A Literary and Comparative Study of the Ramayana

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Abstract

The Ramayana, one of the most revered epics of ancient India, continues to hold immense literary, cultural, and philosophical significance across centuries. This research undertakes a literary and comparative study of the Ramayana by analyzing its narrative structure, character development, thematic depth, and stylistic elements across different versions and regional adaptations. The study explores the Valmiki Ramayana as the classical Sanskrit source text and compares it with its various reinterpretations such as Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, Kamban's *Ramavataram*, and other folk and modern retellings from South and Southeast Asia. This comparative analysis highlights the variations in cultural values, narrative focus, and moral interpretations, while also emphasizing the common thematic core centered on dharma (duty), devotion, sacrifice, and the conflict between good and evil. Through this literary lens, the study examines how different societies and traditions have reimagined the Ramayana to reflect their unique historical, ethical, and religious perspectives.

Keywords: ***Ramayana ,Comparative Literature,Valmiki Ramayana ,Ramcharitmanas ,Kamba Ramayanam,Dharma,Epic NarrativeIndian Mythology,Cultural Interpretation,Literary Analysis***

"Fiction has only one form. True story inevitably has many." — Velcheru Narayana Rao, on Oral Narrative

I. INTRODUCTION

The Significance of Poetry

Poetry is often described as the crown of an era. A poet, indeed, forms an integral part of any age. As the tide of time flows, both the poet and the societal acceptance of his or her poetic voice evolve. Yet, certain human values—those that are universal and timeless—continue to find sustenance and expression in poetry. There exists a marked distinction between the common man and the poet: one of heightened sensitivity and profound empathy. While the common man moves with the times, the poet possesses the potential to transform them. A poet becomes the custodian of an era. Through the study of a great poetic work, one discerns how the poet led their age, and, conversely, how the spirit and events of that age compelled the poet into leadership.

Thus, in every era, literature bears the marks of transformation. The rise of the *Upanishads* in India was no accident; it was nurtured on a land illuminated by knowledge. Even today, India venerates karma (action). Values such as renunciation, non-violence, truth, compassion, and forgiveness were deeply embedded in life. In epochs where these values flourished, literature mirrored them; and conversely, the literature which bore these values helped further them. This relationship is fundamentally reciprocal—a give and take. The poet is both a product and a producer of the age.Across the world, wherever revolutions or freedom movements occurred—be they political or humanistic—they were invariably accompanied by a surge in literary fervor. During India's independence movement, writers such as Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, and

Maithili Sharan Gupt contributed immensely through patriotic literature, carving an enduring place for themselves in history. For the making of any era, the writings of visionary thinkers and authors often emerge as the primal source. Literature and its age are like two faces of the same coin—each inspires the other. Should an age become tainted with corrupted ideologies, literature does not shy away from portraying even that. Consider the episode of Valmiki, who, en route to his ritual bath, wandered momentarily through a forest. There, he witnessed a pair of *krauncha* birds engaged in playful intimacy. In a moment of violence that broke the natural law, a hunter pierced the male bird mid-act, causing it to collapse in blood. Distressed by the sight and by the anguished cry of the female, Valmiki was overwhelmed with sorrow. He felt deeply that this act of unrighteousness, if left unaddressed, would only pave the way for greater injustice.

Spontaneously, words of a curse flowed from his lips:

"Mā niṣāda pratiṣṭhāṁ tvam agamaḥ śāśvatīḥ samāḥ;
yat krauñcamithunādekam avadhīḥ kāmamohitam."
(*Valmiki Ramayana, Bala Kanda 2.15*)

Thus, the seed of the *Ramayana* lies in compassion. Scholars of poetics have long hailed it as a *kavya* (epic) suffused with the **rasa** (aesthetic flavour) of **karuṇa**—compassion.The foundation of any great epic lies in its narrative. And that narrative is invariably rooted in values central to human existence. In the case of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, it is definitively held that the great sage-poet Valmiki was the first to gather the scattered oral tales of *Rama*, prevalent during the Vedic era, and weave them into an expansive and enduring epic.

II. Method

The Period of Composition of the Ramayana

There exists considerable divergence among scholars regarding the precise period during which the *Ramayana* was composed. The epic itself offers no explicit reference to the time of its composition. Estimates by various scholars suggest that different sections of the *Ramayana* may have been composed between the 12th century BCE and the 2nd century BCE. Nonetheless, it is unanimously accepted that the *Ramayana* is an extremely ancient poetic work. Not only is it ancient, but it is also regarded as one of the **primordial texts** of Indian literature—its foundation rooted deep within the very soil of Indian civilization.The **Vedas** are considered the original pillars of Indian culture. Interestingly, the tradition of *Rama-katha*—the legend of Rama—is believed to predate even the Vedic era. Dr. Amarpal Singh, in his work *Tulsipūrv Rāmsāhitya* (Pre-Tulsian Rama Literature), affirms:

"The Vedas have long been regarded as the original source of all knowledge and tradition. It was under this belief that the scholar Neelkantha composed the *Mantra-Ramayana*."

Post-Vedic literature also contains references to the *Kaushala* kingdom, the city of Ayodhya, and the solar (*Suryavansha*) dynasty—all integral to the *Ramayana*. These references provide a strong historical basis for the *Rama-katha*. A close reading of *Valmiki's Ramayana* further confirms that the epic's narrative does not drift far from historical plausibility.

However, in contrast, Father Camille Bulcke, in his scholarly dissertation *Rāmkathā: Utpatti aur Vikas* (*The Origin and Development of the Rama Story*), argues otherwise. According to him:

"Though a few characters found in the *Ramayana* are mentioned in Vedic texts, there is no indication of a narrative tradition linking them in any coherent form. The name of Rama may occur, but there is no narrative content attached to it. Repeated mentions of King Janaka do not confirm his relationship with Sita as father and daughter. Hence, the extensive corpus of Vedic

literature does not support the view that a developed *Ramayana* story was known during the Vedic period. At most, one may conclude that certain names from the epic were already prevalent in ancient times."

Indeed, certain names found in the *Ramayana* appear in Vedic literature as follows:

- The Rigveda and Atharvaveda both explicitly mention the name *Ikshvaku*.
- In the Taittiriya Aranyaka, the word *Rama* appears in the context of 'son'.
- The Rigveda also refers to *Rama* in the sense of a 'king'.
- The names *Janaka* appear in texts such as the Taittiriya Brahmana, Shatapatha Brahmana, and Jaiminiya Brahmana.
- The name *Sita* finds multiple references, most notably in the Rigveda, where she is revered as the goddess of agriculture and associated with the solar deity Savitri, referred to as *Suryaputri Savitri*.

Among the extant recessions of the *Valmiki Ramayana*, the principal narrative remains consistent, though there exist variations in individual verses. The three principal recessions are:

1. The Dakshinatya (Southern version)
2. The Gaudiya (Eastern version)
3. The Pashchimottariya (Northwestern version)

The following verse from the *Brihaddharma Purana* (Chapter 25, Verses 28–29)

encapsulates the foundational nature of the *Ramayana* in Indian literary tradition:

"Rāmāyaṇam mahākāvyam ādau Vālmīkinā kṛtam |
Tan-mūlaṁ sarva-kāvyānām itihāsa-purāṇayoḥ ||
Saṁhitānāṁ ca sarvāsāṁ mūlaṁ Rāmāyaṇaṁ matam ||"

Translation:
The Ramayana, the great epic first composed by Valmiki, is considered the very source of all poetry, of history and mythology alike. It is regarded as the fountainhead of all scriptural compilations.

Which Came First — the Ramayana or the Mahabharata?

This question has intrigued scholars for centuries. While *Mahabharata* is longer and more encyclopedic, *Ramayana* is generally acknowledged as the first poetic work (ādikāvya) of the Indian tradition, attributed to Valmiki. Its emphasis on poetic structure and emotional *rasa*, especially *karuṇa* (compassion), gives it primacy in the literary canon, even though debates on chronology persist.

The Intertextuality of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata: Which Preceded the Other?

When we study the *Ramayana*, we do not encounter any mention of characters or events from the *Mahabharata*. However, the *Mahabharata* does, indeed, reference the *Rama-katha*. This asymmetry of allusion suggests a historical precedence and literary influence of the *Ramayana* over the *Mahabharata*.A verse from the *Mahabharata* itself underscores the all-pervasive presence of Lord Hari (Vishnu) across Indian sacred literature:

"Vede Rāmāyaṇe puṇye Bhārate Bharatarṣabha |
Ādau cānte ca madhye ca Hariḥ sarvatra gīyate ||"
(*Mahābhārata*, Adhyāya 6)

Translation:
In the Vedas, in the sacred Ramayana, in the great Mahabharata, O best of the Bharatas, at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end—everywhere is sung the praise of Lord Hari.

Indeed, in the ancient *Parvas* (books) of the *Mahabharata*, references to characters and narratives from the *Ramayana* are found in four distinct places. This demonstrates how one literary work often serves as an inspiration for another—a fine example of intertextual creativity within Sanskrit epics.The *Ramayana* may aptly be called a *nāra-kāvya*—an epic centered around the ideal man. When Sage Valmiki asked Narada,

"Who is there in this world who is virtuous and heroic?"
Narada's answer began with the word *"nara"*—meaning *man*.
It was thus that Valmiki chose a human being, Rama, as the hero of his epic.

It is also noteworthy that tradition recognizes **three distinct identities** attributed to Valmiki:

1. **Vaiyākaraṇa Valmiki** – the grammarian

2. **Suparṇa Valmiki** – associated with bird symbolism or sacred lore
3. **Maharshi Valmiki** – the great sage and seer

The etymology of the name *Valmiki* is drawn from the word *valmika*, meaning an anthill. During his deep penance, it is said that his body became enveloped by an anthill, and hence he came to be known as *Valmiki*—"the one who emerged from the anthill."

Before embarking upon his spiritual transformation, Valmiki was believed to have been a *dasyu*—a forest-dwelling robber. His transformation into the first poet (*ādikavi*) is a profound example of redemption through wisdom and inner awakening.The names *Lava* and *Kusha*, traditionally attributed to the sons of Rama, are believed to have been bestowed by the *Kusilava* (bardic) community, suggesting the oral roots and bardic heritage of the *Ramayana*.Thus, while the *Ramayana* stands as an independent and earlier literary creation, the *Mahabharata* draws inspiration from it in multiple instances. This example illustrates how one literary masterpiece may give rise to another—each sustaining and enriching the cultural and moral fabric of its time.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Literary Evaluation: The Role of the Narrator

Both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the grand epics of ancient India, reveal that their authors are not merely external storytellers but become integrated within the narrative alongside their protagonists and other characters.In literary forms such as the novel or short story, the role of the narrator holds great significance. Modern literature often features either a first-person narrator or a third-person omniscient narrator, the latter being one who sees and knows all, detached yet all-encompassing. Even in dramatic compositions, the *Sutradhara*—the stage manager or narrator—retains vital importance in guiding the structure and flow of the drama.

When we reflect upon the *Ramayana* through this lens, we observe that its composer, the *Ādi Kavi* Valmiki, appears within his own narrative not only as a character but also as a narrator—sometimes omniscient, sometimes involved—yet always maintaining a delicate balance between engagement and detachment. His ability to be both participant and witness reveals the profound literary craftsmanship required of a true creator of epic. Complete immersion of the author within the narrative risks compromising narrative integrity, as the author's personal involvement may bias

the storyline. Therefore, a degree of objectivity, or detachment, is essential to safeguard the dignity and impartiality of the narrative. Valmiki and Vyasa, creators of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* respectively, were well aware of this challenge. Both maintained an equilibrium between self-insertion and narrative distance—a skill requiring rare creative genius, which they evidently possessed.Valmiki's presence in the *Ramayana* gains heightened significance when he shelters Sita, cast out by Rama, in his hermitage and undertakes the upbringing of her two sons, Lava and Kusha. In the Ashvamedha Yajna, when these young princes recite the *Ramayana* before Rama and his court, Valmiki astonishes the royal assembly with his authoritative proclamation of Sita's purity.

He solemnly declare-

"O descendant of Raghu, I am Prachetas' tenth son. Never have I spoken untruth. These two are indeed your sons.For thousands of years I have performed austere penance. If Sita is impure, let me not reap its fruits.In thought, in deed, in word—she has never erred. If Sita is sinless, may I attain the fruit of my penance.O Rama, having examined with the mind as the sixth sense among the five elements,
I affirm her purity by the waters of the forest stream.
She is righteous, without sin, and ever devoted to her husband.
She shall offer you the assurance you seek, fearful as you are of public slander."

(*Valmiki Ramayana*, Uttarakāṇḍa, Canto 96, Verses 19–24)

Thus speaks Valmiki—not merely as the author or narrator, but as the moral anchor of the epic, upholding truth, dharma, and the dignity of womanhood.

Valmiki proclaims:

"I am the tenth son of Prachetas. So far as memory serves me, never has a false word issued from my lips. I now declare with truth—these two, Lava and Kusha, are verily your sons.

For thousands of years have I observed rigorous penance. If there be any blemish in Sita, then may I be deprived of the fruits of my austerities.

In thought, in speech, and in deed, I have committed no sin. If Maithili be not pure, then may I not reap the reward of my righteous actions.

With all my five senses and the mind—the sixth—I have examined and discerned her chastity; only then did I receive Sita at the forest stream.

O Raghava, your mind was clouded by fear of public censure, and thus you abandoned her,

Even though you knew well that you're beloved was pure in conduct and spotless in virtue."

This passage not only asserts Sita's unwavering purity but also highlights the deep moral authority of Valmiki, who, as both narrator and sage, speaks with the weight of ascetic truth and ethical responsibility. Would you like this translated section integrated into a comparative literary analysis or thematic essay on narrative voice and authorial presence in classical epics?

Valmiki declares:

"I am the tenth son of Prachetas. So far as my memory serves, never has falsehood crossed my lips. I solemnly affirm: Lava and Kusha are verily your sons. For countless years have I pursued rigorous penance? If there be any blemish in Sita, may I not partake of the fruit of my austerities?In thought, in word, and indeed, I have committed no sin. If Maithili be not without fault, then may my meritorious acts yield no reward. Through the faculties of all five senses, and with the mind as the sixth, I have discerned her purity. Only thereafter did I receive Sita at the forest-stream. Your heart, O Raghava, was clouded by fear of public reproach, and hence you abandoned her—

Though you knew within your soul that your beloved was chaste and of spotless character."
(*Uttarakāṇḍa, 96.19–24*)

Thus, through a singular character, the creator of the literary work himself enters the narrative and becomes a part of the tale.In our modern era, when we undertake literary or poetic criticism, the **narrator**—or **nivedaka**—olds central importance.But if we turn our gaze to the age in which the *Ramayana* was composed, we must ask: how did the Ādikavi, the first poet Valmiki, conceptualize this element of literary construction?Today, to achieve such narrative integration, one would attend workshops or literary residencies—yet Valmiki did so with divine intuition.

Now, regarding another profound figure: Mandodari, the consort of Ravana.

Mandodari is revered in Indian tradition as a paragon of chastity. Among the five morning-remembered chaste women (*prātaḥ-smaraṇīya pativratāḥ*), Mandodari finds a sacred place.
It is a striking paradox of Indian cultural philosophy that:

- Ahalya, who was cursed into stone by her husband for her transgression,
- Draupadi, who had five husbands in the *Mahabharata*,

- Sita, whose purity was questioned and who was twice abandoned by her husband,
- And Mandodari, who boldly spoke truth after her husband's death, exposing his flaws—

All these women are revered with devotional fervor in sacred morning chants. This, indeed, is a wondrous vision within Indian culture—a subtle yet profound reconciliation of idealism and realism.

After Ravana's death, the chaste Mandodari speaks thus:

"Thou, who once didst conquer the three worlds by vanquishing thy senses,
Art now overthrown by those very senses—like one stricken by foes he had once subdued.

Failing to attain thy carnal desire in union with Maithili,
Thou hast, O Lord, verily been consumed by the fire of her chastity."
(*Yuddha Kāṇḍa, 111.15, 23*)

"Thou didst once conquer thine own senses and thereby attain sovereignty over the three worlds; yet now, as though in retribution, those very senses have subdued thee

In being bewitched by pure and unfulfilled lust, thou didst squander thy glory and thy penance.

Astonishing it is that, in the very act of abducting Sita, thou wast not consumed by fire and reduced to ashes."

This lament of Queen Mandodari is not unlike the sorrowful cry of any ordinary woman. Yet, it is infused with the dignity, wisdom, and unwavering clarity of one who, though devoted, dares to confront truth.The poets of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* have etched their female characters with a realism and depth rarely seen—portraying them as profoundly human, complex, and emotionally resonant. Be it Kausalya, Kaikeyi, or Shabari, each woman emerges as a vivid, authentic being.Due to the constraints of discourse, it is not possible here to analyze each of them. Yet, the mere presence of figures like Urmila (wife of Lakshmana), Mandavi (wife of Bharata), and Shrutakirti (wife of Shatrughna) invites readers and scholars alike into reflection. Indeed, in the oral traditions of folk culture, tales and songs have risen around them, giving voice to their silent presence in the epic.

The Confluence of Human and Inhuman Qualities

In the earlier portion, we have reflected upon the age in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* was composed. Even in this twenty-first century, the intermingling of human and inhuman traits as found within the

Rāmāyaṇa surrounds the reader like a vast ocean of thought. Among the multitude of characters—major and minor—portrayed in the epic, many bear traits which we, too, recognize within ourselves. This is, indeed, one of the powerful virtues of this literary masterpiece. Take, for instance, Lord Rama himself—who in all grave adversity remains composed and majestic, and yet, in the sorrow of separation from Sita, becomes overwhelmed and weeps openly. Upon seeing birds on a forest bough in loving union, his heart melts; he becomes disconsolate. He sits by the lake, lamenting to himself. This is no mere mythic hero—it is the heart of a common lover clothed in the form of a divine protagonist. When such a sentiment is thus revealed through the pen of the poet, the reader, too, finds himself deeply moved, identifying with the grief.

This is the mark of enduring and triumphant literature.And yet, *inhuman* acts, too, abound in this epic tale—such as the mutilation of Shurpanakha's nose and ears. But if we view the *Rāmāyaṇa* merely within the rigid framework of literary composition, we must acknowledge that it also possesses a quality that may be called "the unaccountable" or "the unfathomable."

Indeed, the *Rāmāyaṇa*—this grand, ancient epic—holds within its womb countless such inexplicable, enigmatic occurrences. Each of these events is a seed potent enough to become an entire novel.

Struggle

As we well know, struggle is the essence of life. And if literature be the reflection of life, then struggle, too, must find its mirror therein. Where does struggle arise? It emerges where there is conflict. And conflict arises where two or more opposing thoughts or actions stand face to face. Not only that—within a single individual, many minds often stirs and contend against one another. A person becomes divided, even seeing himself as his own adversary. Literature, then, is the grand canvas of such conflicts.If we examine the *Rāmāyaṇa* through this lens—this supreme literary creation—we shall discover manifold emotional struggles, opposing ideas, dualities, and contradictions that define the very fabric of human experience. The principal characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, even in its shorter narrations, live their lives bearing within themselves the weight of inner

conflict.Take, for instance, King Daśaratha, tormented by the curse of the blind youth Śravaṇa. A gnawing fear resides within him—a fear born of that curse, mingled with the helplessness he feels in fulfilling the promise he once made to Kaikeyī. Though a mighty monarch, he finds himself powerless before her demand. And when at last he does fulfill it, he surrenders his very life, unable to reconcile his heart with his actions. Thus, a tragic thread runs through the tale—a king undone by grief, his own life becoming a shokāntikā, a tragedy. Such is but one among many internal struggles that animate the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Every major figure embodies some conflict, some moral or emotional discord, within the fabric of their existence. The reader of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as he journeys through these stories, feels the stirrings of these conflicts in his own heart.

He thinks, *"I, too, have once thought such thoughts… I have done likewise… or perhaps such a moment may yet arise in my life."*

Yet, for such a connection to be forged, the reader must possess a heart attuned to human sensitivity—he must be one who truly feels.As a student and critic of literature, one question forever returns to me like a stone cast upon still waters—Has humankind today retained such tenderness of feeling? The lament of sage Vālmīki, who wept after unwittingly taking the life of a krauñcha bird in its bliss—what remains of that deep human empathy in modern man? And if we were to seek an answer to this question, what might we find in our hands? For if literature be the mirror of life, then surely it must reflect its struggles as well. Struggle arises where conflict is born. Conflict emerges when two or more thoughts or acts stand opposed. Nay, even within a single soul, there may stir many minds—and thus a man may find himself contending with his very self.

Literature, then, is the vast **canvas upon which these conflicts are rendered**.

And if we examine the *Rāmāyaṇa* as this noble work of art, we shall see therein myriad human feelings—divisions of mind and heart, contradictions of thought, and the eternal *duality* of

existence. Indeed, it is only when the reader or student of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is endowed with the subtle sensitivity of human emotion that such understanding becomes possible. As a humble critic and seeker of wisdom, a question forever carves itself upon the tablet of my mind—*Has modern humanity preserved such depth of feeling?* When sage Vālmīki grieved for the loss of joy he himself had stolen from the mating krauñcha bird, what noble sentiment did he express! But how much of that rare human compassion lingers within man today? If we were to earnestly search for an answer to this, what shall we find in our grasp? According to the German scholar Dr. Weber, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is but an allegorical account by the Aryans of Northern India depicting their conquest of the non-Aryans of the South and the subsequent spread of Aryan culture across that region. Yet, several Indian scholars have firmly maintained that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is no figment of imagination, no idle fiction. While the historical record outside the text lacks definitive mention of the Raghu lineage described therein—especially in extant Vedic literature—the literary worth of the Rāma-kathā is beyond all price. It is also plausible that the tale of Rāma, as it came to sage Vālmīki, had long been in circulation, orally transmitted through the voices of *sūtas* and *kuśīlavas*, as ballads and songs. Thus, what once was traditional folklore, shaped by the voice of the people, was gloriously rendered by the *ādikavi*, the first poet Vālmīki, into sublime poetic form.Hence, on the strength of critical research and textual tradition, it is now accepted that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the independent creation of the great poet Vālmīki.To comprehend the cultural continuum of India, *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* stands as an invaluable poetic monument. Through countless centuries, it has been studied from myriad perspectives—linguistic elegance, grammatical structure, religious philosophy, aesthetic form, folk tradition, and poetic beauty.The *Rāmāyaṇa* even alludes to a folk festival known as *Indradhvaja*—a ritual where, during the harvest, golden banners symbolic of Indra were raised amidst ripened rice fields. At the close of autumn, offerings of the new grain were made to gods and ancestors alike. Rituals of river-worship and tree-worship were customary; cremation rites were observed; and even dialogues and decisions were framed by placing a stalk of rice between two persons or two factions—signifying the sanctity of the grain. Rice, thus, was accorded reverence. In traditional painting too, depictions of rice, saplings, and flowers abound—testifying to a deep-rooted agrarian consciousness.For a student of literature, all these elements are of utmost import—for it is literature that absorbs the fine grains of such a society and, through the alchemy of art, distils them upon the page. Indeed, the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* serves as a guiding light in the study of ancient Indian history and wisdom. Debates regarding its date of composition or

finer aspects of its narrative are inevitable, yet the wide acceptance and enduring legacy of the *Rāmāyaṇa* within popular tradition cannot be denied. Furthermore, it is worth noting that in the age of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, there existed no practice of child marriage. Nuptials were solemnized only upon attainment of youth and maturity—a reflection, perhaps, of a society guided by thoughtful restraint and natural order.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sītā speaks to her maid Anasūyā with the following words:

"Patisamyoga-sulabhavayo dṛṣṭvā tu me pitā
Chintāmabhyagamad dīto vittanāśāt ivādhanaḥ"
(*Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, 2.118.34)

Translation:
"Beholding me come of age, my father was seized by deep anxiety—much like a man bereft of wealth, stricken by sudden loss."

This poignant expression reveals a vital truth: that maidens, until the proper age of marriage, were not hastened into matrimony but were allowed the time and space for learning and cultivation. Thus, education for girls was not denied, especially within noble households.Indeed, the *Rāmāyaṇa* bears testimony to the intellectual stature of women. Kausalyā, the mother of Rāma, is described as a *mantra-vid*, a knower and chanter of sacred hymns. Likewise, Sītā herself was devoted to the daily performance of *sandhyā*, the ritual of twilight worship—an indication that daughters of noble lineage were permitted, even encouraged, pursuing knowledge and spiritual discipline. However, the status of women in the *Rāmāyaṇa*-era society is not without ambiguity. While woman is often described as singularly devoted to her husband—*ananyā rūpā puruṣasya dāsaḥ* ("she is solely the handmaid of her husband") (*Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, 4.24.34)—this very phrase evokes contention. The exaltation of the wife as an ideal of fidelity sits in tension with her simultaneous characterization as subordinate.

And yet, the *Rāmāyaṇa* utters a timeless truth, relevant even today:

"The family in which the woman suffers shall fall into ruin; but the house in which she finds happiness shall flourish and ascend."

Thus, the story of Rāma is verily the tale of the human condition. It has found its echo in nearly every language of the world.The grand enactment of *Rāma-līlā*—celebrated not only in the sacred land of India but stretching to the isles of Indonesia—receives with thunderous applause the reverberations of this immortal tale.The values embedded in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* are eternal. Beyond its capacity to entertain and elevate the heart, the *Rāma-kathā* also serves as a potent instrument of social transformation.In every tongue and dialect, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been translated; its essence absorbed into the lifeblood of Indian folk tradition. Rāma, Sītā, and their saga have been embraced wholly by the soil of India, embedded in the very grain of its culture.In oral traditions, in folk songs that echo across the countryside, the *Rāma-kathā* has found fresh breath. The people have sculpted Rāma, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa, Hanumān, Lava, and Kuśa in the image of their own hearts—bestowing upon them not divine aloofness, but earthy, tender humanity.Every episode of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been lifted from the ornate robes of high literature and lovingly draped in the rustic garments of village culture. From the divine birth of Rāma to his fateful war with Rāvaṇa, the folk songs of India have retold the story—not from the heights of a palace, but from the humble thresholds of the people. Within the tapestry of folk literature, countless episodes of the *Rāma-kathā* have been vividly portrayed. Even the emotions of animals and birds have found poignant expression in these rustic songs. Consider, for instance, this folk verse celebrating the birth of Rāma:

"Dhanī re Ajudhiyā, dhanī Rājā Daśaratha,

Dhan torī bhāg Kausalā, Rām janam meṃ hai ho."(*Vishva Jyoti*, April–May 1971)

Translation:
"Prosperous is Ayodhyā, noble is King Daśaratha;O Kausalyā, how fortunate you are—Rāma is born unto you."

Following the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, numerous sacred texts have been composed depicting the character and deeds of Rāma. Among them, *Rāmacaritamānasa* by Gosvāmi Tulsīdās stands supreme—a unique and unparalleled literary creation, steeped in the essence of *navadhā-bhakti* (nine forms of devotion), and resplendent with the full range of *navarasa* (nine aesthetic sentiments).

In reflecting upon the *Rāmāyaṇa* as composed by Vālmīki, especially in regard to its literary form and structure, one is struck by a most significant aspect: the poet's conscious and artful act of composition. In *Bālakāṇḍa*, Sarga 4, we encounter the tale of how the sage Vālmīki taught his epic to the twin sons of Rāma, Kuśa and Lava, and instructed them to recite it before their father. This self-reflexive episode, wherein the poet and his composition appear within the narrative, is both striking and foundational. Following this, in Sarga 5, begins the narrative of King Daśaratha's sacrificial rites. We are given a vivid description of Ayodhyā—its royal household, ministers, and citizenry. Thereafter unfolds the resolve to perform the *aśvamedha-yajña*, followed by the *putreṣṭi-yajña*, the divine offering of *pāyasa* to the king's three queens, and the miraculous conception of the princes. What is particularly noteworthy here is the employment of the flashback technique—a narrative device that modern literary criticism often regards as advanced. The very use of flashback in this ancient composition continues to astonish us, revealing the remarkable narrative sophistication of its author. Another equally significant element is the rich inclusion of subplots and subsidiary characters interwoven into the principal storyline. These were either introduced directly by the original author or emerged through the oral traditions of folk literature. Notable examples include the genealogy of Viśvāmitra and the celestial descent of the river Gaṅgā.The strategic use of such *upakathās* (sub-narratives) later influenced the composers of the *Mahābhārata*, and has since become a stylistic hallmark of Indian literature—carried forward even into contemporary forms such as novels, television serials, and web series. In fact, many expansive Indian novels in regional languages are fictionalized prose reflections of these very epics. Indeed, the **DNA of these two great epics**—*Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*—flows unabated into the veins of every Indian literary expression written to this very moment.

The Final Chapter of the Rāma-Kathā

The *Ādi-Rāmāyaṇa*, as composed by sage Vālmīki, concludes with the return of Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa from exile, and the coronation (*abhiṣeka*) of Rāma upon the throne of Ayodhyā.However, the *Uttarakāṇḍa*—a later addition to the text—ushers in a tragic coda to the tale. Here, the story takes on a sorrowful tone, and the saga that once celebrated virtue, victory, and return, ends in lamentation and loss. In order to avert public censure (*lokāpavāda*), Rāma entreats Sītā—who arrives at the *aśvamedha yajña* with Kuśa, Lava, and the sage Vālmīki—to once again prove her chastity. In response, Sītā invokes Mother Earth and, taking a solemn oath

of her purity, beseeches her to receive her into her bosom. Whereupon the Earth parts, and Sītā, the daughter of Bhūmi, enters the earth's depths. Subsequent to this poignant event follows the episode of Lakṣmaṇa's renunciation. Here too, Rāma adheres not to royal law but to the weight of his own solemn vow—choosing to forsake his beloved brother Lakṣmaṇa for the transgression of royal command. Ultimately, the tale concludes with Rāma's ascension to the heavenly realm (*svargarohana*).And yet, precisely where the *Rāma-kathā* concludes, the minds of readers are awakened to manifold questions. A literary creation which, even upon its close, continues to resonate in the hearts of its audience and begets contemplation and inquiry may truly be deemed supreme. By such a criterion, *Rāmāyaṇa* proves itself a literary masterpiece of the highest order.

The Creative Merits and Limitations of Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa

Rāmāyaṇa, a composition that has become not only a cornerstone of Indian civilization but a luminous pillar of the greater Asian cultural ethos, stands fortified by its intrinsic and exalted creative virtues. The global diffusion and enduring appeal of the *Rāma-kathā* owe themselves to the work of Vālmīki.In the quest to determine the original source of the Rāma narrative; scholars have proposed manifold schools of thought. From Western orientalists to Indian savants, many have devoted meticulous research to the numerous facets of the Rāma legend. From classical Sanskrit to the myriad vernacular tongues of India and even beyond—into ancient and modern foreign languages—the Rāma-kathā has served as a wellspring of literary inspiration for centuries.This ancient literary edifice, whose origin stretches back over millennia, has undergone countless adaptations. It has stirred the creative impulse of writers, serving as the foundational muse for their first compositions.

In the *Pūrvakāṇḍa*, Sarga 7 of the *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa*, it is proclaimed:

"Punaḥ punaḥ kalpabhedāj jātāḥ

Śrīrāghavasya ca,Avatārāḥ

koṭiśo'tra bhedaḥ kvacit kvacit" (Verse 29)

Translation:

"In diverse aeons (*kalpas*), innumerable incarnations of Śrī Rāghava have arisen;and by reason of these countless descents, manifold variations appear in the *Rāma-carita*."

Modern critics have even advanced the view that numerous independent Rāma narratives were already in circulation since antiquity. The hero of an epic poem came, over time, to be transfigured into the theological conception of an *avatāra*.The *Ādi-Rāmāyaṇa*, it is believed, was originally transmitted through oral tradition. As it passed from one generation to another, numerous interpolations (*prakṣipta-aṃśa*) became interwoven with the core narrative.By the third century BCE, the influence of Kṛṣṇa-avatāra had begun to permeate the Indian cultural consciousness. The *Rāmāyaṇa* too enjoyed immense popularity. During these centuries, King Rāma came increasingly to be regarded—like Kṛṣṇa—as an incarnation of Viṣṇu. His brothers were similarly viewed as partial manifestations (*aṃśāvatāras*) of the same deity.With the ascendance of *avatāravāda* (the doctrine of divine incarnation), the narrative gradually absorbed elements of the supernatural. Yet, despite this sacral overlay, the primary orientation of the *Rāma-kathā* remained literary rather than theological for many centuries. This is evident from the golden age of Sanskrit classical literature, encompassing both epic poetry and drama.It is also telling that the literary form of the *Rāma-kathā* had already spread to foreign lands prior to the rise of *Rāma-bhakti* (devotionalism toward Rāma). Consequently, in the vast corpus of Rāma narratives outside India, one finds a marked absence of this devotional element.—
Father Camille Bulcke, "Rāmakathā", p. 598

In the subsequent evolved phase of the *Rāma-kathā*, the narrative became increasingly imbued with the virtues of devotion (*bhakti*) and the chanting of the divine Name (*nāmasaṅkīrtana*). The *Rāma-kathā* possesses a singular power to captivate both the reader and the listener; the potency of this literary force commands admiration. Not only India but the entire world draws inspiration from the *Rāmāyaṇa* for living a truly humane and righteous life. The epic encompasses comprehensive knowledge of manifold facets of existence—art, poetry, music, painting, dance, song, warfare, politics, sociology, economics, and other pervasive experiences of life. Every single fragment of the *Rāma-kathā* has been refined through the creative genius of Indian intellect, who have polished it in the realm of elegant literature with their imaginative elaborations. Due to the influence of Indian idealism, the original *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative and its poetic content ceased to remain purely the unadorned story. A case in point is the character of Rāvaṇa. In the primal narrative, Rāvaṇa is depicted as one ensnared by carnal desire for Sītā; yet, in the more polished

versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, composed centuries later, the liberation or *mokṣa* of Rāvaṇa emerges as a significant purpose of the Rāma incarnation. Such references are duly recorded.

Thus, the streams of *Rāma-kathā* may be classified as follows:

1. The *Rāma-kathā* of characters imbued with fundamental human qualities.
2. The narrative of Rāma as an incarnation of Viṣṇu and the related avatars.
3. The devotional poetry that exalts Rāma as Śrī Rāma and sings his virtues—this is the *bhakti*-imbued *Rāma-kathā*.

Hence, the flow of the *Rāma-kathā* from approximately 1000/500 BCE to the present year 2025, viewed through the lens of literary genres, is most delightful and enriching. This represents not merely a refinement of the *Rāma-kathā* but indeed a "cultural refinement." It is also a process of self-purification. This stream shall continue to flow uninterrupted, yet it demands a scrupulous and objective study. How this creative force will contribute to literature in the modern era is a subject requiring much deeper discourse.

IV. Conclusion

The *Rāmāyaṇa* has attained the status of a *dharma-grantha* (religious scripture) in India. Whether it ought to be considered such, or not; whether to accept this or to dispute it—these questions have engendered much controversy and remain debatable. They have even acquired a deep political coloring. However, in this treatise, out of respect for the grandeur and vast expanse of the subject, other contentious issues are not addressed. This presentation has sought merely to cast some light on the universal scope of the *Rāma-kathā*, with particular reference to the Vālmīki-composed *Rāmāyaṇa*.Many immortal compositions in Sanskrit *lalit* (elegant) literature have been created on the theme of the *Rāma-kathā*, notable among which are the *Raghuvaṃśa*, *Uttarārāmacarita*, *Kuṇḍamālā*, and *Bālarāmāyaṇa*. Numerous poetic works employing *śleṣa* (double entendre) and *citra-kāvya* (ornamental poetry) have been composed on the subject. In the modern Indian languages as well, the narrative content of the *Rāma-kathā* has been reflected in varied forms. The heritage of life-values contained within the *Rāmāyaṇa* has found echo in modern Indian literature, sometimes in positive, sometimes in critical or negative modes. Literary works that pierce and question the principal themes of the *Rāma-kathā*—such as ideal modes of living and the portrayal of the ideal person—have begun to appear in modern times. A notable trend in modern Indian

literature is a current of rejection or critique of the particular ideal personalities and life-principles upheld by the *Rāma-kathā*.

Questioning the Rāmāyaṇa, edited by Paula Richman, explores the reconfiguration of the *Kathā*—the story of Rāma—which has remained an enduring feature of Indian civilization. At the dawn of the new millennium, one is compelled to ponder what new forms these cultural symbols shall assume in times to come. Will there arise a necessity to forge counter-myths? Might fresh myths invert the established status of the characters, assigning them altered roles that resonate with shifting social and historical realities?

The ongoing discourse on various versions and the act of questioning themselves serve as a caution against the perils of asserting a singular origin as the sole authentic source.

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