



The Origin and Development of the Ramayana Epic in Indian Languages

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Abstract

The name Rāmāyaṇa is composed of two words, Rāma and ayana "travel, journey," with the grammatical internal sandhi "joining" of the final short a in Rāma and the initial short a in ayana to the longer form ā. Rāma, the name of the main figure of the epic, has two contextual meanings. In the Atharvaveda, it means "dark-colored or black" and is related to the word rātri, "the darkness or stillness of night." The other meaning, which can be found in the Mahabharata, is "pleasing, pleasant, charming, lovely, beautiful." Thus, Rāmāyaṇa means "Rama's journey."

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Introduction

The Ramayana is an ancient Sanskrit epic attributed to the sage Valmiki. It tells the story of Prince Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, his abduction by the demon king Ravana, and his subsequent rescue by a loyal army of monkeys and bears. The epic is a foundational text in Hinduism, revered for its portrayal of dharma (righteousness), duty, and the ideal human life. It is divided into seven books (kandas), covering the childhood of Rama and Sita, their exile, the war with Ravana, and their eventual return to Ayodhya. The epic's timeless themes of good versus evil, loyalty, and sacrifice continue to resonate in both religious and secular contexts. This article serves as an exploration of the Ramayana in Indian languages.

The Origin of the Ramayana

The word "Ramayana" means "Rama's path" or "Rama's journey." The Ramayana, along with the Mahabharata and the Vedas, reflects the cultural traditions of the Indian people. They play a major role in guiding the lives of the people and promoting righteousness (dharma). The Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas are revered as the "Epic Literature" (Itihasas) of the Indian nation. The Ramayana portrays the life of Rama. Rama is considered an incarnation of God (Avatara).

Epics are generally divided into two types:

1. Oral Epic

Literary Epic (or Poetic Epic)

"Oral epic" refers to those that are transmitted purely by word of mouth without being written down. The "Literary Epic" (or Poetic Epic) is a classic written by one or more poets, which narrates the fame and glory of one or more heroic figures that have been prevalent in a country for a long time.

Among these epics, the Ramayana was composed by the sage Valmiki, and the Mahabharata was composed by the sage named Vyasa (Veda Vyasa).

The Ramayana has touched literature, the human mind, arts, and life, bringing about significant changes. Researchers who have studied the Ramayana cite evidence that varying forms of the Ramayana story existed in countries like Cambodia and Thailand. Stories are also found where Sita is depicted as Ravana's lover and as the daughter of Dasaratha.

"Despite how many Ramayanas exist, the beauty, simplicity, majesty, depth, and epic flow found in the kavya of Valmiki, who first sang the Ramayana, cannot be found elsewhere."

The Ramayana in Sanskrit

Valmiki's Ramayana holds the special distinction of being the "Adi Kavya" (The First Epic) in the Sanskrit language. Sages say that "the Four Vedas took the form of the Ramayana from the sacred tongue of Valmiki." The text itself states that the purpose of the Ramayana is to illustrate the essence of the Vedas so that many people can benefit.

The Ramayana explains how essential relationships in life—such as mother, father, husband, wife, elder brother, younger brother, friend, enemy, guru (teacher), shishya (disciple), king, and citizens—are strengthened by the goodness of pure love and selfless relationships. Valmiki's Ramayana forms the very foundation for the religious principles and civil structure of the Hindus. Valmiki's Ramayana contains a total of seven Kandas (Cantos/Books) and more than 24,000 shlokas (verses).

There is an opinion that "Valmiki wrote only six Kandas and 24,000 shlokas. The seventh Kanda (Uttara Kanda) and some parts of the first Kanda (Bala Kanda) are considered interpolations (later additions)." The reason for this is that the story of Rama concludes with his coronation at the end of the Yuddha Kanda (War Kanda), after which the narrative sections seem to be repeated. Since it is stated in the Bala Kanda that Valmiki composed the story of Rama in six Kandas, about five or six sargas (chapters), and twenty-four thousand shlokas, scholars argue that the additional 284 chapters found in the Uttara Kanda are later additions. The fact that Sage Valmiki himself declares his Adi Kavya complete at the end of the Yuddha Kanda also reinforces this view.

Regarding Valmiki's Ramayana, Professor Monier-Williams states that "there is no other epic superior to the Ramayana in the field of world literature." The Ramayana celebrates truth, love, sacrifice, chastity/fidelity (karpū), service, and the idea that the powerful must protect the weak. As a result, this work has been translated into many other languages.

After Valmiki composed the Ramayana in Sanskrit, others wrote subsequent versions of the story. Based on this, two dramatic works, "Pratima Nataka" and "Abhisheka Nataka,"

came into being. Kalidasa (circa 50 BCE) composed the epic "Raghuvamsa."

Additionally, the Yoga Vasishtha Ramayana, Adbhuta Ramayana, Adhyatma Ramayana, Mūla Ramayana, Raghuvira Gadyam (written by Vedanta Desika), Manva Niraya (written by Madhvacharya), and the Jaina and Buddhist Ramayanas are very important. Furthermore, Bhavabhuti, who lived around the 7th or 8th century CE, composed the famous work titled "Uttara Rama Charita."

The Ramayana in Tamil

The epic composed by Kambar is the first complete Ramayana kaviyam to appear in Tamil. Some place Kambar's time as the 9th century CE, while others say it was the 12th century CE. The special prologue (Sirappu Payiram) suggests that Kambar must have titled his work either "Ramavataram" (The Incarnation of Rama) or "Rama Kathai" (The Story of Rama). This is known from the prologue, which refers to the work as "Kasil kotrattu Raman kathai" (The flawless story of the victorious Rama) and "Ramavatarap perth thodai nirambiya thepanu maakkathai" (The great story full of the name Ramavatara).

The poet Panpōthi Pēralakutaiyar, in his Purananuru poem (Puram-376), narrates the incident where Ravana carried Sita off to Lanka, and when she threw down her ornaments as a sign, Sugriva's monkeys found them but stood confused, not knowing how to wear them.

When the poet Kapilar describes Rama's valor, he mentions a scene in the Kurinjikkali section of the Kalittokai: "Lord Shiva, who holds the divine bow (Shiva Dhanus) in his hand, the Ganga in his matted locks, and Parvati in one half of his body, was seated atop the Himalayas. Ravana, the king of the demons with ten heads, placed his broad hand at the base of the mountain and tried to lift it, but he failed and was grieved."

During the Sangam period, art and civilization flourished in Tamil Nadu. As the story of Rama was widespread throughout the region, sculptors and painters carved and painted scenes from the Ramayana in temples. The poet Nappannanaar refers to this event in his Paripaadal.

Segments of the Ramayana story are also found in the Siddha literature. If one examines the parts of the Ramayana that appear in the Divya Prabandham (the collection of hymns by the Alvars), one can find the entire Ramayana story. The Thevaram composers who lived in the 7th and 8th centuries CE—namely Thirunavukkarasar, Thiru-gnana Sambandar, and Sundaramoorthy—referred to events from the Ramayana in their songs while praising Lord Shiva. However, they did not write a complete Ramayana.

Several reasons are suggested for this:

1. **Religious Conflicts:** The proliferation of religious conflicts at the time might have prevented the composition of a unified epic.
2. **Popularity of Mahabharata:** The Mahabharata was a more popular epic cherished by both the common people and the kings than the Ramayana. The Mahabharata was even translated by a Pandya king in the 8th century CE.
3. **Rama's Status:** Rama was not yet universally accepted as an incarnation of Vishnu (Thirumal).

References to the Ramayana story are also found in the Tamil epics Silappadikaram and Manimekalai. Ilango Adigal (author of Silappadikaram) refers to Rama as the "Primeval Lord of the Vedas." Rama's glory is also spoken of in the Aychchiar Kuravai (The Cowherdresses' Dance). Special mentions are made of avatars of Vishnu, such as Kama, Vamana, Narasimha, Parasurama, and Sri Krishna, among the ten incarnations.

It appears that no other Ramayana works were composed in the Tamil language after Kambar. The unparalleled greatness of the Kambaramayanam and its religious significance to the people may be why no other complete works emerged.

The Ramayana in Hindi

In the Hindi language, the work most revered is the "Ramcharitmanas," composed by Goswami Tulsidas (c. 1533–1623 CE). Raman Menon states that "no other Ramayana work that surpasses Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas has yet been created in the Hindi language."

The Ramayana in Malayalam

The first Ramayana work written in the Malayalam language is "Rāmacaritam," composed by a poet known as "Cheerama Kavi," who is believed to have lived in the 12th or 13th century CE. This work extensively details only the events of the Yuddha Kanda (War Canto). It contains 164 padalams (chapters) and 1814 songs.

The second important work is "Kannassa Ramayanam," written by Rāma Paṇikkar (known as Kannassan, son of a family woman), which features seven Kandas and 3059 Virutha verses. It is praised as a "distilled and concentrated Valmiki Ramayana." Its period is considered to be the late 14th century CE.

The third work in Malayalam is "Rāmakathā Pāttu," written by Ayyappiḷla Asan. Besides these, works like the Shiva Ramayana and translations of the Valmiki Ramayana have appeared. A notable work among them is the "Adhyatma Ramayanam," written by Thunchaththu Ezhuthachan in the 16th century CE. He based his work on the Sanskrit text, the Adhyatma Ramayana. This work has found a permanent place in the hearts of the Malayalam-speaking people. He also composed a work titled "Ramayana Kilipattu" (Parrot Song of the Ramayana).

Fifth, Kerala Varma of the Kottayam royal lineage, who lived in the 17th century CE, translated the entire Valmiki Ramayana into the Malayalam language.

The great poet Kumaran Asan contributed parts of the Ramayana as long poems, namely "Bala Ramayanam" and "Sita Immersed in Thought" (Chinthavishtayaya Sita). This was in the 17th century CE.

The Champū literary work called "Ramayana Champu" was composed by Punam Nambudiri in the 17th century CE.

The Ramayana in Other Languages

In the Marathi language, the "Bhāgavata Ramayana," composed by the poet Eknath, is the first Ramayana work. Krishnadas wrote the Yuddha Kanda in Marathi. Other works like the "Muktēshvara Ramayana" by Mukteshvar and the "Bhaṭṭa Ramayana" by Ramadas also appeared. These date to the 17th century CE.

Conclusion

The Ramayana's timeless wisdom continues to offer valuable insights into human nature, relationships, and moral dilemmas, making it relevant for contemporary society. Its ethical principles, such as justice, compassion, and selfless service, provide guidance for individuals and society.

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