But as potent and moving as many of these images and related stories are, even more powerful, I suspect, was the fusion of divine action to the main human focus of the Mahabharata, the horrific war that stands as a tremendous inferno at its center. It was a war of human kings to all appearances, but the audience knew it was really a purge of demonic thugs led by the gods, and it demonstrated the power and influence of gods in the affairs of human beings. Finally, the war itself is something of a dilemma. Simultaneously fascinating and repelling, war holds out the promise of resolving one’s earthly life—it leads to death or glory, heaven or victory. “As moths speeding full tilt to their demise fly right into a fire,” so have men rushed to the war (Bhagavad Gita 11.29), soon to enter the flaming, fanged mouth of god (11.25, 11.27, 11.30). Kumukṣētra is the “creator’s sacrificial altar” (as it is sometimes called, see Mahabharata 3.81.178, 3.129.22, 9.52.20), the war is a sacrificial offering to the gods (see Hildebeitel 1990), battle is the digesting fire by which the gods absorb their food. And in this nightmarish conflagration there is a moral and spiritual collapse into god as well as a material one: the deeds of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva in the war are often immoral from the perspective of men who understand themselves to be noble, who do not wish any ignoble advantage in battle, not even to save their lives or win the war. But the party of the gods wins only because of Kṛṣṇa’s baffling deeds and counsel that ignores the rules of warfare (dharma) and even truthfulness. This advice and behavior makes Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva just the sort of baffling, unheard of and unimaginable new kind of being that Sheldon Pollock (1991: 34-43) sees emerging as the essence of the regular incarnations of Viṣṇu who periodically descend into the world to reenergize dharma (the later and familiar sense of the word “awakening”). So from the human point of view the collapse into the conflagration of the war looks more like the end of the world, when God Agni reduces everything to its elements, likely at the command of the great god Śiva. The war is the mouth of god eagerly devouring the whole world and everyone in it (Bhagavad Gita 11.30). The vast war narrated across more than 40,000 lines of text, the central and most imposing fact of the Mahabharata, is also the most exhilarating, awesome, and consistently moving (frightening, horrifying) reality of the Mahabharata. The great divine Bhārata war is one of the principal mysteries presented in the text, and this fact, coupled with Kṛṣṇa’s baffling behavior (he later comes to be known commonly as mohana, “causing confusion, or consternation, mystifying”) and the immorality of the Pāṇḍavas in order to win the war, has barred this Veda from most homes, except for the Bhagavad Gita, which assimilates Kṛṣṇa and the war and teaches a doctrine fusing devotion to Kṛṣṇa to the yoga of the karmayoga.

Despite its slumbering, it is clear that the most famous of the great epics, the Mahabharata, is a work that has been working on the mind of India, at least, for a very long time. Its appeal is not just scientific, historical, or ideological, but also emotional and spiritual. It is a source of comfort, inspiration, and guidance for millions of people, and it continues to be studied, performed, and enjoyed by people of all ages, and in all parts of the world. It is a work of literature that has been written and rewritten, translated and retranslated, and has been adapted to many different forms of art and entertainment. It is a work that has been studied by scholars and laypeople alike, and it continues to be a source of fascination and wonder for people around the world.

Although it is little known to the average, educated Westerner, the Vālmiki Rāmāyana is arguably one of the three or four most important and most widely influential texts ever written. For the impact this poem and the countless other works it has inspired upon the religions, the arts, and the social and political thought of much of Asia has been and continues to be both profound and widespread. Indeed, the influence of the Rāmāyana is in many ways comparable to that of only such monumental texts as the Bible and the Qur’an.

But where these other two great religious documents have, like the Rāmāyana, made themselves at home in many different cultures, each of them has done so within the confines of a single greater religious tradition, the Judeo-Christian and the Islamic, respectively. In contrast, the Rāmāyana, over the past two-and-a-half millennia, has established itself as a central cultural document of most of the major Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Islamic cultures of South and Southeast Asia.

In short, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that in terms of its diversity, longevity, and ability to transcend boundaries of language, culture, religion, social class, gender, and politics, the Rāmāyana—by which we mean the collectivity of the oral, literary, folk, performative, and artistic representations of the ancient Hindu tale of Rāma and Sītā that have permeated, indeed saturated, the cultures of South, Southeast, and to some extent Central, West, and East Asia beginning with the first millennium BCE—is among the most popular, versatile, and influential stories the world has known. In the following pages we will attempt to trace a few of the outlines of the extraordinary trajectory of this vast and complex polysemic set of texts (to use the broadest possible reading of that term), as its components have impacted the lives, beliefs, aesthetics, politics, social relations, and general culture of diverse nations and communities spanning nearly three millennia of human history and stretching over immense areas of Asia from Iran to the Philippines and from Sri Lanka to Mongolia.

**THE RĀMĀYANA OF VĀLMIKI**

We will begin with a discussion of what we believe to be the oldest surviving version of the Rāma story, the monumental Sanskrit epic poem, the Rāmāyana (the Adventures of Rāma), attributed to the legendary poet-sage Vālmiki. This epic appears to have been
largely composed during the first half of the first millennium BCE (R. Goldman 1984: 14–23). The precise dating of the poem is, however, difficult, and scholarly opinion on the matter varies considerably (Brockington 1984: 1, 1988: 377–79). It is also apparent that some portions of the text, as it has come down to us, were composed later than others (Brockington 1984: 312, 315). Moreover, indigenous traditions of India regard the poem to be a work of the Treta Yuga, the second of the four great cyclical ages of cosmic time, since its author is a contemporary of the epic hero, who is said to have lived in that age. This, in the traditional reckoning, date the epic many hundreds of thousands of years before the modern era. Then, too, a corollary of Yuga theory is that the cosmic ages constantly recur and that events of a given yuga will recur with some variations when that same era comes around again. By this reckoning, Rāma reappears and—with some variations—undergoes his adventures, trials, and triumphs in each of the endlessly recurring Treta Yugas.

As it has come down to us, the Vālmiki Rāmāyana is a lengthy, originally orally composed, narrative poem of roughly 25,000 verses in generally simple, but sometimes moderately ornate, Sanskrit couplets divided into seven large books or kāandas. For the purposes of comparison, then, the poem is approximately twice the length of Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey combined. Because of the popularity of the work and its central cultural and religious significance, it is likely that the poem was subject to a long and complex history of oral transmission before and during the period in which it came to be frequently copied and recopied over the centuries in all of the regions and scripts of India. As a result there is nothing like a comprehensive recension of the oral tradition during which the epic—the Mahābhārata—came to be transmitted in two major regional recensions, the northern and southern, each of which has a number of subregional variants. These in turn are subdivided into groups of manuscripts composed in the various scripts of the subcontinent (Bhatt and Shah 1960–75, i:xxii–xxix). The textual variations that characterize the two major recensions are significant, with only about one-third of the text identical in the two versions. Despite this textual variation and the fact that the two larger versions sometimes back up one or two of the kāandas differently, the general configuration of the narrative is quite similar in all recensions and has generally been regarded by scholars as the departure point for the sometimes quite different treatments of the tale in other, later Rāmāyana versions.

It will be helpful, we believe, to summarize the plot of the Vālmiki Rāmāyana as a starting point to a discussion of the social, cultural, aesthetic, and theological significance of the poem in the development of the larger Rāmāyana tradition and of Hindu civilization in general.

THE STORY

Unlike the Homeric epics, but somewhat similarly to the Mahābhārata, the poem begins with a framing narrative whose purpose is to provide a history of its conception, composition, and early dissemination. The sage Vālmiki is introduced in conversation with the divine seer Nārada. Questioned by the former as to the existence of a truly exemplary man in the current era, Nārada responds with a terse biography of Rāma, the current ruler of the kingdom of Kosalas, whose capital is the city of Ayodhyā. After fulsome praise of Rāma’s physical and moral perfection, the sage relates his career from the eve of his first, abortive consecration, through his exile and sufferings and the war in Lakkā, to his ultimate accession to his ancestral throne and the utopian era that this inaugurates. This brief narrative essentially encompasses, in much abbreviated form, the substance of Books 2 to 6 of the larger epic.

Reflecting on Nārada’s edifying tale, Vālmiki wanders into the woodlands surrounding his dīrgham for his daily ablutions. There his blissful contemplation of nature is rudely interrupted as he witnesses the cruel death of one of a pair of mating cranes at the hands of a tribal hunter. Stunned by what he sees as an act of unrighteousness and deeply moved by the grief of the surviving bird, the sage curses the hunter for his wanton act. The form of this particular curse, however, turns out to be more interesting than its substance, for it issues from the sage’s lips as a perfectly formed metrical unit, a verse, consisting of four equal quarters of eight syllables each whose prosody makes it ideal for singing to the accompaniment of stringed and percussion instruments. Puzzled by these strange events, Vālmiki returns to his dīrgham to ponder them. There he is visited by the great creator divinity Lord Brahmā who tells him that he need not be perplexed, for it was through the inspiration of the god that the sage has been able to transform his sorrow (soka) for the suffering of the grieving crane into an entirely new aesthetic medium: soka or true poetry. Brahmā then reveals his purpose, commissioning Vālmiki to employ his newfound poetic inspiration to compose a monumental poem about the career of Rāma, a brief account of which he had heard earlier that morning from Nārada, an account that would leave him divine vision to be able to know the events of that remarkable career intimately. The sage composes the epic, filling it with all of the poetic moods (rasa), and teaches it to his disciples, notably the twins Lava and Kuśa, who perform it throughout the land to the plaudits of all who hear them. Eventually the fame of these singers of tales—who are in actuality the sons of Rāma—reaches the ears of King Rāma himself, and he calls them to his court where he becomes both the audience and subject of the narrative. It is at this point that the epic story proper begins.

This charming and interesting preambule (upodhāsā) to the poem is important because it is the source of the widely established tradition that regards Vālmiki as not just a great poet but in fact as the udīkavī or first poet and his immortal composition as therefore the udīkāvya or first poem, the source and inspiration for all later poetic composition. This reputation, in many ways richly deserved, is significant for a larger study of the Rāmāyana tradition, in that it accounts in large measure for the enormous prestige the Rāmāyana has enjoyed over the centuries, even among those who do not, and in fact cannot, read its Sanskrit text. It also firmly establishes the tradition that Vālmiki’s is the original formal or literary rendering of the Rāmakathā or the story of Rāma and the direct or indirect source of all subsequent versions.

The epic narrative proper begins with a description of the rich and powerful kingdom of Kosalas, the ancestral domain of the Solar dynasty, the noble race of kings who trace their lineage back to the very sun god himself. As the tale begins, the kingdom is being ruled from its prosperous, fortified capital city of Ayodhyā by the Solar dynast Dasaratha. The aged monarch is represented as possessing everything a man could desire in terms of wealth, virtue, power, and fame with the critical and potentially tragic exception of a son to carry on his ancient line. On the advice of his ministers and with the assistance of the sage Rṣyaśṛṣṭi, the king performs sacrifices with the aim of remedying this lack. Out of
the sacrificial fire emerges a divine personage bearing a vessel filled with porridge which, the king is instructed, is to be fed to his three wives so that they may conceive and bear him sons.

While the king’s prārakṣēni or rite for the production of a son is in progress, the gods, assembled to receive their shares of the oblation, address the creator Brahmā, complaining to him that a terrible demon, a rākṣasa named Rāvaṇa, taking advantage of Brahmā’s boon of invulnerability at the hands of all supernatural beings, has begun to oppress the whole world. Learning from the creator that, in his arrogance, Rāvaṇa had omitted the mention of mere mortals from the list of those who could not harm him, the gods appeal to Lord Viṣṇu, asking him to divide himself into four parts and take birth as the four heroic sons of Daśaratha in order to encompass the destruction of the demon king. Viṣṇu accepts this mission, and Brahmā instructs the gods to father countless semidivine apes and monkeys to serve as his allies.

This episode—found in all surviving recensions and manuscripts—is of considerable significance to our understanding of the theological importance of the Rāmāyana, as it establishes the poem early on as one of the central texts of the emerging Vaiṣṇava corpus and identifies Rāma (along with his three brothers) as, like Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, one of the principal avatāras or incarnations of Viṣṇu and, in the course of time, one of the major objects of Hindu devotionalism. We shall return to the discussion of Rāma’s divinity below when we consider the history of Rāmāyana scholarship.

Unlike the later narratives of the life of Kṛṣṇa and some relatively modern retellings of the life of Rāma, Rāma’s poem pays little attention to the childhood of his hero, moving swiftly from the narrative of his birth to that of his coming of age. As the idealized prince and his brothers approach manhood, the tranquility of the Kosalan court is shattered by the arrival of the frightening and inscrutable sage Viśvāmitra who demands that the aged king lend him his beloved son to defend the sage’s ārāma from the depredations of some rākṣasa who have been interfering with his sacrificial rites. The fond king is reluctant to part with Rāma but is at last persuaded under the threat of a curse, and Rāma, together with Lakṣmīna, his inseparable companion and younger brother, is committed to the care of the sage. The three set off on what amounts to a kind of initiatory journey; during the course of which Rāma receives instruction in mythological lore from the sage, rides the woodlands of a terrible demoness, is initiated in the secret lore of divine weapons, and, finally, fulfills his mission by ridding the Viśvāmitra’s ārāma of its predatory rākṣasa.

In the wake of Rāma’s success Viśvāmitra reveals to him a further purpose of their journey. He informs him that King Janaka of the nearby city of Mithilā is holding a contest of strength and martial vigor for the hand of his adoptive daughter, a princess of rare beauty whom he had found as an infant in the ploughed furrow of a sacrificial ground and accordingly named Sītā, “furrow.” The test, which no warrior has yet passed, is the lifting and wielding of an immensely heavy and powerful bow that had been entrusted to the king’s care by its owner, the mighty lord Śiva himself.

Although still a mere youth, Rāma easily passes the test, lifting and, in fact, breaking the mighty bow. He thus wins the hand of Sītā in marriage, while his brothers wed other girls of Janaka’s household. On the return journey the wedlock party is accosted by Rāma’s Jānakī’s son Parāśurāma (Parāśurāma), the dreaded Brāhmān warrior of the warrior class. To the horror of Daśaratha and his attendants, the Brāhmān-warrior expresses his contempt for what he considers the defective bow of Sīvā that Rāma has so easily broken and challenges him to test his mettle with the more powerful weapon of Viṣṇu that he himself carries. Rāma seizes and masters the bow using it to cutoff the heavenly path of the irascible Brāhmā.

This odd confrontation of the two Rāmas is interesting, since both are regarded as avatāras or incarnations of the lord Viṣṇu. Here the younger Rāma literally displaces the older and comes into his own more fully as the incarnation of his age. It similarly serves as the final element in the opening book’s tilottamavatam of Rāma as an epic hero who has overcome the oedipal dread of the patriarchal Brāhmā to emerge as a fully formed hero in his own right.

The happy couple, Rāma and Sītā, returns to Ayodhyā deeply absorbed in their mutual love. This brings to a close the first book of the epic, the Bālakāṇḍa.

The action of the second book, the Ayodhyākāṇḍa, opens some years later and centers itself centrally with a political intrigue in the women’s apartments of King Daśaratha’s household and its catastrophic consequences. The old king, feeling the burden of his years, decides that the time is propitious for him to withdraw from the life of a householder and monarch and consecrate his eldest and most deeply beloved son, Rāma, as yuvārāja or prince regent. He determines that the moment is particularly opportune since his next oldest son, Prince Bharata, the son of his favorite queen Kaikeyī, is temporarily away from the capital on a visit to his mother’s family. The immediate consecration of Rāma is announced to the general rejoicing of the populace. However, when the news reaches the ears of Kaikeyī’s lifelong servant-woman, the hunchback Manthār, she rushes to her mistress’s aid. The king sees her as a calamity. The naive and inexperienced prince, unaware of the good fortune of Rāma, but Manthār soon persuades Kaikeyī that the accession of Rāma and the attendant elevation of his mother, Kausalyā, to the status of queen-mother can only spell disaster for her and her son. At length persuaded, the simple-minded Kaikeyī skillfully employs her feminine wiles and takes advantage of the sexual thrilldom of the aged king to force Daśaratha to grant her two thus far unfulfilled and unspecified boons he had once promised her as a reward for her assistance. Using the boons she forces the king, for instance, to create out of his own body a son as powerful as himself. This is accomplished as a peninsular wanderer for fourteen years and to the succession of her own son Bharata in his place. The blow to Daśaratha is a crushing one.

Most noteworthy at this juncture is the way in which Rāma distinguishes himself by the stoicism and calm fortitude with which he accepts the sudden reversal of his fortunes. His only concern is to maintain the truth of his father’s word despite the advice to refuse his father’s command on the part of his impetuous brother Lakṣmanā and his own mother. Rāma takes his leave of his family. His mother is desolate, but Sītā, arguing passionately that a wife’s place is at her husband’s side through thick and thin, rejects Rāma’s arguments that she should remain hidden in safety and comfort. In this way, Sītā establishes herself firmly in the popular imagination as the archetype of the pativrata, the unconditionally devoted Hindu wife, just as Rāma has now proven himself to be the idealized son, deferring unconditionally to patriarchal authority and the all-powerful code of dharmā. Diving themselves of their wealth and finery, Rāma, Sītā, and the ever-faithful Lakṣmanā set out for the wilderness, followed by virtually the entire population of the city. Slipping away from their devoted followers, they cross the Gagā and enter the idyllic woodlands of Mount Cittirūka. In the meanwhile, Daśaratha, his heart broken, dies grieving for his beloved son.
Bharata, alarmed to the catastrophe at Ayodhyā through prophetic dreams, returns home in haste to find his father dead, his brother banished, and the kingdom without a ruler. Rebuffing his mother for what she has done and refusing the royal consecration pressed upon him by the court Brahmans, he organizes a grand expedition to bring Rāma back to take up his rightful place as king. The brothers meet but cannot come to any immediate resolution of the succession issue. Both refuse the throne, Rāma on the grounds that he must adhere strictly to his father’s words, and Bharata on the grounds that Rāma should, by virtue of his age and qualities, be the king in any case. At length a compromise is reached whereby Bharata will rule the kingdom as Rāma’s regent for the specific period of the latter’s exile, placing Rāma’s sandals on the throne as a symbol of the latter’s true sovereignty. At the end of the fourteen years, Rāma is to return and take up his long delayed consecration as king. Bharata returns to a village outside Ayodhyā to await his brother’s return. Rāma and his party, however, eager to avoid further such encounters, plunge deeper into the wilderness. This brings the Ayodhyākāndam to a close.

The third book of the epic, the Aranyakāndam, finds the hero wandering with his wife and brother Laksmana amongst the hermitages of the sages of the Daṇḍaka Forest. The ascetics appeal to Rāma to protect them from the savage rākṣasas that haunt the region. Rāma agrees, despite Sītā’s uneasiness at her husband’s involvement in the world of violent conflict. After several hostile encounters with monstrous demons who foreshadow the central moment of the book and the poem by attempting to abduct Sītā, the threesome settles into a peaceful, poetic life near the banks of the Godavari river. This idyllic idyll, however, is soon interrupted by the arrival of a promiscuous rākṣas woman, Sūprapakha, sister of the demon-king Rāvana. Attempting first to seduce the brothers and then devour Sītā, she is teased and ultimately disfigured by the heroes. She reports her humiliation first to the local rākṣas garrison, whose warriors are then annihilated in combat by Rāma, and ultimately to Rāvana himself. Sūprapakha’s report fills the rākṣas overlord with hatred for Rāma and passion for his beautiful wife, Sītā. He forms a plan to lure Rāma and Laksmana away from the āśrama and into the forest, to the rākṣasas’ island kingdom of Lankā. Resolved to send one of their number as a spy to scout for the abducted princess, the monkey leaders each declare the distance he can leap. Only Hanumān, son of the wind god, sits silent. When it has been made clear that none of the other monkeys has the power to leap the mighty ocean, the task falls to him. As he prepares to make his flight, the Kīṣṇindhamāṇḍam draws to a close.

The fifth book of the epic, the Sundarakāndam, opens with a lengthy account of Hanumān’s protracted leap and his long and frustrating search of the rākṣasas’ island kingdom of Lankā. This poem depicts the forest princess in captivity and her confrontations with her monstrous suitor Rāvana. Eventually, Hanumān discovers Sītā in a park attached to the harem. He reveals himself to her, reassuring her with his accurate description of Rāma and his presentation of Rāma’s signet ring. He offers to carry her back, but she refuses, stating her preference of being rescued by her husband himself. Hanumān then takes his leave of Sītā and begins a rampage of destruction in the palace parkslands, during which he encounters and kills many of the rākṣasas sent to capture him. At length he is captured by Rāvana’s son Indrajit. Dragged before the rākṣasas king, the monkey rebels him for his lawless conduct and urges him to restore Sītā to Rāma or face the most severe consequences. Rāvana orders that Hanumān be paraded through the town with his tail set ablaze. But the monkey slips his bonds and, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, sets the city ablaze.
Taking leave once more of Sītā, Hanumān leaps back across the ocean, to the delight of the waiting monkeys. In high spirits they march back to the monkey capital of Kiśkindhā to report the discovery of Sītā to Rāma, Laksmana, and Sugrīva. This brings the Sundarakānda to a close.

The sixth book, called the Yuddhakānda (or in some versions the Lakṣākānda), is the longest of Vālmikī’s poem and deals with the great battle before Rāvaṇa’s capital is taken. At one point, Rāma’s forces march to the shore of the ocean, where, after Rāma subdued the turbid terrestrial ocean divinity, the monkeys construct a great causeway by means of which the army crosses to Lankā. There they are joined by Rāvaṇa’s younger brother, Vibhūsana who has defected after Rāvaṇa has brutally rejected his advice to return Sītā. Rāma and his forces lay siege to Lankā, and a protracted and sordid battle rages for many days with triumphs and disasters on both sides. Rāma and Laksmana encounter and ultimately destroy such fearsome warriors as Indrajit, Rāvaṇa’s son and master of supernatural weaponry, and the demon king’s eigth brother, the monstrous Kumbhakāraṇa. Nonetheless, their victory does not come easily. At one point both of the brothers are immobilized and nearly killed by the magical serpent arrows of Indrajit and are revived only in the eleventh hour by the arrival of the divine bird Garuda, the celestial mount of Viṣṇu and the sworn enemy of all serpents. When the redoubtable Indrajit uses his supernatural weaponry to strike down virtually the entire monkey host, Hanumān once more saves the day by flying to the Himalayas to carry back a mountain on which healing herbs are growing. This episode remains in popular art and the popular imagination as one of the central iconic moments of the epic tale and in the cultus of Hanumān. At length, after a terrific battle, Rāma is finally successful in slaying the ten-headed demon-king.

But now, after his long sought and costly victory, Rāma is far from demonstrating the expected joy at the recovery of his abducted wife. Instead, he speaks harshly to Sītā, reproaching her, as one who has lived in the house of another man and claiming, that he has fought the battle only for the sake of his own honor. He dismisses her, telling her to go with whomever she wishes. It is only when Sītā submits to his command that he relents, and publicly demonstrates her fidelity to her lord, that Rāma agrees to take her back, stating that he had known all along of her loyalty but needed to demonstrate it to others. The couple then returns to Ayodhīya, where at long last Rāma, having carried out to the letter his father’s orders, is consecrated as king. This brings to an end the sixth book.

The last book of the poem, the Uttarākānda, serves both as an epilogue to the epic narrative and a prologue to the careers of some of its secondary characters. Thus it provides a lengthy biography of Rāvaṇa, relating his birth, his conquests, his pleasures, his berths and his sons, with the curve of his life following his uprooting by the supreme divinity Viṣṇu and his eventual destruction at the hands of Rāma. It is in this final book that the story of Sītā is told, as the latter is rescued by her husband and restored to the palace where the couple lives in happy conjugal bliss. Similarly, but much more succinctly, it provides an account of the childhood and early deeds of Hanumān. Returning to the central characters, the book describes Rāma’s formal dismissal of his monkey and rākṣasa allies and the well-deserved pleasures of his life with Sītā. The felicity of the royal couple is, however, soon shattered when Rāma’s spies bring him reports of gossip among the citizens of Ayodhīya concerning the chastity of the queen during the year in which she lived in captivity in the house of Rāvaṇa and the propriety of Rāma’s having taken her back into his household. Acting to protect the honor of his house and his moral authority as a ruler, Rāma commands Laksmana to take Sītā, now pregnant, to the forest on the pretext of an excursion and abandon her to her fate. The forlorn queen takes refuge in the āśrama of none other than the sage Vālmiki, author of the poem, where she gives birth to

Rāma’s twin sons, Lava and Kuśa. These two, as was narrated in the upodgaha of the Bālakānda, will become principal performers of the epic poem. The kāṇḍa continues with a varied array of dramatic scenes and supernatural beings. At one point, Rāma dispatches his brother Śatrughna to aid the sages of the Yamunā region by slaying the oppressive demon Lavaṇa. Śatrughna accomplishes this feat and establishes himself in the city of Muthūr. At another point, Rāma is confronted by a Brāhmaṇa grieving for the untimely death of his son. Realizing that such an unfortunate event could occur only if there were irreligion in his otherwise perfect kingdom, Rāma scours his realm until he finds the source of this disharmony in the form of a lowly Śūdra engaged in the austerities normally reserved for his betters. Rāma unhesitatingly slays the offending Śūdra, thus restoring harmony to the kingdom and the Brāhmaṇ’s son to life.

At length Rāma decides to perform an aśvamedha, the great horse sacrifice of the ancient Hindu kings. In the course of the ritual, Kuśa and Lava, acting on the instructions of their guru Vālmiki, proceed to Ayodhīya to sing the Rāmāyana at the gateway of Rāma’s sacrificial enclosure. Rāma is amazed and delighted by the poem, and upon inquiry discovers that its singers are in fact his own sons and that its author has been sheltering his beloved Sītā. He sends for Sītā, bidding her to declare her fidelity under oath once again in the assembly. Sītā appears with Vālmiki who, as an irreproachably truthful seer, attests to her innocence. Rāma declares that he has always been convinced of Sītā’s fidelity but repudiated her for fear of public censure. He acknowledges his sons and expresses his desire to be reconciled with his wife. Sītā, however, calls upon her mother, the earth goddess, to witness her devotion to her husband and to once more receive her if she has been pure in thought and deed. The goddess emerges from the earth on a celestial throne and, taking her daughter in her arms, descends once more into the depths. Rāma is filled with rage at this turn of events and threatens to tear up the earth and destroy it, if Sītā is not returned to him. He is, however, pacified through the intercession of Brāhmaṇ, the creator god, who reminds him that he is in fact the son of Viṣṇu and assures him that he will be blissfully reunited with his beloved wife in heaven. Bereft of Sītā, Rāma rules his kingdom in sorrow for many years. At last, Yama, the god of death himself, comes to Rāma to remind him that the purpose of his earthly existence has now been accomplished and that it is time for him to return to the heavenly realm. Acting on the advice of Bharata, whom he is prepared to consecrate in his place, Rāma divides his territory into the kingdoms of northern and southern Kosala, establishing his sons in these realms respectively. Then, surrounded by all the inhabitants of Ayodhīya, Rāma immerses himself in the waters of the Sarayū River and ascends to heaven in his divine form, thus bringing the kāṇḍa and the epic to an end.

LEVELS OF SIGNIFICANCE IN VĀLMIKI’S RĀMĀYANA

The Rāmāyana as an aesthetic creation

As will be evident from a reading of the earlier synopsis, the Vālmiki Rāmāyana works powerfully on a number of critical levels. One of these, which we have already discussed, is the literary and aesthetic. This poem, uniquely among all versions of the Rāma story, is regarded as the original and the archetype of human poetry. In its claim to have originated
the genre of poetic composition through the transmission of raw emotion in aesthetic delight by means of literary composition and artistic performance, the poem lies at the heart of the important and well-known philosophy of aesthetics, which we recognize under the rubric of rasa or aesthetic relish, derived from the sublimation of human emotion. The portion of the epic text contains one of the earliest if not the earliest listing of the rasa, first systematized by Bharata in his Natyashastra. The prestige of the work as the “great source for all poetry” has, moreover, carried over to a number of major retellings in important regional languages of South Asia. Thus works such as the Irāmavatīram of Kampān, the Ramārāmānas of Tulasidāsa, and the Ramāyaṇa of Kritibhāsa are frequently regarded as the outstanding and even foundational literary compositions in their respective languages, here Tamil, Avadhī, and Bengali, respectively.

The Rāmāyaṇa as a social text

A second critical level on which the Rāmāyaṇa operates powerfully is the social. The poet has skillfully crafted his central characters, and the situations in which they find themselves, to be monovalent examples of idealized positive and negative role models in Hindu society. Thus Rāma is the ideal son, elder brother, husband, monarch, and general exemplar of a favored Hindu norm of masculinity. He is handsome, energetic, brave, compassionate, strong, and wholly committed to the governing principles of dharmas by which society, and indeed the entire cosmos, is supposed to be regulated. These traits emerge most clearly in a number of focal episodes in the epic narrative. Particularly noteworthy here is Rāma’s calm acceptance of the cruel and unjust exile (Rāmāyaṇa 2.16), which he must undergo as a result of Kaikēy’s manipulation of King Daśaratha (2.9–10). At no point does Rāma betray either dejection at his loss of the kingship or even anger at the wickedness of his stepmother. His sole concern is his deference to his father’s orders and his preservation of the king’s reputation for truthfulness. This easy renunciation and seeming indifference to worldly power and pleasures are among the characteristic traits of the spiritual hero as described in Hindu literary and religious texts from a very early period.

One of the main concerns of the epic poet in the creation of the character of Rāma is a focus on the maintenance of the integrity and harmony of the Hindu joint family. The poet is everywhere eager to portray his hero as ready to sacrifice his personal good for that of the family. In this the Rāmāyaṇa contrasts very starkly with its sister epic the Mahābhārata, where conflicting interests lead inexorably to the rupture and annihilation of the central ruling house. Although depicted as a supremely competent warrior, Rāma is shown as always willing to take the path of peace, deferring to Bharata (Rāmāyaṇa 2.16, 2.99), accepting Vibhiṣana (6.12), and even, it appears, being willing to make peace with the demonic Rāvaṇa should he somehow abandon his evil ways (6.12.21). This, too, contrasts strongly with the implacable enmity and bloodthirsty vervefulness of the warrior heroes of the Mahābhārata.

Similarly, figures such as Lakṣmana, Śita, Kaustubh, and Hanumān represent, respectively, the idealized deferential younger brother, the single-mindedly devoted wife, the virtuous mother, and the perfect servant-devotee. On the other hand, the epic’s plethora of monstrously perverse characters, notably the licentious and violent Rāvaṇa himself, represents in uncomplicated form the radical opposition of those models of restraint, decorum, chastity, and deference that the epic idealizes so powerfully. The complex ambiguities, conflicting loyalties, and shades of gray that so characterize the central figures of the Mahābhārata are almost nowhere to be seen in Vālmiki’s work. In this way, the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa and many of its subsequent reworkings stand out as among traditional South Asia’s most powerful and widely disseminated instruments for the formation of and reinforcement of characteristic social and cultural norms.

Central to Vālmiki’s social vision is the powerful valorization of the late Vedic conception of varṇārama-dharma. This is the set of the normative rules laid out most clearly in the Dharmaśastras or law texts. According to these, society is to be ordered by means of a strict social and ritual hierarchy in which each of the four varṇas or social classes knows and maintains its traditional place, status, and duties and each individual, at least those of the higher varṇas, is expected to pass through a prescribed series of life stages. This is the rigid top-down system of the four varṇas: Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra. Each of these adheres to its immemorial function and defers to the classes above it. In this system, Brāhmaṇas are to be especially respected and feared as the equals or even superiors of the gods themselves. This seminal concern of the Brāhmaṇical literature is nowhere more powerfully illustrated than in the Bāleśkanda’s extensive treatment of the history of the sage Viśvāmitra and his conflicts with and triumphs over demons, sages, and divinities in the course of his struggle to transform himself from a Kṣatriya to a Brāhmaṇa (Rāmāyaṇa 1.50–64). The question of the traditional dārāmas or life stages (student, householder, hermit, renunciant) is not explicitly taken up in any elaborate way in the epic but can be seen implicitly in episodes such as that in which King Daśaratha in his old age wishes to renounce the throne in favor of his son (Rāmāyaṇa 2.13).

A particularly significant aspect of the social message of the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa is the way in which the epic poet and his characters deal with the issues of gender and sexuality. In a number of ways, the Rāmāyaṇa has become a touchstone in traditional India for the assertion and reinforcement of the power of patriarchal attitudes. Śītā’s idealization as the perfect wife and the perfect wife rests centrally on her unswerving subordination to the wishes and interests of her husband. Although she is shown occasionally to question Rāma’s decisions, she does so only when his initial decision is at variance with the demands of the normative subordination of women. This, of course, is most clearly seen in the famous episode where Śītā refuses to accede to Rāma’s plan to leave her behind when he goes into exile (Rāmāyaṇa 2.24). Śītā’s lengthy meditations and soliloquies during her captivity (Rāmāyaṇa 5.23–24, 5.26), as well as her sharp rebukes of her demonic suitor (5.19–20), focus largely on the issue of gender subordination and the representation of the wife virtually as a form of property of the husband (S. Goldman 2001). In this way Śītā stands in sharp contrast to a figure such as Draupadi, heroine of the Mahābhārata, who, aside from having five husbands, is far more outspoken in defense of her rights and privileges as a woman (Sutherland 1989).

Surely, the most critical gender-related issue in the Rāmāyaṇa is the issue of impact on the lives of the people of South Asia is Rāma’s treatment of Śītā after she has been freed from the clutches of the demon-king. The issue is clearly of great importance to Vālmiki, since he highlights it twice in the poem, once during the course of Śītā’s agniparikṣā or trial by fire (Rāmāyaṇa 6.104–4), and again when she is banished on the strength of greater about her conduct in the house of Rāvaṇa (7.44–47). It is noteworthy that the poet constantly stresses the fact that Rāma, for all his harsh treatment of his wife, never for a moment in fact doubts her absolute fidelity. His brutal treatment of Śītā on both occasions,
it is stressed, derives from his concern for the loss of honor and prestige that unchecked rumors about the queen’s chastity would bring in their train. The Stätityā or “abandonment of Stät” is a somewhat controversial episode and is not present in all versions of the story. Nonetheless it has sent a powerful message.

If Stät represents the idealization of femininity in Hindu India—chaste, demure, dependent, and soft-spoken—the epic poet has, as in the case of his male characters, given us several striking counterexamples. On the one hand, there is the somewhat characterless Rāmeyāsa, essentially a good-hearted and devoted, if somewhat simple-minded, mother to her son Bharata, who allows herself to be led away from the path of wisely devotion by her twisted alter ego, the scheming hunchbacked serving maid, Manthāra (Sutherland 1992). Kaikēyē, although she becomes the representation of the proverbial “shrewish wife” in popular imagination (Akkōkār 1999), is quietly rehabilitated by the poet and appears to blend back in with the other mothers at the court of Ayodhyā after the exile of Rāma.

On the other hand, in his characterization of the voracious and voraciously sexual Rākṣasa woman born to Tājkadā and Sūṛpānākhī, the poet has given us dramatic examples of traditional South Asia’s nightmare image of feminine run amok. The treatment of Sūṛpānākhī is in radical contrast to that of Stät, for whereas the latter is dependent, submissive, generally compliant, and fiercely chaste, the former is independent, outspoken, and, above all, sexually aggressive. The sexual liaison she proposes between Rāma and herself in the Aranyakādīga is treated by the poet and his heroes as ludicrous, incongruous and as a source of both amusement and violence (Rāmāyana 16.16–17). This attitude contrasts very notably with the parallel situation in the Mahābhārata where, with the sanction of his mother and brothers, the Pandava hero Bhima enjoys just such a sexual idyll with the Rākṣasa-woman Hīdimbā (Mahābhārata 1.139–43).2

For all its powerful assertion of patriarchal authority and the subordination of women in almost every respect to males, the Rāmāyana of Vālmiki puts forward a somewhat gentler vision of masculinity than is to be found in some parallel documents of ancient Hindu culture. Thus, for example, where the warrior heroes of the Mahābhārata tend to exemplify a certain brash, boisterous, and vengeful hypermasculinity, Rāma, as noted above, is represented as having his Kṣatriya pride and martial prowess tempered by compassion and concern for the rules of family and society.

Although it is less given to prescriptive passages than the Mahābhārata and the Dharmaśāstras, the Vālmiki Rāmāyana functions like these works also as a sort of treatise on the political constitution of the early Hindu state. At several points in the narrative, it is suggested that kingship is regarded as partaking of divinity (Pollock 1991: 15–54). Additionally, much of the narrative revolves around the critical issues of royal legitimacy and succession. This is true not only in the realm of the Solar dynasty of Kosala but also among the monkeys of Kīkṣīndhā and even the Rākṣasas of Lankā. The Ayodhyākāśa in particular sheds interesting light on the ancient conception of kingship, illustrating a situation where King Daśaratha appears to have to engage in at least ceremonial consultation with his citizens and advisors before naming Rāma as his successor (Rāmāyana 2.134–2.2).

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the Vālmiki Rāmāyana for the political life of South Asia has been its positing of the possibility of a utopian kingdom under the authority of a perfectly righteous ruler for whom Rāma would be the archetype. This conception is brought forward especially in the Bālabalkīśa and Utrarakīśa with their descriptions of Rāma’s kingdom as being free from crime, disease, poverty, natural disasters, social strife, and so on, and is clearly illustrated in the episode of Rāma’s slaying of the Śūdra ascetic mentioned earlier. Such a conception has had significant implications both for the redefinition of the Hindu state in late medieval India and for a powerful vision of the construction of a post-independence Indian utopia in the modern era. There is some evidence that Hindu monarchs of the medieval period confronted with the threat of the alien forces of Islam turned increasingly to the Rāmāyana as a source for the revalorization of a specific notion of divine Hindu kingship (Pollock 1993).

In more modern times, political leaders ranging from Mahātmā Gandhi to Rajiv Gandhi and the ideologues of the resurgent Hindu right have frequently raised the slogan of “Rāmāyana,” the idealized integral Hindu polity, as a mobilizing strategy. The ideological and emotional force derived from this aspect of the Rāmāyana is such that it is no accident that the leaders of the Bharatiya Janata party identified the issue of the “Rāmajanmabhūma”—the campaign to erect a temple dedicated to Rāma in place of an existing mosque at the site traditionally believed to be his birthplace—as the one that would vault them into positions of power.

The Rāmāyana has also played a role in the area of ethics in traditional India. As the ideal man and ideal monarch, Rāma is everywhere held up as the paragon of ethical behavior, scrupulously following all the rules put forward by the culture of dharma. In this he is, again, often in contrast with the parallel epic heroes of the Mahābhārata, who frequently engage in unethical and even vicious behavior. (Rāmāyana 16.17). Rāma makes a particularly interesting and enlightening contrast with his fellow avatāra, Kṛṣṇa, who, as he is represented in texts such as the Harivamsa, Mahābhārata, Bāhagavata Purāṇa, and the like, blithely transgresses the rules of social, sexual, and ethical propriety. Rāma, on the other hand, is most starkly to be contrasted with the great anherof of the Rāmāyana, Rāvanā, giving rise to such popular moralizing prescriptions as “You should always try to behave like Rāma, never like Rāvanā.”

Rāma’s ethical conduct is set as the standard against which others are to be measured. The Rāmāyana has often been called into question, whether in Vālmiki’s text or by later authors, have tended to loom large in the popular consciousness. The two episodes most often cited in this regard are Rāma’s killing of the monkey-king Vālin in ambush in the Kīkṣīndhākīśa (Rāmāyana 4.17–19) and the abandonment and exile of his blameless, pregnant wife Siṭā (7.44). (R. Goldman 1997). The former is the subject of lively debate between Vālin and Rāma in the text itself, in which the stricken monkey sharply castigates Rāma for what he sees as a gross violation of the rules of combat. Rāma rejects Vālin’s criticism on a number of grounds, and his arguments succeed in satisfying the other monkey in at least one instance. Rāma’s defense is indeed acted in accordance with dharma. Nonetheless, the issue has continued to haunt the imagination of Rāmāyana commentators and audiences to the present day, as evidenced in such documents as the popular Rāmāyanaśākhavālīs in which contemporary playwrights and authors respond to “doubts” or questions on the part of the faithful.

The ethical issue raised by the abandonment of Siṭā is not explicitly engaged in Vālmiki’s text. The only hint the poet gives us of the controversial nature of Rāma’s decision is the fact that Rāma forbids his brothers, on pain of suffering dire consequences, from questioning or criticizing it (Rāmāyana 7.44.18). Nonetheless, this seemingly cruel and unjust treatment of the devoted and virtuous Siṭā has disturbed readers of the text
from ancient times down to the present. The great poet-playwright, Bhavabhūti, in his eighth-century drama the *Uttarārāmacarita*, has several of his characters, most notably Rāma himself, roundly condemn the cruelty of his treatment of Sītā (R. Goldman 1997: 201). Later authors such as the immensely influential Tulsidīsa confront the issue with a magisterial silence, excising the entire episode from their renderings of the Rāma story. This issue grew heated once again during the production of the popular Indian television serialisation of the tale, the *Rāmāyana* of Ramanand Sagar. The question of whether or not to include the epilogue representing the rejection of Sītā led to political conflict, labor unrest, and litigation that pitted a sweeper caste identifying itself with Vālmiki against high-caste Hindu groups (Jain 1988: 81). The controversy was only resolved through a very delicate rendering of the episode on the part of Sagar, who, treating it from a kind of feminist perspective, makes Sītā, and not Rāma, the author of her own banishment (Tully 1991: 132–33).

**The Rāmāyāna as a religious text**

Perhaps the most dramatic impact the *Rāmāyāna* has had on Hindu culture and civilization, particularly in the medieval and modern periods, lies in the area of religion. As noted earlier, the received text of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyāna* in all versions and recensions identifies Rāma as an *avatāra* of the supreme divinity Viṣṇu at various points in the poem. The history of this identification has been, as we shall discuss next, a matter of some scholarly dispute. However, it is fair to say that for the overwhelming majority of Hindus, the main thrust of the epic story is the exemplary narrative of god’s birth and career as a man engaged in the central avatāric mission of the salvation of the virtuous, the destruction of evil-doers, and the reestablishment of dharma as the governing principle of the cosmos. The identification of Rāma with Viṣṇu, like that of Kuśa in the *Mahābhārata*, is both textually and theologically complex. The theological complexity derives from the fact that one of the features of the principal human *avatāras* is the ambiguity with which the incarnation is represented as both man and god and yet neither clearly one nor the other and the fact that the nature of the incarnate divinity is often represented as occluded even to himself (R. Goldman 1995). The liminal status of the *avatāra* is particularly pronounced in the case of Rāma, since by the terms of Rāvana’s boon, the demon cannot be destroyed by a simple god (Pollock 1991: 15–43). Although Vālmiki’s poem seems thoroughly suffused with the notion of Rāma’s divinity, the work only sporadically takes on an intensely devotional tone, focusing more centrally on the narrative, aesthetic, and exemplary aspects of the story. In this, it contrasts with the many later renderings of the tale, some of which, notably for example, the *Rāmacarītāmāna* of Tulsidīsa, are deeply and thoroughly permeated with an intense spirit of Rāma-bhakti or devotion to Rāma as a personal savior.

Although there seems to be only scanty evidence for the large-scale cultic worship of Rāma as a temple divinity prior to around the ninth century CE (Pollock 1993), the practice became widespread in the centuries following that time. Rāma temples sprang up throughout India, and Rāma and Sītā emerged as the central sectarian divinities of a wide variety of religious traditions, ranging from the Viśṇullātva schools of Rāmānuga and his followers based largely on Vālmiki, through the mainstream North Indian devotional tradition textually grounded in Tulsidīsa, to the esoteric gender-bending beliefs and praxis of the rasik sādhus of Ayodhya (van der Veer 1988), who canonize the obscure and esoteric

**Bhusudāri Rāmāyana (Keśilār 1998).** Rāma has, as noted earlier, also become a central icon of Hindu religious and political revivalism, especially in the north. Certainly by the time of the composition of the early Mahāpurāṇas, Rāma has become virtually universally accepted as one of the standard Viśṇu Purāṇic group of the ten *avatāras* of Viṣṇu (Brockington 1984: 233–41). Some of the later Viśṇu Purāṇas show a more complex sense of the Rāma-*avatāra*, regarding Daśaratha’s four sons, whom Vālmiki already recognizes as partial incarnations of Viṣṇu (*Rāmāyana* 1.17.6–9), as corresponding to the four manifestations (*vyūhas*) of Viṣṇu as they are represented in the Pāñcaratra school of Viṣṇu temple theology (Brockington 1984: 236).

In addition to the towering figure as Rāma as god-become-man, two other major characters in the epic story have acquired significant religious identities of their own. The first of these, of course, is Sītā. Since Rāma is generally acknowledged to be one of the principal incarnations of Viṣṇu, it follows that his wife Sītā must be a corresponding manifestation of Viṣṇu’s consort, the goddess Śrī or Lakṣmi, although this is not made as clearly explicit in Vālmiki’s poem as it is Rāma’s identification with Viṣṇu. As such, Sītā, along with Rāma, becomes a focal object of worship as she is part of the divine couple or *yugal surkha* central to some forms of Viṣṇu temple worship. In some religious traditions, such as those of the rasik sādhus (van der Veer 1988) and the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, Sītā may be foregrounded as an object of devotion or approached in her motherly aspect as the principal intercessor between the worshiper and the lord (Mumme 1991). In some Śākta traditions, particularly in eastern India, Sītā emerges clearly as the dominant member of the divine couple, and it is her power as the goddess that enables Rāma to defeat his demonic foes. In some cases, she is actually called upon to rescue him from them (W. L. Smith 1988).

The second of these figures is the semi-divine monkey-herd Hanumān, the partial incarnation of the Viṣṇu wind-god Vāyu. This fascinating figure achieves enormous status in the Viṣṇu temple tradition in his role as the *paramarāmabhakta* or supreme exemplar of devotion to Lord Rāma. As such, he is extolled in many versions of the Rāma story and is a regular figure in plastic representations of the story and its major characters. But the popularity of Hanumān is such that it extends well beyond the cult of Rāma and the celebration of the *Ramakīrti*. He is widely worshiped as a divinity in his own right in connections that are either utterly separate from the Rāmāvata story or at best only tangentially connected to it. As such, he has taken on many roles as a divine intercessor. He is the patron divinity of the aṅkāra, the wrestlers’ pit of North and Western India, the highest recourse for those afflicted with spirit possession, a much invoked aid in connection with fertility and even a stalwart defender of the Republic of India against the perceived threat of Pakistan. Indeed, it has been asserted that of all the manifold divinities in worship among the diverse communities of Hindu India, Hanumān, whose shrines seem to appear on every street corner, is the most widely worshiped of all (Goldman and Goldman 1994; Ludvik 1994; Lutgendorf 1997).

**The Rāmāyāna in India and Beyond**

In the more than two thousand years since the composition of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyana*, the Rāma story has undergone a truly extraordinary number of reworkings at the hands of authors composing in every major language and belonging to every significant indigenous
religious tradition of the vast, rich, and diverse cultural domains throughout Asia. In one
form or another, the text has been widely available and continually in use by countless
hundreds of millions of people for as long or longer than virtually any non-Indian text still
known and imbibed by a mass audience.

The almost staggering profusion of Rāmāyana versions in the high literary, folk, and—
more recently—popular genres of the region is, first and foremost, a consequence of the
tremendous importance that many traditional cultures of Asia have placed upon the story.
These versions have been multiplied many times in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the regional
languages of India and beyond at every chronological stage in their development. The epic,
moreover, along with its characters and central themes has been appropriated by virtually
every religious, philosophical, and sectarian tradition in the long history of the cultures of
South and Southeast Asia. All of this serves as a demonstration that the text was seen as
being of absolutely seminal importance, so much so that regional and sectarian audiences
need to have versions available to them that they could understand and which adapted the
epic story to the various and changing needs of all segments of the society.

From as far back as the tools of textual criticism can take us, the monumental Sanskrit
poem had already been differentiated into a number of regional recensions and subrecen-
sions written down in virtually every area and script of India. In addition, the epic story
was reworked numerous times for inclusion into other Sanskrit texts, such as the
Mahābhārata, many Purāṇas, and numerous religious and philosophical texts. Versions
of this sort are the Rāmpūrhāṇyaḥ of the Mahābhārata, the Anantarādyānya, the
Adhīyāmarāmāyaṇa, the Yogavāsaṅgī, and the like. (Broekhuis 1984: 233–41.) The
Rāma story, moreover, became a favorite theme of the poets and playwrights of classical
Sanskrit. Numerous Sanskrit literary works explore particular aspects of the complex
Rāma story, and although some of these are now lost or known only as fragments
(Raghavan 1961), poetic masterpieces, such as the Rāghuvamśa of Kālidāsa, the
Bhaṭṭīyāvyasa, and the Rāmāyanacampū, and important Sanskrit dramas, such as the
Pratimāṇḍakā of Bhāsa and the Mahāvīrhacarita and Uttarāśīralīcarita of Bhavabhūti,
are still read and deeply enjoyed by those conversant with Sanskrit

Nor are any or all of the Rāmāyanas restricted to the cultural universe of Hindu India.
Despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that the epic’s hero, Rāma, came very early onto
be regarded as one of the principal avatāras of the great Hindu divinity Viṣṇu, a central
figure of devotional Hinduism, his story was of such importance and popularity that even
non-Hindu groups, such as the Buddhists and the Jains, rapidly learned the value of
adapting the Rāmāyaṇa to serve the propagation of their own religious systems.
The Rāma story was appropriated early by the Buddhists. Thus the historical Buddha
is often said to have been born in a branch of the Ikṣvāku dynasty whose greatest hero was
Rāma. The Rāma story in its various parts figures significantly in the important Jātaka
tales, which provide a transmigration biography of the previous births of the
Bodhisattva, the future Buddha. One of them, the Daśaratha Jātaka, recounts a version of
the epic story that completely excises its central avatāra narrative of the rapacious demon
king and his abduction of Sīta, focusing instead on Rāma Paṇḍû’s legendary self-control
as an exemplar illustration of this cardinal Buddhist virtue. In another, the Śrama Jātaka,
the avatāra is transformed into the demon in which the banishment of Rāma is attributed to a curse laid
upon his father for having, in his youth, accidentally slain the son of a blind ascetic couple.
This reworked with a different cast of characters. In this reading, Rāma is in fact one of

the earlier incarnations of the Bodhisattva. Moreover, Vālmiki’s poem is known to and
admired by the first century CE Buddhist poet Avangaha who not only alludes to the
Rāmāyaṇa’s representation of Vālmiki as the first poet but also clearly uses his creation
as the model for his poetic biography of the Buddha, the Buddhacarita.

Jaina authors especially make the Rāma legend their own, regarding Rāma not, of
course, as an avatāra of godhead but as one of the thirty-two saṅkṣiptapuruṣas or exemplary
Jaina laymen and the hero of numerous Jaina Rāmāyaṇas such as the Rāmāyaṇa of both
Sanskrit and Prakrit (Narasimharach 1939). Here even the martial character of the epic
warrior-hero, the scourge of the demonic rākṣasas, must give way before the Jaina
imperative of ahīṃsā, noninjury, to all living beings. Thus the Hindu avatāra’s central and
most defining act, the slaughter of his ten-headed nemesis, Rāvaṇa, is, in Jaina versions
of the tale, assigned to his loyal younger brother Lakṣmana.

In the regional languages of India, the influence of the Rāmāyaṇa has been even more
profound. In virtually all of the major literary languages of India, there exists a signif-
iciently and immensely popular version of the epic that is regarded as marking the very beginning
of that language’s literary tradition. Such, for example, is the popularity and prestige of
poems, such as Kṛtitas’a Bengali Rāmāyaṇa, Kampan’s Tamālīrmāvatāram, and the
massively popular devotional rendering of the sixteenth-century epic in the Old Avadhī
dialect of Hindi, the Rāmcarīrāmānas of the scholar-poet Tulasiāda, widely revered among
the three hundred million inhabitants of the “Hindi Belt” of North India.

Even these powerful and hegemonic regional versions of the Rāmāyaṇa do not exhaust
the diversity of the poem. Each region has, in addition to this kind of major literary
nachrichtung: many other versions, performative and literary, oral and written. In this
category may be noted the various Rāmalīls of North India, the Jāta plays of Bengal, and
the many folk versions and dance-dramas of the Rāmāyaṇa story known from every region of
the subcontinent. One recent author has noted and described some fifty different litera-
ry Rāmāyaṇas from the eastern states of Bengal, Assam, and Orissa alone, each with
a different religious, aesthetic, or ethical thrust (W. L. Smith 1988). In addition, the
Rāma story has virtually saturated the plastic arts of South Asia, in innumerable temple
scultures and reliefs, court paintings and folk painting, and even the ubiquitous commercial
“calender” art.

A text of such massive diffusion that has permeated the “high” and folk traditions of
textual composition as well as the visual arts of both pan-Indian and regional cultures for
nearly three millennia can hardly have failed to make a profound impression on the popu-
lar culture of modern cosmopolitan India. The nature of this impression can be judged
by an examination of the media of popular culture in both their elite forms and those that
are consumed by a mass audience. A survey of modern Indian literature from the time of the
nineteenth-century Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt down to Salman Rushdie
reveals that the Rāma story and its themes and characters appear to continually haunt the
imagination of the modern writer in the colonial and postcolonial period. A survey of
Indian cinema yields similar results. For not only have the producers of the popular Hindi
musicals exploited various aspects of the story but also the story of Rāma has formed a
rich source for the makers of the popular “mythologicals,” such as Homji Wadia’s
Harishman Chhulisa and the Telugu Sampoorna Ramayana. Even the art films of such
 auteurs as Aravindan in his Kamcanaa Sita and the “avant garde” Akshara Theaker’s
production of Ramayana have based their works on the epic tale.
Nowhere, perhaps, has the immense popularity of the Rāmāyana been demonstrated more clearly and dramatically than by the extraordinary success of the lengthy serialization of the epic created for Doordarshan, the Indian government television network, by the filmmaker Ramanand Sagar. This production was originally broadcast throughout India in weekly half-hour episodes and has since been widely marketed there and throughout the world in the form of video cassettes and DVDs. Newspaper and eyewitness accounts describe how the showings would empty the bustling streets and bāāsās of the country, leaving an impression of desolation as people, often having bathed and dressed as for worship, would gather in front of television screens to watch the unfolding of the ancient and well-known story with rapt attention. The tremendous political and cultural aspects of this phenomenal success have already been the subject of a considerable body of journalistic and scholarly analysis. Indeed as recent events—many of them tragic—have demonstrated, the influence of the Rāmāyana on the hearts and minds of the Indian people—far from waning with time—has grown both more powerful and more apparent in recent years.

But the cultural saturation of the Rāma story is by no means confined to the Indian subcontinent. As is well known to students of Southeast Asia, the Rāmāyana has achieved a position of productive cultural centrality in virtually all of the countries of this far-flung and highly diverse region. In Buddhist Thailand the Rāmākien becomes a sort of foundational epic for the Ayutthayan dynasty (1468–1767 CE) which rules its descendants after the epic hero Rama (1, 2, 3, and so on). At least six or seven poetic or dramatic versions of the story, many of which are attributed to the various kings Rāmas, are widely known and performed (H. Sarkar 1983). In Laos the Phra Lak Phra Lam and the Govīy Dvāraṭhī give eloquent testimony to the localization and naturalization (to use Sachcheidandann Sahai’s phrase) of the epic in a variety of milieus (Sahai 1976). In Islamic Malaysia and Indonesia, as is well known, the Rāma story in the form of texts such as the Hikayat Seri Rāma, the Javanese Rāmāyana Kakekwin, the widespread and diverse styles of wayang or shadow puppet theater, and the temple sculptures of such complexes as Prambanan have established the story of Rama there regarded as the model of an Islamic prince, as one of the region’s principal cultural artifacts and acculturative devices (Sweeney 1972, 1980). The Rāmāyana tradition is well attested in Burma with the performance tradition of the Yama-pan. Moreover, it has deeply saturated traditional Cambodian culture in a wide variety of forms, including various literary renderings of the Rāma story, such as the Rāmakerti from around the sixteenth century CE (Pou 1977), and the famous reliefs at Angkor Wat (Han and Zauw 1980). In Sri Lanka the literary rendering of the story attributed to the sixth-century CE monarch Kumārīnāda, the Jānakīcharaṇa, is thought to be the earliest Sanskrit work to be found in that country (Godakumbura 1980). Even as far as the Philippines we find texts such as the Maharadja Lawana, current among the Maranao ethnic group from perhaps the seventeenth century, which have kept the story, derived here no doubt from Malay sources, alive (Francisco 1980).

But the Rāmāyana story has spread in other directions as well. It has traveled to the West where there are a number of poorly studied Persian versions of the tale and notably to the North and East. J. W. de Jong (1983) and others have studied and translated the Tibetan manuscripts of the Rāmāyana found at Tun-huang, while the Mongolian scholar T. S. Damdinsuren (1980) has discovered and studied four versions of varying length in Mongolian as well as three Tibetan versions. Khotanese versions have been found at Tun-huang as well. Mongolian versions appear to have come from Tibet, and their influence can in turn be found as far north as Central Asia, as a Kalmuk folk version of the epic has been preserved in manuscript form in the Siberian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Chandra 1980: 651–52).

Although the presence and the destiny of the Rāmāyana story in East Asia is harder to trace than in some other areas of the continent where its influence is pervasive, it is less real and may, in some ways, be more interesting. There can be little doubt that some versions, particularly those found in the Jītasaks and other Buddhist sources, would have been known to Chinese scholars from the early centuries CE. K’ang-seng-hui, for example, is said to have translated Jītaka tales into Chinese in 251 CE, and other versions followed in the ensuing centuries as the passion for the translation of Indic Buddhist texts into Chinese grew into a virtual cottage industry. It is also well known, as mentioned earlier, that Tibetan and Khotanese texts of the Rāmāyana were kept in the cave library at Tun-huang along with the pien-wen manuscripts of early Chinese literary texts (DuBridge 1970: 160–61). Indeed, it has been a subject of extensive scholarly debate as to whether, and to what extent, the character of the hero of the famous sixteenth-century novel Hsi-yu chi (The Divine Monkey), Sun Wu-k’ung, and his antecedents in Chinese literature may have been inspired by Hanumān, the monkey divinity and hero of the Rāmāyana tradition, who shares many of his characteristics and exploits.

From China, it is hardly surprising to note, versions of the Rāma legend made their way in time to Japan. The Japanese Sanskrit scholar Minoru Hara has studied two interesting texts derived from Chinese Buddhist sources. The first is an abridgment of the Rāma legend found in the twelfth-century collection of popular tales, the Hobutsusha of Tairano Yasyoyori that appears to derive from a Chinese canonical Liu-pu-lo-mi-ching (otherwise known as Liu-tu-isci-ching or Rokudōjikkō, the Six Pāramitāsūtra). The second, a rendering of the Rāmāyana episode in which Dāsaratha is cursed for accidentally killing a blind ascetic’s son, is from a tenth-century collection of tales, the Sambo-ekotoba of Manzumono Tamenori, derived, no doubt, from the canonical version of the Sāma Jītaka. In addition to these Buddhist canonical sources, which inspired a number of popular literary authors, Hara hypothesizes that the Rāma story may have made its way into popular or courtly circulation directly from the oral versions narrated by Hindu savants, such as Bharadvāja Bodhisena, who were known to have visited Japan from the eighth century onwards (Hara 1983). In East Asia, as in the rest of the continent, the Rāmāyana story has been fully localized and naturalized and is rarely regarded as belonging to an exotic or alien culture.

**LITERARY AND SCHOLARLY TREATMENT OF THE RĀMĀYANA IN INDIA AND BEYOND**

It is hardly surprising that a text that has had so diverse and profound an impact on the civilization of India for so long a period should have given rise to numerous additional ways of representing in the spheres of literary and artistic production, the performing arts, folklore, philosophical and religious discourse, and scholarly and vernacular analysis both in India and in the West. No doubt the oldest and most sustained surviving corpus of scholarly analysis of the Vālmiki Rāmāyana is that contained in the substantial
body of Sanskrit commentaries the work inspired in India. These, of which some forty-five survive in whole or part (Bhatt and Shah 1960–75, 7: 655–56), were composed largely between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries CE (R. Goldman 1984: 115–17; Lefebre 1994: 17–28). They vary considerably in their density and in the textual and substantive issues they address, ranging from the very sparse gloss attributed to Rāmānuja, to thoroughgoing analytical treatises like the Dharmākhyātan of Tryambakārya Mahākin. They collectively present us with a diverse and learned set of readings of the poem by a series of scholars for whom it was of more than purely intellectual interest and who, one may say, more closely approximate the "intended audience" of the epic than any other readers who have left us written records of their responses to it. As such, these commentaries constitute a critical resource for our own understanding of the poem and of its receptive history. It is a pity that these works have not, for the most part, been taken seriously or even read in many cases by modern Western and Indian students of the epic.

It must be noted by way of background to the contributions of the Sanskrit commentaries that they are rarely if ever works of the sort of disinterested or objective scholarship that was unquestioningly associated with European and European-style Orientalism in the pre-Saidian era. Most of the works—when they are more than mere glosses—are the products of scholars associated with one or another school of Śrīvaśnavism, for which religious system the Vālmikī Rāmāyana is the foundational text. From this it follows that the vast majority of surviving Sanskrit commentaries on the text, and virtually all of the significantly analytical ones, are associated with one or another of the manuscript traditions of the southern recension or with the mixed recensional versions recorded in the Devanagari script and affiliated largely with the southern text. As such, several of the surviving commentaries, notably those of Ṣaṅkarasmārtarāja, Nāgāra Bhatta, Govindarāja, Mādhavayogin, and Satyavrītha, concern themselves to a greater or lesser extent with the numerous theological issues that present themselves during a reading of the poem, particularly from a Vaiṣṇava perspective. These commentators are by no means in any kind of agreement as to these issues and often debate and quarrel with the interpretations of their predecessors, whom they may quote with approbation or revile in the strongest possible terms.

But said this, it must be acknowledged that the Sanskrit commentaries are important repositories of scholarly information and interpretation. Their authors draw on vast, even encyclopedic knowledge of the śāstra literature to shed considerable light on the innumerable grammatical, lexical, rhetorical, and textual problems that a work such as the Vālmikī Rāmāyana inevitably presents. In the textual area, particularly, it is noteworthy that their authors pay careful attention to the textual variants available to them and earlier commentators and make interesting judgments as to the spuriousness and authenticity of individual verses and passages. In addition, they provide much useful information about the realia, flora, fauna, architecture, technology, and social and religious customs, which they associate with the epic period. While it must be acknowledged that the commentators cannot be regarded as a univocal or infallible resource, coming as they do many centuries later than the composition of the Rāmāyana text and frequently disagreeing among themselves, they are at least tacitly aware of the speculative nature of much Rāmāyana exegesis and remain an essential source for contemporary Rāmāyana scholarship.

The antiquity of the Rāmāyana and its centrality to Hindu and larger Indian civilization over the millennia early on attracted the attention of European savants interested in Sanskrit and the culture of which it was the principal medium. The text of Vālmiki was edited by William Carey and Joshua Marshman in the opening years of the nineteenth century (1806–10), and scholarly interest in the text and its message gained force and momentum steadily through the nineteenth and twentieth century. Early European scholarship on the Rāmāyana, in many ways like that stimulated by the Mahābhārata, concerned itself with the issues of the sources and historicity of the story. Some scholars such as Albrecht Weber (1872) viewed the poem as derivative of what he saw as earlier texts, notably the Dāsaratha Jātaka and even the Homeric epics. Others saw the work as kind of extended allegory referring to historical, natural, or mythological events. Thus Christian Lassen (1866–74, 1) interpreted the epic as a coded reminiscence of the Åryan subjugation of the Dravidian south, while J. Taibbo Wheels (1867–81, 2: 1–406) saw in it the conquest of the Buddhist civilization of Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Victor Henry (1904: 162–67) read the text as the reflection of ancient solar mythology, while Hermann Jacobi (1893: 120–39) saw in it a revision of the Rg Vedic myth of Indra and Vṛtra. A. Weber (1872), likewise, additionally read the epic story as a myth alluding to the cycle of agricultural growth. In fact, the Rāmāyana, like the Mahābhārata, presented itself as a fertile field for the popular theories of textual interpretation of the nineteenth century (Brockington 1998: 48–52; R. Goldman 1984: 14–29).

Rāmāyana studies in the twentieth century underwent an explosive growth during the course of which Vālmiki’s epic and the many other retellings the Rāma story from virtually all parts of Asia have been studied and subjected to analyses that take into account the diverse linguistic, textual, historical, literary, rhetorical, religious, political, social, and psychological aspects of the Rāmāyana tradition in its various settings. It would be impossible within the scope of this discussion to even begin to scratch the surface of the enormous body of Rāmāyana scholarship in dozens of languages that has appeared in print (Brockington 1998; Krishnamurty 1991; Sientencron, Gietz, Malins, Kollmann, Schreiner, and Brockington 1994). However, a few central questions and issues concerning the text of Vālmiki have tended to stand out in the discussions of scholars and continue to inspire learned debate. These issues center around the distinction—also important in Mahābhārata studies—between the so-called synthetic and analytic interpretations of the text. One such issue concerns the textual history of the poem itself. Jacobi (1893: 55–59) argued that the first and last books of the epic as we know it are later additions to a central core consisting of what are now Books 2 to 6. Similarly, he argued that the central portions of the fifth book or the Sundararākṣana, the episodes that deal with Hamamīn’s exploits in Lāṅkā, are later than the older portions of that book. These assertions have stimulated a lively and still ongoing debate about the epic’s textual history (Brockington 1998: 377–97; R. Goldman 1984: 60–81; Goldman and Goldman 1996: 87–91). This discussion has, of course, involved controversy about the date of the text as well (Brockington 1998: 379–83; R. Goldman 1984: 14–23).

One particularly controversial issue associated with this type of analysis concerns the question of whether or not earliest strata of Vālmiki’s text recognizes Rāma as an avatāra of the supreme divinity Viṣṇu. Some early European scholars argued that textual evidence supported the view that the oldest portions of the poem do not regard the hero in this way (Jacobi 1893: 61, 65; Muir 1967, 4: 441–81), while some more recent authorities have taken an opposite view (Pollock 1991: 15–55). The issue is still a matter of debate among Rāmāyana scholars (Brockington 1998: 464–72). Interest in issues such as these and many others relevant to a deeper understanding of the Vālmiki Rāmāyana has been reignited in
recent years by the completion of the critical edition of the text by scholars at the Oriental Institute at Baroda (Bhatt and Shah 1960–75) and by the appearance of a translation of the critical text accompanied by elaborate introductions and copious annotations in which these and other scholarly issues are discussed (R. Goldman 1984–96).

Contemporary scholarship on the Rāmāyana ranges widely over the intellectual spectrum with many interesting studies being undertaken in the field from such diverse disciplinary perspectives as feminist and gender studies (S. Goldman 2001), psychological analysis (R. Goldman 1978), performance studies (Blackburn 1996; Schechner 1985), religious (Lutgendorf 1991b), political (Pollock 1993), folkloric (Ramanujan 1991b; Singh and Datta 1993), and so on. The diversity of disciplinary approaches to the study of the Rāmāyana in all its many manifestations has given rise over the past few decades to numerous monographs and anthologies concerned with the manifold aspects of the tradition (Iyengar 1983; Richman 1991; Singh and Datta 1993; Thiel-Horstmann 1991). So rich is the Rāmāyana in implications for the study of all aspects of traditional and modern South Asia that it is likely that scholarly interest in this great textual tradition will continue in the coming decades and develop in as yet unanticipated dimensions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is safe to say that no full or deeply nuanced understanding of the cultures and societies of South and Southeast Asia can be achieved without at least a basic familiarity with the plot, characters, and central themes of the Rāma story first introduced to a broad audience by the legendary poet-sage Vālmiki in his immortal epic, the Rāmāyana. The destiny of this extraordinary work and its unparalleled influence on the arts, cultures, societies, and religions of the region from the middle of the first millennium BCE down to the present day have amply validated Lord Brahmā’s prophecy concerning the longevity of the poem:

यावत सिखायति गिरया वार्त्तिसब्ध महित्तले 
तावत रामायनकाति लोके शुचि प्रकटायति

As long as the mountains and rivers shall endure upon the earth, so long will the story of the Rāmāyana be current throughout the worlds.

NOTES

1 All Rāmāyana references are to the critical edition published in Baroda.
2 The Mahābhārata reference is to the critical edition published in Pune.

CHAPTER FIVE

PURĀNA

Velcheru Narayana Rao

Pūrāṇa is a general term used to refer to a large number of religious texts, most of them composed in Sanskrit, which defy ready description, classification, authorship, or dating. Despite this obvious difficulty, efforts to assign authorship, classify, date, and describe them have been made both within the Hindu tradition and outside the tradition by modern scholars. This chapter is an effort to present the indigenous concepts of the Pūrāṇa and to provide a brief overview of modern scholarship on the Pūrāṇas.

INDIGENOUS CONCEPTS OF THE PURĀNA

Traditionally, Vyāsa is believed to be the author of all Pūrāṇas. The son of Parāśara, Vyāsa, also known as Kṛṣṇa Dvaiḍyānya, was born an adult and had direct access to perfect knowledge of everything past, present, and future. Vyāsa was also the editor of the Veda, which he had divided into four parts: Rig, Yajur, Sāma, and Atharva. Authorship by such a superhuman person elevates the Pūrāṇas to an infallible status and endows them with a coherent meaning. The disparate texts themselves include a variety of contents, which in fact are not organized coherently. However, the idea that such a powerful personality as Vyāsa is the single author of these many texts encourages the readers/listeners trained in the culture to see a coherent meaning throughout despite apparent inconsistencies. Tradition also speaks of the Pūrāṇa as a broad genre, including the epic texts. While it is generally stated that there are eighteen Pūrāṇas and eighteen more Upapurāṇas or minor Pūrāṇas, the fact is that there are a lot more than thirty-six texts. It is difficult to list all the names under which the various texts are known in different parts of India or to arrive at a firm textual boundary to each text. Such textual flexibility of the Pūrāṇas was accepted in the tradition with no anxiety. No one seriously concerned themselves with minor variations between one version of a text and the other or for that matter even when the variations were huge, as is well known in the case of Skanda Pūrāṇa.

In contrast, the Vedas, included in the class of śruti (revealed texts), are considered fixed, unalterable, and beyond translation. They were rarely put into writing but were memorized with incalculable care to their word order, accent, and stress. The Hindu tradition speaks of the Pūrāṇas as texts that expand on the Vedas and consider them compliments of each other. The Pūrāṇas renew themselves and adapt to the changing times.