

Miller Valmiki

THE LEGEND OF RAMA
ARTISTIC VISIONS

Edited by Vidya Dehejia

Marg Publications

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THE UNIVERSE OF RAMA VALMIKI'S EPIC POEM

BARBARA STOLER MILLER

The *Ramayana* is neither one story nor one text—it is an epic universe that has deeply influenced the religious and cultural life of India and South-East Asia for thousands of years. It has been told, retold, and transmitted in poetry, prose, folk song, and learned commentary for millennia.¹ It has been illustrated throughout India in various media—stone, wood, paint, palm-leaf, and clay.

More recently, beginning in January 1987, Indian national television, Doordarshan, broadcast a serialized version of the *Ramayana*. Ramanand Sagar's video film was based largely on Tulsidas's Hindi rendering of the Rama epic, with elements freely drawn from Tamil, Bengali, and other regional versions, as well as from the Sanskrit *Valmiki-Ramayana*. Sagar's idea of compressing the vast epic into dramatic episodes was not entirely new—through the ages local performers and travelling acting troupes have brought the story alive for audiences in villages and towns. But this was the first time a single version of the entire epic reached a mass audience.

In its ancient Sanskrit and regional versions, the *Ramayana* shares some features with the other great Indian poem, the *Mahabharata*, but their place within wider Indian culture differs significantly. Neither easily fits within the Western "epic" genre but in view of the work's heroic language, action, characters, and scale, the label "epic" has comparative value. The Sanskrit terms used to define them reflect the distinct place that each poem has within Hindu culture. The *Mahabharata* is called *itihasa* or "history" (literally "thus it was said"). The *Ramayana* is called *kavya* or "poetry", a term first used in the *Rig Veda* to refer to the inspired hymns of the Vedic poets. A poem of family loyalties, adventure, love, loss, and mythic renewal, the piety of the *Ramayana* is in marked contrast to the brutality and moral ambiguities of the *Mahabharata*.

The title *Valmiki-Ramayana* is used to distinguish the ancient Sanskrit epic poem, traditionally attributed to the authorship of Valmiki, from versions of the Rama story in other Indian languages.² The style and language of Valmiki's epic show a uniformity of composition, characterized by elaborate descriptions and an abundant use of poetic ornamentation. Within Indian literary tradition, Valmiki's work is considered the "original poem" (*adi kavya*), whereas the *Mahabharata* is called the "encyclopedia of knowledge" (*jnana kosa*).

In terms of the traditional Hindu authority of Valmiki, and his epic, it is important to understand how the bards constructed their origins and represented their own authority within the text, and what significance this has for its transmission. Since manuscript traditions can be traced no further back than the Gupta period and few records exist to document the historical reality of ancient poets, the legendary traditions of authorship and textual sources must be taken seriously. The process by which the *Ramayana* presents its author highlights the theoretical sophistication found in the poem itself. Valmiki has a particular status within the text and his presence

defines the imaginary universe he inhabits.

According to popular legend Valmiki is portrayed as a thief who became a sage by meditating on the word "death" (*mara*) until it became the name Rama (*ma-ra-ma-ra-ma-ra-ma-ra-ma-ra-ma*). By that time the sage was covered by an anthill (*valmika*), from which he emerged as Valmiki.

The text of the epic itself begins with a mythic dialogue between Valmiki and the divine sage Narada, who is a repository of Vedic wisdom. In answer to Valmiki's question as to who in the world was the perfect man, Narada outlined the story of Rama (figure 1), exiled by his father and whose wife Sita was abducted by the demon king Ravana.

Obsessed by the story, Valmiki went for a walk along the banks of the Tamasa River (which Rama with his wife and brother crossed when they went into exile) and saw a pair of mating cranes. The sonorous sound of mating cranes filled the forest, but an evil-minded hunter hiding in a blind shot the male of the pair even as Valmiki watched.

Seeing her mate's bloody body writhing on the ground where it was struck, the female crane gave a heartrending cry. When the seer, steeped in sacred law, saw the bird shot by the hunter, compassion welled up in him. From intensity of emotion he took the bird's part and perceived:

This act mocks sacred law....

Hearing the crane's crying mate, he chanted:

Hunter, year after endless year
you will not find a place to rest—
When these cranes mated, you murdered
the love-bewildered male.

While he was speaking, anxiety rose in his heart:

What is this I said, so pained by anguish for that bird?

With great insight he continued to ponder, mindful that he had made a design, then the sage spoke to his pupil:

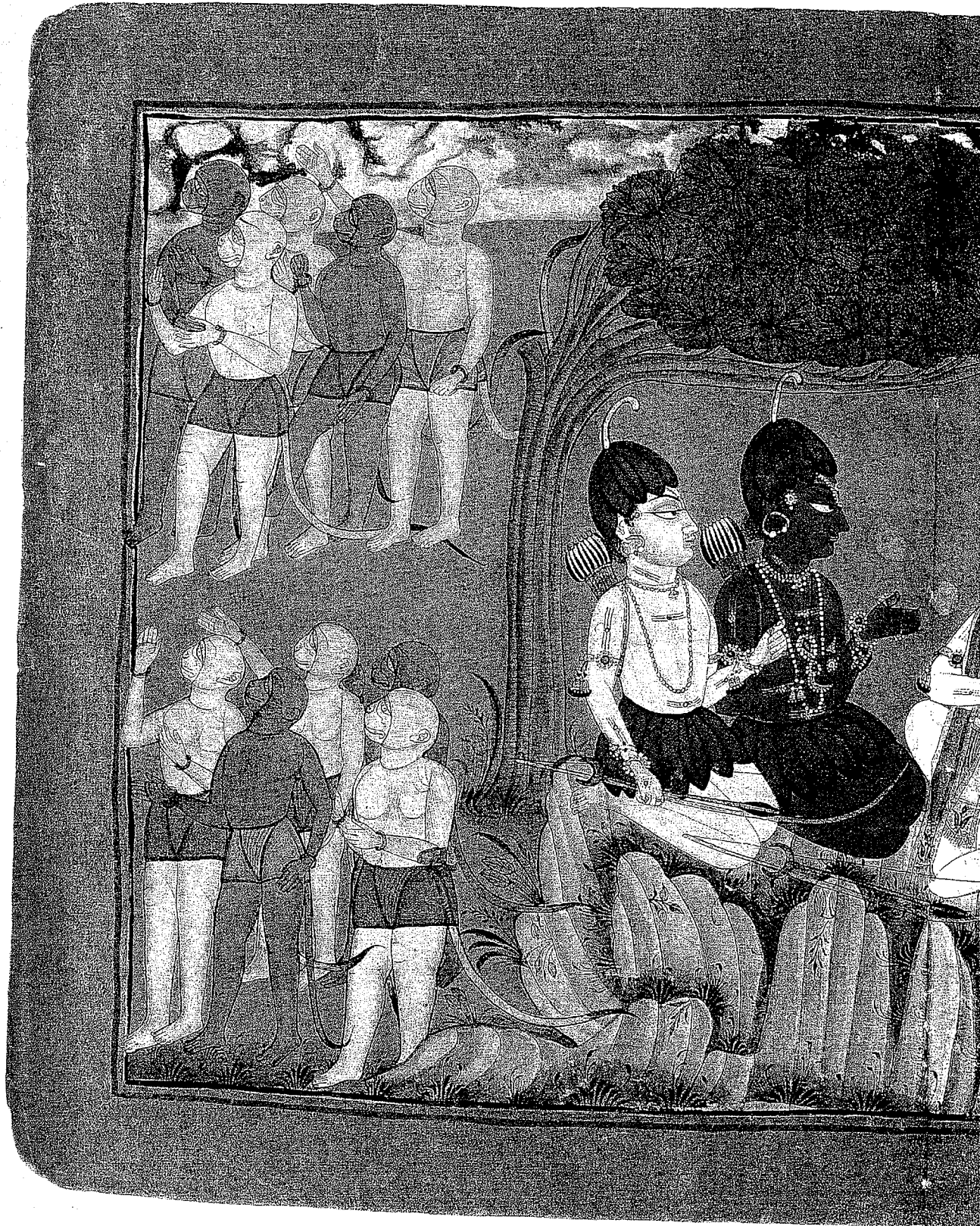
Divided into quarters of equal syllables
measured to the tempo of a lute,
lyric verse came forth from the pain of my anguish—
let verse so formed endure!³

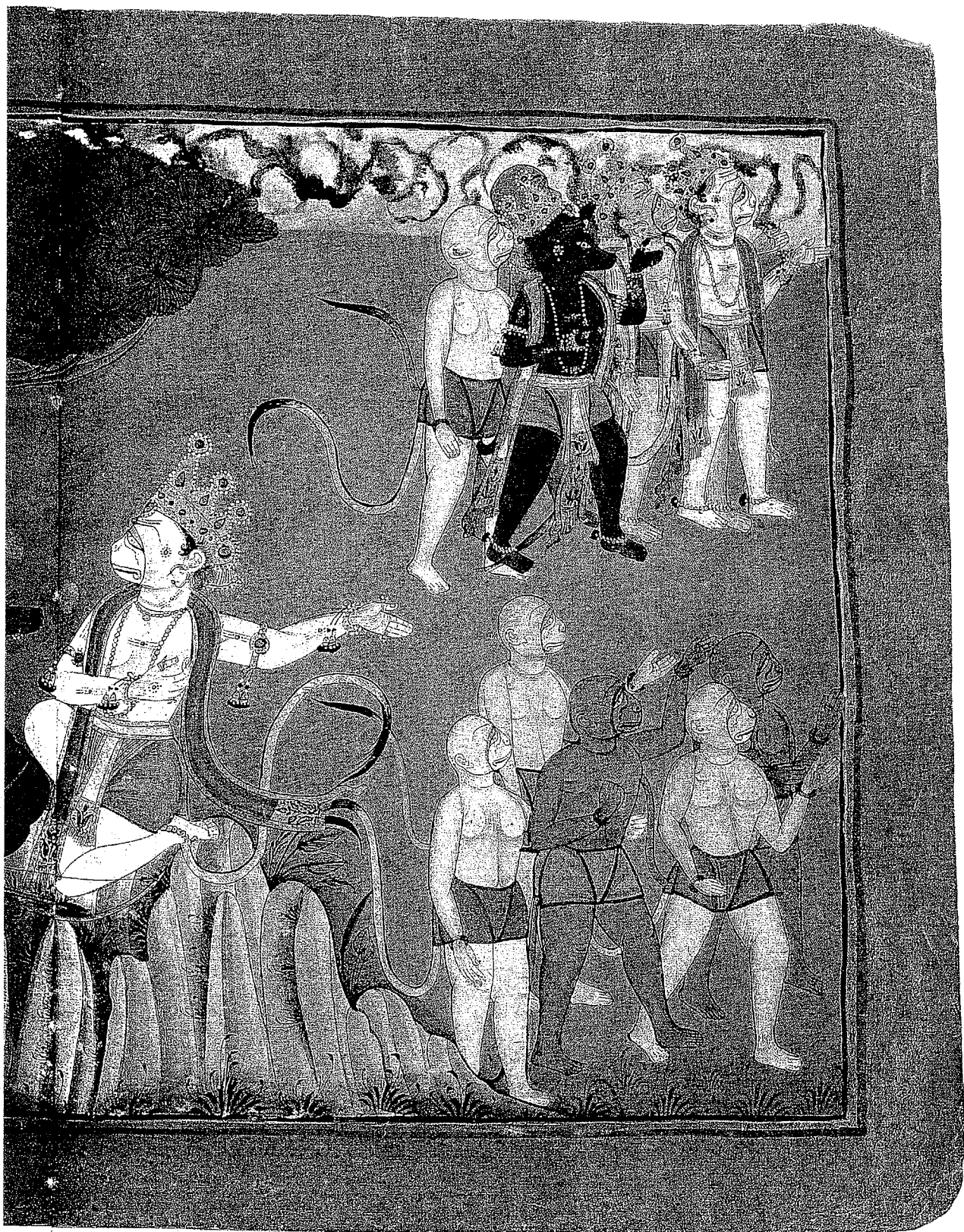
The sight of a female crane lamenting the death of her mate had aroused in Valmiki a sympathy for the long separation of Rama and Sita. Through divine inspiration, he transformed the ancient legend he learned from Narada into lyric narrative, and then the god Brahma appears to sanctify the poem. Like the seer-poets who composed the sacred Vedic hymns, Valmiki is characterized in the epic as having the special power to give form to his vision of eternal myth and legend.

The creation of lyric poetry from anguish is compressed in Sanskrit into a half-pun on anguish (*soka*) and lyric verse (*sloka*). The episode is not only the frame for the entire epic text, it is a parable of poetic inspiration and an epitome of the poem's pervading mood of compassion. The structural unity of the *Ramayana* is derived from the powerful emotional base of anguish, which recurs in many episodes with laments for dead or departed loved ones punctuating the narrative. Memorable among these are the lament of the people of Ayodhya for the exiled Rama (II.42), Bharata's lament for his dead father and exiled brother (II.68), Rama's lament and vow for Sita after Ravana abducts her (III.56-60), Tara's lament for her dead husband Vali (IV.20,23), Sita's suicide lament (V.26), and Mandodari's lament for the slain Ravana (VI.99). Most pitiful are the descriptions and laments of the anguished Dasaratha as he suffers the torture of exiling his son and chosen heir (II.10,37,53). Shortly before he dies, the king awakens from a troubled sleep to relate the story of how in his youth he accidentally shot and killed the ascetic son of blind parents who cursed him to die in grief of separation from his own son (II.57-58). The common denominator in all these episodes is death, which excludes the promise of reunion and which involves an emotional pain of exquisite power.



1. Rama (detail). Basohli. Circa 1730. Photograph: courtesy the Chandigarh Museum.





The mood of the epic is sustained by means of poetic ornamentation. In this, too, Valmiki both inherited an older poetic tradition and himself served as the model for later poets. In Vedic literature one finds figures of speech which serve as the basis for later poetic devices. Figures used to heighten the liturgical purpose of the Vedic poets are used in the *Valmiki-Ramayana* to stress the emotional content of the legend being retold. Foreshadowing the elegant digressions of later *kavyas*, Valmiki's formal embellishments are often embedded in descriptive passages which obstruct the action of the story and function to deepen the aesthetic mood. Descriptions of seasonal changes, mountains, and rivers, reflecting emotional states, have been exploited by centuries of Indian artists in their visual interpretations of the epic. One of the most elegant and moving is Rama's description of spring's sensuality, interwoven with his own painful separation from his brother Bharata and his abducted wife Sita (IV.1). The recurring words in the description are those of anguish (*soka*) and passion (*kama*, *manmatha*). The intensity of Rama's response to the beauty of spring (figure 2) is mingled with personal sorrow and desire.

Lush dark green fresh grass lies glowing
 under a cover of colourful flowers fallen from trees.
 Lakshmana, the spring that wild birds sing
 sparks smouldering anguish with Sita gone from me.
 My dark lotus-eyed soft-speaking love, Sita,
 is anguishing as I am at the mercy of another man now.
 This flower-bearing wind's soothing cool Himalayan touch
 is fire-like for me as I think of my love.⁴

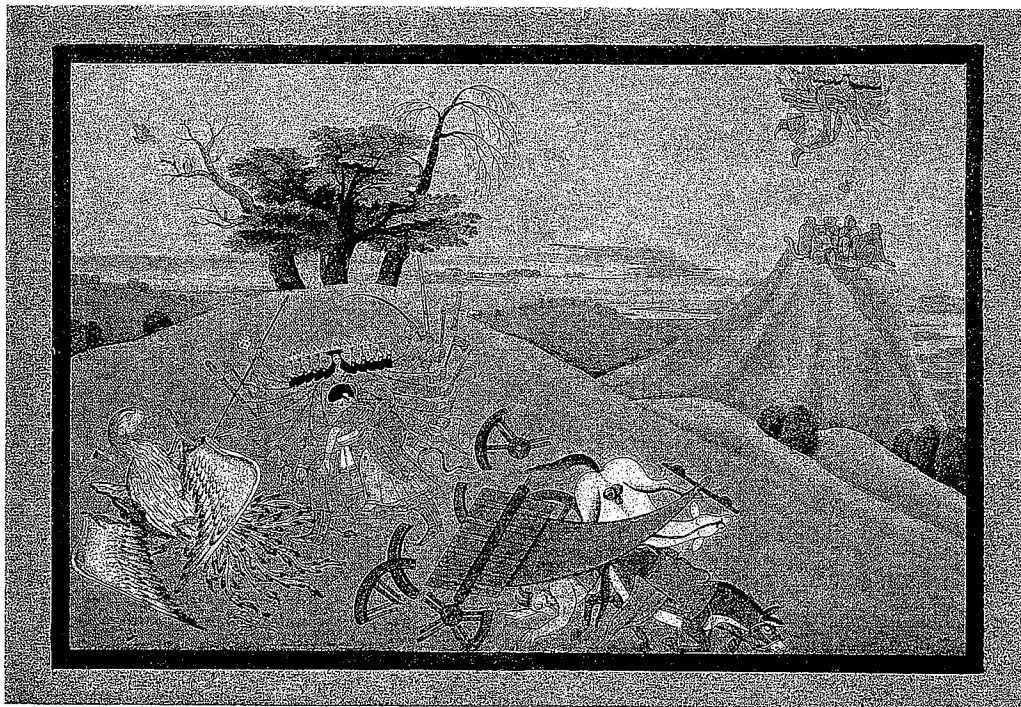
The two rhapsodists (*kusilavas*), Kusa and Lava (figure 3), who learn the poem from Valmiki in his hermitage in the forest and sing it before Rama, are literally the sons of Rama and Sita. Thus, Rama, whose story Valmiki heard from the gods, comes to hear about himself from his own two sons through Valmiki. The episode of Valmiki's inspiration is cited by Sanskrit poets and literary critics when they refer to him as the "original poet" (*adi kavi*). The earliest specific reference to this is found in Bhavabhuti's drama *Uttararamacarita*, which probably dates to the early eighth century. In the second act, the female ascetic Atreyi recounts the origin of the epic to a forest goddess and calls Valmiki the first poet. In the *Dhvanyaloka* of the ninth-century critic Anandavardhana, reference is also made to Valmiki as the first poet.

When early Sanskrit poets and critics like Bhavabhuti and Anandavardhana referred to the *Valmiki-Ramayana* as the *adi kavya*, they were indicating that it was the "original poem" in the sense that it was the inspired work to which they looked as the basic model for their own art.⁵ What profoundly affected the development of Indian literary values was the establishment in the poem of intense emotion as the basis of poetic expression. Such emotion was at the heart of the processes by which later Indian poetry came to be created and appreciated. Intense emotion involved an experience in which the lines between secular and religious poetry were blurred. When poets composing in regional languages took up the Rama story, they looked to Valmiki's epic version as the source from which they could recreate works of emotional and spiritual depth in distinctive local idioms.

In its extant form, the *Valmiki-Ramayana* consists of about twenty-four thousand verses. Despite the historical layers within its seven books, the text is remarkably homogeneous in style and structure. Its nucleus, which dates from 500-300 BC, was probably gathered in the Kosala region from oral traditions of Rama's heroic adventures. The power of the story made it available to reinterpretation in local traditions throughout India. In regional variations such as the Hindi *Ram-caritmanas*, the Tamil *Kamban Ramayana*, and the Bengali *Krittibas Ramayana*, the poem became the iconic text of devotional Hinduism and its eponymous hero Rama became the paradigmatic figure of moral authority. The different versions of the Rama story have functioned over time as sources of authority at various levels of Hindu society, each reflecting the religious and ideological context in which it was formed. In its South-East Asian versions, which are basic to the shadow-puppet theatre of



3. Forest dwelling of Valmiki, with Sita and her young twin sons (detail). Kangra School. *Circa* 1800. Photograph: courtesy the Brooklyn Museum.

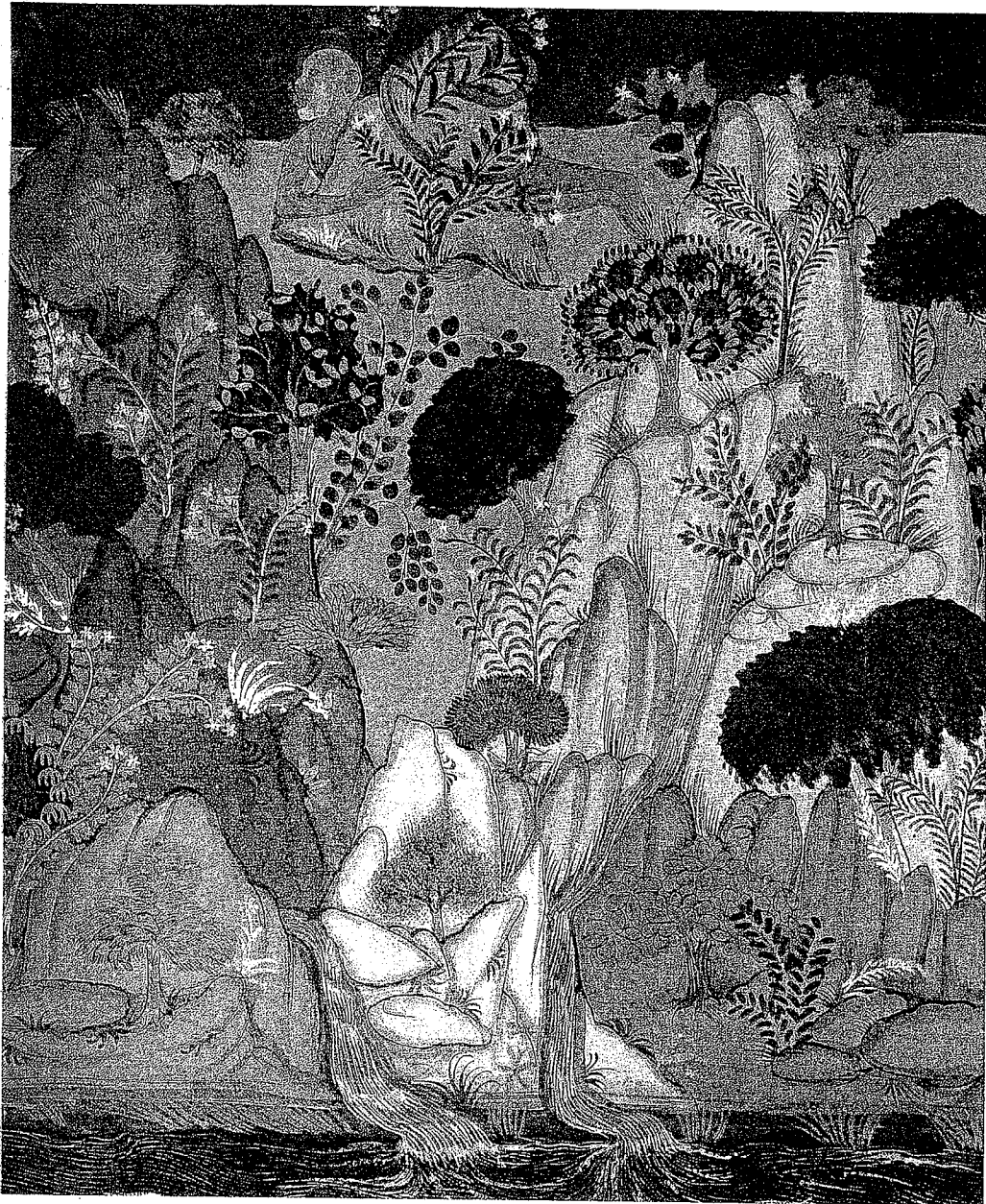


4. Ravana abducts Sita. Kangra. *Circa* 1775-1780. Photograph: courtesy the Brooklyn Museum.

Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the popularity of the epic story and its characters transcends religious bounds.

Within the narrative universe of the *Ramayana*, temporal and moral dimensions of heroic action are governed by distinctive conceptions of time and moral order. The narrative unfolds in terms of a grand model of time that represents cosmic history as cycles of four degenerating ages, named *krtayuga*, *tretayuga*, *dvaparayuga*, and *kaliyuga*, for different throws of dice used in gaming. On the level of individual time and history is the idea that all existence is made up of cycles of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsara*). The history of an individual or a lineage includes not only the events of the present life, but also actions buried in former lives which reveal themselves only to those of extraordinary wisdom.

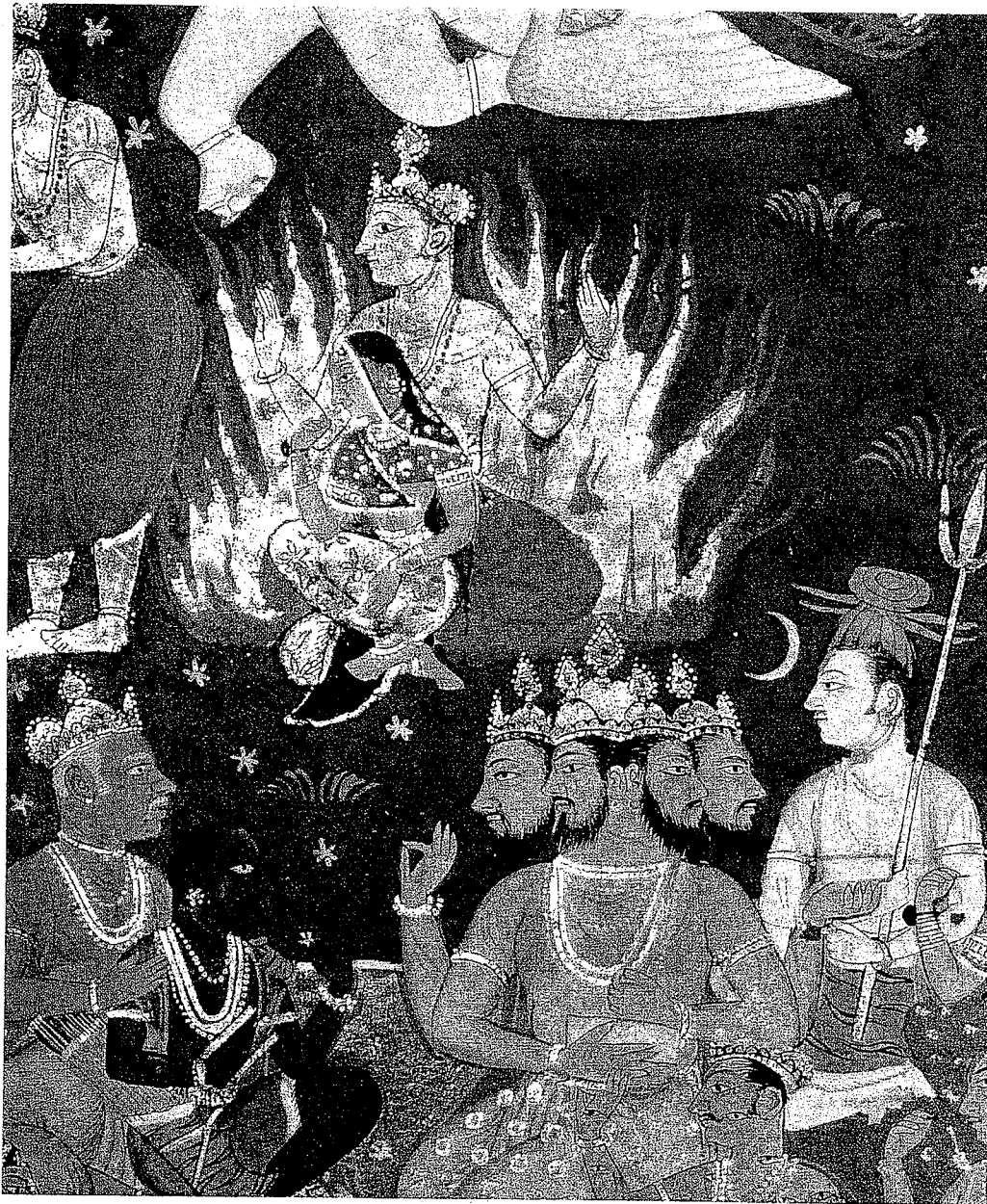
Like time, moral authority in the epic universe is effective on different levels. The basic idea of moral authority is contained in the concept of *dharmā*. *Dharma*, which literally means "that which sustains", generally refers to the order or law



5. Hanuman fetching the herbs (detail).

that sustains the cosmos, human society, and the individual. On the human scale, it is religiously ordained duty, represented through the actions of the epic heroes.

The hero of the *Ramayana*, Rama, considered an incarnation of the cosmic deity Vishnu, is the embodiment of *dharmā*. His heroism triumphs through self-sacrifice, devotion to paternal authority, and spiritual victory over evil. Sacred sites throughout India are associated with events in the epic and Hindu rulers through the centuries have constructed their moral authority with reference to Rama. Certain village Rajputs of north India define their past in epic terms.⁶ The kings of medieval Vijayanagara identified themselves with the divine king Rama. In Vijayanagara, the capital of the Hindu kingdom that controlled much of south India from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, the visual representation of Rama's mythology in architecture, sculpture, and urban design, served to reinforce the legitimacy of the king.



6. The vindication of Sita (detail).

The authority of the *Ramayana* lies embedded within the text of the *Valmiki-Ramayana* itself, which blends historical saga with fantastic nature mythology. The lineage of the royal house of Ayodhya and the adventures of Rama form the core of the epic, from books two to six. Books one and seven, generally agreed to be later additions, form a frame for the narrative portions. Their content transforms the epic into a sacred text glorifying Rama as an incarnation (avatar) of the god Vishnu. The story is introduced with the idea that Ravana, by his ascetic practices, obtained a boon of invulnerability to gods, demons, and demigods, but being arrogant ignored humans. His abuse of his status led the gods to ask Vishnu to incarnate himself as a man to destroy Ravana. So, as he had done at six other critical moments in the world's history, Vishnu descended to earth in the incarnate form of Rama to accomplish the task of restoring order by his actions in the world.

The narrative of book two, titled "Ayodhya", concentrates on events at the court

of Rama's father, Dasaratha, in Ayodhya. Dasaratha has four sons—Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana, and Satrughna—by his three wives. Rama is married to Sita, daughter of King Janaka of Videha, whom he wins by the trial of bending a magical bow. Rama is appointed heir apparent, but the intrigues of Queen Kaikeyi to place her son Bharata on the throne result in the exile of Rama with Sita and Lakshmana. Bharata succeeds to the throne, but agrees only to rule as regent for Rama until he returns from exile.

A very different set of ideas dominates books three to six, titled *Aranya* (the forest), *Kishkindha* (the kingdom of the monkeys), *Sundara* (the beautiful), and *Yuddha* (the war) *Kanda*. Here characters and events represent mythic types traceable to older Vedic and non-Vedic sources. The main narrative relates the wandering in the forest of Rama with Sita and Lakshmana, the abduction of Sita by the demon-king Ravana (figure 4), and Rama's campaign to recapture her, culminating in the attack on Ravana's fabulous island kingdom of Lanka. After various episodes in which Rama is in combat with the demons who infest Dandaka forest, Ravana vows revenge. He has Rama and Lakshmana lured away from their forest home by a golden deer of illusion and abducts Sita. In order to find her, Rama allies himself with the monkey-chief Sugriva and his minister Hanuman (figure 5). They depose Sugriva's powerful brother Vali and prepare to invade Lanka. Meanwhile, Hanuman crosses over the ocean from the mainland to Lanka in a single bound to search for Sita.

Ready to harass the enemy,

Hanuman took the celestial bards' path
to trace Sita to the place where Ravana had abducted her.

Strong and bold, he bounded willfully
over hills of turquoise colored grass,
pretending it was water.

Gaining vision as he alarmed birds,
uprooted trees, and struck down wild animals,
he swelled to a lion's size.

He spied a plateau patterned with natural colors of ores
in white and black and lotus-flower hues
of dark blue and vivid red.

Its denizens were godlings in various guises
who changed form at will—
yakshas, kinnaras, gandharvas, and semidivine snakes.

Standing there on that high rocky plateau
crawling with serpents
the great monkey seemed like an elephant
standing in a lake.⁷

Once on Lanka, Hanuman shrinks back to his size to secretly enter the city, where he explores the mural-painted halls and chambers of Ravana's palace. Not finding Sita, he laments:

Maithili must be dead since my searching
reveals no sight of her.

A girl intent on keeping her virtue,
she must have been killed by the demon king,
killed by his vile act
when she remained firm in her noble duty.
Seeing the bizarre forms of his demonic queens,
deformed, weirdly colored,
their monstrous faces and long grotesque looks,
Janaka's daughter died of fear.

I spent my prowess without seeing Sita,
I wasted precious time with the monkeys—
I don't have the choice of rejoining Sugriva;
the monkey's rod is harsh and he is strong.

I have seen all of Ravana's private chambers and his women,
 but I haven't seen virtuous Sita—my effort frustrates me.
 What will the assembled monkeys say to me when I go back?
 "When you went there, hero, what did you do? Tell us that!"
 Without seeing Janaka's daughter, what will I say about her?
 They will surely condemn me to death for wasting the time.
 What will old Jambhavan say and what will Angada say to me—
 and the monkeys who accompanied me to the ocean shore?
 Daring is the root of success—daring its own high pleasure.
 I will search again wherever I failed to find her...
 Not even a crevice the size of a finger
 did the monkey ignore in Ravana's private chambers.
 Then he explored interiors of ramparts and chariot stalls,
 sacrificial altars, tombs, chasms, and tanks.
 Demonesses in various forms, deformed, misshapen,
 Hanuman saw there, but not Janaka's daughter.
 Choice women of celestial magicians, matchless in the world
 Hanuman saw there, but not the joyful wife of Rama.
 Serpent girls with exquisite limbs and full-moon faces
 Hanuman saw there, but not fine-waisted Sita.
 Virgin princesses forcibly abducted by the demon king
 Hanuman saw there, but not Janaka's joyful daughter.
 Not seeing her, seeing other exquisite women,
 great-armed Hanuman, son of the wind, sank into despair.
 Feeling the futility of the monkey-chief's efforts
 and his own leap over the ocean, he fell to brooding again.⁸

Finally, from the ramparts of the palace, where he sits in sorrow, Hanuman spies Sita
 inside Ravana's pleasure grove, a prisoner despairing of Rama ever coming to save
 her, and subject to taunts from hideous demoness guards. He sees Ravana come to
 woo her with words of seduction:

Rama cannot claim you from my hand
 the way Hiranyakasipu reclaimed Fame from Indra's hand.
 I cherish your smiles, your teeth, your eyes, seductress—
 fearful Sita, take my heart like a hawk seizing a snake!
 Seeing you in tattered silk, frail, unadorned,
 I take no pleasure in my wives.
 Women of high perfection live inside my palace;
 hold supreme power over them, Janaki!
 My bowmen are peerless in three worlds, blackhaired Sita;
 they will honor you like nymphs serving the goddess Sri.
 In the realm of Kubera, fair-browed Sita, enjoy jewels
 and riches and worlds and me...
 Rama is not my equal in penance or strength
 or heroic act or wealth or glory or fame, goddess.
 Drink, revel, delight, enjoy pleasures!
 I will show you enormous wealth and fertile earth.
 Be as wild as you will to my wild loving!
 Let your relations rejoice in your loving me!
 Gold and pure pearls adorning your limbs,
 fearful Sita, roam with me in these groves
 on the shore of the sea,
 where thick flowering trees hum with bees.⁹

After observing Ravana's blandishments and Sita's scornful rejection, Hanuman
 reveals himself to her, consoles her, wreaks havoc in Lanka, and returns to report to
 Rama. The monkeys build a fabulous bridge and Hanuman carries Rama at the head
 of the army to attack Ravana's rich city. The demons are routed, Rama kills Ravana,

and liberates Sita. After Sita is made to prove her chastity by an ordeal by fire (figure 6), Rama returns with her and Lakshmana to Ayodhya.

The significance of this second part of the epic has been interpreted in allegorical and mythological terms. Allegorically, Rama's journey and victory over the demons is said to represent the spread of Aryan culture to south India and Sri Lanka; the idea is suggestive, but there is little textual evidence to support it. On the other side, most characters in the *Ramayana* represent basic types which recur throughout ancient myth and epic. For example, Rama's conflict with Ravana and other demons parallels the conflicts of heroic figures like Indra (the Vedic king of the gods), Gilgamesh, or Odysseus. He is the embodiment of order and duty (*dharmā*) in contrast to Ravana, who represents the chaos of evil passion. Sita, whose name means "furrow", is related to the prototype of prehistoric tree and fertility goddesses. Hanuman, the monkey who is the son of the wind-god, is the theriomorphic figure who embodies an abundance of shamanic power, combined with a spontaneous creative energy which Rama needs to accomplish the task of restoring order in the world.

In the final book, *Uttara Kanda*, public scandal concerning Sita's chastity during her captivity in Ravana's palace forces Rama to have her abandoned in the forest. She takes refuge in the hermitage of Valmiki on a bank of the Ganges and gives birth to twin sons there. It is from Valmiki that the twins learn the saga of Rama, which they later sing in their father's presence. On hearing the story, Rama begs Sita for forgiveness, but she invokes the earth from which she was born and it opens to receive her. When Sita returns to the earth from which she was born, the cycle of Rama's incarnation on earth effectively ends, but the epic account remains in Valmiki's version, to be carried down the ages.

NOTES

1. Paula Richman, ed., *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Stuart Blackwell et al., *Oral Epics in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
2. G.H. Bhatt and U.P. Shah, general eds., *The Valmiki-Ramayana: Critical Edition* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1960-1975); R.P. Goldman and Sheldon Pollock, trans., *The Ramayana*, Books 1-3 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984-1991).
3. *Valmiki-Ramayana*, "Balakanda," I.2.9-17; Barbara Stoler Miller, trans., "The Original Poem: Valmiki and Indian Literary Values," *Literature East and West*, vol. 17, nos. 2-4 (1973), pp. 163-173.
4. *Valmiki-Ramayana*, "Kishkindakanda," IV.1.5,12,22,23.
5. Miller, "The Original Poem."
6. Bernard S. Cohn, "The Pasts of an Indian Village," *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987).
7. *Valmiki-Ramayana*, "Sundarakanda," V.1.1-6.
8. *Valmiki-Ramayana*, "Sundarakanda," V.10.1-24.
9. *Valmiki-Ramayana*, "Sundarakanda," V.18.27-35.

FIGURE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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