

THE LEGEND OF RAMA
ARTISTIC VISIONS

Edited by Vidya Dehejia

Marg Publications

SAHIB DIN'S BOOK OF BATTLES

RANA JAGAT SINGH'S YUDDHAKANDA

J. P. LOSTY

One of the greatest manuscript projects ever undertaken in India, surpassing in scale all those prepared for the Mughal Emperor Akbar except for the gigantic *Hamzanama*, is the *Ramayana* of Valmiki commissioned by Rana Jagat Singh I of Mewar (r. 1628-1652). Conceived on a vast scale, the manuscript is written in the traditional *pothi* (horizontal page modelled on palm-leaf) format with a separate volume for each of the seven books of the *Ramayana*, and has some four hundred full-page paintings. The six surviving books were completed in Udaipur by the scribe Hirananda between the Samvat year 1706 and 1710 (AD 1649 to 1653), a few months after Jagat Singh's death. Three main styles of Mewar painting may be distinguished in the work, of which two books of the *Ramayana*, the *Ayodhyakanda* and the *Yuddhakanda*, are painted in the style associated with the artist Sahib Din, while the ninety paintings of the latter book are actually attributed to Sahib Din in the colophon.¹

Sahib Din is an artist especially associated with Rana Jagat Singh, for his earliest known work (a dispersed *Ragamala* series—paintings of musical modes) is dated in the first year of Jagat Singh's reign in 1628, and his other paintings span the course of the monarch's reign, with the last known work dated 1655.² His early style takes the basic elements of seventeenth-century Mewar painting (the *Ragamala* from Chawand dated 1605 being the principal surviving example) and interprets them within the broader context of the Mughal tradition. Even in his early Mewar work he is able to break free of the unremitting horizontality of the Mewar style as exemplified by the Chawand *Ragamala* and make some use of a horizon; and in his late work in the *Ramayana* he has developed to the point where he makes brilliant use of aerial perspective. This alone makes possible the ambitious scale of his compositions, which far exceed in their complexity anything that was being produced in other Rajput studios at the time. There is no direct evidence as to his origins, artistic or otherwise, but his Muslim name (originally Shihab ad-Din) need not necessarily indicate a non-Mewar origin; his predecessor Nusarati (Nasir ad-Din), the artist of the Chawand set, was also a Muslim. It would seem that at some stage in his career, Sahib Din was exposed to Mughal influence; he may indeed have been in the retinue of Karan Singh or Jagat Singh, as Mewar princes in attendance on Jahangir.³

It is not until the close of Jagat Singh's reign that Mewar paintings are to be found in styles distinguished from that of Sahib Din; at this time, paintings associated with the name Manohar in a style possibly influenced by Bundi painting make an appearance,⁴ while a third style of Mewar painting is closely associated with Deccani painting.⁵ It would seem therefore that during much of Jagat Singh's reign, Sahib Din was the acknowledged master of the royal studio in Udaipur, and it was not until the ambitious project of illustrating the *Ramayana* was mooted that the need

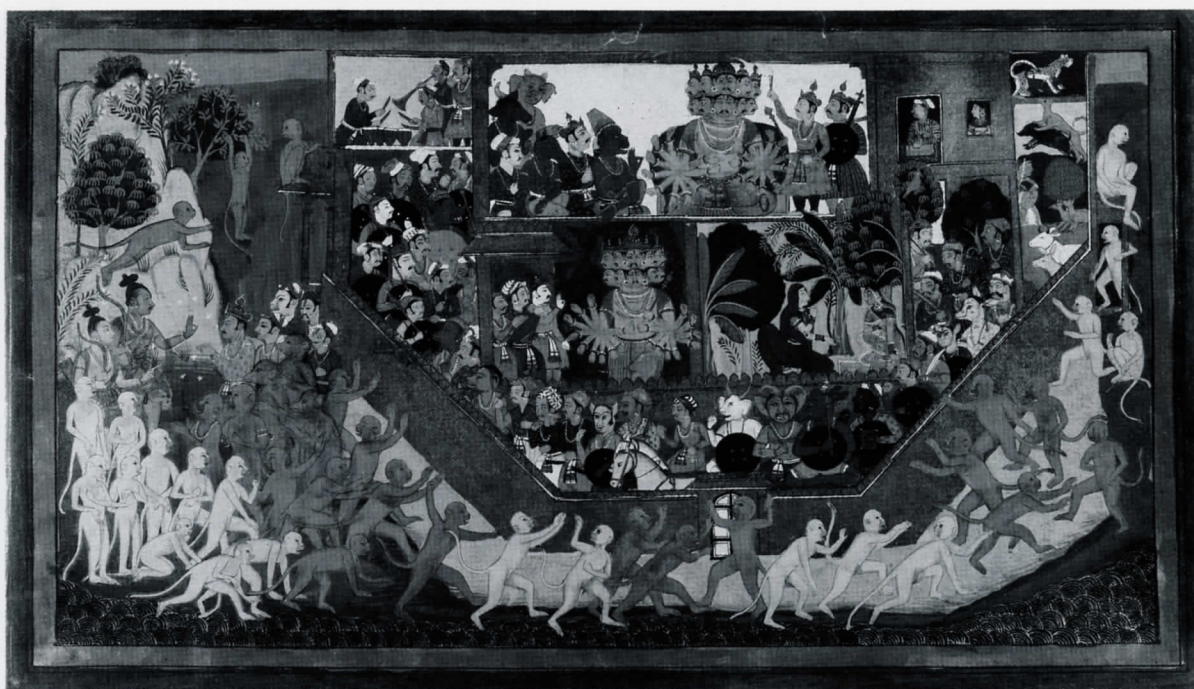
arose to expand the studio.

The *Ramayana* manuscript of 1649-1653 is the crowning artistic achievement of Jagat Singh's reign, laid out on a far grander scale than any of the other manuscripts he commissioned. The reasons for the lavishness of execution of this particular text are not far to seek, as the *Ramayana* had a special place in the history of the Mewar royal house. Rama, who lived on earth as a human being had an ancestry and descendants; the Hindu genealogists traced his ancestry back to the sun. The Solar Rajputs, represented principally by the Sesodiya ruling house of Mewar, therefore included Rama among their ancestors, which explains why the Maharanas of Mewar have always been accorded primacy of place among the Rajput royal houses. The *Ramayana* is therefore in a sense a family history of the Sesodiyas, just as works such as the *Timurnama* and *Genghisnama* had been for the Mughals. In Sahib Din's paintings in the *Yuddhakanda*, Rama is portrayed in the guise of a hero of the Solar Rajputs with his battle standard displaying the sun in splendour—the motif of the Sesodiyas. It cannot therefore be coincidental that in one memorable scene Ravana appears at the window of his palace with a crowd of demons below saluting their monarch exactly as in a Mughal painting of a *darshan* (audience with an august or holy person) of Jahangir or Shah Jahan at the *jharoka* (window) of one of the Mughal palaces. As Jahangir used his painters to embody his political aims, in his case fantasies of victory over Shah Abbas and Malik Ambar,⁶ so Jagat Singh seems to have used his to express, through his ancestor's struggle against his evil enemy, his hopes of redeeming his grandfather's surrender to the Mughals.

Yet, so vast was the undertaking that only a studio organized to some extent as the Mughals organized theirs, could have produced it. Though the only dates available for this manuscript are 1649-1653—the span of the completion dates of the individual books—the royal studio at Udaipur was not large enough to have produced all these paintings within such a relatively short space of time, especially since two of the books are credited to individual artists. Allowing only a month for the production of each of the hundred and fifty or so paintings in Sahib Din's style, even with assistance he would still have taken as long as twelve years to produce them. Such a time-scale, in fact, fits with the known dates of his work, for there is no dated Mewar painting from the middle years of the reign. The production of the whole manuscript must have been phased over a number of years, with Sahib Din as the master of the studio, three master artists responsible for the layout of the individual books, and teams of assistants painting much of the subsidiary areas.

The tragic books of the epic, the *Ayodhyakanda* and the *Yuddhakanda*, demand pictorial treatment which is both detailed enough to convey the narrative in all its heroism, yet transcends the detail to impart the essence of the work. Of the artists available in the Udaipur studio, Sahib Din alone could have been capable of producing such an effect, requiring as it did the importing into the primitive Mewar style of the basic elements of Mughal composition. The greatest of all these books, and Sahib Din's masterpiece, is the *Yuddhakanda*. Its ninety full-page paintings contain not only all the details of this highly complex story, but in addition convey the full pathos of the epic and the tragic grandeur of a flawed hero originally beloved by the gods. Ravana's moral flaw is his lust for another man's wife, but he goes to his end fulfilling his duty as a warrior. Throughout the text it is repeatedly conveyed that his side is doomed; he sends his generals, his brothers, his sons, and finally himself goes to battle with forces he knows have moral superiority. They all do their duty as warriors, meeting inevitable death unflinchingly. It was scarcely surprising that such a text would have particular appeal to the Rajputs of Mewar, whose own moral code was scarcely different from that of Valmiki's epic, but it is perhaps a cause for surprise that Sahib Din has been able to transform primitive Mewar painting into so sophisticated a medium for portraying Rajput ideals and society.

The sheer number of paintings—ninety in two hundred and five folios or nearly one in every two folios—allows Sahib Din a freedom of narrative control which makes his paintings independent of the text to which they, in theory, are subservient.



1. Ravana takes counsel. Add. 15297(1), folio 6r.

He makes full use of all the available narrative techniques to vary the pace of his paintings, here concentrating several chapters into one painting, there allowing himself to spread an episode over several paintings, thus building up a cumulative pictorial tension carrying the story along without need of the text. Nothing of moment in the story has been omitted.

The pictorial narrative proceeds in various ways, beginning at a rapid pace with the first six paintings occupying the rectos of folios 2–7, while the text takes until folio 22 (end of chapter 14)⁷ to reach the same place in the narrative. This opening sequence is the only time that the artist gets so far in advance of the text, and must be explained by the scribe taking up a pile of already existing pictures and simply beginning to write on their versos. Suddenly realizing that he could not go on like this, he began paying attention to what was on the pictures and interspersed unillustrated folios between them.

In order to treat a story in an extremely detailed manner without confusing a viewer, the paintings must be capable of dealing with several episodes at once. With this in mind Sahib Din sets up two principal spatial references—Rama's camp on the left, and Ravana and the city of Lanka on the right. Rama is a constant presence in all the paintings of the *Yuddhakanda*, regardless of whether he is actually involved in any of the activity depicted. Sahib Din is communicating that he is the axis around which the entire story revolves. His presence is unregistered only when the action temporarily leaves Lanka, as when Hanuman flies off to the Himalayas to fetch magical herbs. Also noticeable right through this volume is the highly organized sense of directional geography. Rama and his allies always advance on Lanka from the left of each picture, and Ravana and his cohorts come out to meet him from the right. This sense of direction persists until the summoning of the flying Puspaka *vahana* (celestial vehicle) to take Rama home to Ayodhya. This being already in Lanka, comes out from the right of the picture, and the sense of direction is now reversed, culminating in a triumphant return to Ayodhya, and meeting with Kausalya and the other widows of Dasaratha.

The opening chapters consist largely of Ravana sending out spies who report back to him, so the same spies can be shown both engaged with Rama on his side of the painting and then reporting back to Ravana on the other. The fifth painting, folio 6r (figure 1), shows these spatial coordinates to perfection, with Rama, Lakshmana, Vibhisana, and their allies planning the attack on the left at the foot of Mount Suvela; on the right Ravana, having previously shown Sita a false head of Rama, is summoned





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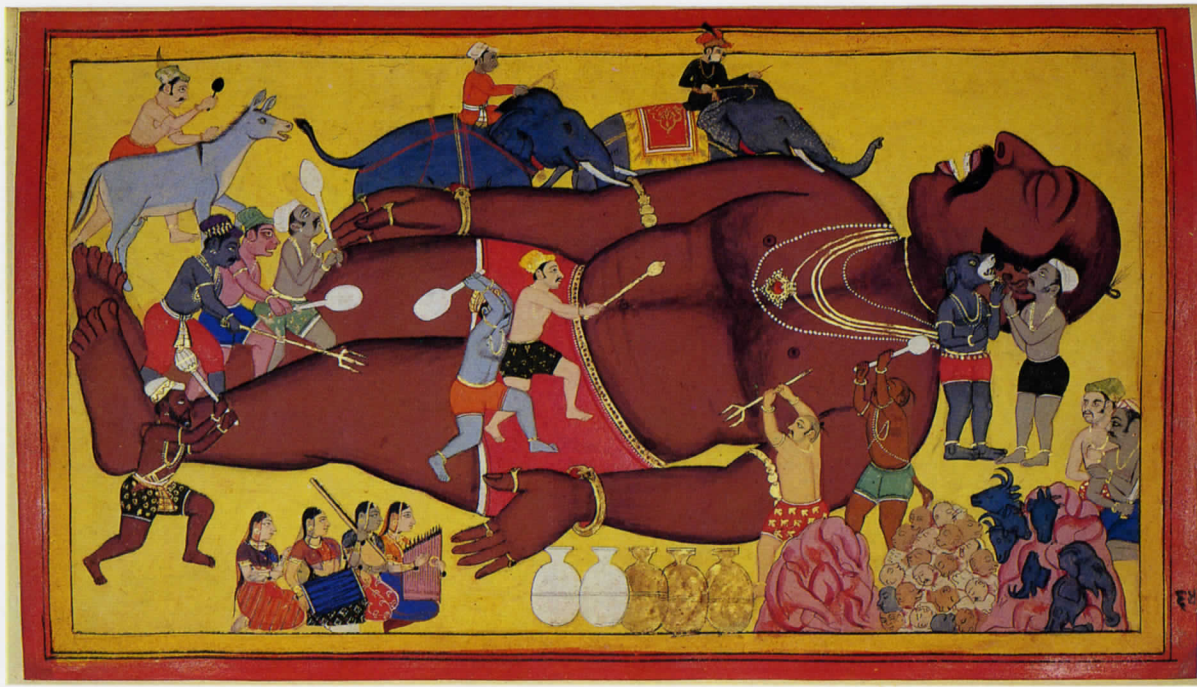
3. Indrajit uses his magic weapons. Add. 15297(I), folio 34r.

to confer with his ministers, while in the centre of the painting the kindly demoness Sarama disabuses Sita about Rama's apparent death. Ravana orders the drums and trumpets of war to sound and his troops to man the walls, around which the monkeys begin to swarm.

The two great battle scenes illustrating the first general assault on Lanka, picture 9, folio 29r (figure 2), show Sahib Din at the absolute height of his powers. Realism had of course always been far from the consciousness of Indian artists, and the blow-on-blow physicality that artists trained in the Mughal tradition could impart to the depiction of battles was not what Mewar artists of the seventeenth century needed at all. Though Sahib Din begins illustrating battle scenes, as he does here, with tremendously crowded and exciting representations of the golden city of Lanka almost vanishing beneath the tumultuous swarms of fighting monkeys and demons, as the manuscript progresses he simplifies his battle scenes into epic but almost hieratic combats between the chief protagonists. The inevitability of the result in the Rama-Ravana struggle rendered this almost theatrical style ideal for the depiction of such an epic but unequal contest.

Pictures 11 to 14 deal with the attempts by Indrajit to overcome the allies using magic: faithful to the text, Sahib Din shows Indrajit with the sacrificial fire and a black goat or kid during all his attempts to create magic. Picture 12, folio 34r (figure 3), is another good example of a complex painting covering the material of five chapters (21 to 25). In the centre of Lanka, Indrajit tells his father he is going out to fight; he is then seen attacking Rama and Laksmana from the other side of the horizon — his magic has made him invisible. Rama and Laksmana lie prostrate, entwined in the coils of Indrajit's serpent, and surrounded by their grieving friends. Back in the city Indrajit returns in triumph, greets his father, and is congratulated by him. Finally, Trijata is seen talking to Sita whom she then takes in the Puspaka chariot over the battlefield to see her husband, apparently lying slain. Despite the complex compositions occasioned by this narrative technique, Sahib Din's pictures are always wonderfully clear. Here he has broken up Lanka into different compartments with different background colours to show that adjacent scenes are not contemporaneous.

The episode of the awakening of Ravana's giant brother Kumbhakarna and his going into battle has always been one of the favourite parts of the *Ramayana* and Sahib Din has no less than seventeen paintings (pictures 23 to 39) over 26 folios (ff. 62 to 87) devoted to it, illustrating chapters 40 to 51 of the text, and making it the



4. The awakening of Kumbhakarna. Add. 15297(I), folio 64r.



5. The death of Kumbhakarna. Add. 15297(I), folio 87r.

most heavily illustrated section of the *Yuddhakanda*. The density of illustrations makes it possible for Sahib Din to illustrate single episodes in the story. The very first of these chapters, Kumbhakarna's awakening, has no less than four paintings devoted to it—one of Ravana despatching his servants to awaken the sleeping giant, the others showing first their efforts to awaken him and then his gorging himself on food. In the second of these four illustrations, picture 24, folio 64r (figure 4), Sahib Din has Kumbhakarna stretched out along the axis of the painting, surrounded by lilliputian figures making various attempts to awaken him by hitting him with weapons and clubs and shouting in his ear, while women play musical instruments, elephants trumpet, and a donkey brays. Piles of food (dead animals including monkeys) and jars of liquid (blood, wine, and fat) await him. Perhaps no further proof of Sahib Din's Mughal training need be offered than the Persian musical instrument which one of the women is playing.



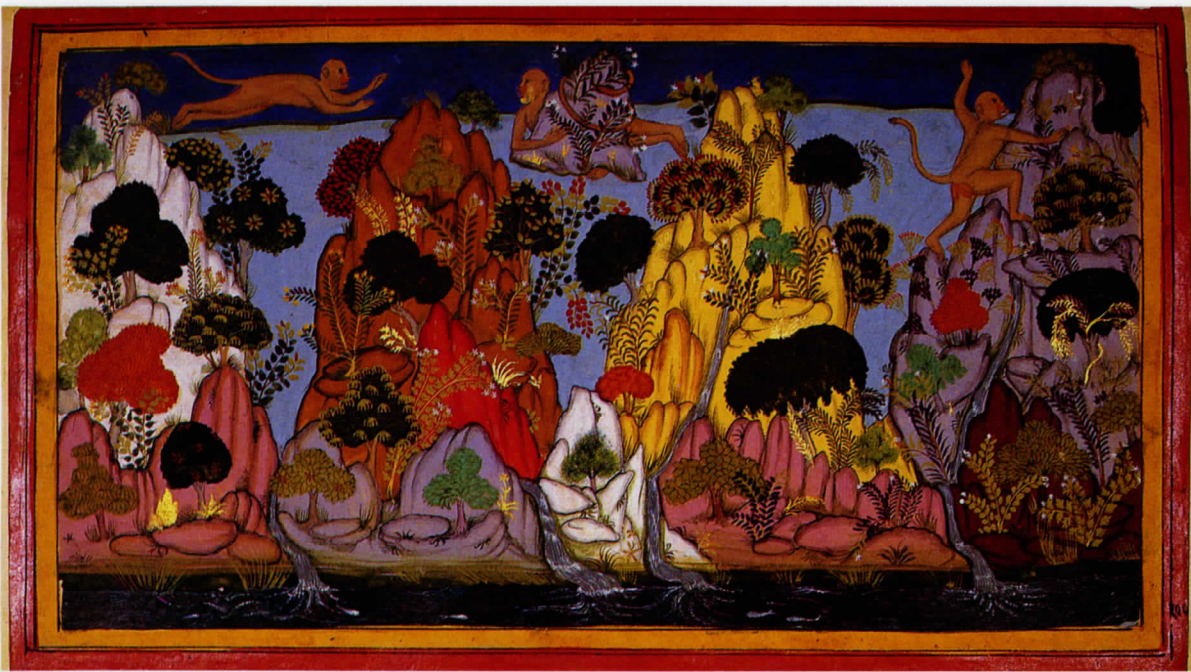
6. Grief and resolution among the demons. Add. 15297(I), folio 89r.



7. Indrajit's magic weapons. Add. 15297(I), folio 98r.

Pictures 27 to 29 then deal with the preliminaries of sending Kumbhakarna into battle, while the four chapters covering Kumbhakarna's entry into battle and the battle itself have ten paintings (30 to 39). With his arms severed by Rama's arrows, picture 39, folio 87r (figure 5), then his legs, and finally his head, the giant crashes to the ground. To accommodate Kumbhakarna's head crushing part of the city of Lanka in its fall, Sahib Din moves a building from Lanka so as not to destroy the symmetrical inevitability of his composition. The monkeys' exaltation and Vibhisana's grief for his brother are well contrasted.

One of the most moving aspects of Sahib Din's treatment of the *Yuddhakanda* is the way in which, faithfully interpreting Valmiki, he humanizes demons. Even demons have emotions which Valmiki always brings to the fore, and Sahib Din is able to convey these feelings in an utterly natural way especially in their grief for Kumbhakarna. The battle may ultimately be one between good and evil, but to treat evil as always demonical would be to trivialize it. By affording the demons natural



8. Hanuman fetches the herbs. Add. 15297(I), folio 100r.



9. Ravana prepares for battle. Add. 15297(I), folio 138r.

feelings unleashed by the events around them, both Valmiki and Sahib Din make the struggle more credible and the final victory all the more noble. In picture 40, folio 89r (figure 6), Ravana is given the news of Kumbhakarna's death. Seated in his palace bowed down by grief, clearly conveyed by all his faces in profile⁸ and surrounded by his grief-stricken brothers and sons who remain with him, Ravana resolves to send out more of them in a magnificent cavalcade below the palace, with Sahib Din faithfully following Valmiki's description of their conveyance.

Indrajit's machinations and his flirtations with magical powers must have been another favourite episode in Mewar, for the next section of the *Yuddhakanda*, which covers twenty-two chapters (58 to 79) in the manuscript (including the battles with Kumbha, Nikumba, and Maharaksa while Indrajit is resting) includes another fifteen paintings (44 to 58). Sahib Din follows Valmiki in emphasizing Indrajit's magical preparations in the banyan grove, several times showing Indrajit depicted as a normal man crouched by a sacred fire with the black buck or kid which is part of his sacrifice



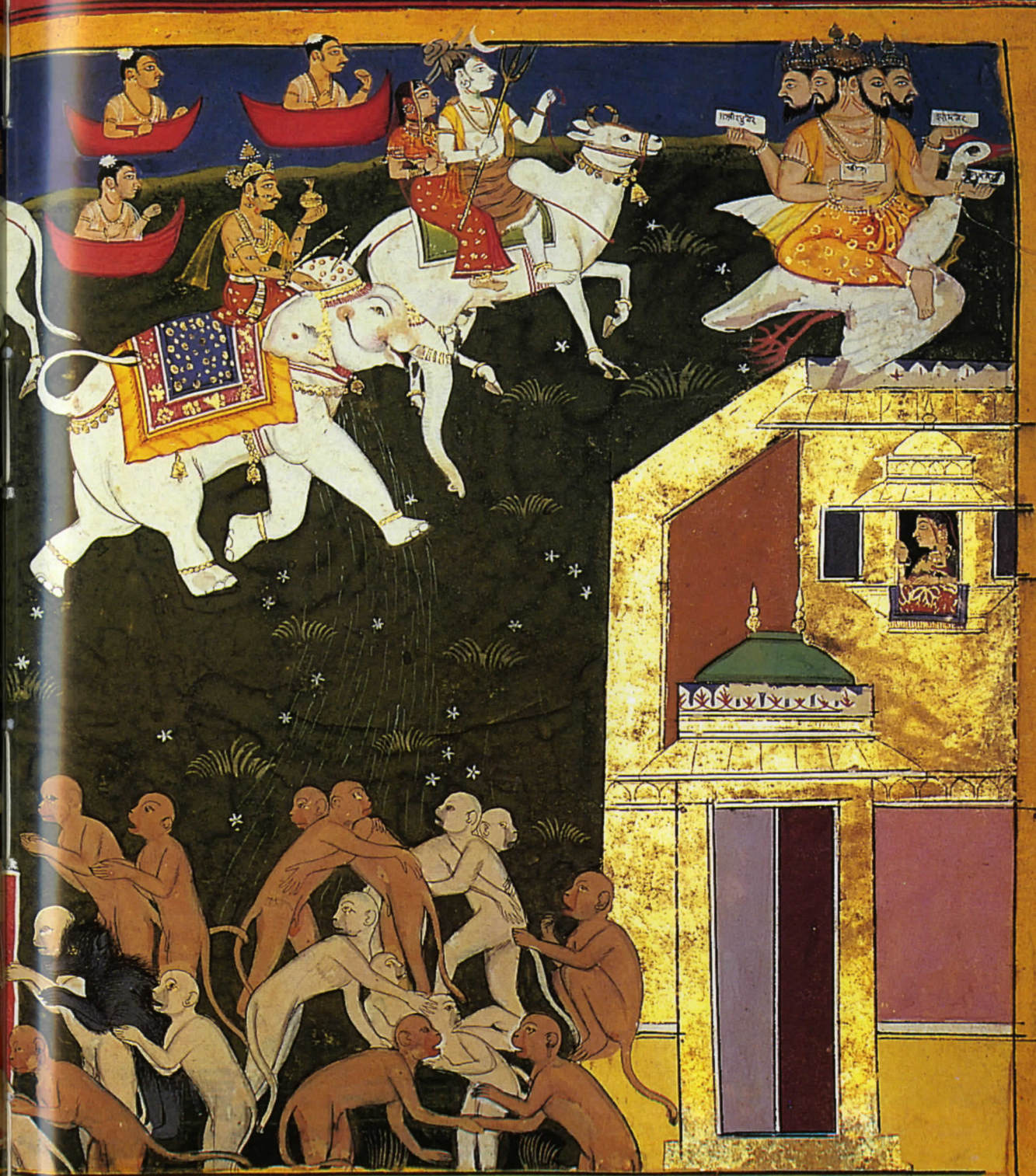
10. Ravana at the *jharoka* (detail). Add. 15297(I), folio 155r.



11. The battle between Rama and Ravana. Add. 15297(I), folio 162r.



12. Lamentations of Ravana's wives (detail). Add. 15297(0), folio 173r.



to Agni (the god of fire) to achieve invisibility. With this long sequence the substance of every two chapters can be compressed into one painting, or again with favourite episodes there can be two paintings for each chapter. Here the invisible Indrajit so showers the allies' army with arrows that all including Rama and Laksmana are overwhelmed. Hanuman thereafter assumes his true enormous shape and springs to the Himalayas for the life-giving herbs. Picture 45, folio 98r (figure 7), shows the allies riddled with arrows aimed by Indrajit, both from his chariot and invisibly (represented in a flying *vimana*). Rama and Laksmana lie entranced, and Vibhisana and Hanuman ask Jambavan what to do; it is Jambavan's advice that Hanuman should fly to the Himalayas for life-giving herbs, and Hanuman accordingly grows gigantic before departing.

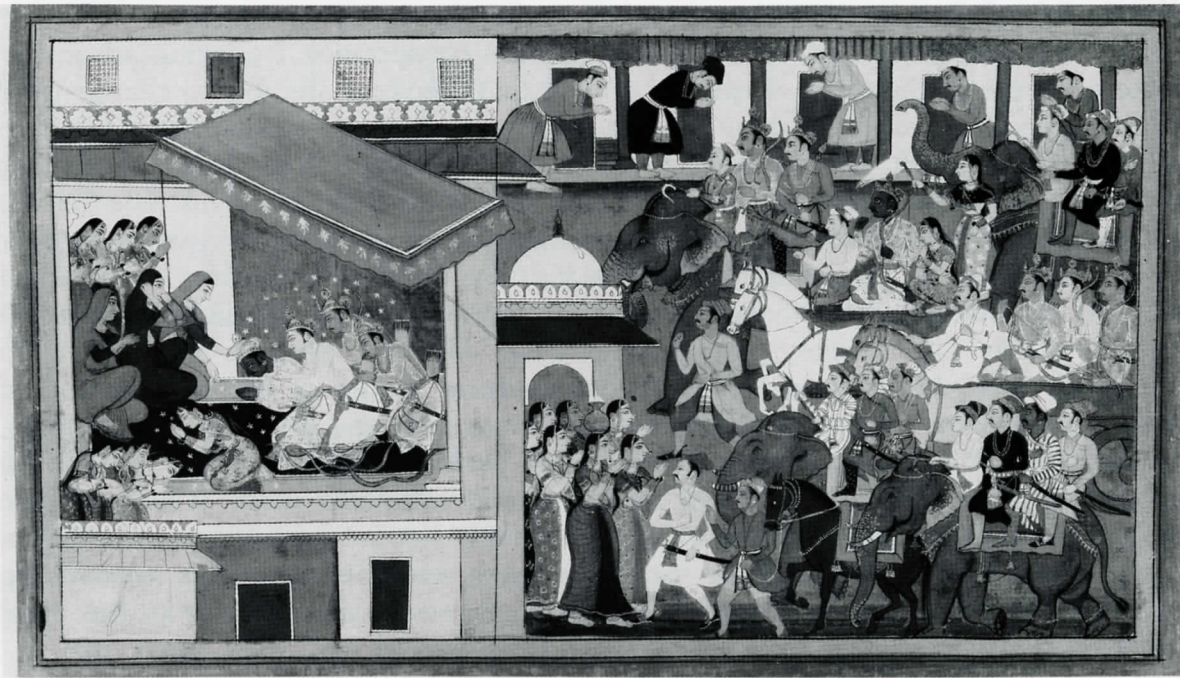
In picture 46, folio 100r (figure 8), Hanuman has reached the Himalayas, but not knowing which herbs he needs, he wrenches off the entire mountain peak and returns with it. This magical landscape is one of Sahib Din's loveliest paintings. As so often, one is impressed by Sahib Din's grasp of the need for continuation, to link his paintings together without the need for text by selection of the key elements in the story. Having shown Hanuman grow enormous in the previous painting, his size compared with the mountain peaks now comes as no surprise.

With his emotions stimulated by the *rasas* (sentiments) which both Valmiki and Sahib Din have laid before him—*vira* (heroic), *adbhuta* (wondrous), *raudra* (fierce) and *bibhatsa* (odious) *rasas* being the most prominent—the viewer now reaches the climax of the book, the cosmic battle between Ravana and Rama and his allies, which is handled in chapters 80 to 101 of the manuscript text and paintings 59 to 75 or seventeen paintings to twenty-two chapters. Picture 63, folio 138r (figure 9), shows us, the morning after the destruction of most of the remainder of his army, Ravana taking a bath within red *qanats* (tent hangings) and then emerging resplendent in golden armour to mount his chariot with the full panoply of regal and brahminical ceremonial. Red *qanats* were, of course, the prerogative of the Mughal emperors in India, although Mewar *ranas* (rulers) had used them ever since capturing some of Babur's in 1527. This is one of several small but surely significant details in the *Yuddhakanda* which suggest that Sahib Din is making political points, linking Ravana explicitly with the Mughals.

Picture 70, folio 155r (figure 10), which also illustrates this theme, shows Hanuman returning the peak to the Himalayas, while on the right Ravana from a window in his palace is directing some of his more demonic followers to stop him. They are clearly unsuccessful, but what is of particular interest about this picture is the way Ravana appears at his *jharoka*, like Jahangir or Shah Jahan, while the demons below acknowledge the order and salute in a manner characteristic of the Mughal courtiers in such a position.

As the climax approaches, Rama is brought the chariot, arms and armour of the god Indra by the latter's charioteer Matali (the text speaks only of Indra's arms), to counteract some of the terrible weapons unleashed by Ravana. In picture 73, folio 162r (figure 11), Matali drives Rama and Laksmana into battle beneath the solar pennant of Mewar. For this final confrontation, Sahib Din has cleared the myriad struggling figures of earlier battle scenes in favour of a grand simplicity of construction — Rama and the forces of goodness on the left, Ravana and those of evil on the right.

The final sequences of the *Yuddhakanda* include some of Sahib Din's most moving paintings. Picture 76, folio 173r (figure 12), shows Rama on the left issuing instructions for Ravana's funeral, with the preparations for it taking place above, while on the right Ravana's wives are grouped in mourning around his corpse. Their hand and body movements, and the unbinding of the tresses of Mandodari, her back to us, fully express the grief which they feel. Picture 79, folio 182r (figure 13), the vindication of Sita by the gods, is another triumph of organization, again a single painting containing the contents of five chapters. The gods come down and vindicate Sita, and Agni restores her to Rama. Dasaratha returns and takes Rama on his lap, and at Rama's request Indra restores the dead monkeys to life — they rise wildly exultant from the



14. The exiles return to Ayodhya. Add. 15297(I), folio 202r.



15. Dressing for the consecration. Add. 15297(I), folio 200r.

earth, and a shower of nectar falls on them from Indra as he returns to the heavens with the other gods. The Puspaka chariot is brought out to convey the exiles back to Ayodhya, and from now the directional tendency of Rama and his friends is from right to left. In pictorial terms the ending is a triumph, for Sahib Din picks his elements from a series of rather confused chapters to heighten the pictorial and dramatic impact of the story. In particular, the exiles meet Kausalya and the widows of Dasaratha not in the grove outside Ayodhya where Valmiki notes this meeting first occurred, but at the last possible moment, just before the consecration of Rama as king, and the culmination of the directional imperative from right to left which has been operative for the previous seven pictures. Picture 88, folio 202r (figure 14), shows us the procession journeying to the palace through the bazaar which is full of bowing shopkeepers, the brothers now in separate vehicles. They are met at the gates of the palace by ladies and inside they bow before all three of Dasaratha's widows at the

extreme left of the painting. Their exile over, they have arrived home.

Sahib Din has heightened the dignity of Rama's consecration by taking advantage of the reference in the text towards the end — that monkeys are able to change their form at will — and showing them all in human form as Rajput princes from the time the Puspaka has left the monkey kingdom of Kiskindha. Thus Rama sends out Hanuman in human guise to tell first Guha and then Bharata of his safe return, following which he and his brothers are accompanied by none but princes along their way to the palace. In preparing for this final journey, he and his brothers are depicted by Sahib Din being bathed, shaved, and robed with much tying of cummerbunds and turbans, while the monkeys in human guise likewise prepare themselves in picture 86, folio 200r (figure 15). In the penultimate scenes of the consecration of Rama, and of Rama and Sita enthroned giving away gold and jewels to their helpers, Hanuman is still in human form to receive Sita's necklace. Sahib Din has brought the pictorial narrative from the heights of the heroic and wonderful *rasas* which resonate through the previous pages down to scenes of fairly normal occurrences in a Rajput palace. These final moments of the story thus much resemble the events surrounding a normal change of rule in Udaipur, linking Rama ever more firmly with the royal house of Mewar.

NOTES

1. For detailed bibliographic notes on each of these volumes, see the present writer's *The Art of the Book in India* (London, 1982), pp. 124-130.
2. For some discussion of his other work, see Losty, *The Art of the Book*, and Andrew Topsfield, "Sahibdin's *Gita Govinda* Illustrations," *Chhavi* 2, ed. A. Krishna (Benares, 1981), pp. 231-238.
3. See the various references to the two between 1614 and 1622 in Jahangir's memoirs: *The Memoirs of Jahangir*, trans. A. Rogers, ed. H. Beveridge (London, 1909).
4. Manohar's only signed work is the *Balakanda* of this *Ramayana* under discussion (see Moti Chandra "Paintings from an Illustrated Version of the Ramayana painted at Udaipur in AD 1649," *Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India*, no. 5, [1955], pp. 33-49), but his influence is paramount in the work of other artists, such as the anonymous artists who painted the *Aranyakanda* and *Uttarakanda* of this *Ramayana*, and other series such as the "Gem Palace" *Ragamala*. The Bundi influence appears in Mewar in such paintings as the equestrian portrait of a Raja (perhaps Jagat Singh himself) in Melbourne, see Topsfield, *Paintings from Rajasthan* (Melbourne, 1980), no. 49. The figures of the attendants concur closely with those in Manohar's *Balakanda* in Bombay, or in the *Aranyakanda* in Udaipur (see Losty, *The Art of the Book in India*, pp. 125 and 127).
5. The style of the *Kiskindhakanda* and *Sundarakanda* of the *Ramayana*, a dispersed *Gitagovinda*, etc. The Deccani influence was brought back to Udaipur by Sesodiya nobles serving in the Mughal armies of the Deccan. See Losty, "Aurangabad or Mewar? The influence of the Deccan on Rana Jagat Singh's Ramayana of 1649-53," *Karl Khandalavala Felicitation Volume*, ed. B.N. Goswamy, forthcoming; and Andrew Topsfield, "A dispersed Gita Govinda series in the Mewar-Deccani style," *Makaranda: Essays in Honour of Dr. James C. Harle*, ed. Claudine Bautze-Picron (Delhi, 1990), pp. 215-226.
6. As in Abul Hasan's two famous paintings of Jahangir shooting at the head of Malik Ambar, in Dublin, and of him pushing Shah Abbas into the Mediterranean in Washington, DC, often reproduced as in the present writer's "Abu'l Hasan," *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1991), pp. 69-86.
7. The recension of the *Yuddhakanda* followed in this manuscript begins with the sending out of spies by Ravana, after Rama and his monkey allies have reached Lanka, and contains one hundred and twenty-three chapters. All references to chapters within this paper refer to the text as presented in the manuscript under discussion, not to any printed edition.
8. Sahib Din always draws Ravana's ten heads in two rows, as compared with Manohar's single row. Interestingly, Manohar follows the iconography used in Akbar's *Ramayana*.

FIGURE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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