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EPIC AND HISTORY: TRADITION, DISSENT AND POLITICS IN INDIA*

Historians have maintained that some societies preserve what they regard as significant events in a manifest form, in a chronological, sequential order so that it is relatively easy to reconstruct the broad outlines of the past; other societies bury their past in forms which are often difficult to unravel. The latter are regarded as denying history. Yet often the sense of the past is so powerful in these societies that they carry it, even if transmuted, into the present. Indian society appears to be one such. There is no denial of history but rather a carrying of history perhaps more overtly than in many other societies. I shall seek to demonstrate this by reference to the epic in Indian history: more specifically to one of the two major epics, the *Ramākathā*, of which an early form is the *Rāmāyaṇa*.¹ In doing so I shall consider a few of its mutations and the historical reading of these.

The cultural survival of the epic as a frozen form, such as the Greek epics of Homer, is familiar to us. What is less common is the role of the epic as part of the mainstream of a culture, except where the epic is deliberately reconstructed, as was the *Kalevala* in Finland as an agent of national revival. Even more rare is an epic changing its form each time it is used to mobilize support for a different ideological position. Such have been the fortunes of the *Rāmā-kathā* in India. These functions introduce major changes into the epic form, even though popular belief today tends to elide these changes and insists that the original epic prevails.

Some decades ago historians using the data from the two epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, argued for what was termed “the

* This is a slightly expanded version of the Philip Maurice Deneke Memorial Lecture, 1988, delivered at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. I am grateful to Susan Reynolds for her comments on an earlier draft.

¹ The text composed by Vālmiki is now treated as the standard version but has nevertheless been reworked in parts and added to. The critical edition of the text has been published by the Oriental Institute at Baroda in seven volumes under the general editorship of G. H. Bhatt and U. P. Shah during the period 1960-75. The critical edition is being translated into English under the general editorship of R. P. Goldman and is being published by the Princeton University Press. The first volume was published in 1984. An earlier translation of the text in English, prior to the critical edition is that by Hari Prasad Shastri, *The Ramayana of Valmiki*, 2 vols. (London, 1952-69).

epic age" in Indian history.² This age has now been eroded from historical periodization, for the original epics are embedded in the versions which have survived. There have been many interpolations over the millennium from 500 B.C. to A.D. 500, and therefore only episodes can perhaps be dated on comparative evidence. This would imply that the epics do not belong to a specific period because they are part of a continuing tradition and that the epic itself is made to change its function over time when it is converted from bardic to religious literature.³ The emphasis on the sacred has tended to make these texts the preserve of specialists in religion. Analyses of their religious concepts and philosophical ideas are frequent and some are valuable to the study of Hinduism, as is also the unravelling of their mythology.

What has, however, been neglected is the comparative study of the large range of substantially variant versions. Frequently intended for a popular audience, they incorporate changes which have a significance other than just a sectarian religious statement or a deviation in mythology. The change of function is in itself of historical importance and the range of variations suggests that the historian should view the variants as recounting historical change. A few of these variants will be discussed here, as well as their significance as perceived by a historian. I hope also to show that this is pertinent even to the contemporary use of the epic, both in defining social attitudes and in manipulating political conflicts.

The *kathā* or story of Rāma, put together from a number of floating, bardic compositions, no longer exists in its original form. The surviving versions, dating in their present forms to the early centuries A.D., have each been worked over from particular perspectives. Among the early versions was the literary epic composed by the poet Vālmīki and known as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which has come to be accepted as the standard version. The story incorporates the usual raw material of epic tales. The hero, Rāma, is the eldest son of King Daśaratha, who rules from the city of Ayodhyā over the kingdom of Kośala situated in the middle Ganges plain.⁴ The neighbouring forests are the haunt of demons, the *rākṣasas*, who continually interfere with the

² See the discussion in A. D. Pusalkar, *Studies in the Epics and the Puranas* (Bombay, 1955).

³ The most recent discussion of these interpolated layers is to be found in J. L. Brockington, *Righteous Rama* (Delhi, 1984). An earlier and pioneering analysis of the text, written in Hindi, is that of C. Bulcke, *Rāmakathā* (Allahabad, 1950).

⁴ On the borders of present-day eastern Uttar Pradesh and north Bihar. Ayodhyā, near modern Faizabad, is the focus of a pilgrimage for the worshippers of Rāma.

sacrificial rituals in the forest hermitages of the ascetics. Rāma and his younger brother, Lakṣmaṇa, are called upon to rid the forest of the demons. This they do, and then proceed to the court of King Janaka in the foothills of the Himalayas. The daughter of Janaka, Sītā, is to be wed. The choice of her husband is dependent on which of the heroes gathered at the court can lift and bend a massive iron bow. The young Rāma alone succeeds, and Sītā becomes his bride. On their return to Ayodhyā, Rāma's father announces the installation of the young prince as the future king. But Rāma's stepmother, prodded by her hunchbacked maid, reminds her husband of a promise which he had made to her earlier, and demands that her son succeed Daśaratha, and that Rāma be exiled to the forest for fourteen years. Daśaratha, true to his word, sadly gives in. Rāma, his wife Sītā and his brother Lakṣmaṇa, the latter two voluntarily, go into exile, wandering in the forests of the Vindhya to the south of the Ganges plain. Here the inevitable happens. Sītā is kidnapped by the powerful demon Rāvaṇa, who takes her away in his aerial chariot to his home in Lankā. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, on discovering this, prepare to attack Rāvaṇa with the aid of an army of monkeys led by their chief, Hanumān. After a protracted battle Rāvaṇa is eventually defeated. Sītā is rescued but has to undergo a fire ordeal to prove her chastity. The three then return to Ayodhyā where, the exile being completed, they are warmly welcomed. His father having died in the mean while, Rāma is crowned and his reign is symbolic in social memory with a mythologized utopian period of prosperity and well-being reflected in the phrase *rāma-rājya*. The story has all the ingredients stereotypical of epic narratives: the changing fortunes of the hero, the kidnapping of the princess, the quest, the heroic battle interspersed with flying monkeys, demons and an aerial chariot.

The original epic, composed by bards as part of the oral tradition, was recited at sacrificial rituals, at feasts and at the courts of the *rājās* — the chiefs and kings. Its origin could be seen as a eulogy on a patron or else the eulogistic functions could be seen as a simile.⁵ The story involved the families of the *kṣatriyas*, chiefs and warriors,

⁵ Prior to this, eulogies are available in certain hymns of the earliest Vedic text, the *Rg Veda*, generally dated to the late second or early first millennium B.C. The particular hymns are the *dāna-stutis* in praise of the generosity of chiefs bestowing gifts on the composers of the eulogistic hymns: A. A. MacDonnell and A. B. Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, 2 vols. (repr. Delhi, 1967), i, p. 336, ii, p. 82. Other categories of eulogies from the same body of literature are the *gāthās*, *nāraśamsis* and the longer narratives of the *ākhyānas*: i, pp. 445, 350-1, 224, 52.

with other social groups playing lesser roles.⁶ The hero had often to be distinguished by a special birth. Thus Rāma and his brothers were born only after the performance of a sacrificial ritual by a particular sage.⁷ Exile was a useful device. It gave the bard occasions for fresh incidents if the narrative was wearing thin. Time was not rigid. It could move back and forth with a continuum between mythic, heroic and historical time. Narrating the previous incarnations of various persons was an Indian way of playing with time.

The livelihood of the bard lay in his creative imagination, but he also had something of the shaman in him, for he was regarded as inviolable, as imbued with a sacred quality and possibly even powers of immortality.⁸ His high status was underlined by his unique relationship with the *rājā*, for he alone was free to comment not only on the activities of his patron but on society in general. However, this status changed and declined when the epic tradition was taken over by a new set of authors, the brahmins. Clearly the epic was too important to be left to the bards and its preservation required priestly intervention. What then happens to the *Rāma-kathā* when it is rewritten by brahman authors?

The appropriation of the text by brahmins by the early centuries A.D. was to convert it from a literary epic into the literature of the sacred. The hero Rāma was now said to be an *avatāra* or incarnation of the god Viṣṇu, one of the two emerging major deities of Hinduism.⁹ The *Rāmāyaṇa* therefore became a text for the propagation of the worship of Viṣṇu. Additional books at the beginning and end of the text¹⁰ gathered to it a variety of myths, legends, genealogies and changes in the narrative which drew on features of the religious sects

⁶ For a discussion on the background of the early society, see Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State* (Delhi, 1984).

⁷ *Rāmāyaṇa*, i.13.46, where Daśaratha performs the *aśvamedha* or horse sacrifice. The more specific ritual of the *putreṣṭi* is also mentioned in i.14-16.

⁸ *Taittirīya Samhita*, 4.3.2.

⁹ With the gradual decline of the Vedic religion, popular support was extended to the Bhāgavata cult and the Purāṇic religion which came to be established by the mid-first millennium A.D. Here the focus of worship was on a single deity, the form of worship was no longer the centrality of the sacrificial ritual and salvation lay in complete loyalty and devotion to and faith in the deity. Vedic deities such as Indra, Varuna and Mitra faded out and Śiva and Viṣṇu emerged as the pre-eminent deities. The incarnations or *avatāras* of deity are specially associated with Viṣṇu who is said to have had at least nine major incarnations so far, including animal and human forms. The last, Kalkin, is awaited and carries almost a millennarian association as it will come during the age of iron (the present age of moral decadence) and will restore the social conditions associated with a well-ordered society based on caste hierarchy.

¹⁰ These are the "Bāla-kāṇḍa" or Book 1 and the "Uttara-kāṇḍa" or Book 7.

of the Bhāgavatas and included forms of popular worship known to have been practised during the early centuries A.D. Furthermore an elaboration on the character of the protagonists led to an exaggeration of their earlier depiction. Thus Rāvaṇa emerges as a ten-headed monster, and so much the personification of evil as to be almost a caricature. Yet at the same time, in a lengthy interpolation at the end, we are told that Rāvaṇa was descended from a line of brahman seers and was himself an ascetic whose power had to be broken because of his turning to evil actions.¹¹ Substantial changes introduced into the story have their own interest, such as those referring to Sītā. In the narrative of the birth of Sītā we are told that one day when King Janaka was ploughing the land for a sacrificial ritual, a girl-child appeared from the furrow, so he named her Sītā, meaning "furrow", and brought her up as his daughter.¹² Further, when Rāma and Sītā return to Ayodhyā after the exile, Sītā's chastity is again questioned and on this occasion she is banished and goes to live in the hermitage of the sage Vālmiki¹³ (incidentally the author of the earlier version). Here twin sons are born to her and are given the curious names of Kuśa and Lava, curious because *kuśilavaḥ* came to be used as the technical term for a bard.¹⁴ It is said that Vālmiki composed the *Rāmāyaṇa* and taught it to the sons of Sītā, directing them to recite it on appropriate occasions. This is a twist which no self-respecting bard would have given to the story and was perhaps a kind of apology by the brahmins for having taken over the epic.

The main thrust of the brahmanized version which continued to be referred to as the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa* was of course the glorification of Viṣṇu incarnated as Rāma. Much has been written on the meaning of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It has been argued that the conflict between Rāma and Rāvaṇa is a prototype myth echoing the earlier conflict between Indra and Vṛtra, and exalting the heroic ideal.¹⁵ Many see it as a battle between good and evil where the narrative encapsulates a theory of ethics. Others have seen it as a compendium of nature myths, with Sītā as a fertility goddess and Rāma as a solar deity, given his descent from the Sūryavaṃśa or solar lineage. One of the more popular explanations of recent times originated from a nineteenth-century Indologist, Christian Lassen, who argued that the story describes the

¹¹ *Rāmāyaṇa*, vii.9-34.

¹² Brockington, *Righteous Rama*, pp. 98-9.

¹³ *Rāmāyaṇa*, vii.43-8.

¹⁴ *Arthaśāstra*, 1.12.9; 2.1.34; 2.27.7.

¹⁵ *Rāmāyaṇa*, vii.75-7; H. Jacobi, *Das Ramayana* (repr. Darmstadt, 1970), pp. 130-1.

Aryan invasion of the non-Aryan south, and that the conflict is between Aryan and Dravidian culture.¹⁶ The Aryan is represented by the orderly and advanced society of Ayodhyā and the Dravidian by the uncouth wildness of the *rākṣasas*. This Aryan/Dravidian dichotomy was a direct transplant from European ideological concerns with Aryan origins and did not reflect indigenous identifications. But this explanation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been politically explosive in the ideologies of regional subnationalism in south India during the last fifty years. Effigies of Rāma were burned in retaliation to the more generally observed north Indian festival of setting fire to the effigy of Rāvaṇa.

None of these explanations, however, takes account of the particular society from which the epic emerged. The hero was part of a web of kinship providing clues to a social structure where clan relations dominated. Heroic actions, although ostensibly arising from kidnapped maidens, frequently involved clans in conflict. The Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa* has obscured the identity of the *rākṣasas* by describing them as demons, perhaps a form of social amnesia. Nevertheless it is evident that these were not demons but a people with ways of life different from those of Ayodhyā and into whose territory the hermits and the exiled heroes were intruding. On the analogy of Moses Finley's study of the Greek epics in *The World of Odysseus*,¹⁷ there is much that can be prised out from the *Rāmāyaṇa* on the social and political concerns of the text. I have argued elsewhere that the original *Rāma-kathā* probably related to a conflict between chiefdoms.¹⁸ Subsequent rewriting changes the focus to a strong endorsement of the monarchical state. Monarchy is now regarded as the ideal political form and there is an implied disapproval of pre-monarchical or variant systems such as those of the *rākṣasas*.

Chiefdoms were characterized by a clan-based society in which identity was by birth into the clan, and therefore the maintaining of lineages and genealogical connections was crucial.¹⁹ Ownership of wealth both in kind and in land was claimed by the ruling clans, the *kṣatriyas*. Those who worked for them were largely the members of the lesser clans, the *viś*, and also those who were alien to begin with but inducted into production, the *sūdras*. The relationship between

¹⁶ C. Lassen, *Indische Alterthumskunde*, 4 vols. (Leipzig, 1847-62), i, pp. 596 ff.

¹⁷ M. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (Harmondsworth, 1962).

¹⁸ Romila Thapar, *Exile and Kingdom: Some Thoughts on the Ramayana* (Bangalore, 1979); and Romila Thapar, "Ramayana: Theme and Variation", in S. N. Mukherjee (ed.), *India: History and Thought* (Calcutta, 1982), pp. 221-53.

¹⁹ Thapar, *From Lineage to State*.

the *kṣatriya* and the brahman was finely balanced as inevitably between priest and patron. The ritual of sacrifice in the case of major sacrifices was a gathering of the clan, a propitiation of deities, an assertion of status as well as a consuming of wealth.

The gradual disintegration of this system in some parts of the country gave way to kingship, a process which was intensified in the evolution of monarchical states. The stratification of caste was more evident and a sharper dichotomy appeared between those who controlled wealth and those who produced it. The state assumed the existence of a number of institutions, such as an administrative structure, howsoever minimal, the use of coercion both as law and as armed strength, and the systematic collection of revenue. The continuum between forms of chiefdoms (the *gaṇa-saṅghas* and *gaṇa-rājyas* as they are called in the literature) and monarchical states was frequently a source of confrontation in Indian history.

The legitimation of the king began to draw less on the rituals which had earlier been prescribed for *kṣatriyas* and more on political power and control over resources which permitted kingship to be open to any caste. The bard who had legitimized the chief by his compositions on the chief's lineage and prowess was gradually edged out by the brahman who kept the genealogy of the king and was often also the court poet and chronicler. This was particularly so in the latter half of the first millennium A.D. when ruling families began to claim *kṣatriya* status and such status had to be proved through fabricating genealogies. Whereas previously it was maintained that the sacrificial rituals could bestow the qualities of divinity on the *rājā*, it was now argued that the king could on occasion be an incarnation of divinity, an important shift in the association of divinity with kingship.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* repeatedly states that for a people to be without a king is conducive to general anarchy.²⁰ Ayodhyā is the capital of a monarchical state; Rāma endorses the duties of a king; primogeniture becomes a crucial issue when the eldest son is exiled and debarred from kingship, contrary to the norm. Society in Ayodhyā is ordered according to the rules of caste.²¹ Its citizens count their wealth in grain and in valuables which they exchange even over long distances.²² The *rākṣasa* territory by contrast has no boundaries, lacks the authority of a state and its society is not ordered according to caste. Decisions are taken by Rāvaṇa, the *rākṣasa* chief, and his kinsmen, for there is

²⁰ *Rāmāyaṇa*, ii.61.7 ff.

²¹ *Ibid.*, i.1.75; 2.15.11; 2.98.37.

²² *Ibid.*, ii.30.16; 33.17; 43.3-4.

neither consultation with ministers nor a hierarchy of status. Lankā, his island stronghold, is described as a city of gold, gems and untold riches, but there is no obvious source of wealth.²³ The luxury may well be an example of extravagant poetic imagination. The *rākṣasas* are unfamiliar with agriculture and know no trade.²⁴ The hermits are the vanguard, as it were, of encroachment into the hunting grounds and forests of the *rākṣasas*, for they were in effect also the precursors of an agricultural society which would clear and settle the forested areas. This may well have occasioned the need for the *rākṣasas* to disturb the rituals of the hermits. The *rākṣasas* were looked down upon. Yet they are also said to have access to magical powers and objects among which the most impressive was the aerial chariot of Rāvaṇa, of which more later. The emphasis on magic may reflect an apprehension of the supernatural powers associated with those claimed to have been subordinated. The demonizing, as it were, of the *rākṣasas* could be the projection of a feared enemy. There is both a putting down as well as a looking up to Rāvaṇa in the brahmanical version. In some other versions the putting down is less evident. It could perhaps be argued that in some areas Rāvaṇa symbolized the figure in opposition to the dominance of the brahmans.

The lesser persons who became the allies of Rāma in exile, such as the Niṣāda chief²⁵ and the kinsmen of Hanumān the monkey, were people bound by elaborate rules of gift-giving and reciprocal obligations, more so than in the monarchy. The text therefore seems to incorporate a continuum of social and economic forms, moving from hunting and gathering peoples to chiefdoms and reserving the accolades for the monarchical state. With each major version of the text, there is increasing emphasis on the monarchy as the model, but some of the non-monarchical forms are retained for contrast or else manage to slip through.

We know from other sources, archaeological and literary, that monarchical states in the Ganges plain were well established by the fourth century B.C. The concept enters theoretical discussions in the analysis of what are regarded as the constituents of a state.²⁶

²³ Devaraj Chanana, *The Spread of Agriculture in North India* (New Delhi, 1963), pp. 27-9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ The Niṣāda are frequently described as the hunting and gathering tribes of the forests, who in an early myth were expelled to less accessible areas: *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, i.13. See also Romila Thapar, "Origin Myths and Historical Tradition", in Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (New Delhi, 1978), pp. 307 ff.

²⁶ *Arthaśāstra*, vi.1.

Nevertheless chiefdoms and oligarchies, the *gaṇa-saṅghas*, had for some time held their own in competition with evolving monarchies. Such chiefdoms continued to prevail in the area south of the Ganges plain, the area of the exile of Rāma.

The story of Rāma was part of a floating tradition of bardic stories which were picked up and reworked into variant versions. This is confirmed also by versions which occur in the literature of what are generally regarded as the heterodox religions, Buddhism and Jainism, the heterodoxy being opposition to brahmanism. From the Buddhist sources comes the story as narrated in the *Dasaratha Jātaka*,²⁷ dating to anywhere between the fourth and the second centuries B.C., and which is in effect the briefest of summaries of one part of the *Rāmā-kathā*. There is a significant change in the story, for here Sītā is not the wife but the sister of Rāma. At the end of the exile when Rāma returns to Ayodhyā, Sītā is made the queen consort of Rāma and they rule jointly for sixteen thousand years. This version may reflect the tradition of brother-sister marriages in Buddhist origin myths, including that of the Buddha himself. It can be interpreted in many ways: as a symbol of the purity of blood or, possibly, a demarcation of a distinctive status. A comparison with Buddhist origin myths suggests that Rāma and Sītā may have been seen as the originators of a royal clan and therefore placed in this particular relationship, for the ancestry of Rāma is traced back to the eponymous ancestor Ikṣvāku, from whom incidentally the clan of the Buddha also claimed descent. Sibling incest is not to be taken literally but is to be seen as a cultural signal.²⁸

There are references to episodes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* in a few of the other *Jātaka* stories where the epic is introduced in order to draw a moral or to provide an example. A close connection has also been traced between the *Vessantara Jātaka* and the sections of the *Rāmāyaṇa* concerned with exile in the forest. It would seem that the author of this *Jātaka* was familiar with at least the earlier text of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. What is significant in the *Jātaka* is that the ethical problems posed to the prince in exile are different from those in the epic. His wife is not kidnapped but is asked for as a gift (*dāna*) by an avaricious and seemingly poor brahman, who requires a servant for his wife. The children of the prince are also taken away from him

²⁷ V. Fausboll, *The Dasaratha Jataka, Being the Buddhist Story of King Rama* (Copenhagen, 1871); *The Jatakas*, trans. E. B. Cowell, 3 vols. (repr. London, 1969), *Dasaratha Jātaka*, no. 461, *Vessantara Jātaka*, no. 547.

²⁸ Thapar, *From Lineage to State*, p. 294.

on a similar pretext. The prince Vessantara, who is the epitome of the gift-giving man, gives away his family and all that he possesses, believing implicitly that gifting all that one owns is the highest form of ethical altruism. Thus the purpose of the story in the *Vessantara Jātaka* is very different from that of the brahmanical *Rāmāyaṇa*.²⁹

The Jaina version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Paumacariyam*, is aggressively different and sets itself up as the counter-epic.³⁰ Composed by Vimalasūri in about the third century A.D., it was written in the popularly used language, Prākṛit. It contradicted the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*, which it described as part of the false tradition propagated by the brahmins who were the heretics from the Jaina point of view.³¹ The Jaina version, framed in the perspective of the Jaina ethic and doctrine, was in a way the mirror image of the Vālmiki version. The author naturally claims veracity for his narrative but also introduces a new dimension, historicity, in arguing that his version conformed to what actually happened. Historicity is not one of the claims of the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*. The Jaina version starts by giving the genealogy and background not of Rāma, as in the Vālmiki version, but of Rāvaṇa and then of Hanumān.³² We are told that the *rākṣasas* were not demons but normal humans. Rāvaṇa was not a ten-headed monster but was described as such because he wore a necklace of nine large gem-stones which reflected his face. Similarly Hanumān was not a monkey but the leader of a clan who had a monkey emblem on its standard. His role as mediator, rather than one who loyally serves Rāma, is more pronounced in this version. Rāvaṇa, we are told, belongs to the Meghavāhana lineage, the word literally meaning that he was “cloud-borne”, which also links him to his other epithet, *akāśa-mārgi*, he who travels through the sky,³³ which epithets are suggestive of aerial chariots. At this point one begins to wonder whether Vimalasūri was not a functional anthropologist! Vimalasūri’s claim to the historicity of his version may have to be taken more seriously than it generally is, since there was a historically attested dynasty of Megha kings ruling in the Vindhyan region around the

²⁹ Thapar, *Exile and Kingdom*, pp. 7 ff.

³⁰ There is a difference of opinion on its date, which ranges from the first century to the seventh century A.D., but the third century seems the most likely. The text has been edited by H. Jacobi, *The Paumacariyam of Vimalasuri* (Prakrit Text Soc., repr. Varanasi, 1962). There is no English translation. See also K. R. Chandra, *A Critical Study of Paumacariyam* (Prakrit Jaina Inst. Research Publication Ser., iv, Varanasi, 1970); V. M. Kulkarni, *Vimalasuri’s Paumacariyam* (Kasi, 1962).

³¹ *Paumacariyam*, ii.116; iv.64 ff.

³² *Ibid.*, ii.25.7.

³³ *Akāśa-mārgi* is mentioned *ibid.*, viii.1-28, 50-4, 63.

Christian era.³⁴ There is also mention of some royal families in this region who claimed descent from the line of Cedis.³⁵ Tradition associates the Cedis with an ancestor who had an aerial chariot given him by the god Indra.³⁶ One wonders whether the Ikṣvākus and the Cedis had hostile relations and the latter had been disguised by Vālmīki in the description of the *rākṣasas* as demons.

At the time when the Jaina version was written the Vindhyan region had witnessed earlier settlements growing into trading centres, cities and the nuclei of small kingdoms. Patronage of Jainism came to be associated with some of these.³⁷ Were the ruling families of these kingdoms descendants of the earlier Cedi tribes and therefore not averse to a more realistic depiction of Rāvaṇa? The new focus of the story would have helped in their political legitimation if there still remained a social memory of the actual identity of the *rākṣasas*. Not unexpectedly, Rāvaṇa in the Jaina version, far from being a villain, is a devoted Jaina who practised all the required religious precepts and austerities and acquired considerable ascetic power. At the end of the story, Daśaratha, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa all become Jaina ascetics and Sītā takes herself off to a nunnery. The question of self-perception therefore takes on a different definition. The ethic of the warrior so evident in the Vālmīki version now changes to that of the Jaina ascetic. At the same time the Jaina epic is a powerful contradiction of the brahmanic version.

The outline of the *Rāma-kathā* provided familiar stories to a variety of audiences. These themes found their way into plays and poems written for the royal courts and the literati. They were reworked into the classics of creative literature in Sanskrit and many underwent major changes conforming to the requirements of courtly literature.³⁸ Some even took the form of a literary *tour de force*, as in the ninth-century biography of a contemporary east Indian king, Rāmapāla, where the *Rāmacaritam* of Sandhyākara-nandin can be read equally

³⁴ B. M. Barua, "Hathigumpha Inscription of Kharavela", *Indian Hist. Quart.*, xiv (1938), pp. 459-85; K. D. Bajpai, "The Meghas of Kausambi and Southern Kosala and Allied Problems", *Indian Numis. Chronicle*, iii, pt. 1 (1962), pp. 18 ff.

³⁵ *Inscriptions of the Kālcī-Cedi Era*, ed. V. V. Mirashi (Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, iv, pts. 1, 2, Ootacammund, 1955), pp. xxxi ff.

³⁶ *Mahābhārata*, i.63; *Cetiya Jātaka*, no. 422.

³⁷ V. S. Agrawala, "Catalogue of the Mathura Museum, Jaina Tirthankaras and Other Miscellaneous Figures", *Jl. Uttar Pradesh Hist. Soc.*, xxiii (1950), pp. 36 ff.; K. D. Bajpai, "Development of Jaina Art in Madhya Pradesh", *Jl. Indian Hist.*, lv (1977), pp. 89 ff.

³⁸ Among the better known and often quoted are the narrative poem of Kālidāsa, *Raghuvamśam*, the play of Bhāsa, *Pratimā-nāṭaka*, and Bhavabhūti's *Uttararāmacarita*.

easily as the story of the *Rāma-kathā* or as the biography of the king.³⁹

Current philosophical ideas were also on occasion woven into the story. It has been suggested that discussions on the notion of illusion and perception in Advaita Vedānta philosophy possibly gave rise to a new idea which was introduced into the story.⁴⁰ It was said in some versions that Rāvaṇa had abducted an illusory or shadow Sītā, the real Sītā having been removed by Rāma before the abduction and returning to Rāma when she emerges out of the first fire ordeal.⁴¹ More recently this has been described as an Indo-European feature of the split woman.⁴² The shadow Sītā took on a different meaning to which I shall return.

By the early second millennium A.D. there had been an enormous spread of the Rāma story. There were versions popular in central Asia, China and Tibet, drawing on the Buddhist originals.⁴³ In south-east Asia there was an avid appropriation of the story with strong local variants deriving inspiration from local geography, tradition and events. In one version the area of north Vietnam (Annam) is identified as the Ayodhyā of the text and that to the south of it (Champa) as Lankā⁴⁴ — suggesting a situation which pre-dates by a few centuries the clash in our times! In many of these versions the story was sometimes turned askew. Sītā appears, unknown to him, as the daughter of Rāvaṇa,⁴⁵ which makes the abduction doubly heinous but adds a further layer to symbolic interpretation. The more up-to-date versions in south-east Asia incorporate Islamic legends, some even featuring the prophet Adam.⁴⁶ There was also a noticeable growth of versions all over India, most of them in the emergent

³⁹ *Rāmācaritam*, ed. Haraprasad Sastri (repr. Calcutta, 1969).

⁴⁰ Advaita Vedānta was a major school of Indian philosophy at the turn of the first millennium A.D., particularly through the works of Śaṅkarācārya. Among the ideas expounded by this school was that of phenomena and their classification by name and form being illusory. This was popularized into the notion that some aspects of seeming reality are an illusion. The *Yogavasiṣṭha-rāmāyaṇa*, the *Adbhuta-rāmāyaṇa* and the *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa* show the influence of this idea.

⁴¹ B. H. Kapadia, "The Adhyatma Ramayana", *Jl. Oriental Inst. Baroda*, xiv (1964-5), pp. 164-70; F. Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of the Ramayana* (Delhi, 1980), pp. 105-218; *Adhyātma-rāmāyaṇa*, ed. N. Siddhantaratna (Calcutta Sanskrit Ser., ii, Calcutta, 1935).

⁴² W. D. O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities* (Delhi, 1987), pp. 92 ff.

⁴³ Brockington, *Righteous Rama*, pp. 287 ff.

⁴⁴ E. Huber, "La légende de Rama en Annam", *Bulletin d'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient*, v (1905), pp. 168 ff.

⁴⁵ Brockington, *Righteous Rama*, pp. 285-6, 295.

⁴⁶ As in the Javanese version, *Serat Kanda*: J. Kats, "The Ramayana in Indonesia", *Bull. School of Oriental and African Studies*, iv (1926-8), pp. 579-85.

regional languages, using the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* as the starting-point, such as the Tamil epic of Kampan⁴⁷ or the later Bengali Kṛtibāsa.⁴⁸ The former is distinctly different in its treatment of Rāvaṇa, who is here the hero in decline rather than the villain. Narrative art in painting and sculpture had also begun to draw on the local version of the story from the mid-first millennium A.D.⁴⁹

The historian has perforce to ask why there was this mushrooming of the story in India. One obvious reason was that it was a tale well told, personifying the conflict between good and evil with the virtuous eventually triumphant. Equally obvious was the use of the text for the propagation of the cult of Viṣṇu. Specialists in the history of Indian literature have argued that the spread of Sanskrit to new areas, which were until then using their own local languages, was facilitated by the use of the simple Sanskrit of the epic. The Sanskrit epic became the model for epic genres in the new regional languages, although the narrative was modified or changed in accordance with the demands of popular culture and local tradition. Such explanations are entirely feasible, but perhaps not sufficient.

It is here that an investigation of the historical background may fill out the picture. I would like to return to the idea that the *Rāmāyaṇa* was a charter of validation for monarchy and suggest that it was an appropriate text for historical changes taking place from about the eighth century A.D.⁵⁰ There was a noticeable growth of a large number of small kingdoms. Barring a few major dynasties, these were generally short-lived kingdoms of no great pretension to extensive territory but each claiming and indulging in the full panoply of monarchical status. Minor rulers rushed to take grandiloquent titles and did not hesitate to call themselves *mahārājādhirāja*, great king of kings. Local courts boasted large retinues of retainers whose code of behaviour laid emphasis on heroic chivalry combined with blinkered devotion and loyalty to the king. The subsistence of these kingdoms came in large part from the steady encroachment of the agrarian economy into erstwhile forested regions. Waste land was brought under cultivation, not necessarily by the state directly but also through

⁴⁷ Kampan, *Iramavataṛam: The Kamba-ramayanam*, ed. Muttaiya Pillai (Madras, 1883); K. Zvelibil, *Tamil Literature* (Wiesbaden, 1974).

⁴⁸ Kirtivasa [Kṛtibāsa], *The Ramayana* (Serampore, 1830-4); D. C. Sen, *The Bengali Ramayanas* (Calcutta, 1916).

⁴⁹ Such as the Gupta-period sculpture at the temples of Nacna Kuthara and Deogadh, which are among the earliest representations of the story.

⁵⁰ R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism* (repr. Delhi, 1980); B. N. S. Yadav, *Society and Culture in Northern India in the Twelfth Century* (Allahabad, 1973).

a system of granting land to learned brahmins and those holding high administrative office. The ancestors of many of the lesser kings were such grantees in origin and the more ambitious among them aspired to the monarchical model. Some came from families of tribal chiefs who through administrative office had moved into the hierarchy of the state. In this situation access to economic resources implied increasing the land under cultivation. Forest tribes were under all circumstances to be subjugated, a strategy which has continued through the centuries. The triumph of Rāma over Rāvaṇa therefore provided a powerful metaphor for a process which was actually taking place.

Many of the origin myths of these families, particularly those which came from epigraphic sources, have a brahman of repute wandering in and out of the story. The function of the bard was being appropriated by the brahman and the status of the bard had been lowered in the formal hierarchy.⁵¹ Thus the brahman legitimized the king by providing him with a genealogy and by performing rituals through which his divine status was proclaimed.⁵² By means of the genealogy the status of *kṣatriya*, now seen as that of the landed aristocracy, was bestowed on the family irrespective of its actual origins. Frequently these “new” *kṣatriyas* sought links with one of the two ancient lineages, the Sūryavaṃśa or solar and the Candravaṃśa or lunar. Those who claimed descent from the solar had Rāma as a distant ancestor. The *Rāmāyaṇa* would then become the story of the royal ancestor. That the ancestor was an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu helped underline the divinity of kingship, which by this period was more generally asserted than in earlier times.

The settling of brahmins in areas previously unfamiliar with brahmanical culture brought about an acculturation through which a familiarity with the Sanskrit tradition was introduced to these

⁵¹ The Manu *Dharmaśāstra*, one of the most influential texts on customary law, lowers the status of the bard: x.26.

⁵² Romila Thapar, “Genealogy as a Source of Social History”, in Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, pp. 326-60. The two major royal lineages were the Sūryavaṃśa or solar line and the Candravaṃśa or lunar line. The ancestry of Rama was traced back to the Sūryavaṃśa. Genealogies of ruling families after the mid-first millennium A.D. latched themselves on to these two lineages by claiming descent from them. Thus the major Rajput family of the Guhilots of Mewar had a genealogy linking them to the Sūryavaṃśa. It was stated that their ancestor was the fifty-fifth in descent from the son of Rāma, Kuśa: D. C. Sircar, “The Guhila Claim of Solar Origin”, *Jl. Indian Hist.*, xlii (1964), pp. 381-7. Similarly, the Candellas of Bundelkhand traced their descent from the Candravaṃśa or lunar line: Romila Thapar, “Legitimation politique et généalogie en Inde du Nord”, *Annales E.S.C.*, xxxix (1984), pp. 783-97.

areas. But such acculturation increasingly required that the Sanskrit tradition incorporate manifestations of the local culture. Heroes who died defending village cattle from raiders and came to be worshipped locally could be converted into a specific incarnation of Viṣṇu;⁵³ a conversion which assisted the process of political mobilization as well.

Perhaps there was some elaboration of certain aspects of the story. The episodes involving Hanumān are suggestive of this. In the origin myths of the Gond tribes of the Vindhya, a four-brother phratry when threatened by death is saved by a monkey who helps them cross a flooded river, and the monkey totem becomes common among them.⁵⁴ Did the Gond story influence the elaboration of the Hanumān episodes in the epic or vice versa? That there was some association with the story is suggested by the fact that when the Gonds eventually established their own kingdom and claimed *kṣatriya* status, in the second millennium A.D., some clans sought descent from Rāma and others from Rāvaṇa.⁵⁵ A link with the defeated may seem surprising, but the experience of the *Aeneid* should perhaps caution us against a hasty conclusion.

One form taken by these manifestations was the use of historical geography. The geography of the earlier Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* remained confused. Thus the location of Lankā, never made precise, may have moved from the Vindhyan region south-eastwards, following a known route of migration and trade.⁵⁶ Popular opinion links it to the island of Ceylon, the Sri Lanka of today. This geographical flexibility could be put to good use. The theme of exile came in very handy. Originally a bardic device to stretch the story or incorporate other fragments, it now became part of the process of acculturation. Local opinion could claim that exile had actually brought Rāma to that area. Topographical features and local cults were gradually linked to the story. This enhanced the prestige of the site, assisted in the proselytizing of the religious cults of Rāma and incidentally also helped strengthen the theory of the genealogical links of the local ruling family where it claimed descent from Rāma. In a sixteenth-century version from

⁵³ Romila Thapar, "Death and the Hero", in S. C. Humphreys and H. King (eds.), *Mortality and Immortality: The Archaeology and Anthropology of Death* (London, 1981), pp. 293-316.

⁵⁴ C. von Fürer Haimendorf, *The Raj Gonds of Adilabad* (London, 1948), pp. 123 ff.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 6 ff.; C. U. Wills, *The Raj Gond Maharajas of the Satpura Hills* (Nagpur, 1925).

⁵⁶ There has been a wide-ranging discussion over many decades on the location of Lankā. The more acceptable analyses point to some part of the Vindhyas or to Orissa on the east coast: Thapar, "Ramayana".

Orissa in eastern India, the exiles are depicted as travelling through the then contemporary kingdoms.⁵⁷

The versions of the *Rāma-kathā* now carried many layers of thought, some of which led to curious paradoxes. Exile in the forest allows the introduction of another theme which recurs frequently in the Indian tradition: the forest contrasted with the settlement. If the settlement is the known and the orderly, the forest is the unknown and the uncontrolled. But the forest is also the habitat of the renouncer and the ascetic, both important to society in spite of their renunciation of it. Authority within the settlement was vested in the brahman as priest and the *kṣatriya* as embodying kingly power and control over land. Yet it was conceded that the third focus of authority was the renouncer, drawing his strength from the supernatural powers associated with ascetic practices as well as a kind of moral authority which lay in his being outside the competition for social power.⁵⁸ So dominating was the renunciatory figure that both gods and kings trembled before ascetics. In the later version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* the god Indra, the established prototype hero deity, is more than once humiliated by an ascetic, doubtless both to elevate the ascetic and to embarrass Indra, whose decline coincided with the rise of Viṣṇu as the supreme deity. The combination of a brahman and asceticism was formidable. When such a situation occurred the gods were known to fear the consequences and could send a beautiful, celestial maiden, an *apsarā*, to seduce the ascetic and thereby break his accumulated power. Such incidents are used sometimes to demarcate a genealogical change, for the child born of the seduction often becomes the ancestor of a famous line of descent.⁵⁹

A paradox in the brahmanical versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the statement that Rāvaṇa was a brahman by birth, performing many sacrificial rituals and acquiring considerable power through asceticism. The abuse of this power led to Viṣṇu's having to incarnate himself as Rāma in order to prevent Rāvaṇa from unleashing evil. Was this perhaps a concession to alternative views of the epic, particularly the Jaina version or that of Kampan, expressing the sentiments of those who had some sympathy for Rāvaṇa, and required

⁵⁷ N. N. Misra, "Folk Elements in the Jagmohan Ramayana", in A. K. Banerjee (ed.), *The Ramayana in Eastern India* (Calcutta, 1983), pp. 74 ff.

⁵⁸ Romila Thapar, "Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-Culture?", in Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, pp. 63-104.

⁵⁹ As, for example, Urvaśi whose sons were ancestors to the Candravamśa lineage or Śakuntalā, the daughter of the *apsarā* Menakā, whose son Bharata founded a major lineage.

that Rāvaṇa be depicted not as the personification of evil but as a hero in decline? Can it then be argued that Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā was a variant on the theme of the ascetic succumbing to the beautiful woman and thereby destroying the power so carefully accumulated through ascetic practice? The epic stereotype of an abducted maiden would therefore carry the further impress of a different stereotype and meaning.

Sītā's fire ordeal in the later versions is less a test of Sītā's chastity and more a mechanism by which the real Sītā is reunited with Rāma. This idea, apart from its link with the philosophical notion of *māyā* or illusion, was perhaps also a concession to the popular goddess cults of this time which not only insisted on the presence of the female principle to activate the male, but also may not have allowed a goddess of fertility to be subjected to such ordeals.⁶⁰ There may also have been an echo here of another practice. Engraved stones commemorating women who immolated themselves on the funeral pyres of their hero husbands and thus became *satis* are found in large numbers, often in the vicinity of memorials to dead heroes.⁶¹ It was believed that by immolating herself a wife would not only confirm her chastity but be reunited with her husband in heaven. Going through fire was thus a form of reunion.⁶² Sītā's return to Rāma via the fire ordeal may well have been intended as a subtle means of imprinting this argument.

It was also at the turn of the first millennium A.D. that there emerged an influential sect of worshippers of Rāma, the Rāmanandin sect. They argued that focusing on the worship of Rāma or Rāma-bhakti was the most effectual form of *bhakti* or devotional worship, and the sect gained a following in many parts of the country. Their teaching drew on the brahman-controlled Sanskrit versions of the story. The growth of this movement led to pilgrimages at Ayodhyā, and this in turn required the demarcation of a sacred topography locating the events of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In the early part of the second millennium A.D. the *Ayodhyā-mahatmya* was compiled,⁶³ one among a genre of such texts which deal with the local history of a temple or

⁶⁰ There was a considerable increase in the worship of the female consorts of the male gods from the first millennium A.D., such as the worship of Durgā, Pārvatī and Umā associated with Śiva, and Lakṣmī and Śrī associated with Viṣṇu. The earlier and seemingly subordinate cults of Tantrism and Śakti now acquired considerable respectability, linked as they were to families coming into prominence at this time.

⁶¹ S. Setter and G. Sontheimer, *Memorial Stones* (Dharwad, 1982).

⁶² The association of the fire ordeal with chastity is also evident from the Draupadi cult in south India where it appears to be more in practice among the lower castes: A. Hildebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi* (Chicago, 1988), p. 438.

⁶³ A. Bakker, *Ayodhyā* (Groningen, 1984).

sacred site and which include myth, narrative about the cult and descriptions of the sacred places. It is from this point onwards that there begins the glimmering of the idea that Rāma as the incarnation of Viṣṇu might have had a historical actuality. This was doubtless associated with the powerful sect of the Rāmanandins, who needed a geographical centre — and what better than the town of Ayodhyā?⁶⁴

In the sixteenth century Tulsi composed the *Rāmacaritamānas* in Hindi, which became the most popular version in northern India. This was almost inevitable, as the Rāmanandin sect required a text which would be comprehensible to a larger audience than the limited one of those who knew Sanskrit. What is interesting is that this major thrust should have been in the Hindi-speaking area. For Tulsi, Rāma was essentially the divine being present among humans. We are told that he is adored by all, even by ascetics who gaze on him like a bevy of partridges gazing at the autumn moon.⁶⁵ Tulsi's view of the world made such devotion imperative. Cosmology was seen as a cycle of declining morality from the initial golden age to the present age of iron, the *kaliyuga*, accompanied by inevitable decline in social and ethical norms. Caste rules are ignored, upstarts and low-caste people come into prominence and succeed through fraud and cheating. It is indeed a world turned upside down. The only consolation is the worship of Rāma, which alone could bring back the utopian society ruled by Rāma.⁶⁶

Popular opinion today maintains that this was Tulsi's protest against the Mughal rulers who were Muslims and that his *Rāmacaritamānas* consolidated and saved the Hindu ethos. But the text does not bear this out. The historian should perhaps look rather

⁶⁴ One of the sacred locations listed for the pilgrimage is the Rāma-janma-bhumi, supposedly the precise location where Rāma was born, and currently under dispute with a group of Muslims since there is a mosque abutting on this location, which various Hindu organizations would like to have removed. The insistence on the identification of this spot raises problems for the historian. Even if the historicity of Rāma is conceded and an approximate date ascribed to him, the location of the spot would still have been determined at least fifteen hundred years after the writing of the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*, which raises serious doubts about the veracity of the location. This is in striking contrast to the historicity of the Buddha, where a pillar marking the village of his birth was erected by the Mauryan emperor Aśoka, a couple of centuries subsequent to the Buddha. Yet even here the exact spot of the Buddha's birth is not marked, only a reference to the village is given, commemorating the forest in the vicinity where he is said to have been born: Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 66-8.

⁶⁵ *Rāmacaritamānas*, i, Caupai 213; *The Ramayana of Tulasidasa*, trans. F. S. Growse (repr. Varanasi, 1978).

⁶⁶ *Rāmacaritamānas*, vii.96-103.

at the deep structures of ideological concerns. The evils of the age of iron were conjured up repeatedly by brahman authors whenever they felt that brahmanical power was in crisis, and this had happened at various times even before the coming of Islam to India.⁶⁷ Tulsi as a brahman was doubtless disturbed by many of the current religious movements which denied the authority of the brahmans and the texts which they respected, which propagated alternative religious ideologies and attracted large audiences of non-brahmans.⁶⁸ Even among the Vaiṣṇava sects there was some competition for patronage, especially between the worshippers of Rāma and those for whom the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa was the central one (as among the followers of Caitanya and Vallabhācārya), and whose centre was being established at Mathura and the adjoining Vrindavana. The *Rāmacaritamānas* is in some ways not only a Vaiṣṇava tract but a text which focuses on Rāma-bhakti. For Tulsi the golden age lay in the past, in the reign of Rāma, which he hoped would return. Tulsi's version endorses a millennarian dream. Interestingly, this millennarian strand became ideologically significant to peasant resistance, protesting against British colonial rule and landlordism in parts of north India as recently as a few decades ago. In the 1920s and 1930s a mendicant by the name of Baba Ramachander travelled through the villages in a part of Uttar Pradesh, mobilizing the peasants against oppressive taxation.⁶⁹ The use of the name Ramachander, the full name of Rāma in the text, was an astute move, as also was the popularizing of particularly those verses of the Tulsi *Rāmacaritamānas* which speak of the evils of the present age and the anticipated return of the rule of Rāma.

The popularity of Tulsi's text encouraged a new idiom, that of the

⁶⁷ Yadav, *Society and Culture in Northern India; Vāyu Purāṇa*, 99.388-412; *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, iii.74.200-4.

⁶⁸ Despite the popular assertion today that India under Muslim rule saw the decline of Hinduism, the facts are the reverse. The second millennium A.D. was a period of great vibrancy for a large number of Hindu sects, many growing from Purāṇic and Śākta roots in various parts of the sub-continent. The differences within and among these sects covered a span from Vedic orthodoxy to complete heterodoxy, and the denial of Vedic belief is evident in the teaching of some of these sects. I have elsewhere attempted to demonstrate the differences between these sects and the Semitic religion, although today, in what is sometimes referred to as the New Hinduism of the nineteenth century, there has been an attempt at reconstructing the religion on a Semitic model: Romila Thapar, "Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity", *Modern Asian Studies*, xxiii.2 (1989), pp. 209-31.

⁶⁹ M. H. Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in Northern India: The United Provinces, 1918-1922* (New Delhi, 1978); G. Pandey, "Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism, 1919-1922", in R. Guha and G. C. Spivak (eds.), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New Delhi, 1988), pp. 70 ff.

Rāma-lilas. These were in the nature of folk-plays enacting the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and performed in the Hindi-speaking areas of north India. The time of year coincided with the autumn harvest and the worship of ancestors, as well as the major seasonal worship of the mother goddesses. Elsewhere the goddess is worshipped, but in the Hindi-speaking areas the focus is on Rāma and Sītā. Possibly the *Rāmāyaṇa* ousted the worship of the goddess or it was incorporated into the worship of Viṣṇu and his divine consort projected as Rāma and Sītā. The Rāma-lila plays continue to be performed in villages and towns and carry a flavour of the early Christian mystery plays or the more contemporary Passion Play at Oberammergau. They vary from simple to extremely elaborate in accordance with patrons and audience. They encapsulate a sharing of the events of the story through a vibrant oral tradition and the actors playing deities are seen as manifestations of an incarnation.⁷⁰

Local versions of the story differing in narrative and symbolism from the Sanskrit version have continued to be performed or even read. Among these mention may be made of a popular Tamil version which was earlier handed down orally, but since the beginning of this century has been made available in printed form. This is the *Caṭakaṇṭakatai* or the *Story of the Ten-Headed Rāvaṇa*.⁷¹ Here it is Sītā who with Rāma as her charioteer goes into battle against Rāvaṇa and in single combat kills him. Clearly the imprint of the powerful, assertive goddess figure overrides the more accommodating and gentle image of the Sanskrit and Hindi texts. These are not marginal traditions, for they are central to the societies from which they emerge.

The tradition of folk-theatre was picked up by the film industry, and since the 1940s films have been made on the themes of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and advertised as "mythologicals". This was largely an attempt at using a familiar story based on the Vālmiki and Tulsi versions in a new medium in which spectacular sets, glittering costumes and ham dialogue could run riot with the original story. After forty years it has taken a new form as the most successful soap opera on national television, again drawing on Vālmiki and Tulsi, now regarded as received versions.⁷² At the end of an episode there is a

⁷⁰ A. Kapur, "Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: The Ramalila at Ramnagar", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, xix.1 (1985), pp. 57-74.

⁷¹ D. Shulman, "Battle as Metaphor in Tamil Folk and Classical Tradition", in S. H. Blackburn and A. K. Ramanujam (eds.), *Another Harmony* (Delhi, 1988), pp. 105-30.

⁷² The reasons why the Vālmiki and Tulsi versions have gradually become the received versions, even in areas where other versions are more familiar, could be

(cont. on p. 23)

commentary which is in a sense a return to the bardic pattern, when the bard elaborated upon his recitations. The commentary, spoken incidentally by a veteran actor of the earlier films, is used as a peg on which to hang a medley of ideas which are part of the new value-system of middle-class India.

Because the medium of television is the most powerful in the country, in places superseding even the entrenched oral tradition, its use of this theme has to be seen in context. A specific version is chosen with no attempt to suggest that there were other versions contradicting it. The version selected is a Hindu Vaiṣṇava text, centring on the worship of Rāma, familiar to north Indian Hindi-speakers and broadly to the literate few elsewhere. The choice of this version therefore makes a specific social and political statement, and this statement becomes all the more significant given that television is part of the government-controlled media.⁷³ With such powerful backing, the serial comes to be seen as the national culture of the mainstream. This tends to eliminate the range of folk and popular versions or alternative versions. There is a very deliberate choice of one tradition and the elevation of this tradition (remoulded in accordance with contemporary tastes and values) to national status. The differences, the debates, the discussions implicit in the interplay of variants are thus nullified. Inevitably this is also part of the attempt to redefine Hinduism as an ideology for modernization.

Some of these concerns are reflected in a new insistence on proving the historicity of epic personalities and events. Since historical re-

(n. 72 cont.)

investigated further. There is of course the prestige attached to the Sanskrit text of Vālmiki and its working-over by brahman authors as well as the fact that it is the text projecting one of the major incarnations of Viṣṇu. The Tulsi version carries this further, but added to this is the fact that it was tied to the development of Hindi literature and regarded as a classic. Many of the film "moghuls" of the 1940s were upper-caste north Indian Hindus and familiar only with Vālmiki and Tulsi texts, as indeed are many of those associated with the recent television version. The variant forms, assuming that they were even known, tended to be dismissed by these persons as quaint folk-forms not to be taken seriously. The advantage of using themes from the epics was that the story was familiar to the audience. This also had the impact of etching in the film version as the most memorable in terms of using a modern medium for a traditional story. When Indian films required censorship in the 1940s, it was safer to make "mythologicals".

⁷³ A literal attempt was made to use the television serial as a political statement in the elections at Allahabad in 1988. The candidate fielded by the party in power, the Congress (I), was opposed by a major critic of this party who had once held high ministerial rank in the government but had resigned. The Congress (I) included in its election campaign speeches by the actor who had taken the part of Rāma in the television serial and was easily recognizable as such. The electorate rejected this attempt to gain mileage both out of religion and out of the media.

search has not proved anything conclusive, an appeal is made to archaeology. If Schliemann could come face to face with the death-mask of Agamemnon, why should excavations in Ayodhyā not reveal some tangible evidence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story? That to search for the archaeological counterpart of the epic is to chase a chimera does not deter some of the leading archaeologists: as we also know from numerous examples from elsewhere — not least the search for Camelot in the South Cadbury excavations. But the excavations at Ayodhyā have been something of an anti-climax. Habitation goes back at most to the seventh century B.C.⁷⁴ and not to the earlier millennia as is popularly believed. All that has been uncovered is a rather indifferent settlement of wattle and daub structures with a scatter of commonly used pottery. Clearly the poetic imagination of a Vālmiki went beyond these mundane artefacts. Or else one has to accept that the description of Ayodhyā in the text belongs to a later period of urban growth. This would be compatible with epic chronology which often used descriptions of a more recent period but projected them backwards to earlier times. The epic then becomes the literature of one age looking back nostalgically to another, to what it believes was past glory. With cremation as the preferred form of body disposal and the absence of tombs, there is little else that archaeology can provide by way of corroborating the text. It could point up the diversity in culture where the urban society of Ayodhyā is in contrast to the society of the *rākṣasas*, which incidentally may well have been that of the megalithic culture of the Vindhya with which the textual description corresponds to some degree.

It is the same insistence on historicity which has provided a base for a considerable political mobilization in northern India over the question of the precise location of the birthplace of Rāma in the city of Ayodhyā. There is currently an altercation with a group of Muslims over a site said to be the birthplace and on which a mosque abuts. The issue has aroused Hindu religious loyalties expressed in mammoth processions and demonstrations and has become politically pivotal to an ideological perspective which some have described as Hindu fundamentalism. Riots have occurred where the discontent has grown out of a multiplicity of other causes, yet the ostensible factor has been the dispute over the presence of a mosque at the birthplace of Rāma.

The narrative of Rama has played many parts in Indian history.

⁷⁴ B. B. Lal, "Historicity of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana: What Has Archaeology to Say in the Matter?" (paper presented at seminar on "New Archaeology and India", New Delhi, Oct. 1988).

Even the very few aspects of some selected variants touched on here raise questions pertinent to the historian's perception of the past. Literature was once regarded by historians as too fictional to provide historical data. But although the literary construction of a given reality may not be historical fact, it offers insights into that reality and captures some facets of the articulation of the historical fact. That the evidence from literature is not always direct forces the historian to an awareness of embedded forms.

In a society where cultural survivals are integral to the social process, these cannot be ignored but are perhaps better seen as potential historical data. The sources of history in Indian society are therefore more varied than what are conventionally viewed as sources. A story can become a historical object if placed in its historical context or perceived as part of a larger dialectic where ideology is immanent. Perhaps the historian has to eavesdrop on the dialogue between the past and the then present of earlier times.

The cultural centrality of a narrative may be stated through recourse to variant versions, suggestive of a debate, where each version attempts to authenticate its own perspective on the past. This requires that the historian be both familiar with the variants and cautious in ascribing the narrative invariably to the particular variant regarded as dominant. Not only do symbol and character take on different meanings in changing contexts, but the juxtaposition of variants illuminates each one in a manner which is absent when the versions are treated in isolation, as has been the tendency so far.

Equally significant is the insistence on historicity. At one level historicity affects attitudes to time. Cyclic, epic time tends to flatten out into linear time. At another level historicity is related to a concern with the past. The brahmanical version of the story does not claim historicity. The first claim to this comes from the Jaina version, which states that the other versions are false. But the present-day insistence on proving the historicity of epic characters and events discards the heterodox Jaina version since it contradicts the brahmanical. The modern Hindu claim to the historicity of this story is for a version for which previously historicity was irrelevant. This is quite apart from the fact that even if historicity is claimed the events of the epic cannot be used as a direct source for historical information, for such events would be enclosed by cultural forms and poetic fantasies which would first have to be sloughed off. The wish for historicity indicates a fundamentally new concern with the past, reflecting on ways of legitimizing the present. It also has to do with the moment when an

object of the past becomes part of a national memory, when a society interprets it as a common focus of its attention.

This is linked to the historical use of the story. In a sense, the epic ceases to be so after the first rewriting, for each version is a statement of historical change. Implicit in all these versions is literally the politics of culture which these adaptations demonstrate. The symbols of the story are universally understood, even if earlier insights are integrated with new meaning. The characters and events acquire connotations which can be far removed from the original meaning. The brahmanized Vālmiki version becomes the hegemonic text in support of monarchy and of a particular religious Vaiṣṇava sect. The Hindi version of Tulsi highlights the religious sectarian content; but at the same time it has a millennial appeal for peasants and to that extent becomes part of what is now being called the discourse of the oppressed. The television version subordinates the millennial aspect but emphasizes the message of a universalizing Hinduism, providing indirectly a possible ideology for middle-class concerns, a version which is linked to what is seen as the strategy of the ruling élite.

This in turn introduces the idea of the political use of the story: to legitimize monarchy; to legitimize religious orthodoxy by converting the hero into an incarnation of deity or to legitimize dissenting religious heterodoxy by changing the context of the story and claiming historicity for this version; to legitimize the protesters' search for a utopian society; and finally, to legitimize a community identified by religion and anxious to include the largest possible number for representational mobilization, as is often so in the making of a modern political community.

In looking at variant versions over a span of time, the dichotomy between historical continuity and change gets blurred, for the seemingly same story actually represents a new situation or a historical order may reproduce itself as change. One may then begin to ask: what are the layers which now go into the making up of our consciousness of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as an epic? Much of early Indian history is embedded in such cultural forms. It is only as we learn to decode these forms that we begin to see the presence of history.