

A History of
SANSKRIT LITERATURE

BY

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In its present form the *Rāmāyana* consists of about 24,000 *çlokas*, and is divided into seven books. It has been preserved in three distinct recensions, the West Indian (A), the Bengal (B), and the Bombay (C). About one-third of the *çlokas* in each recension occurs in neither of the other two. The Bombay recension has in most cases preserved the oldest form of the text; for, as the other two arose in the centres of classical Sanskrit literature, where the *Gauda* and the *Vaidarbha* styles of composition respectively flourished, the irregularities of the epic language have been removed in them. The *Rāmāyana* was here treated as a regular *kāvya* or artificial epic, a fate which the *Mahābhārata* escaped because it early lost its original character, and came to be regarded as a didactic work. These two later recensions must not, however, be looked upon as mere revisions of the Bombay text. The variations of all three are of such a kind that they can for the most part be accounted for only by the fluctuations of oral tradition among the professional reciters of the epic, at the time when the three recensions assumed definite shape in different parts of the country by being committed to writing. After having been thus fixed, the fate of each of these recensions was of course similar to that of any other text. They appear to go back to comparatively early times. For quotations from the *Rāmāyana* occurring in works that belong to the eighth and ninth centuries A.D. show that a recension allied to the present C, and probably another allied to the present A, existed at that period. Moreover, Kshemendra's poetical abstract of the epic, the *ṛ-kathāsāra-manjarī*, which follows the contents of the original step by step, proves that its author used A, and perhaps B also, in the middle of the eleventh century.

Bhoja, the composer of another epitome, the *Rāmāyana-champū*, probably used C in the same century.

The careful investigations of Professor JACOBI have shown that the *Rāmāyana* originally consisted of five books only (ii.–vi.). The seventh is undoubtedly a later addition, for the conclusion of the sixth was evidently at one time the end of the whole poem. Again, the first book has several passages which conflict with statements in the later books. It further contains two tables of contents (in cantos i. and iii.) which were clearly made at different times; for one of them takes no notice of the first and last books, and must, therefore, have been made before these were added. What was obviously a part of the commencement of the original poem has been separated from its continuation at the opening of Book II., and now forms the beginning of the fifth canto of Book I. Some cantos have also been interpolated in the genuine books. As Professor Jacobi shows, all these additions to the original body of the epic have been for the most part so loosely attached that the junctures are easy to recognise. They are, however, pervaded by the same spirit as the older part. There is, therefore, no reason for the supposition that they are due to a Brahman revision intended to transform a poem originally meant for the warrior caste. They seem rather to owe their origin simply to the desire of professional rhapsodists to meet the demands of the popular taste. We are told in the *Rāmāyana* itself that the poem was either recited by professional minstrels or sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument, being handed down orally, in the first place by Rāma's two sons Kuça and Lava. These names are nothing more than the inventions of popular etymology meant to explain the Sanskrit word *kuçilava*,

“bard” or “actor.” The new parts were incorporated before the three recensions which have come down to us arose, but a considerable time must have elapsed between the composition of the original poem and that of the additions. For the tribal hero of the former has in the latter been transformed into a national hero, the moral ideal of the people; and the human hero (like Kṛishṇa in the *Mahābhārata*) of the five genuine books (excepting a few interpolations) has in the first and last become deified and identified with the god Viṣṇu, his divine nature in these additions being always present to the minds of their authors. Here, too, VĀLMĪKI, the composer of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, appears as a contemporary of Rāma, and is already regarded as a seer. A long interval of time must have been necessary for such transformations as these.

As to the place of its origin, there is good reason for believing that the *Rāmāyaṇa* arose in Kosala, the country ruled by the race of Ikshvāku in Ayodhyā (Oudh). For we are told in the seventh book (canto 45) that the hermitage of Vālmiki lay on the south bank of the Ganges; the poet must further have been connected with the royal house of Ayodhyā, as the banished Sītā took refuge in his hermitage, where her twin sons were born, brought up, and later learnt the epic from his lips; and lastly, the statement is made in the first book (canto 5) that the *Rāmāyaṇa* arose in the family of the Ikshvākus. In Ayodhyā, then, there must have been current among the court bards (*sīta*) a number of epic tales narrating the fortunes of the Ikshvāku hero Rāma. Such legends, we may assume, Vālmiki worked up into a single homogeneous production, which, as the earliest epic of importance conforming to the rules of poetics, justly received

the name of *ādi-kāvya*, or "first artificial poem," from its author's successors. This work was then learnt by professional rhapsodists (*kuçilava*) and recited by them in public as they wandered about the country.

The original part of the *Rāmāyaṇa* appears to have been completed at a time when the epic kernel of the *Mahābhārata* had not as yet assumed definite shape. For while the heroes of the latter are not mentioned in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the story of Rāma is often referred to in the longer epic. Again, in a passage of Book VII. of the *Mahābhārata*, which cannot be regarded as a later addition, two lines are quoted as Vālmiki's that occur unaltered in Book VI. of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The poem of Vālmiki must, therefore, have been generally known as an old work before the *Mahābhārata* assumed a coherent form. In Book III. (cantos 277-291) of the latter epic, moreover, there is a *Rāmopākhyāna* or "Episode of Rāma," which seems to be based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as it contains several verses agreeing more or less with Vālmiki's lines, and its author presupposes on the part of his audience a knowledge of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as represented by the Bombay recension.

A further question of importance in determining the age of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is its relation to Buddhist literature. Now, the story of Rāma is found in a somewhat altered form in one of the Pāli Birth-Stories, the *Daxaratha Jātaka*. As this version confines itself to the first part of Rāma's adventures, his sojourn in the forest, it might at first sight seem to be the older of the two. There is, however, at least an indication that the second part of the story, the expedition to Lankā, was also known to the author of the *Jātaka*; for while Vālmiki's poem concludes with the reunion of Rāma and Sītā, the

Jātaka is made to end with the marriage of the couple after the manner of fairy tales, there being at the same time traces that they were wedded all along in the original source of the legend. Moreover, a verse from the old part of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (vi. 128) actually occurs in a Pāli form embedded in the prose of this *Jātaka*.

It might, indeed, be inferred from the greater freedom with which they handle the *çloka* metre that the canonical Buddhistic writings are older than the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in which the *çloka* is of the classical Sanskrit type. But, as a matter of fact, these Pāli works on the whole observe the laws of the classical *çloka*, their metrical irregularities being most probably caused by the recent application of Pāli to literary purposes as well as by the inferior preservation of Pāli works. On the other hand, Buddhistic literature early made use of the *Āryā* metre, which, though so popular in classical Sanskrit poetry, is not yet to be found in the Sanskrit epics.

The only mention of Buddha in the *Rāmāyaṇa* occurs in a passage which is evidently interpolated. Hence the balance of the evidence in relation to Buddhism seems to favour the pre-Buddhistic origin of the genuine *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The question whether the Greeks were known to the author of our epic is, of course, also of chronological moment. An examination of the poem shows that the *Yavanaṣ* (Greeks) are only mentioned twice, once in Book I. and once in a canto of Book IV., which Professor Jacobi shows to be an interpolation. The only conclusion to be drawn from this is that the additions to the original poem were made some time after 300 B.C. Professor Weber's assumption of Greek influence in the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* seems to lack foundation.

For the tale of the abduction of Sītā and the expedition to Lankā for her recovery has no real correspondence with that of the rape of Helen and the Trojan war. Nor is there any sufficient reason to suppose that the account of Rāma bending a powerful bow in order to win Sītā was borrowed from the adventures of Ulysses. Stories of similar feats of strength for a like object are to be found in the poetry of other nations besides the Greeks, and could easily have arisen independently.

The political aspect of Eastern India as revealed by the *Rāmāyaṇa* sheds some additional light on the age of the epic. In the first place, no mention is made of the city of Pāṭaliputra (Patna), which was founded by King Kālāçoka (under whom the second Buddhist council was held at Vaiçālī about 380 B.C.), and which by the time of Megasthenes (300 B.C.) had become the capital of India. Yet Rāma is in Book I. (canto 35) described as passing the very spot where that city stood, and the poet makes a point (in cantos 32-33) of referring to the foundation of a number of cities in Eastern Hindustan, such as Kauçāmbī, Kānyakubja, and Kāmpilya, in order to show how far the fame of the *Rāmāyaṇa* spread beyond the confines of Kosala, the land of its origin. Had Pāṭaliputra existed at the time, it could not have failed to be mentioned.

It is further a noteworthy fact that the capital of Kosala is in the original *Rāmāyaṇa* regularly called Ayodhyā, while the Buddhists, Jains, Greeks, and Patanjali always give it the name of Sāketa. Now in the last book of the *Rāmāyaṇa* we are told that Rāma's son, Lava, fixed the seat of his government at Çrāvastī, a city not mentioned at all in the old part of the epic; and in Buddha's time King Prasenajit of Kosala is known to have

reigned at Çrāvastī. All this points to the conclusion that the original *Rāmāyaṇa* was composed when the ancient Ayodhyā had not yet been deserted, but was still the chief city of Kosala, when its new name of Sāketa was still unknown, and before the seat of government was transferred to Çrāvastī.

Again, in the old part of Book I., Mithilā and Viçālā are spoken of as twin cities under separate rulers, while we know that by Buddha's time they had coalesced to the famous city of Vaiçālī, which was then ruled by an oligarchy.

The political conditions described in the *Rāmāyaṇa* indicate the patriarchal rule of kings possessing only a small territory, and never point to the existence of more complex states ; while the references of the poets of the *Mahābhārata* to the dominions in Eastern India ruled by a powerful king, Jarāsandha, and embracing many lands besides Magadha, reflect the political conditions of the fourth century B.C. The cumulative evidence of the above arguments makes it difficult to avoid the conclusion that the kernel of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was composed before 500 B.C., while the more recent portions were probably not added till the second century B.C. and later.

This conclusion does not at first sight seem to be borne out by the linguistic evidence of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. For the epic (*ārsha*) dialect of the Bombay recension, which is practically the same as that of the *Mahābhārata*, both betrays a stage of development decidedly later than that of Pāṇini, and is taken no notice of by that grammarian. But it is, for all that, not necessarily later in date. For Pāṇini deals only with the refined Sanskrit of the cultured (*çishṭa*), that is to say, of the Brahmans,

which would be more archaic than the popular dialect of wandering rhapsodists; and he would naturally have ignored the latter. Now at the time of the Açoka inscriptions, or hardly more than half a century later than Pāṇini, Prākṛit was the language of the people in the part of India where the *Rāmāyaṇa* was composed. It is, therefore, not at all likely that the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which aimed at popularity, should have been composed as late as the time of Pāṇini, when it could not have been generally understood. If the language of the epic is later than Pāṇini, it is difficult to see how it escaped the dominating influence of his grammar. It is more likely that the popular Sanskrit of the epics received general currency at a much earlier date by the composition of a poem like that of Vālmīki. A searching comparative investigation of the classical Kāvyaś will probably show that they are linguistically more closely connected with the old epic poetry, and that they deviate more from the Pāṇinean standard than is usually supposed.

In style the *Rāmāyaṇa* is already far removed from the naive popular epic, in which the story is the chief thing, and not its form. Vālmīki is rich in similes, which he often cumulates; he not infrequently uses the cognate figure called *rūpaka* or "identification" (e.g. "foot-lotus") with much skill, and also occasionally employs other ornaments familiar to the classical poets, besides approximating to them in the style of his descriptions. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, in fact, represents the dawn of the later artificial poetry (*kāvya*), which was in all probability the direct continuation and development of the art handed down by the rhapsodists who recited Vālmīki's work. Such a relationship is distinctly recognised by the authors

of the great classical epics (*mahākāvī*) when they refer to him as the *ādi-kāvī* or "first poet."

The story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as narrated in the five genuine books, consists of two distinct parts. The first describes the events at the court of King Daṣaratha at Ayodhyā and their consequences. Here we have a purely human and natural account of the intrigues of a queen to set her son upon the throne. There is nothing fantastic in the narrative, nor has it any mythological background. If the epic ended with the return of Rāma's brother, Bharata, to the capital, after the old king's death, it might pass for a historical saga. For Ikshvāku, Daṣaratha, and Rāma are the names of celebrated and mighty kings, mentioned even in the *Rigveda*, though not there connected with one another in any way.

The character of the second part is entirely different. Based on a foundation of myths, it is full of the marvelous and fantastic. The oldest theory as to the significance of the story was that of Lassen, who held that it was intended to represent allegorically the first attempt of the Aryans to conquer the South. But Rāma is nowhere described as founding an Aryan realm in the Dekhan, nor is any such intention on his part indicated anywhere in the epic. Weber subsequently expressed the same view in a somewhat modified form. According to him, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was meant to account for the spread of Aryan culture to the South and to Ceylon. But this form of the allegorical theory also lacks any confirmation from the statements of the epic itself; for Rāma's expedition is nowhere represented as producing any change or improvement in the civilisation of the South. The poet knows nothing about the Dekhan; beyond the fact that Brahman hermitages are to be

found there. Otherwise it is a region haunted by the monsters and fabulous beings with which an Indian imagination would people an unknown land.

There is much more probability in the opinion of Jacobi, that the *Rāmāyana* contains no allegory at all, but is based on Indian mythology. The foundation of the second part would thus be a celestial myth of the Veda transformed into a narrative of earthly adventures according to a not uncommon development. *Sītā* can be traced to the *Rigveda*, where she appears as the Furrow personified and invoked as a goddess. In some of the *Grihya Sūtras* she again appears as a genius of the ploughed field, is praised as a being of great beauty, and is accounted the wife of Indra or Parjanya, the rain-god. There are traces of this origin in the *Rāmāyana* itself. For *Sītā* is represented (i. 66) as having emerged from the earth when her father Janaka was once ploughing, and at last she disappears underground in the arms of the goddess Earth (vii. 97). Her husband, *Rāma*, would be no other than Indra, and his conflict with *Rāvaṇa*, chief of the demons, would represent the Indra-Vṛitra myth of the *Rigveda*. This identification is confirmed by the name of *Rāvaṇa*'s son being *Indrajit*, "Conqueror of Indra," or *Indraçatru*, "Foe of Indra," the latter being actually an epithet of Vṛitra in the *Rigveda*. *Rāvaṇa*'s most notable feat, the rape of *Sītā*, has its prototype in the stealing of the cows recovered by *Indra*. *Hanumat*, the chief of the monkeys and *Rāma*'s ally in the recovery of *Sītā*, is the son of the wind-god, with the patronymic *Māruti*, and is described as flying hundreds of leagues through the air to find *Sītā*. Hence in his figure perhaps survives a reminiscence of *Indra*'s alliance with the Maruts in his conflict with Vṛitra, and

of the dog Saramā, who, as Indra's messenger, crosses the waters of the Rasā and tracks the cows. Saramā recurs as the name of a demoness who consoles Sītā in her captivity. The name of Hanumat being Sanskrit, the character is probably not borrowed from the aborigines. As Hanumat is at the present day the tutelary deity of village settlements all over India, Prof. Jacobi's surmise that he must have been connected with agriculture, and may have been a genius of the monsoon, has some probability.

The main story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* begins with an account of the city of Ayodhyā under the rule of the mighty King Daçaratha, the sons of whose three wives, Kauçalyā, Kaikeyī, and Sumitrā, are Rāma, Bharata, and Lakshmaṇa respectively. Rāma is married to Sītā, daughter of Janaka, king of Videha. Daçaratha, feeling the approach of old age, one day announces in a great assembly that he desires to make Rāma heir-apparent, an announcement received with general rejoicing because of Rāma's great popularity. Kaikeyī, meanwhile, wishing her son Bharata to succeed, reminds the king that he had once offered her the choice of two boons, of which she had as yet not availed herself. When Daçaratha at last promises to fulfil whatever she may desire, Kaikeyī requests him to appoint Bharata his successor, and to banish Rāma for fourteen years. The king, having in vain implored her to retract, passes a sleepless night. Next day, when the solemn consecration of Rāma is to take place, Daçaratha sends for his son and informs him of his fate. Rāma receives the news calmly and prepares to obey his father's command as his highest duty. Sītā and Lakshmaṇa resolve on sharing his fortunes, and accompany him in his exile.

The aged king, overcome with grief at parting from his son, withdraws from Kaikeyī, and passing the remainder of his days with Rāma's mother, Kauçalyā, finally dies lamenting for his banished son. Rāma has meanwhile lived peacefully and happily with Sītā and his brother in the wild forest of Daṇḍaka. On the death of the old king, Bharata, who in the interval has lived with the parents of his mother, is summoned to the throne. Refusing the succession with noble indignation, he sets out for the forest in order to bring Rāma back to Ayodhyā. Rāma, though much moved by his brother's request, declines to return because he must fulfil his vow of exile. Taking off his gold-embroidered shoes, he gives them to Bharata as a sign that he hands over his inheritance to him. Bharata returning to Ayodhyā, places Rāma's shoes on the throne, and keeping the royal umbrella over them, holds council and dispenses justice by their side.

Rāma now sets about the task of combating the formidable giants that infest the Daṇḍaka forest and are a terror to the pious hermits settled there. Having, by the advice of the sage Agastya, procured the weapons of Indra, he begins a successful conflict, in which he slays many thousands of demons. Their chief, Rāvaṇa, enraged and determined on revenge, turns one of his followers into a golden deer, which appears to Sītā. While Rāma and Lakshmaṇa are engaged, at her request, in pursuit of it, Rāvaṇa in the guise of an ascetic approaches Sītā, carries her off by force, and wounds the vulture Jaṭāyu, which guards her abode. Rāma on his return is seized with grief and despair; but, as he is burning the remains of the vulture, a voice from the pyre proclaims to him how he can conquer his foes and recover his wife. He now proceeds to con-

clude a solemn alliance with the chiefs of the monkeys, Hanumat and Sugrīva. With the help of the latter, Rāma slays the terrible giant Bali. Hanumat meanwhile crosses from the mainland to the island of Lankā, the abode of Rāvaṇa, in search of Sītā. Here he finds her wandering sadly in a grove and announces to her that deliverance is at hand. After slaying a number of demons, he returns and reports his discovery to Rāma. A plan of campaign is now arranged. The monkeys having miraculously built a bridge from the continent to Lankā with the aid of the god of the sea, Rāma leads his army across, slays Rāvaṇa, and wins back Sītā. After she has purified herself from the suspicion of infidelity by the ordeal of fire, Rāma joyfully returns with her to Ayodhyā, where he reigns gloriously in association with his faithful brother Bharata, and gladdens his subjects with a new golden age.

Such in bare outline is the main story of the *Rāmāyana*. By the addition of the first and last books Vālmiki's epic has in the following way been transformed into a poem meant to glorify the god Vishṇu. Rāvaṇa, having obtained from Brahmā the boon of being invulnerable to gods, demigods, and demons, abuses his immunity in so terrible a manner that the gods are reduced to despair. Bethinking themselves at last that Rāvaṇa had in his arrogance forgotten to ask that he should not be wounded by men, they implore Vishṇu to allow himself to be born as a man for the destruction of the demon. Vishṇu, consenting, is born as Rāma, and accomplishes the task. At the end of the seventh book Brahmā and the other gods come to Rāma, pay homage to him, and proclaim that he is really Vishṇu, "the glorious lord of the discus." The belief here ex-

pressed that Rāma is an incarnation of Vishṇu, the highest god, has secured to the hero of our epic the worship of the Hindus down to the present day. That belief, forming the fundamental doctrine of the religious system of Rāmānuja in the twelfth and of Rāmānanda in the fourteenth century, has done much to counteract the spread of the degrading superstitions and impurities of Çivaism both in the South and in the North of India.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* contains several interesting episodes, though, of course, far fewer than the *Mahābhārata*. One of them, a thoroughly Indian story, full of exaggerations and impossibilities, is the legend, told in Book I., of the descent of the Ganges. It relates how the sacred river was brought down from heaven to earth in order to purify the remains of the 60,000 sons of King Sagara, who were reduced to ashes by the sage Kapila when his devotions were disturbed by them.

Another episode (i. 52-65) is that of Viçvāmitra, a powerful king, who comes into conflict with the great sage Vasishṭha by endeavouring to take away his miraculous cow by force. Viçvāmitra then engages in mighty penances, in which he resists the seductions of beautiful nymphs, and which extend over thousands of years, till he finally attains Brahmanhood, and is reconciled with his rival, Vasishṭha.

The short episode which relates the origin of the *loka* metre is one of the most attractive and poetical. Vālmiki in his forest hermitage is preparing to describe worthily the fortunes of Rāma. While he is watching a fond pair of birds on the bank of the river, the male is suddenly shot by a hunter, and falls dead on the ground, weltering in his blood. Vālmiki, deeply touched by the grief of the bereaved female, involuntarily utters

words lamenting the death of her mate and threatening vengeance on the wicked murderer. But, strange to tell, his utterance is no ordinary speech and flows in a melodious stream. As he wanders, lost in thought, towards his hut, Brahmā appears and announces to the poet that he has unconsciously created the rhythm of the *çloka* metre. The deity then bids him compose in this measure the divine poem on the life and deeds of Rāma. This story may have a historical significance, for it indicates with some probability that the classical form of the *çloka* was first fixed by Vālmiki, the author of the original part of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The epic contains the following verse foretelling its everlasting fame :—

*As long as mountain ranges stand
And rivers flow upon the earth :
So long will this Rāmāyaṇa
Survive upon the lips of men.*

This prophecy has been perhaps even more abundantly fulfilled than the well-known prediction of Horace. No product of Sanskrit literature has enjoyed a greater popularity in India down to the present day than the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Its story furnishes the subject of many other Sanskrit poems as well as plays, and still delights, from the lips of reciters, the hearts of myriads of the Indian people, as at the great annual Rāma festival held at Benares. It has been translated into many Indian vernaculars. Above all, it inspired the greatest poet of mediæval Hindustan, Tulsī Dās, to compose in Hindī his version of the epic entitled *Rām Charit Mānas*, which, with its ideal standard of virtue and purity, is a kind of bible to a hundred millions of the people of Northern India.