



A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE RĀMĀYANA TRADITION OF ASSAM

(UPTO 1826 A.D.)

B. K. DEVA GOSWAMI

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A Critical Study of the Ramayana Tradition of Assam

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DEDICATION

*Dedicated to the sacred memory of
my father
Late Mahendra Narayan Deva Goswami.*

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FOREWORD

The tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is one of the important social phenomena, which has far reaching impact on both the life and the society of India. Of course, this impact, however is not limited only to India but is extended up to the Pan-Indian dimension. In the Assam context, the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition has been functioning as a perennial source of social functions on the cultural life of both the tribal and the non-tribal.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition may rightly be divided into two broad genres, viz., Oral tradition and Written tradition. Both these traditions are not independent, since they are interrelated and they may be co-existed and overlapped and inter-mingled. The Oral tradition may frequently enter into the domain of Written tradition and similarly the Written tradition can and frequently does enter into Oral tradition. There are other two relevant traditions, such as, the tradition of performing arts and the pictorial tradition. These two traditions may be attached to both the Oral and the Written tradition.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition of Assam may rightly be subdivided into these four dimensions. The Oral tradition is found in the forms of Oral songs, verbal prose narratives and proverbs and riddles. These are current both in the tribal and the non-tribal societies of Assam. The tribals of Assam are by and large appear to be rich in the context of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. The *Sābin Ālun*, which is enjoying the status of a long ballad or a folk epic, is an illustrious specimen of the Karbi version of the great *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. So long it was current in the Oral process, but now it takes the written form. In the same way, the Lālungs (i.e., Tiwas) an important tribe of Assam, have possessed the tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which is known as *Lik-Cāo-Lāmān*. Similarly, the Tai-Ahoms have a strong and long tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is termed as the *Cau-Lik-Lāmāng*. Furthermore, the Boros, the Rābhās and

the Dimācas are also well acquainted with the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

FOREWORD

The written tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Assam is equally rich and colourful as well as varied. This tradition may again be subdivided into a few sub-groups, e.g., version based on Vālmīki, version based on other than Vālmīki's work, prose version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, popular version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, dramatic representation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, devotional songs based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*-these and so on. Many performing art forms have emanated from the *Rāmāyaṇa* theme. The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition is also represented through the medium of sculpture and wood-carving as well as painting. Furthermore, puppets and masks are also still made depending on the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

Dr. Basanta Kumar Deva Goswami's book sheds much light on the multidimensional aspects of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition prevailing in Assam. Dr. Goswami's deliberation is elaborately planned and meticulously executed. Being a student of folklore Dr. Goswami has not ignored the folkloristic aspect of the topic. The author of the present book, presents a classified Bibliography of Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, English and Sanskrit books connected with the area of his study. The comprehensive Glossary and the significant Index add to the value of the book. The book should be use to students and researchers of both literature and culture. We may be thankful to Dr. B. K. Deva Goswami for his learned and notable scholarly achievement.

Let me congratulate the learned author as well as the generous publishers on this performance.

Gauhati University,
3rd August, 1994.

Nabin Chandra Sarma,
Reader,

Department of Folklore Research, G.U.

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At the very outset I express my heartfelt gratitude and indebtedness to my teacher Dr. Nabin Chandra Sarma, Reader, Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University for his repeated and valuable encouragement for doing research on the subject—'A Critical study of the *Rāmāyaṇa* Tradition of Assam (upto 1826 A.D.)'. The study was prepared and completed during 1985-87 under the supervision and guidance of Dr. Sarma and it was accepted for the Ph.D. Degree of the Gauhati University in 1987. I, further, offer my sincere regard to him for writing the foreword.

I shall remain grateful to Dr. Praphulladatta Goswami, retired Professor and Head, Department of Folklore Research and Dean of Faculty of Arts, Gauhati University ; Late Ācāryya Manoranjan Śāstrī, former Principal of Nalbari Sanskrit College, Nalbari ; Shri Jagannath Chakravorty, Principal, Nalbari College, Nalbari for the help, I have received from them in this academic indeavour while I was carrying on my research.

I acknowledge my gratefulness to the authorities of Gauhati University for permitting me to publish the thesis.

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Last but not least, I must offer my great sense of indebtedness to all authors from whom I have freely quoted, without whose learned experience the study would not have completed.

B. K. D. Goswami.

PREFACE

The present work is essentially a critical study of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition of Assam from fairly distant past till the historic yāndābu Treaty. Its object is to present a connected, well documented and systematic study of the four traditions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* current in Assam upto 1826 A.D.

It is observed that the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition has got wide footing in Assam long ago. Besides the non-tribal the tribal of Assam also have been influenced by it. Although no exact date of its entrance into Assam can be fixed, yet it can be assumed that due to the process of sanskritization the tradition has widely spread in this region. The vedic Aryans, in their migration from northern India to ancient prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa carried on this tradition heavily patronised by the local Hindu kings who were great lovers of learning.

The sporadic references to the Ramayanic Characters found in many of the ancient inscriptions of Assam including the Dubi copper plate of Bhāskaravarmā may prove that the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition received a definite shape in the early part of the seventh century A.D. This date may be earlier also because the traditional tales, ballads, epic-larys etc. based on the theme of the *Rāmāyaṇa* were current among the folk.

It is a common phenomenon that while oral tradition becomes the source of all traditions, so also the literary tradition may again turn into an oral tradition. As such different versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* current both in the tribal and non-tribal of Assam are not directly influenced by the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*. For example mention may be made of the *Sābin Ālun* and the *Lic-Cāo-Lāmān* of the tribals as well as the *Gīti-rāmāyaṇa*, the *Śrīrāmākīrtana*, the *Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Gaṇaka Caritra* etc. of the non-tribals in this regard.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* based audio-visual performing art forms are still continuing as the important factors of peoples amusement and ethical knowledge. They are some means to understand the socio-cultural and religious motifs of the Assamese society also. It is worth mentioning that music, dance and performing arts have a long antiquity in Assam since these are still associated with the temples and public fairs. It may be assumed that since music and dance are inseparable companions of the performing arts, so the drama is the youngest outcome amongst them. The Assamese drama like *Rāma Vijaya Nāṭa* attained maturity at the hands of Śaṅkaradeva. Most of the dramas composed during the Vaiṣṇavite era by the *Sat-trādhikāras* were based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition and these were treated as the means of entertainment to the masses with proselytising zeal. In some occasions dramas were found staged to honour distinguished guests also.

The written tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Assamese began as soon as Mādhava Kandalī rendered the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki into Assamese language in the early part of the fourteenth century A.D. His true successor was Ananta Kandalī in this regard. Similarly, both Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva respectively rendered the *uttarākāṇḍa* and *Ādikāṇḍa* into Assamese. In course of time, a good number of Assamese poets rendered different *Kāṇḍas* of the Original *Rāmāyaṇa* into Assamese. So also some poets made attempts to compose Ramayanic *Kāvya*s centring round the different myths and legends as well as tales based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

Assam has a long and strong tradition of songs both devotional and secular based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

The *Gītirāmāyaṇa* composed in the style of *rāga*-based songs mentions different names of *rāgas* and *rāginīs*. Many of the *Bargītas* and *Gītas* as well as *Vandanās* and other devotional songs composed by Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva, Śrīrām Ātā, Rāmānanda and other saint-poets of Assam are based on this tradition.

The pictorial tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* repletes with sculptures, wood carvings and manuscript paintings etc. may reinforce and supplement its literary tradition. Besides being the source of Assamese culture and civilization, the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition plays a vital role in respect of Socio-cultural unification among the different groups of this region. The study of this could fulfil fundamental human needs, restrict social evils, protest social injustices, reflect peoples' ethical and moral values, as well as help in bringing and understanding ones neighbour closer.

In preparing this edition, we have made an attempt to collect all informations about its multidimensional aspects from different sources and to collate and present them before the learned reader in a cogent manner.

In spite of our sincere efforts a few errors have crept into the body of the book for which I tender my apology.

With these prefatory words, I humbly present this work for its assessment by the learned, because as Kālidāsa says '*Santaḥ Parīkṣyānyatarat bhajante, mūḍhaḥ parapratyayaneya buddhiḥ*'.

Santipur,
Nalbari.
Janmāṣṭamī
29-8-94

B. K. D. Goswami.

SCHEME OF TRANSLITERATION

(The following scheme of transliteration has been applied to
sanskrit and Assamese languages.)

Vowels

अ a, आ ā, इ i, ई ī, उ u, ऊ ū,

ऋ ṛ, ए e, ऐ ai, ओ o, औ au

Consonants

क k, ख kh, ग g, घ gh, ङ ṅ,

च c, छ ch, ज j, झ jh, ञ ñ,

ट t, ठ th, ड d, ढ dh, ण ṇ,

त t, थ th, द d, ध dh, न n,

प p, फ ph, ब b, भ bh, म m.

य y, र r, ल l, व v

श ś, ष s, स ṣ, ह h,

Anusvāra ṅ ; ṁ ; visarga ḥ

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

(A) Importance and significance of the study :

The term 'tradition' has been derived from the Latin word *traditio* meaning handing down, handing over, delivery, surrender etc. The term tradition includes both the process and the product. According to Robert Redfield, "The word tradition connotes the act of handing down and what is handed down from one generation to another."¹ It is the cumulative heritage of society. Some one looks upon tradition as habits, customs, attitudes and ways of life. So we may say that tradition implies age and with it a fairly long period of continuity.

There are mainly two kinds of tradition. They are (a) Oral tradition and (b) Written tradition. Tradition that orally transmitted is called the Oral tradition. The tradition transmitted through written scriptures is called Written tradition. Both the Oral tradition and the Written tradition are inter-related, co-existed, overlapped and inter-mingled, since Written tradition builds up on the Oral tradition. The other two relevant traditions, the performing arts and the pictorial may be attached to both the Oral and the Written tradition. The pictorial is an established tradition based on written document mainly.

The tradition of the *Rāmāyana* must have been prevalent in India from times immemorial. According to Monier William "We cannot be far wrong in asserting that a great portion of the *Rāmāyana*, if not the entire *Rāmāyana* now before us must have been current in India as early as fifth century B.C."² M. Winternitz says: "There has been in India since the oldest time also historic songs which in course of centuries have been condensed into two great national Epics,

the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*.³ Scholars are practically unanimous in holding the view that the basis of the principal episode of the Rama-story was floating ballads. It was Valmiki who at first put into shape those floating ballads, which were lying scattered from the very ancient times in the mouth of bards, minstrels and singers and made it into a unified poem. Rightly does observe A. D. Pusalkar : "From the internal evidence in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is evident that the Rama-epic, before being reduced to writing, was in a ballad form, and was sung in assemblies. Its first recitation according to the *Rāmāyaṇa* was before the gathering of sages in the forest followed by one in the thorough fairs of Ayodhya and finally in the palace of Rama, at the conclusion of the horse sacrifice, before a distinguished gathering. When the *Rāmāyaṇa*, still in its floating stage of Oral transmission, passed into the hands of the *sūtas*, additional matter of diverse kinds came to be associated with it. Several factors conspired to augment Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* by these interpolations.⁴ So, it is clear that the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition began with the Oral tradition.

Although Madhava Kandali (14th century A.D.) successfully introduced the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition (i.e., written tradition) in Assam by translating the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Valmiki nevertheless the Oral tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was current in Assam prior to Madhava Kandali. This statement is testified by the *Rāmāyaṇa* based folk-songs, ballad, epic-lays, myths, legends, beliefs, *mantras* (charm), folk- tales, proverbs and riddles prevalent in this region. Of course, the version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Madhava Kandali as well as the Bengali version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Kṛttivāsa made impact on the folk-mind of Assam in the growth of the Oral tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* proper.

Like Madhava Kandali, Harivara Vipra, Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva, Ananta Kandali and other poets of early Assamese literature translated the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Valmiki partly or fully. They tried to introduce folk-elements in their versions to some extent. But poets like Durgāvara Kāyastha,

Ananta Ātā, Raghunātha Mahanta, Adbhut Ācārya, Gaṅgārām Dās, Bhavadeva Vipra, Dhanañjaya Kavi and others made fruitful attempts in bringing out folk-versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition not only made far-reaching impact on the periphery of Hinduism but also those outside the pale of Hinduism have come under its impact. As a result, we have come to across the Kārbi version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, i.e., *Sabin Ālun* and the *Khāmṭi* version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* i.e., *Lic-Cāo-Lāmān* or *Cāo-Ālām-Lāmān*. In the same way, the tradition of the seven headed Ravana is also current in Mizoram.

Besides the episodic narratives there are a large number of devotional plays dealing with the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. Devotional songs are also composed centring round the *Rāmāyaṇa* theme. Furthermore, many performing art forms have come into existence based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition has exercised far-reaching influence on the different strata of the North Eastern Region in general and the Assamese societies in particular. The *Rāmāyaṇa* has been serving as one of the strongest instruments of national cohesion and integration at different levels both directly and indirectly.

(B) Objectives of this study:

Due to advancement of modern education and rapid urbanization and other reasons, the Oral tradition is fast dying. Therefore, it is the necessity at the moment to study the Oral tradition as well as the Written tradition, so that the same may be of interest to people of later generations. Secondly, it is a sad fact that outside Assam very little is known about the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition of Assam. This is due to the fact that no systematic studies have been undertaken till now. Isolated studies on particular aspects of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition of Assam are available, but there was no connected study. The present study attempts to give for the first time a comprehensive and connected study of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

ya tradition prevalent in Assam. Attempt has been made to focus how far the *Rāmāyana* tradition in the Assam context is local or parochial and how it tends to receive universalization due to contact with Sanskritization.

(C) *Method of the study :*

The present study is mostly confined to relevant books, manuscripts and fieldworks. The relevant and contemporary works include Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, English and Sanskrit literatures. Our principal sources of information are different versions and texts of the *Rāmāyana*, biographies of mediaeval saints and chronicles written during the period. Notes and studies by subsequent scholars and writings of modern critics are also taken into consideration. Some Assamese version of the *Rāmāyana* are still in the manuscript form. These are being preserved in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, the Kāmarūpa Anusandhān Samiti, the Manuscripts Preservation Department of Gauhati University and the Kāmarūpa Sañjivani Sabhā, and the Pūrvabhāratī Museum, Nalbari. I have used all these manuscripts in this study. I have collected the available manuscripts of the different versions of the *Rāmāyana* from some generous persons also.

The fieldworks have included both observation and interviews. I have met the 'bearers' of the *Rāmāyana* based performing art forms, personally and have collected material either by questionnaire or by interviews throughout Assam. I have applied both the 'close-system' and the 'open-system' (Whenever necessary) in respect of fieldwork. I have made rapport with the local leaders of merit who have acquainted me with the folk of the different areas. Visits to important villages, *sattras* etc. planned considering the time of calendaric festivals observed there so that I could learn them directly and then from the informants. Repeated visits and night-halts made whenever it felt necessary for collecting field material. I have visited several *sattras*, e.g., *Āuniātī*, *Kamalābarī*, *Garmur*, *Dakṣiṇpāt*, *Khaṭarā*, *Devānanda*, *Kāljhār*,

Barpeṭā, *Īsvarahāṭī*, etc.; several temples, e.g., *Kāmākhyā*, *Belsor*, *Hayagrīva-Mādhava*, *Madanakāmadeva*, *Bālilecā* etc.; several places and institutions for collecting manuscripts containing arts and painting, icon, sculpture and wood-carving etc. I have attended various rituals, religious congregations, and public fairs where art forms of varied structure are performed associated with the *Rāmāyana* theme. In this connection I have made extensive visits in a number of places where the respective active bearers are inhabiting. These places are *Mājuli*, *Mohkholi* and *Mākhībāhā*, *Sipājhār*, *Duni*, *Baladevpārā*, *Kaihāṭī*, *Tupāpārā*, *Barnī*, *Sipājhār*, *Dipilā*, *Mangaldai*, *Roumārī*, *Jāgrā*, *Kokrājhār*, *Goālpārā*, *Bilāsi-pārā* and *Hājo*, besides *Bāgānpārā*, *Tupaliyā*, *Ulābari*, *Sib-sāgar*, *Tezpur*, *Golāghāt*, *Numaligarh* and so forth.

Furthermore the data on Oral tradition of the *Rāmāyana* and its values, attitude, beliefs, knowledge and superstitions and religion, etc. have been collected through informal and group interviews and in natural contexts as well as artificial contexts.

The audio-visual equipment such as tape-recorder and camera was also used whenever and whenever necessary.

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