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Rama and the bards: Narrative technique in the *Ramayanas*

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For the past two thousand years *The Ramayana* has been among the most important literary and oral texts of South Asia. This epic poem provides insights into many aspects of Indian culture and continues to influence the politics, religion and art of modern India. It tells the story of Rama, the crown prince of ancient Ayodhya, and an earthly incarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu. The heroic deeds of Rama have been a source of inspiration to poets for centuries. Among the numerous versions, the three most popular ones are by Valmiki (original author, 500 B.C.) in Sanskrit, by Kamban in Tamil (9th Century A.D), and by Tulsidas in Hindi (16th Century A.D). Universally acclaimed and accepted as the 'adi kavi' (first poet) among Sanskrit poets, Valmiki is credited with discovering a metrical expression containing such dimensions, visions and ideas that his verses remain unparalleled to this date. Valmiki's *Ramayana* in classical Sanskrit consists of 24,000 verses and is divided into seven sections. Kavi Kamban was born in the culturally rich Tanjavur district in the modern state of Tamil Nadu, India. His version of *The Ramayana* in Tamil called '*Ramavataram*' is an epic of 10,000 verses of 4-lines each. *Kamba Ramayana* is not a translated version of the Sanskrit epic by Valmiki, but an original retelling of the story of Rama, as the incarnation of Lord Tirumal (Vishnu). His poetry, which includes brilliant use of rhyme and simile, earned him the title — Kavichakravarti (emperor among poets). Tulsidas, a great scholar, was well versed in Vedic lore, philosophy and mythology. His *Ramcharitmanas* in Hindi, widely popular in northern part of India, lays a strong emphasis on Rama as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

This paper would analyse the narrative techniques and socio-political ideologies employed by the two latter poets (Kamban and Tulsidas) with an in-depth study of a particular canto, the *Ayodhya Canto*. The *Ayodhya Canto*, the most dramatic chapter in the Rama legend, deals with the story of Rama's exile from Ayodhya. It also narrates the filial anguish of Rama's stepbrother Bharata due to his mother Kaikeyi's deceitful act. Through these two versions of the *Ayodhya Canto*, this paper would underscore the **narrative function** of rhyme schemes, metrical patterns, metaphors and similes, incorporation of local legends and the reception of ideas from other texts.

The paper would also explore how deeply influenced by the sentiment of *Bhakti*, the medieval *Ramayanas* transform Rama from the chivalrous warrior and paragon of (patriarchal) familial virtues (as depicted in Valmiki's *Ramayana*) into the human manifestation of all-powerful God. The difference between Valmiki and either Kamban or Tulsi is that, with the later poets, Rama is God at every turn. But in Valmiki, though Rama is undoubtedly recognized as an incarnation of Vishnu, yet the treatment of character and incident, on the whole, is that of a devout and valiant

prince. By the time Kamban and Tulsi came to sing *The Ramayana*, Rama had already been completely deified for generations with temples and rituals dedicated to His worship as an *Avatar*. Thus, it would have been wholly artificial for Kamban or Tulsi to portray Rama as was done by Valmiki.

The Ramayana is the epic of fidelity to truth and the human world appears in it as the symbolic reflection of a divine order to which all other values are subordinate. Both in terms of the 'time-series' and 'spatial locus', the 'quality of **dharma**' in the legend of Rama has a mass appeal. To be and to act according to present situation is 'dharma' or 'religion'. And the supreme dharma is **word** given to one. And by remaining faithful to this dharma, man contributes in some unknown mysterious way to the maintenance of the cosmic order. Like most of the ancient epics, the Indian epic, too, attaches to this uttered word a **power**. What *The Ramayana* insists on is not that Rama is faithful to his word, but that he is bound by it. If he were untrue, then the three cosmic worlds would be untrue.

This paper would show how the theme of the '**power of the word**' is omnipresent in *The Ramayana*. In fact, it is so central that it provides a completely unified understanding of the whole epic. In the regional renditions, the power of the word is accentuated by the courtly deceptions in Kamban's time and the overwhelming feeling of 'bhakti' or personal devotion to a godhead in Tulsi.

Being the point of intersection between 'tradition' and 'convention', the legend of Rama also designates the traditionally conventional 'common stock'. The repertoire of the Rama tradition is public property. Consequently, its ready availability ensures a transparency of meaning. And hence rendering obscurity to this **topos**, translating a public metaphor into a private metaphor, constitutes a major literary challenge. This paper would focus on such rendition of the topos that, ironically enough, leads the way to the reckoning of 'originality' in Kamban or Tulsi.

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