

## Reading *Ramayana*, Writing Tales: Bhakti Cult and the Songs of Rama

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### **Abstract**

*Reading or listening to Ramayana is a usual practice in an ordinary Hindu household. Sometimes a narrator popularly called kathak or katha-vacak is called to narrate or read the epic story to the entire family, the clan, or the village. Inside the household, it is the women who particularly read the Ramayana during their normal ritual austerity. But the epic poetry is not restricted to this fixed environment; rather it has travelled into the lived experience of the people of the subcontinent. Originally written by Valmiki, the legend of Rama has been retold in more than 200 languages of South and South East Asia. What is interesting, though, is the manner in which the Ramayana is rewritten. In the article, I will analyse the act of reading the Ramayana and will explore the methods that are imparted to re-write the text.*

**Keywords:** *Ramayana, Bhakti, songs, katha, Tulsidas*

Once having finished his Ramakatha, Goswami Tulsidas was returning home when he was told by a ghost that the great devotee of Rama, Hanuman, the Monkey-God, listens to your Rama tale every day.<sup>3</sup> Astonished by the revelation, Tulsidas urged the ghost to give him clues to discover Hanuman; the ghost at once suggested that an old man who attends every *Ramakatha* telling until it ends is Hanuman. Engrossed in the *bhakti* of Rama, Goswami Tulsidas identified the old man during his *Ramakatha* telling and was bestowed with the divine *darsan* (vision) of Hanuman.<sup>4</sup> The tale narrating the efficacy of devotee

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<sup>3</sup> *Ramakatha* is the retelling of the story of Rama.

<sup>4</sup> Bhakti literally means devotion, but it's meaning goes beyond this definition. It is in reality a method of submerging oneself into your lord by perceiving him as friend (*sakha bhava*), Master (*dasya bhava*), child (*vatsalya bhava*) or even beloved (*Madhurya bhava*).

becomes embodiment of the effect of the reading or listening of the *Ramayana*.<sup>5</sup> Goswami Tulsidas, one of the most celebrated medieval poet narrates *Ramayana* in such an epic style that even the great Hanuman himself listens to every retelling. Such continuous interplay of writing to reading and back makes *Ramayana* the most celebrated and widely read literary text of the period.

The epic *Ramayana* is performed, re-written and orally recited in different languages of South and South-East Asia. Every rewriting is considered unique to the extent that some languages such as the Sanskrit have itself twenty-five retellings of the epic story. Emphasising on the variety of the Rama stories, a popular folktale is coined in South India that says that 'for every Rama, there is a *Ramayana*' (A. K. Ramanujan, 1999: 133). Originally written by Valmiki in 500-250 BCE, the epic has continued to inspire thousands of poets and writers around the world. The vastness of thought and scrumptious moments has led to the creation of numerous versions that rewrites the legend in a unique style. Each retelling adds to the epic narrative, making the ancient characters suitable to the contemporary times. In this article, I will go on to analyse the manner in which *Ramayana* has been read and the rewritten by several authors, in order to understand the ways in which reading or listening of the epic tale leads to an original re-creation. What are the various methods of retelling? How is the text retold?

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<sup>5</sup> For the readers who don't know the story of *Ramayana*, here is the brief summary. The narrative records the union and separation of Rama and Sita. After marriage, Sita comes to Ajodhya along with her husband, but soon they depart to forest. Rama's step-mother asks his father King Dasrath to grant exile to his beloved son. With heavy heart he orders Rama's departure. However, Sita and Lakshman, younger brother of Rama accompanied him. On the way, Ravana kidnaps Sita and takes her to Lanka. Rama and Lakshman along with the monkey God, Hanuman and his army defeats Ravana and unites with Sita.

*Re-Writing Ramayana: From Valmiki to Tulsidas*

Figure 1.1 Rama and Sita with Lord Hanuman and Laxman.  
Courtesy British Library

Among the Sanskrit telling, the most prestigious, influential, and authoritative version of the story is the *Valmiki Ramayana*. The text has gained its status because of its antiquity; most authors date its compilation to ca. 500 BCE-250 CE. Also, many devotees consider the text as the primal story, however, the writers respect it purely for its literary worth (Paula Richman 2008:8). Such veneration has won the *Valmiki Ramayana* its pre-eminent historical, religious, and aesthetic authority. Paula Richman clarifies that the phrase “authoritative telling of Ramkatha” is used for *Valmiki Ramayana* on account of the manner in which it espouse normative ideologies of ranked social hierarchy (2008: 8). Also, the *Valmiki Ramayana* as well as the poet himself is revered beyond the temporal and geographical borders. In addition, the text has been canonized and offered a privileged status. The text has inspired numerous rewriting of Rama story in Sanskrit as well as other languages of Asia.

In the vast Purana literature, V. Raghvan argues that “there is hardly a Purana or Upa-purana that has not got a long or short narrative of Ramayana” (1980:5). However, the most popular rendition of the Rama story as narrated by Valmiki is also found in Sanskrit dramas. The important plays based on the text are *Chalitarama*, *Ramabhyudaya* and the *Uttararamacarita* (V.Raghvan 1980:12). Similarly, many Sanskrit poetries of

the ancient period were inspired by Valmiki's *Ramayana*. But the text, as Richman argues, "urges adherence to brahminically defined dharma—even at great social or personal cost" (1980:9). Indeed, Valmiki throughout his text emphasises performing one's assigned duties, including those of spouse, parent, the elder brother, lineage, jati (sub-caste), varna, master, ruler, and Kingdom. The text, therefore, is quite popular among high-class elites, who often championed the text and supported its recitation.

Numerous versions of the epic narrative based on Valmiki's *Ramayana* have been written. However, most of these "retelling" deviate from Valmiki's *Ramayana* in theme and style. While focusing on the variety of theme and style in the later rendition of the epic Philip Lutengendorf claims that although the Sanskrit epic exerted wider influence on later retellings, but the vernacular rendering of the epic narrative in the local language offered "a rather reinterpretation" of Valmiki's story (1991:4). The first major *Ramayana* in the vernacular language was Kampan's *Irāmaoātāram*, written in thirteenth century in Tamil language. Soon Krittibas's popular *Ramayana* in Bengali followed in the fourteenth century. Tulsidas wrote his epic poetry in Avadhi, a literary dialect of Hindi in 1574 A. D. Widely celebrated and recognized for its poetic beauty, Tulsī's *Ramayana* is considered as the epitome of the *bhakti* poetry. Filled with the elucidation of Rama and his multiple visions, the text binds its readers into such moments of epiphany that an ordinary devotee, sitting on a temple, singing the *dohās*, enshrines him or herself into the devotion of Rama. A product of radical *bhakti* movement Tulsidas envisions Rama as his *sakha* and describes the magical moments with alacrity.

Many versions of the *Ramayana* have been written after Valmiki, but Tulsidas's *Ramacaritrāmanas* has captivated the devotees in unimagined manner. Commenting on the popularity of the text, Rev. C. Bulcke argues that there are three particular reasons for the popularity of Tulsī's *Ramayana* (Bulcke,1980:60). He clarifies that the universal appeal of the text could be attached to Tulsī's own submersion into *bhakti* theology and since text adheres to the norms of *bhakti* it detaches itself from Valmiki's focus on "brahminically defined dharma", but it rather goes on to elucidate "love" as the central metaphor of devotion (1980:60). Such moving away from the rigid Brahmin orthodoxy led to the popularity of the text among the ordinary devotees as Tulsī demolishing the social priorities focuses emphatically on the extraordinary vision of Rama:

Kaliyuga joga na jagya na gnānā  
Eka Adhāra Rāma guna gānā (7, 193)

In the Kaliyuga a devotee don't need to perform austerity or sacrifice; there is also no need of knowledge;  
It is only the singing of the name of Rama that leads to salvation

With the beginning of the Gupta period (2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.), the Brahmin orthodoxy, dominated by patriarchy, established knowledge and austerity as the defined methods of religious practice (Vasudha Dalmia and Sadana Rashmi 2012: xi-xii). It denied permission to read sacred texts to the particular gender and caste communities. Such rigidity led to the marginalization of the women and low-caste, leading to the establishment of rigid Brahmin patriarchy. The canonisation of social order continued during the Mughal period and was further sanctified by the British colonial rule. However, in repudiation of such strict Brahmin social codes, the alternative version of religious devotion popularly called as “bhakti” gained momentum first in the Southern part of the Indian Peninsula and then travelled to the northern Gangetic plains. Defining *Bhakti* in metaphorical terms, Jack Hawley argues that “*bhakti* as usually translated, is devotion, but if that word connotes something entirely private and quiet, we are in need of other words” (2019: 3). He goes on to clarify:

*Bhakti is heart religion, sometimes cool and quiescent but sometimes hot—the religion of participation, community, enthusiasm, song, and often of personal challenge...It evokes the idea of a widely shared religiosity for which institutional superstructures weren't all that relevant, and which, once activated, could be historically contagious...It implies divine encounter experienced in the lives of individual people. These people, moved by that encounter, turn to poetry, which is the natural vehicle of bhakti, and poetry expresses itself just as naturally in song.* (2019: 3)

Jack Hawley, here, emphasises on the importance of “singing” in the *bhakti* tradition. Poetry as a vehicle turns into a perfect medium of translating gestures and connotation in words. Adding further to explain the centrality of songs in *bhakti*, Christian Lee Novetzke argues that the “images of *bhakti* are associated with acts of sharing through religious performances (*kīrtan*, *bhajan*, *rāslīlā*) and communities of pilgrimage” (2019:

5). Tulsidas, early in his poetic career, understood the centrality of singing in devotion to Rama. Immersed in the *bhakti* of Rama, he went on to compose beautiful songs in the form of *dohās* (couplets) and *Chaupāis* (quadrants) that captures the mnemonic episodes with literary precision:

Prem bhakti jala binu Raghurāi  
Abhi-antara mala kabahu na jāi (49)

Without the water of loving devotion to Rama;  
The defiled inner self cannot be cleaned

Thus, through his poetry, Tulsi establishes *bhakti* as the palpable method of devotion.<sup>6</sup> In his other poetries written in Sanskrit, too, we find a similar exposition of the beauty of Rama:

Śrīrāmacandra krpālu bhajamana  
Haraṇabhavabhayadāruṇam...

O! heart please pray to the compassionate Rama;  
He is the destroyer of fear and sorrow

Navakañjamukha karakañja  
padakañjāruṇam.

His eyes are like freshly bloomed lotus;  
His feet, too, are like red lotus

Kandarpa agaṇita amita chavi  
navanīlanīradasudaram  
Paṭapītamānahu taḍita ruciśuci  
Naumijanakasutāvaram

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<sup>6</sup> There are various methods of attaining salvation—*janamarga* i.e., salvation through knowledge; *karma marga* i.e. salvation through doing work; *bhakti marga* i.e. salvation through devotion.

The beauty of his body is more than the god of desires, Kamdeva;  
The colour of his body is like the beautiful ink laden clouds;  
The yellow robe on his body seems to lighten like the thunderstorm;  
I bow to such sacred lord of Sita...<sup>7</sup>

Tulsidas later goes on to highlight an exemplary episode of the meeting of Sita and Ram in the flower-garden. As per the popular belief Sita saw Rama before marriage in this garden and fell in love with him. She was so imbued in the love of Rama that she went to the temple of *Shakti* and urged the mother goddess to let her marry Rama. Impressed by her love, the mother goddess blessed her and finally she was married to Rama. Tulsi beautifully captures this moment through his words when he says: "The joy Sita felt after being blessed by the mother goddess is hard to reveal; the auspiciousness began to vibrate her whole body".<sup>8</sup>

Such powerful expression of beauty and love in the poetry gives Tulsidas enough liberty to highlight conjugal relation. Deviating from the Kings and Kinship, he draws on the love courtesy between Sita and Rama. Laden with the propitious moments of sexual interchange such song then enables devotees to further enhance these episodes by including props and signs that highlight the impassioned love between the two individuals. It leads to the composition of multiple versions of *Ramayana* that narrate particular episodes with certain enthusiasm. The writings, particularly folk, that followed Tulsi's *Ramayana* are laden with episodes that expedite certain moments within the epic narrative without any inhibition.<sup>9</sup> I will now analyse such rewriting/retelling of *Ramayana* that are based on popular texts but are folk in origin. They often considerably deviate from the well-known rendition.

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<sup>7</sup> The excerpts are from a famous Sanskrit hymn composed by Tulsidas and sung usually in every North Indian Hindu household. The translation is of the author.

<sup>8</sup> The lines are the parts of the similar aarti (song) sung at every North Indian Household. I am here, only using the translation and not the original Sanskrit text.

<sup>9</sup> Folk in the Indian context are defined as the people of marginalised community.

## Songs of Sitarama

“The Ram legend” argues Philip Lutengendorf has not only given rise to hundreds of literary texts that rank among the masterpieces of world literature, “but has also flourished and still continues to flourish in oral tradition” (1991: 3). The mesmerising events filled with the propitious moments allows for numerous adaptations. These adaptations are purely oral in nature as it perceives Ram from an unlettered mind that is bereft of social prejudices. The strict hold of brahminical patriarchy that voids for restrained sexual passion is erased; the divine figure of Ram and Sita in these songs then transforms into impassioned lovers who are yearning for sexual delight. For better understanding, I will quote one interesting episode of inter-mixing folk and literary device. Originally, translated by Lutengendorf, the retelling records the famous episode of the meeting of Sita and Ram in its own distinctive style:

The other companion saw her condition,  
Her limbs flushed with delight, tears in her eyes.  
They all softly asked, “Tell us the cause of your joy.”  
(These lines are translated from *Ramacaritamānas*)

*The arrow of your eyes has struck,  
Dark youth,  
Your smile has pierced my heart,  
Dark Youth. (refrain; oral song) (1991: 109)<sup>10</sup>*

The performers retell the epic episode, interpolating a folk song popularly called as *kajli* in order to create new aesthetic experience. The lines such as “the arrows of your eyes have struck” aptly conveys the passion of the lovers. Such unabashed display of the passionate love imparts *sringar* (erotic) *rasa* to the whole narrative and challenges the orthodox brahminical position of reviewing the text on traditional lines. A similar deviation from the brahminical narrative is seen in the songs of Sita and Ram sung during the wedding.

The song popularly called “Sita Locked Out” narrates the love tiff between the couple. The story that preludes it shows Ram in an impassioned mood and urges Sita to come to see him. Sita is busy in her

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<sup>10</sup> Ram is here referred to as “Dark Youth” as he was of dark complexion.



domestic duties and is serving her in-laws; she gently defies Rama's orders. Outraged by her behaviour, Rama becomes angry and chides Sita. Laden with deep sorrow Sita locks herself in her room and avoids seeing Rama. To soothe Sita, Rama does several deeds, but Sita is not in a forgiving mood. Later, he calls his mother to rescue him from this situation. The story, popular in the Telugu region, is performed on the wedding night, and it has now become part of the ritual performance. A song is sung narrating the whole situation with gentle irony:

She is born of Earth, and raised by Janak.  
Her loving husband calls her, but she doesn't come.  
Flowers in his hair, fragrance on his body, her husband is in a joyous mood.  
Looking for her, he waits and waits...

When Sita goes shyly to her husband, the lamp laughs with joy.

Fragrance of betel leaves all over the bed.  
Fragrance of betel nuts all over the bed.  
Fragrance of flowers all over the bed.  
Fragrance of musk all over the bed.  
Fragrance of bukka all over the bed.

Who knows how angry Sita is?  
Rama turns to the other side.

"Just how long it takes for butter to melt  
When it is near fire,  
Is how long a woman's anger lasts,"  
Says Sita and moves swiftly  
To make love.

Rama plays all the games of love (Velcheru Narayana Rao 2008: 50).<sup>11</sup>

Such retelling domesticates the divine couple. Paula Richman argues that the folk rendition of the *Ramayana* story is more fluid than other retelling as it "provides more scope for improvisation than do fixed texts, allowing the narrative to be customised according to the predilections of story-tellers and preferences of the listeners' (2008: 11). The performers, in the above cited rendition take enough freedom in depicting Rama being a passionate lover and Sita as wife who can defy the orders of her husband.

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<sup>11</sup>Originally translated by Velcheru Narayan Rao. I am quoting it from Paula Richman's *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India*.

The traditional portrayal of Sita as a quintessential Hindu wife who accepts the pain of exile and goes happily to the forest for the love of her husband is demolished. The folklore, as Richman argues, 'draws on the humanity of Sita'. Such narrative strategy thus portrays 'Sita as someone with an "agency"' (2008: 27).

A folk Purana, written in Tamil language, shows a similar reversal where Sita turns from a benign goddess into the ferocious mother Kali. She defying her husband's order goes out into the battleground to fight the demon (1986: 105-30). Originally published in 1928, *Catakantaravan Katai*, is the prose narrative that recounts the fight between Sita and *Satakantharavan*. The story begins with the arrival of Sita in Ayodhya and deviates from the traditional Ramayana in its portrayal of Sita as a warrior queen. The style of the text is literary, but as Schulman claims, it has a marked tendency to break into more popular idioms and images (1986: 106). The form of the text is also literary, but its narrative, Schulman argues, 'is more closely allied to oral prose tradition' (1986: 106).

Numerous oral songs sung in the Mithila, where Sita is said to have born is replete with the reference of Sita and Ram. The image of Sita as "Kishori" becomes epithet of divine blessing and the daughters are often compared with her:

Bar re yatan sa Sita ke pauslaon,  
Seho raghuvansi lene Jaye  
Mili laye sakhi sab mile laye,  
Sita beti Jayet sasurai (Tarakanta Mishra1985:150) (Maithili)<sup>12</sup>

I have brought up Sita with much efforts  
But see Raghuvansi is taking her away  
O Friends of Sita, please go and meet her  
Sita is now departing to her in-law's house<sup>13</sup>

An unusual moment of the departure of the bride to the groom's house is here depicted with Sita at the centre of the narrative.<sup>14</sup> These songs

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<sup>12</sup> Maithili is a language spoken in the Northern part of India in the states of Bihar and Jharkhand.

<sup>13</sup> The translation is mine.

<sup>14</sup> The folk songs sung by women during the marriage or the ceremonial departure of the bride often influenced by the episodes of the epic. The divine characters in these songs are domesticated and it shows women's creativity at best. Mostly these songs are orally passed down from one generation to the other.

referred to as *samduan* are sung at the wedding ceremony reflecting the immersion of the *Ramayana* in to the living consciousness of the ordinary. Every moment then turns into a retelling of *Ramayana* where the situations from the day to day life are narrated by comparing it to the epic story.

### Conclusion

From what we have discussed, it can be concluded that most of the retellings of *Ramayana* defy the brahminical concepts of religious devotion and are veritably filled with the love of Rama. Whether it is women singing songs, celebrating the love courtesy of the divine couple or the general *kirtan* performance at any Hanuman temple in North India, the voice of the devotee echoes the “Tulsi’s love” for the lord. Elucidation of *Ramayana* story imparts such impassioned relationship between the lord and the devotee, that it leads to magical experience and for a moment enchants its readers or listeners into a world of divine bliss:

Sitaram charita ati pavan  
Madhur saras aur ati mann bhavan  
Puni puni kitane ho sune sunae  
Phir bhi pyass bujat na bujae...

The legend of Sitaram is very sacred  
It is simple, filled with honey and so very desirable to heart  
Again, Again, many have listened and retold it  
Still the thirst has not been quenched...

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