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The story of *Rāma* is first told in the Sanskrit epic the *Rāmāyaṇa,* which is ascribed to Vālmīki. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is more than just one of the two great Sanskrit epics: it is a living tradition cherished at all levels of society throughout India and the whole of Southeast Asia, expressed in many languages and art forms – sophisticated Sanskrit literature, popular folk tales, sculpture and painting, drama, dance, puppets, and even a television soap opera. Its major figures have developed into figures of great religious significance not only in Hindu but also in Buddhist texts, and its hero *Rāma* is now worshipped as a deity by millions, either as the seventh *avatāra* of Viṣṇu or as the supreme deity himself. His name, *Rāma* in Sanskrit, becomes Rām in many modern Indian languages.

The Core Narrative

Although tradition has it that all seven books (*kāṇḍa*s) of the Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* were orally composed by a sage called Vālmīki, the version now extant was undoubtedly composed over many centuries between perhaps 500 BCE and 300 CE, during which period it was also committed to writing. Its core is contained in the second to sixth books, in which *Rāma* is presented primarily as a warrior hero of outstanding moral stature. As the story grew in popularity and Rāma’s character became steadily more elevated, the natural desire to fill out the story, already seen within the five core books, resulted in adding both a precursor and a sequel around them.

The story no doubt originally began with the court intrigues that open the second book, the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (Ayodhyā is the kingdom’s capital). King Daśaratha decides to install his oldest son *Rāma* as “young king” and co-ruler, but Rāma’s stepmother, Kaikeyī, contrives to have him supplanted by her son, Bharata, and banished to the forest for 14 years. Daśaratha feels forced to give in to her petulance in fulfillment of two boons he has previously granted her, but he dies of grief shortly after Rāma’s departure from Ayodhyā in the arms of Kausalyā, Rāma’s mother; as he dies, he recalls an episode of his youth when, hunting in the forest, he killed an ascetic boy by mistake and thus orphaned the boy’s helpless parents – he now sees his death in separation from *Rāma* as retribution for his sin. His distress is shared by the citizens but not by *Rāma* himself, whose reaction is not anger but calm acceptance of his father’s will – an impressive demonstration of filial obedience and of the calm self-control that regularly characterizes him. He even suggests sending messengers to recall Bharata, who is away from Ayodhyā on a visit and thus innocent and ignorant of his mother’s machinations; *Rāma* prepares for his departure with no protest whatsoever, accompanied at their own insistence by his wife Sītā and his brother Lakṣmaṇa, in similar displays of wifely devotion and brotherly affection. The trio make their way first to Mount Citrakūṭa, where they erect a hermitage. Meanwhile, Bharata, recalled to Ayodhyā, confounds his mother’s schemes by angrily rejecting the proffered kingdom and setting off to fetch *Rāma*, who greets Bharata warmly but insists on carrying out to the letter his father’s express wish. Eventually, Bharata returns, taking with him Rāma’s sandals as a symbol of his authority, and he administers the country as Rāma’s regent.

Book three, *Araṇyakāṇḍa* (Forest Book), narrates the exiles’ life amongst the friendly sages and the hostile *rākṣasa*s of the more remote Daṇḍaka Forest. Despite Rāma’s resolve to live like an ascetic, it is his role as the perfect warrior that now comes to the fore. The brothers have to rescue Sītā from the clutches of a *rākṣasa*, and *Rāma* fulfils his princely duty by offering protection when the sages extract a pledge from him to protect them against the depredations of the *rākṣasa*s. For ten years *Rāma* and his party wander among the sages,

visiting, among others, Agastya, who gives *Rāma* divine weapons and advises him to build a hermitage in nearby Pañcavaṭī; on the way there, they meet the vulture Jaṭāyus, who offers them his protection. While they are living here, the hideous but nonetheless amorous *rākṣasī* Śūrpaṇakhā makes advances on the brothers; infuriated by their disdain, she attacks Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa mutilates her as a punishment. After her brother Khara's troops fail to avenge her, Śūrpaṇakhā incites another brother, Rāvaṇa, king of Laṅkā, to take action, not so much by narrating her own woes as by extolling Sītā's beauty. He decides to abduct Sītā and secures the aid of the unwilling Mārīca, whose disguise as a golden deer and feigned call for help induce Sītā to send both brothers after it; Rāvaṇa, disguised as a mendicant, thus has no difficulty in seizing her. Jaṭāyus is fatally wounded when he intervenes, and Sītā is taken to Laṅkā, where, having vehemently rejected all Rāvaṇa's blandishments, she is confined in a grove of *aśoka* trees. *Rāma* and Lakṣmaṇa, in great distress, find the dying Jaṭāyus, who gasps that it is Rāvaṇa who has abducted Sītā before he expires, and they encounter the monster Kabandha, who advises them to ally themselves with the *vānara* (monkey) leader Sugrīva, who will help them to recover Sītā.

Book four, *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa,* concentrates on events relating to the *vānara* capital Kiṣkindhā. By Lake Pampā, the two princes are accosted by the exiled Sugrīva's minister, Hanumān, who takes them to his master. *Rāma* and Sugrīva make a solemn pledge of alliance. Sugrīva enlists Rāma's help in ousting his usurping brother Vālin, and he recounts the history of their quarrel. Encouraged by *Rāma*, Sugrīva challenges Vālin to single combat and, after killing Vālin with Rāma's covert assistance, is installed as king. Subsequently, a vast army of *vānara*s is mustered, divided into four, and sent off with instructions to search for Sītā in every direction. *Rāma* places most faith in the party led by Hanumān and the heir apparent, Aṅgada, and entrusts his ring to Hanumān as a token for Sītā. Eventually, Aṅgada and Hanumān's troops learn that Sītā is on the island of Laṅkā, and Hanumān resolves to leap over the sea to find her.

Book five, *Sundarakāṇḍa,* opens with a long account of Hanumān's fantastic leap and his wandering unnoticed through Laṅkā. Entering Rāvaṇa's magnificent palace, he searches in vain for Sītā, but eventually discovers her in the *aśoka* grove and overhears her rebuff to Rāvaṇa's entreaties and threats. Hanumān gently reveals himself to the incredulous Sītā and establishes his identity by producing Rāma's ring. Sītā refuses to escape with Hanumān, preferring to be liberated by *Rāma* in person, but in return she gives him a jewel as a token to take to *Rāma*. Hanumān then embarks on a course of ostentatious and wanton destruction and is captured by Indrajit, Rāvaṇa's son. The angry Rāvaṇa is dissuaded from killing Hanumān outright when Rāvaṇa's virtuous brother Vibhīṣaṇa's reminds him of the inviolability of envoys, so he merely sets fire to the *vānara*'s tail, but Hanumān uses it as a brand to complete the destruction of Laṅkā. Reassuring himself of Sītā's safety, he recrosses the sea and returns to Kiṣkindhā with news of the success of the mission.

Book six, *Yuddhakāṇḍa* (War Book), concerns the final battle between the armies of *Rāma* and Rāvaṇa. While *Rāma* and the *vānara*s march southwards, the *rākṣasa*s prepare for war, but Vibhīṣaṇa defects when his conciliatory advice is refused. After some debate, he is welcomed into Rāma's camp and consecrated king of Laṅkā. Nala's construction of a causeway enables Rāma's army to cross the sea. A long series of duels results in the eventual deaths of all the most fearsome *rākṣasa* warriors at the hands of *Rāma*, Lakṣmaṇa, and the *vānara* chiefs, even though Rāvaṇa's son Indrajit repeatedly resorts to magic. At last, only Rāvaṇa is left, and he takes the field again amid evil omens. Finally, after *Rāma* receives divine help in the form of Indra's chariot and charioteer, Rāvaṇa too is killed and Vibhīṣaṇa installed as king.

Little trace remains of what was presumably the original ending of the story. The heroic tale that formed the core of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was expanded by generations of reciters and redactors, who gathered together differing – sometimes contradictory – treatments, passages, or episodes into an expanding text in response to popular taste and the expectations of their audience; one motive was to explain the reasons for characters' actions that seemed questionable by later moral standards, while another was to reflect Rāma's moral elevation and incipient divinity. Accordingly, at the close of this sixth book, in the extant version, the attitudes of the next stage of the poem's growth become obvious. Later qualms about Sītā's virtue cause *Rāma* coldly to spurn her, saying (for the first time) that he undertook the quest and combat simply to vindicate his own and his family's honor, and not for her sake. In desperation, Sītā attempts suicide by fire (often seen as an ordeal by fire). The gods appear to *Rāma* and reveal that he is in fact Viṣṇu, and Agni, the god of fire, hands Sītā back to her delighted husband, unharmed and exonerated. Daśaratha too appears to bless his sons and tells *Rāma* to return to Ayodhyā and resume his reign (the 14 years of exile having at this point expired). Everyone on the victorious side climbs into Rāvaṇa's aerial chariot and flies back to Ayodhyā. Bharata is delighted by the news of Rāma's triumph and return, and he restores the kingdom to him. This is followed by an elaborate ceremony of installation, and the original story is rounded off with a eulogy of *Rāma* and his righteous ten-thousand-year reign.

Rāma's portrayal as the ideal prince and warrior prompts this gradual understanding of him as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu and eventually as supreme deity himself, although there is an alternative view that regards the theme of the divine king in Indian thought as the key to Rāma's divinity – on this view, present from the earliest phases of the epic (see e.g. Pollock, 1984). However, in the core narrative within the second to sixth books, *Rāma* is a martial hero whose actions are accepted without question as necessary and for that reason are justified. His martial ability means that he is quite often compared to Indra, the leader of the vedic gods in battle, and at the climax of the whole story, in his duel with Rāvaṇa, he receives the help of Indra's charioteer, Mātali. On occasion, indeed, *Rāma* and Lakṣmaṇa are compared to Indra and Viṣṇu, respectively, reflecting the relative status of the two gods in vedic literature.

But Rāma's adherence to ethical values is equally outstanding (he is frequently called "the best of upholders of *dharma*" [*dharmabhṛtāṃ varaḥ*]). His moral status comes mainly from his filial obedience, shown especially in his willing submission to his sudden and arbitrary exile. When Kaikeyī abruptly demands his banishment, *Rāma* accepts his father Daśaratha's reluctant decree with absolute submission and with the calm self-control so characteristic of him. Equally, his greatest deed, the killing of Rāvaṇa, has obvious moral overtones, since Rāvaṇa is presented by Vālmīki as a slave to lust and thus later is quite naturally seen as the embodiment of evil, defeated by good in the person of *Rāma*.

The Expanding Narrative

As part of the increasing emphasis on Rāma's moral elevation, various episodes are reworked or expanded to eliminate the possibility of moral lapses on his part; for example, his killing of the *vānara* chief Vālin while the latter is fighting his brother Sugrīva, with whom *Rāma* has made a pact, is elaborately justified, as are his martial activities to protect the hermits while they go about their religious activities (basically in terms of his duty as a prince to uphold law and order). Throughout most of the earlier expansions, *Rāma* is still viewed as human, but as a particularly moral figure, so that his linking with Indra becomes increasingly problematic as Indra's morals came into question. In that passage at the end of the sixth book – which is transitional to the outlook of parts of the first and seventh books (and may belong with them in date) – where the major gods headed by Brahmā assemble to praise *Rāma* for his defeat of

Rāvaṇa (by now transformed into a threat to the stability of the universe), they reveal his divinity to him in a series of identifications with various gods (Nārāyaṇa, Varāha, Brahmā, and Indra included, before an identification with Viṣṇu), but this recognition is expressed in terms of identity and not yet as incarnation (*avatāra*).

The growing veneration accorded to *Rāma* is then given expression in the first and seventh books, not only by including material that presents *Rāma* as divine, but also by narrating episodes that enhance the status of his opponent Rāvaṇa – and so indirectly of *Rāma*, the only person able to defeat him.

The first book, *Bālakāṇḍa* (Childhood Book), narrates Rāma's birth, youthful exploits, and marriage, providing a general background to the story. The birth of *Rāma* and his three brothers is told in miraculous terms: King Daśaratha is childless, and in his anxiety for an heir, he performs a sacrifice for sons. At the other gods' request, Viṣṇu becomes incarnate as Daśaratha's four sons as the only means of destroying Rāvaṇa, the evil king of Laṅkā. In due course, four sons are born: *Rāma* (Kausalyā's son) and Bharata (Kaikeyī's son) play the chief roles, while the twins Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna (Sumitrā's sons) each attach themselves to one of their half brothers as loyal but subservient companions. When *Rāma* is fifteen, the sage Viśvāmitra comes to court to ask for *Rāma* to protect his sacrifice against attack by *rākṣasa*s. Once this mission is successfully accomplished, the sage takes *Rāma* and Lakṣmaṇa to the court of King Janaka, Sītā's father, at Mithilā. We learn of Sītā's miraculous birth from a furrow (*sītā*), and of Śiva's bow, which no man has the strength to string; *Rāma* does not merely bend but breaks the bow and, with his father Daśaratha's consent, is married to Sītā.

The seventh book, *Uttarakāṇḍa* (Further Book), despite its title, first deals extensively with Rāvaṇa's misdeeds before his encounter with *Rāma* (defiance of the gods, lifting of Mount Kailāsa, and general misuse of his boon of invulnerability, except from humans), and more briefly with Hanumān's career, before turning to events after Rāma's installation. After his guests depart, *Rāma* lives happily with Sītā for a while, and the country prospers under his righteous rule, but slanderous gossip about Sītā's virtue while a prisoner of Rāvaṇa compels *Rāma* reluctantly to order her exile to Vālmīki's hermitage (placing public opinion above his own feelings for his wife). Subsequently, Sītā bears Rāma's twin sons, Kuśa and Lava, at Vālmīki's hermitage. Much later still, *Rāma* prepares a horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*; see *yajña*), during which Kuśa and Lava are recognized by their singing of the *Rāma* story. Sītā is recalled and publicly affirms her purity by calling on the goddess Earth (Bhūdevī) to swallow her; the goddess embraces Sītā and disappears with her, while *Rāma* is left to mourn her loss. After a long and prosperous reign, *Rāma* settles the kingdom on Kuśa and Lava and publicly immolates himself in the river Sarayū (thus returning to his form as Viṣṇu), and he is welcomed to heaven by Brahmā.

The belief that *Rāma* is an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu is rare even in these two books: it is found explicitly only in the birth story and in the brothers' final self-immolation, and it is a development that sits uneasily alongside the many statements still retained in the earlier text stressing that *Rāma* is human, as well as the boon developed from hints in the first stage that Rāvaṇa cannot be killed by gods, only by a human.

The text of the *Rāmāyaṇa* did not become relatively fixed until probably the Gupta period (4th–6th cent. CE) – a period of consolidation of the high culture, nearly a thousand years after the composition of its core. At later periods still, passages in all seven books were elaborated and narrative insertions made by poets who filled out the story, but did not extend it to any great degree forward or backward. Large-scale alteration ended in perhaps the 12th

century, by which time *Rāma*, originally a human hero, had become widely recognized as divine. After this date, rare hints are introduced, sometimes in only a few manuscripts, of concepts such as *bhakti*, the saving grace of Rāma's name, and – rarest of all – Rāmacandra as the name of the hero. But for these developments we must mainly look elsewhere.