too.<sup>29</sup> When Nārad reaches the end of his story, we are back in the narrative present. As Nārad retreats, the *Sītācarit* resumes the narrative of Sītā’s forest exile, fire ordeal and final renunciation, ending on a note of veneration towards Sītā as a *satī* and leaving a mournful Rām to ‘go home’ (SC.2516).<sup>30</sup>

We may briefly consider how the *Sītācarit* narrates the fire ordeal sequence, where, in the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*, the bed of fire is through divine agency replaced with a royal throne. In the *Padma Purāṇa*,<sup>31</sup> Rām immediately responds by venerating the seated Sītā, asking her to leave any anger aside and to come home with him. Sītā, of course, responds by declaring that the time has come for her to

26 *E tau triyā kalāṃkita.*

27 *E satī yāṃ siradāra/ bhāgavaṃta isa darasa sauṃ lahai turata bhava pāra.*

28 *Jain Rāma Kathā, or, Padma Purāṇa* (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 2008), v. 102.

29 I cannot detail these modifications here, but a fairly expansive overview is given in Plau, ‘The Deeds of Sita’, 2018.

30 *Cale nija geha.*

31 Raviṣeṇa, *Jain Rāma Kathā, or, Padma Purāṇa*, vv. 105.61–70.

renunciate. In the *Sītācarit* (SC.2479–2487), however, Rām’s speech is moved and Sītā declares her decision to renounce without any prompting from him. The gods and *munis* sing her praises, joyful that ‘this great woman was in the world’.<sup>32</sup> Only after this praise does Rām enter with his speech. It is unaltered in essence from the *Padma Purāṇa*, yet simply appears out of touch coming after the more or less universal veneration that just followed. Sītā’s retort is almost shockingly direct—‘Only idiots are angry’<sup>33</sup>—and it sets the stage for another long speech on the same theme as her initial speech to the army commander at the very beginning. It even begins with a phrase (‘Who is the son, who the brother, the father?’)<sup>34</sup> that echoes one of the closing statements of that first speech (‘Who is the son, who brother, father?’).<sup>35</sup> It is a brilliant display of narrative bookending and it effectively highlights how the *Sītācarit* upholds the *satī* Sītā as an ideal of Jain conduct through which we are encouraged to understand the actions and decisions of the other characters of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story.

In this, the *Sītācarit* is a Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* that essentially is a *satī-kathā*. Rām, Lakṣmaṇ and Rāvaṇ’s status as *śalākāpuruṣas* is referenced, but never to any great length, and the stories of their former births and Rām and Lakṣmaṇ’s lives after Sītā’s renunciation and eventual death and ascension to divine status are all omitted. The *śalākāpuruṣa* superstructure is still there, but the *Sītācarit* clearly does not aim to instruct its audiences in the finer points of that structure. If anything, it presupposes that everyone already is familiar with it.<sup>36</sup> In its restructuring of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story as a subplot to be viewed through the lens of Sītā’s forest exile, the *Sītācarit* is perhaps the clearest example of a *satī-kathā* that draws on a familiar structure to weave an innovative narrative.

The *Sītācarit* was followed by a wave of Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* that exclusively told the story of Sītā’s forest exile and fire ordeal, completely omitting the rest of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story. One such is the undated *Sītā pacīsī*,<sup>37</sup> a short undated, anonymous composition that appears in a nineteenth-century manuscript and is

32 *Jaga maiṃ aha moṃī nārī*; SC.2482.

33 *Krodha karai so mūḍha hai*; SC.2488.

34 *Kuṇa veṭtau kuṇa bhāī vāpa*, SC.2489.

35 *Kūna veṭtau ko bhāī vāpa*; SC.75.

36 Similarly, there are references to Śreṇika and Gautama discussing matters in the ongoing narrative, though the narrative framework of Śreṇika telling the story to Gautama is never formally introduced. Rāmcand Bālak clearly assumed that his audiences were familiar with other Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*.

37 *Sītā pacīsī*, manuscript, 1862, 3673/1, Apabhraṃśa Sāhitya Akādamī, Jaipur.

written in a Braj Bhāṣā bordering on modern Hindī.<sup>38</sup> A short cycle of songs, it sets the tone with its very first line—‘Rām abandoned the faultless Sītā alone in the forest’<sup>39</sup>—and proceeds to give a narrative that is very similar to that of Sītā’s forest exile and fire ordeal in the *Sītācarit*. Yet Nārad’s story session with Lavaṇ and Aṅkuś is dropped and the focus turns exclusively to Sītā as a *satī*. As far as Genette’s notion of the transfocalization goes, the *Sītā pacīsī* may be its ultimate example amongst the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*. Rām and Lakṣmaṇ are here merely supporting characters to the main drama, and Rāvaṇ little more than a shadow on a past horizon. Though it is without a doubt a *satī-kathā*, one might indeed question whether it really is a *Rāmāyaṇa*.

As Sītā’s story as a *satī* here crystallizes, its ties with the rest of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *śalākāpuruṣas*, though always implied, grow ever fainter. And so we reach the final wave of the *satī-kathā* strand of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*, where the bond is severed entirely. Kelting<sup>40</sup> writes of the story of Añjanā, Hanumān’s mother, that the further it ‘gets from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the more it stresses her virtues as a *satī*’. And indeed, Añjanā the *satī*, Kelting shows, has now taken on a position in Jain popular storytelling practice where her roots within the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story are completely omitted. They are simply no longer relevant to her story. In a similar turn of events, I spoke with a practising Jain at the 20th Anniversary Jaina Studies Workshop at SOAS in 2018, who had heard Sītā’s name many times in popular hymns listing the names of great Jain *satīs*, but had never considered that this was ‘the Sītā’ of *Rāmāyaṇa* fame.

Fully detailing the afterlife of Sītā as a *satī* in modern Jain practice must be the task of future studies, and here we can only make a few attempts in that direction. One such is of course Danuta Stasik’s chapter in the present volume on Tulsī’s *Agni-parikṣā* and the controversy that followed in its wake. A much less visible modern Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* is the 2010 pamphlet *Sītā caritra*,<sup>41</sup> which I encountered in the library of the Vīr Sevā Mandir in Delhi. Unfortunately, no further information on the publication was available but that contained in the booklet itself. Its title page informs us that one thousand copies of this text were printed in Delhi on 1 April 2010, at the behest of Jaykumār Nīraj Jain, owner of

38 The Patan manuscript catalogue (Muni Jambūvijayajī, *Catalogue of the Manuscripts of Pāṭana Jain Bhaṇḍāras*, vol. 3, Ahmedabad: Sharadaben Chimanbhai Educational Research Centre, 1991, p. 525) refers to several short works with titles such as *Sītā sajjhāy* and *Sītā satīnī sajjhāy*, the *sajjhāy* being a particularly popular format of *satī* praise song. Further research may reveal whether these titles bear similarities to the *Sītā pacīsī*.

39 *Ara niradosa jyānakī raghupati nai choḍī vana mai yekālī*.

40 *Heroic Wives*, p. 66.

41 Elācārya Vasunandī, *Sītā caritra*, Delhi: Nirgrantha Granthamālā, 2010.

Delhi Sweets. The pamphlet was printed at the ‘holy occasion’ of the first anniversary of Vasunandī Jī Munirāj’s ascension to the position of ‘First Teacher’ (*elācārya*), one of the highest orders within the Digambara monkhood. It is also Elācārya Vasunandī who is credited as the ‘editor’ (*sampādak*) of the pamphlet’s text.<sup>42</sup> The attribution as ‘editor’, combined with the fact that the text is not listed amongst Elācārya Vasunandī’s authored works on his own webpages, indicate that the text may be gathered from lectures and storytelling sessions given by the Elācārya. This potentially differentiates the *Sītā caritra* from Tulsī Ācārya’s *Agni-parīkṣā*, in that it seemingly has a more oral origins than the latter. Unlike the *Agni-parīkṣā*’s relatively elaborate structure with eight sections, including a closing *praśasti* chapter, and its many instances of verse, Elācārya’s *Sītā caritra* is a short text of 41 pages, consisting of 19 brief prose sections interspersed with only a few songs and verses.<sup>43</sup>

The text itself gives a succinct Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* that clearly belongs to the *satī-kathā* branch. Like the anonymous *Mahākāvya Sītācaritra*, Elācārya’s begins by recounting the birth of Sītā and Bhāmaṇḍala in Mithilā, entirely skipping the stories of Bhāmaṇḍala’s former births. The entirety of the narrative from Rām, Lakṣmaṇ, and Sītā’s setting out from Ayodhyā up to and including their victorious return is covered in seven brief sections, where the narrative elements are mostly given very cursorily. For instance, Rāvaṇ’s setting out for his final battle and his death at the hands of Lakṣmaṇ all takes place in one brief paragraph. Throughout, the focus is on dialogue over action, with Rāvaṇ and Sītā’s conversation in the *vimāna* after her kidnapping stretching over several pages. As is by now familiar from other *satī-kathās*, the concluding scenes of Sītā’s forest exile and fire ordeal are given more space, and the exiled Sītā is even called ‘*satī Sītā*’. And like in Bālak’s *Sītācarit*, it is here Sītā, not Rām, who suggests that she should undergo a fire ordeal. As the ordeal passes successfully, the pamphlet ends with Sītā rejecting Rām’s entreaties and taking up renunciation. As in other *satī-kathās*, we learn no more of Rām and Lakṣmaṇ’s fates.

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42 Elācārya Vasunandī has a relatively active website ‘Vasunandiji Blogspot’ (*Vasunandiji Blogspot* (blog), accessed 24.08.2018, <http://vasunandiji.blogspot.com/>), yet little information is available apart from basic biographical data. Vasunandī was born in 1967 with the name Dinesh Jain in Dhaulpur, Rajasthan, and renunciated in 1979. His ascension to Elācārya status seems to have been a big public event, taking place in Delhi’s Green Park. In 2015, five years after the publication of the *Sītā caritra*, he attained the ultimate *ācārya*-title. As noted above, the website’s list of his many works does not include the *Sītā caritra*.

43 These include a song by Nyāmat Siṃh, a Jain poet and playwright of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Very little information is available on him. The other song is a brief, uncredited *caupāī* in Hindī.

Through both the *Agni Parīkṣā* and the 2010 pamphlet *Sītā caritra* runs a centuries-long current of *satī-kathā* storytelling, where Rām, Lakṣmaṇ and Rāvaṇ are abandoned to the margins of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* story while Sītā becomes its natural centre. As a final testament to this tradition, we may briefly consider a mural that can be found on the wall of a study alcove in the Baṛā Terāpanthiyā temple of Jaipur’s Old City, which is deemed by its trustees to be one of Jaipur’s oldest Jain temples. The mural was painted in 1957 by the artist Gopīrām, with additions by Mainābāi Sonī in 1975 and 1981, seems to have been commissioned by a group of women that met in the temple on Mondays. The mural’s marginal images give a panorama of scenes from the Jain *Rāmāyaṇa*, including Rām returning victorious from Laṅkā and the exiled Rām, Lakṣmaṇ and Sītā’s adventures in the forest. The mural’s two main images, however, are of Sītā before and after her ordeal by fire, divided by a *dohā* describing the event. In the uppermost image, portraying Sītā’s ultimate triumph as a royal throne has replaced the bed of fire, Sītā sits majestically at the mural’s centre. As a whole, the mural is a striking encapsulation of the *satī-kathās* shift of narrative gravity, away from the all-important superstructure of the *śalākāpuruṣas* towards the definite centring of Sītā, the *satī*, at the story’s core.

#### 4. Conclusion

The brief survey of the *satī-kathā* strand of Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* that I have given here is of course quite rudimentary. Research archives and, especially, temple libraries hold vast amounts of material that can contribute towards a better delineated and more precise understanding of their historical rise and dynamic evolution. What I would like to underline here, at this tentative stage, is again that we must be alert to the ways the processes of narrative rearrangement at work in these compositions, with their subtle shifts of emphasis, focus, and perspective, can amount to genuinely novel narratives. These *satī-kathās* are firmly Jain and they are for the most part certainly full-fledged *Rāmāyaṇas*, but in their act of drawing on a familiar superstructure to craft transfocalized, innovative narratives they are also distinct from the Purāṇic branch of Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* and they should be recognized as such. I suggest, as a step towards acknowledging this distinctive quality of the *satī-kathās*, that when we think of the ‘many *Rāmāyaṇas*’ perspective, we also spare a thought for the ‘many Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*’.

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