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Introduction

Like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana too has influenced the Indian cultural and literary scene through translations, and retellings. The *Ramayana* is believed to be older than the Mahabharata, and is believed to have been composed by Valmiki between 5th and 4th century BC. It was composed in Sanskrit and is much shorter than the *Mahabharata*, consisting of 24,000 verses in seven kandas. Valmiki is believed to be the adikavi (First Poet) as he was the first to write such a huge kavya of mammoth proportions. The epic does not have the complexity or range of characters like the *Mahabharata*, and the story is recounted in a much more focused manner. We do not have the multitudes of stories branching off in various directions, providing a story within a story. The major attraction of the Ramayana is its strong philosophical content and moral message on the duties expected of a human being. It raises ethical and moral issues regarding existence on earth. Rama is depicted as the ideal to which all human beings should aspire. If the *Mahabharata* gives us a lot of morally ambiguous characters in shades of grey, the moral message of *Ramayana* is clearer with its upright and virtuous people ranged against the evil ones.

The *Ramayana* also was initially an oral epic, to be written down only years later. The oral tradition meant that much got added and much got lost in the process, with the result that we really cannot be sure if the text that we today know as Valmiki Ramayana was actually completely composed by Valmiki. In fact, there are speculations about the identity of Valmiki himself. But this did not prevent the epic from becoming part of the common man's heritage in India. Paula Richman says: "Throughout Indian history many authors and performers have produced, and many patrons have supported, diverse tellings of the *Ramayana* in numerous media" (*Many Ramayanas*). In fact, she argues that it is wrong to assume that Valmiki's Ramayana is the definitive text, and that other versions are derivatives of this: "We need [instead] to consider the "many *Ramayanas*", of which "Valmiki's telling is one, Tulsi's another, Kampan's another, the Buddhist jataka yet another, and so forth. Like other authors, Valmiki is rooted in a particular social and ideological context. His text represents an intriguing telling, but it is one among many".

Initial Translations

Ramayana passed into the multiple Indian languages only with the medieval period, when most of those languages were finding their feet. But there was a retelling of it in Prakrit in the 4th century AD – *Paumachariya*, the Jain version written by Bimal Suri. This also marks the first interlingual translation between Sanskrit and Prakrit. This was an anti-Brahminical text, where Ravana is not a monster or Hanuman a monkey, but “vidyadharas, semi-divine personages” (Dash and Pattanaik, 138). This also reveals how translations can be

‘original’ creations, marked by the ideology of the translator. Bhatti’s *Bhattikavyam* written in the 7th century AD was a retelling in Sanskrit itself.

“The Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places”–
Romila Thapar (*Many Ramayanas*).

The first of the Indian language versions was Kamban’s *Iramavataram* in Tamil, also known as *Kambaramayanam*. Dash and Pattanaik attribute this to Kamban’s anti-Sanskrit stance, as Tamil had a long history of independent existence behind it. Nagachandra in the 12th century wrote the Jain version of the Ramayana in Kannada, called *Ramachandra Charitrapurana*. This had a radically different story line, in that Ravana is the tragic hero of the epic. He abducts Sita in a moment of weakness and is killed by Lakshmana instead of Rama. Rama converts to Jainism in the end and becomes an ascetic. Nagachandra is known as Abhinava Pampa after the poet Pampa who wrote the Jain version of the Mahabharata. Sarala Das in his Oriya *Bichitra Ramayana* deviates slightly from Valmiki’s version. The washerman who tells tales which leads to the banishment of Sita is changed to a milkman who has an adulterous wife. When the wife is discovered by her husband, she is not defensive and asks her husband why he could not put up with her if Rama could tolerate a Sita who had stayed with Ravana. Dash and Pattanaik argue that this story challenges “the Brahminic notion of chastity and male domination” (147). Balaram Das’s *Jagamohan Ramayana* is also an Oriya text that subverts the well-known Valmiki version.

Other languages do not seem to have departed radically in terms of story and characterization like this. Krittivasa’s Bengali translation was in the 14th century. Ezhuthachchan’s *Adhyatmaramayanam Kilippattu* in the 15th century was modeled on the Sanskrit work *Adhyatmaramayanam*, and is believed to have laid the foundation of the Malayalam language. Tulsidas’s *Ramcharitmanas* in the 16th century was written in the Awadhi dialect of Hindi, and its aim was to infuse the spirit of bhakti in a people who were thought to be spiritually adrift. Tulsi who wrote during the Mughal period, is believed to have had the aim of drawing people to Hinduism through his retelling. His translation is thus a product of the socio-political context of his times, an individualist answer to what he felt to be the need of his age.

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Ideological bias in translation

Like the Mahabharata, the translations or rewritings of Ramayana are too numerous to be recorded comprehensively.

We have seen how Jain retellings radically altered the story and interrogated the Brahministic bias of Valmiki. Ideologically

oriented translations like these, from the dalit viewpoint or

feminist viewpoint, have been done in the 20th century. Of these, *Periyar E. V. Ramasami Naicker* the one worth mentioning is the Tamil *Iramayanakkurippukal*

(Notes on the Ramayana) written by E. V. Ramasamy Naicker in 1955. This was actually an interpretation of the *Ramayana* from his political viewpoint of the Dravidian movement. He also wrote the *Iramayanappatirankal* (Characters from the Ramayana) in 1930, which was an interpretation of the characters in the epic. Both were violently subversive, in that they successfully dethroned Rama and gave a sympathetic portrayal of Ravana. Periyar, as he was known, was acridly against what he perceived to be the North Indian Brahmin bias in Valmiki's epic. His campaign for a South India that was free of North Indian domination tended to view the epics also with suspicion. Thus in his reading Ravana becomes the symbol of the victims of North Indian oppression; this in due course came to be extended to all dalits or victims of caste oppression. His works were widely translated and even now continues to have the support of dalit movements in other parts of India. His work inspired a play called *Keemayanam* in which Rama was a drunkard and Sita was a woman of loose character.

Periyar's work of interpretation is a good example of how a translation can be used to push an ideology across. In fact, his literary writings gained him widespread popularity and eventually led to the establishment of what is today the political party of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Paula Richman says: "... his denial of the epic's sacrality echoes his own youthful disillusionment with Hinduism, while his condemnation of Rama as an agent of North Indian oppression parallels his attack on Brahmins as dominating both the Congress Party and local positions of power. What makes his reading of the text more than an idiosyncratic response to the *Ramayana*, however, is the extent to which E.V.R. imbued this response with political purpose and self-consciously presented his reading for public consumption" (*Many Ramayanas*). This is an instance of how a translation can be used to promote a particular reading, even in a context far removed from its original one.



Inter-cultural translation

Paula Richman says: “This account of E. V. Ramasami’s interpretation of the *Ramayana* confirms that even in the modern period the *Ramayana* continues to be reread in ways that reflect and shape the concerns of both exegete and audience” (*Many Ramayanas*). If this was the case of a translation influenced by ideology, the epic in other countries show the influence of cultural differences. *Ramayana* is a living tradition in Thailand, Nepal, Indonesia and other South Asian countries. Frank Reynolds argues that *Ramakien*, as the *Ramayana* is known in Thailand, shows the influence of Thai Buddhism (*Many Ramayanas*). In this version, Sita is Ravana’s daughter who is abandoned because of an astrological prediction that she will bring destruction on her father. *Kakawin Ramayana* of Indonesia bears the stamp of the old 9th century Javanese text called *Yogesvara Ramayana* written by Yogesvara. Bhanubhakta Acharya of Nepal is considered to be the adikavi of Nepali for his rendering of the *Ramayana* into Nepali. The *Ramayana* has been appropriated by the target culture to fashion an epic according to its norms. Another country which has its own Ramayana tradition is Cambodia which has *Reamker*. This epic has variation in the depiction of certain characters like Hanuman.



Appropriation of the text to suit the target culture can be seen within India also. The Ramnamis, a dalit sect of Chattisgarh consider the *Ramcharit Manas* to be their authentic text. But they edit out certain verses they do not agree with, and has an epic that has around 400-500 slokas instead of the original 24,000. Richman notes: “In addition, through ritual chanting and debates, members of the sect continue to personalize their *Ramayana* text, embellishing it with verses that usually then become part of the corpus” (*Many Ramayanas*). Thus, the notion of an ‘original’ that can be translated becomes more and more hazy.

Inter-genre adaptations

Like the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* too has inspired a lot of dramatic and dance performances. The Ramlila performed annually during Dussehra in North India is the best example of this. It is primarily the dramatic re-enactment of the epic, but it has minor variations from region to region. The most famous of all Ramlilas is the one in Ramnagar, Varanasi. This lasts for 31 days instead of ten days like most other Ramlilas. This also has the special feature that the performance is spread out over various venues and ends with the Rama-Ravana war in Lanka which is a part of the town of Varanasi. The Ramlila is a good example of the translation of epic to folk drama, or from high culture to popular culture.



The ‘tholppavakkoothu’ or leather-puppet show of Kerala is another unique adaptation. It is puppet theatre that uses Kamban’s Tamil Ramayanam as the basic text. The narration is not in the local language Malayalam but a mixture of Tamil and Malayalam. It is still performed as part of festivals in Devi temples across central Kerala, but is not part of the classical temple-art tradition. In fact, its stage is usually the maidan outside the temple with a sleepy audience as it is an all-night performance. But this is a beautiful example of the syncretisation of culture manifested in the translation of genres as well as languages.



The most popular inter-genre translation that occurred recently was Ramanand Sagar’s television serial of Ramayana. It was so popular that it caught the attention of intellectuals and social historians, making them wonder why the serial was such a success. Richman attributes this to the “enthusiasm” that Indians would give to a “new entrant into what has been an unending series of Ramayanas in India and beyond” (Many Ramayanas). However, the historian Romila Thapar was concerned that this Doordarshan version of Ramayana was a reflection of the concerns not of the vast majority of Indians but of what she calls “the middle class and other aspirants to the same status” (qtd by Richman). Thapar was worried about the monopoly that one translation / version might gain in a tradition that was marked by plurality.

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Adaptations

The *Ramayana* has been retold from various perspectives, of which the feminist perspective is perhaps the strongest. The character of Sita has yielded most versions, perhaps because of Rama's abandonment of her at the end of the epic. The ambiguity of this action has prompted many writers to look at the epic from the wronged Sita's viewpoint. The deviant (sub)versions of the *Ramayana*, much more than the *Mahabharata*, have never been kindly received by believers. This is perhaps because of its strong moralistic and philosophical message, and the conceptualization of Rama as the maryadapurushottam. Aubrey Menen's *Rama Retold* (1956) is an irreverent adaptation. The novel is, according to Menen, a "secular retelling" of the *Ramayana* where Sita is more intelligent than Rama. She gives herself as hostage to Ravan to save the ashram of Valmiki where her husband is also living. Sita is attracted to Ravan and there is the hint of a relationship between the two of them. Ravan is killed in a street fight, and Sita's agnipareeksha is conducted using Egyptian fire that does not burn. This adaptation aroused the hostility of Hindu right-wingers and the book was banned.

The 2008 adaptation of Ramayana by Nina Paley called *Sita Sings the Blues*, is an animated film which has beautifully interwoven the Ramayana story with the life of a modern American woman. The parallels between her and the abandoned Sita are brought out through this interweaving. The heroine of the film is a young American wife whose husband gets posted to Trivandrum. Feeling lonely, she joins him in Trivandrum and discovers that her husband is not interested in her anymore. She flies back to America and reads the Ramayana when she realizes the parallel between her and the epic heroine . (<http://www.sitasingingtheblues.com/>).

The Malayalam playwright C. N. Sreekantan Nair wrote *Lankalakshmi* where Ravana is portrayed as a hero of tragic proportions. He is a king who aspires to unlimited power, but who realizes the enormity of the crime he has committed, and decides to meet his fate calmly in the battlefield. Ravana in this play calls for intense dramatic moments and is quite unlike the villain of the epic. This play is part of a trilogy of which the other two are *Saketam* and *Kanchanaseetha*. All the plays look at Rama and Ravana as human beings caught up in the throes of a moral dilemma.

In cinema, perhaps the most dramatic departure from the usual treatment of the characters was seen in G.

Aravindan's Malayalam film *Kanchanaseetha*. The film was the adaptation of the play by the same name of C. N. Sreekantan Nair. Aravindan interrogated the Aryan good looks attributed to the epic heroes in the usual pictorial depictions and made two tribal actors play the role of Rama and Lakshmana. Sita is visualized as nature in the film, and is the wind swaying the trees or the swiftly flowing stream.



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Conclusion

What is given above is not a definitive or comprehensive list of all the adaptations or retellings of both epics. It was just a random sampling that was meant to give an idea of the breadth and depth of the field. However, the multitude of retellings or translations does raise the question that is faced by every translator – how sacrosanct is the basic text and how faithful do you have to be in translation? It is clear that the concern with fidelity and equivalence was not an overriding one. Shanta Ramakrishna says: “Indian translators have not traditionally been preoccupied with the question of fidelity; adaptations were and still continue to be quite common. Whereas in the past such adaptations were well received and welcomed by readers as important contributions to the development of language and literature, the modern-day translator and his bilingual critic often attach undue importance to the question of fidelity” (87). It is this Indian concept of a fluid source text (which is very similar to poststructuralist concepts) that has been lost in translation today. The various translations are somewhat similar to the oral nature of epics, whereby matter was added, dropped or transformed to suit the context in which it was used; this resulted not in a ‘faithful’ translation, but a palimpsest. Perhaps this attitude to translation would rid translators of the gnawing worry of strategies of translation that would help them attain equivalence.



India's unique
translation
tradition allowed
creative rewrites.

Assignments

1. How is the translation tradition of Ramayana different from that of the Mahabharata?
2. Try to ‘translate’ any character of the Ramayana from your point of view. Analyse the result and evaluate how much of your own personal ideology has influenced the retelling.

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