

The Many Lilas of Rama



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The name 'Ram' rolls easily off the tongue, whichever corner of India you come from, whichever Indian language your mother taught you. Although Rama and Krishna are the best-known gods in human form in our mythology, Rama is recognised across swathes of Southeast Asia. I have watched Ramayana ballets on Bali island, wayang shadow puppet shows on Rama's life on Java island, and admired the Ramayana bas reliefs at Angkor Wat.

In December 1995, Cambodia marked the end of decades of war and destruction with an International Ramayana Festival at Angkor Wat. More than 300 dancers, musicians and puppeteers from across Asia gathered in the ancient temple complex to celebrate Rama's life. The Ramakien (Glory of Rama) is Thailand's official epic. It was retrieved from the ruins of Ayutthaya on the Chao Phraya river and restored with royal patronage. Although Thailand is a Buddhist nation, the Ramayana still exerts much influence on its art and culture.

Both Rama and Krishna were blue-blooded and lived, loved and fought in locations we can still identify in our modern geography. Their parentages, their families and playmates, their allies and foes, are familiar to even the unlettered among us.

But unlike the supreme Hindu triumvirate of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, who descended to Earth occa-

sionally to fix the cosmic order (and who are enshrined at Prambanan near Yogyakarta in Indonesia), Rama lived a human existence we can easily comprehend in its trials, tribulations and outcomes.

Like millions of my compatriots, I have been touched by the story of the handsome young warrior prince, banished to 14 years of exile in the forests by an avaricious stepmother. His wife Sita is abducted; he and his brother Lakshmana battle adversities; the prince fights and kills the demon ruler Ravana of Lanka; his wife is freed from captivity; and the noble victors with their loyal followers return triumphantly to reclaim the throne of Ayodhya. Rama's reign — Rama Rajya — is happy, prosperous and virtuous.

Like it has been told and retold over the centuries, this tale etched itself in my imagination through oral tradition — the 56 songs of the Geet Ramayan, the Marathi ballad written by G D Madgulkar and first sung by Sudhir Phadke over All India Radio in 1955-56.



Ram Rajya 3.0: Still from 'Sita Sings the Blues', dir. Nina Paley, 2008

But the ballad itself is based on the maha-kavya, or great poem, composed by the sage Valmiki about 2,500 years ago. This is where it gets interesting. The Valmiki Ramayana has been adapted and retold over the centuries, for instance, by Tulsidas, Kalidasa and Kamban. The most recent interpretation is Bibek Debroy's 2018 three-volume translation. Valmiki's poetry focused entirely on Rama. However beautiful the 25,000 shlokas, or stanzas (and they can be enjoyed only in their original Sanskrit), the written version itself took shape centuries after Valmiki's composition was transmitted through generations of balladeers. The latter of the seven kandas, or cantos, may themselves have been embellished by later storytellers.

What I find fascinating is Rama's personality: well-intentioned, principled and yet gullible. He is revered as the 'Maryada Purushottama', the ultimate exemplar of virtue and respect, a mortal who tried to adhere to dharma, or righteousness, whatever the price he had to pay. Here, too, scholars make clear we have Rama's story, an individual's life journey, warts and all. "On that exile to the forest, why did he take Sita and Lakshmana along with him? Was Shurpanakha's disfigurement warranted? Why did he unfairly kill Vali? Why did he make Sita go through tests of purity, not once, but twice? Why did he unfairly kill Shambuka? Why did he banish Lakshmana?" Debroy writes.

From my readings, it appears Valmiki's Ramayana itself was sung to Rama in his court by his twin sons Kusha and Lava, who were born and brought up at the sage's ashram during Sita's own banishment by her doubting husband. The tale goes that Rama did not recognise his sons. Was their recitation poetic justice?

In a thoughtful 2013 essay (bit.do/ffgdG), Devdutt Pattanaik analyses the Rama narrative. It creates the framework, he writes, "to explain key social concepts such as kinship, fidelity, property and self-image, which is why it is retold constantly, each retelling focusing on a particular theme or point of view".

British colonial translations of multilingual Rama stories into English, casting them in historical terms, upset Hindus who believed in their faith's timelessness. And then American scholars' secularisation of the Ramayana, stripping it of religious significance, viewing it in caste and gender terms, and presenting Rama as a "not quite ideal man or God..." This riled the nationalists and religious fundamentalists who saw such intellectual analyses as a violation of their sacred narratives, and an attempt to undermine all things Hindu."

For centuries, dozens of Hindu dynasties, like the Thai kings, adopted the Ramayana as their user manual or combination symbol-proxy-totem. Rama's deification began to formalise around 500 CE at the Vishnu shrine at Deogarh in Uttar Pradesh, which contains eight Ramayana panels. (Rama is considered one of Vishnu's avatars.) There was a burst of Rama temple construction over two centuries from around 1125 CE, when two temples were built in Raigarh district in Madhya Pradesh.

But it is the much-anticipated temple at Rama's putative birthplace in Ayodhya that preoccupies our politicians nine centuries later. The Supreme Court's verdict on the 2.77-acre piece of land will most likely be delivered next fortnight, just before Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi ends his term. Rama walked away from his whole kingdom. Which side will follow his example? Hey Ram!