

Rāmāyaṇa in the North-East India

নামসিতাশ্রুতজিহ্বাসিয়াভ্রুৎ ॥ পহিবলকষিদেবেধবিক্রম
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Edited by
Sujit K. Ghosh

RĀMĀYAṆA

IN

THE NORTH-EAST INDIA

Proceedings of the National Seminar organised by
Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Samiti, Silchar

Edited by
Sujit K. Ghosh



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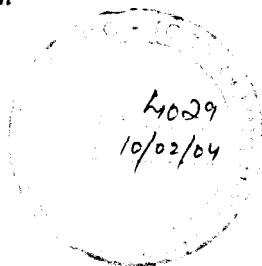


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Rāmakathā Tradition in North-East India – An Introduction

In the preface to his play *Raktakarabi*, Tagore teasingly accuses Ādi Kavi Vālmiki for stealing his story. He maintains that the Ādi Kavi stole his story beforehand by means of his intuitive imagination, for there are thousands of evidences to suggest that Swarṇalaṅkā is a thing precisely of our times. Making a contemporary claim to *Rāmakathā*, Tagore discovers his creative affinity with Vālmiki in recreating *Rāmakathā* appropriate to our times. For him, *Rāmāyaṇa* is not a story of the conflict between good and evil, but between materialism and its opposite. Sītā is portrayed in the play as *Bhumikanyā*, a daughter of the earth who challenges Rāvaṇa and his materialism. The conflict gets resolved in the triumph of the values of an agrarian civilization over an industrial one through Sītā's integrity and moral protest. *Rāmakathā* over the centuries, has been rendered in different ways in order to highlight different aspects of our moral, social and cultural values. In E.V. Ramaswami's re-rendering of *Rāmakathā*, one understands the politicisation of the Aryan and Dravidian cultural conflict. In his interpretation, Rāvaṇa is seen as a paragon of Dravidian values. Besides these renderings, *Rāmakathā* has been part of popular culture and represented through puppet dances of Kerala, *Rāmlīlas* of Varanasi and Balinese dance-dramas. To cap it all we have recently Rāmānanda Sāgar's television version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. All these different presentations of *Rāmāyaṇa* prove the fact that the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been part of a diversity that has been part of a living tradition.

Broadly speaking, there are three formations in the *Rāmāyaṇa* : the Rākṣasas, the Bānaras and of course, Rāma and his followers. These three formations represent three different cultures with their own civilizational values. Closely examined, *Rāmāyaṇa* is not a religious text, it has a multiplicity of purpose and meaning, yet it is spell-binding in its simplicity, serenity and sublimity. Might be because of its complexity and simplicity, it has been adopted across cultures world-wide without the help of the sword. For its 'thick descriptions' it has been able to meet the demands of each culture where it is adopted.

Apart from the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain versions of this master text we have different culture specific renditions of *Rāmakathā* like the Thai, Korean or Burmese *Rāmāyaṇas*. It has been transported and transplanted into various languages and cultures of the world. Travel of *Rāmāyaṇa* to countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia and other eastern and far eastern countries in Asia has been of immense historical and cultural significance. The *Rāmāyaṇas* available in these countries differ significantly from the original Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, the basic story line is kept intact. Even if there is dilution of the original story, the character of Rāma stands out as virtuous, righteous and noble. Irrespective of cultural and racial differences, Rāma's story has been accepted by Mons, Khmers, Khotanese, and Mongolians who rewrote the story to suit to their own social and cultural milieu.

It is allegedly believed that except Assam the rest of North-East has little or no contact with the mainland, therefore, to talk about the influence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* on the culture and people of this region is to beat around the bush. It has been a fact that the North-East India has come under the sway of *Rāmāyaṇa* at some period of time. Some argue, might be the Rāma story had travelled to this part from another direction that was from Thailand and Burma instead of moving from Indian mainland itself. This position may not be wholly true

because during the 12th and 13th centuries there were people devoted to spreading *Rāmā-kathā* all over the sub-continent. It is possible that these bards might have travelled into difficult areas of the North-East and spread the story of Rāma. However, there is a strong oral tradition about *Rāmakathā* in North-East. Although it has been institutionalized as has been in other countries and in many parts of India, nonetheless, it was of great influence on the lives of the people of this region. It is because of this in Mizo folk songs we have Rāma and Khenā (Lakṣmaṇa) described as gods :

You mother and father of paddy,
Your roots covered vast land,
.....
When mother nature modelled the world,
You were created by Khenā and Rawa
 To predict the truth
 You should predict the truth,
 You see the truth
And not forewarn deception.

We have a strong tradition of *Rāmakathās* among the tribal people of North-East India. Unfortunately, after the advent of Christianity this tradition, which was part and parcel of the socio-cultural ethos of indigenous people of the region, has been ignored or placed under deliberate amnesia. Among the many *Rāmakathās* *Chabin Alun*, the Karbi version and *Khenā Leh Ramate Unau Thawnthu*, the Mizo version prove this point beyond doubt. In Brahmaputra valley *Rāmakathā* appeared in various forms as presented by Madhav Kondoli, Sankardev, Madhavdev and Ananta Kondoli. The story of Rāma in North-East India developed in a way as to suit to the imagination and cultural ethos of the people of North-East India. There are important translations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo languages of North-East.

A two-day seminar during 30-31st August, 1998, was

organised at Silchar by the Bharatiya Itihasa Sankalana Samiti to examine and discuss various aspects of *Rāmakathā* tradition in North-East. Scholars from Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Assam and Meghalaya presented 20 papers in the seminar. These papers are highly illuminating in exploring the *Rāmakathā* tradition in North-East. Not to sound overtly academic, I am presenting these papers for the better judgement of the readers, for these papers speak for themselves about the *Rāmakathā* tradition in the North-East. If the book is well received, our efforts in the direction of rediscovering *Rāmakathā* tradition in the North-East will be most fruitful.

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Sujit K. Ghosh