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## Sreekantan Nair's Rāvaṇa in *Laṅkālakṣmi*

Nearly two decades after Indian independence, an innovative Malayalam theatrical production by C.N. Sreekantan Nair (1928–1976) emerged, based on the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* of India's *Rāmāyaṇa* textual tradition. Nair earned his livelihood as a writer but devoted much of his energy to cultural activities in accord with his leftist political ideals. Later in life, he grew disillusioned with party politics that stymied effective governance and dedicated himself to enriching Malayalam drama by introducing modernist theatrical ideas, while holding fast to what he saw as Kerala's cultural ethos. Conceived, researched, and written during Nair's final two years of life, his *Laṅkālakṣmi* (*Lakshmi of Lanka*), the last of his trilogy on the *Rāmāyaṇa* story, first appeared on stage in 1976.<sup>1</sup>

*Laṅkālakṣmi*'s three acts are set in Laṅkā's assembly hall where Rāvaṇa, Mandodarī, the chief warriors, and court ministers debate about what lessons can be drawn from *rākṣasa* history to help repulse Rāma's imminent attack on the island. The prologue and epilogue of *Laṅkālakṣmi* reflect on the transience of wealth and glory, as epitomized by Lakṣmī's departure from Laṅkā, doing so through a philosophically monist view of the universe. Rāma never appears in the play; Sītā speaks only in the epilogue. Unlike texts that depict Rāvaṇa as driven by unbridled desire for pleasure, wealth and fame, Nair represents him as a patron of the arts and a monarch devoted to family and lineage. Unlike most *bhakti* texts which present the war through the victors' eyes, Nair focuses on the 'losers', especially Rāvaṇa.

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1 In 1961, Nair published his first play based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* story, *Kāñcana Sītā*, which draws on the *Uttarakāṇḍa* to explore how Sītā, Ūrmilā, and Rāma suffer due to his rigid interpretation of his *dharma* as a king. In 1975, he published *Sāketam* (another name for Ayodhyā), which draws from the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*. In 1976, Nair published *Laṅkālakṣmi*, which draws from the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*. Thus, the chronology of Nair's playwriting differs from the order in which the episodes appear in the story (e.g., Nair's first play deals with events in the sixth *kāṇḍa*). The Malayalam edition listed in the bibliography (C.N. Sreekantan Nair, *Nāṭakatrayam (Three Plays)*, Tiruvananthapuram: DC Books, 2001) contains all three plays.

## 1. From Politics to Organic Theatre

Even during his college days, Nair played a leadership role in local politics, in 1947 as secretary of All Travancore Students Congress and in 1948 as Vice-President of All India Students Congress. After graduation, he worked as a writer in various venues, editing weeklies, serving as chief editor of *Kerala Bhushanam's* daily edition, and publishing well-regarded Malayalam poetry. Later he worked as a District Information Officer for Kerala state. Toward the end of his life, he also started his own press. During much of this time, he was actively engaged with leftist politics aimed at enhancing social and economic equality in Kerala. Yet the many ideological disagreements and rivalries among leftist groups eventually left him discouraged about achieving the kind of change that he saw as necessary to reform society.

In 1960, Nair withdrew from politics and channeled his energies into building a Malayalam 'Little Theatre' movement. He organized one of the first Malayalam drama festivals, started a group titled Nava Rangam (New Theatre) for play-reading sessions, wrote scripts, and arranged theatre workshops. The main target of his criticism was Malayalam popular theatre of his day, much of which he saw as indebted to Victorian staging notions, filled with melodramatic plots, overly commercial in its inspiration, and lacking in engagement with contemporary life in Kerala.<sup>2</sup> The solution to these flaws, he argued, lay in what he called *tanatu* (indigenous, organic, or rooted) *nāṭaka vedi* (theatre).<sup>3</sup> K.S. Narayana Pillai, a scholar of Malayalam literature, voices scholarly consensus in

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<sup>2</sup> Nair articulated the flaws of popular Malayalam drama of his day and set out his vision for modern theatre in his collected essays: C.N. Sreekantan Nair, *Nāṭum nāṭakavum (Land and Theatre)*, Tiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Nair coined the Malayalam phrase to describe his envisioned Little Theatre Movement but later K.N. Panikkar's English translation, 'Theatre of Roots', gained currency outside Kerala. The Sangeet Natak Akademy in Delhi reified the phrase, using it to distance itself from colonial-era theatre, link actors to nationalist goals, and fund playwrights who drew on indigenous theatre (whether deeply or superficially). Nair used the phrase fluidly, but Delhi's patronage of 'roots theatre' led to the financial marginalization of playwrights who did not use indigenous theatrical forms during this period. See Rustom Bharucha, 'Government Policy: Anatomy of an Official Cultural Discourse', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27: 31/32 (August 1–8, 1992), pp. 1667–1676. Erin Mee also draws attention to Safdar Hashmi's objections to appropriating older theatrical genres since they often endorsed outdated social hierarchies; Erin Mee, *Theatre of Roots: Redirecting the Modern Indian Stage*, New York: Seagull Press, 2008, pp. 187–205.

crediting Nair with initiating 'significant changes in the concept of drama in Kerala'.<sup>4</sup>

After independence, many in the theatre world beyond Kerala were seeking an 'Indian' theatre. Certain regions of India—among which Kerala was pre-eminent—had long-standing performance traditions yet, 'Indian theatre' was identified as a national desideratum by elites in Delhi.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Nair focused on what he knew best: Malayalam theatre. In 1967, Nair and G. Sankara Pillai invited directors, actors, and theatre critics to a workshop to explore theatre that was 'rooted' in Kerala, an event which, in retrospect, was a turning point for theatre in Kerala.<sup>6</sup> Nair found modernism's critique of social institutions compelling, but rejected the claim that modernism was a universal form that transcended specific localities. Instead, Nair urged actors and directors to create a Malayalam theatre that grappled with the dilemmas of modern life while simultaneously rooting itself in speech, music, ritual, and performance conventions of Kerala.<sup>7</sup> He did so by writing (and urging others to write and perform) plays about current concerns in Kerala, including disbelief in ritual among youth, pointless violence stirred up

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4 Scholar and poet K. Satchidanandan identifies dramas by two playwrights, Nair and C.J. Thomas, as 'the first truly modernist plays in Malayalam'; K. Satchidanandan, 'Introduction', in C.N. Sreekantan Nair and Sarah Joseph, *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*, tr. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 14.

5 Ebrahim Alkazi, first Director of the National School of Drama (NSD), established a three-year training course for students in 1967, drawing largely on British curricula. Although he did not intend to exclude indigenous theatre, little curricular precedent existed for educating pupils in 'national' Indian theatre. The next director, B.V. Karanth, actively integrated it into NSD's curriculum in 1977: he organized traditional theatre festivals, added courses that gave 'exposure to a wider range of approaches and styles through visiting experts', and required that students be exposed 'to at least one traditional form'; Kirti Jain, 'National School of Drama', in *Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, ed. Anand Lal, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 305. By 1977, Nair and his playwriting Malayalam colleagues had been experimenting for a decade with indigenous theatrical forms.

6 The workshop, directed by Nair and G. Sankara Pillai (1930–1989), was held in Shastamkotta (Kollam District) and attended by students from all over Kerala. Sankara Pillai composed over 20 full-length plays, established the School of Drama at Calicut University in 1977, and served as its first director.

7 K.S. Narayana Pillai sums up Nair's vision: '[t]he theatre of Kerala could become creative and strong only if it had an identity of its own and, to achieve that, it had to be rooted in the native culture and associated with the artistic tradition of the land'; K.S. Narayana Pillai, 'C.N. Srikanthan Nair', *Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, p. 472. Kerala boasts one of India's richest set of performance traditions, including centuries-old Sanskrit drama (*kūṭiyāṭṭam*), martial dance-drama (*kathakali*), ritual possession (*teyyam*), and leather puppetry (*tōl pāva kūttu*).

by politicians, and the failure of the Communist government to eradicate elite privilege.

Nair pursued these issues in *Kali*, staged in Kottayam in 1967, which was immediately recognizable as a modernist work. Its plot unfolds abruptly, punctuated by acts of violence. Nair names his characters after ideology (Revolutionary), corporate entities (the People), appearance (Charming Woman, Boy, Lunatic), and occupations (Professor, Oracle, Mother, Helper). Verbal exchanges between characters are abstract, stilted, and schematic. Even Nair concedes the anomalous nature of the play, calling *Kali* an 'off-beat form, off track journey' with 'a mythological appearance'.<sup>8</sup> I summarize *Kali*'s plot:

In Act 1, Revolutionary discovers a *mūrti* (image of a deity used for worship) before whom people bow and chant mantras that sound like political slogans. While Lunatic sings, Revolutionary becomes possessed by the deity, who demands human sacrifice. From now on, Revolutionary takes on the role of Temple Oracle. As Act 2 opens, the *mūrti* has grown taller and dominates the stage. Young Man is slain as an offering while Lunatic sings. When Oracle orders Lunatic to be silent, he defies the order. Charming Woman then dances to his song. Many others also begin to dance. Suddenly, Oracle kills Lunatic, who has been standing with People. In Act 3, the even taller and more menacing *mūrti* is identified as Kali. Mother and Boy worship Kali, then Mother tells Boy that he should become Oracle, but Charming Woman tries to dissuade him. A masked figure abruptly enters and drags Boy away, as Mother calls him the 'next sacrificial goat'. Professor offers to sacrifice himself but instead the khaki-clad Oracle orders him to burn his books and he obeys. Lunatic's singing is heard (but he does not appear) as Helper announces over a loud speaker that Kali needs more blood. Everyone shouts that Oracle should be the next victim, but he points to Charming Woman. Refusing to submit, she shouts that Oracle has killed life, acting on behalf of death. Boy suddenly returns on stage and kills Oracle. As the other characters destroy the *mūrti*, the play ends.

The figure of Kali, familiar from the *Mahābhārata* incident in which he possesses Nala and compels him to gamble away his kingdom, exemplifies the multivocality of the play. To punish Kali's misdeeds, King Parikṣit has decreed that he must dwell only with gamblers, drunkards, murderers, and other evildoers. Moreover, Kali is also identified with Kalki, Lord of the final *yuga*, a time when people transgress *dharma* with pleasure.<sup>9</sup> In *Kali*, Revolutionary explains what Kali symbolizes within the context of Nair's play:

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<sup>8</sup> Cited in Abhilash Pillai, *C.N. Sreekantan Nair: Vision and Mission of a Theatre Activist*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007, p. 175.

<sup>9</sup> Vettam Mani, *Purāṇic Encyclopaedia*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979, p. 376.

The last incarnation of Vishnu is Kali. The last Nabi [Prophet] is also Kali. Kali is the last Christ. Kali has already achieved Plato's Republic, Thomas Moore's Utopia, Gandhi's Ramarajya, and Marx's Communism.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Kali is identified with figures from the three main religious communities of Kerala (Hindus, Muslims, Christians) and with secular leaders—all of whom promote utopian ideologies of radical change.<sup>11</sup> Nair has fashioned Kali to stand as a condensed representation of all those whose ideologies promise a better society but instead prove futile.<sup>12</sup> *Kali* conveys feelings of betrayal about utopian visions that were never actualized in society but led to loss of lives.<sup>13</sup>

In his detailed notes for producing *Kali*, Nair emphasizes that the staging should include 'organic theatre or rooted theatre' (*tanatu nāṭaka vedi*), and provides practical instruction for how cultural features of Kerala should be highlighted in it.<sup>14</sup> He specifies that the ritual drums played in Kerala temples should sound when the *mūrti* is found by Revolutionary; when it is destroyed at the play's end, Nair calls for the auspicious sound of the conch. Nair bases the character of Oracle on those who serve as mediums for goddess temples in Kerala. Nair also likens the worship of the Kali *mūrti* in the play to a ritual in north-cen-

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10 Pillai, *C.N. Sreekantan Nair: Vision*, p. 167.

11 Plato's *Republic* depicts an ideal Greek polity, More's *Utopia* preaches eradication of private property, and Gandhi idealizes a self-reliant Indian village. According to T.J. Nossiter (*Communism in Kerala: A Study in Political Adaptation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p. 1) leftists in Kerala created, except for the tiny Italian principality of San Marino, 'the first case of democratically elected communist government in the world'.

12 The play is so open-ended and depersonalized that 'Kali' could refer to radical figures or events ranging from the messiah, the French revolution, Stalin, Mao, to Gandhi who preached a radical ideology of non-violence.

13 Splits between leftist parties and sparring between state and centre made it difficult for leftist groups to implement changes in political practice. Leftist movements in India formed, split, coalesced, and shifted many times between 1930 and 1960. During WWII, some leftists supported Russia, others rallied behind Subhas Chandra Bose, while others postponed the independence struggle until the war's end. In 1949, after the Kerala Socialist Party split, one group joined the Revolutionary Socialist Party and established a strong Kerala branch. Nair worked for it under the leadership of N. Sreekandan Nair, who won a seat in the 1952 Lok Sabha elections. In 1957, Kerala elected a communist government which sought to dismantle the elite near-monopoly in landholding. Nehru thwarted that plan in 1959 by dismissing the ministry, dissolving the Assembly, and appointing a caretaker administration.

14 The character of Kali would be familiar to *kathakali* audiences from *Naḷacaritam*, an often-performed work among Malayalam speakers. Composed by Unnayi Variyar (1675–1716), it depicts how Kali possesses Nala and induces him to gamble.

tral Kerala which cleanses a village of sin. In an interview, Nair told Malayalam poet Katammanitta Ramakrishnan: 'I tried to project the indigenous character of Kerala or *Thanatu* of our rural areas'.<sup>15</sup> Nair's modernist play, thus, was grounded in its region.

The audience's reception at *Kali*'s opening night pushed Nair to think specifically about how to change the expectations of audiences at Malayalam theatrical productions. During the play's debut, the audience grew increasingly impatient, shouting insults so loudly that it was hard to hear the play's dialogue. The final act prompted more hostility in the audience than on stage.<sup>16</sup> *Kali*'s failure impelled Nair to analyse why audiences responded so negatively.<sup>17</sup> He realized that staging modernist plays was insufficient to achieve his goals; theatre workers also needed to create new expectations among spectators. Audiences in 1967 expected to watch conventionally depicted characters from popular drama; they lacked experience in decoding characters as symbols in modernist plays.<sup>18</sup> Eight years after *Kali*, Nair again deployed characters who represented ideological stances but did so within a familiar narrative framework that aided his audience in interpreting what occurred on stage.

Before writing *Laṅkālakṣmi*, Nair studied *Rāmāyaṇa* texts ranging from the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* and the anonymous c. fourteenth-century Sanskrit *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* (both of which had become available in Malayalam translation by the time that Nair wrote his script) to Michael Madhusudan Dutt's 1861 epic, *Meghanādavadha kāvya*, the first modern Bengali work to depict *rākṣasas* in

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15 In his *C.N. Sreekantan Nair: Vision* (p. 175), A. Pillai cites this quote from Nair's interview with Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan (1935–2008), a colleague who shared many of Nair's cultural commitments and was also active in leftist groups of Kerala. President of the Kerala State Library Council and the Progressive Writer's Association of Kerala, Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan began writing poems in the 1960s. In the estimation of P.P. Raveendran and G.S. Jayasree, he was among the most widely-read among modern Malayalam poets; P.P. Raveendran and G.S. Jayasree (eds), *In the Shade of the Sahyadri: Selections from Malayalam Poetry, Short Fiction, and Drama*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 26.

16 The description comes from A. Pillai, *C.N. Sreekantan Nair: Vision*, p. 172. The response to *Kali* echoes reception of the avant-garde *Rite of Spring* in 1913 with Igor Stravinsky's orchestral score and Nijinsky's choreography, where insults from the audience grew so loud that dancers could not hear the orchestra. A scuffle broke out, leading to a near-riot.

17 *Kali*'s script was published posthumously as *Kali: Nāṭakam*, Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Cooperative, 1977. My summary draws from it, A. Pillai, *C.N. Sreekantan Nair: Vision*, pp. 160–176, and correspondence with K. Satchidanandan.

18 The statement applies to all but a small number of enthusiasts of modern theatre in Kerala at that time.

unorthodox ways.<sup>19</sup> Given that *Laṅkālakṣmi* deals primarily with the war in Laṅkā, Nair gave particular attention to the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* in Eḷuttacchan's sixteenth-century, Malayalam *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇam*.<sup>20</sup> Nair's *Laṅkālakṣmi* thus took its place in what K. Satchidanandan, Malayalam poet and scholar, calls a long lineage of 'innovation, revision, and interrogation' in Malayalam *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.<sup>21</sup> Nair innovates in *Laṅkālakṣmi* by demythologizing *rākṣasas*, refraining from 'othering' *rākṣasas*, depicting them in familiar kinship relationships, and by revealing how *rākṣasas* perceive and define their own *dharma*.

## 2. Representations of *Rākṣasas* in *Laṅkālakṣmi*

The characters in *Laṅkālakṣmi*'s three acts exhibit no supernatural powers.<sup>22</sup> Instead of depicting *devas* (gods) and *rākṣasas* as performing miraculous deeds, Nair portrays both groups as separate communities, each sharing its own distinctive beliefs, values, and practices. That is, Nair 'demythologizes' both *rākṣasas*

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19 Dutt wrote: 'People here grumble that the sympathy of the Poet in Meghnad is with the Rakshasas. And that is the real truth. I despise Ram and his rabble, but the idea of Ravan elevates and kindles my imagination. He was a grand fellow', cited in Clinton Seely, 'The Raja's New Clothes: Redressing Rāvaṇa', in *Meghanādavadha Kāvya*, in *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991, p. 137.

20 'Eḷuttacchan' was originally a term for a Malayalam teacher of village children from *jātis* such as the Nāyars. Eḷuttacchan drew upon the Sanskrit *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, but adapted it to Malayalam literary conventions, such as endowing the text with a parrot translator in keeping with the literary genre of *kili-pāṭṭu* (parrot songs). Rich Freeman ('Genre and Society: The Literary Culture of Premodern Kerala', in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 480) notes that Eḷuttacchan's text spread 'with a phenomenal popularity in manuscript form from one end of Kerala to the other in Nāyar and other middle-caste homes' and became the classical Malayalam rendition of the story. In many Hindu households of Kerala, it is recited daily during the month of Karkadakam (July-August).

21 Satchidanandan, 'Introduction', p. 5–6. The oldest extant retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story in Malayalam (c. 12th century), the *Rāmacaritam*, retells the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, the same *kāṇḍa* Nair chose for *Laṅkālakṣmi*.

22 In many *bhakti* tellings of the story, when Rāma kills foes, they attain salvation, so their death is a triumph. In contrast, since *Laṅkālakṣmi* lacks creatures with supernatural powers, Rāvaṇa's departure for his final battle with Rāma, when he knows with certainty that he will die, is a deeply tragic moment.

and deities.<sup>23</sup> For example, when monkeys slain earlier in the war later return to life, a character explains that it is not a miracle but the work of a physician with knowledge of the healing qualities of certain herbs (II: 221–222).<sup>24</sup> By giving rational explanations for seemingly supernatural deeds in the plot, Nair depicts *rākṣasas* and deities not as those with miraculous powers but as a community among multiple communities, each of which exhibits its own ideals and conventional behaviour.

Second, Nair de-exoticizes the *rākṣasas* by situating them in kinship relations, the basis for human belonging and identity in Hindu culture. In *Laṅkālakṣmi*, Nair portrays four generations of warriors, all related by blood, in Rāvaṇa's court. The oldest generation of *rākṣasas* (Mālyavān, Sumālī, and Mālī) founded the dynasty but only Mālyavān remains alive, serving as the court's elder statesman. His son and Sumālī's sons, Prahasta (army commander) and Supārśva (king's advisor), form the second-oldest generation and play key roles in court. Rāvaṇa, Kumbhakarna, and Vibhīṣaṇa represent the second-to-youngest generation.<sup>25</sup> Rāvaṇa's sons (Indrajīt and Atikāya) and Kumbhakarna's sons (Kumbha and Nikumbha) lead the youngest generation. By filling Rāvaṇa's court with his own relatives, Nair stresses kinship solidarity among the *rākṣasas*, thus presenting them as like humans in valuing blood ties.

Moreover, Nair refrains from essentializing the *rākṣasas*. Rather than portray Rāvaṇa as 'the' *rākṣasa* and others as nearly indistinguishable fighters in war, Nair crafts the distinctive character of both the king and each of his chief

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23 Other Indian self-declared modern writers have also demythologized characters from Indian epics. S.L. Bhyrappa, a Kannada writer who retold the *Mahābhārata* in the form of a novel, acknowledges presenting mythological characters with only human abilities, stating: 'I was aware all along that I was not giving exact copies of the characters of the original Mahabharata, but only the different facets and forms of human nature and human relationships'. See S.L. Bhyrappa, *Parva: A Tale of War, Peace, Love, Death, God and Man*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994, p. viii.

24 An English translation of *Laṅkālakṣmi* appeared serially in *Samyukta: A Journal of Women's Studies*: Act 1, tr. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, vol. 1, no. 2 (July 2002), pp. 196–214; Act 2, tr. B.S. Bini, vol. 3, no. 1 (January 2003), pp. 219–231; Act 3, tr. B.S. Bini, vol. 4, no. 1 (January 2004), pp. 213–224. When I cite from or refer to the translation, the act and page number appear in the text in parentheses immediately afterwards.

25 For *rākṣasa* kinship, see Mani, *Purāṇic Encyclopaedia*, pp. 435, 901, 906 (*rākṣasa* genealogies); Robert P. Goldman, Sally Sutherland Goldman and Barend A. van Nooten (tr.), *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki. An Epic of Ancient India. Volume VI. Yuddhakāṇḍa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, pp. 1553–1556 (glossary), and Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman (tr.), *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki. An Epic of Ancient India. Volume VII. Uttarakāṇḍa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 1403–1405 (family trees).

warriors by having them articulate differing views on matters of warfare and *rākṣasa* history in court debates. In fact, Nair mined older sources to match the speeches of specific *rākṣasas* to their ancestry, past deeds, and martial styles.<sup>26</sup> For example, Kumbhakarna's huge size leads him to refuse offers for troops to join him in battle, leaving him alone to fight Rāma's entire army. In court debates, Supārśva raises suspicions about the motives of the other *rākṣasas* but laments that he lacks the creativity to identify solutions to problems. In a similar manner, each *rākṣasa* plays an individual role in debate and war, rather than in just one in a mass of *rākṣasas*.

One major division between those members of Rāvaṇa's court derives from age. Rāvaṇa and older *rākṣasas* express pride in Laṅkā's military ability, pointing to its heroic warriors, strong forts, protective moats, effective weapons, and long record of victory in war. Indrajīt, Rāvaṇa's favourite son, articulates the views of younger *rākṣasas* when he urges elders to stop recalling past victories and prepare to cope with new battle strategies because, he warns, war has changed. It no longer consists of one-to-one duels between champion warriors because now military tacticians also employ psychology and trickery to demoralize foes.<sup>27</sup> Although his elders despise such tactics, they continue to show respect to Indrajīt because they know that, whatever his views on battle tactics, he is brave, loyal, and willing to risk his life for Laṅkā.

In contrast, Nair depicts Rāvaṇa's brother, Vibhīṣaṇa, as a traitor to *rākṣasa-dharma*. When Rāvaṇa offers him the coveted honour of leading the troops into battle, Vibhīṣaṇa turns it down, insisting that Laṅkā cannot defeat Rāma because he possesses an 'invisible aura of unconquerable strength' (I: 209).<sup>28</sup> Instead, Vibhīṣaṇa tells Rāvaṇa that he should offer to return Sītā to Rāma before the war commences. When Rāvaṇa refuses the idea as insulting to his royal dignity, Vibhīṣaṇa vows to leave Laṅkā and requests the customary permission to depart.

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<sup>26</sup> Nair refused to let his carefully researched scripts be modified without his permission. It was unusual since, at that time, directors often altered scripts and actors added topical references; A. Pillai, *C.N. Sreekantan Nair: Vision*, 2007, p. 195.

<sup>27</sup> Indrajīt's military strategies stress efficacy. He wanted Rāvaṇa to attack Rāma's forces as they crossed the causeway, so it would be easy to pick them off. He also advises Prahasta to kill Sītā and show her dead body to Rāma's army to sap their will to fight. Later, he notes that Vibhīṣaṇa's alliance with Rāma is part of a recurrent pattern: 'It is Rama's strategy to befriend the younger brother to fight against the elder one. The weak one can be kept in obedient servitude as a dependent chieftain' (II: 222).

<sup>28</sup> *Pariveśom*, translated here as 'aura', denotes a positive external manifestation of an inner quality, alluding here to a visible manifestation of Rāma's inner power. The term signals an inner greatness, described in *Purāṇas* as radiating light that glows from a great ascetic or king. I thank Rizio Yohannan Raj for clarifying its nuance here.

Rāvaṇa accuses him of betraying his country, but Indrajīt goes further, demanding that his uncle be killed on the spot. Unwilling to oversee his brother's murder, Rāvaṇa orders Vibhīṣaṇa to leave at once, while the other *rākṣasas* denigrate him as a coward and turncoat.

Vibhīṣaṇa's transgression of *dharma* leads to a debate about *rākṣasa-dharma* in the realm of intimate male-female relations, since Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā has led to war. Supārśva asks if mixing *rākṣasa* blood with non-*rākṣasa* blood weakens the *rākṣasa* lineage. Indrajīt responds that, on the contrary, Mālyavān, Sumālī, and Mālī were offspring of a union between a *rākṣasa* father and *gandharva* mother. Rāvaṇa adds that his sons begotten on non-*rākṣasīs* in his harem have fought bravely for Laṅkā in war.<sup>29</sup> Thus, all agree that *rākṣasa-dharma* allows males to move outside their lineage to marry females from other groups (unlike humans who are enjoined to marry within their social rank).

Nikumbha defines *rākṣasa-dharma* in this way: 'Whenever one sees beauty, taking it with or without force is the dharma of rakshasas' (I: 202). Rāvaṇa agrees, adding that '[a]nything which is rare in the three worlds should belong to Lanka'.<sup>30</sup> He declares that he abducted Sītā as the 'perfection of beauty', just he seized Kubera's Puṣpaka Vimāna (a beautifully ornamented chariot that flies through the air). Rāvaṇa's love of beauty has also impelled him to use his war booty to enhance Laṅkā's grandeur. He declares, 'I am a lover of all rare and beautiful objects. All things of beauty this Ravana will win. They will adorn Lanka and will be a lasting fortune for the clan of rakshasas' (I: 207).<sup>31</sup> Since *rākṣasa-dharma* entails taking what is rare and precious, Rāvaṇa claims that abducting Sītā fulfills his *rākṣasa-dharma*.

### 3. Shared Narratives and Doubt

Despite their distinctive strengths and opinions, the play's *rākṣasas* share knowledge of two central narratives about their lineage. The first narrative tells of how it lost its honour by fleeing from battle. That was long ago, when Mālī, Sumālī, and Mālyavān recklessly attacked Indra, king of the Vedic gods. At that time, the

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29 He refers to *apsarases*, celestial female dancers, and forest spirits in his harem.

30 He does, however, concede that one reason for abducting Sītā was his own passion for her.

31 For example, Rāvaṇa had Maya (Mandodarī's father) construct a building with a golden dome visible from all over Laṅkā. When the dome Maya built was damaged during the fire set by Hanumān, Rāvaṇa ordered it rebuilt so tall that its glow would radiate across the southern seas, attracting attention to his capital city.

three brothers assumed that the gods did not know of their plan to attack heaven, so the brothers did not expect Viṣṇu to come to Indra's aid, but Indra had learned of the plan and decided to pre-empt it by enlisting Viṣṇu on his side. When the *rākṣasa* attack came, Viṣṇu immediately arrived and killed Mālī on the spot. Terrified, Sumālī and Mālyavān fled for refuge in the netherworld, where Sumālī died. With hindsight, Mālyavān realizes that the attack was a catastrophe. He sadly recalls that before the attack, he had reigned happily, flanked with a brother on each side of his throne. He laments, 'At the end of that heroic journey spotted with massacre, demolition and conquests, total destruction awaited us; a fall so absolute!' (III: 214). The narrative shows that action lacking forethought leads to death, flight, and shame for oneself and one's lineage.

The second narrative, a sequel, recounts how Rāvaṇa restored the *rākṣasas'* honour. Nair's speech by Rāvaṇa about restoring the honour of his lineage employs vertical imagery and the 'royal we' to describe his rise from the nadir of his life to Rāvaṇa's rule over the cosmos:

We had walked from hidden valleys to the hills. We have trodden earth, we have tramped over rocks, we have triumphed, we have climbed. We climbed and climbed to every mountain peak, and when we arrived at the summit, we saw it was difficult to climb further; but we grasped at the stars, we tramped among the spheres, still climbing. And as we ascended, we raised up a family that had been destroyed.<sup>32</sup>

Many *rākṣasas* view Rāvaṇa as saviour of the lineage. The second narrative suggests that valour and persistence on behalf of one's lineage earn victory, fame, and prosperity for all *rākṣasas*.

By the middle of *Laṅkālakṣmi*'s second act, however, Rāvaṇa and his court come to realize that neither of the two shared narratives can guide them in their battle with Rāma. Like their three reckless *rākṣasa* ancestors (Mālī, Sumālī, and Mālyavān) who attacked heaven and were defeated by Viṣṇu, Rāvaṇa recklessly abducted Sītā, wife of Viṣṇu's avatar. And despite Rāvaṇa's harsh self-mortification, which led to his rule over the three worlds, his arrogance led to a foolish error: he neglected to request invincibility from lowly humans, as he had done for deities and *rākṣasas*. And, thus, the tide of the war turns toward Laṅkā's defeat.

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<sup>32</sup> For this quote, I have used Clifford Hospital's translation of Rāvaṇa's speech because it so effectively replicates the triumphant momentum of the Malayalam original. Clifford Hospital, 'Rāvaṇa as Tragic Hero: C.N. Srikantan Nayar's *Laṅkālakṣmi*, in *Rāmāyaṇa and Rāmāyaṇas*, ed. Monika Thiel-Horstmann, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1991, pp. 92–93.

Now, the audience sees that *Laṅkālakṣmi*'s prologue has foreshadowed the play's dramatic arc. The prologue began with Hanumān's arrival in Laṅkā, where he encountered a *rākṣasī* guarding the entry gate to Laṅkā and attempted to enter. When she blocked his path, Hanumān knocked her onto the ground. She quickly regained her original divine form and told him that she is Goddess of Good Fortune (Sanskrit, Lakṣmī), who was cursed to be reborn as a *rākṣasī* guardian in Laṅkā. The curse was partly mitigated when a Brahmin blessed her and declared that the curse would end when a monkey hit her. Now that it has ended, in the prologue, she leaves Laṅkā taking good fortune with her, thereby signaling that Laṅkā's downturn in fortune will begin.

In Act I, the *rākṣasas* boasted of unsurpassed military resources as they prepared confidently for war but, in Act 2, nearly all Laṅkā's famed warriors are slain in battle. By Act 3, Rāvaṇa realizes that defeat is inevitable. He sees that his former fame, wealth, and glory was transient.<sup>33</sup> Rāvaṇa, Mandodarī, his brothers, sons, and other valiant warriors will all die by the play's end, as in a Shakespearean tragedy.<sup>34</sup>

The most radical transformation in *Laṅkālakṣmi* is seemingly invincible Rāvaṇa turning into someone overwhelmed by self-doubt. Due to his boon of invincibility from the *rākṣasas* and deities, he rarely harboured any questions about his abilities in the past. His first crisis results when his trusted military commander, Prahasta, is slain and Rāvaṇa rushes into battle to avenge his death. Although Rāvaṇa recently saved Vibhīṣaṇa from death at Indrajit's hand before he left Laṅkā, when Rāvaṇa enters the battle, Vibhīṣaṇa launches a potent missile directly at him. Rāvaṇa parries the missile, but the attack forces him to accept that his traitorous brother will now use any means to guarantee Rāma's victory. Uncharacteristically, Rāvaṇa now wonders if his current ill fortune might result from a curse that his heads would be smashed, uttered after Rāvaṇa sexually assaulted Nalakūbara's fiancée, Rambhā. He pushes the idea aside, denying the possibility that the consequences of his past deeds might now come to fruition, and clings to the hope that he has suffered only a temporary setback.

To regain the upper hand in the war, he then awakens Kumbhakarna, his humongous brother who usually sleeps for six months at a time. As soon as he has eaten mountains of food and drink, he insists on entering the battlefield alone, without a *rākṣasa* army to support him. Before leaving for war, the huge brother states: 'I promise now in this court, when Kumbhakarna is alive, you don't have to fear from anybody' (II: 227). Kumbhakarna spreads terror in battle,

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33 The play takes its name from Lakṣmī, as Gatekeeper in the prologue and as Goddess Sītā in the epilogue.

34 Only the *rākṣasas* that left Laṅkā, Vibhīṣaṇa and his advisors, survive the war.

dueling first with Lakṣmaṇa and then single-handedly mowing down battalions of monkeys, leaving those remaining ready to flee for their lives. Even when his limbs are cut off, he continues to fight but eventually even he succumbs to his wounds. Rāvaṇa laments that he and Kumbhakarna were so close that his loss makes Rāvaṇa feel as if half his body is gone.

Characteristically, Supārśva's words raise a doubt that disturbs Rāvaṇa, thereby adding salt to the king's wounds. Referring to the boons that Rāvaṇa won by performing tapas, Supārśva declares, 'those immense gifts were spent in annexing countries and gaining wealth and pleasures. When you finally come to know that all those are frivolous and futile—then restlessness creeps in' (II: 229). Essentially, Supārśva implies that Rāvaṇa wasted his precious boons by using them to acquire things that do not last. Stung by his words, Rāvaṇa begins to wonder if his life has been a meaningless waste. At this point, when most of Laṅkā's chief warriors have died, Indrajīt enters the court and entreats his father to let him lead the troops.

Eager to evade his increasing doubts, Rāvaṇa quickly takes refuge in the delusion that Indrajīt can single-handedly turn the tide of the war. The father glorifies his son's war prowess, shouting, 'Let the auspicious war cries pierce the four directions!' and telling Indrajīt, 'The ocean of war is a small estuary for you. Let the cosmos marvel at your prowess' (II: 231). Indrajīt fights fiercely and cleverly but after some time, he too is slain. Now Rāvaṇa recalls another curse upon him: Vedavatī was performing tapas to win Viṣṇu as husband when Rāvaṇa sexually assaulted her. She cursed Rāvaṇa that Viṣṇu would ruin him. Rāvaṇa wonders if Vedavatī has taken birth as Sītā and Viṣṇu as Rāma.<sup>35</sup> Now overcome by doubt, Rāvaṇa asks Mandodarī if his life has been futile. She replies that she vehemently disagrees with that view.

#### 4. From Sacrifice to Cosmic Monism

Although Mandodarī does not believe that all is lost, her close observations of Rāvaṇa lead her to suspect that he has lost some of his energy and self-confidence, so she encourages him to conduct a fire sacrifice (*homa*) to Śiva. She urges him to complete the *homa* so he will win the war and warns that, if he does not, he will be defeated. She promises that, after the ritual is done, she will anoint his forehead with auspicious vermilion before he goes into battle. Once again, Rāvaṇa gains hope. He lights the sacrificial fire and chants a Sanskrit

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<sup>35</sup> When Rāvaṇa raped Vedavatī, she vowed to cause his death in a future rebirth and sacrificed her life by entering a fire.

hymn that he has composed for Śiva, which lauds the deity's power. Examining textual precedents for this sacrificial rite that can produce the sacrifice special powers will show how Nair has transformed it.

In the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, Indrajīt, not Rāvaṇa, performed a special sacrifice to gain powers of illusion to deploy in the war. Indrajīt tried to dishearten the monkey army by creating an illusory double of Sītā, which was then killed in front of the monkeys. At first alarmed, they rally when Vibhīṣaṇa explained that it was only a trick. Then Indrajīt went to the Nikumbhilā grove to conduct a sacrificial ritual that will win him invincibility in combat (VI.71.22). Vibhīṣaṇa warned Rāma that Indrajīt must be slain before he completed the sacrifice; otherwise it would be impossible to defeat him. Rāma ordered Lakṣmaṇa to the grove and, when he arrived, Indrajīt was in the middle of conducting his ritual. Lakṣmaṇa challenged the *rākṣasa* to a duel and slayed him, leaving the sacrifice incomplete and, hence, useless (VI.78.33).

In the Sanskrit *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, in contrast, the ritual to gain special powers in battle was undertaken by Rāvaṇa, Indrajīt's father. In that text, Rāvaṇa's guru gave the king a mantra and told him that, if he performed a *homa* without interruption, a chariot, bow, and arrows would emerge from the fire; with them Rāvaṇa would defeat Rāma.<sup>36</sup> To avoid interruption, Rāvaṇa dug out a secret sacrificial hall beneath the palace, and began the *homa*. Vibhīṣaṇa saw its smoke emerging and warned Rāma that the ritual was taking place and would have to be stopped or Rāvaṇa would gain invincible power. Sugrīva, Hanumān, Aṅgada and other monkeys were sent to the hall to distract Rāvaṇa from the sacrifice. They went there but failed to break his concentration. Aṅgada then went to the women's quarters of the palace, dragged Mandodarī by the hair to the underground hall where Rāvaṇa was chanting, and ripped off the jewelled belt that bound her clothing. Disrobed, she lambasts Rāvaṇa as shameless for not coming to his wife's rescue. Now aware of her anger, he stopped the ritual and attacked Aṅgada with his sword. After interrupting the ritual, the monkeys then fled back to Rāma's camp.<sup>37</sup>

Eḷuttacchan's Malayalam retelling of the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* increases the magnitude of the episode's drama by depicting ten crores of monkeys accompa-

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<sup>36</sup> V. Raghavan expresses surprise that Rāvaṇa's guru in the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* is Śukrācārya, guru of the *asuras*, because he is 'completely out of the picture in Valmiki or elsewhere'; V. Raghavan, *Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇas Other than Vālmīki's: The Adbhuta, Adhyātma, and Ānanda Rāmāyaṇas*, Chennai: Dr. V. Raghavan Centre for Performing Arts, 1998, p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> Lala Baij Nath (tr.), *The Adhyātma Ramayana*, Allahabad: The Panini Office, 1913, pp. 161–162.

nying Hanumān and Aṅgada to disrupt Rāvaṇa's *homa*. Aṅgada crushes the boulder that blocks the cavern and enters, seeing Rāvaṇa's eyes closed in meditation. The monkeys now rush in, extinguish the Vedic fire, and strike Rāvaṇa with the oblation ladle but he ignores the commotion. When monkeys remove the queen's jewellery and her clothing falls to the ground, she cries, 'What did I do to deserve this insult?' and declares, 'A husband should protect his wife, yet foes torment me while you sit idly by, no longer desiring wife or honor'.<sup>38</sup> Realizing what is occurring, Rāvaṇa chases the monkeys away in fury. The Malayalam account of ten crores of monkeys wrecking the *homa* reads almost like a spoof of stories about *rākṣasas* polluting fire sacrifices.<sup>39</sup>

Nair's rendition is less dramatic but far more harrowing. Only Aṅgada, crown prince of the monkeys, finds the hidden door to the palace. The sound of him entering draws Mandodarī away from Rāvaṇa's *homa* to investigate. Seeing Mandodarī alone, Aṅgada rushes over and threatens her. Horrified, she demands to know whether Rāma ordered him to insult her. When he replies that, in war, a soldier must destroy all chastity in the foe's land, she takes her own life with her dagger. Aṅgada's matter-of-fact justification for raping a dignified and elderly queen illustrates clearly how war degrades all its participants. Back at the ritual hall, when Rāvaṇa recognizes enemy voices, he realizes that it will be impossible to finish his *homa*. He dons his armour, Mālyavān anoints him with Mandodarī's blood, and the king goes to meet his death. Earlier Rāvaṇa recalled how he raped two women; now a monkey has raped his wife.

After Act 3 ends with Mandodarī's suicide and Rāvaṇa's departure for war, the epilogue, which follows it, serves as a commentary on the entire play. Structurally, the epilogue is akin to the prologue: both feature a dialogue between Hanumān and a goddess. Yet, the identity and characteristics of the goddess differ. When the *rākṣasī* gatekeeper recovers her true form as Goddess Lakṣmī, she departs, along with good fortune. In contrast, Sītā has remained in Laṅkā throughout the war and expresses her feelings of identification with those who suffered during it. She articulates her close link to the war by defining herself as both a witness to the war as well as its cause. Indeed, she has watched an entire era's destruction. Remarking that the spilled blood of war has washed away

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38 Reade Wood (tr.), *The Adhyatma Ramayana Translated from the Original Malayalam*, Cochin: Printers Castle, 1998, pp. 151–152.

39 Eḷuttacchan's account evokes the Purāṇic story of Śiva commanding Vīrabhadra to pollute and wreck Dakṣa's Vedic sacrifice because he refused to invite his son-in-law Śiva to the event. Mandodarī's disrobing and Draupadī's disrobing both occurred when a male sought to humiliate another male foe by removing his wife's clothing.

Laṅkā's sins, Hanumān asks Sītā to forgive Laṅkā. She replies that she has already done so and now reveals her true nature to Hanumān.

Declaring, 'I feel Lanka has become a part of myself and I an element of Lanka' (III: 223), Sītā conveys that she perceives no difference between herself and Laṅkā. This philosophical statement echoes the central premise of Advaita Vedānta, namely that the substratum of the universe (*brahman*) and the divine essence in all creatures (*ātman*) are non-different. Her words lead Hanumān to realize that the Goddess exists in all entities as the underlying divine essence of the universe and that she abides in them all. Reverently, he tells her that he sees in her 'the fall and rise of aeons', echoing Arjuna's wonder at Kṛṣṇa's theophany in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. As Hanumān asks to pray at her feet and 'spend the rest of my life in tranquil serenity', a play about war ends with a request for eternal peace (III: 224).

## 5. Conclusions

Nair's *Laṅkālakṣmi* innovates in multiple ways. At the level of plot and characterization, the play recounts the war in Laṅkā differently from both the epic account in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* and devotional tellings by authors as far apart as Kampan in Tamil and Tulsīdās in Hindi by presenting events almost entirely from the perspectives of the *rākṣasas*. Some individual *rākṣasa* warriors possess a three dimensionality rarely encountered in any other retellings. Although Indra-jīt, Kumbhakarna, and Vibhīṣaṇa are usually represented in compelling ways in other retellings of the narrative, even minor *rākṣasas* such as Supārśva and Prabhasta come across as full-bodied characters, while Mālyavān stands out as a cautious statesman willing to disagree with Rāvaṇa despite the king's anger when criticized. Nair does not leave Mandodarī as a background character, instead revealing how astutely she encourages her husband's unique talents, while empowering him when he feels that his life has been wasted. Nair succeeds in creating a *Rāmāyaṇa* play with an absent Rāma, a hard feat to accomplish. Most impressive, Nair has presented Sītā simultaneously as the human wife of Rāma subject to abduction and the Great Goddess who underlies the cosmos, all in the play's epilogue.

*Laṅkālakṣmi* delves into some of the same issues as Nair's earlier experimental play, *Kali*, but succeeds in grappling with those issues in a framework that makes them accessible to his audience. Both explore the dissatisfaction of youth with ritual practices: the *mūrti* in *Kali* symbolized how ritual could compel submission to abstract notions that limit thought; the failure of Rāvaṇa's *homa* reveals the inadequacy of ritual prescriptions to save one from death in battle. *Kali* portrayed how young people were pressured to sacrifice their lives for

ideology, while *Laṅkālakṣmi* raises ethical questions about the slaying of young warriors because Rāvaṇa abducted Sītā. *Kali* identifies its main character with all those who promise a utopian society but fail to deliver it; *Laṅkālakṣmi* portrays a monarch who gained power through conquest, looting, and abduction but deludes himself that he is virtuous because he patronizes art and beauty. Nair rejected popular Malayalam melodrama for ignoring the dilemmas of modern Kerala. *Kali* dealt with them in a way that proved opaque to its audience but *Laṅkālakṣmi* grapples with those dilemmas by placing them in the context of an already familiar narrative. Nair's Indrajīt shares views with many leftist youths in Kerala who condemned their elders for clinging to outmoded views rather than facing up to new ways of thinking.

*Laṅkālakṣmi* has been performed multiple times since its debut in 1976 and is required reading for many studying Malayalam literature. Prominent theatre workers in Kerala rank it one of the most eloquent and compelling modern plays in Malayalam. The production in which thespian Murali (Muraleedharan Pillai) played Rāvaṇa for Natyagriham is, even today, remembered as a masterpiece starring a master actor. The text was chosen as a script for intensive study at the University of Calicut's School of Drama in Thrissur, Kerala; recently a reunion of its alumni included a read-through of the play. Abhilash Pillai played the role of Indrajīt in a 1987 production directed by Krishnan Namboodiri. In 1994, Pillai then directed *Laṅkālakṣmi* (translated from Malayalam into Hindi by Sree Janardanan) at the National School of Drama, Delhi. Nair's play will probably be performed long into the future.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Look on YouTube for excerpts from recent productions of *Laṅkālakṣmi*. The one by Lokadharmi (deeply reflective of symbols, colours, and rituals from Kerala) includes striking costumes, scene design, and oratory, all aspects that Nair considered crucial to modern theatre and emphasized at workshops.

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