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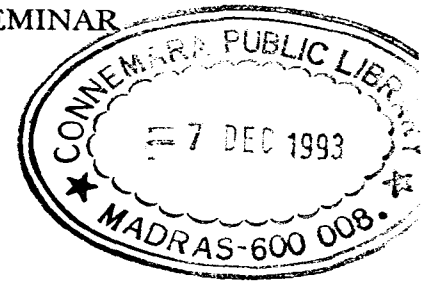
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RAMA - KATHA IN TRIBAL AND FOLK TRADITIONS OF INDIA

PROCEEDINGS OF A SEMINAR

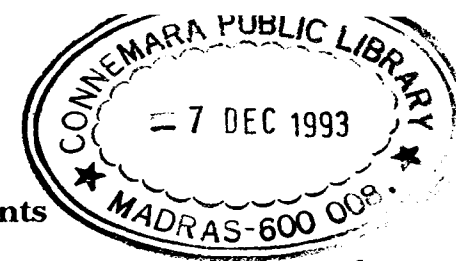


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BIRENDRANATH DATTA

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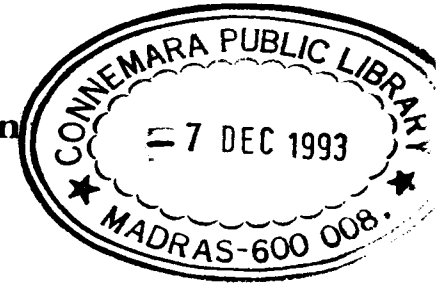
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Introduction

K. S. Singh



The tribal and folk versions of the two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and their anthropological interpretation has been a major focus of academic interest. The Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) collaborated with other institutions in generating such material and interpreting it. The Survey in collaboration with the Department of Folklore Research, Guwahati University, organized a symposium on Rama-katha in Tribal and Folk Traditions with Special Reference to the North-east, at Guwahati in February 1988. Three and a half years later, the Survey also collaborated with the Indian Institute of Advanced Study and the Himachal Academy of Art and Culture in organizing a workshop on Tribal and Folk Versions of the Mahabharata at Shimla in October 1991.

The Symposium on Rama-katha owes its immediate origin to a chance encounter at Kohima in December 1985 with Dr Birendranath Datta who had discovered the Mizo version of the Rama-katha. It had nothing to do with the popular Ramayana serials on Doordarshan. We have all shared a sense of curiosity and fascination at the way epic and *puranic* traditions have diffused throughout the country and have been readapted by communities everywhere. While there is a core story, there are also endless versions of it according to people's perceptions. This reflects the vibrancy and dynamism of what we call the Indian cultural system. On the one hand, there is the transmission of idioms, ideas and structures of what we call the pan-Indian system and, on the other hand, their readaptation and recreation in a local milieu in terms of its

ethos. These processes have been going on for centuries and have to be seen in their nascent forms in the north-east in order to understand how they probably once worked elsewhere in the country in the remote past and how they continue to work and be presented in contemporary art forms.

The epics, aptly described by Jawaharlal Nehru as the story of India, were not only religious texts but also historical documents, anthropological treatises. The Ramayana was religiously recited in our homes, or by an itinerant pandit in a village, and as children we were as excited by the deeds of its heroes as of heroes anywhere else. One of the reasons for the popularity of the Ramayana serials on television was not its appeal to fundamentalism, as some have put it, but the fact that it enabled most of us to relive our childhood. Yet another reason for the popularity of Rama-katha is that it deals with that profound human emotion, love. The Ramayana is a love story. It is the story of brotherly love, of love between father and son, of the love of a wife for a husband and of a husband for a wife, and of love among friends. Even at the most critical moments of their relationship, Sita speaks touchingly of Rama's love for her, and of there being no other woman in his life. Chakravarty Rajagopalachari, who may be described as a modern Valmiki because of his rendition of the Ramayana into English and because he did more than anyone else to popularize the work among the Indian elite, mentions an incident. Once, while discussing with Gandhi how love could develop between their daughter and son, sheltered and separated by distance, the Mahatma asked, 'Has she not read the Ramayana?'

As one interested in the secular aspects of the diffusion of epic traditions I could not but be impressed by the manner in which I saw them at work. When I started my career as a researcher about thirty years ago I saw the process of diffusion as a two-fold one in what we call a

culture contact situation. On the one hand I collected a number of songs on Rama-katha composed by tribal and non-tribal poets which seemed like verbatim translations of the story, rendered with passion and conviction. This also reflected the influence of the Oriya and Bengali versions of Rama-katha prevalent in the Hindi belt. On the other hand—and this is important—there were also songs which appeared older, more closely related to the tribal world view and their mores, which suggested that some aspects of Rama-katha had almost been internalized. In the course of researches subsequently conducted I came across various versions of Rama-katha among the Mundas, Gonds, Korkus, Kols, Savaras, Bondo and so on, which did not suggest the existence of any mini-Ramayana or mini-Rama-katha as such but represented an echo from the past, a stirring of tribal memory, of what they might have heard from their forefathers or of what they might have imbibed through the teachings of the mendicants called Gossains who travelled through their land. They also reflected a sense of awe and admiration for the heroes; and, sometimes, delight and fun at their presence in their homeland. There is even a streak of irreverence in the Rama-katha versions of some of the tribes who also identify themselves, without any inhibition and in a forthright manner, with what we might call the anti-heroes, such as Meghanada or Ravana.

We might recall at this stage the two major works which have influenced scholarship in the area. The first consists of the writings of Verrier Elwin in the area of what he always loved to describe as the aboriginal *purana*. He collected and wrote down the folklore, including the epic and *puranic* lore, in the tribal areas of middle India and the north-east. The other was a masterly survey of Rama-katha done by the distinguished Jesuit scholar Fr Camil Bulcke. Originally published as a Ph.D. dissertation, *Rama-katha* in Hindi went into two editions by 1972. It deals with the origin, evolution and spread of Rama-katha. Bulcke

collected various extant versions of Rama-katha within the country in Indo-Aryan, Dravidian and tribal languages; he also collected the Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain versions; he cast his net even wider to collect the central Asian versions which, again, were influenced by the accounts of traders and missionaries from various parts of India. The line of enquiry initiated by these masters is still continuing. Elwin could not complete his survey. Fr Bulcke used all the tribal material known till 1971 that he could lay his hands on, but he did not have access to all the sources which had become known till then. A great deal of material has become known since.

One of the objectives of the symposium was to carry forward the line of research initiated by the two masters and by many others who have worked in the area of folklore in India in an endeavour to explore the psyche of the tribal people. We tried to bring together scholars who have brought to light folk and tribal versions of Rama-katha and are actively engaged in presenting and interpreting them. Our efforts were also inspired by an urge to comprehend what is of vital importance, the processes of interaction and integration within the country. The Ramayana presented on the television may not be good history and may not be supported by archaeology, but it is good myth. And a myth is not without historical content, because it reflects a people's perception. It shows a whole pattern of relationships among communities (some of whom are our tribal people), interaction of regions and culture systems, norms of a lineage and family which became the norms of social behaviour.

It was only appropriate that the symposium should be held at Guwahati University in the Department of Folklore Research where pioneering work has been done in this field. It is through the efforts of the scholars here that we know today of the versions of Rama-katha and Mahabharata and *puranic* traditions of a number of tribes in the north-

east. This will help us understand the processes of interaction in one of the frontier areas of Indian history and culture.

Professor Iravati Karve produced an anthropological study of the Mahabharata entitled *Yuganta, the End of an Epoch* in which she tried to relate various events to the norms and customs of the people then living. She came to the conclusion that the Mahabharata war was fought because Bhishma remained unmarried! There are possibilities of a similar anthropological study of the Ramayana, the versions of which are somewhat more dispersed than those of the Mahabharata, both as a tradition and a folk art form. One of the enterprising anthropologists who studied Rama-katha identified Hanumana and other *vanaras* with the homonoids, forgetting that this species had become extinct long before Rama ruled. One necessary step in producing a comprehensive scientific work of this nature is the collection of various versions of Rama-katha ranging beyond what Elwin or Bulcke had attempted.

The symposium and its deliberations should pave the way for an anthropological study of Rama-katha. A major focus of discussions was the Rama-katha versions among various communities in the north-east. There were also attempts to identify folk elements in Valmiki's *Ramayana* with the folk material in popular versions of Andhra, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Tripura and so on. What made the symposium memorable for us was the performance of Rama-katha troupes from various parts of Assam, ably compered by our host, Dr Datta, to reinforce the message of the symposium that Rama-katha is a continuing tradition, lively and popular as ever, especially in parts of the north-east.

This volume consists of a selection of the papers presented at the seminar, some of them, which have overlapping

subject areas, being merged to avoid repetition. The papers are being presented in two parts, a large section of them relating to the north-east and the rest ranging over the rest of the country.

Vyas presents a general account of the version of the Rama-katha prevalent among the tribes of Rajasthan and the Nimad region of Madhya Pradesh. Sita was born in a year of drought, a victim of drought like any other tribal child. The golden deer was to be killed for its flesh, a typical tribal need, at the behest of Sita.

Mishra's study of the Ramayana traditions mainly deals with the versions available in Chhatisgarh and western Orissa (or South Kosala), particularly among the Bondo, Baiga, Gaur etc. The Rama-katha traditions have been 'localized' here. To invoke rains in a dry year, Rishyashringa Yajna is performed.

T. B. Naik presents, among other things, a detailed account of the Bhilodi Ramayana of the Bhils and the version of the Birhor, a hunting and food gathering community of Bihar. The Birhor are the only Bihar tribe to have such a detailed account. Rama's fourteen-year exile in the forest—where he lived like one of them—appears to have struck a sympathetic chord. It was Rama who conferred upon the Birhors their occupation of trapping and approved their eating monkeys and baboons.

Singh draws mainly on his Munda material, and discusses briefly the diffusion, readaptation and recreation of Rama-katha traditions among other communities, such as the Austro-Asiatic-language-speaking communities. Probably the most satisfactory explanation of the term Sita is provided by the Munda and cognate groups. Sita was found under the plough. She was a tribal girl, grazing goats, who was whisked away by Ravana.

Upadhyaya deals with those features of Rama-katha in Avadhi and Bhojpuri folksongs which are different from the classical traditions. Of particular interest is the

institution of *kohbar* in this region, mediated by women, which introduces a bridal couple to the norms of marital sexuality. The image of Sita in most of these folk and tribal traditions is not one of a meek, self-effacing wife, but of a strong, courageous and self-respecting woman who turns down Rama's plea that she return to Ayodhya. Folk sympathies are clearly with Sita in her grief and misfortune.

The Telugu version of Ramayana stories, presented by Rama Raju, contains elaborate accounts of various episodes in terms of folk perceptions.

Venugopal presents an overview of Ramayana episodes current in south Indian folk literature covering all the four languages, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada. The myth about the squirrel is possibly the bridge between the southern and northern folk regions. Sita is a devi who has not even been touched by Ravana. Rama is god incarnate who can do no wrong. The story of Mahiravana is unique to these regional versions. Sita's relationship with Ravana is dealt with in many folk versions which, however, generally give her a clean chit. The Tamil version about Sita drawing the portrait of Ravana who begins pestering her is the same as the Mizo version.

The second half of the book deals with the folk and tribal versions of the Rama-katha in the north-east. There are as many as five papers on the versions current in Assam alone. While the classical narrative account of Valmiki is adopted by Assam's poets, they also make use of local traditions and regional beliefs in elaborating and developing the Ramayana themes. Most of these accounts centre around the Vaishnava tradition.

Satyendra Nath Sarma tells us generally about the various folk versions of Rama-katha in Assam. Birendranath Datta presents an overview of the Rama-katha traditions in Assam in literary traditions and in performing arts and he also deals together with other scholars with the Rama-katha traditions current among the tribes. It is evident that the

Rama-katha has been a powerful element in the Vaishnava tradition (Mahanta). The poetic work composed by Durgavar, called *Durgavari Giti-Ramayana*, popularized the episodes of Rama among the rural people (Das). The episodes also inspired *ojapali* which is one of the ancient traditional art forms of Assam (Goswami).

There are as many as seven papers on the impact of the Rama-katha on the tribes in north-east India. Swami Bangobinda introduces the subject. Goswami takes up Rama-katha traditions among the Bodo Kachari of Nalbari district and discusses its impact on their myths, tales, beliefs and so on. Birendranath Datta presents an overview of Rama-katha traditions among the Karbis, Tiwas, Mizo, Mising, Khamti and that prevalent in Manipur. A number of scholars present the Rama-katha versions in Karbi folk traditions in considerable detail. The Karbi have a fairly elaborate version of the Rama-katha with strong ethnic peculiarities. Among the Tiwas or the Lalungs, the impact is not as pervasive, and is seen only in stray stories and tales. The Mizo version of the Ramayana has evidently been influenced by the South Asian versions which again are influenced by the versions carried by the immigrants from different parts of India. This was evidently an eastern and southern version. Ravana had seven or twelve heads. Lakshmana is the hero in such versions. The Mizo version gives prominence to Lakshmana and Hanumana. The Rama-katha is embedded in the tribal and folk traditions of Tripura, as described by Jagadis Ganchoudhuri. Finally, there is the Buddhist version of the Rama-katha in the Tai-phake cultural tradition in which Rama is described as a Bodhisattva. He seeks pardon from Sita who returns to live happily with Rama and their children till the end of their life. This version is unique in that it has a happy ending, unlike all the other versions.

The material has been extensively revised and edited. Dr Birendranath Datta was one of the two sponsors of the

seminar and but for his co-operation and tireless efforts, the material would not have been generated. Therefore his contribution is acknowledged by associating him as co-editor. Ms Anjum Katyal of Seagull Books was responsible for turning this diverse collection of papers into a very interesting and solid compilation covering all parts of the country.

I hope the proceedings of the symposium and papers presented will help us in understanding the process of cultural formation in the north-east and the country as a whole, and I feel that it will be of great interest to both the lay reader and the specialist.