



Indian Horizons

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Indian Council for Cultural Relations

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) was founded on 9th April 1950 by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the first Education Minister of independent India.

The objectives of the Council are to participate in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes relating to India's external cultural relations; to foster and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries; to promote cultural exchanges with other countries and people; to establish and develop relations with national and international organizations in the field of culture; and to take such measures as may be required to further these objectives.

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Corrigendum

With reference to the ICCR Publication, Indian Horizons Volume 59, No. 4, October-December, 2012 it is to state that Dr. Anindita Balslev who is the founder of Forum Cross Cultural Conversation was the Academic Coordinator of the Interfaith Conference, "On World Religions: Diversity, Not Dissension."

The current issue on the Ramayana was a totally enriching experience for the entire team. For me in particular it was like the visitation of modern avatars in the form of scholars who came forth to pen their ideas about the great epic in a manner that made it read like something of an analysis of things around us. Their arguments and their synthesis of the contents of this great source of India's cultural inspiration was an eye opener to me. Having grown up seeing countless Ram leelas and being acquainted with a few cantos of the epic, the concretizing of the epic in scholarly analyses gave a very different dimension to the contents.

One of the first contributions to reach our desk was by Meghna Shridhar, whose current fellowship has given her the advantage of touring Ramayana destinations worldwide. It was a virtual enlightenment to realise that the Ramayana has takers and readers as far off as Spain and that in every place the Ramayana has yielded content to be moulded after their own formatting. Thus the Ramayana of Malaysia is distinctly different to that in South Africa or for that matter in Fiji, or India. Professor Goldman's essay was an insightful realization of how this epic has even been intertwined into the Muslim communities of Southeast Asia, so integrally.

Personally, I envisage that the Sundara Kanda has always been the most lyrical and attractive portion of the text for most of us and when Prof Ramashray Sharma offered to write an analysis of it, I couldn't agree more. Not only did he give us an essay that did justice to the great epic, he also rallied round other scholars to our cause and has been the key architect behind the fruition of this volume. Our grateful

thanks to him. Dr Sudha Sharma also painstakingly cobbled together enough proof to convince us that the Vanaras were actually a non-Aryan tribe with a social and moral code that differed from that of the Vedic rulers. By the end of her essay, I was fully convinced about the differences. Dr Shastri and his essay made me realise a special understanding of the character of Ravana and the regal milieu that prevailed in his domain. The childhood concept of him being the embodiment of all that is evil thus got ironed out through this essay.

A significant inclusion, which brought the Ramayana right into focus as a living tradition was our team's coming in contact with the Akshara Theatre duo, Gopal Sharman and Jalabala Vaidya. This couple's saga of linking with the Ramayana has elements of a fairy story played out through its ups and downs. It was they who first professionally performed with the epic across countries in Europe and America, introduced it at colleges in the States and then established a nightly performance of their self-scripted version of the epic in the capital. Gopal Sharman had transformed it into a katha vachak dialogue which his wife recited on stage and gripped audiences with its meaningful content.

Fortunately this quarter's cultural calendar carried a major Ramayana Mela which provided a rich pageantry of Ramayana incidents to be viewed on stage through a culturally enhanced choreography. It made me understand how the 'leela' aspect of the epic is its richest potential for this is what has turned the simple tale of good and evil into a virtual Jacob's coat of many colours. As these stage-based

Ramayana enactments were drawn from countries where the Indian diaspora have sunk their roots, at some point in history, they all waft the fragrance of a subtle underside of their roots. The Fijian costuming was recognizable by its Indian looks whereas the costuming of the Thai and Malaysian performances was what distanced itself from the Indian presentation. It was their truthful adherence to the story outline of the epic that was recognisable through their dance. All of them chose single episodes but on stage there was a holistic feel to the event.

The end pages of the volume are a colourful spread of the many events that were held at the auditorium and the gallery walls of the Azad Bhavan complex. Each of them carried a distinctive attraction and left indelible impressions on viewers' minds. The International Jazz festival was a bonus for the capital's music lovers held under trees in the Nehru Park. All this made up a well rounded cultural bonanza of relevance this quarter. We as usual have tried to bring it before you so that you too, can relive those moments on stage and in your armchairs, during your reading time.

Editor



Subhra Mazumdar

Foreword

Satish C. Mehta
Director General, Indian Council for Cultural Relations

The Ramayana is an integral part of our society and consciousness. It is woven into our lives, forever guiding and inspiring us. It has travelled with the Indian diaspora and has been an inseparable part of their lives

This issue is a tribute to the timeless and universal message of the Ramayana and its being a medium to link people across the world. Meghna Shridhar has narrated the way the influence of this epic has spread in different parts of the world. She has narrated glimpses of the Ramayana as seen by her in Spain, South Africa, Indonesia and Malaysia. Dr Robert Goldman engages us with a scholarly understanding of its potential as an expression by communities that profess other faiths, in particular its adaptation by the predominantly Islamic community of South East Asia.

The action-packed flow of the Sundara-Kanda segment of the Ramayana is popular among those with even a slight acquaintance with the epic. Dr Ramashray Sharma's in-depth study of the role that Hanuman has played, will be of interest with its scholarly yet engaging content. Dr Sudha Sharma

presents a comparative study of the various groups of people mentioned in the epic, bringing forth a clear picture of their cultures. Dr Nikhilesh Shastri's study also throws new light on the societies of that era.

Not forgetting the theatrical richness of the Ramayana, the photo essay in this volume comprises snippets from the International Ramayana Mela organized by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), which was in progress when this issue was being prepared. The four decade history of an ongoing Ramayana production at the Akshara Theatre by Gopal Sharman and Jalabala Vaidya is another salute to the Ramayana's engaging content.

The regular pages of the issue contain a review of the artistic talent that the ICCR takes pride in encouraging through its dedicated platform of the Azad Bhavan Auditorium and Gallery. The book review contains a study of Gopal Sharman's play of the Ramayana written from the angle of Rama as the ideal ruler.

The attempt, as always, has been to provide rich content as examined by scholars, performers and enthusiasts. We hope, this Ramayana-themed issue will meet your expectations


Satish C. Mehta

From our Archives:
A vision of ICCR's activities over the years



Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, President of India during an exhibition of Nepalese Arts & Crafts, August 29, 1963



Visit of Miss Margaret Kenyatta (Kenya), December 1963-January 1964



Inauguration of the Conference on Central Asia, February 11, 1969



Exhibition on "50 Years of Czechoslovakia", March 20, 1969



Seminar on Australian and Indian Literature, January 12-16, 1970



Exhibition of Czech Glass and Ceramics, October 27 - November 2, 1971



Reception in honour of a delegation of musicians and dancers from Japan, January 25, 1972

Vishwakanda: A Year in Exile

Meghna Sridhar

Here is the setting: a small room, between a bike repair shop and an English language bookstore, in the aptly titled Street of Holy Spirit, a winding road off one of Madrid's main, jazzy high street *Gran Via*, with the smell of incense wafting out of it, and the unmistakable sound of *manjiras* and *bhajans* coming from inside.

Here are the characters: a young Indian girl, sitting inside, leaning across the tables in the din of the prayer songs downstairs and the clang of metal plates and forks upstairs, frowning and trying to muster all the powers of her college learned Spanish to understand the man sitting opposite her. He's Swiss, and old, and wearing saffron robes, and he's talking about the story



Talking about the story of Jatayu



Ramayana – a people's experience of it as a story

of Jatayu—whom he calls “Yatayu,” in his accented Castellan, and the story of whom invokes tears in his eyes. “You do not understand what it means to be so devoted,” he says, and wipes his cheek. “It is a story of true love.”

The woman to his right looks skeptical. She’s blonde, and young, and from Spain; she shakes her head and rolls her eyes. “Tell me the story of Sita,” she says, with the enthusiasm of a child asking for her favourite bedtime story. “That one is really romantic, I like that one. That’s more the story of true love, for me.”

I like to joke that I’m engaged in a truly immersive study of *The Ramayana*: like Rama, I’m spending some time in exile from my home, although it’s less of a *vanvaas*, and more of a voyage through airports and youth hostels and *ashramas* and ISKCON temples and open air dance performances scattered from end to end of a world map. I am a recipient of the Thomas J. Watson fellowship, a unique research grant that allows

fellows to travel the world in pursuit of independent, spontaneous, creative, and immersive research into a topic of their choice. A childhood love of storytelling, and a lifelong fascination with mythology, combined with a college education in an interdisciplinary study of politics, history, anthropology, and culture, pushed me towards choosing to study *The Ramayana* and its myriad global variations.

The Ramayana is, as a cultural artefact, somehow simultaneously both overstudied and understudied. It is subject to a lot of academic and literary analysis, a lot of religiously fanatical scrutiny seeking to “prove” its reality and affirm its status as *itihaasa*, a lot of studies of translation and cultural anthropology and history charting its spread and variations over South and South-East Asia (the latest being AK Ramanujan’s inspiring *300 Ramayanas*), and a lot of controversy. It is also, however, in my humble preparatory readings, not explored enough as a phenomenon of myth making, as an experience of global interconnectivity,

an affirmation of authenticity and belonging, and quite simply, as a story whose telling and retelling is an extremely unique, impactful and significant event. As I embarked on this year of participatory research, my aim was to untangle the *Ramayana* from the religious propaganda and faux-historical foundations that guided research towards it, and instead focus on understanding people's experience of it as a story, as a piece of art or performance or culture, or as a spiritual event, and what that experience spoke about and reflected back on their own stories and cultural roots. This essay aims to be a compilation of sides of the *Ramayana* and its impact that we don't normally think about; it aims to use the *Ramayana* as a sort of prism to view cultural variations, diaspora experiences, and race relations, amongst other things. It aims to narrate a year of exile and interactions and unpredictable experiences through a story that is about fourteen years of exile and interactions and unpredictable experiences, and dig out everything

fascinating and unexplored that comes from this perspective.

***Ramayana* as a Relationship**

The beginning of my travels, all alone in a crowded backpacker's hostel in Rome, the streets unforgiving with catcalling restaurant owners and pickpockets, feeling like someone out of *Queen*, I thought a lot about the theme of exile. I pondered on the idea of displacement and finding ways to hold on to your sense of home, and how what you perceive as home changes as you separate yourself from it and know it only through memories. The Watson Fellowship, as a part of its push to foster a truly unique travel experience, demands that fellows not return home or any place familiar for the length of a year, in order to really make travelling an all-encompassing part of the fellowship. I found solidarity in the theme of exile, not only through rereading the *Ramayana*, but through encountering many people who were facing



Behind the scenes in a performance of the *Ramayana*

their own exiles, for different reasons, from their homeland, India, and talking to them about the epic poem.

What opened as a conversation about the mythological tale often led to many interesting divergent conversations. In Rome, I chanced almost by accident upon a shop called "Delhi Barber's," and took a chance on a whim to step in and converse with the people who worked there. Ajay, from Delhi, a kindly young man who laughed at my questions a lot, agreed to talk to me about his memories of encountering the *Ramayana* growing up, and he spoke of it with simultaneous reverence and hesitancy. His friend, Vishal, walked with me to a nearby park, and tried to stumble through narrating the *Ramayana* in a dual mix of Italian and Hindi, stopping every two minutes to disclaim, "But correct me if I'm wrong, I hope I remember this correctly, I am very proud of my culture — I just sometimes forget the details." I was met with similar disclaimers in Germany, where I talked to Gita, a shy Tamilian girl who worked in an Indian restaurant in the small town of Jena, who apologized repeatedly for forgetting any chunk of the story that she did, and told me, panicking, several times, that she wasn't the one to ask about this, afraid she misspoke at any time in her narration. In Cagliari, a small town in Sardinia, I met a man selling sunglasses on the bus, and he smiled in relief when he heard I was from India, surrounded by terrifying foreigners speaking strange tongues to his ear on a daily basis. He immediately shook his head wildly, however, at the prospect of talking about the *Ramayana*, and got off the bus a few stops later, smiling regretfully and saying it was outside his comfort zone to speak of the story with any authority.

All of these conversations have led me to several interesting reflections. I was given a chance to encounter a part of the Indian diaspora that isn't often talked about — not the middle class, English speaking numbers that occupy the UK and the United States, and whose experiences are well documented in anthro textbooks and Jhumpa Lahiri novels, but

working class Indians who've moved out of necessity — a very different kind of exile — to European countries, grasping the language through everyday interactions, adopting parts of the culture on a need based basis. The results of this cultural mixing are very interesting — how many Indians do we know, for example, who speak fluent Hindi and French, but almost no English? Or Indians who mix Italian food and Indian food, not out of fancy cultural fusion, but because it's the two options available to them?

Talking to this diaspora revealed an interesting facet about the *Ramayana* as a symbol of the relationship of a migrant peoples to its homeland. It is an object of memory, and through memory an affirmation of identity, something that symbolizes belonging when in a foreign and strange terrain they are constantly reminded they don't belong. It is for this reason, I think, no matter how nervous they are, that they smile upon being asked to narrate the story, and they struggle to recount it in French or Italian or German no matter how fluent they otherwise are in it, because the story feels like home, and their tongue refuses to associate it with a language they've come to resolutely link to their journey away from it. At the same time, they hold the *Ramayana* at a distance, as an object of reverence that they are afraid to insult with improper narration of it or if they forget the details of it — as though it would invalidate their identity as Indian, already balanced precariously at the edge through their travelling and settling elsewhere.

Of course that also throws an interesting light on Hindu hegemony over Indian culture. The idea that the knowledge of Hindu mythology is somehow linked to the validation of one's identity as Indian, and the association of reverence and untouchability attached to this Sanskrit, shows the far reach of upper caste Hindu nationalism even in diaspora and lower class communities who are distanced from a first hand experience of it in India but carry that conditioning and associations into their construction of the idea of India and what it means to be Indian.

Ramayana as a Badge of Authenticity

The experience of the *Ramayana* in South Africa was an interesting thing to witness after examining the *Ramayana* through interactions with the European diaspora, as the South African diaspora, having lived in foreign lands for several more generations, exhibit different and similar attitudes to the *Ramayana*, that are deeply affected by the country's prominent, traumatizing, and inescapable history of race and class relations. The *Ramayana* here became a very unique lens to view the dynamics that constituted the post-Apartheid Indian community of Cape Town, and the divisions and unities that prevailed amongst them. Through the stories and myths they remembered, recounted, and told, that is, you could understand a sense of who they were and what was important to them and how their histories lived on in their present.

The *Ramayana*, along with other Hindu myths, was a means for the Indian community of South Africa, which had voluntarily or involuntarily left one home to find another, to find a way to connect to its roots. While this is similar to the European diaspora I had talked to, the South African Indians had obviously left India several generations ago, where the possibility of cultural reconnection or communication to your homeland was near impossible, and new cultures and new experiences of Hinduism had to be formed using the community resources at hand and only memories of the land they had left behind. Memories fused with local culture and resulted in new traditions and new myths that reflected the past left behind in India, as well as the present of their day-to-day struggle in pre during, and post-Apartheid days.

The most interesting example of this was to observe the divergences in the practices, forms of storytelling, and forms of ritual, between the 'Gujarati' community of South Africa — who had come to the country as 'free men' and affluent traders — and the 'Tamil' community, who came to South Africa much earlier, as an indentured labour community, and were

treated much more harshly under Apartheid law as a consequence.

For the Tamil community, their Hindu roots formed the basis of old labour solidarity, and reflect that even today. Separated from India for several generations, the cultural practices had mixed heavily with other communities and religions they had encountered. Their religious rituals were not recognizably Hindu from a contemporary Indian perspective, but were an amalgamation of historical ways in which the community had got together, shared moral, ethical, and spiritual messages with each other, and reaffirmed their own unique cultural identity. In Cape Town for example, it is popular for the *Ramayana* and other Hindu myths to be discussed in temples as a form of Sunday sermon, mimicking Christian Church sermons. The priest uses anecdotes from holy epics to illustrate issues that are affecting the community, making the temple an important space not just for individual prayer but community discussion, activism, and organization. The *Ramayana* is thus narrated in these spaces with emphasis on the parts of it most relevant for the community — during the Week Against Violence Against Women, for example, Rama and Sita's relationship is highlighted and critiqued; during moments of racial tension, as another example, the tolerance between Rama and Laxmana and the *vanarsena* was discussed.

For the Gujarati community, knowledge of and access to "authentic" Indian rituals, and Hinduism as practised in India, including knowledge of the myths, was a form of currency, an affirmation of their place as "real" Hindus or "real" Indians. Going back to India every so often, performing religious rites as dictated by priests from India, and knowing Indian languages was seen as an important validation of their cultural pride and identity. However there's a hybridism you can view here as well, and once again inquiring about the *Ramayana* opened me up to that. Festivals involving the *Ramayana*, dance performances that enact certain parts of it, and music sung about it, are all performed in South African public spaces where

an effort is made to make it relatable and enjoyable to the general public, resulting in modifications that modernize the tale and making it accessible, thus rendering the *Ramayana* a distinct cultural object in its Gujarathi-South African variations.

***Ramayana* as a Form of Storytelling**

Through my travels in Europe and South Africa, I had to delve deep into the local Indian communities and extract their experiences of the *Ramayana* out in order to learn more about their lives and the race, class and cultural dynamics that played out amongst them.

However, when I left South Africa and set off to South-East Asia – famed “other home” of the *Ramayana*, I encountered a very different form to the *Ramayana*. Instead of seeking out the familiar in an unfamiliar space, I was instead presented an unfamiliar form — variations of the *Ramayana*, in different languages, using different art forms and dance styles and musical styles than my experience of *Ramlilas* or performances of the *Ramayana* — of a familiar story. It was at this point that I shifted my attention from the *Ramayana* as a story to the *Ramayana* as a practice of storytelling, and how the experience of storytelling the *Ramayana* is now reflexive of the local community.

I am talking, in particular, of studying the *Ramayana*'s role in Bali, Indonesia. Balinese Hinduism is a very distinctive form of Hinduism that is completely divorced culturally and religiously from Hinduism in India, and yet shows striking similarities with Indian Hinduism due to their shared Sanskrit roots. The *Ramayana*, and the ritual of performing it through 'Kechak' dance in Bali, however, opens us up to just exactly how unique Balinese Hinduism is. Balinese Hinduism is very ritual-based, grounded in the participatory experience of performance and storytelling. It is also an understudied branch of Hinduism, with a rich and unexplored cultural and spiritual heritage behind it.

Kechak, or the monkey chant dance, is as much a religious experience for the performers as a spectacle for the viewers. The monkey is of key significance in Bali, and, as the huge monkey temple in Ubud attests to, is a sacred animal for their religion. This makes Hanuman, the monkey prince, the most important character of the Balinese *Ramayana*, which is often condensed in performance, and organized around scenes that feature Hanuman prominently. Hanuman is at times more important than Rama himself, and delights audiences with his playfulness as much as he invites their respect and awe with his bravery and loyalty.



The experience of the *Ramayana* in South Africa



Ramayana a religious and social experience, Bali

The dance performance, acted out by performers in elaborate costume, is accompanied not by music, but by the chant of several priests who live in the temple: a 'monkey chant', that is meant to imitate the sounds of Hanuman's army and is said to put the chanters in a spiritual trance that energizes them to chant without losing breath through the entire one-to-two-hour performance. The dance is accompanied by cleansing rituals of fire and water before and after the performance and is usually performed daily at almost every Bali temple at sunset. Kechak is an important example of how the *act* of storytelling, of the *Ramayana* in particular, can be very important to the religious or spiritual experiences of a community. The *Ramayana* is a point where worship and performance meet, and a means through which Balinese people can both protect their own traditions but also showcase their culture and share it with eager audiences.

The above examples and reflections aren't the totality of my interactions with and experiences of

the *Ramayana* during my travels; however, I've chosen them as three very different lenses through which we can view the *Ramayana* and its impact and power as both a story and a form of storytelling, narration and myth making. Our focus on The *Ramayana*, as I've talked about before, has primarily been as an object of religion, art or culture: I wanted to zoom in on it as a much more personalized, experiential tale that affected the lived experiences of people and says something about the histories and contexts and communities they inhabit.

I chose to study the *Ramayana* during my year of independent research and travel, because I was afraid that it had become an object of cooptation; of untouchable and inaccessible reverence; of Hindu cultural hegemony. I was afraid that claims were being made towards the ownership of and right to access the *Ramayana*, in terms of who has the right to tell the story, who has the right to determine the protagonists and antagonists and moral virtues of



Hanuman in a moment of contemplation

the story, who has the right to analyze the story and who didn't. The backlash as a worrying data point in a trend that claimed that the *Ramayana* belonged to a very certain community, or culture, or religion, and that modifications of it were somehow irreverent, incorrect, and impermissible. I wanted to document how much stories and myths like The *Ramayana* become so much a part of our lived reality that they are no longer bound into the conventional narratives the orthodoxy wishes to constrain them to. I wanted to capture The *Ramayana* in the ways in which it is the most alive — in people's minds, and hearts, and realities.

To understand how much a culture or a community cannot claim ownership or control over a story opens us up so much more to a whole new world of possibilities of what happens when we throw mythology and stories and narratives out there in the

world and let different people grasp them, take them, reform them, and modify them during the course of their own lives. Stories become powerful in that way, and subversive, instead of censored and controlling, and can truly spread their wings and take flight into a world of endless, beautiful, interesting variations and forms.

The *Ramayana* is a story, in the best sense of the word. The *Ramayana* isn't, as will never be, 'just' a story, because there is no such thing as 'just' a story — stories are the building blocks of our lives, and can be compelling and life changing and culture defining and reflexive of our history and values and morals and everything we hold dear to us. The *Ramayana* is a story, and charting it through the world as just that has opened me up to everything that it is and can be, and more.

Rāma-Rāvaṇa-Yuddha — A Clash of Culture

Dr. Sudha Sharma

The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki is a poetic presentation of a pre-historic event. The evidence of language conclusively establishes that the epic was composed in the post-Vedic period when Aryan society had evolved fairly advanced social, political and religious institutions. As against this, the South India of Rāmāyaṇic times was solely populated by aboriginal tribes who were on varying rungs of civilization. There are references to Yakṣas, Gandharvas, Kinnaras and Asuras in the poem but the poet provides some

details only about two peoples, the Vānaras and the Rākṣasas who are intimately involved in the drama of the epic. A very queer fact about the Vānaras and the Rākṣasas of the Rāmāyaṇa is that the former, in the style of their living, are so naive and primitive that the poet, almost always, is prompted to describe them as monkeys, while the latter represents a highly developed stage of civilization. Not only materially but otherwise too, they are the most developed people in contemporary history. They are also



Lord Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa in Exile



A scene from the Rāmāyaṇa

supported by an advanced polity, largely organized on an oligarchical pattern, but retaining the genes of a 'gaṇa-rājya', which at least originally, recognized and honoured the opinion of every family in the city state, Laṅkā. Geographically the Vānaras and the Rākṣasas are separated from each other in the sense that the Vānaras are the inhabitants of the vast hills and forests stretching to the south of the Vīndhyas, while the Rākṣasas, had, in contemporary history, settled in Laṅkā, an island town on the farthest end of the South. Laṅkā possessed all the strategic advantages supplied by nature and men. It was an 'ambu-durga' surrounded with sea as it was; it was a 'gīri-durga', as it was built on the land surrounded by three hills (Trikoṭa); it was a 'vana-durga', as dense forest stretching between the sea-coast and the fort surrounded it, and it as a 'Kṛtṛma-durga', as it was provided with artificial means of defence like the moat, the draw-bridges, the city-wall with 'Satagehim' mounted on it. Politically, the Vānaras and the Rākṣasas were allies, for Ravana, the ruler of Laṅkā, had entered into an 'ahimsaka-sakhya' a political alliance, with Bāli, the powerful

ruler of the Vānaras. These two peoples of the South prominently share only one common characteristic; both of them possess robust physique and are a strong power of the South. Their distinguishing points, however, are manifold. The Vānaras are brown in complexion, while the Rākṣasas are dark; the Vānaras are strictly vegetarians, while the Rākṣasas having no such taboo. The Vānaras are still forest-dwellers with a very primitive kind of social and political organization, while the Rākṣasas have very strong and advanced social, religious and political institutions to preserve and promote their interests. Vālmīki, in the supplementary Book of the epic, the Uttara-Kāṇḍa, provides a fairly detailed account of the past history of the Rākṣasas, showing, how, having suffered a few vicissitudes in their political life earlier, they had emerged under the leadership of Ravana as a great power. The imperialistic ambition of the Rākṣasas constantly urged them to adopt aggressive policies to such an extent that even in an age of primitive transport facilities they were regularly and systematically carrying out terrorist activities in northern India.

The country towards the North of the Vindhya was almost completely under Aryan occupation. True, a few names connected with Rāma, the hero of this epic, for example, Daśaratha, his father, Ikṣvāku, his ancestor, Janaka, his father-in-law, Sītā his wife, are found in early Vedic literature and create an impression that the tale of the epic is presumably a historical one. However as stated earlier, the fact is that the Rāmāyaṇa is primarily a 'Kāvya', which might have been inspired by an event of the past but largely it is the creation of the imagination of the poet. No doubt, Vālmīki presents a fairly advanced stage of Aryan culture, but the fact remains that the political condition of North India that he has depicted in the epic corresponds to an antique period, a period in which there was no central authority. According to Vālmīki's account, North India was being ruled

by congeries of monarchies whose rulers sometimes claimed to be 'Cakravartins' although the position on the ground was that they held sway over fairly small territories and the presence of vast and dense forests between states, populated by two diametrically opposite sections of people, was very common. One section comprised the Aryan 'Vānaprasthas' engaged on the one hand in religious pursuits for their spiritual advancement and on the other in imparting training and education to 'brahmacārins' who were staying with them. The other section consisted of notorious elements from non-Aryan aboriginal tribes, particularly the Rākṣasas, who were criminal to the 'brāhmaṇa' sages, their penances and sacrifices. What is significant to note is the fact that the Aryan participations were conscious of their weakness vis-a-vis the organized terrorists, who were viciously active



Lord Rāma and Sītā

in areas not very far away from their kingdom. The 'kṛṣatriya' rulers conveniently blinked at the outrages of these miscreants. In reply to Viśvāmitra, who was insistently imploring Daśaratha, the renowned ruler of Kosala to lend him the service of the princes, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, to guard his sacrifice against the notorious Rākṣasas, the king volunteered to personally accompany the sage followed by his army, but cordially admitted, "Devas, Dānaras, Gandharavas, Yakṣas, Patagas and Pannagas were incapable of withstanding the power of Rāvaṇa... I cannot (successfully) fight against him or his forces." (R.I 19/21-22) The words of Daśaratha were neither abrupt nor incoherent. The Rāmāyaṇa testifies to the fact that Rāvaṇa, through his army men, was regularly carrying out a campaign against the Aryans, particularly against their religious activities. He

had established a military post comprising 14,000 soldiers at Janasthāna, under the command of his officer to carry out terrorist activities in North India (R.III34/2-5) The Rāmāyaṇa further corroborates this fact by showing that Rākṣasas humbled and uprooted from their strongholds by Aryan princes rushed to Laṅkā and reported the matter to their master, Rāvaṇa. This shows that prior to the appearance of Rāma on the scene the Rākṣasas of Rāvaṇa were active in North India specially targeting the sages living in the forest. The sages were their main targets, for the rules of conduct and the ideals of morality which inspired the Aryan King and the clown alike in their behaviour emerged from their hermitages. There sages were truly the harbingers of Aryan culture and the Rākṣasas on that account bore an inherent enmity against them. Vālmīki nowhere feels



Mithila painting depiction of Rāma and Sītā wedding



The Rāmāyaṇa: love and valour in India's great epic

tired in referring to the Rākṣasas as 'Yajña-ghna', 'Muni-ghna', 'Kratu-kriyāṇām-praśamani-karāh' and 'Loka-Kaṇṭhakāh'. Nevertheless, the fact of the story is that in comparison to the Rākṣasas the Aryan princes of those times, whatever the reason, were neither limited nor well organized to openly take up the challenge. In such a situation, the 'Brāhmaṇa' sages of the times took the lead to resist and destroy the menace.

In the style of ancient heroic poems, the Rāmāyaṇa also makes a great show of the boiling resentment against the atrocities of Rāvaṇa and the Rākṣasas. We are told that on the occasion of Daśartha's 'putresti' the divine community, along with illustrious 'ṛṣis' and paramarṣis', met together and decided that Viṣṇu be born as sons of Daśartha and destroy Rāvaṇa along with his followers (R. I-14) This is corroborated by a verse in the Uttara-Kāṇḍa in which Kubera, the foster-brother of Rāvaṇa, through his dūta, admonishes Rāvaṇa to desist from unrighteous practices, for 'the Devas, in conjunction with the host of the 'Ṛṣis' were planning to destroy him. (R.VII13/32)

The first step towards the execution of this plan was to take out (Viṣṇu, born as) Rāma from a life of ease and comfort that he was passing in the palace of Ayodhyā. Viśvāmitra, originally a 'Kṣatriya' king but raised to the status of a 'brahmarṣi' through complete control over 'kāma' and 'krodha', prevailed upon Daśartha to lend him his sons, the princes Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. On this occasion, Viśvāmitra also let out significant hints about the plan of the 'Devas' and the 'Ṛṣis', saying, "I will confer upon him (Rāma) manifold blessings, by means of which he will secure the good of the three worlds." Viśvāmitra also added that the sage Vasiṣṭha and all others that were stationed in asceticism knew fully well (the real identity of) Rāma (and his mission on earth). (R.I18/14) Pleased at Tātakā-vadha the sage conferred on Rāma various divine missiles that he possessed and then equipped him for the coming challenge against the Rākṣasas. During the period of exile Bharadwāja pushed Rāma towards Citrakūṭa (the field of Rākṣasas-activity); the sage at Citrakūṭa sent him to the hermitage of Śarabhanga'. Śarabhanga sent him to Sutikṣṇa

and the latter to the hermitage of Agastya; i.e. to Janasthāna, the region where was the military post of Rāvaṇa under the command of Khara. In a verse of the Araṇya-Kāṇḍa (R.III29/31) the 'Rajarṣis' and the 'Paramarṣis' explicitly reveal to Rāma that his visit to that region was not fortuitous, rather it was wholly contrived by the 'maharṣis' with the specific objective of the destruction of the Rākṣasas, the evil, the enemies. In fact, the brief stay at Viśvāmitrā's hermitage and the sight of the hills like maze of bones of sages killed by the Rākṣasas near Citrakūṭa had filled the heart of Rāma with such rage and hate against the Rākṣasas that, despite the righteous comments of Sitā not to kill the Rākṣasas without provocation, Rāma felt committed to destroying them wherever he happened to spot them out.

A modern reader might feel bewildered at all such references to supernatural elements appearing so thickly interwoven with the story in the Rāmāyaṇa. We may, in the first instance, invite his attention to the following observation of C.M. Bowra about the hero of a Heroic Poem: "He is a marked man from the start, and it is only natural to connect his superiority with unusual birth and breeding. The greatest heroes are thought to be so wonderful that they cannot be wholly human but must have something divine about them." (Heroic Poetry, P.94) Heroic poems are indeed anthropocentric in character. Vālmīki too, no doubt, recognizes his hero as an incarnation of Viṣṇu but he nowhere allows this divinity to manifest itself in his behaviour. It is a fact that Rāma is throughout conscious of his human character only. His words, "ātmānani mānuṣain manage Rāmani Daśarathātmajan" (R.VI105/10) (I consider myself-Rāma, a human being, the son of Daśratha) are sincerely spoken. In addition to the words of Bowra we may point out that Asuras, Rākṣasas, Gandharvas, Yakṣas, Kinnaras and the like, who are termed semi-divine characters in later Sanskrit literature, were originally human tribes. Dharma-sūtras and Smṛtis have presented evidence of this fact in the form of their recognition to 'Apraśasta' marriages which were

obtaining among the non-Aryan, but human tribes before they got assimilated into the Aryan society. Moreover, the Āpastamba Dharma-sūtra is explicit in saying, "Formerly 'Devas' and 'Manuṣyas' lived together in this world. Then the 'Devas' in reward for their (righteous) acts went to Heaven but 'Manuṣyas' were left behind" (II7/6/1)

The Rākṣasas of the Rāmāyaṇa are definitely a human race. In contrast to the fair Aryans they are dark like soot; as opposed to the Aryans who are patrilineal and patriarchal, the Rākṣasas are matrilineal and matriarchal. This shows that ethnically they are a different stock. However, what specially distinguishes the Rākṣasas from the Aryans and inspires strong repugnance of the poet and the contemporary Aryans is their outlook on life. The Rākṣasas view life as an opportunity for sensual enjoyment with exceptional predilection to sexual enjoyment. In the description of the personal chamber of Rāvaṇa in the Sundara-Kāṇḍa Vālmīki spares no pains in emphasizing that it was provided with all and the choicest objects of enjoyment. He himself sums up the description saying, "Like a mother it satiated the five senses by (making readily available) the best of the five objects." (RV7/26) Hanumān was so bewildered at the extravagance of articles of enjoyment in the 'Sāla that (for a moment) he thought, "This is, indeed, Svarga', 'Devaloka', (amarāvati) the town of Indra, or the supreme achievement (in life) (R.V7/27). As to the appetite for sex of the Rākṣasas, Vālmīki records the history of the female progenitor of the Rākṣasas race — Sālakaṭankaṭā, the daughter of mythical Sandhyā, on which account the Rākṣasas are; Rajnī putras' and 'Rajnī caras'- it is said (R.VII4/24pp) that Sālakaṭankaṭā, immediately after delivering a child, was seized of the passion for amorous sport with Vidyutkeśa, her husband. So, she left the baby crying in a cave of Mandara and returned to her husband to sport with him. Umā happened to spot the child and pronounced the following boom: "Henceforth the Rākṣasas shall conceive in a day, bring forth (the child) in a day, and the child shall in a day be



Weapons in the period of the Rāmāyaṇa

furnished with the age of its mother.”— Mark! Like figures of speech, this is a poetic way of emphasizing a distinctive trait of a race — This weakness for sex of the Rākṣasas got panegyricized to such an extent that they bestowed upon it the status of a religious duty. Rāvaṇa declared before Sītā, 'O Timid Lady! To rape other wives or abduct them by force is, verily, the 'Dharma' of the Rākṣasas.' (R.V18/15) That such assertion about the Rākṣasas were not pure imagination of Vālmīki is proved, beyond doubt, by the fact that Dharma-śāstras define the Rākṣasas mode of marriage exactly in the same way as stated by Rāvaṇa above. Manu says, "The forcible abduction of a maiden from her home, while she cries out and weeps, after (her kinsmen) have been slain or wounded and their houses broken up, is called a 'Rākṣasas vivāha'" (III-33) The Rāmāyaṇa further confirms it by recording that Rāvaṇa, when he returned to Laṅkā

after his 'dig-vijaya' unloaded a cart-load of women whom he had captured in the course of his exploits. (R.VII 25/16-17). Further, about the galaxy of young damsels in the bedroom of Rāvaṇa, the poet observes, "...the residence of Rāvaṇa thronged with his Rākṣaṣi wives, as well as with princesses forcibly captured by him." (R.V7/5)

Strong attachment to desire coupled with an innate sub-consciousness of the finitude of human power leads one to the recognition of divine or super-natural power and invariably one is tempted to somehow enlist their good will to one's advantage. This basic human psychology can be discussed to be at the root of all primitive religions. No wonder, the Rākṣasas are also religious in this sense. In the name of sacrifice they practise sorcery, on which account the poet quite often calls them yātūdānas. On his entry into

Laṅkā Hanumān noticed guards (some) carrying handfuls of 'darbhas' for their weapons and (some) others having sacrificial fire-place for their arms. (R.V3/28) Likewise, in the name of penance, the Rākṣasas practise self-torture to coerce super-natural forces to grant them super-human powers. At the beginning of their career, Rāvaṇa and his brother too are said to have gained super-eminence through such penance only. The Rākṣasas are also described as worshippers of a female deity, Nikumbhilā, to please whom they drank and danced in her temple and, on special occasions, made offerings of human flesh also (R.V22/41). During the course of the war Indrajit and Rāvaṇa are actually shown to be engaged in rites of sorcery at the Nikumbhila temple.

Interestingly, Vālmīki characterizes Rākṣasas as men predominated by the intellect ('buddhi-pradhānān') (R.V4/12). It may be pointed out that Nature has provided two sets of instruments ('Karaṇaś') — external on 'bāhya' and internal or 'antaḥ' — to men to be of service to them in life. With the help of the external set a man perceives the 'Kārya-jagat', the phenomenal world, which is there present to the view. The 'Kāraṇa-jagat', the causal world, which is at the back of the 'Kārya-jagat' and is not directly perceivable with the help of the external instruments is comprehended by the intellect, an important member constituent of the internal set. Intellect enables man to discover on the one hand the principle of causality, where lies the very foundation of empirical existence, and on the other to analyze this knowledge in making life materially rich and comfortable. Spirituality mellows



Painting by Raja Ravi Verma, Rāvaṇa, killing Jatayu who was encountering Rāvaṇa to save Sītā, wife of Sri Rāma

intellectual knowledge by introducing principles of righteousness. But in the case of the Rākṣasas, who were divorced from spirituality, there was no other choice but to revel in the sensual world. In the 'Sabhā' of the Rākṣasas one of the members openly declared that 'Dharma' and 'Artha' were rooted in 'Kāma', while according to another member, the fruition of 'Dharma' itself was in 'Kāma' which was

the foundation of 'trivarga'. (R.VI colophon 9/5) In such a situation intellect so shapes its votary that his craving for more becomes insatiable and his inner constitution gets so contracted that he can neither think of sharing his gains with the other, nor is able to tolerate the idea of the other becoming his equal or superior in view of this psychology, it is perfectly understandable that the Rākṣasas were even suspicious of the penance and sacrifice of others and were even vigilant and prompt in liquidating persons engaged in such activities. No wonder, such behaviour of the Rākṣasas turned them into 'Loka-Kaṇṭakas, universal enemies.

In contradistinction to the Rākṣasas culture the Aryan culture, even in the early Vedic times, had declared its performance for spirituality. By constant meditation the Upaniṣadri had come to realize that all worldly objects were, no doubt, not untrue, but that they were neither the whole truth nor the ultimate truth. This realization had taught them to approach life in a spirit of synthesis. In the form of the 'aśrama-vyavasthā' they evolved for themselves a course of life, which offered opportunity to develop 'nivṛtti', a natural tendency of abstaining from worldly pleasures, but only after 'pravṛtti', a regulated course of engagement with the material world, which brought to them the experience of transience and hollowness of sensual pleasures. Under this scheme, every individual was required as a 'gṛhastha' to fulfill his duty towards the family and the society and himself experience gratification of the senses (Kāma)

through the acquisition of wealth ('artha'). But this onerous stage devolved upon him/her only often he/she in the earlier part of life, received intensive training and high education, living an austere life with an experienced preceptor in his hermitage. Later, with the advance of age, when the senses grew weak and mind got surfeited with the material pleasures one was advised to withdraw from the hustle and bustle of town life and repair to the calm and quiet corner of the forest for spiritual advancement. Here, one habituated one's body to all sorts of privations and mortifications by living a life of severe discipline. As the story of Viśvāmitra in the Beta-Kāṇḍa reveals, the sole effort of an individual was to attain the 'brahmarṣi' ideal by gaining complete control over passions.

Obviously, the Rākṣasa culture and the Aryan culture of Rāmāyaṇic times represented views and ways of life which were diametrically opposed to each other, leaving no scope for co-existence; a clash between the two was inevitable. Rāma-Rāvaṇa-Yuddha was therefore a culmination of conditions which had slowly and gradually reached a climax; surely, it was not a clash between two individuals initiated by the disfiguring of the sister of one and the abduction of the wife of another. That the Rāma-Kathā commands a universal and perennial appeal is due to the fact that Rāma and Rāvaṇa symbolise virtue and vice respectively. The Indian tradition is fully justified in commemorating and victory of Rāma over Rāvaṇa as the triumph of 'Dharma' over 'Adharma'.

The poetic personality of Vālmīki as revealed from the Sundara-Kāṇḍa of the Rāmāyaṇa

Dr. Ramashraya Sharma

Introduction:

Genius is a divine gift to few blessed ones. It is a creative faculty, which manifests itself in a variety of ways. Someone chisels a stone and produces an image of exquisite beauty; the other one draws a fascinating painting with the help of a brush and colours; yet another employs no external means, and only with

the graceful and suggestive movements of his limbs presents a dance-performance which thrills the viewers; a musician, with the modulations of sound, creates a symphony which captivates the hearts of his listeners; the poet creates poetry by the employment of words. The position of a poet among the artists is unique, for his medium is not gross like the stone, the canvas and the colours, or the limbs of the body; nor



A scene in the forest during the exile of Lord Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣhmaṇa

it is as abstract as the sound of music; he employs words and creates pictures of beauty, which are as concrete as the image of a sculpture or a painter and are, in addition, more coherent, comprehensive and conducive to spiritual health. Obviously, the artists create art-objects which vary from one another, yet, they are identical in the sense that they are all "beautiful presentations of the beautiful" in life.

No doubt, poetic genius is a faculty. But, for its blossoming and perfection it requires human effort. Sanskrit poetics rightly recognizes 'śakti' and 'vyutpatti' as absolutely necessary requisites of a poet, of which the former is an innate quality, while the latter is an acquired one. Daṇḍin has rightly pointed out that for the cultivation of 'naisargikī pratibhā', the inherent creative faculty, effort is needed in the form of clear and vast learning and untiring application.

There are many aspects of an individual's life, and each gives a distinctive mark to his personality. In case of a poet, sensibility to poetry are most dominant. Naturally, his personality comprises what is to be presented in

a composition, how it is to be presented and why it is to be presented. Vālmīki's genius, it is well-known, got awakened by the 'krauñca' incident. He was moved by the 'soka' of the 'krauñcī' and there was a sudden outpouring of 'śloka' poetry; the poet in him became instantly susceptible to 'the cry of the universe'. On reflection, he realized that the words that had slipped out of his lips in the state of excitement were arranged in a particular manner, which not only made them pleasing to the listener but were also capable of evoking the same sentiment in him. Vālmīki was directed by Brahmā to present

the Kāvya from the Rāma-Kathā, the outline of which had been narrated to him by Nārada. Thus, Rāmāyaṇa became the embodiment of the poetic personality of Vālmīki. A comprehensive study of the Rāmāyaṇa to unfold the poetic personality of the 'Ādikavi' is a great desideratum. The present paper is only a modest attempt towards that on the basis of the Sundara-Kāṇḍa.

The Rāmāyaṇa consists of seven Kāṇḍas or Books. The last Book, aptly termed the Uttara-Kāṇḍa, is a supplement appended to the main work in order to explain the background of the story and, principally,

to provide details about the past history of the hostile Rākṣasas. With the exception of the fifth Book, the titles of the earlier Books refer to the place or time of the events. The fifth book is entitled Sundara-Kāṇḍa or the Beautiful Book, which is a clear indication that the 'Ādikavi' was himself conscious of the exceptional poetic merit of this portion of his Kāvya.

The Sundara-Kāṇḍa presents only the subsidiary plot. But obviously, the subsidiary plot, in any composition, finds its existence in relation to the

main plot; it is there only because it helps the main plot. The progress of the main plot of the Rāmāyaṇa is held up because the whereabouts of the abductor of Sītā are not known. The dying Jatāyu had only mentioned the name of the abductor and Kabandha too, transformed in a divine figure, had only directed Rāma to meet Sugrīva was willing to help Rāma, but he too, had no knowledge of Rāvaṇa, his Laṅkā or his followers. For the first time some definite information about Rāvaṇa, his Laṅkā and Sītā was provided to the Vānara party (led by Aṅgada) by Sampātī. He told them that Rāvaṇa, resided in Lankā,

*When wisest Viṣṇu thus had given
His promise to the Gods of heaven,
He pondered in his secret mind
A suited place of birth to find,
Then he decreed, the lotus-eyed,
In four his being to divide,
And Daśaratha, gracious king,
He chose as sire from whom to spring.
That childless prince of high renown,
Who smote in war his foemen down,
At that same time with utmost care
Prepared the rite that wins an heir.(109)
Then Viṣṇu, fain on earth to dwell,
Bade the Almighty Sire farewell,
And vanished while a reverent crowd
Of Gods and saints in worship bowed.
-Vālmīki*

which was situated on the southern coast of the sea and that they could see Sītā, held captive by Rāvaṇa in his inner apartments, only after crossing the vast expanse of the sea. The theme of the Sundara-Kāṇḍa is the removal of this hurdle so that the main plot resumes its desired movement.

The subject-matter of the Sundara-Kāṇḍa is the 'search of Sītā by Hanumān. It covers five main points, namely (i) Hanumān's journey to Laṅkā across the sea; (ii) Hanumān's search for Sītā in the palace of Rāvaṇa; (iii) Hanumān's search of Sītā in Aśoka-vana, the Royal Garden attached to the palace; (iv) Hanumān's picking up a row with the Rākṣasas for strategic considerations; and (v) Hanumān reporting first to his companions and next to Rāma and Sugrīva about the success of his mission. Each of the above points further comprises several other sub-points, resulting in the expansion of 'search of Sītā' to sixty-six cantos for which Vālmīki has invited ungenerous criticism of modern scholars, who are of the opinion that the poet has added to the bulk of the Book

by unnecessary details and repetitions. On careful examination, it may be stated, such a criticism is wholly unwarranted.

The opening canto of the Sundara-Kāṇḍa contains one hundred and ninety verses. The first seventy-four verses describe the physical and mental preparation of Hanumān for the great adventure and the impact that the tremendous jump had on the environment. The next hundred verses describe the three encounters of Hanumān with Maināka, Surasā and Sirṅhikā. Hanumān had committed himself to a very onerous undertaking and he had pledged before his companions that he would straightaway

go to Laṅkā without stopping anywhere on the way. The meeting with Maināka was meant to vindicate Hanumān's sincerity to the pledge; the encounter with Surasā was prompted by the Devas to test Hanumān's valour the encounter with Sirṅhikā was real danger to which Hanumān reacted with prompt severity. The remaining verses describe the landing of Hanumān on the sea coast and a distant view of Laṅkā. The following four cantos describe Laṅkā, and the next two cantos, the Royal palace, particularly the inner apartments of Rāvaṇa. Here Hanumān has a view of the exceedingly graceful figure of Mandodarī, whom Hanumān mistakes to be Sītā. But

very soon he corrects himself and is overtaken by a sense of despondency on not finding Sītā in the palace of Rāvaṇa. Thus ends the first round of Hanumān's search for Sītā. It extends upto the end of the eleventh canto.

Towards daybreak Hanumān gets a view of the Aśoka-vana. There, in the mighty and majestic Caitya-Prāsāda, he sees Sītā surrounded by female guards. Just then, he observes Rāvaṇa with his retinue approaching Sītā.

A dialogue follows between Rāvaṇa and Sītā, at the end of which Rāvaṇa leaves in a huff, himself pronouncing a threat upon Sītā and directing the guards to anyhow compel Sītā to yield to his wishes. The guards try their tricks but seeing no success propose to make a meal of her. This terrifies Sītā who is led to entertain thoughts of committing suicide. Trijatā's dream and some auspicious omens, however, seem to discourage her from taking such a step.

It was natural for Hanumān to start his search for Sītā in the palace of Rāvaṇa. It was again natural that he saw Rāvaṇa there. This helped him to identify

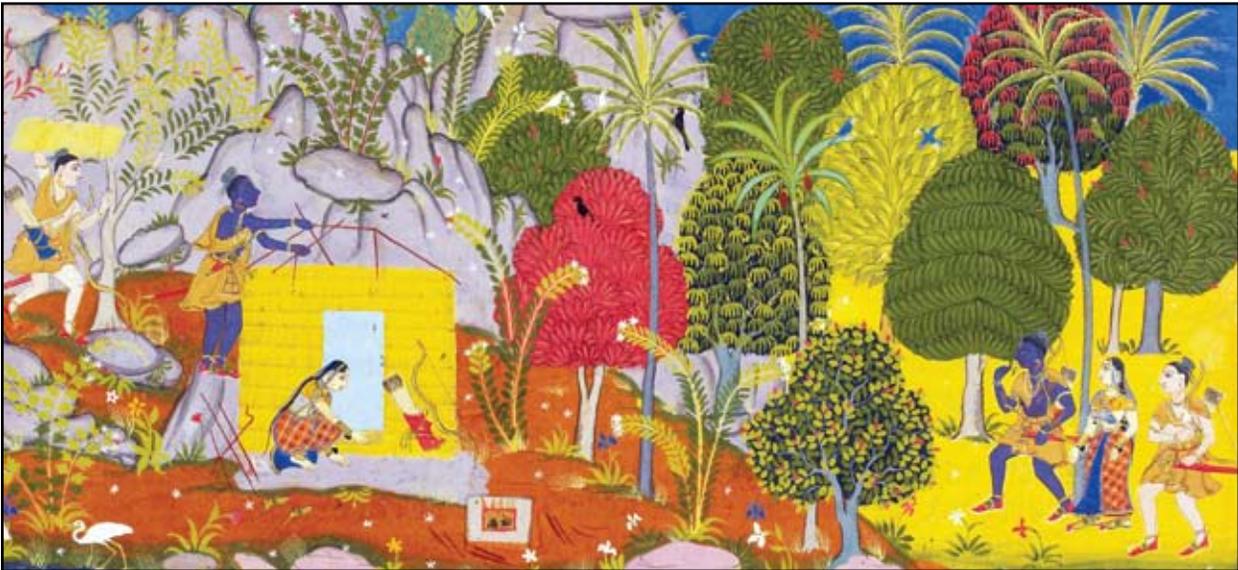
*"Sprung from Pulastya's race there came
A giant known by Rāvaṇ's name.
Once favoured by the Eternal Sire
He plagues the worlds in ceaseless ire,
For peerless power and might renowned,
By giant bands encompassed round.
Viśravas for his sire they hold,
His brother is the Lord of Gold.
King of the giant hosts is he,
And worst of all in cruelty.
This Rāvaṇ's dread commands impel
Two demons who in might excel,
Mārīcha and Suvāhu hight,
To trouble and impede the rite."*

Rāvana when later he approached Sītā in the Aśoka-vāṭikā. The dialogue between Rāvaṇa and Sītā helped Hanumān to be sure about the identification of Sītā. This was necessary, for he had been duped earlier by the wrong identification of Mandodarī as Sītā's virtuous character on Hanumān. It also made Hanumān conscious of the urgency of speedy action on the part of Rāma for her recovery. Sītā's bewailings made it imperative for Hanumān to introduce himself to Sītā and to console her. This was the end of the second round of Hanumān's search and the commencement of the third and the last one. The round covers another sixteen cantos.

Sitting on the branch of the tree, Hanumān attracts the attention of Sītā by reciting the names of Daśāratha and Rāma along with a brief narration of the events that had taken place at Janasthāna. He assures Sītā of his identity as a Rāma-dūta by presenting the signet ring of Rāma. In return he asks for a token, which could assure Rāma of his meeting with her. Sītā in reply, narrates the Jayanta-kathā and gives the cūḍā-mani. This marks the end of the third round and the accomplishment of Hanumān's assignment. In this round there are some repetitions

on the part of Sītā; But they are no defects, for they manifest the mental state of Sītā; in the beginning she was suspicious of Hanumān's identity, and later, she was nervous at the prospect of a friend from her husband's camp leaving her so soon. Thus the poet comes to the end of the thirty-eighth canto.

Hanumān's assignment was to search Sītā. But as a conscientious emissary he examines the situation and feels that the policy of 'sāma' (conciliation) could be of no avail with the Rākṣasas, that the policy of 'dāna' (liberality) could not be effective in case of those who were already overflowing in wealth and that people proud of their strength could not be brought round by sowing dissensions; hence, the only course available against such people was that of 'daṇḍa' (war). He, therefore, decides that the mandate of his Master would be truly carried out only when he returned with an objective ascertainment of the relative (military) strength of his own side and that of the enemy. To achieve this objective he molests the Royal Garden and the Caitya-prāsāda and thus impels Rāvana to bring forth his army to fight. During the fight Hanumān creates panic among the Rākṣasas by making boastful announcements. When



On the right are Rāma with his wife Sītā and brother Lakṣhmaṇa entering the forest where they will spend their exile. On the left the three work on constructing their hut. Note how Rāma and Lakṣhmaṇa's clothing has changed since the palace scenes, as they now wear the garments of bark that Kaikeyi demanded in her request from Daśāratha

he is caught in the Brahmāstra, employed by Indrajit, he welcomes it, in the hope that it would provide him an opportunity to meet the king in Council. His hope is amply rewarded, for he perceives there the traitor in Vibhīṣana. Rāvaṇa orders capital punishment for Hanumān, but Vibhīṣana's intercession succeeds in getting it reduced to mutilation of limb. Hanumān puts to good avail the burning of his tail by the Rākṣasas by causing damage to the fortification of the enemy and by spreading panic among the people. With this, Hanumān feels that his mission was wholly fulfilled. For a while Hanumān is terrified at the thought that in his enthusiasm to turn Lankā into a burning inferno he had brought about the death of Sītā too, and thus ruined the cause of his Master. But the conversation of the divine minstrels, who were wondering at the miracle that Sītā was unscathed while the entire town was burning, consoles him. Hanuman now has his last meeting with Sītā and with this finally ends the search for Sītā. This supplement of 'the search' occupies sixteen cantos and brings the Book to the end of the fifty-fourth canto.

The last twelve cantos deal with the winding up of the theme of the Sundara-Kāṇḍa. The return journey of Hanumān is described only in twenty-eight verses, and the poet does not fail to mention Maināka greeting Hanumān. Practically a summary of all what had passed earlier is given in the form of a detailed report by Hanumān to his companions. The fellow-Vānaras get excited and overjoyed to learn of the success of the mission. Aṅgada, the leader of the party, is over-enthusiastic. He proposes to his mates that they better raid Laṅkā and meet Rāma along with Sītā. His proposal is, however, turned down by the wise Jāmbavān, who points out that their mission was only to discover Sītā, not to recover her. There is a lurking fear in the minds of the Vānaras that they had crossed the time-limit (of one month) stipulated by Sugrīva for the search, and Sugrīva was known to be harsh in inflicting punishments. To ascertain the mind of Sugrīva the Vānara-party makes a forced entry into the Royal Honey-grove. In gay-abandon the Vānaras not only drink honey to

their hearts' content but also molest the grove and manhandle the guards. This is a message to Sugrīva that the party had returned successful in its mission. He not only overlooks their transgression but grants them free use of honey in the grove and asks them to present themselves in his audience as soon as possible. In the end Hanumān presents his account before Rāma and Sugrīva.

What impresses most in the above account is the fast and spontaneous progression of the action. There is not a single incident which is without significance or which does not evolve naturally from its data or from one another. As noted above, there is a long list of events, but there is remarkable unity of time — the entire course of events covering roughly two days and two nights, without any break. The action comprises a variety of incidents and is spread over a long range of space. But there are no gaps in between and no inconsistencies between what precedes and what follows. The details have been arranged with a striking sense of balance and proportion. There are, no doubt, certain events which appear to be supernatural and unusual, e.g., the flight of Hanumān, the emergence of Maināka from the sea, the assumption of different forms by Hanumān and the like. But such is the force of conviction of the poet that all this impresses as orderly and natural in the circumstances in which it is presented. In fact, the supernatural elements is an integral part of heroic poetry.

Moreover, the conditions of oral recitation necessitate the employment of such techniques and devices for arresting the interest of the audience. "The audience", as Dr. Bowra observes, "knows that they (such devices) exist, expects them to be used, greets them as old acquaintances, and applauds the poet who uses them expertly." Thus, in summing up, it can be confidently said about the story in the Sundara-Kāṇḍa that it is fresh, interesting and artistically told by the poet.

Characters:

Action is intimately related to character; it gives shape to character, and in turn is shaped by character. In a

literary composition a number of people of certain given dispositions are introduced in such a manner that a clash of interest arises among them, and this gives rise to diverse action. One or more characters strive to achieve a particular goal, while someone else, aided by his associates, resists this. This in a nutshell constitutes the story of that composition. In the Rāmāyaṇa, virtue represented by Rāma comes into clash with vice represented by Rāvaṇa. The latter, in retaliation to the rough treatment meted out to his sister Śurpanakhā by Rāma and his brother, abducts Rāma's wife and holds her captive in Laṅkā. The action in the Sundara-Kāṇḍa, as shown above, is an account of Sītā's search by Hanumān. The characters directly involved in the action of the Sundara-Kāṇḍa are only three, viz., Hanumān, Rāvaṇa and Sītā.

Hanumān :

The principal character in the Sundara-Kāṇḍa is, of course, Hanumān. He undertakes the search, carries it out, meets Sītā, and reports about his findings, first to his companions and later to Rāma and Sugrīva. He was eminently fit for such an undertaking, for, as the celestials observed, one who possessed fortitude, foresight, sagacity and skill never suffered failure in one's undertakings. Moreover, his master Sugrīva had full confidence in him, for he knew that dogged perseverance, intelligence, diligence, valour and learning were deeply embedded in none other than Hanumān. Hanumān was a Vānara begotten by the Wind God in Añjanā, the (so called) wife of Kesarī. Hanumān

took pride in referring to his birth from the Wind God. Hanumān was huge and strong in constitution and exceedingly nimble in action. The poet refers to him as 'parvata-samkāśah', 'vajra-saṁhananah' and 'manah-sampātavikramah.' He possessed the rare gift of assuming different forms at will. The poet calls him 'Kāmarūpi' and 'Kāmarūpadhrk. Rāvaṇa was impressed by the exceptional terrific speed, energy,

proWess, intelligence, courage and capacity to change shapes of Hanumān. So was Sītā. Among the Vānaras, he seems to be an exceptional person who had studied the Sanskrit language and lore. In his speech and conduct he evinced thorough knowledge of state-craft, specially the duties of a Plenipotentiary envoy, In the interest of his Master's cause, he decided of his own to initiate a fight with the Rākṣasas and to meet Rāvaṇa in his council.

Hanumān was a past-master in the employment of speech, best suited to the occasion. He employed gracious speech in conversation with (personified) Samundra and Maināka; he adopted conciliatory and stern speech while talking to Surasā and Sirṁhikā respectively; he resorted to a speech

which inspired confidence and assurance while in conversation with Sītā, and in the Council of Rāvaṇa he was frank, fearless and stiff in his speech. He boldly and significantly pointed out to Rāvaṇa that he would not be able to protect his life against Rāma, a man and Sugrīva, a Vānara, for they were not covered under the immunity from death that he had secured for himself by severe penances. Hanuman was, no

Then thus the king addressed the sage:

*"No power have I, my lord, to wage
War with this evil-minded foe;
Now pity on my darling show,
And upon me of hapless fate,
For thee as God I venerate.*

Gods, spirits, bards of heavenly birth, (145)

*The birds of air, the snakes of earth
Before the might of Rāvaṇ quail,
Much less can mortal man avail.*

*He draws, I hear, from out the breast
The valour of the mightiest.*

*No, ne'er can I with him contend,
Or with the forces he may send.*

*How can I then my darling lend,
Godlike, unskilled in battle? No,
I will not let my young child go.*

*Foes of thy rite, those mighty ones,
Sunda and Upasunda's sons,
Are fierce as Fate to overthrow:*

I will not let my young child go.

Mārīcha and Suvāhu fell

Are valiant and instructed well.

One of the twain I might attack,

With all my friends their lord to back."

doubt, extremely cultured in his speech and behaviour. But this was the result of learning and training. In unguarded moments his rough Vānara nature asserted itself, and he acted most indiscreetly. At the sight of Mandodarī, whom he mistook for Sītā, Hanumān felt overjoyed and started releasing 'kilkilā', jumping and frolicking, and kissing his tail - the typical traits of a Vānara. He was ridiculed by Sītā for his Vānara nature when he offered to instantly carry her on his back to Rāma. To coax Sītā about Rāma's love for her he was over-indulgent in describing Rāma's sorrow, and to convince her about the truthfulness of his account he swore by mountains, fruits and roots. He himself cursed his fickle Vānara nature at the thought that in his recklessness he had himself burnt alive Sītā, and thus destroyed the cause of his Master. The poet sometimes conveys the 'kapitva' of Hanumān by presenting certain pictures in glaring contrast to the physical and social environment of the Vānaras. Thus through the dazzlement of Hanumān at the sight of the luxurious way of life of the Rākṣasas the poet presents in contrast the simple and unpretentious life of the Vānaras. Likewise, by showing the unflinching devotion and dedication of Sītā to her husband the poet elicits the appreciation and admiration of Hanumān for her, because it presented a glaring contrast to the character of women in Vānara culture. In fact, the virtuous character of Sītā had a very deep impression on Hanumān, who became her devotee even in preference over Rāma. At the time of parting he told Sītā that he would faithfully report to Rāma everything that she had done and spoken in his presence.

Hanumān was a religious and righteous person. Before taking the leap to cross the ocean he remembered various gods and offered them his homage. He did the same more entreatingly when, after meeting failure in his task in the palace, he was entering the Aśoka-vāṭikā. As is well-known, Hanumān was a brahmacārī. It grievously distressed him that he had to survey someone's seraglio with its inmates confidently asleep. He feared that it would result in a serious loss

of merit. But he soon consoled himself by arguing within that he did so to discharge his duty; after all, a lady could be searched only among ladies. Moreover, he recalled that it was the inclination of the mind which determined whether an act was a virtue or a sin, and that his mind was completely unperturbed. There are many instances in the Sundara-Kāṇḍa to show that reflection and discernment were the guiding principles of Hanumān's behaviour.

Rāvaṇa:

The appearance of Rāvaṇa in the Sundara-Kāṇḍa is comparatively brief, but he is more important than even Hanumān, for the entire action of this Kāṇḍa is caused by Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā. Rāvaṇa was the son of Viśravā, a renowned sage. But his mother was Kaikasī, a member of an aboriginal tribe governed by matrilineal tradition. Naturally, she exercised a more dominating influence in the shaping of the individuality of Rāvaṇa. No doubt, being born and bred in his father's 'āśrama' Rāvaṇa was conversant with Vedic lore, but he did not imbibe the spirit and values of Vedic culture; he took pride in declaring himself a Rākṣasa and in promoting and practising the values of Rākṣasa culture, which viewed life as an opportunity for eating, drinking and merry-making.

In complexion Rāvaṇa was dark like a cloud, or a heap of beans. His limbs were enormous in size and stout and sturdy. His arms bore scars of the tusks of Airāvata, of 'vajra' of Indra and of the disc of Viṣṇu. It seems, his constitution was so symmetrical and attractive that it presented a handsome appearance. The poet describes him as Cupid, who had laid aside his bow. Rāvaṇa's appearance was majestic, inspiring awe in the onlooker. When Hanumān first saw him asleep in the palace he felt so scared that he immediately withdrew from his sight. Rāvaṇa's personality, when he presided over the Council, was so impressive that Hanumān was filled with admiration for him.

The character of Rāvaṇa has a bright side as well as a dark one. Only two generations above Rāvaṇa the



Lord Hanumān

Rākṣasas had been forcibly driven out of Laṅkā with bag and baggage by the Devas, led by Viṣṇu. They had to seek shelter in the Pātāla loka, ostensibly the sea-coast, to which presumably they originally belonged. To fulfill the ambitions of his mother and his father Rāvaṇa put tremendous exertions; he successfully led military expeditions and reclaimed from the Devas the glory of the Rākṣasas and established himself as a super power in contemporary history. But the anticlimax in Rāvaṇa's career and character commenced with his extraordinary achievements. He became arrogant, self-indulgent, boastful and of pampered ego.

The first half of the Sundara-Kāṇḍa portrays Rāvaṇa as a libidinous character. He was seen by Hanumān sunk in deep sleep after a long session of music, dance, drinks and amorous sports. In his next appearance he is seen approaching Sītā, to whom he was passionately attached and towards whom, on awaking, his thoughts were directed. He courted her in the most loving terms and tried to coax her by admiring her beauty and by offering to make her the chief of his queens. He tried to lure her by his wealth and promised to confer rich gifts on her father Janaka and other Kinsmen. He tried to impress her by making references to his riches and prowess and appealed to her not to be indifferent to her beauty and youth. He made disparaging reference to Rāma, who was living like a destitute in the forest, being deprived of all his rights. When rebuffed by Sītā in the most insulting terms he was filled with a fit of anger and reminded her of the deadline after which she was to be cut into pieces by the chefs, for his breakfast.

In the second half of the Sundara-Kāṇḍa Rāvaṇa appears in the role of a ruler. Haughtiness, which had taken full possession of him, made him behave in a most reckless manner, resulting in one folly after the other. The guards of the Royal Garden reported to him not only the molestation of the garden by a gigantic Vānara but also the fact that he had confidential conversation with Sītā. But Rāvaṇa acted in a very casual manner and deputed the Kiṅkaras to capture him. He was not seized with the seriousness of the situation till prince Akṣa was killed by Hanumān. Now, he deputed Indrajit and impressed upon him the gravity of the situation. But again, in the Council, infatuation returned to him, He made no effort to cross-examine Hanumān. He summarily passed orders of capital punishment for Hanumān. His greatest failing as a ruler was that under his nose Vibhīṣaṇa was harbouring nefarious ambitions and Rāvaṇa was most negligently oblivious of it. Vibhīṣaṇa had, through his wife and daughter,

established rapport with Sītā, and, in the Council, he interceded for Hanumān, who was de-facto a spy but was tactfully posing as an envoy. Vibhīṣaṇa's argument also was very queer; he impatiently wanted to invite a war for the Rākṣasas, conveniently forgetting that in politics war was a measure to be resorted to only when all other measures had failed. Rāvana's decision to set fire to the tail of Hanumān was a decision taken totally in disregard to consequences, specially in view of the exploits of Hanumān that he had witnessed only a short time ago.

Sītā :

Sītā is a sullen figure in the Sundara-Kāṇḍa, and naturally so, because her abductor had kept her a prisoner, away from her husband. She was seen by Hanumān wearing a single braid of hair and dressed in a fine, but untidy cloth. As was customary in that period, she was observing the vow of separation and on that account she wore no external ornamentation and was greatly reduced in body due to regular fasts. She presented a very pitiable appearance, for her eyes were full of tears and she was continually releasing heavy sighs of sorrow. But her natural grace, rendered more luminous by the lustre of her

character had not departed from her. By the brilliance of her personality she was (as though) dispelling (nocturnal) darkness all around her. In order to convey a sort of ethereal character of her personality the poet employs a number of abstract 'upamānas'—standards of comparison—for her, for example, memory enshrouded with doubt, prosperity razed (by adverse turn of circumstances), faith shattered (by blasphemy), hope dashed to pieces, success lost by obstacles, intelligence trained (by perversion) and

fame soiled by false censure. Removed from all joys and surrounded by untold perils, Sītā was placed in very trying circumstances. Hanumān felt that it was only her love (for Rāma) that was providing sustenance for her survival.

Love was not merely sustaining Sītā's life; it was bestowing upon her courage to endure all the hardships imposed upon her by the change of circumstances and also boldness to face with dignity the crude and coarse behaviour of the enemy. She rejected with contempt the advances of Rāvaṇa. When Rāvaṇa

approached her in the Aśoka-vana, as behoved a lady of noble family possessed of high education and culture, she tried to make an appeal to the moral conscience of Rāvaṇa and expressed her unflinching devotion to Rāma, her lord. She even advised Rāvaṇa to make peace with Rāma, her lord. She even advised Rāvaṇa to make peace with Rāma for his personal safety and for the safety of the Rākṣasas. Rāvaṇa, however, got enraged by the words of Sītā and instantly shed away the cloak of clemency that he was so far reining in. He became harsh and threatening. Undaunted by his threat Sītā, in her reply, became more stubborn and even abusive. She called him a

thief and a coward, who stole her only after contriving her husband's absence from the cottage. She termed him a (tiny) here in comparison to Rāma, who was a mighty elephant.

It needs to be pointed out here that Sītā's staunch devotion for Rāma was a great puzzle for Rāvaṇa, for in Rāvaṇa's estimation Rāma was weak, resourceless, destitute, living a wretched life in the forest being deprived of his rights by his father. In fact, it hurt his

*Facing the east, the glorious saint
Pure from all spot of earthly taint,
To Rāma, with delighted mind,
That noble host of spells consigned.
He taught the arms, whose lore is won
Hardly by Gods, to Raghu's son.
He muttered low the spell whose call
Summons those arms and rules them all
And, each in visible form and frame,
Before the monarch's son they came.
They stood and spoke in reverent guise
To Rāma with exulting cries:
"O noblest child of Raghu, see,
Thy ministers and thralls are we."
With joyful heart and eager hand
Rāma received the wondrous band,
And thus with words of welcome cried:
"Aye present to my will abide."
Then hastened to the saint to pay
Due reverence, and pursued his way*

ego that despite his immense wealth and matchless prowess he was not able to dethrone Rāma from the prestigious position that he occupied in the heart of Sītā. This humiliation, the pinch of which he incessantly suffered in his sub-consciousness, explains why he did not prevail upon Sītā by force, even though she remained in his captivity for nearly a year.

In separation from Rāma, Sītā was, indeed, very sad. The crowd of uncultured, uncouth and ugly female guards surrounding her day and night made her life all the more miserable. In such circumstances, Hanumān's offer to deport her to Rāma was an irresistible one. Sītā's rejection of this offer and the reasons cited for the same speak volumes about her character. She kept her cool and pointed out to Hanumān that such an elopement would bring disgrace to her husband's name and fame. She declared in unequivocal terms that she would like to go from Lañkā only when Rāma recovered her from there after killing Rāvaṇa, along with his followers, in an open fight. A similar

illustration of her composure and sharpness of intellect is found in her comment on the state of Rāma reported to her by Hanumān. She did not feel elated at the sorrowful state of Rāma in separation from her; rather, she felt worried, for such a mental state was averse for enterprise, which was the need of the hour. To raise the spirits of Rāma, therefore, she reminded him through Hanumān of the Jayanta episode at Citrakūta. Her specific message to Rāma was "For my sake, against a mere crow, you employed the 'brāhmastra'. How do you then, suffer the enemy who has carried me away from you? As a token she sent her head-dress, which she had received from Daśaratha at the time of marriage. It was an emblem of her personal honour and at the same time of the family of Rāma.

Next to purity and sincerity of core, what impresses in Sītā is her knowledge and understanding of political matters. She was extremely vigilant and cautious. She did not take Hanumān or his words on their face value. She interrogated Hanumān about his acquaintance



Traditional Thai painting of the Rāmāyaṇa

with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa; she satisfied herself about the alliance of Rāma with the Vāranas and about the strength of the latter. But once she had satisfied herself she reposed full confidence in Hanumān and felt worried about his safety and security. She passed on to Hanumān a significant hint about Vibhīṣaṇa, which the latter found amply corroborated in the Council of Rāvana. Hanumān later put it to great use by emphatically pleading in favour of Vibhīṣaṇa when he approached Rāma to join his camp.

Sītā was bold, prudent and of firm determination. Nevertheless, she was a human being. The company of a friend coming from her husband's camp gave her joy and consolation. She was well aware of the perils involved in Hanumān's staying in the metropolis of the enemy. Yet, she felt nervous at the idea that he was preparing to depart from her. She expressed her nervousness over and over again and even requested him to stay for a day, if possible. Likewise, a fleeting thought of committing suicide after the threat of Rāvana and of the barbarous Rākṣasī-guards, only shows that she was a real character, not an ideal in the imagination of the poet.

The above analysis of the principal characters of the *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* reveals that Vālmīki had penetrating insight into human character. No doubt his Vānara and Rākṣasa characters bear appearances which appear to be unhuman, but their hearts pulsate with the same feelings and emotions which are common to human beings. This makes such characters real, not mythical, in the imagination of the audience. The same is true of the divine and semi-divine characters like Samudra, Maināka, Surasā and Sirṁhikā (that could not be examined for want of space). Vālmīki provides graphic descriptions of his characters. He takes special pains to pinpoint whatever is individual and characteristic in the physical aspect or demeanour of a character at any critical moment so that it is conspicuously impressed on the mind of the audience. The characters of Vālmīki are drawn not only from the different strata of the society but also from different cultures. In respect of dress, demeanour

and disposition, Vālmīki keeps in mind the cultural and social distinctions of his characters and observes consistency about it; variations are made only when psychology demands them. The *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* can neither be labelled as a 'caritra-pradhāna' Book nor a 'kathā-pradhāna' one. It is full of action and contains the element of marvel to a large measure. But at the same time its characters are real men and women, who do not move as puppets propelled from outside by the director; they feel, speak and act in accordance with their dispositions, and influence the course of action, rather than being merely driven by the force of circumstance. No doubt, there is not much of characterization in the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the modern sense, yet, the characters of Vālmīki are not static; they grow with new experiences.

Dialogue and soliloquy are inseparable from characters. Vālmīki knew that dialogues create a dramatic effect even in a 'śravya-kāvya.' in the *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* he has introduced a number of short and long dialogues which not only create interest for the audience but also take them deep into the recesses of the heart of the characters, establishing their intimacy with them. In a 'dṛṣya kāvya', dialogues generally contribute to the movement of the plot. In the *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* dialogues help the progress of the plot only indirectly; they mainly help the elucidation of character.

Vālmīki has made a very effective use of soliloquy in the *Sundara-Kāṇḍa*. Generally he has employed this device in between two actions. It provides an opportunity to the character to reflect on what has just passed and on what is likely to follow, or on what remains to be done and how. Hanumān and Sītā have made frequent use of this device in the *Sundara-Kāṇḍa*.

Sentiment :

Characters are the repositories of emotions, which are evoked in them when they come into association with others and when they are faced with special situations. Emotions, in their train, bring experiences of pleasures and pain. Life, indeed, is a multi-coloured

His tortured senses all astray,
 While the hapless monarch lay,
 Then slowly gathering thought and strength
 To Viśvámitra spoke at length:
 "My son is but a child, I ween;
 This year he will be just sixteen.
 How is he fit for such emprise,
 My darling with the lotus eyes?
 A mighty army will I bring
 That calls me master, lord, and king,
 And with its countless squadrons fight
 Against these rovers of the night.
 My faithful heroes skilled to wield
 The arms of war will take the field;
 Their skill the demons' might may break;
 Rāma, my child, thou must not take.
 I, even I, my bow in hand,
 Will in the van of battle stand,
 And, while my soul is left alive,
 With the night-roaming demons strive.
 Thy guarded sacrifice shall be
 Completed, from all hindrance free.
 Thither will I my journey make:
 Rāma, my child, thou must not take.
 A boy unskilled, he knows not yet
 The bounds to strength and weakness set.
 No match is he for demon foes
 Who magic arts to arms oppose.
 O chief of saints, I have no power,
 Of Rāma left, to live one hour:
 Mine aged heart at once would break;
 Rāma, my child, thou must not take.
 Nine thousand circling years have fled
 With all their seasons o'er my head,
 And as a hard-won boon, O sage,
 These sons have come to cheer mine age.
 My dearest love amid the four
 Is he whom first his mother bore,
 Still dearer for his virtues' sake:
 Rāma, my child, thou must not take.
 But if, unmoved by all I say,
 Thou needs must bear my son away,

Let me lead with him, I entreat,
 A four-fold army(144) all complete.
 What is the demons' might, O Sage?
 Who are they? What their parentage?
 What is their size? What beings lend
 Their power to guard them and befriend?
 How can my son their arts withstand?
 Or I or all my armed band?
 Tell me the whole that I may know
 To meet in war each evil foe
 Whom conscious might inspires with pride."

texture designed with a variety of emotions. But in a literary composition only one emotion is developed as a dominant one; various others appear as subsidiaries only to promote the primary one, both by directly supporting it and also by opposing it. In actual life, emotions are individual in character, because they arise in the heart of a particular person in a particular situation. But in a literary composition, when they receive the touch of the magical wand in the form of the poet's art, they undergo a total transformation; they lose their particularity and assume a universality; they become the experiences of all the recipients of poetic art. In the process, they undergo a catharsis, which makes them solely delightful, without even a tinge of pain or sorrow. Indian poetics gives the name of 'Rasa' to such universalized emotion.

Vālmīki flourished in a heroic age which had a special appeal for action and for the honour which comes from it. He picked up a character to be the hero of his poem, who was moved in life by the self-assertive principle, which inspired him for brave doings, for courting risks and for winning praise. Rāma, it is well-known, deliberately invited confrontation with the Rākṣasas and vowed to bring an end to their atrocities. Obviously, he and his associates were animated by a spirit of exemplary enthusiasm, 'utsāha', to uphold virtue and oppose vice. In the Sundara-Kāṇḍa, Hanumān, an emissary of Rāma, exuberantly displays this spirit. The miseries of Sītā and the evil doings and designs of Rāvaṇa serve as excitants to heighten this

spirit and to manifest it in action even with greater tenacity. Actions like the flight of Hanumān across the sea, events like the emergence of Maināka from the waters of the sea, or the characters like Sirīhikā, capable of catching a creature in the sky by the shadow in the water, might appear miraculous, but, as Viśvanātha has pointed out in the *Sāhitya-darpana*, they become not only easily acceptable but also relishable to the listening audience, for the emotions underlying them are perfectly natural. Thus, the prevailing sentiment in the *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* is *Vīra*, which is an auxiliary of the 'angī-rasa' of the entire *Rāmāyaṇa-kāvya*.

Language :

Language is an important element of poetry. In fact, in a śravya-kāvya it is the most important one, because the poet has to present the picture of an object, or a character, or an action, or an emotion solely through the 'spoken word', and his success or failure in commanding the attention and interest of his audience also depends on the dexterous use of language. The poet has to so employ words that his audience does not suffer from a feeling of incompleteness and, at the same time, is able to concentrate on the point or points that the poet considers important. Every organic poem inevitably consists of a variety of material, and correspondingly its language has also to vary. In the *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* one can easily notice three such variations of language in the presentation (a) of descriptions, (b) of dialogues and (c) of narrations. For want of space a detailed study cannot be attempted here. However, attention is drawn to the chief characteristics in each of these categories.

(a) Descriptions: The bulk of a 'prabandha-kāvya' consists of descriptions. In the *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* there are descriptions of nature, of *Lankā*, of battles and of characters. In this *Kāṇḍa* the poet is preoccupied with the primary action, namely, search for *Sītā*, and therefore he neither finds opportunities nor leisure to indulge in elaborate descriptions of nature, for

example of the changes caused in the *Mahendra* mountain by the terrific pressure of *Hanumān*. Canto four of this Book presents a very beautiful description of 'Candrodaya.' Canto thirteen has an equally beautiful description of the *Aśoka-vāṭikā* looking additionally attractive by artificial trees, birds and animals, all carved in gold, silver and precious gems. These descriptions are figurative and couched in a language rendered extremely musical by the use of alliteration and even rhyme.

The Book contains lengthy descriptions of battle scenes. These are mostly stereotyped and even boring to modern taste. But the action involved in them perhaps had a strong appeal for the audience of *Vālmīki*. Moreover, some of the verses presenting a graphic picture of a warrior engaged in action seem to have a universal appeal; for example the following picture of *Hanumān* bringing to death the *Rākṣasas* by the employment of natural weapons: *talenābhīhanat kāmścit, pādaiḥ kāmścit parantapaḥ, muṣṭibhiścāhanat kāmścin nakhaiḥ kāmścit vyadārayat, pramamāthorasā kāmścid, ūrubhyāmaparānapi, kecittasyaiva nādena tatraiva patitā bhūvi.*

Most attractive are the descriptions of characters in a particular situation. *Vālmīki* does not revel in cap-a-pie descriptions of his characters but he takes special pains to underline some special feature in the figure of disposition of his character in a particular situation. Thus the following picture of *Sītā* deeply impresses upon her anxiety and effort to save herself from the evil eye of *Rāvaṇa*. The poet describes her : *urubhyāmudaram chādyā bāhubhyām ca payodharau, upaviṣṭā viśālākṣi rudati varavarṇini.* Equally remarkable is the description of *Hanumān's* posture as he was preparing to take the giant leap. Sometimes, the poet makes very effective use of contrast for highlighting the beauty of a particular character, e.g., before introducing the splendid figure of *Mandodari* the poet describes a galaxy of sleeping beauties. The verse under reference is: *tāsamekānta vinyaste śayānām śayane śubhe...*

gaurīm kanakavarṇābhāmiṣṭāmantaḥ pureśvarim... By such contrasts Vālmīki very effectively conveys his appreciation or the reverse of it regarding physical beauty and beauty of character. Mistaking Mandodari to be Sītā on account of her physical charms, Hanuman expressed his joy by jumping and frolicking, but when he actually saw Sītā in the Aśoka-vaṭikā he had only a moderate expression of joy in the form of a few tears trickling down from his eyes. Likewise, the poet expresses his repulsion about the wealth and glory of the Rākṣasas by such expressions as 'citāstha iva pāvakaḥ' and 'pradipta'.

(b) Dialogues: The language of dialogues in this Book is always very natural and simple. It invariably echoes the character in whose mouth it is placed. Sītā's words to Rāvaṇa, as Vālmīki himself says, were "vṛtta-śauṇḍirya-garvita" and the words of Rāvaṇa to Sītā were expressive of his lascivious character. The words of Samudra and Maināka were expressive of their affection and admiration for Hanumān and those of Sirmhikā expressed cruelty and crookedness.

(c) Narration: The narrative verses have an artless flow, e.g. the opening verse of the Book — Tato Rāvaṇaitāyāḥ Sitāyāḥ Śatrukarṣaṇaḥ iyeṣa padamanveṣṭum cāranacārite pathi. Generally the opening verses of the cantos are of this character. They connect the present account with the past account by such words as 'tataḥ', 'tasys', 'tatra', 'atha', etc. and take the account further.

In summing up it can be safely said that Vālmīki's language is of easy comprehension, sweet to the ears and chaste. Being arranged in metrical feet, it is capable of being sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument. Spontaneous alliteration provides it an additional charm. Like his metres the figures of speech of Vālmīki are free of encumbrance and therefore they embellish the language without appearing burdensome in any manner. Vālmīki

rarely resorts to artificial metaphors, puns and harsh sounds in long compounds. This he does generally to express his displeasure and disapproval of the sensual character of the Rākṣasa culture.

Conclusion :

The Sundara-Kāṇḍa is devoted to the description of wealth, power and glory, of Rākṣasarāja Rāvaṇa. As a poet Vālmīki was conscious of the fact that a theme of conflict becomes real and relishable only when the contending parties are equal in strength; a conflict between a lion and an elephant is always worth presenting, but never the one between a lion and a hare. The Sundara-Kāṇḍa repeatedly alludes to the towering mansions in Laṅkā, to their costly paraphernalia, to the glamorous displays of silver, gold and various kinds of gems. It refers to the birth of Rāvaṇa in the illustrious family of Pulastya, to his frequent victories over Devas — particularly over the guardians of the four quarters — to the rare acquisition of the aerial car Puspaka after defeating Kubera, to the majestic personality of Rāvaṇa and to his extensive learning. But, by displaying the rough and ill treatment of Sītā by Rāvaṇa in this kāṇḍa the poet foreshadows the end of Rāvaṇa and the Rākṣasas and conveys the message that material resources devoid of righteousness and purity of character do not emerge triumphant in the end, that it is virtue that wins the final victory.

The Sundara-Kāṇḍa, through the smooth progress of action, the convincing portrayal of characters and the easy and delightful flow of sentiment, all presented in a language which is lucid and pleasing to the ears, amply demonstrates the ability of the poet in expert handling of the elements of poetry. It affirms that Vālmīki's poetic personality is, indeed, so towering that the literary tradition of India is justified in recognizing him as the 'Ādikavi' and in deriving inspiration from him.

Photo Essay

The International Ramayana Mela held under the auspices of the ICCR, was a multi-cultural stage performance on different facets of the epic. Through these colourful and meaningful presentations the ideas and ideals of the Ramayana flowered in a myriad formats. The photo essay on these pages carries facets of the Ramayana's magical alchemy

as it was presented by troupes from eight countries, ranging from Indonesia, Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, India, to Fiji and Trinidad. This colourful presentation reinterpreted the ceaseless depths of the epic as a basis for story telling, artistic performance, cultural interpretations and art forms.



A 14-member Ramayana group from Indonesia performing at the inaugural of the first edition of the International Ramayana Mela-2015, on February 23, 2015 at FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi



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A 10-member Ramayana group from Fiji performing on February 23, 2015, at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi



A 10-member Ramayana group from Fiji performing on February 23, 2015, at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi



A 13-member National Ramleela Council Group from Trinidad & Tobago performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 24, 2015



A 13-member National Ramleela Council Group from Trinidad & Tobago performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 24, 2015



A 13-member Cambodia Reamke Performing Art Troupe-2 from Cambodia performing at the FICCI Auditorium on February 25, 2015



A 13-member Cambodia Reamke Performing Art Troupe-2 from Cambodia performing at the FICCI Auditorium on February 25, 2015



A 11-Member Timeless Ramayana by Tanjai Kamala Indira Barathanatya Vidyalaya group from Malaysia performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 26, 2015



A 11-Member Timeless Ramayana by Tanjai Kamala Indira Barathanatya Vidyalaya group from Malaysia performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 26, 2015



A 15-member Bhaskar's Art Academy group from Singapore performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 26, 2015



A 15-member Bhaskar's Art Academy group from Singapore performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 26, 2015



A 20-Member Ramayana group of Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture from Thailand performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 27, 2015



A 20-Member Ramayana group of Fine Arts Department, Ministry of Culture from Thailand performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 27, 2015



A 17-Member Kalamandalam Raman Kutty & Troupe from India performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 27, 2015



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The non-Aryan Tribes in Valmiki Ramayana

Dr. Nikhilesh Shastri

For a long time even after the Aryan settlement in North India in the Vedic period, southern India remained almost isolated from *Aryavarta* and aboriginal tribes continued to hold their sway on that part of the country. Most probably Agastya was the first Aryan to cross the Vindhyas and penetrate into

the south. Subsequent to this, came a series of attacks and counter-attacks by the Aryans and aboriginal people of the south – each trying to establish its supremacy over the other. Valmiki has left in the Ramayana a very graphic and most authentic account of this struggle, and even though the peoples of the



Mithila painting of Ahalya in the Ramayana

south have been disfigured by mythological colouring, the principal ones among them can be recognized as human beings and one can easily gather from the epic ample information with regard to their social, political and religious life. Most important are the Rakshasas and the Vanaras.

Among the Rakshasas of the Ramayana there are two categories (i) Rakshasas by birth and (ii) Rakshasas by culture. Rakshashood, with which is identified as savagery and ghastliness, descends upon the members of the second category as a punishment for some serious offence. Thus Viradha, Kabandha and Chayagrahini of the lake on the Gandhamadana had to embrace Rakshashood because they roused by their misbehaviour the anger of some august person and thereby invited his curse. These Rakshasas are, without exception represented as night rangers and man-eaters. Their disposition is characterised by treachery, trickery and savagery. Outcast from society, they live their own isolated life.

The Rakshasas by birth are essentially human beings. One important respect in which these Rakshasas are to be distinguished from the Aryans is the

'matrilineal character' of their family life. It was only due to this peculiar character of the Rakshasas that notwithstanding the fact that their father was Pulastya, a *brahmarshi*, Ravana and his brothers were recognized as Rakshasas because they were born of Kaikasi, who was a Rakshasi.

As opposed to fair complexioned Aryans, the Rakshasas were of dark complexion and the general constitution of their body was different from the Aryans. On an average, male and female Rakshasas are represented as possessing prodigious strength and huge forms, having long teeth or big jaws, large mouthed and of frightful aspect. The poet Valmiki represents the Rakshasas as possessing limbs of various animals.

The main feature of the Rakshasas is their hostile dispositions towards those things which the Aryans valued. In fact, the Rakshasas are the enemies of sacrifice and the ascetic. Moreover, wine and woman and lust for wealth inspires the strongest repugnance of the poet for the Rakshasas.

From the accounts of the Uttara kanda, the homeland of the Rakshasas appears to be the southern sea



Indian Mithila Miniature Tribal Folk Ramayana handmade painting



The war with the Gods

coast. From there they moved to the Lanka fort and settled their independent political power and later on emerged as a mighty power. With a strong and capable leader Ravana, they had made strong, powerful and secured position.

In addition to their mighty political power, the Rakshasas were most advanced in respect of material wealth. The abundance of gold, sapphire, coral, and jewels, such as pearl and diamond reflect the opulence of the Rakshasas. The Lanka-nagari was made of gold. The general description of their town including the royal palace is an evidence of the high architectural skill of the Rakshasas. One can gather similar impressions about dance, music and painting and the graphic picture of Ravana's court. The variety of drinks and other viand, art galleries, sports pavilions, pleasure

groves and description of royal gardens of exquisite charm are convincing proofs that the Rakshasas were not just barbarians but a very highly civilized race. Hanuman was so much bewildered at the sight of the opulence in Ravana's palace that he thought he was wandering in some celestial region – heaven, and the ladies of Ravana to be heavenly beings.

The Rakshasas :

The poet Valmiki very aptly characterizes the Rakshasas as men 'predominated by intellect'. A corollary of this predominance of the intellect pursued naked sensualism and according to the Rakshasas the very fruition of dharma was in Kama (the gratification of the senses).

So far as the religion of the Rakshasas is concerned, it was very intriguing and we observe two distinct



Hanuman meets mother Sita at Ashoka Garden in Lanka: Mithila painting

currents, namely Vedic and non-Vedic, simultaneously flowing in their society. Several passages in the Ramayana refer to Rakshasas in Lanka as engaged in *Swadhyaya*, *Japa* and performance of the *agnihotra*. One passage of the epic calls Ravana a *Vidya – Veda – Vrata – Snata* and *Brahma Rakshasas* well-versed in Vedas with their six auxiliaries. Also *Vivaha* (marriage ceremony) and *antyeshti* (post-death ceremony) also prevailed.

Apart from this, there are references to several practices of witchcraft and sorcery among the Rakshasas and practices like human offering (*nara – bali*) to the goddess. *Siva – linga – poojan* by Ravana appears to have been popular among the Rakshasas. Since Ravana and his brothers were born and bred in the hermitage of the sage Vishravā, they must have derived from there a good many Vedic practices.

The Vanaras :

Next now let us take the Vanaras. Valmiki has more powerfully illustrated his picture of the Vanaras. These people were so primitive that the poet describes them as monkeys, but they were actually human-beings from the fact that they had all the salient features of Aryan culture and religion. The cremation of Bali is almost on the same lines as of Dasharatha. Later Valmiki describes Sugriva's coronation in a characteristic Aryan style (IV.19/22) because there is reference of *homa* and offering of *havih* into the kindled fire of the altar. In addition to this, Tara, desirous of her husband's success in the combat recites the *mantras* (IV. 12/10). Bali is believed to have performed the *Sandhya* every day before sunrise and muttered the *naigama* verses (VIII, 22/7).

Valmiki describes the Vanaras as brown in complexion, *Pingaksha* having long hair all over the body with a tail (IV. 61/64). The cry of the Vanaras is expressed by the poet as *Kilkila* and when they are in joy, they are described as beating their arms, kissing their tails and jumping. Inconstancy (*chupalata*), fickle-mindedness (*asthira chittata*) are the characteristics of their nature.

A few more facts about the Vanaras of the Ramayanic period are:

- (i) The food of the Vanaras is declared as fruits and roots and they were fond of *madhu* (honey) and *maireya* (an intoxicating drink made of fruit – juice)
- (ii) The dress of the Vanaras (men and women) consisted of one upper and one lower garment but with no stitching. However, a few passages indicate that the Vanaras remained nude.
- (iii) In spite of all the glitter of a capital town, the royal palace Kishkindha and the residential quarters of Bali and Sugriva remain a mountain cave.
- (iv) The sex relations of the Vanaras are extremely loose – verging almost on promiscuity.

By the time of Rama the Vanaras had completely adopted the Aryan culture (Bali's cremation makes clear that the Vanaras had become Aryanized). It can be asserted that the Vanaras were a primitive people emerging from a nomadic state in compassion to the Aryans and the Rakshasas. They were backward materially and culturally. But they excelled in medicine and bridge-building, in which Sushena and Nala respectively were the masters.

In fact, Valmiki had no clear idea of the origin and past history of the Vanaras. He calls them the sons of Devas and Gandharvas and from different gods. In the seventeenth chapter of the Bala-Kanda, the Vanaras are described as becoming incarnate of gods as beings in the monkey tribe skilled in arts of

magic, swift as the wind and skilful in the science of warfare. Thus gods as instructed by Lord Vishnu were born in the monkey tribe from the wombs of countless celestial beings. Indra created Bali and the Sun created Sugriva. Brihaspati created Tara, Kuber begat the general of the monkey Gandha-madana, Vishwakarma, the mighty ape Nala, Agni created Nila who was blazing like fire and having valour. Pavan begat the warrior called Hanumana whose body was as hard as a diamond and who excelled in wisdom and power. Thus the monkeys were of outstanding valour. They were skilled in every kind of weapon and could uproot strong trees. They could as well fly up in the air. Thus were born millions of monkeys.

Family life of the non-Aryans :

The study of family life in the Ramayana is of a particular interest, for the whole drama of the epic is of intrigues of several persons of a family who were striving to secure power and prominence by pushing away the brothers and relatives. This was also prevalent in the Rakshasas and Vanara. For instance to secure power and kingdom, Bali expelled his brother Sugriva, so did Ravana with Kubera.

Position of Women :

Man and woman are the two basic supports on whom the family rests and one is incomplete without the other. However, from the early literary records of the Indians, it is clear that the woman in the family was in no way made to live a life of subjugation. Early Sanskrit literature has preserved the names of Lopa Mudra, Gargi, Damayanti, Savitri and many others who were paragons of beauty, wisdom, learning and even chivalry. Similarly the Ramayana also contains names of Arundhati, Anusuya and Sita, who have commanded reverential apprehension because women were imparted adequate education. The roles played by Tara and Mandodari reflect that even the daughters of non-Aryan society received such education as went a long way in the full growth of their personality. In this connection worthy of mention are the words of the dying Bali to Sugriva about Tara. He said, 'the

Sushena's daughter is wonderfully expert in giving counsels in an hour of danger. Do thou, perform what shall the chaste lady instructs (IV. 16 – 100).

The royal princesses, it seems were given special training and education to equip them for their coming life. Just as Kaikeyi had some sort of training in her childhood which enabled her to serve her husband in the battle field, similarly Sita was conversant with royal rites and duties (*Rajdharm*), so the non-Aryan Tara and Mandodari are seen participating in political deliberations along with their husbands (IV. 28/6, VI.35/10). In Lanka one can see ladies being employed as military guards and even acting as spies. They had also a fairly wide knowledge of ancient legends and folk literature, and had been receiving education, training in fine arts like dance and music. This fact is proved when in the court of Ravana, a galaxy of fairies was seen by Hanuman reclining against various instruments (V/127 – 140).

The next and important stage in the life of a woman is wifehood. The true outlook of people towards women

can be gauged primarily from the status enjoyed by them as wives. Among the non-Aryans wives, in actual practice also received a better treatment. Tara though abandoned by her husband Bali enjoyed a position of honour and love from Bali (IV, 16/100). Ravana's treatment of Mandodari is also full of regard for her (VI, 35/17).

Rakshasas' Marriage :

Sex and the offspring are the two primary factors responsible for the evolution of marriage as a social institution. Ellis Havelock in his book *Psychology of Sex* says, "Marriage in the biological sense, and even to some extent in a social sense is a sexual relationships entered into with the intention of making it permanent." The Ramayana recognizes this institution as a permanent or eternal bond of unity through marriage between man and woman in all phases of life.

So far as marriage among Rakshasas is concerned, the poet has described Ravana's marriage with Mandodari in a characteristic Aryan style. Earlier, Ravana is also



Lord Rama and Laxmana killing the demoness Taraka



Ravana and Sita

shown giving his sister Shurpanakha in marriage to a befitting husband. These references point at the fact that Rakshasas recognized the necessity of marriage and the sex freedom of women in their community was curtailed. Sex relations outside wedlock was completely banned for them. They were even denied the privilege of remarriage after the death of the husbands.

Compared to Rakshasa-women, the Rakshasa-men were extremely lascivious and women were only for satisfying their lust. Seizing other's woman, raping and abducting was common among them. This fact is proved when Vibhishana reports to Ravana about the forcible seizure of their cousin Kumbhinasī by Madhu. This act is considered lawful. Ravana himself returning from the conquest of the *lokas* brought a large number of women as prizes of war (canto VIII. 30/11 – 12). Many concubines, Rakshasa girls voluntarily offered themselves to him (V. 5/91).

In addition to this, Rakshasas' maidens could select their life partners. For instance, Kaikasi approached

the sage Vishrava, had married him. Similarly, Heti a Rakshasa directly approached Bhaya and married him (VII. 3/16). The other method was to offer the girl's father large and valuable presents to secure her as Ravana tells Sita that he would confer upon Janak a rich and vast dominion for her sake. Thus the Rakshasas had five modes of securing a woman – (i) by regular marriage (ii) by voluntary offer (iii) by purchase (iv) by capture (v) by force.

Vanaras' Marriage :

In contrast to the Rakshasas, the Vanaras of the epic appear to be of a primitive race. Sex relations among Vanaras were loose. We know for instance that Tara and Ruma, who are the wives of Bali and Sugriva respectively, were both living at one time with Sugriva as his wives (IV. 37.22) and at another time with Bali and then again with Sugriva. Thus the wives pass from one brother to another. This was a common practice among the Vanaras and clearly indicates the Vanaras sex morality was very much different from that of the Aryans. Similarly Jambavan declares before the



Rama Ravana yuddha – Mithila painting

Vanaras that Hanuman was the *auras* son of Vayu, begotten on Anjana.

One point may be touched upon in this context that the custom of *niyoga* was popular among the Vanaras. Vayu, Indra and Surya approached the Vanara ladies being enamoured by their beauty. They blessed them with sons, brave and strong for the privilege of sharing their beds.

Mythology :

The concept of divinity in the Ramayana comprises all spiritual characters. The divine family is thus constituted of (i) gods (ii) mythical saints (iii) divine races (iv) evil spirits and (v) divine rivers. An account of each of the above said heads and important detail of the fourth head (viz. evil sprits) is relevant so far as this article is concerned, because evil spirits are in the non-Aryan category.

Parallel to the Devas, the Ramayana refers to a class of beings possessing almost all the traits of the Devas

but are distinguished as a group hostile to the Devas on account of their opposition to goodness. These are Daityas, the Danavas, the Asuras, the Rakshasas, the Yatudhanas and Pishachas who constitute a hostile group. The Daityas derive their name from their mother Diti. They are also called as Asuras. Hosts of Asuras are believed to be living in the bottom of the sea. On his way to Varuna's home through the water Ravana comes across a host of the Daityas. In a few cases the mountain caves are the

homes of the Asuras and Danavas. These Asuras are noted for their *maya* (illusions). Maya is renowned as an architect of the Danavas and built several beautiful houses in Lanka (V. 5/12). This indicates that they were noted for their craftsmanship.

Political Constitution :

The political constitution of the Rakshasas as described in the Ramayana follows the same pattern as of the Aryans having a king, council of ministers and popular sabha. However, there was only one state in a single town Lanka. There were no feudal lords nor subordinate kings. It is worth noting that the entire army in Lanka belonged to the king and unlike the Vanaras, it was not constituted of different units. These Rakshasas were not only mighty in political power, but in respect of material wealth they were a most advanced people.

Thus this is a general survey of the social and political institutions of non-Aryan tribes as reflected in the Ramayana of Valmiki.

A Poem for the Ages: Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa and its Aesthetic, Spiritual and Cultural Legacy in South and South East Asia

R. P. Goldman

Although it remains little known in the West, the ancient, monumental Sanskrit epic poem, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, ascribed to the legendary poet seer Vālmīki is one of the most enduring, influential and often retold tales in human history. It is a work of some 50,000 couplets (ślokas) composed and expanded during the second half of the first millennium BCE and throughout the two-and-a-half millennia since then has, in its own right and through its countless re-iterations in all of the linguistic, ethnic, and religious communities of South and Southeast Asia and in virtually every possible literary, artistic and performance medium helped shape the aesthetic, religious, social and political outlines of the peoples of India and indeed all of southern Asia, down to the present day.

The extraordinary success of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story raises a number of important historical and cultural questions that I will attempt to address below. These questions are as follows. How and why did the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in all of its innumerable forms and versions become so widely disseminated throughout South and Southeast Asia? And how did it attain such remarkable longevity in all of the ethnic, linguistic, and religious cultures of the region from Iran in the west to Bali and the Philippines in the east in the more than two millennia since its first telling? How did the tale

manage to establish itself so firmly in the literature of various schools of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Islam as perhaps the most widely recognized and influential text of southern Asia, rivaling, in terms of the sheer numbers of people who admire it, and strive to live by its moral teachings, such works as the Bible and the Holy Koran in popularity and impact?

Questions as to what the *Rāmāyaṇa* is one that would, for the most part, only need to be asked in the West. As for India and much of Asia it is true that, as the late linguist, poet and folklorist A. K. Ramanujan was fond of saying, "No one ever hears the *Rāmāyaṇa* for the first time." What he meant by that was that, since the story has so deeply permeated the cultures of Southern Asia in literature, courtly, folk, and commercial poster art, temple sculpture, public religious drama, puppet theatre, religious, and moral discourse, proverbs, bedtime stories, folktales, film, TV comic books, political speeches and even commercial advertising, there can be few, if any, who grow up in a southern Asian, especially in an Indian milieu, regardless of language, region, social class, religion or community who would not be familiar with the themes, narrative and characters of the basic story. In the west, however, the situation is quite different. Generally speaking, with the exception of South and Southeast Asian area specialists and members of the

South and Southeast Asian Diaspora, the epic tale and its characters are largely unknown to the general public and even to many academics.

On its surface, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is, like its epic counterparts in ancient Greek culture, *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, a tale of love and war, a story of a hero's quest to recover his beloved wife from whom he has been separated. But in India the epic has taken on much greater cultural significance in at least three critical areas. So, in an effort to explain some of the ways in which the *tale of Rāma*, and particularly the Sanskrit epic poem of the poet-seer Vālmīki, has situated itself in the social and psychological heart of India, I would like to discuss some of the significant ways in which the work has powerfully impacted India and the many cultures of southern Asia that have been influenced by Indian civilization. Although these ways are deeply imbricated with one another, I will isolate three specific strands from the work's rich cultural tapestry — the aesthetic, the spiritual, and the social.

A critically important feature of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, and one that is unique to it alone among the countless versions of the Rāma story, is the tradition that it is not only a work of exquisite and deeply moving poetry, but it is in fact the very first work of poetry in history and the source and model for all subsequent literary composition. According to the poem's framing narrative, the tale of how it came to be composed, the sage Vālmīki, in conversation with the divine seer Nārada, had heard a brief account of the exemplary career of the virtuous and heroic Rāma, the king of the country of Kosala. Then, wandering through the woodland to perform his morning ablutions, the sage is entranced by the beauty of nature and particularly by a loving couple of sarus cranes. But, as Vālmīki looks on a tribal hunter suddenly shoots and kills the male of the pair. Angered at this act and filled with sorrow (śoka) and compassion for the grieving hen crane, he curses the hunter to suffer for his act. Such curses are far from unusual in the Sanskrit epic literature, but what is extraordinary here is that the

curse issues from the sage's mouth in a musical and metrical form; in short as poetry (śloka).

samākṣaraiś caturbhir yaḥ pādair gīto maharṣiṇā |
so 'nuvyāharaṇād bhūyaḥ ślokaḥ ślokatvam āgataḥ ||
VR 1.2.39

The *śoka*, grief, that the great seer sang out in four metrical quarters, all equal in syllables, has, by virtue of its being repeated after him, become śloka, poetry.

Astonished at this striking turn of events Vālmīki returns to his ashram where he soon receives a visit from no less a figure than Lord Brahmā, the creator of the universe. The Lord tells the sage that it was he himself who had inspired him with the gift of poetic creation, and he instructs him now to compose a beautiful epic poem about the life of Rāma, a poem rendered in charming verse and replete with all the *rasas* or poetic sentiments.

Granted a special divine vision by the god, Vālmīki is able directly to witness all the events in the life of Rāma, past present and future, and is thus able to compose his monumental epic. He teaches the poem to his two most brilliant disciples Kuśa and Lava who are actually Rāma's long lost sons, and they in turn perform it at the court of their father. It is this remarkable episode that has established and guaranteed the poem's unique reputation as the first and greatest of poems (Ādikāvya) and its author the title of First Poet (Ādikavi). The work thus came to be enshrined in the literary culture as the first piece of literature that conveyed its message, its spiritual, moral and social teaching, through a medium that would move the emotional and aesthetic sensibilities of its audiences and thus combine instruction with delight. This is made very clear in the poet's account of the first performances of his work. When his disciples sing the poem before an audience of sages, the latter are not only charmed by the poetry and its musical rendition, they are, so it appears, able in their aesthetic rapture to share the divine vision of



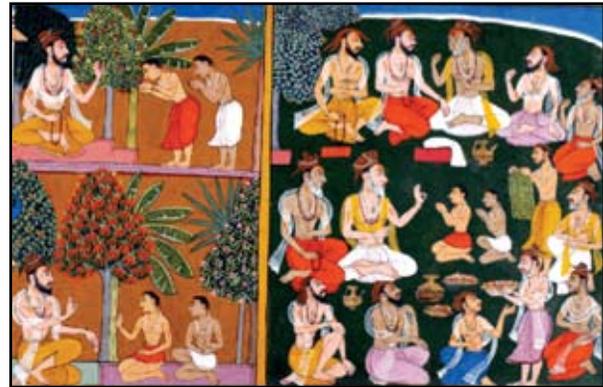
Brahmā instructs Vālmīki to compose *Rāmāyaṇa*

the poet and visualize the events in the epic story just as he himself had done.

*te prītamanasah sarve munayo dharmavatsalāḥ /
praśaśamsuḥ praśastavyau gāyamānau kuṣilavau //
aho gītasya mādhyam ślokānām ca viśeṣataḥ //
ciranirvṛttam apy etat pratyakṣam iva darśitam //* (VR
1.4.15–16)

"Then with delighted hearts all those sages, who delighted in righteousness, praised those two bards, so worthy of praise, crying, 'Oh! The sweetness of the singing and especially of the poetry! Although all this took place so long ago it is as though we see it before our very eyes.'"

As the critical role of Lord Brahmā in the history of the *Rāmāyaṇa* would suggest, the work has a critically important spiritual component. And indeed, there is no doubt that much of the work's influence, popularity, importance and longevity is to be attributed to the fact that it is a major religious text — perhaps the very earliest — of Vaishnavism. On this level the tale



Vālmīki teaches the *Rāmāyaṇa* to Lava and Kuśa who then sing it to the sages

is an account of the earthly sojourn of one of the most important of the many *avatāras* of the Supreme Lord Viṣṇu who, according to Hindu theology takes birth in age after age when, as periodically happens, the gods, the guardians of *dharma*, righteousness, are overwhelmed by the dark, demonic forces of *adharma*, unrighteousness. In this case these forces incarnate in the person of the mighty ten-headed *rāksasa* lord Rāvaṇa who, through the power of a

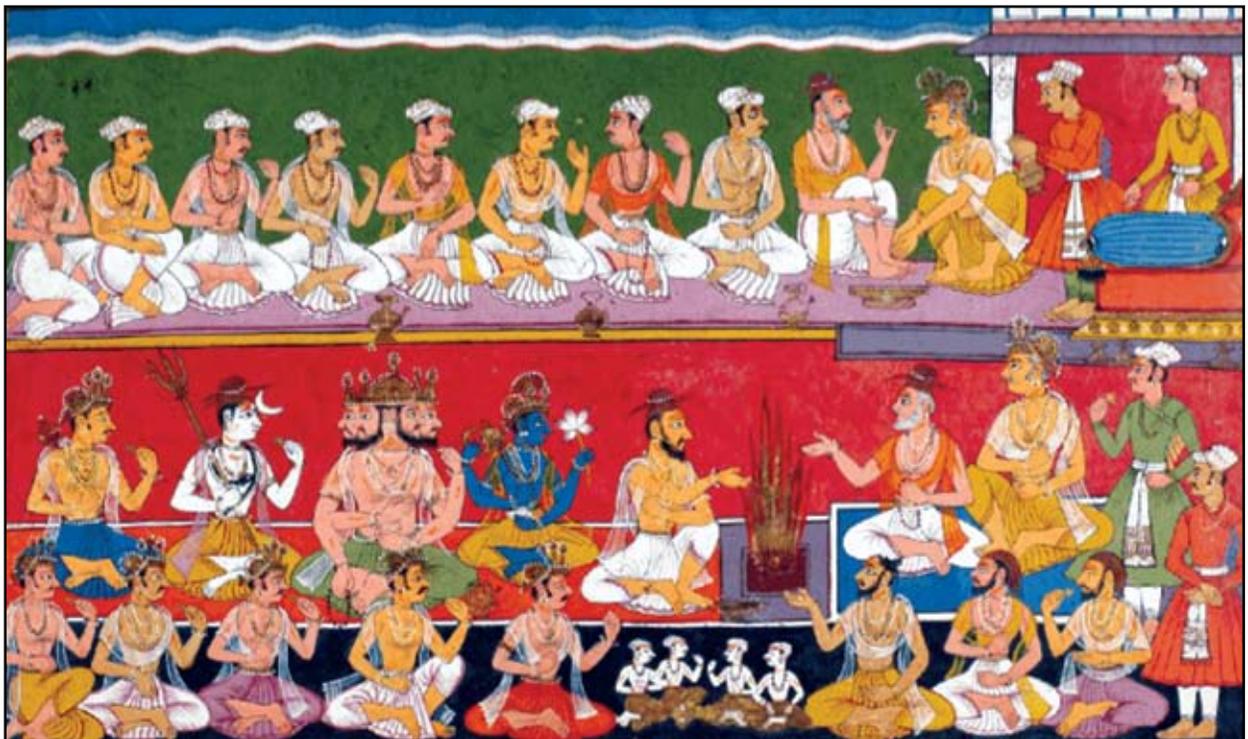
boon of invulnerability to all superhuman beings, has been oppressing and terrorizing the three worlds.

King Daśaratha of Ayodhya, eager to produce a son, an heir, performs the sacred Horse Sacrifice, the *aśvamedha*, in order to free himself from any obstacles in his path. The gods, who are present as guests at the ritual, appeal to Lord Viṣṇu to aid them by ridding the world of the monstrous Rāvaṇa. In order to destroy the monster without violating the boon he had received from Lord Brahmā, Lord Viṣṇu agrees to take on the form of a human prince, Rāma, the son of King Daśaratha, along with his three brothers Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna.

The Lord infuses his divine energy into a special dish, a *pāyasam* and, in the course of King Daśaratha's *putrakāmeṣṭi*, a sacrifice to ensure the birth of a son, a celestial personage emerges from the sacrificial fire bearing the *pāyasam* in a great golden bowl. The king shares the dish among his three wives who, in due course, give birth to four heroic sons, Rāma, Bharata, Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna.

Thus the tale of Rāma is not simply a poetic account of the career of a great hero and legendary king but, on a much larger scale, a sacred narrative of God's sojourn on earth where, in keeping with the boon awarded Rāvaṇa by Brahmā, he undergoes many difficult trials including banishment from his ancestral kingdom, the abduction and painful separation from his beloved wife, Sītā, a painful and sanguinary battle and the cruel slander of the people for having taken her back after her captivity in the house of Rāvaṇa. But in the end, he resumes his rightful role as the dharmic king and inaugurates a millennia-long period of peace and prosperity.

It is unquestionably because of Rāma's role as one of the principal *avatāras* of Lord Viṣṇu, as the ultimately righteous monarch and, most important of all, as a personal saviour of his devotees, that Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and the many other versions of the story that it has inspired in all of the many languages of India have held so high a position in the esteem of hundreds of millions of Hindus



The gods attend King Daśaratha's sacrifice



Daśaratha receives the divine Pāyasam

worldwide from antiquity down to the present day. But, as I noted above, the story, in its many versions has remained in wide circulation and has attained great prestige among many non-Hindu communities in India and throughout South and Southeast Asia as well as among Hindus. Thus the tale of Rāma in many versions has been popular in the religious

literature of the Jains and the Buddhists, neither of which traditions subscribe to the Vaiṣṇava *avatāra* theory. Nonetheless, the Jains regard Rāma as one of the sixty-three outstanding men (*śalākapuruṣas*) of the Age, while the Buddhists include him among the Bodhisattvas or prior incarnations of the Buddha himself.



The Jain Rāmāyaṇa: Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa visit a Jain muni

Beyond India, the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has come to be adopted and made central to the cultural and political life of the Buddhist and Muslim countries of Southeast Asia. Thus the Thai kings took Rāma as an exemplar of kingship so much so that the older ruling dynasty gave his name to their rulers and named their capital Ayutthaya, their version of the Sanskrit Ayodhyā. The Thai version of the epic, the *Ramakien* is in many ways the national epic of the Thais. A similar situation can be found in other Buddhist countries of the region such as Laos and Cambodia.



Ramakien battle scene: Wat Phra Keo Temple

Even in the Islamic cultures of Southeast Asia such as those of Malaysia and Indonesia, The *Rāmāyaṇa* story has been popular for centuries as for them Rāma stands out as the paragon of an ideal Muslim ruler. Thus the traditional literature includes such great works as the Javanese Ramakakawin and the

Malay *Hikayat Seri Rama* while the various regional styles of the shadow puppet theatre (*wayang*) feature renditions of the Rāma saga.



Javanese Wayang Kulit Sri Rama battles Tāṭakā

The reason for this very broad and cross-cultural fascination with the *Rāmāyaṇa* thus is neither the poetic brilliance of Vālmīki, nor the Hindu religious reverence for Rāma as a great *avatāra* of Lord Viṣṇu. Instead it derives without a doubt for the original *Rāmāyaṇa* poet's immortal portrayal of his hero.

For what Nārada's history gives us and Vālmīki's epic poem gives us is the classical and never superseded idealized representation of the ideal South Asian paragon of masculinity. Rāma is powerful, lovable and learned, capable of commanding nations and contesting even the gods, but compassionate and always ready to renounce his own interests and desires in favour of those of the social and ritual order. Rāma is, above all a prodigy of self-control, of the mastery of the senses and the submission of the individual to the demands of family, society and state. He is a living example of the triumph of the duty and righteousness, in short of *dharma* and as such has become the standard of behaviour for countless generations, the radical opposite of his demonic counterpart, the grotesque caricature of unbridled self-indulgence and contempt for legitimate authority, the ten-headed *rākṣasa* tyrant, and sexual predator Rāvaṇa.

Surely it is this characterization of Rāma, and not his status for Vālmīki and the Hindu tradition as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, that has led Buddhist, Jain, and Muslim authors and audiences to adapt the Rāma tale to their own purposes in order to make him,

the exemplar, respectively of the Buddhist virtue of emotional self-control in the Dasaratha Jātaka and the Thai *Ramakian*, the ideal practitioner of the *ahiṃsā* or non-violence in the many Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*, and the ideal of the resourceful Islamic prince in the *wayang* dramas of the Malay-Indonesian world.

In addition to the towering figures of Rāma and Rāvaṇa, Vālmīki has peopled his epic with a variety of characters, who are themselves powerfully exemplary of both positive and negative roles in traditional Asian society. Thus Vālmīki's Sītā, Rāma's long-suffering wife, is crafted as a figure held up to this day as the model for the ideal wife while his brother and constant companion Lakṣmaṇa is held up for emulation as the archetype of the unfailingly deferential and devoted younger brother. Similarly his willful stepmother Kaikeyī, the architect of his banishment, has become proverbial as the insubordinate wife.

It is these qualities, then, on the one hand along with the powerful aesthetic resonance of Vālmīki's poetry and the enormous prestige it gained for him as the First Poet and, on the other hand, the unparalleled didactic quality of his tale and his characterizations that produced and sustained the spread and influence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* throughout the vast expanse of southern Asia. In this way Vālmīki's immortal poem has served and continues to serve several vital functions in the countries and cultures of the region. It is the first and greatest of poems inspiring ever-new versions in every language of the subcontinent and beyond. It is, along with texts like the *Bhagavad Gītā*, one of the foundational scriptures of Hinduism. And it is for millions across southern Asia a guidebook

teaching us how to live a good life in our families and our countries.

Through such an analysis, I believe, it is possible to shed light on what has accounted for the extraordinary longevity, popularity and influence of Vālmīki's great tale of the life and reign of King Rāma. The epic has been re-visioned over the ages by such outstanding poets and saints as Kamban, Krittivas, Rām Dās and, Tulsī Dās to name but a few of those who have each given us their unique contribution to the *Rāmakathā*, the Tale of Rāma.

Yet, despite the well deserved reverence these and a many other re-tellings of the story have earned, and their fruitful role in the development of the many glorious literary traditions in all of India's regional languages, Vālmīki's ancient and unique epic poetic rendering of the trials and triumphs of Rāma and Sītā has endured through the ages and truly lived up to the promise the creator divinity, Brahmadeva made to the legendary First Poet:

*yāvat sthāsyanti girayaḥ saritaś ca mahītale |
tāvad rāmāyaṇakathā lokeṣu pracariṣyati ||*

*yāvad rāmasya ca kathā tvatkṛtā pracariṣyati |
tāvad ūrdhvam adhaś ca tvam mallokeṣu nivatsyasi ||*
VR. 1.2.35–36.

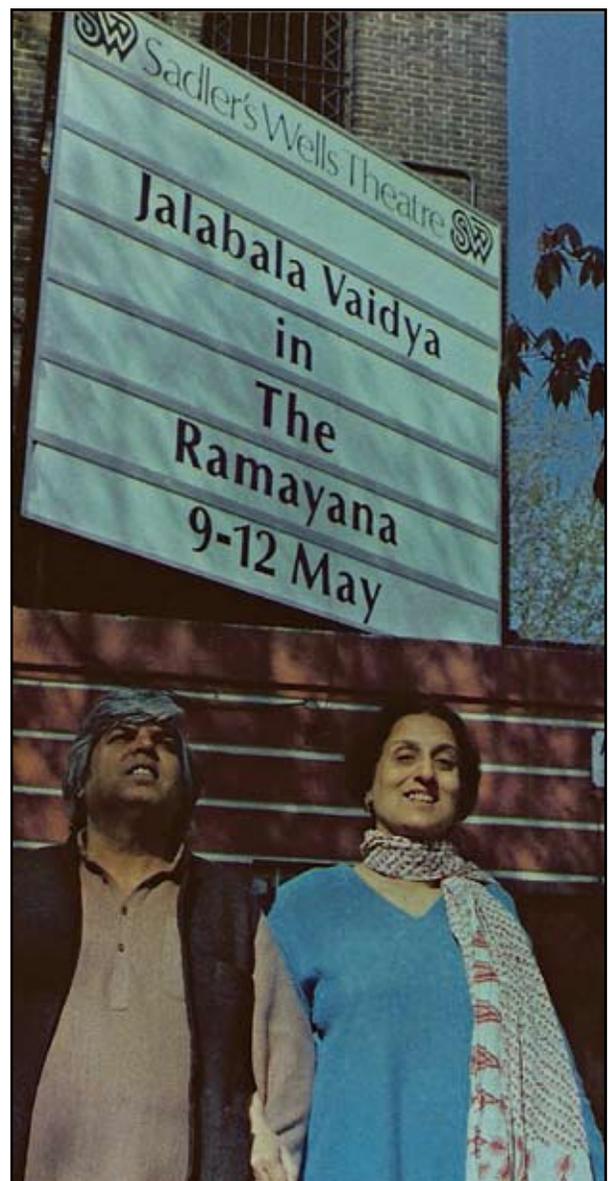
As long as the mountains and rivers shall endure on this earth so will the tale of Rāma remain current in all realms. And as long as Rāma's tale, as you composed it shall remain current above and below so long shall you dwell in my realms.

The Akshara Journey of the Ramayana

Indian Horizons team work

On a tree lined street of the capital stands a red sandstone building with the signboard reading Akshara Theatre. A few billboards announce the goings-on within, but nothing on the current premises prepares one for what one can unearth about it from the owners of the place, Gopal Sharman and Jalabala Vaidya. It is not likely that the names would ring a bell among the younger generation of theatre goers, but when one learns of their activities, it appears electrifying to say the least.

If the poet Tulsidas is credited with transforming the story of Ram into a leela that is enacted across every city, town, country and public space in its very dimensions across the length and breadth of the country, then surely the couple Jalabala Vaidya and Gopal Sharman can be called the modern-day successors of the ancient bard. To them goes the credit of taking the ancient epic overseas as a theatre presentation which has been shown to audiences across the Continent and America as a solo performance by the duo. If that were not enough, it is Gopal Sharman, a journalist by profession, who specially wrote his version of the *Ramayana*, to suit his wife's theatrical talents and circumstances and make the show receive standing ovations across the globe. Back at home, the Akshara Theatre became the space where the *Ramayana* in the Gopal Sharman version was enacted every night to a delighted audience, who awakened to another interpretation of the epic through this source.



Gopal & Jalabala in Sadler's Wells Theatre, London



Gopal & Jalabala with Akshara in the background

Unlike the Valmiki version where Rama is an incarnated version of Vishnu and becomes a godlike figure of spiritual significance, in the play that Sharman has written, the couple do not have the legendary parting of ways with Sita being consumed by Mother Earth. Instead, the couple are united on earth and perform their duties of kingship in a spirit of dedication and commitment, a modern-day look at the duties of Lord Ram, as the ideal of manhood. This change of stance is not for adding interest or contemporariness to the ancient lore but a recognition of newer aspirations emerging from newer churning at various levels. In this capacity, the couple have given the epic a moral

dimension that creates an upsurge of consciousness not just about the need to take a relook at our epics or other sources but also to the fact that we also must expand our thought process and become engaged in matters of reinterpretation of our culture not by launching agitations and the like but by relating the new energy and trends into a new activism by exploiting our ideological bank balance to find newer insights and perspectives that are more meaningful and acceptable.

But the coming to this pass of daring to reinterpret such a sacrosanct work as the *Ramayana*, that is

interwoven into the bloodstream of India, was not a one-night vision. It began as a chance incident which is best related through the words of Jalabala herself. 'When he was younger, Gopal was an editor for the *Sunday Standard* as a freelance writer. He wrote a very popular column on the Upanishads and questions on philosophy, life, and death under a pseudonym, Nachiketas. Unbeknownst to us, President Radhakrishnan was a regular reader of this column. When he had his cataract operation and was unable to read the column, he sent an old friend of his, Professor K. Subramaniam, formerly chief editor of the *Indian Express*, to find out who Nachiketas was, and invited him to come to the President's residence and read aloud the columns he had missed during his recovery period. We were ecstatic of course. But Gopal was not confident about his reading skills. So he told me to go read to the President. I had done some acting, so he persuaded me to do it. I used to wear glasses, but I memorised the whole thing so that I wouldn't have to wear them. I was very vain.'

And when the President had asked why Gopal had not accompanied her that evening, Jalabala had to spill the beans. The security check at the gate had taken an inordinately long time for the impatient Sharman who that evening had to review a performance at the theatre nearby. He had thus walked down Raisina Hill to the theatre premises leaving his wife to literally manage the show and Jalabala in defence had said: "Well, at this moment he is walking down the road to the Kamani theatre ..."

But the evening had a very portentous aftermath and Jalabala says, 'We had recited the poems of Kabir. There was a crowd of intellectuals and professors and I was terribly intimidated, but I carried on. These people were tremendously impressed, and President Radhakrishnan said, "You should perform this for the public." And that was where it all began.'

Incidentally, it was not the *Ramayana* that the couple had performed that evening, but a play 'Full Circle' which had brought them such honours. Following the presidential performance, had been a

show at the Azad Bhavan Auditorium, of the ICCR, on the recommendation of their host. 'It was the beginning of a "fairy story", according to Vaidya. 'It was Friday, 13th January, 1967,' she recalls with remarkable vividity.' That was the only available date and the hall was full including ambassadors from two countries who specially came. The Italian and Yugoslavian ambassadors requested us to perform in their home countries.' Offers of this kind had opened the floodgates of recognition for this theatre couple who had never at that point visualized the outcome of their efforts. It was their first trip to Europe, and while the Italian host paid for their lodgings and food, they refused to pay for their tickets. "So we bought two one-way tickets and we were off."

The Italian initiative set off a chain reaction as they were requested to perform at the Institute of Middle Eastern and Oriental Studies. It was an offer that led to a virtual opening of an Ali Baba cave. At the theatre that evening was Professor Tucci who invited the couple to the Theatre Giordoni off Piazza Novona where again the Full Circle performance was a huge success. The saga of their success with theatre performances went on to reach another high, when they were invited by the Italian National TV to do a performance which they readily obliged. 'When we looked at the cheque that we had been paid for the performance we were flabbergasted to say the least. As we stepped on to the street, wondering where could be the next opportunity to perform, we saw the showroom of a car company right across the street and with our fee money from the TV show we were able to buy a Volkswagon 'beatle' and with that taking care of our travel expenses, we were able to go on a tour of Europe in comfort.'

At their next stopover, Dame Luck smiled affably as the Bavarian TV invited them for a show in Germany, learning of their Italian success. 'We went on to perform in Austria and to Munich. Then at Easter, we were invited by Rev. Father Jerome D'Souza, assistant to the College of Cardinals to perform and we made a special selection of philosophy and poetry for the

evening. We were lodged in a convent right next to the Vatican! We also learnt that the Pope was studying Sanskrit and was taken up by the Upanishad.' Other rewards became memorable landmarks as a Jesuit monk, who had taken a vow of silence, broke it — to speak to them, something he could only do once every three years. The success had continued unabated and this time round the couple had crossed over from the Continent to England when a photographer from *The Times* and the paper's art critic was 'specially interested in our style' remarks Vaidya.

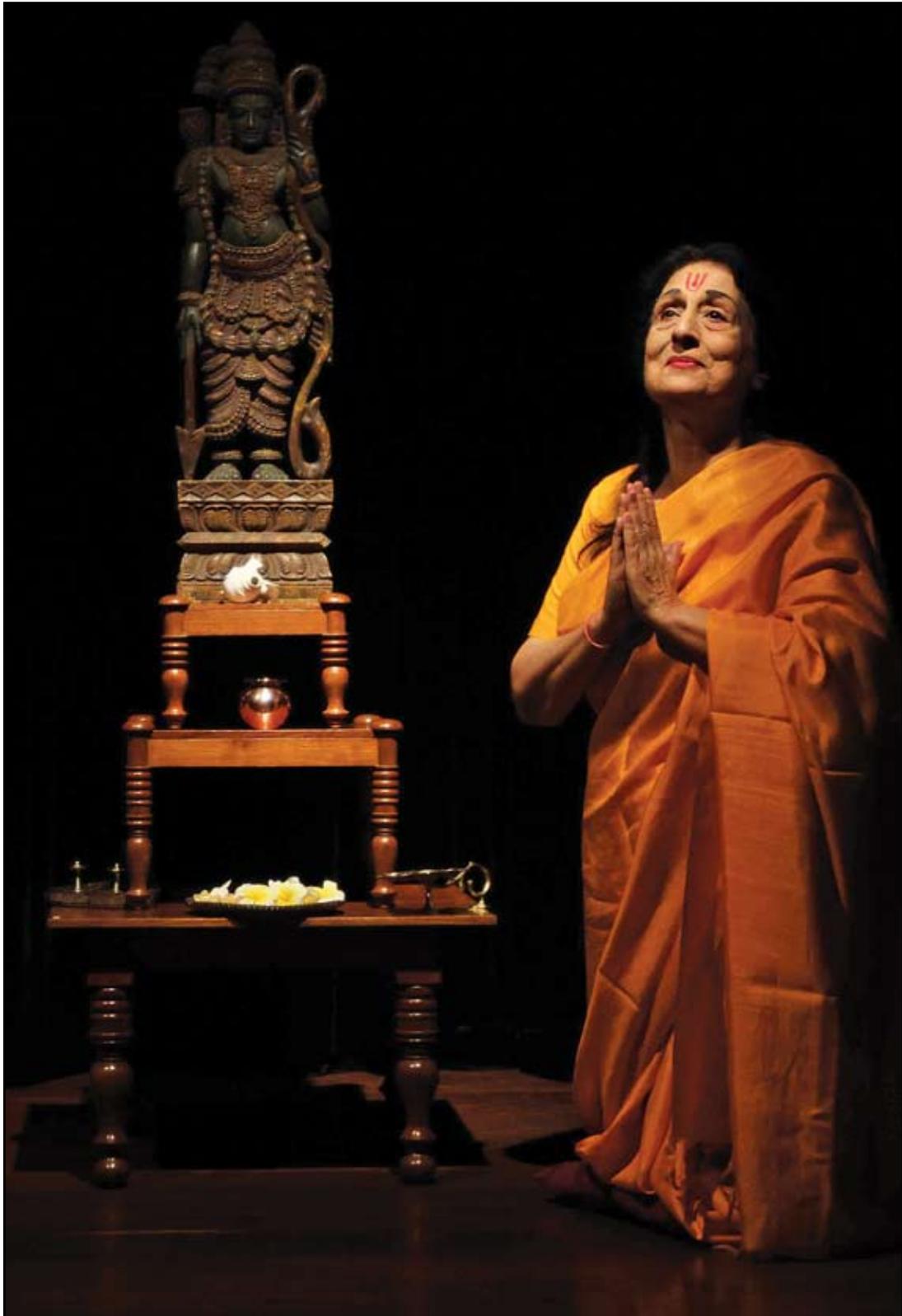
The English tour had thus begun with the right credentials. The couple went to London and performed at two famous London theatres: The trendy Arts Laboratory on Drury Lane and The Mercury Theatre, famous for verse productions. Incidentally, it had also premiered T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Christopher Fry's *Ascent of F6*, and it was a great honour and recognition for Gopal's work to be asked to play *Full Circle* there. Of course, the positive responses followed almost as a matter of course.

All this was routine in comparison to what was to come. It was an invitation from the Royal Shakespeare



Gopal Sharman

World Festival of Theatre who invited us to bring a play the next year for its world season. The organizers stated that despite so many rounds of world theatre showings they had never had a play from India. At this Gopal told them that he would like to bring the *Ramayana* as he was always interested in the



Jalabala Vaidya in a Ramayana performance

Ramayana,...Who is this Ram? Why is there both such a revulsion of his acts and yet such a devotion of him?’

The sponsors fell in with their idea about the *Ramayana* when Gopal Sharman had to confess that the script he had in mind for his play was not yet written. But the theatre officials were undeterred, and instead, offered to contract Sharman. Also, they were also willing to set up a tour of the *Ramayana* by Gopal Sharman. In short, it was a win-win situation for the couple once again. At the same time, thoughts of opportunities on home shores were also being explored by the couple particularly as the Tatas had just initiated a scholarship scheme, namely the Homi Bhabha Fellowship Scheme to artists of all categories who were willing to work for the propagation of the arts. The couple was well ensconced and the play began to take shape. In a typical Sharman stance recalls Jalabala, Sharman’s method of writing was to lie on his back on the floor, in the dark, and dictate the words to Vaidya. He said that after making his mind completely blank, words and paragraphs would rush into his mind, like a revelation. Thus was born the play, *The Ramayana*, which was to make raves across the country and the world, with Vaidya in a solo act.

But there were still hitches along the way. When it was nearing completion and ready for the litmus test of all plays, facing a theatre audience with the final product, there was a twist. The couple received a call from the Prime Minister’s office about the play. It was widely rumoured that he then premiere Morarji Desai would review the production as he did with all others sent to him and invariably, the organizers received a cancellation thereafter. Under such circumstances, it seemed, their *Ramayana* was likely to be stillborn. ‘We approached the PM’s office at 7.30 a m. with our own misgivings. He was notorious we had been told for rejecting scripts and ours was now being put to scrutiny by him. On entering his office he asked ‘give me the preface’ and we sat with bated breath.’ The clouds cleared miraculously and the birds chirped as the couple heard the pronouncement.

‘Wonderful approach’ certifying that Sharman’s idea of humanizing the idea of Ram as a man of our times, an ideal ruler, husband, law giver etc, had struck the right note.’

The year was 1968 and performances with a cast of thirty, who were earmarked for the world premiere of the play were being readied for the forthcoming performance. ‘We suddenly had a huge setback. We were touring India when the cast of thirty performers demanded tickets to return to London. As we refused, the result was that they all resigned. ‘It was a frightful experience because the entire cast went on strike. The entire cast wanted their return tickets to London to be booked and they would leave forthwith.’

While still in this dilemma, the couple began examining other avenues for their script. ‘Gopal and I decided to read a portion of the play to Dr Karan Singh and his wife, knowing of their erudite tastes in the culture of India.’ When he heard the script, we had not expected his response to say the least. He enquired: Why did you need a whole cast? Why don’t you do it alone? ‘Our reaction was one of plain horror. Anyway, Gopal decided that we drive off to Shimla and think things over. Gopal has grown up in a family where story telling is a tradition. It was common in his home to have kathas recited and he decided to transform the script from one of being a theatre concept to that of a katha vachak form, where a story teller narrates the episodes of the story. It was supposed to be a three-hour performance initially and now had to be concised and tailored to the new version.’

This new image of the *Ramayana* has made the couple unsurpassable in the world of theatre. Their fledgling experiment, after that portentous conversation, had resulted in the Ministry of Tourism offering them space in a modest but exclusive setting. ‘We were given a room above the porch of the Ashok Hotel to try out our creation at what was known as the Ashok Chamber Theatre and on 3rd November, 1970, premiered this remarkable solo performance

of the *Ramayana*, using the Gopal Sharman version. It was an astounding success as nearly a hundred people came for the opening and sat around on the floor with bolsters as support instead of chairs. We continued with the show for a month but realized that we needed a space designated for it, when we were given the option of a semi-detached place in a bungalow, which is now the one I perform. In. I enact the entire play taking on the different roles and play the parts changing my voice to suit the roles.'

Then was born another of Sharman's incisive inputs as the couple decided, 'Let us design our own little 'Ashoka'. That was in 1971 and then the Bangladesh War delayed the whole arrangement but not for long, as the Akshara opened its doors for the nightly show on 11 March, a year later in 1972. ' It had the unfortunate effect of our dropping out of the World Theatre season at the Royal Shakespeare Company but we were playing to full houses. That was not surprising, as the couple had constructed their theatre from scratch, taking every aspect into consideration. 'In most auditoriums in Delhi, you can't even see the floor of the stage. The difference in Akshara is the steeped seating arrangements. The acoustics are helped by the floor of the stage which is made of teak, rosewood, and hardwood, which gives voices a clear tone. The chairs are also made of wood, which amplifies the mellow sound. Metal reverberates whereas wood does not. We also have two inches of rubber under it. The empty space doesn't hurt the performers, unlike concrete. The entire complex has been designed and built by Gopal, who thought of all these things.'

Just why he was successful in creating a space of professional excellence, goes back to the childhood days of Gopal Sharman. He had spent his growing up years in Lucknow where at the corner of his house was a carpenter's shop and a sadhu would run it. Gopal was fascinated watching the man and his visitors who were sadhus themselves. Seeing his keenness the owner-cum-carpenter had allowed him

to try his hand at the job and the eager student had acquired a lifelong interest in the art introducing him to the magic of the wood that would unlock for him its hidden potentialities if he learnt to treat the wood kindly and respectfully. Thus when he decided to build the Akshara as their personal space, the childhood love for wood that over the years had become more than mere material for building, came in handy when Akshara was designed by him as an 'all-wood' theatre.

Once again the visitors to their shows went back satisfied and in turn, came to their rescue. As the couple had begun to put out 3-cm ads in the dailies to spruce up dwindling audience numbers at their daily evening show, the audience numbers picked up and so did the visitors who mattered, in a way. The High Commissioner from Fiji to India visited a performance and immediately invited the couple to stage their performance in his country. Even more remarkable was the visit of the American President and Dean of Colleges, who was there as a guest of the USEFI. On his last night in the city he had come to see the play and immediately invited the couple for a breakfast meeting at his hotel. Thereafter, all through the summer of 1973, the *Ramayana* had made the rounds of American academic circles, propounding 'Dashrath's dispensation of justice, in his approach, the Ayodhya approach to the same, the exploration of the inverse... not fabulous wealth but by righteousness. The political ideal that was understood by all and different from that of Ravana'

Of course there were the usual hiccups along the way and one of them was to make the sets portable during their tour. Sharman had again put his skills to test and built compact scenery that could be dismantled and packed into suitcases to be reassembled at the other end. 'Our daughter Anasuya took over the lighting and sound and I had a clutch of four saris for each act beginning with an orange for the opening scenes of Ayodhya followed by a faded green one for the Vana vas. I wore a black one for portraying the scene of the Lanka durbar and finally an anga vastram for the



Jalabala Vaidya



The Akshara facade

triumphant return to Ayodhya as I did not go into the arms of Mother Earth.'

Today the play has clocked more than 2000 performances and has included prestigious performances from Broadway to West End and the UN headquarters at New York. It has been witnessed by audiences in Canada's and Europe's national theatres besides its tour of university towns in the USA. In India, the play has been performed in 35 and more cities and everywhere this two-hour 35 minute katha of the version of the *Ramayana* has found an eager audience.

Across the four decade plus record of performances, there has been little change except what has now been done due to literally a force of circumstances. All these decades, it was Vaidya who sat in a low chair and began speaking out the parts holding the *Ramayana* in front of her on a book holder, widely used in homes as a rest for their scriptures. This stance was a classic shot, imaged on viewers' minds. Her voice and body language soon had her audience

enthralled. One moment she would alter her being into the lovesick Ravana longing for Sita's attentions while with just a flick of her shawl when she would tell Rama those telling words: 'the time has come when you must do your duty and I, mine.'

Today, the same low chair holds the focus of this much loved epic performance but instead of Jalabala Vaidya on it, there sits her granddaughter. The play is now a multiple cast affair. Now, it is from the same low chair that Vaidya watches as her 20-year-old granddaughter Nisa Vaidya adjusts a pale green sari, draped like a Bharatanatyam dancer's garb. "That's the same costume I wore when I played Sita", says Vaidya, in her clipped accents. The multiple cast has been trained by her while Jalabala continues to be the narrator and thus the essence of her production continues to be the same. 'It is a play that glorifies Ram and Sita as a modern couple. She is a god-fearing person but also a down-to-earth human being who saves his honour by the force of his will.' she concludes.

Art Reviews: Azad Bhavan Gallery

The charter of the ICCR, ever since its beginning in 1950, has been the propagation and dissemination of India's rich cultural heritage within the country and across the world. This has resulted in a rich repertoire of India's cultural map, defined by her music, contemporary art practices, theatre, folk traditions and dance. With such a wide gamut of items and forms to select from, creates its own set of problems and challenges: what to project and what is likely to be left out, in the course of this selection across such a wide spectrum. Thus what initially appears to be a simple cake walk of handpicking whatever strikes one's fancy from the field of the cultural traditions, in actuality, turns out to be a great responsibility to shoulder. And this is just part of its responsibilities for while Indian culture is being taken abroad for better understanding, culture from other climes is constantly being introduced to people here, so that we are given an opportunity to understand, appreciate and link with traditions and cultural highlights from across the globe. Into this fabric of weaving traditions



Hon'ble Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi lighting the lamp at the inauguration of the International Ramayana Mela-2015. Also present are, Smt. Sushma Swaraj, External Affairs Minister, Prof. Lokesh Chandra, President, ICCR and Shri Satish C. Mehta, Director General, ICCR

from India and abroad there is a distinct category of practitioners who have been studying, promoting and engaging with Indian traditions in their own lands, thus making people of their adopted countries aware of our cultural highlights. These people too, find a platform on the ICCR radar as they need to be encouraged for the yeoman service they have rendered to Indian culture.



A 14-member Ramayana group from Indonesia performing at the inaugural of the first edition of International Ramayana Mela-2015, on February 23, 2015, at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi

Also, it is always refreshing for us to see how others have adopted Indian culture and taken it to newer and more imaginative heights through their personal sensitivity as well as the cultural roots they now hail from.

This month, viewers in the capital have been fortunate in that they have had two glorious opportunities to savour curatorial exchanges being fostered by people

from other lands. The first of these during this quarter was the **International Ramayana Festival**, which was graced by the Hon'ble Prime Minister personally, where he ably touched upon the lessons of the Ramayana and its significance in our global world today. He had dwelt in particular on the sacrifice of the mythical Jatayu and his supreme sacrifice, a legacy that binds human beings and their capacity to endure, serve and rise above petty considerations into a higher level of understanding beyond the everydayness of existences.

Troupes from across the world where the Indian diaspora had carried the message of the Ramayana in their humble personal belongings way back as indentured labour to these lands in the 19th century were on displays. These early settlers had found solace in reading the cantos of the epic after a grueling day at work, on days when they had to retire without a proper meal, or when hardships of more than the usual kind, came their way. In those countries today, there continues to be a strong enactment of Ramayana through song and dance



A 13-member National Ramleela Council Group from Trinidad & Tobago performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 24, 2015



A 13-member Cambodia Reamke Performing Art Troupe-2 from Cambodia performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 25, 2015

and ritual incorporated within it, to provide a wide-angled view of the immense possibilities of a single epic. Thus these renditions of the Ramayana 'gatha' originating from our culture, have helped to stoke, enrich and enlighten and interpret the cultural potential of their adopted countries so charmingly that today, viewing it after a space of a century or more, one finds meaning, linkages and differences that charm audiences in both countries. Ranging from as far off as Trinidad and Tobago across to Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand and Singapore, and Fiji, the rich contents of the epic made for a spectacular display of pageantry, interpretation, choreography, through the reinterpretation of the tale of Rama on the capital's stage. Carried across the seas to wherever the Indian

diaspora had set its roots, and into the silent recesses of minds and hearts of the people there emerged a magical alchemy of cultural interpretations making for a most enriching creative and artistic dialogue with these troupes..

While the Ramayana enactment was a classic presentation where audiences were made privy to a variety of inspirational outpourings, the **International Jazz Festival** featured later this quarter, offered a genre of music that is as much a heart throb for the Indian listener as it is in America the land of its origin, and elsewhere. Yes, I am talking of the highly successful jazz bonanza which, unlike the structured traditional performances of the earlier international

meet, on this occasion, turned the stage into a get-together of informal bonhomie. Opting for an open-air ambience the festival had been held in the capital city's prominent, Nehru Park, which wore all the trappings of a colourful fare ground, with people pouring in casually, cell phones on the ready, clicking at the goings-on on stage as well as in the surroundings. The casual aura of the music made it much more embracing and while the front rows had people sitting in formal attentiveness, the rear seats were packed with college crowds who milled around, listening in as they walked around the park, making the most of the salubrious summer evening.

The musicians too, seemed to have got into the mood of the evening as they peppered their items with casual chats with their audience, enquiring if the music was going well and in accordance with their expectations. Then they promised some more of their numbers and had audiences

eagerly looking forward to what was in store. The opening concert by A trio consisting of a cellist, a pianist and a drummer jazzed up the show with their fast paced rhythms, their innovative play on the strings and the throbbing beat of the cello where the musician plucked at the strings with his finger tips, giving a nimbleness to the content of the music. The



A 11-member Timeless Ramayana by Tanjai Kamala Indira Barathanatya Vidyalaya group from Malaysia performing at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi, on February 26, 2015

pianist matched the tone and setting with a similar tingling light hearted composition and the drummer went along with the duo in rhythmic congeniality. The overall content was refreshing, attention grabbing and casual, making for an evening of pure enjoyment without having to concentrate too much on the nitty gritty of the music making process.



Esteban Copete y su Kinteto Pacifico (Colombia)

While all music has an emotional underbelly and every composition runs through a gamut of emotional experiences, the improvisations of a jazz musician makes music slough off all these pricey connotations and thrill with its foot tapping rhythm, its soul stirring appeal and its straight forward unpretentious yet sincere attempt to touch hearts and minds. That



Rimon Jazz Institute Trio (Israel)



Piotr Wojtasik Quintet, Poland



Remi Panossian Trio (France)



Esteban Copete y su Kinteto Pacifico (Colombia)

is what was evident through the universal language of these jazz artists from many lands. Also, giving a fresh twist to the music was an Indian component of jazz, presented through Ustad Kamal Sabri and his troupe. Known for his command over the sarangi, this maestro and his troupe, who have often teamed up with musicians elsewhere in fusion concerts, added a new dimension to the language of jazz by enriching it with a version of Indian jazz. Listeners were struck by the similarities that came forth through this Indian chapter and one realized that with both the Indian classical form and jazz being based on the artist's capacity to create of his own, it is surprising that it has taken so long for this music to have come to the fore. For international audiences too, the concert was an eye opener for while they have heard Indian performers in solo concerts and even fusion efforts by the artists, very few have unearthed this treasure of jazz innovations till date.



Ariadna Castellanos Trio (Spain)



Within the gallery premises, too, there were several art shows that caught viewer attention by the quality of their content, the choice of subject matter and the ease of presentation by the artist himself. Of note were the works of **Biplab Biswas**, in his exhibition

titled: *'Thank God for Love!'* Disclaiming the Bacchus-like suggestion that the title evokes one comes face-to-face with works that are a distant reminder of the compositional flair of the Indian miniaturist, the colourations of the European masters and the geometrical play of the Cubists, all of which have been dexterously assembled in the techniques adopted by the master artist. A graduate from the Indian College of Arts and Draughtsmanship under the Rabindra Bharati University and a trained teacher in the teaching of Art from the University of Calcutta, this veteran artist has been a prominent face on the Indian art scene since the eighties. Working between Kolkata and Delhi his works have been displayed at eminent art addresses in both the cities in a range of solo and group shows.

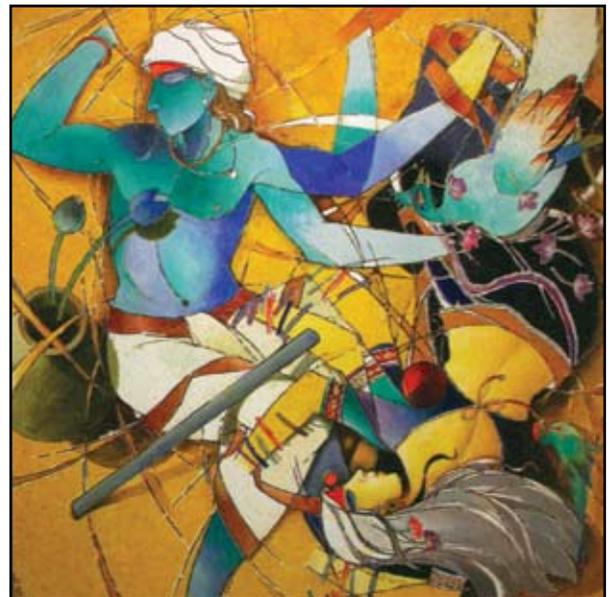
The works have a romantic delicacy in their overall suggestive makeover. In fact, that heightens the mood of love that the artist has set out to portray in his work. The woman figure which is made the primary spokesman of his romantic narrative, is

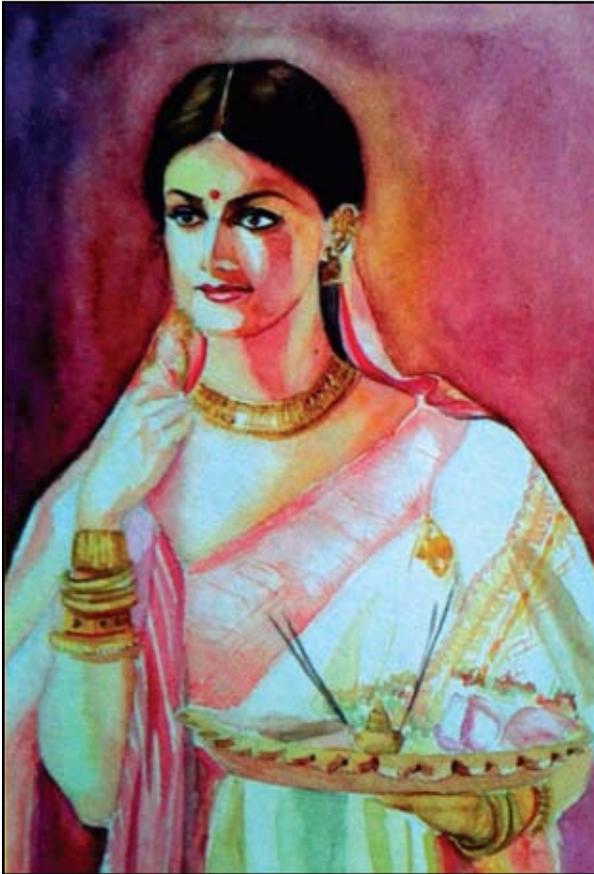




depicted as both earthy and ethereal, her graceful contours making for a powerful suggestiveness. The angularity and graphic outlining of the figure gives a clear cut understanding of the theme and her setting on the canvas space, in a prominent spot without her being made overbearing, is the master stroke that the artist has perfected. The hazy tones of the backdrop in these works contrasts well with the frontal figure and assists in the interactive nature of the exercise. Perhaps what conveys the feelings which the artists sets out to portray is the colour tints that he has chosen. None of them can be defined as loud or in-the-face and yet the ultimate result is a succinct playfulness on the theme of love, giving his choice of colours the capacity of a thinking application instead of a haphazard playfulness. The placement of figures across the canvas belies the rules of formal composition as they dot the space much like narrative accents of a crowded miniature platform. This technique plays a huge role in gripping viewer interest and makes the peripheral spaces play a significant role in artistic interpretation.

The works also suggest the artist's tendency towards a natural setting, within a garden-like ambience. This choice provides the works with a patina of innate delicacy and the inclusion of the Krishna figure and his tell-tale flute, adds volume to the suggestive content of the works. Enhancing the symbolic approach to the central theme of love, he has broadened the theme further through a criss cross of fine lines, that do nothing to disturb the image but which certainly adorn the space with suggestive touches, becoming the artist's signature brand. Stringing together mythical symbols like the white cow, the pastoral backdrop and Krishna painted in a smooth flourish of mellow light, makes the works somewhat surreal rather than definitive, and yet the works do not stray far away from the actuality, for in their recall lies a familiar backdrop of rustic makeover that the viewer can relate to when standing before a work by Biswas. Here indeed is an artist who has made a thorough study of the potential of colour, the uncanny sophistication of figurative placing and the charming inclusiveness of all these different elements to create a work of true art.





Pooja, water colour on paper: 7x11 inches

A joint exhibition by **Advait Singh, Rekha Singh** and **Reva Singh** elicited much interest because of the choice of their painting styles. Their coming together on the same platform gave viewers an opportunity to assess and enjoy a variety of works distinct in their forms and yet gelling seamlessly on this platform. Also, their variety of medium choices gave the works on display a dimension of interest for each one of the artists showed a instable tendency to provide their viewers with a distinct experimental take on art. Even the periods of time that they chose to portray were unlinked and yet arresting for while Advait Singh appeared taken up with the urban youth in the metro cities and their on each of us wearing a mask that hides our inner being from the world. Each of these figures are thoughtfully created and carry within them a story of their own lifestyle, Rekha Singh's take on miniatures and the graceful feminine forms of the old



Made for each other, tempera on paper: 16x24 inches
Advait Kumar Singh



Abhisarika, wash tempera on paper: 16x24 inches
Rekha Singh

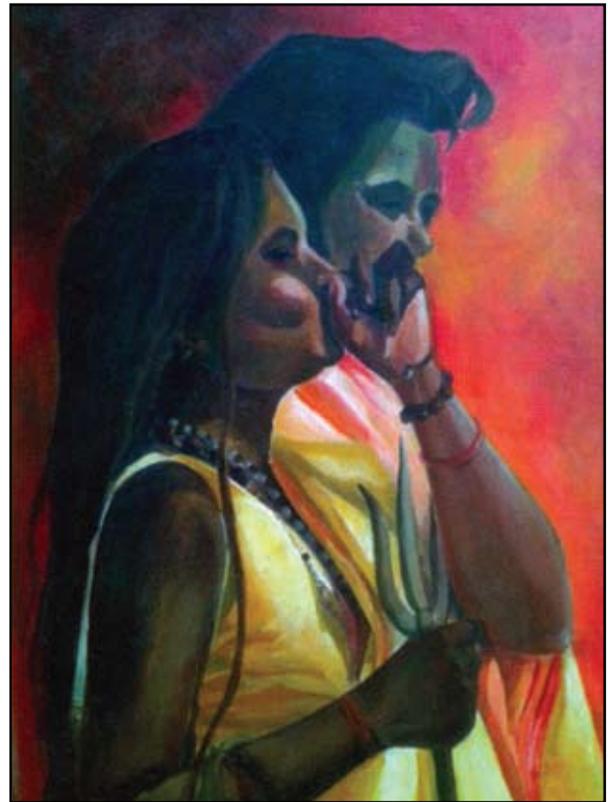


Bala ji, wood dust on hardboard: 19x31 inches
Reva Singh

ustads of these schools is marked by scholarship and care. Reva Singh on the other has completely deviated from the senior artists and made batik her chosen medium, orienting it to portray figures both mythical and contemporary. Explaining her *raison d'être* for this medium, she continues: 'In other mediums you can see the progress of your work continuously but in batik you can see the result after the whole process has finished.'

The choice of subjects for Advait Singh as well as the mediums, speak of an artist who likes to challenge himself. Ranging from portrayal of couples who can be spotted anywhere today, he has also successfully caught the expression of a rugged soldier in his work titled 'Officer', sporting a cocky expression matching

with his domineering facial expression. The take on 'Yogini' is a tongue-in-cheek satire for as the tulsī bead wearing female form has cupped her hands to blow a conch, her mind is dwelling in a parallel way around a male figure at her shoulder. Rekha Singh's works hark back to the Bengal School in her use of the wash-tempera technique and her choice of the female figure in a surreal setting, and central to the scenic surround. The composition is marked by bespoke delicacy where every element is distinct as a feather touch. For Reva Singh, the experimentation with batik has also been clubbed with forms made from wood dust, such as the large portrayal of Balaji, complete with a gamut of ornamentation. Though her figures carry the familiarity of concentration on the finesse of embellishment on drapery, the folds of garments and the details of facial features in the work 'Mahakal' is what emits a special attention for her viewers. Essentially realistic, Reva has a perfectionist streak which she has used to advantage in her works.



Yogini, oil on canvas: 20x30 inches
Advait Kumar Singh



Coming to the domain of sculpture, it was the works of artist **Shashi Kumar Paul** that was the talk of the town literally. A graduate from Deoghar, Jharkhand, Paul carries in his art a flavour of his roots which he uses assiduously to portray human figures in day-to-day circumstances. Acts such as holding an umbrella up on a gusty day, or running after a ball during a football game, when the players' bodies are stretched into linear postures as they try to wrestle the ball out of the opponent's reach, bring back a smile of recollection into viewers' visages. Using the difficult medium of bronze, his figures are chiseled and angulated with constant manipulation of the metal

so that every angle of the body in his forms comes out as he wants it. The bronze patina, glows and grips the senses amicably. The overall effect is of a block of marble being fashioned into art through a concentrated thinking process and the light and shadow falling on his bodies provides a charming patina on the surface. The bends in the body, the upward movement of the arms are perfectly balanced so as to maintain their realistic format meticulously. Aptly titled '**Balanced Harmony**' his art is a paean sung to the harmony of balance in everyday circumstances.

The subject matter too, is as varied as his expertise. Though Paul prefers to invest in the man-woman relationship as his chosen theme for his sculptures,



Yogic Concentration



Juggler

he is equally adept in reaching out to higher planes of philosophic thought as is evident in his work titled 'Yogic Concentration' and Bodhisatva. That his imagination is an essential element of his art creation is for all to see in works such as 'The Spirit of (the) Forest', where a Pan-like central figure, seems to emerge from a bunch of leaves playing a merry tune on a violin. These mythical touches contain within them a sense of humour and fantasy that pleases as well as tantalizes the mind. The muscular form of the juggler on the other hand, takes one into the merriment of a mela in any rustic setting, where the form is full of attentiveness balancing a set of balls in space. Works such as 'the Force' suggest brute reality and having

chosen the horse form for ideating the theme, the artist has traveled beyond the conditioning of sheer brute force to one of the fury of the natural elements that can humble any human situation, which is expressed as the force of raw strength.

Thus Paul's works can be seen to move at two levels. At the visual end, what the viewer enjoys is a perfectly chiseled element illustrating a representative situation. On another plane, stretching beyond the visual into one that tugs at one's consciousness, the figure is transposed into an idea, a narrative that converges the sensuality of form with another level of conviction where the actual is sidelined and the virtual takes precedence, albeit through its natural content.



Footballer



The Force



Shelly Jyoti Timeless Silhouettes, A blouse, ajarkh dyeing printing and needle work on khadi fabric 2013: 51x36 inches



Shelly Jyoti Timeless Silhouettes: Seven blouse samplers ajarkh printing dyeing on khadi 2014: 60x60 inches



Shelly Jyoti, Timeless Silhouettes: Angrakha 1&2, ajarkh printing dyeing on khadi fabric 2014: 34x50 inches

In an unusual take for exhibition purposes was the show of **Shelly Jyoti**, a visual artist who on this platform referenced the display in the cultural context of Indian History. Titled '**Salt: the Great March**', she exhibited a contextual referencing of the Ajrakh textiles of Gujarat created on khadi cloth. The muted texture of the khadi and the simplicity of her forms, essentially had a pristine calming effect on the minds of viewers. The exhibits, seen in isolation would appear to be garments of everyday use, but when exhibited within a context such as the Salt March, wafted the spirit of khadi in the spaces. Every visitor was left contemplating not on what the cloth would look like on a fashionista, but what it meant for the many hands that must have worked to bring alive the pieces on display in the gallery. In particular, the artist had picked on one of the most telling events in our history, namely the Salt March to ideate the theme and the project stimulated debate and discussion on the vast potentiality of khadi and its inherent artistic strength.

Another major take-off of this exhibition was its site-specific installations, a form of artistry that are



Ajarkh dyeing, printing and needle work on khadi fabrics, 2013: 75x22 inches

generally not on view at this platform. The creation 'The Threads of Swaraj, handspun threads from a Dandi Gujarat Weaver' was a work that narrowed the divide between gallery exhibits and craft makers beckoning viewers to blend these two aspects of human endeavour closer, with its compelling inputs. Says the artist: *In the course of making Salt: The Great March, I visited Dandi and met veteran freedom fighters such as Mr. Acharya Dhirubhai and Mr. Gosiabhai Patel. Despite their advanced age and failing health they sang songs of freedom while devotedly spinning and pursuing other Gandhian activities and principles. It was inspiring to see 90 years old enthusiasm. I bought these attis from of Dandi and created this installation in view of investigating the idea that if these threads were threads of Swaraj for Gandhi, these could be threads of Swaraj for present times, if we all 40 crore Indian urban population engages in social movement of buying and wearing Khadi and bridging a gap of rural and urban.*

Another eyeball catcher at this display was that of a large artwork, 60X60 inches, mounted on a khadi frame with an intricate patterning in ochre and black,. On it were hung different silhouettes of the upper body garment, a stylised version of the waist coat a form of wear that is popular with all classes. The artwork with Ajrakh patterns is not for visual pleasure but is much more telling when one realizes that it is also a manner of documenting the blocks used by the Ajrakh printers for their craft. The artistic eye of Shelly Jyoti has been able to encash the visual appeal of these 'tools of labour' and serve as indicators of the power of human hands in our country. Also, techniques and crafts such as these can be dated back to the first traces of civilizations in our country, going back to during the Indus Valley period. These medieval clothes also waft the scent of the prosperity of early times for cloth such as these were traded regularly from the 14th century onwards, along the Indian Ocean route.



Work on progress, ink on paper: 165x135 cm

An artist with a versatile portfolio and a yen for water colours, **Manoj Mohanty** depicted a handpicked offering of his artistry this quarter at the gallery. Choosing water colour works over which the artist showed perfect mastery, he utilised a wash technique to enhance the abstract nature of his subject matter. His in-depth study of his technique and the thought process behind each concept came out clear in paintings such as 'the Hidden Icon' wherein the wash of colour in the foreground, managed to block out subjectively the frontal views of well known monuments and buildings dotting our historic sights. The paint blots seemed to convey the fact that the ravages of time do not give us a clear cut view of the past but simply demonstrate a few iconic memories sifted from the pile that are then held up as representative pieces of the entire past.



8th wonder, watercolour ink and sticker on paper: 1005x120 cm

With his capacity of experimenting with new media and the injecting of a fresh thought process into his works, each painting on display became a look at contemporary times through a novel outlook. The



Hidden Icon, watercolour on acidfree paper: 165x135 cm

perpendicular column piercing through the centre of his work in water colour, soft pastel on paper, held all the novelty of a fresh use of materials and a new look at forms. The needle-like sharpness of his central architectural form had all the suggestiveness of a man made creation while the splash of water colour across the paper, and over the higher reaches of the tower, juxtaposing the perishable and the permanent in a highly reflective manner through this quarter, has yielded its own pleasures.. The rhythmic uniformity of the work titled 'Difference between' and the novel use of ink, thread and stickers to create his works suggests a delightful softening of the grim reality depicted in the subject of the painting. The geometrical block of his painting titled '8th Wonder'

holds up to mankind a mockery of his creative skills which he boasts of. What mankind has created by his ingenuity shows that it is already a crumbling and ravaged block even as man continues to mount the pile with more solidity and crass ugliness, all the time. This makes his art a telling mirror into the state of the present world. The massive garnering of fine lines with unusual artistic mediums like fiberglass, silicone, terracota and bronze, is another interesting offshoot. It is a telltale description of our times where we are melding newer materials and ideas into existing and ancient structures seamlessly and creating emergent forms that blend the two seamlessly. Thus newer man made wonders like silica and fiberglass can be merged with ancient terracotta in use since Indus Valley times and pulped paper, another of ancient man's legacies to us. The 'dust cleaner' on the other hand is a satiric take on our immense love of gadgetry and its aftermath. While such a gadget sweeps our surrounding queaky clean, on the other hand it simply collects the dust and oozes it out of its entrails into the atmosphere elsewhere, bringing all our efforts at cleanliness down to naught. This clearly reflects our present socio-political conditions where on the one hand we are working toward welfare of people on the other hand we are busy preparing armoury for contaminating the environment and destroying what we have built. The works do not size up to the title of 'pretty works' but they definitely jerk our sensibilities and open up for us the tremendous possibilities for expressiveness that art offers.



Dust Cleaner, watercolour on paper: 90x120 cm

Many an artist is influenced not just by the world of paints and creations but even more deeply by their cities and its surrounding character. Such is the case with artist **Ritu Chopra**, a resident of the spiritually



Devi Kali, oil on canvas: 36x36 inches



Devi Saraswati, acrylic on canvas: 48x48 inches

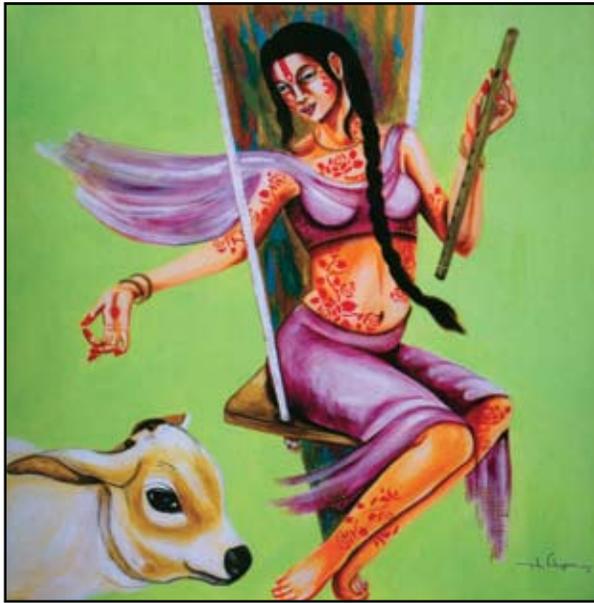


Devi Durga, acrylic on canvas: 48x48 inches

and culturally rich city of Ujjain . Her initiation into the wonders of this city came to light when she first participated in a group show at the Kalidas Academy in Ujjain where she had depicted a series of women engaged in the daily labour of living, not in the comfort of a home but on the streets of the city. Thus the city influence became merged with her chosen figure, the feminine mode. Ever since then, this artist

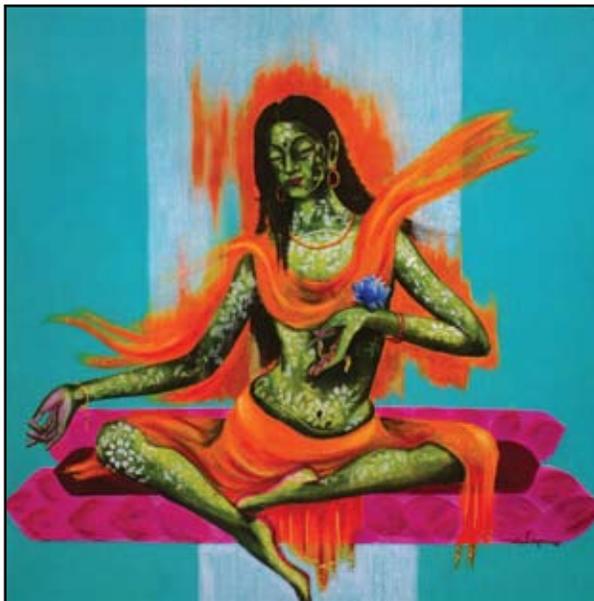


Tri Devi, oil on canvas: 36x36 inches



Devi Radha, acrylic on canvas: 48x48 inches

has explored the possibilities of her woman in varied settings ranging from that of Devi, Shakti to her more mundane forms in the household. As Shakti and Durga, her form is elevated to encompass the entire Universe and she becomes the repository of motherly affection and divine power. She is also the symbol of fertility and thus the mark of regeneration, hope and life in a society.



Devi Tara, acrylic on canvas: 48x48 inches

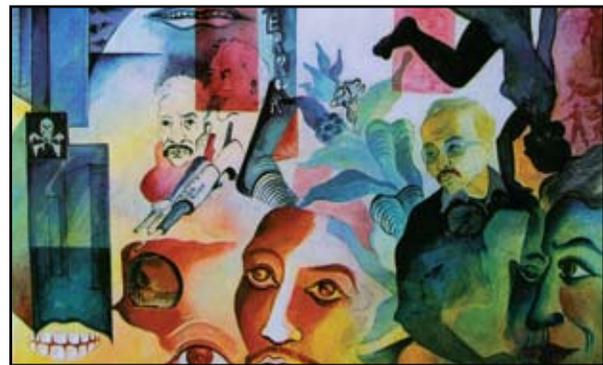


Devi Laxmi, acrylic on canvas: 48x48 inches

The current series of perfectly structured female forms, with graphically etched facial features are set within a concentric circle, harking back to the idea of a mandala which is the containment of divine Shakti. For the artist, such power is not a mythical far-off idea but a throbbing reality experienced in the power of womanhood that is seen in the visage of every woman. Her forms are thus ornate, embellished with floral and trellis like adornments running across their doe-eyed looks and perfect chins and noses. It is a picture of perfection down to the last stroke and is a deliberate attempt at depicting beauty in its purist strokes. Instead of keeping the background for expressing enrichment it is the body of the figure that serves as her canvas for this purpose. This gives greater meaning to her art and define her as a distinct a free thinking creator. The poses that these women have adopted are godly as well as earthly thereby expressing the idea that femininity expresses itself in the ethereal and celestial as much as it does in the ordinary and everyday. By keeping her figures unique and her spaces clear cut and pristine, she allows tremendous space for contemplation for viewers when standing in front of her deep-seated thought-provoking works.



The exhibition of artist Dibyendu Dey of the College of Art and Design, Bardhaman, is another take on the power of womanhood. An assistant professor at the institution, this renowned artist has both an academic perfection and a knowing approach to his creativity so his works are both well conceived but not clinically sanitized into perfected images. Thus their artistic emergence comes forth in a studied yet suffused-with-artistic-content way a combination that few have been able to reach through their creations. Another artist who is absorbed in the power of womanhood, he selects the contemporary version visible in our day to day existence as part of the personal and social milieu. That she is something above the ordinary is expressed through the eyes of his forms where he endows each of his forms with a rare depth managing to give the impression of looking into deep set pools of water in a calm lake. It is a



Terrorism in Mumbai, water colour on paper: 31x22 inches

pair of eyes that manage to look into the depths of the human mind and contain within them a treasure trove of human feelings windowing their content through these charming avenues of facial expression.

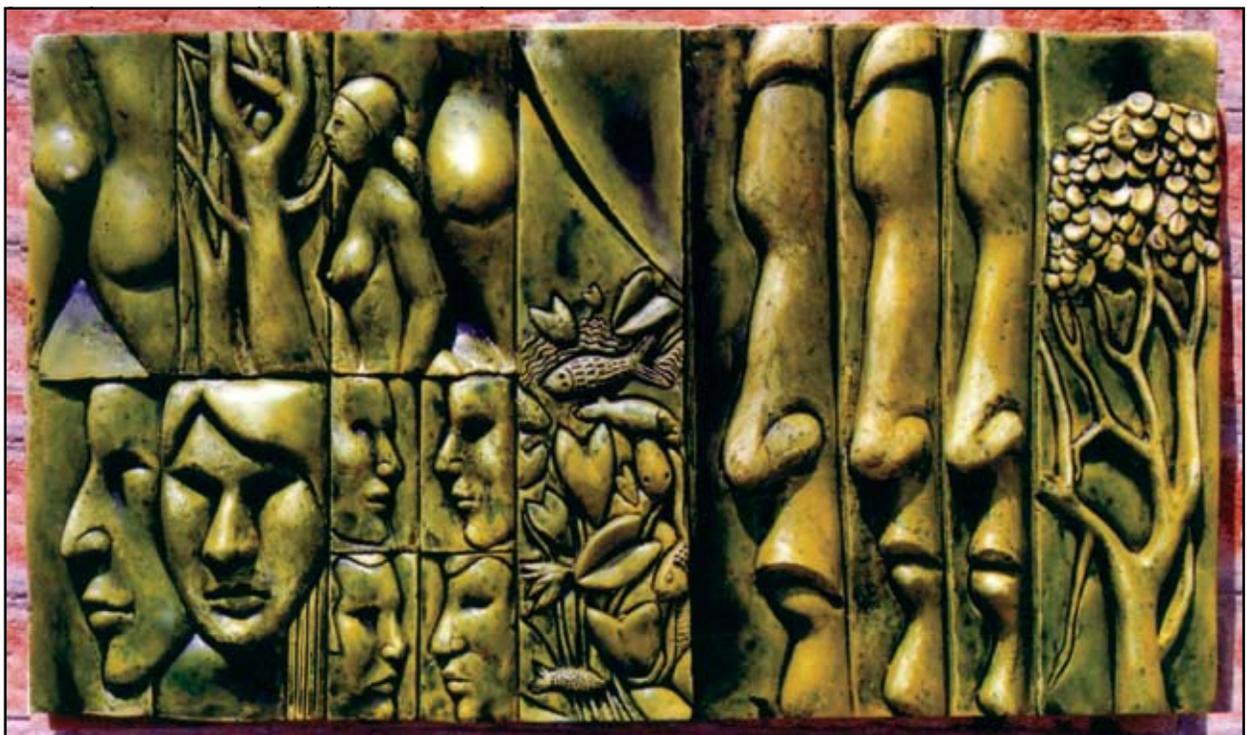
That the face is more than an object for prettifying is defined through the graffiti that adorns the rest of the



Untitled, water colour paper & collage on paper

a conglomerate of strokes, words, meanings and the like, they picturise the current state of affairs in a most poetic manner. The artist does not hold a candle up to this or that protest or movement instead he simply collects and harvests ideas based on the goings-on in our contemporary setting of today. The graphic exactitude of his features, the line of the eyebrow, the streak of kohl uplifting the eyes and the use of red for the highlighting of the nose and the bindi, give depth and academic support to his artistry. The works are thus more than a visual treat. They are an in-depth understanding of all that one ought to realize when putting strokes on a canvas and creating forms.

Not only was it marked by tremendous variety but also professional competence. The exhibitors were as usual handpicked and committed, so that every display at this platform was not a momentary viewing exercise but a recall of the immense strides that art has taken, as more and more professionals are coming to the fore with their innovative techniques, strokes and patterns of thought and thrust.



Nostalgia II, fibre glass painted with acrylic colour: 2x1 feet

The Ramayana

the epic; as a play in English

Gopal Sharman

Publishers: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan

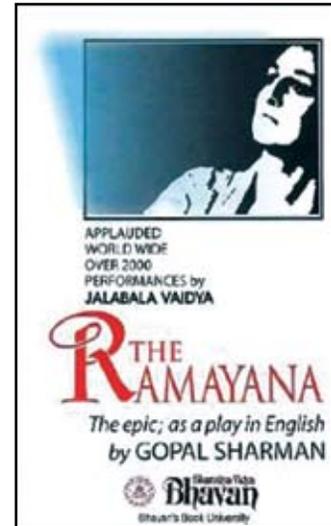
Pages: 155

Price: 275

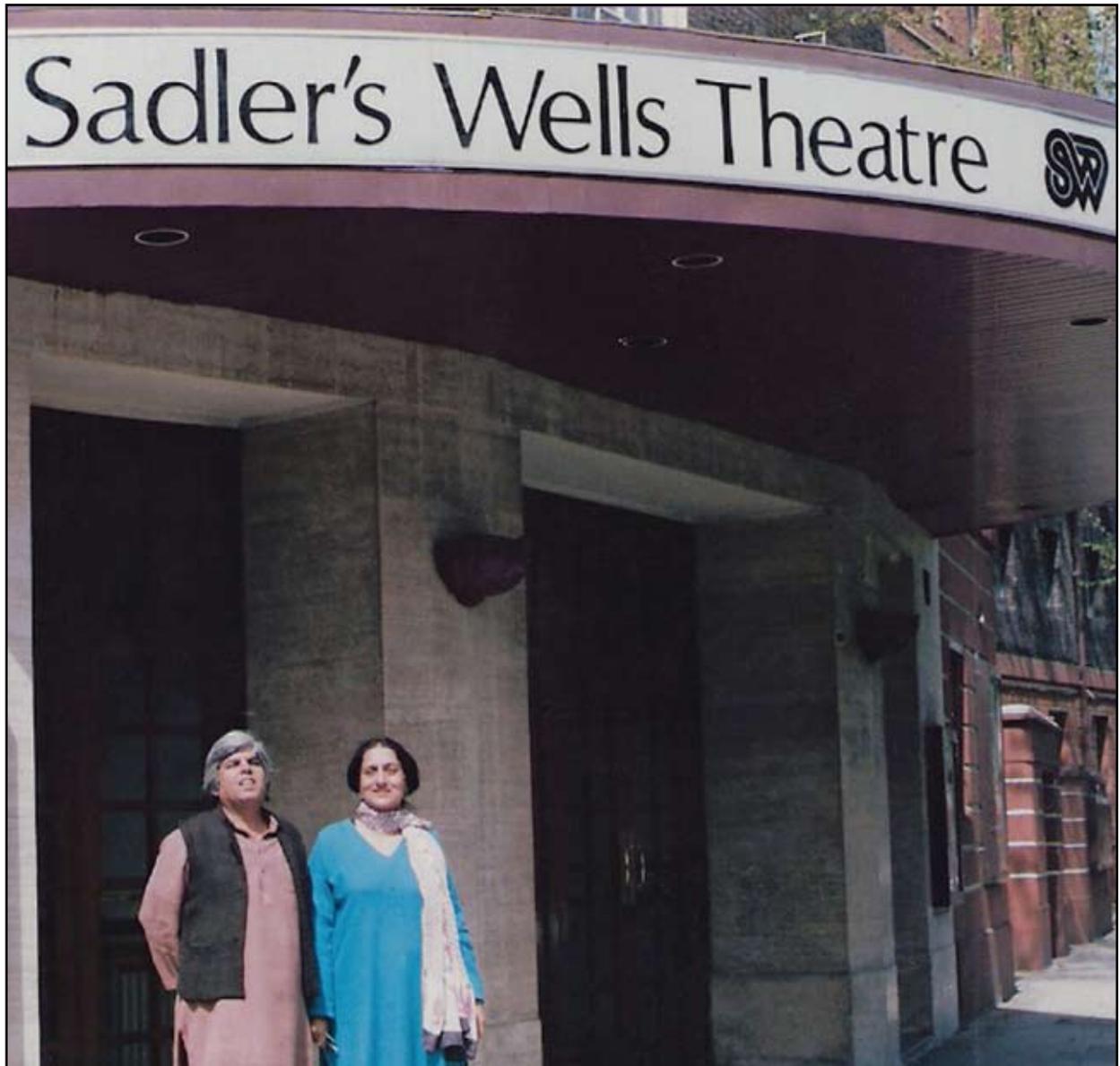
Review by Pawan Kumar Mishra

The story of Rama has been told and retold uncountable number of times by countless writers, poets, bards, seers and saints, across millennia of time. Gopal Sharman's retelling stands out as a piece of brilliant drama, embedded within a contemporary context. Its uniqueness is heightened by the fact that this play has been enacted singly by Sharman's highly talented wife, Jabala Vaidya, portraying all the twenty characters by herself, rendered in the Katha-style, presented in over 2000 performances worldwide since 1970.

Rama is portrayed as a seeker of absolute freedom — freedom of the Source, from the circumstances; freedom of the fragrance from the flower it belonged to. Sita, his wife, is the catalyst of such a search on the one hand, and the feminine fire that burns away the circumstances and the context with a firmness which only a woman can do. She lives the silence that unites them both as one, she walks away from his life the moment words stir up this silence and



Gopal & Jalabala in Sadler's Wells Theatre, London

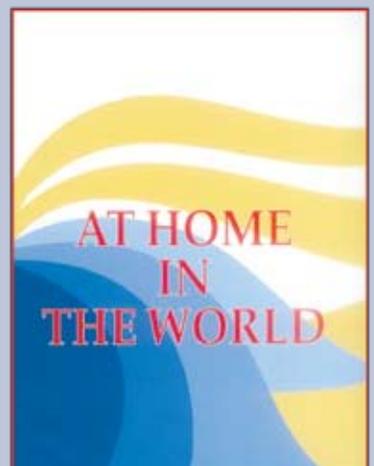
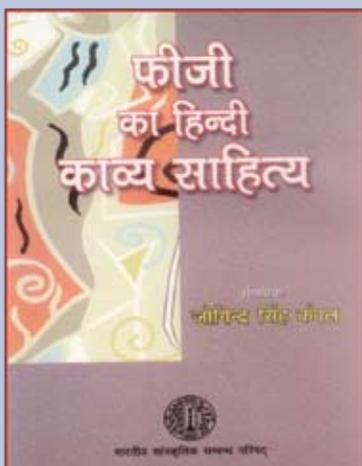
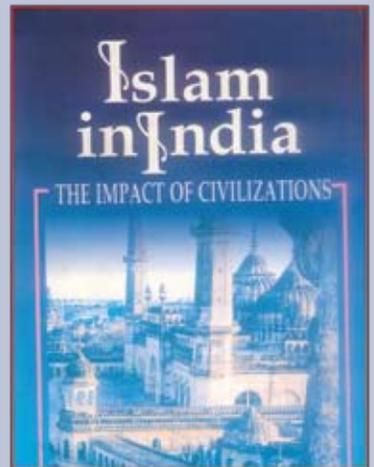
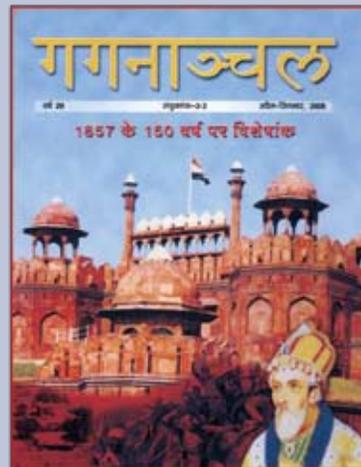
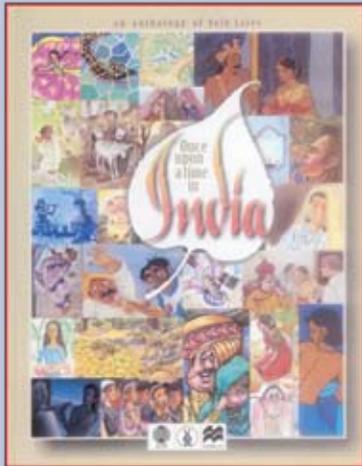


Gopal & Jalabala in Sadler's Wells Theatre, London

makes them into two. Hanuman, neither beast nor man, neither here nor there, immortal, and timeless, is the narrator of the story, apart from being Rama's trusted messenger, aide and general. Ravana, the insatiable hoarder-consumer who mocks at the rest of the world, is portrayed as the insanely passionate lover who risks his own life and all his kingdom to own a place in Sita's heart. Through a terse telling of

a timeless story, Sharman weaves the viewer/ reader into the heart of this narrative.

The book as well as the story of the genesis of this book is an intriguing read, which takes away the curtain of time that separates the past from the present, and the present from the future. The reader experiences a flow through time, as easily and gently as one's breath, exhaled.





CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Nikhilesh Shastri

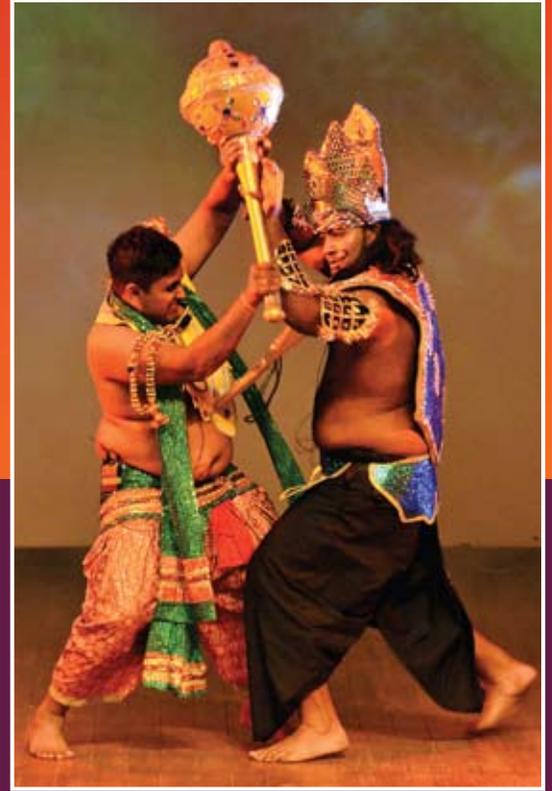
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