

RAMAYANA

Myth or Reality ?

By

H. D. SANKALIA



PEOPLE'S PUBLISHING HOUSE
NEW DELHI

RAMA AS VISNU^{13a}

Unlike the Mahabharata Rama is the central figure in almost all the important events. It is he who with the help of Lakshmana kills the Rakshasas while still a boy of 16, it is he who destroys no less than 14,000 Rakshasas in the Dandakaranya, in a single combat, while standing bare-footed, while his opponents were initially seated in a chariot. It is Rama who with one arrow only pierces all the seven sala trees. Ultimately it is Rama who kills Ravana and after regaining purified Sita flies back to Ayodhya in Ravana's Pushpaka Vimana. These unique feats, but particularly the *ekapatni-vrata* of Rama, in days when polygamy and alliance with young beautiful girls was common, and so also steadfast love of Sita for Rama against all threats and temptations and the brotherly affection of Lakshmana and Hanuman's unflinching services have left indelible mark on the Indian mind. Everyone of these characters has become an *adarsha*, an ideal to be cherished.

How old is this belief and what is its source?

The story of Rama and Sita is natural. It may happen at any time and in any clime, hence its universality. But the behaviour of the four or five principal characters is rare and unusual and it has gripped all readers.

From the preparation of the Critical Edition at Baroda it is evident that the Ramayana in all its essentials was known in India by at least the 5th century A.D. It was at this time that important scenes, events in the story, began to be portrayed in sculpture in early temples devoted to the worship of Visnu and possibly Siva also (though as yet we have not found any temples dedicated to Rama of such an early date).

This was the time when Kalidasa composed a major *kavya*, the *Raghuvamsa*, in which the events of Ramayana were incorporated. And slightly later Bhavabhuti wrote the famous *Uttara-Ramacharita*.

Thus by the 5th century the Ramayana was known not only over a great part of India but the story began to spread out-

side India and we have got inscriptions and temples in Java as well as records from Central Asia.

Naturally there were different versions. In India two main versions are recognised.

VARIOUS VERSIONS OF RAMAYANA

The Northern recension has three further important divisions :

- (a) Sarada or North-Western Group
- (b) Nepali or North-Eastern Group,
(The latter had two further subdivisions:
 - (i) Maithili version
 - (ii) Bengali version)
- (c) Devanagari version.

Each of three principal versions has several subdivisions.

The Southern recension has three main divisions :

- (a) Telugu version
- (b) Grantha version,
- (c) Malayalam version.

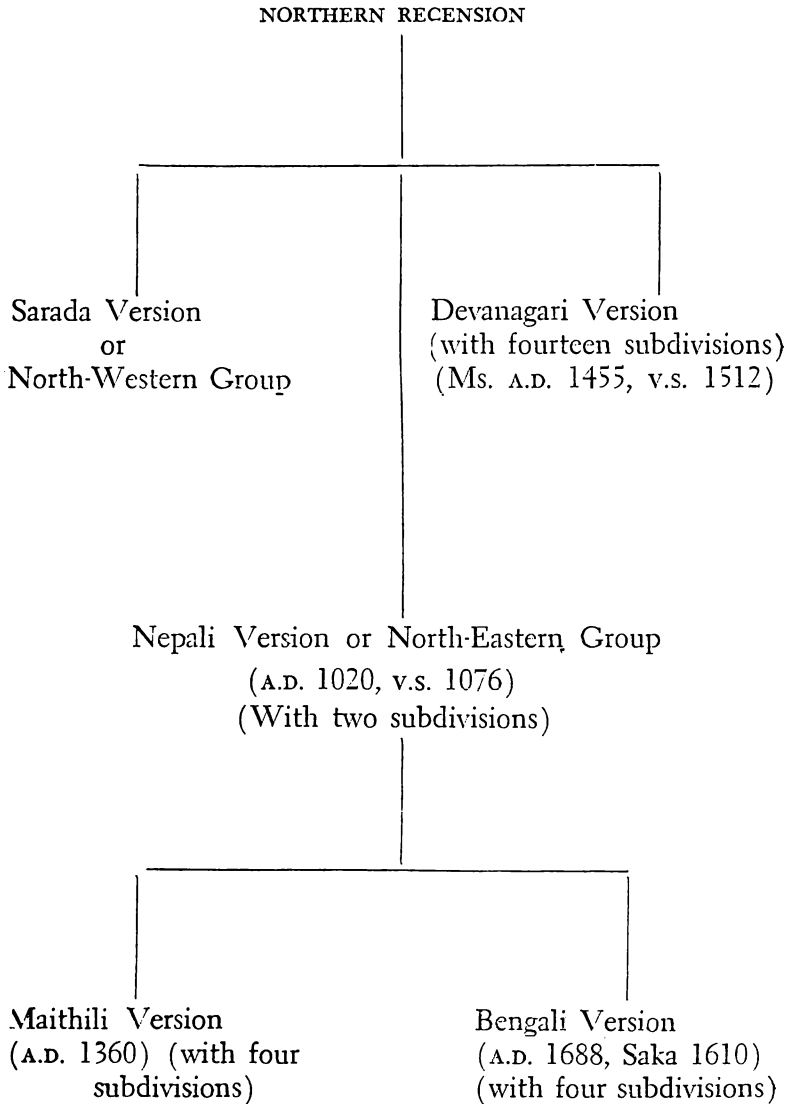
Each of three has again several subdivisions.

What is important to remember in all this mass of data is the fact that no Ms is earlier than A.D. 1020 and the latest is as recent as A.D. 1800.

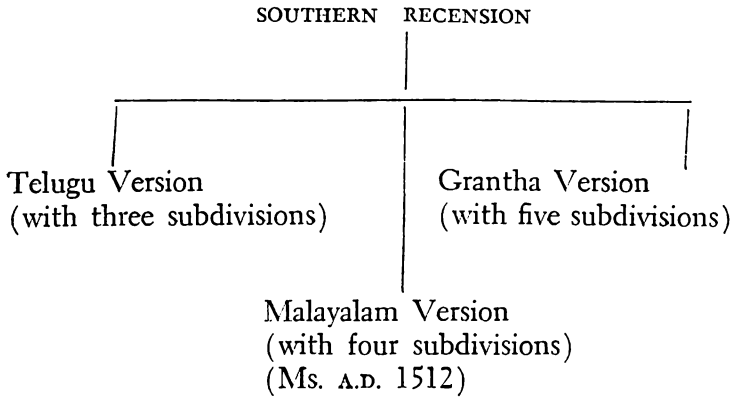
For an easy and clear understanding we may reproduce the chart of the various versions and subdivisions :

I

(only Balakanda)



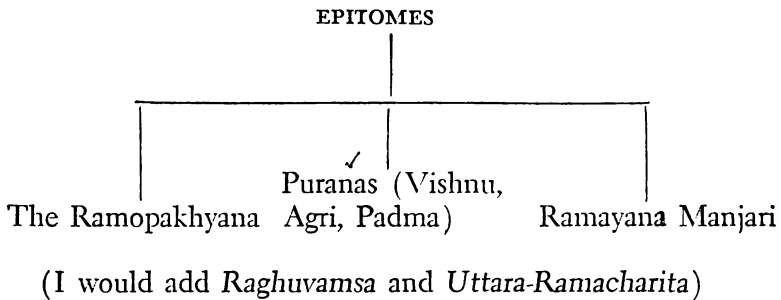
II



III

COMMENTATORS (OR TESTIMONIALS)

IV



*Critical Edition*¹⁴

The Critical Edition has been prepared at Baroda after collating all the manuscripts of these different versions. It is interesting to note that the oldest manuscript known so far

is one from Nepal. It bears the date A.D. 1020, whereas of all the four versions, the South Indian version is said to be more reliable because it contains lesser interpolations.

A critical edition of any work only gives us a reliable text which might prove to exist at a particular time. In the case of the Ramayana which we are discussing a text is now available which might have existed even in the 5th century A.D. But the reconstruction of a reliable text does not mean that whatever this text contains is true, either at that time or at any time in the past. What Valmiki created was a heroic poem, and this poem went on being inflated from time to time, incorporating at least some features of that time. When this heroic poem was created, mythical things—characters and events—were introduced into the story. This inflation has not stopped as I will have occasion to point out later. It is going on before our very eyes.

Divine Weapons^{15 15a}

Of the things mentioned by me just consider how Rama was made to acquire divine weapons in the Balakanda. The normal weapons of a warrior anywhere in the world were the bow and arrow for a long distance fight. For the hand-to-hand fight, there was either the gada (mace) or the shield and sword.

The Rakshasas also used these weapons, though at times they might uproot a tree, or pick up a large boulder, even a living rock and hurl it against the enemy.

The Vanaras never used the bow and arrow, sword and shield, or any other made weapons. They are invariably found to employ trees, rocks and small tops of hillocks.

Thus distinction made by the author of the Ramayana not only helps us to identify or categorize the three main participants in the epic, but when we further examine the terms used for describing the weapons, the arrows, shields, etc. of Rama, Lakshmana and the Rakshasas, we find that they are all made of iron. Though we cannot visualize the exact

form of the weapons to date them more precisely, we can definitely say that they are not very old. Further, they all belong to the Iron Age and the earliest date of this would be about 800 B.C.

Chronological study of the word 'astra' also shows that this word is not very old and its meaning as a magical weapon or a weapon to be used with the help of different kinds of mantras, so that one could create different kinds of effects—set ablaze a city or habitation, produce rain and storm—is comparatively a very late concept in Sanskrit literature. Historically, it may be said that astras, even if they existed, were not employed by the rank and file of the army. Their use was very rare and confined to only a few individuals, who had obtained divine powers. Ramayana itself gives an interesting description of the origin of these magical weapons, and the fact that this description occurs in the Balakanda would go to prove their late origin.

Further the introduction of astra-concept in the epics and Puranas seems to have taken place at a time when mythological descriptions began to outgrow small historical events, whereas these seem to have had no effect on the actual course of Indian history. For had the use of astras been common, we would not have been worsted in any war against a foreign invader. Therefore it is my considered view that astras are mythical.

The description of Kishkindha and Lanka as shown above are quite fanciful, though as will be shown later based on a few historical facts.

No ancient city known to archaeology either in India or outside had gates of gold, or even gold plated doors, so also toranas of iron (*avasa*) are unknown. The entire conception of Lanka situated on a hill was supposed to be on an island in the sea but also still having a moat, together with fortification, is mythical. This is further indicated when we examine how it was defended on all the four sides when Rama invaded it.

SOUTH INDIA—UNKNOWN

Lastly it can be shown that Valmiki or the author of the Ramayana does not know the South or the country south of the Vindhya. Not only he has no clear and definite conception of the various hill ranges, but shows complete ignorance of the people, places and customs of the South.

Burial Customs and Vali's Cremation^{10 16a}

Only one example should suffice to prove this statement. Some scholars who have identified Kishkindha, the capital of Vanara chief Vali, with the Bellary region in Andhra-Karnatak do not realise that this region and further south is full of monuments of the Megalithic and Neolithic periods, c. 500 B.C. to 2500 B.C. When Vali was killed by Rama, Sugriva along with all the members of his family orders Vali's cremation (*dahana*). This cremation ceremony is very elaborately described but few readers have realised and also enquired how old this custom of cremation is and whether it was current in the Andhra-Karnatak at this time. Anybody who reads these 30 verses or so will be convinced that the poet gives the description of a typical Hindu (Aryan) method of cremation, which has come down to us from Vedic times. But cremation, and that too of this type, seems to have been quite unknown in the whole of South India, from the Godavari in the north to the Tambraparni in the south, right from the earliest times to about 3rd century B.C. at least. Burial was the prevalent custom. The adults were buried in a specially made pit in north-south direction and children up to the age of 14 or so were buried in a series of pots and a very young child in one or two pots, either laid horizontally or vertically. This custom is first documented in about 2500 B.C. and continued up to about 1000 B.C. Then came still more elaborate practice of burying the dead in an underground chest, or a terracotta sarcophagus, which was kept in a specially made pit, and then the whole thing was carefully covered above the ground with large stone slabs. These take several forms, but generally the

name used for any of this huge stone burial is "megalith". As the early Tamil literature tells us, this custom was still prevalent in early historic times.

However, the author of the Ramayana is completely unaware of the Megalithic and the still earlier Neolithic burials which dotted the land.

EXISTING RAMAYANA—A FICTION

However old, widespread and deep-rooted the belief in the present Ramayana, enshrined as it is in all the existing version of the epic, so much so that even the Critical Edition prepared at Baroda has to incorporate many of these beliefs and stories and though documented in temple sculptures from about the 5th century A.D. and perhaps in small terracotta plaques as early as 1st-2nd century B.C. and in inscriptions from far-off Java and in Vietnam (ancient Champa), where at Tra-kien has been found an inscription which refers to the dedication of an image and temple to Valmiki himself by a king Prakasadharmā who ruled between 653-79 A.D.¹⁷, as early as the 7th century A.D., still one has to say regretfully, after critically examining the descriptions of events, places and persons, that these are very much exaggerated and hence have had no existence in real life. Everyone has become mythical and belongs to a time when Rama was looked upon as an incarnation of Visnu, and Ravana and other adversaries, as demons. Consequently, both Rama and Ravana, as well as their associates and places they lived in, were looked at from a different angle.

This was Valmiki Ramayana, a poet's creation.¹⁸ But a poet, however gifted and endowed with a faculty to know the past, present and future (*trikalajñani*), does belong to a certain time and clime, and might cursorily or occasionally throw hints of these in his poetic composition. If these hints about the time when the poet lived can be detected, then one may hope to get at the truth, the original story. This truth or reality of the Ramayana might be discussed with the help of archaeology and a careful study of the

geographical descriptions in the Ramayana. This might be supplemented by or checked against ethnographical data, as well as the knowledge of the flora and fauna. Such a multi-pronged approach might help get at the ur or the original Ramayana.

This original Ramayana cannot be such a narration like Ramopakhyana, as thought by Dr P. L. Vaidya (p. xxxvi). Though this appears in the Mahabharata which is regarded as history (*itihasa*), and not poetry (*kavya*), still a glance through it will show to any student of facts (archaeologist) that even this Ramopakhyana contains a number of myths, the most important being the building of the bridge over hundred yojanas long sea. Though this *akhyana* differs in a few details from that occurring in the Ramayana, such as the non-mention of Vibhishana, and the mention of Avindhya instead, and the proving of Sita's chastity by Vayu, and not by Agni, still it appears to me that it is indeed a summary of the Ramayana, as already shown by Jacobi, Sukthankar and other scholars. The more I read such literary approaches for deciding the antiquity or otherwise of our epics and puranas, the more I am convinced of the necessity of examining them from archaeological and other points of view.