

FOREWORD

THE *Rāmāyaṇa* OF Vālmīki has inspired, illuminated, entertained, and deeply moved countless generations of people in a great many countries in the world. Perhaps even more importantly, it has induced creativity in an enormous variety of fields—from literature, ethics, painting, design and sculpture to music, dancing, theatre, shadow plays and—now—cinema. It has also lightened up the lives of many hundreds of millions of children by stories that make one think and argue while being cheered and amused, as it did me when I first encountered the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* as a restless boy looking for intellectual engagement as well as fun. It is, therefore, with some well-grounded anxiety that I welcome this opportunity to say a few words in presenting, in so distinguished a series of Sanskrit classics, this excellent translation, by ROBERT GOLDMAN, of one of the great books of the world.

What Is It About?

I will not try to summarize the book, which consists of a narrative poem of around 50,000 lines, arranged in seven chapters, mixing credible events with incredible actions, and combining indisputable concerns with unusual priorities. This is not so much because a summary cannot be produced, but because many different summaries can be assembled, with a variety of concentrations and slants, each of some interest of its own. To give an example of a possible summary, it can be said that this is an epic poem in which a famous queen from a country is abducted by the

king of a close-by island, followed by the invasion of the island from the mainland, through which the queen is rescued. Thus stated, a European reader might well imagine that I am talking about the “Iliad,” but it fits the *Rāmāyaṇa* as well. As I write this Foreword from a little place next to what the Italians claim was Circe’s abode (now called San Felice Circeo), and as I look at the hills so well described by Homer in the “Odyssey,” other comparisons between Homer and Vālmīki suggest themselves. But the two stories are radically dissimilar in many other respects, which make the two epics so very different. It is not easy to decide on what features of a narrative a summary should choose to focus.

Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* was presented as poetry or *kāvya*, in contrast with its twin—and also hugely famous—epic, *Mahābhārata*, which is fashioned as traditional history or *itihāsa* (though the claims of *Mahābhārata* to historical veracity could also be radically doubted). The *Rāmāyaṇa* by Vālmīki, who is often described as the earliest poet (*ādikavi*), consists of a collection of stories told in poetry—with a variety of anecdotes woven around a principal narrative. Even though I will not attempt a summary, nevertheless I have to take note, in writing this Foreword, of the fact that an uninitiated reader may demand some clues as to what all the stir is about. So here is a rapid—in fact a vulgarly super-rapid—review, not pretending to be, in any way, a synopsis or a precis or an abstract.

Rāma is the eldest son of the honorable and popular king, Daśaratha, who rules over the kingdom of Kosala in east central India, with its capital in the beautiful and walled

city of Ayodhyā. While the just and noble Rāma is taken to be the legitimate heir to the throne, the aging Daśaratha makes an oddly exacting promise to his younger and scheming wife, Kaikeyī, the mother of two of Daśaratha's four sons. The promise is to banish Rāma from the kingdom, with the throne going to Kaikeyī's son, Bharata. As his father passes away, the obedient Rāma agrees to abide by his father's promise and duly goes off to the forest for fourteen years, accompanied by his gentle and virtuous wife, Sītā, and his valiant and devoted brother, Lakṣmaṇa. The throne is indeed offered to Bharata in line with the cunning deal of his mother. But Bharata thinks all this to be entirely outrageous and goes to Rāma to seek his return from banishment to become the king. The inflexible Rāma refuses to comply.

In the forest Rāma's wonderful wife, Sītā, is abducted by Rāvaṇa, the king of the evil clan of *rākṣasas* from the island of Laṅkā, or Ceylon. Rāma wages a battle to rescue her, after striking an alliance with good—and rather articulate—monkeys from the kingdom of Kiṣkindhā. They build a bridge to Laṅkā, and fight and win a bloody war, while Rāma kills Rāvaṇa, and Sītā is indeed rescued. Rāma is, however, consumed by doubts about Sītā's fidelity and arranges an apparently well-known test by fire, to establish her innocence in the period of her incarceration. She passes the test handsomely, and Rāma returns, with his wife, for his belated coronation.

Here the story could have ended, to everyone's comfort, but it does not. In the last chapter of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which is often taken to be a later addition (so, by the way, is the first chapter, concerned mainly with the boyhood days of

Rāma and his brothers, and the background of the family), Rāma gets influenced by some nasty rumors spreading among his subjects about—again—Sītā’s sexual infidelity with Rāvaṇa. As a dutiful king, responsible to his subjects, Rāma decides to banish Sītā, despite her being pregnant, and despite the absence of any serious indication that Rāma himself believes, at this time, the rumors to be true.

Sītā finds refuge in the ashram (a kind of austere but high-brow residential educational institution—ashrams make frequent appearances in accounts of ancient India) of the poet Vālmīki, the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The twin boys, Kuśa and Lava, to whom Sītā gives birth, while being educated in the ashram also master the story of *Rāmāyaṇa* from Vālmīki himself. When they go and recite the poetical narrative at a festival in Rāma’s presence, Rāma is deeply moved and seeks Sītā’s return to Ayodhyā. Sītā, however, has by then had enough, and calls the Earth, described as her mother, to receive her, and goes down into the ground that is opened up by the ever-receptive Earth. Moved by intense grief, Rāma divides his kingdom between his sons, and drowns himself in a river around the city, joined by his subjects. The only happy ending of the story of Rāma comes from the claim at the end of this tragic “last book” that he is well received in the heaven by the creator.

When Did It Originate?

The first written version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* that can be seen now is from as late as the eleventh century. A Nepalese palm-leaf manuscript from 1020 CE has the pride of place here. There are earlier glimpses though, including a San-

skrit inscription in a Cambodian temple from 600 CE. It is not, however, doubted that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is indeed one of the ancient literary works of India. In fact, some have placed its origin as far back as the thirteenth century BCE (GASPARE GORRESIO has offered some complicated, but I would argue unconvincing, reasons for that dating), placing it close enough to the Vedas themselves, the most ancient works in early Sanskrit (indeed in “Vedic Sanskrit” as it is called). This is almost certainly much too early, so that the *Rāmāyaṇa* does not in fact compete with the Homeric epics, the “Iliad,” and the “Odyssey” in terms of the antiquity of its origin, though some of the stories included in the epic could have been germinating from very ancient times.

There is, however, rather convincing evidence, presented mainly by HERMANN JACOBI (and accepted by most contemporary experts, including ROBERT GOLDMAN, the translator of the text in this volume), that the latest that the extant version of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* could have emerged would have been in early fourth century BCE. *Rāmāyaṇa* is eloquent on the glory of the kingdom, Kosala, governed from Ayodhyā, but the last great ruler of Kosala was Prasenajit, in Gautama Buddha’s time in the sixth century BCE, and he governed the kingdom from a different city, Śrāvastī. Perhaps more significantly, the *Rāmāyaṇa* shows complete innocence of the huge changes occurring in north India from the sixth century BCE with Gautama Buddha’s taking India by storm and the emergence of the new imperial power in Magadha, with its capital city of Pāṭaliputra (called, now, Patna) ruling over much of India from the fourth century BCE. *Rāmāyaṇa* knows nothing of such im-

perial rules, which as it happens would inter alia cover modest Kosala along with much of the country, which would lead one to suppose that it was finalized in this form before the emergence of a unified imperial power in India in the fourth century BCE. Ayodhyā was, of course, part of this empire, and indeed much discussed in Buddhist literature, but largely called, by then, Sāketa, whereas, as JACOBI notes, it is always called Ayodhyā in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*.

If that is the latest date, what about the earliest? Well, the lack of reference to the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* by the Buddha and his early followers has been taken to indicate that the origin of this narrative could not have been much earlier than around that time, perhaps the seventh century BCE. I am not sure how seriously to take this argument—a work could have been composed at one time and become known much later (not every author has the good luck of Shakespeare in being instantly famous). But if we do accept this argument about the earliest date (as is done by many who are experts on the subject, which, as a poor economist, I certainly am not), then we do have a relatively thin slice of time within which the book, of which this is the translation, would have taken shape.

What Happened Then?

While there may be scope for doubt about how and when this particular narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa* may have emerged, there can be little doubt about the extent of its spread and the domain of its influence. The spread was, however, accompanied by many distinct transformations, some minor, some quite major (this is in line with the point

made earlier about the creative reactions that the *Rāmāyaṇa* generated). Within India there is a huge dichotomy, involving serious differences between the Northern and Southern versions. There are differences even between Northeastern variants and Northwestern ones, all in Sanskrit. As the *Rāmāyaṇa* gets translated into the later Indian languages, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali, and others, the narrative takes again many different turns. And there were particular variants seen from different perspectives, for example that of women, rather than men. And as the *Rāmāyaṇa* spread abroad, also like wild fire, with translations and adaptations across the eastern world, with *Rāmāyaṇa* stories circulating in Annamese, Balinese, Cambodian, Javanese, Khotanese, Laotian, Malayan, Sinhalese, Thai, Tibetan, and others, we get a huge cluster of generically linked but partially divergent narratives.¹

Along with the literary transmigrations, come new departures, in painting, sculpture, music, dancing, and other areas of creative arts, inspired by the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The Hindu kingdoms in Java, Sumatra, Cambodia, Malaysia, and elsewhere in Asia in the first millennium greatly facilitated the spread. However, the dissemination often defied religious boundaries, well illustrated by the predominance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* themes in the dances of Buddhist Thailand, where many of the major monarchs were called Rāma (and differentiated through a sequence of consecutive numbers). Indeed, the ancient capital of that country was called Ayutthaya, a cognate of Ayodhyā.

What spread the *Rāmāyaṇa* across the world was not so much any shared religiosity (a point of some importance,

given the modern tendency to see the *Rāmāyaṇa* as mainly a religious document, on which more presently, rather than as an epic, or as *kāvya*), but the book's literary interest and its inspirational qualities that defied religious boundaries. This was, of course, helped greatly by the influence of Sanskrit language and literature across the world; it is worth recalling that the Chinese Buddhist scholar Yi Jing, who went to India in 675 CE, learned his Sanskrit in Srivijaya, a flourishing coastal city in seventh-century Sumatra, as he halted his sea journey to India, before spending ten years studying at the ancient university of Nālandā (located in between modern day Patna and Gaya). This was part of the culture of a huge world of unified scholarship (before vernacularization split up that world, beginning around 1000 CE), when, as SHELDON POLLOCK puts it, "Sanskrit literary texts circulated from Central Asia to Sri Lanka and from Afghanistan to Annam, and participating in such a literary culture meant participating in a vast ecumene."²

Even with religious changes, for example the advent of Islam, the interest in the *Rāmāyaṇa* often survived powerfully, as it did for example in Indonesia and Malaysia. The national airlines of the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, viz. Indonesia, is called "Garuda"—the divine eagle which befriended Rāma and his family. There is also some evidence that the first Bengali translation of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* was commissioned by a Muslim Pathan king of Bengal (it was certainly commissioned within the culture of the Muslim courts).

As A.K. RAMANUJAN says in his perceptive essay "Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas," Vālmīki's narrative, with its many

variants, has become part of the general culture of the region. “No one” ever reads it “for the first time,” since “the stories are there, ‘always already’.”³

Rāmāyaṇa and Politics

There has been much interest in the *Rāmāyaṇa* recently with distinctly political uses. Rāma has been constantly invoked as the Hindu version of God. And it is on the alleged ground that a sixteenth-century mosque in modern Ayodhyā, called the Babri Masjid, was located exactly where the “divine Rāma” was born, that the mosque was forcibly demolished by Hindu political activists in December 1992. Campaign movements on chariots, *ratha yatras*, are organized in alleged memory of Rāma by another group of Hindu politicians.

There is some “creativity” here too, including in the political extremism in Ayodhyā, but of a rather odd kind. First, who was born where can be of little relevance for land rights, especially one enjoyed by a place of worship (like the Babri Masjid), particularly in a case in which the nativity involves a character about whom we know so little, and in which the “knowledge” about whom comes from a *kāvya*—not even from a claimed *itihāsa* or traditional history. Second, more generally, there is a profound “category mistake” in taking a *kāvya* to be “a matter of historical fact” rather than a marvellous “parable” (as RABINDRANATH TAGORE put it). Third, in many variants of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma is not treated as a divine at all, but a good man, and in some variants as a somewhat confused man, with serious weaknesses, like a propensity to harbor unjustified suspi-

cions about his wife’s fidelity to act without moral uprightness as shown by his willingness to take actions, like banishing the pregnant Sītā, in response to rumors even when he does not himself believe them to be true.

Indeed, depending on which part of India one is from, being rude to Rāma and his followers may or may not be treated as outrageous even among very traditional Hindus. Hanumān, the leading monkey warrior aiding Rāma, is an object of veneration in parts of India, whereas from my childhood I remember loving the slapstick moments in the rural theatrical performances (*jatras*) of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, when Hanumān would arrive as a bull in a China shop and upset every civilized arrangement through his monumental clumsiness. More significantly, there was no special difficulty about MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN DUTT’s long narrative in Bengali poetry, *Meghanādavadha Kāvya*, published in the mid-nineteenth century, achieving great literary praise and widespread admiration, despite the way he made Rāma into the villain of the piece and presented Rāvaṇa as an admirable character (as DUTT put it, “I despise Ram and his rabble, but the idea of Rāvaṇa elevates and kindles my imagination, he was a grand fellow”).

The great thing about this classic book is not the conformity it is allegedly trying to achieve—religious or even literary—but the creative diversity it allows and encourages, which has had profoundly constructive effects across a huge part of the world. *Rāmāyaṇa* seems to be in constant readiness to stimulate new questions and fresh concerns that stretch the mind. This is an integral part of the text of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* itself. When the learned pun-

dit Jābāli tries to dissuade Rāma from giving up his kingdom because of faithfulness to a promise made by his father and willingness to sacrifice, driven by his religious belief in such behavior, Jābāli broadens his attack comprehensively on religion (“nonsensical ideas”) by arguing that “there is no [after]world to come,” and that “it was only as a charm to secure themselves donations that cunning men composed those [religious] books that tell us, ‘Sacrifice, give alms, sanctify yourself, practice asceticism, renounce.’” This is backed up by a general methodological critique: “Address yourself to what can be perceived and turn your back on what cannot.”⁴

Though Vasiṣṭha explains away Jābāli’s arguments by saying that Jābāli had said those things only to dissuade Rāma from giving up his throne, the fact is that the *Rāmāyaṇa* retains Jābāli’s arguments for the future readers who can themselves judge and decide whether or not there are merits in such heterodoxy. Allowing, even encouraging, creative departures is part and parcel of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and not just a later reaction that takes the book beyond the richness of its manifest motivations and arguments. That capaciousness is irreducibly present in the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* itself.

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Notes

- 1 Some guidance to the huge literature can be found in the papers included in K.R. SRINIVASA IYENGAR ed., *Asian Variations in Ramayana* (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1983), and PAULA RICHMAN, ed., *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
- 2 SHELDON POLLOCK, “India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000–1500,” *Daedalus*, 127 (1998), p. 45.
- 3 In RICHMAN, ed., *Many Ramayanas*, p. 46. RAMANUJAN says the same, with justification, about the *Mahābhārata*.
- 4 From SHELDON POLLOCK’s translation in the CLAY SANSKRIT LIBRARY, *Ramāyana, Book Two: ‘Ayódhya,’* New York: New York University Press and JJC Foundation, 2005, pp. 549–53.