

Rāvaṇa Reclaimed: The South Indian Dravidian
Movement's Reclamation of Identity Through
the *Rāmāyaṇa*

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	3
1. Narrative Form (<i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> as Regional History)	
1.1 Indianizing Asia through the <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i>	4
1.2 Moral Rules and Cultural Hegemony: Implications of Adaptions ...	7
1.3 The North-South Divide	9
1.4 The Vedic Characteristics of Valmiki's <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i>	11
1.5 Implications of Vedic Characteristics.....	16
1.6 Dharmic Discussions	19
1.7 Kampan's <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> of South India	20
2. Anthropological Form (<i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> as Self-Contained Story)	
2.1 Cultural Conflict: Changing Forms of Morality	27
2.2 Patterns of Demon-Reclamation in India: Mahiṣa	29
2.3 The Dravidian Movement and Periyar	31
2.4 Anti-Brahminism and Rāvaṇa as the Hero	35
2.5 The Rāma-līlā: A Subversion of Ritual	42
2.6 Śambūka: The Most Famous Sudra	44
2.7 Slippery Issues of Rāvaṇa's Past	49
3. Conclusions	50
Bibliography	55
Endnotes	59

i. Abstract

The *Rāmāyaṇa* proves itself to be an inimitable and lasting artifact of cultural measurement. The variety of interpretations, filled with intertextual complexity and culturally specific commentary as well as surrounding polemic discussions, serve to highlight and perpetuate norms of civilization and specifics of religion as the narrative was passed among many areas. Transmission through trade, conversion, conquest, and artistic productions catapulted the *Rāmāyaṇa* all over Asia, but notably from North India to South India. This thesis examines the differences in retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* from the North – Valmīki’s text – and in the South – through Kampan’s Tamil language text as well as a few modern South Indian retellings – to see how the *Rāmāyaṇa* is actively applied as a tool of either oppression or resistance. Through the recharacterization of several characters and narrative events, this thesis examines the importance of representation and autonomy in the *Rāmāyaṇa* as it relates to how religious literature can be used as a tool of ideology. I include literary analysis and comparison, investigation of political movements and key figures – centered around the encompassing Dravidian Movement – and nuanced discussions of *dharma* and its implications in order to show how the Dravidian Movement uses the *Rāmāyaṇa* to reconstruct a political and historical identity in opposition to a Brahmanical North Indian cultural hegemony.

"As long as the mountains and rivers shall endure upon the earth, so long with the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* be told among men:"¹ this statement, uttered by the Hindu god Brahmā in Valmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, has remained true for centuries. In a broad sense, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a tale about political intrigue, warring factions, religious ethics and morality, the interference of gods in earthly affairs, and the triumph of good over evil – themes that transcend time and place. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is one of two great epics of India, along with the *Mahābhārata*. While the *Rāmāyaṇa* may not be the oldest of these religious epics, it is considered more poetic, and is the most retold literary tradition throughout South and Southeast Asia.² As Robert Goldman,³ the director of the Valmīki Ramayana Translation Project, called it, the *Rāmāyaṇa* can be considered like "the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the Bible [all] in one package."⁴ Presumed to be thousands of years old, and with more than 50,000 lines, the *Rāmāyaṇa* still manages to captivate massive populations from varying cultures throughout the world, and, as Brahmā predicted, continues to influence art and religion, TV dramas and festivals, and even modern political movements.⁵

This thesis deals with issues relating to modern Indian politics and identity, while addressing the influential premodern Indian epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and its lasting effects. While the other great Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata*, is not the focus of this thesis, it will be mentioned briefly for comparison purposes in discussions of *dharma*. Though the *Rāmāyaṇa* does not have a character like Bhīma and his addresses on *dharma* like the *Mahābhārata* does, Rāma himself is the embodiment of this meta-discourse. Rāma's embodiment of *dharma* functions as a deeply important model; the use of metaphor allows for more

personal reflection and resonance with readers and viewers than might just a simple dialogue of *dharma*.

While most scholars would agree that “there is a long history to the relationship between *Rāmāyaṇa* and political symbology,”⁶ few have analyzed the application of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a tool of resistance. The characterization and subsequent re-characterizations of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s villain, Rāvaṇa, the heroine Sītā, and the lowly Śūdra Śambūka, were used as ideological tools and weapons first in Valmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* to ‘domesticate’ indigenous populations, and then by the Dravidian Movement of Tamil Nadu in order to reconstruct a political and historical identity in opposition to a Brahmanical North Indian cultural hegemony. While the exact reclamation and reusage of these characters oftentimes leads to more questions, some without easy answers, the characterizations influence notions of religious *dharma* (right conduct or virtue), and offer a practical pathway to reimagine identity and provide social mobility for the people of South India.

1. *Rāmāyaṇa* as Regional History

1.1 *Indianizing Asia through the Rāmāyaṇa*

Paula Richman, in *Many Rāmāyaṇas*, writes on the prevalence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story in modern day India:

The cultural area in which *Ramayanas* are endemic has a pool of signifiers (like a gene pool), signifiers that include plots, characters, names, geography, incidents, and relationships. Oral, written, and performance traditions, phrases, proverbs, and even sneers carry allusions to the Rama story. When someone is carrying on, you say, ‘What’s this *Ramayana* now?’

Enough.’ In Tamil... a proverb about a dim-witted person says, ‘After hearing the *Ramayana* all night, he asks how Rama is related to Sita,’ and... to these must be added marriage songs, narrative poems, place legends, temple myths, paintings, sculpture, and the many performing arts.⁷

With popularity comes great power, and the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been used as a tool to Indianize numerous communities, even as far away as Indonesia and China.⁸ Foreign kings throughout Asia sometimes chose to adapt and appropriate the *Rāmāyaṇa* along with other aspects of Indian culture as part of a system of gaining and maintaining power over vast territories. Kings before the rise of the modern Indian nation-state acted more as tribal chieftains, fighting over control of smaller areas with other local chieftains until the founding of bureaucratic kingdoms supported by routine taxation of agricultural production.⁹ With this change, the chieftains often looked to models and structures made accessible by the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The presentation of the Prince Rāma character as a divine king inspired rulers to adopt similar religious-cultural norms, including the acceptance of Brahmanical priestly authority in order to gain legitimacy in their rule. Rulers thus understood the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a model for effective governmental leadership – a basis for Indian kingship and religious moral structures.¹⁰ Virtually every country that has come into contact with the *Rāmāyaṇa* has adapted it into their own narrative and artistic traditions, making changes when needed, and transforming it for their own purposes.

This process occurred in much the same way in South India as it had in the north. Peaceful immigration and the mixing of cultures through intermarriage, the transmission of text, and the influence of religious and political figures culminated in widespread Brahmanical cultural influence. The *Rāmāyaṇa*’s transmission into the south brought with it the encoded cultural

norms and Brahmanical messages that urged peoples to accept the normative social order and the dominance of Indo-Aryan culture over the indigenous Dravidian culture of the south — a culture that some consider to have been more widespread in India during pre-historical times, but later became relegated to South India.¹¹

The cultural oppression claimed by the Dravidian people to have originated from Indo-Aryans and encumbered onto South India stems from the influx of foreign texts that included coded language, themes, and ideology. The contemporary view of this hypothesis can be summarized as the migration theory, wherein Indo-Aryans arrived in India from the Steppes via Bactria, bringing with them their Indo-Aryan language, traditions, and social stratification, and pushing Dravidian culture southward in the subcontinent. This history is perceived to be encoded in the *Rāmāyaṇa* through the zoomorphic forest dwellers of the Nandaka forest, through the vilification of Rāvaṇa and his people, and through the deification of Rāma as Viṣṇu. These characterizations work to portray a strict dichotomy of good and evil, which then reinforces an existing social hierarchy that oppresses Dravidian peoples as ‘lowly Śūdras,’ below the status of Brahmins (and others) from the North.

Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, in *A History of India*, describe the Brahmanization of South India as “literally put[ting] the tribal people in their place,” going on to give the example of Brahmins “recit[ing] the verses of the *Mahabharata* which state that it is the duty of tribes to lead a quiet life in the forest, to be obedient to the king, to dig wells, to give water and food to travelers and gifts to the Brahmins in such areas where they could ‘domesticate’ the tribal

people.”¹² Like all colonizers, it seems that the Brahmins required assimilation and obedience, as seen through their attempts to ‘domesticate’ the tribal people.

Another tactic in domestication was through the use of religious right and religious rite. B. A. van Nooten, in the introduction to William Buck’s English translation, ascribes the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s popularity to its status as the “work of exemplars, of models of good behavior which people in distress and frustration, when doubts assail them, can follow and imitate with beneficial results.”¹³ To some Hindus, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a religious poem detailing the life of the seventh incarnation of Viṣṇu as he returns to Earth to overcome evil. To others, it is purely a tale of exploits and adventure, heroes and monsters.

1.2 Moral Rules and Cultural Hegemony: Implications of Adaptions

As a history, the *Rāmāyaṇa* could possibly be loosely based on a battle of great antiquity, when the Sanskrit speaking Indo-Aryan group moved into the Indian plains from the mountains of Afghanistan during the second millennium BCE,¹⁴ interacting with the indigenous Dravidians; “so speculation goes that the *Rāmāyaṇa* represents a glorified account of this excursion of the Aryans into Southern India with Rama as the Aryan cultural hero, and the rakshasas of Lanka, as well as the monkeys and bears, the less developed races encountered by the Aryans.”¹⁵ However, van Nooten then posits that this “theory [of a complete Indo-Aryan military takeover] is highly speculative and probably false.”¹⁶ Other theories include a peaceful cohabitation and the appropriation of culture from both the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian sides, theories of which have

been enlightened by evidence of peaceful immigration and settlement.¹⁷ It is illuminating, however, to read the militaristic theory as justification on the side of North Indians' right to rule over India, and as reason for the South Indians to be offended regarding the metaphor of their people as animalistic forest denizens. These interpretations, especially when stemming from those in power, carry with them great meaning for all those who come into contact with the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Indo-Aryan culture encapsulated a massive body of work: religious, moralistic, hymnal, epic, and literary features that were composed in various Indo-Aryan languages. As such, the Indo-Aryan culture can be viewed through the *Vedas*, as the *mantra* texts are said to be divinely inspired, and thus were passed down reliably from priests in oral tradition.¹⁸ The *Ṛigveda*, as part of the *mantra* texts, contains invaluable information on the views and daily struggles of the early Indo-Aryans, as it is both the most ancient and sacred text.¹⁹ Through these texts, early Indo-Aryan concerns are exhibited; prominent themes include fighting and war, ritual and practice, and praise to the gods. Propagated largely by Brahmins (an elite caste of priests, poets, and scholars supported by royal patronage) and by monastics of the Buddhist and Jaina orders, this religious and political culture is exhibited throughout the Sanskrit and Prakrit texts.

Dravidian culture, by contrast, existed through Dravidian languages: Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. Separated from the north by the Vindhya mountains and the Narmada river, the Dravidian lands of South India were able to develop while being less influenced from outside forces than their counterparts in the north. They were thus more tribal, without the Brahmin-influenced methods of consolidating power. Societal stratification began with the

need to defend against raiders. Sea-trade being a profitable exploit, many tribal areas and principalities made their homes along the fertile land of the coast. The resulting economic boom allowed principalities to grow, and in the second century CE, Ptolemy mentions ports of South India as well as capitals and rulers further inland.²⁰

1.3 The North-South Divide: Encoded Culture and Geography

This history of distinction between north and south in India is more than just linguistic differences and natural boundaries. India, from prehistoric times on, has been inhabited by many groups. Peoples calling themselves “Ārya” migrated in around the middle of the second millennium BCE, most likely from Bactria, over the Afghan mountains after the depletion of the Ganga river tributaries.²¹ These Aryans, carrying the poetic and ritual traditions that would be canonized as the *Vedas*, traveled south; their move in reaction to a sudden change of climate, and the Vedic Indo-Aryans consequently arrived in the Indus Valley. Possibly due to overgrazing, related issues of tectonic movement, or deforestation, the great earlier civilization of the Indus valley (whose ruins were found at Harrapa and Mohenjo-Daro, and over a very wide area beyond) evidently declined between 1800 and 1700 BCE.²² After 1500 BCE, rainfall and vegetation renewed gradually, though dry periods starting from 2000 BCE allowed penetration through the thick jungle in the Gangetic plain.

There is no sign of violent invasion by the migrants in the archeological record, as had been previously theorized. Current genetic biology findings have

all but confirmed the Bronze Age migration theory, though cannot echo the severe oppression of tribal groups. Recent scholarship into Y-DNA lines of descent (through male lineage genetic pools) – instead of the previously studied matrilineal mtDNA – have shown that ample external infusion occurred. Complementing this theory is the confirmation of a sex bias existing during Bronze Age migration: men migrated heavily during this period, much more so than women, and this inequity was due to the patriarchal pastoral society. These migrating men then intermarried with local populations of women, which results in a mixing of Y-DNA and a commonality of mtDNA. From a paper published in the American Journal of Human Genetics in 2013, geneticists including Harvard's Priya Moorjani, Lalji Singh, and David Reich, write about the population mixing event in India dating 4,000 years ago:

The dates we report have significant implications for Indian history in the sense that they document a period of demographic and cultural change in which mixture between highly differentiated populations became pervasive before it eventually became uncommon. The period of around 1,900–4,200 years before present was a time of profound change in India, characterized by the de-urbanization of the Indus civilization, increasing population density in the central and downstream portions of the Gangetic system, shifts in burial practices, and the likely first appearance of Indo-European languages and Vedic religion in the subcontinent.²³

The paper ends with recognition of Vedic texts: “the shift from widespread mixture to strict endogamy that we document is mirrored in ancient Indian texts.”²⁴

In contrast to this view, the Vedic literature does allude to battles with dark-skinned foes called *dāsa* or *dasyu*, which may be references to conflicts with indigenous populations.²⁵ The Indo-Aryans had the advantage of domesticated horses and swift spoke-wheeled chariots. But it is important, also, to note that the Indo-Aryans were not politically unified. There were many Indo-Aryan

groups, some even in conflict and competition with each other, until the shift from tribal organization to bureaucratic kingdom of the Indo-Aryans was established. Two types of Brahmins followed with the initial migration: royal priest-advisers and sages. While the pre-existing kingless tribes tolerated the forest-dwelling sages, they were suspicious of the Brahmin priests and courtiers.²⁶ The *Rāmāyaṇa* has been heralded as a synthesizing and informing tool of Indo-Aryan iniquity concerning caste and color inequality, being received well as it conformed to a tradition of storytelling rather than overt politics.²⁷ In the eyes of North Indian Brahmins, as shown through the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the non-Brahmin peoples in Tamil Nadu were all relegated to the low Śūdra caste.²⁸

1.4 The Vedic Characteristics of Valmīki's Rāmāyaṇa

A notable facet of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is its religious underpinnings. This is found most obviously in the incarnation of Rāma as Viṣṇu. The Hindu god Viṣṇu has the ability to transform himself into bodily forms out of love and compassion, changing himself so as to allow followers to gain access to him, and to offer assistance when needed.²⁹ With ten popularly known avatars, or descents of Viṣṇu on Earth, Viṣṇu's forms have been recorded in Hindu scriptures like the *Purāṇas* and the *Mahābhārata*. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, his seventh incarnation as an avatar is in the form of Rāma. Viṣṇu is also incarnated partially in Rāma's brothers, though not anywhere near as much as in Rāma himself.

The germ of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story – by which I mean the second book, for reasons that will be addressed later – begins in Ayodhyā, where King Daśaratha

is a beloved ruler along with his three wives.³⁰ While he has no children, he desperately desires sons. This trope, of a childless ruler who urgently wishes to have an heir and so decides to seek advice from mystics, is seen throughout time in many different cultures. What makes this iteration special is the inclusion of a Vedic fertility rite: a rice-offering eaten by King Daśaratha's three wives.

With help from the Vedic sage Nārada, Brahmin priests, and Lord Viṣṇu's divine intervention, King Daśaratha soon begets four sons from his three wives: they are Rāma, Bharata, and the twins Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna. All the sons are said to be brave, gifted, and kind, as well as partially divine. They are excellent warriors as well as politicians, but Rāma stands out among his brothers as the most kingly:

All the world knows Rama to be a decent man, for truth and righteousness are his first concern. And he is wise in the ways of righteousness, true to his word, a man of character, and never spiteful.

He is forbearing, conciliatory, kind-spoken, grateful, and self-disciplined.

He is gentle, firm of purpose, ever capable, and unspiteful.

He speaks kindly to all people, and yet he always tells the truth.

He shows reverence for aged and deeply learned brahmans.³¹

For these reasons, the people of Ayodhyā wished for him to become king. The reverence for the “aged and deeply learned brahmans” is of particular note, as it showcases the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s political message: Brahmin are to be well-regarded; it is a trait of the perfect, ideal ruler that he should respect the Brahmin, and thus continue the traditional hierarchical caste structure. This endorsement of orthodoxy comes to play a major role in future discussions of *Rāmāyaṇas* and the enduring power of Brahmin in India.

Once it is time for Rāma to marry, he hears of a neighboring kingdom that harbors a beautiful princess, Sītā. Her father, King Janaka, has declared a

competition for her hand in marriage: whoever can string Śiva's heavenly bow will be Sītā's groom. Rāma, as the seventh incarnation of Viṣṇu, easily succeeds. After a plot by one of King Daśaratha's wives to install Bharata on the throne instead of the rightful heir, Rāma is exiled to the forest for fourteen years. His bride Sītā and his loyal brother Lakṣmaṇa insist on accompanying him. While in the forest, a *rākṣasī* approaches Lakṣmaṇa and asks to marry him. *Rākṣasīs* and *rākṣasas* are usually translated as 'demon' in English, however the connotation associated with demon is definitively negative. By labeling *rākṣasas* as demons, translations often negatively feed into the stereotype of *rākṣasas* being depicted as grotesque evil creatures, which the subsequent discussion of Rāvaṇa will complicate. It is better to understand *rākṣasas* as being similar to the Greek *daimon*, or a spirit-being that lives in wild and desolate locations. They are not, as would be assumed by the category of 'demons,' intrinsically evil, though they are commonly depicted as antagonistic and violent. Though depicted as brutes, they also have the capacity for moral redemption or ascetic self-discipline. However, this *rākṣasī*, who approaches the encampment, disgusts Lakṣmaṇa with her plea for his love, and he then mocks her and cuts off her nose. The *rākṣasī* happens to be the sister of King Rāvaṇa, the *rākṣasa*-king of Laṅkā, and, understandably, her mutilation enrages him. Rāvaṇa sees this trespass as an act of war, and, following Tamilian modes of warfare, he is well within his right to retaliate.

Meanwhile in the forest, Sītā sees a golden deer. Having been completely captivated by the animal, Sītā asks Rāma to bring it to her. He dutifully complies, and runs after the creature. The golden deer, however, is actually a *rākṣasa* in disguise, sent by Rāvaṇa after he had seen Sītā's beauty and coveted her in revenge. Rāma succeeds in finally killing the deer, but not before the *rākṣasa*

yells for help in Rāma's voice, luring Lakṣmaṇa to leave Sītā alone and run towards the cry. While alone, Sītā is kidnapped by Rāvaṇa who comes disguised as a holy mendicant begging for alms, and she is taken away to Laṅkā. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa begin their quest to find and retrieve Sītā, enlisting the help of an army of monkeys and bears. Together they eventually succeed in attacking Laṅkā, going to war with the *rākṣasas* and killing Rāvaṇa, and freeing Sītā from her imprisonment. The reunited couple returns to Ayodhyā, having reached the fourteen-year term of their exile.

But Sītā's tribulations do not end with her reunion with Rāma. Having been away from Rāma's side for almost fourteen years, she was held captive in the household of another man. And while she has been nothing but a loyal and chaste wife, her situation has caused rumors of her infidelity to spread throughout the kingdom. Rāma hears of his people's anxiety but has no idea how to persuade the kingdom of her innocence. In order to prove her chastity, Sītā voluntarily undergoes a trial by fire.

The trial by fire, known as *agni-parīkṣā*, is a ritual wherein the accused steps into a blazing fire to be judged by the fire god Agni. If the accused is innocent, she will emerge unscathed. Sītā's *agni-parīkṣā* is an example of a restorative ordeal, and was "a recognized part of Brahmanical Hindu custom throughout much of pre-modern India."³² Usually, ordeals were a ritualized institution, wherein there existed a defendant and a plaintiff. These would have to be overseen by a Brahmin, who would be paid for his time and service. Another ritual governed by the Brahmanical normative structure, Brahmins benefited economically, but the defendants also benefited: "the person who commissions a restorative ordeal has the otherwise unavailable opportunity to

vindicate himself of some suspected wrongdoing.”³³ Regarding Sītā’s ordeal,

David Brick says that:

Sītā’s *agni-parīkṣā* and the parallel narratives that it inspired may have provided a widely accepted and highly revered model through which Indian audiences could appreciate the performance of restorative ordeals....In other words, attendees at such ordeals may have understood the rite by analogy with Sītā’s *agni-parīkṣā* and, therefore, been particularly willing to accept it as a legitimate means of exoneration. If so, this might help explain the development and spread of the practice.³⁴

The telling of Sītā’s *agni-parīkṣā* uses the same poetic devices of metaphor and repetition that would traditionally have accompanied Brahmanical restorative ordeals, fostering acceptability and trust in the seriousness of the ordeal. Sītā is “assailed by false slander,” accused “before a large crowd” and so attempts to clear her name to everyone in audience.³⁵ Before the trial begins, she recites a verse:

As my heart never strays away from Rāma, so may the purifier, the witness of the world, completely protect me!³⁶

This verse is derived from the *Dharmaśāstra*, similar to the verse required to be recited by anyone undergoing a fire ordeal:

You, O fire, O purifier, move within all beings. Like a witness, O wise one, speak the truth about my good and bad deeds!³⁷

While she is vindicated by Agni and emerges from the fire unharmed, she is still turned away from Ayodhyā due to the continuing concerns of the common people. Rāma, though heartbroken, sides with his people over his wife. Sītā is exiled again into the forest, this time alone. Her moral heroism shines through during this trial, as she is secretly pregnant with Rāma’s twins. Sītā supports her husband by following his command even while she knows he is wrong, showing the ideal woman as a subservient, obedient one. Sītā is then taken in by the sage Valmīki who finds her alone by a river. The narration of the *Rāmāyaṇa* then

begins again in the first book, from Valmiki's teaching of the Rāma story to the twins, Kuśa and Lava.³⁸

This example of Sītā's restorative ordeal shows an interesting possible case of religious narrative informing religious practice (that of the readers), though Brick qualifies this by saying that "they still constitute a unique and hitherto unrecognized custom of pre-modern India, one that shows how the determination of guilt and innocence sometimes resided outside of formal, judicial courts in the so-called court of public opinion."³⁹

1.5 Implications of Vedic Characteristics

Though the narrative is known across the globe, the ultimate origins of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are, to this day, unknown. The narrative germinated in a long oral tradition, and when the epic was finally fixed in writing, even then it was soon retold in a variety of languages.⁴⁰ While there are many regional recensions and sub-recensions, Goldman concludes that all existing versions are ultimately traced back to "a more or less unitary archetype."⁴¹ Many scholars of Sanskrit view the *Rāmāyaṇa* to be extremely metrically advanced and to be the work (mostly, possibly excluding the later additions) of a single skilled metrist.⁴² Agreed to stem from Vedic periods, the germ of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is said to represent the eastern districts of a limited Northern India.⁴³

Authorship of the 'original story' is traditionally attributed to Valmīki, a mythicized ancient poet-sage who functions as the narrator of Rāma's story, and is thus immortalized in his own myth. I qualify this statement and the use of the

term 'original' because of the history of oral storytelling in India; there could very well have been many iterations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* occurring contemporaneously, with Valmīki's version being cemented before or during the others.

The actual poetry exhibited in this epic is held up by commentators as unique, with Valmīki's "versification...possess[ing] a polish and grace, a quiet elegance, that markedly differentiate it from anything known before."⁴⁴ In the introduction to the first volume of his translation, Goldman says that "the text has come down to us in two major regional recensions, the northern and the southern, each of which has a number of versions defined generally by the scripts in which the manuscripts are written."⁴⁵ The Southern recension includes much more added material and distinct characterizations.

If the Sanskrit epic is the work of a single author, known to tradition under Valmīki, scholars assume that he drew upon popular folk tellings of the Rāma story and wove them into a continuous narrative with the addition of his framing story.⁴⁶ Conventional Vedic literary techniques are incorporated in this recension, including "the use of narrators at various stages, the descriptions of nature to suggest the mood of action, [and] occasional divine interventions."⁴⁷ Sheldon Pollock, translator of the second and third books in the project, notes that "the most impressive formal feature, and the most sophisticated aesthetic advance... is a complex narrative technique, quite unlike either the simple episodic or the emboxing procedures that are the norm in Sanskrit literature." The effect of this is not of pure suspense and added dramatization, but functions as a way to typify issues in the story.⁴⁸

Valmīki's mythical authorship is written into the epic through the first and last books (*Bāla-Kāṇḍa* and *Uttara-Kāṇḍa*), which are suspected to have been added after the other five books (*kāṇḍas*).⁴⁹ Valmīki himself debuts in the *Bāla-Kāṇḍa*, the first book. He comes across Nārada, a Vedic sage who was familiar with all of history. After asking Nārada if there was any man on Earth who was “endowed with excellent and heroic qualities, who is versed in all the duties of life, grateful, truthful, firm in his vows, an actor of many parts, benevolent to all beings, learned, eloquent, handsome, patient, slow to anger, one who is truly great; who is free from envy and when excited to wrath can strike terror into the hearts of celestial beings,” he listens as Nārada answers him with a description of Prince Rāma. Nārada then urges Valmīki to take in the exiled and pregnant Sītā who has been exiled to the forest, and, without comfort, would commit suicide by drowning herself in the Ganga river. This framing device continues with its use of metaphor as Valmīki sees the death of a male heron as the bird is mating with his female counterpart. Valmīki is “moved profoundly with grief, [and then] pronounced a curse, without knowing what he was doing, condemning the hunter to hell for eternity.”⁵⁰ This curse leads to Valmīki's encouragement by Brahmā, the Hindu creation god, to take up the task of composing a *kāvya*, poetry, in order to make up for the ill-will he brought upon the hunter.⁵¹ In the *Uttara-Kāṇḍa*, Valmīki again makes his appearance as a sage ascetic who brings Sītā and her now-grown twin sons, Kuśa and Lava, to Ayodhyā to sing the story of their father.⁵²

1.6 Dharmic Discussions

Throughout the *Rāmāyaṇa*, there are several pertinent themes, the most important one to discuss in the context of religious and political influence is *dharma*. The succinct definition of *Dharma*, in either the historical and contemporary sense, differs as the meaning has changed with time and modern perception. English translation also falls short, due to the problems with pinpointing a solid definition onto a word that encompasses an assortment of meanings. John Brockington, in his 2004 article, “The Concept of *Dharma* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*,” details how *dharma*’s meaning shifted, using Rāma and the perception of Rāma as the touchstone. Commenting on the Sanskrit phrase, *rāmo dharmabhṛtaṃ varaḥ*, Brockington notes:

From an original meaning which one might paraphrase as ‘a pillar of the establishment,’ with the emphasis on *dharma* as the correct social order, there was a shift to *dharma* as ‘righteousness, moral values (only),’ to ‘Righteous Rāma;’ but in a *kṣatriya* context an emphasis on *dharma* as the correct social order, even political stability, is entirely natural.⁵³

Brockington’s examination of *dharma* notices that, most often, *dharma* is used to denote morality and proper behavior. However, in addition to ‘righteous’ living, there lies “an emphasis also on caste, family or personal duties and on an element of necessity, as well as on the duties of a king.”⁵⁴

The linguistic use of *dharma* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* can be broken into several varying usages. Brockington analyzes over 1100 occurrences of the word, finding that around two-thirds mean ‘propriety’ or ‘morality.’ The second highest meaning is as caste or personal duty. But *dharma* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* extends to mean, at varying times, “tradition or custom, norms, necessity and legality.”⁵⁵

Brockington also records several occurrences of *dharma* being defined inside the text itself. These usages break down into “filial obedience, the equivalence of *dharma* and *satya*, ‘truth’, and once that the highest *dharma* is absence of cruelty,”⁵⁶ the first of which is shown through Rāma’s declaration that “this is duty, my shapely wife, obedience to father and mother, and so, if I disregarded their command, I couldn’t bear to live.”⁵⁷

While giving us many definitions of *dharma* and through these lenses examining what is right and what is wrong action, the *Rāmāyaṇa* includes several events that leave us with a dissonance. In the dispute between Sugrīva and Vālin, the two monkey brother-kings, Rāma sides with the wronged Sugrīva, after Vālin had kidnapped his brother’s wife. While Rāma’s choice to side with Sugrīva makes moral sense, the slaying of Vālin by Rāmā – an interference in the brother’s fight – by shooting him from a hidden position is morally destitute. Rāma’s justification for his breach of military decorum is that he acted as his brother Bharata’s agent, and that animals such as Vālin are not protected under the same rules of war as humans (a statement that could very well be perceived as racist towards Dravidian peoples, who could be viewed as being represented by the forest-dwelling animals).

1.7 Kampaṇ’s *Rāmāyaṇa* of South India

Kampaṇ, known as the ‘emperor of poets,’⁵⁸ is the name given to the author of the first extant Tamil version of the Rāma story, entitled the *Irāmāvatāram* (‘The Descent [Incarnation] of Rāma’), though it is commonly

referred to as *Kampa-Rāmāyaṇam*. For ease of the reader, I will refer to this piece as Kampan's *Rāmāyaṇa*. As with Valmiki, not much is known about Kampan apart from his work. Even basic details such as his name and his time-period are contested, though he is generally dated to either to the end of the 10th century CE or to the reign of king Vikrama Chola, 1118–1135 CE.⁵⁹ In the legend surrounding the poet, he was the son of one Adita, an *uvaccaṇ* responsible for ringing the bell in a Kālī temple in Tanjore district.⁶⁰ It is said in the mythos that surrounds him that he was murdered by the Chola king himself while in a jealous rage about Kampan's notoriety.⁶¹

K.V. Raman and T. Padmaja depict Kampan as a worshipper of Rāma and Sītā as incarnations of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī, and as a devoted fan of Valmiki's, whom he "described as a veritable ocean of milk and compared himself to a tiny cat, ambitious but incapable to drink all the milk."⁶² Raman and Padmaja do not assert that Kampan's *Rāmāyaṇa* was derivative of Valmiki's. Instead, they highlight the many differences in Kampan's tone and poetic structure, as reminiscent of Tamil culture and tradition.

An example of the differences between Valmiki and Kampan lies in the disparate tellings of the Ahalyā saga in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Valmiki's version of Ahalyā, the wife of the great sage Gautama, is willingly seduced by Indra in the guise of her husband: "She knew it was Indra of the Thousand Eyes in the guise of the sage. Yet she, wrongheaded woman, made up her mind, excited, curious about the king of the gods."⁶³ In Kampan's telling, Ahalyā realizes Indra's real identity but is unable to bring herself to stop the union: "yet unable/to put aside what was not hers,/she dallied in her joy."⁶⁴ The corresponding punishments

given to Indra and Ahalyā by Gautama reflect North and South Indian cultural concerns and their greater poetic themes. While Valmīki's Gautama castrates Indra and causes Ahalyā to wait in perpetual hunger alone in her home until the arrival of Rāma, Kampan's Gautama curses Indra: "May you be covered by the vaginas of a thousand women"⁶⁵ and curses Ahalyā into turning to cold stone until Rama's arrival. Kampan's punishments reflect the wrong doings committed, and furthers the mythos of Indra, known as 'Thousand Eyes,' by having a thousand vaginas turn to eyes on his body.⁶⁶ South Indian folklore emphasized explanation of preexisting myth. In Kampan's version, during an attempt to get away unnoticed by Gautama, Indra transforms into a cat – another common folklore motif. Once Rāma arrives to release Ahalyā from her stone imprisonment, there comes an opportunity for the reader to practice *bhakti*, devotion of Rāma as the savior. Paula Richman says these motifs, "are attested in South Indian folklore and other southern Rama stories, in inscriptions and earlier Tamil poems, as well as in non-Tamil sources...Kampan, here, and elsewhere, not only makes full use of his predecessor Valmīki's materials, but [also] many regional folk traditions. It is through him that they then become part of other *Rāmāyaṇas*."⁶⁷

An Indian writer and revolutionary of the 19th and 20th centuries, exceptionally active in unearthing ancient Tamil texts, V. V. S. Aiyar, wrote that "in the *Ramayana* of Kampan, the world possesses an epic which can challenge comparison not merely with the Iliad and the Aeneid, the Paradise Lost and the *Mahābhārata*, but with its original itself, namely, the *Ramayana* of Valmiki."⁶⁸ The culture from which Kampan was working influenced several aspects of his

work. His version of Rāma's tale is roughly half the length of Valmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. The reception of his *Rāmāyaṇam* was unanimously positive in his time.

The premise of Kampan's retelling remains the same: Rāma is still exiled for fourteen years into the forest due to his stepmother's command, Rāma and Sītā still marry, Sītā is kidnapped and held in Laṅkā for years as Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa attempt to bring her back, and eventually evil is defeated and Rāvaṇa is killed by Rāma. But Kampan includes more wordplay, wit, and perceived exuberance in his poetic and deeply religious retelling as opposed to Valmīki's sometimes dry and solemn writing style.⁶⁹ He never lets the reader forget the divinity of Rāma, and he highlights *dharma* (social duty), religious piety, and the greater cosmic destiny of each character as their actions embody their ideals. Also, similar to Valmīki, Kampan emphasizes class and role within society for these dharmic actions. Rāma embodies his role by accepting his exile with grace, even when King Daśaratha attempts to convince him to stay. His brother Bharata embodies religious piety by revering Rāma and offering him back the throne. The feminine is depicted likewise, as Sītā is the model of chastity and female righteousness, which is highlighted even more when Kampan's Rāvaṇa removes the circle of ground beneath her during her kidnapping instead of touching her. The extermination of Rāvaṇa and *rāksasas* is the culmination of the divine plan, again emphasizing cosmic duty and destiny, as societal duty is of the utmost concern.

Due to the religious and political environment in which Kampan would have been writing, it was impossible for him to create a Rāma character that was not wholly divine, as it was an accepted and objective fact in India that Rāma was the seventh incarnation of Viṣṇu. However, while Valmīki lauds Prince Rāma as

indestructible in morality and perfect in virtue, for Kampan̄ he is the all-loving and all-forgiving Supreme Lord, known thus to everyone including Rāvaṇa:

Who can this Rama be?
 He is not Siva, nor Tirumal, nor the Four-faced One.
 As for austerities, he looks not strong
 enough to mortify his flesh.
 Is he perhaps the Universal Cause
 of whom that Veda speaks?⁷⁰
 ...
 'Tis little if I say he loved all men
 ev'n as he loves himself: the love he bears
 to thee, ev'n that's the measure of his love
 to all things living.⁷¹

Scholar Kamil Zvelebil claims that this divinization of Rāma began in Tamil Nadu with the *ālvār bhakti* poets like Kulacekara Ālvār.⁷² The *ālvārs'* works comprise over 4000 songs of devotion, and often dote on Rāma's virtuous characteristics. The poet Nammālvār cries: "Is there any name worthier than Rāma for those who desire to know about the supreme?"⁷³ Perhaps inspired by the empathetic gods and personal relationships written about by the *bhakti* poets, Kampan̄'s Rāma is characterized as the compassionate reincarnation of Viṣṇu, Rāma does not continue fighting Rāvaṇa after he has fallen, and instead issues the traditional rites given to noble deaths: "Although his evil has cleaved our heart in twain, let us forgive!"⁷⁴

It is not just Rāma who is portrayed in a rose-colored light. While antagonist Rāvaṇa is motivated throughout the narrative by a love of glory and power, he is described by Kampan̄ as intelligent and noble, cultured and exalted.⁷⁵ A. L. Basham for this reason claims that "[l]ike Milton, Kampan̄ was of the devil's party without knowing it."⁷⁶ Rāvaṇa's power-hungry characteristic is shown through intelligent monologues:

Even if I lose, if that Rāma's
 name will stand, will not
 my name last, too, as
 long as the Veda exists?
 Who can escape death
 that comes to all?
 We live today
 and tomorrow we die.
 But glory—does it ever die?
 ...And even if I fall,
 I cannot stoop to
 shameful littleness!⁷⁷

Even Rāvaṇa's relationship with Sītā is recharacterized to fit Kampan's overall moral code. In interactions with her, Rāvaṇa is delicate and sensitive, even courteous, addressing her as a *koel*:⁷⁸ “O slender-waisted *kuyil*! When will you bestow on me your sweet grace? Speak!’ And he proceeds: ‘The days are dying one by one... Will you accept me after I am dead, killed by your cruelty?’⁷⁹ Zvelebil states that “[t]he love of Ravana for Sita is decidedly of a higher type in Kampan than in Valmiki; it is dignified and courtly, passionate, deep and all-absorbing, and hence tragical.”⁸⁰

As her husband exemplifies the ideal man, Sītā is the quintessential woman of morality. She exhibits only the positive characteristics required in the female gender. The ideal woman, wife, and even captive, Sītā's struggles in the *Rāmāyaṇa* all focus on protecting her image. Linda Hess, in “Rejecting Sītā: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of his Ideal Wife,” examines three of Sītā's struggles: *agni-parīksā* (the fire ordeal), her abandonment immediately following her rescue from Rāvaṇa, and a second ordeal that she undergoes once she reunites with Rāma again in the *Uttara-Kāṇḍa*.

Valmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* includes all three of these events. Other renderers, however, must have found these struggles contentious or uncomfortable, and

decide to leave them out. Kampan̄ and Tulsīdās versions, for example, end with the picturesque scene of Rāma and Sītā enthroned, ushering in a golden era of perfect rule. However, Valmīki's version shows a harsher Rāma, who proclaims to Sītā in front of his own people that:

A suspicion has arisen with regard to your conduct, and your presence is as painful to me as a lamp to one whose eye is diseased. Henceforth, go where you like, I give you leave, oh Janaki. Beautiful one, the ten directions are at your disposal. I'll have nothing more to do with you. What man of honor would indulge his passion so far as to take back a woman who has dwelled in the house of another? You have been taken into Ravana's lap, and he has looked lustfully at you. How can I, who boast of belonging to an illustrious lineage, reclaim you? My goal in reconquering you has been achieved. I no longer have any attachment to you. Go where you like.... Go to Lakṣmana or Bharata, Shatrughna, Sugriva, or the demon Vibhishana. Make your choice, whoever pleases you most. Surely Ravana, seeing your ravishing, celestial beauty, did not respect your body when you dwelled in his house.⁸¹

Not taking such a rebuke silently, Sītā replies in a stirring speech that shames Rāma for his cruelty and urges Lakṣmaṇa to raise a pyre. Agni, the god of fire himself, saves her from fiery death, thereby proving her chastity and loyalty to Rāma who immediately claims the trial was for public appearance purposes and that he never doubted her at all. Kampan̄'s devotional *Rāmāyaṇa* makes elaborate efforts to avoid any suggestion of impropriety on Rāma's point as he is so reverentially depicted.

Kampan̄ composed his *Rāmāyaṇa* during a period when Rāma was fully deified as Viṣṇu, and Sītā as Lakṣmi. Therefore, his version is more similar to *bhakti* devotional poetry. For instance, the 16th-century Hindi version by Tulsīdās of north India transforms the *agni-parīksā* into a well-intentioned protection of Sītā. During an initial conflict with *rāksasas*, following the mutilation of Rāvaṇa's sister, Agni is summoned to envelope Sītā in flames, out

of which a false Sītā is produced while the true Sītā is kept safely hidden. Then, when the *agni-parīksā* is performed after the rescue of the false Sītā, another switch of the pair of Sītās takes place and the true and pure Sītā is returned. The moral fiber of society was Kampaṇ's target, compelled to change in the image of Rāma and Sītā, the perfect beings. Showing the ideal way to act, embodied these characters, allowed Kampaṇ to denigrate the hypocritical Hindu population, that lived in opposition to traditional virtues.

Kampaṇ's Rāma emphasizes self-control as a pathway to prosperity and intellectual attainments which would enrich all of society. While highlighting Rāma as the ideal ruler, Kampaṇ's Ayodhyā is governed in consideration of its peoples' wishes. He cultivates his relationships with his citizens, hearing their concerns and enquiring after their well-being. This is shown against the example of Laṅkā, wherein Rāvaṇa and his people go to war for the sake of defending their king's power and prestige.

2. Anthropological Form: Rāmāyaṇa as Self-Contained Story

2.1 Cultural Conflict: Changing Forms of Morality

In a 2002 paper, Ganagatharam explores the *Rāmāyaṇa's* cultural effects by highlighting the plurality of tellings. Issues of authenticity arise when comparing versions of the story, however. The historian Romila Thapar posits that "the *Rāmāyaṇa* does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in many versions which were woven around

the theme at different times and places,"⁸² and thus any claim to a singular authentic version cannot be met with objective fact. In this context, discussion of 'authenticity' privileges a putative original from which other versions derive. The epic's importance in defining religious and cultural idioms, its function in codifying cultural behavior, and its everlasting nature have been constant since antiquity, but the epic's reception within varying social groups has also held a dynamic relation to meaning and form. The author states that "each of the many versions views social reality from its own cultural perspective and makes particular statements as an ongoing dialogue over time,"⁸³ and this is evident in the *Rāmāyaṇas* of Valmīki and Kampan.

The epics of Hinduism are important touchstones for groups assimilating themselves culturally to the Brahmanical heartland, and provide a model of kingship and ideal religiosity to a vast and diverse geographic area. Viewing the religious narrative as a vehicle for constructing cultural attitudes, it is not difficult to understand the narrative as a vehicle for deconstruction as well. Issues arise between separate camps with every telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. An "arena of cultural conflict,"⁸⁴ the *Rāmāyaṇa* offers a literary and religious basis – or vehicle – for every group to promote their cultural agenda: Vaisnavites against Śaivites, Brahmins against non-Brahmins, and Dravidians against Indo-Aryans. Each group has found a way to interject themselves into the narrative tradition, and to use the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a tool to both solidify their identity and fight back against perceived subjugation and cultural hegemony.

2.2 Patterns of Demon-Reclamation in India: Mahiṣa

In discussion of patterns similar to the reclamation and exaltation of Rāvaṇa, another case-study arises: the Mahiṣasur Martyrdom Day. In North Indian 'low caste' groups celebrate Mahiṣa, the buffalo demon-king of the Hindu mythology, to signify the Bahujan culture of resistance to any perceived Brahmanical tyranny. Throughout India are both attempts at the reclamation of cultural identity and attempts to balance the power relationship between indigenous populations and Brahmanical culture. Switching the traditional notions of protagonists and antagonists, and using a 'demonic' figure to accomplish this is more common than would be expected.

The great feminine power Durga, created through the combination of all gods, slayed the *asura* (enemies to the *devas*, gods, and known as the forces of evil) Mahiṣa in the *Mahābhārata*. A traditional figure of great evil, Mahiṣa's parents are King Rambha and a female buffalo, thus granting Mahiṣa the head of a buffalo and the power of an asura king.⁸⁵ Following the customs of his people, Mahiṣa continued the ongoing war with the *devas*, and he was quite successful; he had performed a penance so great that Lord Brahma granted him an exceptional boon –that no god, man, or animal should ever be able to kill him.⁸⁶ Similar to Rāvaṇa, the boon was vague and tricky, excluding the specific naming of woman, and thus allowing an ambiguity, and Mahiṣa's death by female hands. Mahiṣa's emissaries told him of Durga's beauty, which caused him to wish to marry her. According to Brahmanical texts, Durga along with an army of women battled Mahiṣa once he had gained control of the heavens and the earth. To his

request for her hand in marriage, Durga laughed and killed his generals and full army, before beheading Mahiṣa with Viṣṇu's discus.

In a recent article on Mahiṣasur Martyrdom Day in the Forward Press of India and written by the organizers of the 2013 Mahiṣasur Martyrdom Day and JNU students, celebrators marched Brahmanical texts – and any other texts that hold the indigenous Bahujans in contempt – in a symbolic death procession, which may end in burning at the 'power centers' of the town, where a selected local woman then burns the texts.⁸⁷ In a list of suggestions for organizers of this celebration, the "most important objective of this programme is for the Bahujan community to resolve to stay united, re-establish its culture and get back its lost material prosperity. The speeches, seminars, etc should be centred [sic] on these themes."⁸⁸

The *Markandeya Purana* text, the containing stories of Mahiṣa, is described as 'distorted information' regarding Mahiṣa-related culture by the Bahujan community. Instead, 'correct' information can be found throughout Bahujan folk traditions and legends, which details Mahiṣa as a potentially historical, and heroic, figure. In fact, the Bahujan lore labels Mahiṣa as a "brave, egalitarian, and popular mass leader," a king who had taken a vow to defend the helpless of his kingdom: women and animals.⁸⁹ Mahiṣa's death is then the unfair demise of a hero defending his people, "the gods thus killed a valiant social, cultural and political leader, and a genocide followed. It is this murder and genocide that is celebrated ...This festival is the celebration of the killing of the hero and the ancestors of Bahujans."⁹⁰

This disparity between myth from the Brahmanical religion and myth from peripheral folk religion is important to note, and it is not a phenomenon limited to the Banhujan people. In Bengal, there are many who consider themselves the descendants of Mahiṣas. The celebration of Durga in Bengal has caused a forceful reactive: “Such incidents as...Smriti Irani’s Parliament speech and the thrashing of dalits at Una in Gujarat prompted various organisations in Bengal to reclaim the identity and pride of India’s indigenous people,’ said Saradindu Uddipan, a writer and coordinator of the Mahiṣasur Smaransabha Samiti, an amalgamation of about four dozen dalit and tribal organisations.”⁹¹ This uniting of Dalit and indigenous peoples around Mahiṣa resembles the uniting of Dravidian Śūdras in Tamil Nadu, creating an inclusive culture of ‘descendants’ who wish to challenge dominant ideology, and through that challenge, reclaim a narrative of independence and strength. This idea, of elevating an antagonist to the role of a hero and even martyr, illustrates the need for alternative understandings of mythos and history.

2.3 The Dravidian Movement and Periyar

K.V. Zvelebil, in his article, “Ravana the Great in Modern Tamil Fiction,” brings several examples of subversive reimagining of Rāvaṇa into the light, and examines the reactive inspiration, creation, and practical use of a South Indian construction of Rāvaṇa, especially in conjunction with the Dravidian Self-Respect Movement of the 1930s.⁹² The Dravidian Movement began under British colonial rule. Though described by Marguerite Barnett as ‘Cultural Nationalism,’⁹³ the

Dravidian Movement is much more than a national awakening; it is centered in a historical and class context. The political scientist N. Ram writes that “in the modern colonial society, it was no surprise at all that any movement for social equality and against caste domination had to have an anti-Brahmin orientation;”⁹⁴ this makes sense, as the Brahmins occupied the top position in Indian caste structure. Though this was not from luck, Brahmins worked hard to promote this hierarchical ranking that was defined in relation to inner, innate purity of Brahmanical knowledge. By allying with their royal patrons, they actively worked to stigmatize low birth-status, indeed by literally defining it as low.⁹⁵ They held, and continue to hold, a massive amount of cultural and legislative power. The British ruling concept of ‘divide and conquer’ was applied to India after they usurped power from the Mughals, and “the federalism which the British introduced as a device for the devolution of power in terms of provincial autonomy ran counter to nationalist aspirations.”⁹⁶

The British then helped to intensify conflicts between Brahmin and non-Brahmin Indians. Anglo-Indian journals covered the story of Muthuswamy Iyer, a Brahmin appointed to the Madras High Court in 1870 with polemic discussions. Accompanying this came the sentiment of a writer described only as ‘Śūdra Correspondent’ that “subordination to a Brahmin is an outrage that makes the blood boil in the veins of a European.”⁹⁷ Another statement, this time from ‘Dravidian Correspondent’ spoke of Brahmins as the “least fitted of all castes to deal fairly with the masses...since he considers himself as a god, and all others as Mlecchas [a derogatory term for foreigners].”⁹⁸ Kulke and Rothermund describe the Indian political system as hardly permitting “a successful alliance of urban people with the lower strata of rural society...[as] the majority election system

favours a broad middle-of-the-road party like the Congress and works against smaller parties with a specific ideological profile whose competition even enhances the chances of the Congress candidate.”⁹⁹ Tensions were running high throughout India for decades, and out of strong democratic leanings and a strain against oppressive caste demarcation came the beginning of Dravidianism and of the Dravidian Movement.

The Self-Respect League was founded in 1925 by E.V. Ramaswami (also known by the honorific Periyar) who latched onto non-Brahmin polemics in Tamil Nadu. Periyar was from a wealthy merchant family, and though he was of high caste, as a child he interacted with boys of the lower castes which resulted in him getting taken out of school at age seven.¹⁰⁰ After a successful stint in his family business, Periyar became a wandering holy man, a *sadhu*, and then an active politician in the Indian National Congress party with the goals of turning “the present social system topsy-turvy and establish[ing] a living bond of union among all people irrespective of caste or creed.”¹⁰¹ Finally, in 1925, he became the leader of the Self-Respect League – a precursor to the Dravidian Movement – after abandoning the Indian National Congress, an anti-colonial activist organization.¹⁰²

The Dravidian Movement began as two groups, the *Dravida Kazagham* and the *Dravida Munnetra Kazagham* (Dravidian Federation and Dravidian Progressive Federation, respectively) which had similar aims and both grew out of the Self-Respect League. They attempted to destabilize the color line that separated Tamil Nadu’s non-Brahmin from the lighter-skinned Northerners by attacking the traditional understanding of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the treatment of Rāvaṇa and his people due to their dark-skin and Southern India heritage.

Through this, the Dravidian Movement essentially attacks Brahmanism, and in Periyar's case, Hinduism itself.¹⁰³ This is succinctly stated by A. S. Venu when he declared that "[a] Hindu in the present concept may be a Dravidian, but a Dravidian in the real sense of the term cannot and shall not be a Hindu."¹⁰⁴ Dravidian people were ostracized from Hindu cultural concepts, exhibited in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and so, any Dravidian who claims to be Hindu must not understand the full meaning of this designation, or otherwise does not fully devote himself to his Dravidian identity. Periyar views the reverence for the epic as indicative of the lack of respect for diversity in India (i.e. the Dravidian people).

Just like with the remnants of the imperialism of the British, Periyar felt that statues, place names, and visible remains of the inequality and injustice of the Brahmin-hegemony needed to be removed. While the *Rāmāyaṇa* is loved by many and heralded as general 'Indian culture,' Periyar disagrees. He says that the *Rāmāyaṇa* does not speak for everyone, and the Self-Respect Movement is against these types of alienating conceptions of a monolithic nation. By reexamining Rāvaṇa's character and role, Periyar highlights the hypocrisy of the Indo-Aryans, the Sanskritics, and the Brahmins of modern India while also uplifting the virtues of the Dravidian peoples.

Periyar's propaganda pamphlet, "The Ramayana: a True Reading," includes such contentious statements as "the men of Tamil Nadu are derided as monkeys and monsters" and "the veneration of the story any longer in Tamil Nad is injurious and ignominious to the self-respect of the community and of the country. Nor there is anything to be called divine, in Rāma or Sītā."¹⁰⁵ He comes to this conclusion after making several other statements, such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*

being a fiction, Rāma and Sītā as purely Northerner and without “an iota of Tamil culture”¹⁰⁶, and Rāvaṇa, the King of Laṅkā, as Southern Dravidian.

One major event that Periyar examines in his reading is Sita’s kidnapping. The motivation, Periyar claims, came from the initial incident of Lakṣmaṇa maiming Rāvaṇa’s sister. Periyar says that this was a pure motivation, and that the consequence of Laṅkā burning and her people dying is cruel and unusual, while the kidnapping of Sītā was following traditional modes of warfare. Periyar’s preface ends with a call to action for Tamils to dismantle the veneration of Rāma and Sītā, and to approach the *Rāmāyaṇa* as an antagonistic piece of fiction.

It is not only Periyar that finds the *Rāmāyaṇa* vulgar and offensive; he claims that other political figures such as M. S. Purnalingam Pillai and Chandrasekara Pavalar have “testified to the Pro-Aryan and Anti-Dravidian propaganda being the sole aim of the writers of the *Ramayana*,” and Swami Vivekananda and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru have “stated unambiguously that the *Ramayana* is a myth depicting the lifelong struggle between the ancient Aryans and Dravidians.”¹⁰⁷

2.4 Anti-Brahmanism and Rāvaṇa as the Hero

Zvelebil traces a change in the accepted analysis of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Dravidian role to the 1800s, when Sundaram Pillai called into doubt the putative inferiority of South India. He shows the effects of dissemination and

appropriation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* into nontraditional versions, caused by the “many non-Brahmin Tamil scholars [who] tried to show that the ‘Dravidian’ religion was distinctive and superior to the Vedic teachings, and attempted to revive what they considered its cream and its peak.”¹⁰⁸ These anti-Brahmin feelings culminated with an academic rift caused by the active displeasure in the classification of Tamil non-Brahmins under the low Śūdra label of social rank defined by Brahmanical sources, implying innate lower status or lesser dignity. Their distinctive role, as told in Brahmanical works, was to serve those of higher *varna*. As the Dravidians felt that they received little in terms of religious or cultural power from the Indo-Aryan North Indian tradition, they instead began to exalt the virtues of the ancient Tamils and rebrand Southern Indian culture “against the scriptures of the Brahmins, and, as a next step, against the scriptures of the ‘Sanskritized’ Tamil poets of the past.”¹⁰⁹

Drawing on P. Sundaram Pillai’s *Ravana the Great: King of Lanka*, a work written in the 1920s as a political re-evaluation of India’s oldest religious epic hero and villain, Zvelebil begins his argument by quoting the reimagining of Rāvaṇa. No longer a debauched evil demon who steals away the bride of the righteous – indeed, divine – Rāma, Rāvaṇa is “a very intelligent and valiant hero, a cultured and highly civilized ruler, [who] knew the Vedas and was an expert musician. He took away Sītā according to the Tamilian mode of warfare, had her in the Asoka woods companioned by his own niece, and would not touch her unless she consented.”¹¹⁰

Kampan̄ “did not characterize Ravana as a black villain but as a complex, tragically heroic personality, slave to his passions, generous and cruel, gentle and

vicious at the same time.”¹¹¹ This early reimagining of Rāvaṇa was at least acceptable to the Brahmins, since Rāvaṇa was still the villain in this narrative and eventually lost to Rāma; even if he was not intrinsically evil, the accepted dichotomy of good and evil still stood. Kampaṇ’s works also functioned to elicit worship and personal devotion, in the style of *bhakti* poetry.

By contrast, a modern Tamil poet, Kuḷantai Pulavar, rejected this mild recharacterization of Rāvaṇa, even going so far as to say that Kampaṇ’s *Rāmāyaṇa* “is guilty of having spread ‘Aryan deception’ and the ugly, polluting ‘Aryan speech’ all over Tamilnadu.”¹¹² Kuḷantai, instead, fully reinterpreted the epic, wherein the “reversed picture of the two protagonists goes hand in hand with the transposition of the minor characters. In general, all those who help Irāmaṇ [Rāma] are either scoundrels or traitors whereas those who are on the side of Irāvaṇaṇ [Rāvaṇa] are tragic heroes.”¹¹³

This new version is an exacting statement in itself, proclaiming that the “Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa* (and all current versions derived from it) is a false picture of what had actually happened, a tendentious pack of lies.”¹¹⁴ By presenting the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a competition not between god and demon but between Indo-Aryan and Dravidian, with the Indo-Aryans being despicable meat-eating fornicators and the Dravidians being pure and tragically gentle vegetarians, Kuḷantai dramatically shifts the view of this piece of literature to the pro-Dravidian side. The light in which Rāvaṇa is shown influences regional notions of religious *dharma* in the Hindu tradition, and these varying conceptions of *dharma* offer a religious grounding to reimagine identity, while providing social mobility for the people of Southern India. Though after Kampaṇ no other

premodern Tamil poet attempted to retell the full *Rāmāyaṇa*, Kuḷantai created a modern anti-*Rāmāyaṇa*, described by Zvelebil as a “chanson de Rāvaṇa.”¹¹⁵

Not only just pointing out the multiplicity of versions, Gangatharan argues that “the epic provides the ideological content for the construction of cultural hegemony over society,”¹¹⁶ notably in issues of *dharma*, the right way of living according to the duties of the righteous, justice, and rulership. Just as each telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* can be viewed in terms of context, “regional versions were neither verbatim translations nor a slavish imitation. They were recreations of the old epic story in accordance with the changed conditions and needs of the age.”¹¹⁷ In Valmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāvaṇa’s genealogy is examined, in order to build him up as a worthy opponent to the gods on the level of other mythic villains, aiding in the personification of *adharma* in Rāvaṇa. This functions as a way to give the Rāma and Rāvaṇa battle cosmic significance. A Buddhist rendition of the epic features Rāma and Sītā as brother and sister in order to emphasize their semi-divine royal rule in accordance with Buddhist religious beliefs on purity of bloodline.¹¹⁸ In the Jain tradition, a counter-narrative *Rāmāyaṇa* features Rāvaṇa as a hero and staunch Jain monk whose plotline “denounced Brahmins as heretics who subverted the actual story for their own spiritual convenience.”¹¹⁹

Dravidian voices contextualize the *Rāmāyaṇa* conjunction within contemporary public discourse. Sundaram Pillai reimagines Valmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* by questioning the portrayal of Rāma, and highlighting how an examination of the “plot construction and narrative ... expose the contemptuous treatment meted out to the Dravidian race.”¹²⁰ A contentious method, re-imagining such a beloved classic of Indian literature, philosophy, and religion, has faced significant

pushback from advocates of the Valmīki narrative. Periyar’s exegesis acts as a call to arms. His hyper-literal reading saw “the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a text of political domination,”¹²¹ and he targets Hinduism and Rāma worship as particularly harmful to South Indians. According to Paula Richman, in his 1959 pamphlet, “The *Rāmāyaṇa*: A True Reading,” Periyar labels the “sanctity accorded the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as well as the high status of the Brahmins that the *Rāmāyaṇa* seeks to justify, as forms of North Indian domination, and he exhorts fellow South Indians to liberate themselves by rejecting belief in Rāma both as moral paradigm and as god.”¹²²

In an article posted in November 1998, ‘Good or Evil? The Politics of Rāvaṇa,’ Periyar criticizes the notion of Rāma as both an ideal man and yet also a man capable of such inhumanity at the expense of his own wife, as well as other characters who committed injurious acts in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Periyar raises the questions :

How can we celebrate the man who subjected his wife to ordeal by fire to prove her chastity? How can we speak of Lakshmana in glowing terms when he, in a racist manner, cut off the nose of Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana, when she expressed her love for him? Isn't it true that Ravana abducted Sita as an honourable revenge for the insult heaped upon his sister? Isn't it a Brahmanical ploy to give the colour of lust to a most honourable kidnapping?¹²³

Caste plays an interesting role in both the historical *Rāmāyaṇa* as well as the more recent arguments of anti-Brahmanism stemming from the Dravidian Movement and Periyar. As the son of King Daśaratha, Rāma is of the Kṣatriya caste. Sītā is the adopted daughter of King Janaka, which makes her Kṣatriya as well. Although Kṣatriya is a high status, both are decidedly not Brahmin. However, Rāvaṇa, the king of Lanka and reclaimed hero of Tamil Dravidians, is

depicted as a Brahmin. In Periyar's pamphlet, he extolls Rāvaṇa's greatness and counters that "Rāma and Sītā are despicable characters not worthy of imitation or admiration even by the lowest of the fourth-rate humans...the veneration of the story any longer in Tamil Nad is injurious and ignominious to the self-respect of the community and of the country."¹²⁴ Interestingly, Periyar rails against the "traditional" view of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as an object of adoration and a source of moral guidance, yet he continues to use it subversively as a tool to spread his message.

Periyar created his pamphlet as an erudite propaganda piece seeking to disrupt and destabilize the dominant assumptions of traditional Indian literature, and the corresponding cultural and social conventions they supported. Since he viewed Sanskrit literature and its ethos as distinctive of its brahmin authors, Periyar was stridently anti-brahmin. Hence, his embrace of Rāvaṇa, the Brahmin rākṣasa, is striking. Just as with the remnants of British imperialism, Periyar felt that statues, place names, and any visible remains of the inequality and injustice of the Brahmin hegemony, like "their (Brahmins') dogmas and the code of Manu, that are derogatory to the Tamil enforced into usage and their existence – unwanted existence – eternized," needed to be removed.¹²⁵ Periyar rails against the *Rāmāyaṇa*, arguing that it does not speak for every Indian, and the Self-Respect Movement was against these types of alienating conceptions of a monolithic nation. If Periyar viewed the reverence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as indicative of the lack of respect for a diverse view of India, and mostly of the Dravidian peoples, then why elevate a Brahmin in his retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*?

The traditional depiction of rākṣasas, the demon race of Rāvaṇa, is of a race that is not wholly evil: “they help the gods; they fight against the gods. They are beautiful; they are hideous. They are weaker than gods...they overcome the gods with ease. They protect; they injure.”¹²⁶ This duplicitous nature stems from their relationship with Yakshas. Born of the same mother, Khasa, the Yakshas and the rākṣasas guard as well as injure.¹²⁷ There is a difference in how rākṣasas is portrayed in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. The *Rāmāyaṇa* takes pains to humanize them.¹²⁸ Rākṣasas-Brahmins are not an anomaly, stemming from Pulastya, the fourth son of Brahman, and Kaikasī, the daughter of Sumāli and descendent of the ascetic Praheti, the original royal rākṣasas.¹²⁹ Also in the family tree is Sukeśa, a Brahmin-rākṣasa who performed enough ascetic practices to receive special boons from Śiva and Umā.¹³⁰

This ill-fitting element of Rāvaṇa’s Brahmin-status in Periyar’s anti-Brahmin agenda does not seem to bother him. While Sanskrit literature included Brahmin-rākṣasas as part of the accepted mythology, the Dravidian Movement handled this uncomfortable parallel simply by not calling undue attention to Rāvaṇa’s status. Instead, they passed over the information as acknowledged but ultimately unimportant to the message they propagated. In his charge against the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Periyar criticizes the effort to portray a paragon of Hindu divinity and kingly virtue through Rāma, when the character himself does not live up to this ideal.

Distinguishing Rāma as morally destitute, Periyar examines the unfair characterization that Rāma’s opponent has received, and links this hypocrisy to discrimination of the Dravidians. This follows Periyar’s anti-Brahmanical stance,

whereby he views Brahmins as attempting to pass themselves off as worthy and principled yet not living up to their own ideals. Rāvaṇa, though, proves to be a rare exception that proves this rule. Rāvaṇa is a true Brahmin in Periyar's eyes.¹³¹ In his pragmatic, iconoclastic approach to this epic, Periyar instilled negative feelings against the dominant Indo-Aryan cultural imperialism, even influencing a new South Indian celebration of resistance with the 'Rāvaṇa-līlā,' a rebuke to the traditional Rāma-līlā celebration.

2.5 The Rāvaṇa-līlā: A subversion of ritual

The Rāma-līlā, a cycle of pageant-like plays based on Rāma's life, is performed by Hindu localities during the nine nights of Navarātrī and culminating on the final night of Dussehra holiday Periyar's 1959 pamphlet, "The *Rāmāyaṇa*: A True Reading," and is inspired by another retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, this time by Tulsīdās in his *Rāmacaritamānasa*. *Līlā* literally means 'sport' or 'play,' however sport in this regard is closer to the idea of dramatizations of sacred scripture and reenacting of divine acts in space and time, similar to Christian nativity and passion plays. This sacred theater is not just a profane performance by actors of a script, but a sacred representation of actual divine characters and deities in a true religious event. Not just representation for entertainment purposes, the actors are embodiments, for a short time, of the deities they represent, thus they can be worshipped while temporarily in character. Norvin Hein has explained that "Hindu thinkers have long taught that the creation, preservation, and dissolution of worlds spring from no lack or need on the part of God, but are the

manifestations of his spontaneous joyful disinterested creativity – they are his ‘sports.’”¹³²

Actors in these plays are always from the community that hosts the performance. Thus, actors are rarely professionals. Minor roles are open to anyone of the four *varna* groups (excluding untouchables) who fits the role, but the parts of Rāma, Sītā, and Rāma’s brothers must be of Brahmin caste since they represent, and embody, divine characters.¹³³ This is important to note, that even while played by child actors, these characters have been the object of worship and devotion. On the tenth day, on which Rāma is said to have slain Rāvaṇa (*Vijaya-Daśami*, ‘Victory 10th’), most local Rāma-līlās stage the defeat of Rāvaṇa. In this scene, giant paper effigies of Rāvaṇa and his supporters are erected while the actors behind Rāma, Hanuman, and the monkeys swarm and eventually light the scene ablaze.

In 1974, the Rāvaṇa-līlā of Madras was a hugely contested event, spurring comments even from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi herself, and resulting in the arrest of fourteen people. The 1974 Rāvaṇa-līlā burned an eighteen-foot-tall Rāma, a seventeen-foot-tall Lakṣmaṇa, and a sixteen-foot-tall Sītā. Duraisamy, an advocate of the movement, commented at the time how “on the day of the event, December 25th, we had placed small effigies of Ram, Lakshman, and Seetha on the stage and hid the bigger effigies behind Periyar statue. The police came in and confiscated the smaller effigies and left the place. After they left we burnt the well decorated bigger effigies.”¹³⁴ This 1974 event represented the beginning of a subversive use of ritual which Dravidianized a common practice by inverting the narrative and replacing the Rāvaṇa effigy with those of Rāma and his family.

Periyar once posed the question: “If there were kings like Rāma now, what would be the fate of those people called Śūdras?”¹³⁵ Remembering Śambūka’s fate, the answer to Periyar’s rhetorical question is not pleasant. In order to challenge the recognized canon of Valmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, Periyar encourages public displays of resistance, based equally on ritual and literature, as both categories have deep holds on Indian people. He wishes to subvert the accepted, and bring awareness to the encoded aspects of the *Rāmāyaṇa* that oppress and marginalize the Dravidian Śūdras of the south.

2.6 Śambūka: The Most Famous Śūdra

The *Rāmāyaṇa*’s more famous Śūdra character, Śambūka, arrives in the last book, the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, performing the ascetic rites called *tapas*. His character is short-lived, since he is held up as a scapegoat for the mysterious death of a Brahmin child. Due to his low birth, he is not meant, based on Vedic tradition, to perform *tapas*. It is argued by Brahmin characters that his actions, which go against *varṇāśrama-dharma* (the duty that each person must perform as dictated by their age and social rank), are the reason for the unexplained death of a high-caste child. Rāma, as king, is brought this theory, and subsequently ventures out to meet Śambūka and discern for himself if wrongdoing is occurring. Once he meets Śambūka and learns that he is Śūdra, Rāma slays him. The Brahmin-child then comes back to life.

In “Śambūka in Modern South Indian Plays,” Paula Richman highlights three South Indian plays, written in Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil, which all condemn Rāma’s slaying of Śambūka, as well as comment on the prohibition of

Śūdras from performing certain practices of asceticism.¹³⁶ From the Andhra region of southeastern India, Telugu playwright Tripuraneni Ramasvami Chaudari explicitly examines Brahmin interaction with non-Brahmins in the South through *Śambūka Vadha (the slaying of Śambūka)*.¹³⁷ In this play, the Brahmins are the villains. They plot to temporarily put the child to sleep until after Śambūka has been blamed and murdered. Richman analyzes the motive as “discrediting the Śūdra ...they seek to neutralize the threat his asceticism poses to Brahmanical claims of religious authority. The Brahmanical conspiracy in Chaudari’s play fits with his view that Brahmins had written religious law books to legitimate their high position and justify the oppression of the lower castes.”¹³⁸ Chaudari was among the writers who championed Dravidian rights, furthering the popular theory that Dravidians first ruled over South India until invading Aryans brought oppression and brainwashed the Dravidians into believing they were lesser than.¹³⁹

Thiruvarur K. Thangaraju’s play in Tamil, *Rāmāyaṇa Nātakam (Rāmāyaṇa Drama)* came about from viewing a traditional *Rāmāyaṇa* performance.¹⁴⁰ Thangaraju was once a member of the Indian National Congress, but left in the 1940s to join Periyar’s Dravida Kazhagam; with *Rāmāyaṇa Nātakam*, Thangaraju furthered his and Periyar’s views on the importance of “proportional representation of non-Brahmin groups in government, [the] abolition of caste hierarchy, and [the] rejection of rituals based on purity and impurity.”¹⁴¹

Like his mentor, Periyar, Thangaraju believed that Brahmins were historically linked to Aryans who dominated and ‘mentally enslaved’ Dravidians, and that the *Rāmāyaṇa* was a tool through which the Aryans portrayed the Aryan conquest of the Dravidians using Rāma and Rāvaṇa as stand-ins.¹⁴² Thangaraju’s

Śambūka is eloquent and persuasive, and the Brahmins are shown to use their texts to justify atrocities and maintain a monopoly on their power. For Śūdras who disobey this conceived notion of *varṇāśrama-dharma*, the punishment laid out in Brahmin constitutional palm leaves is death.¹⁴³ Thangaraju, born into a prestigious and wealthy *jāti*, but still considered Śūdra by northern Brahmin, writes his Śambūka self-reflectively.¹⁴⁴ Even writing the dialogue in his play, he has chosen to use this scripture in a way that would call for his own death. Śambūka's end in Thangaraju's play is the logical ending for a Brahmin-centered *Rāmāyaṇa*. Rāma, while agreeing that Śambūka has uttered some truths, dismisses all evident logic and beheads the Śūdra anyway.

The power that this scene contains is accentuated by the context of its creation. In Tamil Nadu, the varna structure consists of Brahmin, 'clean' Śhūdra, 'unclean' Śūdra, and untouchables. The majority of Tamil Nadu are classified as lesser compared to the more populous "twice-born" *śastra* categories of the north. Providing an intellectual framework with which to protest caste hierarchy, Periyar and Thangaraju crafted arguments based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, filled with ethos and pathos in creative works that rallied Dravidian peoples against north Indian brahmin-culture.¹⁴⁵

In the 1940s, the Kannada-language play *Śūdra Tapasvī* by K. V. 'Kuvempu' Puttappa debuted in Karnataka. Though a Śūdra himself, Kuvempu worshipped Rāma and exalted Rāma's compassion. Coming from his unique position as both devotee and Śūdra, Kuvempu's play transcended the limitations of traditional Rāma-story, but he did not acknowledge that there was one right way to retell the *Rāmāyaṇa*:

It is not correct to say that Valmiki is the only *Ramayana* poet.

There are thousands of *Ramayana* poets.
There is a *Ramayana* poet in every village.¹⁴⁶

To Kuvempu, anyone could write Rāma's story; it belonged to everyone, not just a Brahmin-elite. From this viewpoint, *Śūdra Tapasvī* deviates from the expected.

Of the scenes and characters that are altered by Kuvempu are Hanuman, who no longer burns down Lanka, and Rāma, who admits his wrongdoing in the slaying of Vālin and stands by Sita's side as they both undergo the fire trial. This version of Rāma is not the same Rāma who would slay a Śūdra for practicing religious asceticism. Indeed, Kuvempu's Rāma hears the Brahmin's claims against Śambūka and reacts by calling him a "bigoted pedant."¹⁴⁷ This does not stop Kuvempu's Rāma from attempting to remedy the situation, instead, he begins the process to transform the bigoted Brahmin into a just and kind person.

Kuvempu uses his play as a platform to discuss caste issues. Through interactions and discourse between the Brahmin and Rāma, Kuvempu "interrogates caste's foundation in the purity/impurity dichotomy, from which both caste and gender hierarchy derive."¹⁴⁸ In every piece of dialogue, the Brahmin addresses Rāma with a new epithet. Some of these include 'Killer of Vali,' to remind him of his breach of warrior code, and 'Disciple of Vasistha' to remind him of his guru who held staunch views in support of caste hierarchy. Meanwhile, Rāma addresses the Brahmin as 'One Who Knows Wisdom' in order to imply that the Brahmin needed to be rid of his ignorance.

The ending drama finds Rāma shooting the *brahmāstra*, a mystical arrow that can kill anything and does not stop until its goal is finished. He commands: "Seek out the sinner and destroy him!"¹⁴⁹ When the arrow's course is not towards the *tapas*-practicing Śambūka, but instead towards the bigoted Brahmin,

the Brahmin begs for Rāma's protection. The protection is denied, since only the release of hatred and ignorance will save the Brahmin:

Recourse to scriptures alone
will not help decide the right deed.
A thoughtless act can only do harm to dharma.¹⁵⁰

The Brahmin then has his moment of realization:

I have been hidebound
warped by the texts,
blinded by prejudice.
Does fire worry about
the caste of its fuel?
A sage is to be honored
regardless of his birth.
Humility leads to grace
while scorn corrupts the soul.¹⁵¹

A happy ending eventually arrives, with no life taken, and many minds expanded.

As Richman describes it, the *brahmāstra* succeeded in its quest to kill the sinner, as the sin of bigotry inside the Brahmin was extinguished.¹⁵²

Reactions to Kuvempu's play were divisive, but allowed for an exchange between Brahmin and Śūdra. The famous Brahmin 'Masti' Venkatesha Iyengar reviewed Kuvempu's play in 1944, claiming that the play misinterpreted the *Rāmāyana*, as Richman explains Masti's views: "however we might judge Śambūka's beheading today, Rāma had fulfilled his dharma because he abided by the religious prescriptions of his time."¹⁵³ Masti goes on to say that Kuvempu is at fault for denigrating the *Rāmāyana*'s Brahmin, even if this was done as a way to save face for Rāma. Masti's opinions centered on the worry that Kuvempu's play would add to the discord between Brahmin and non-Brahmin, and added that if Kuvempu's retellings were so vehemently anti-traditional, maybe he should not be writing about mythic stories at all.¹⁵⁴

Kuvempu rejected Masti's claims of Brahmin ownership over traditional, ancient texts. He thought that his work would open up communication about caste-related issues, and offer a different view towards the acceptability of Śūdras and varying forms of religious worship, "creating a society in which scholarship, *tapas*, and education would receive the respect they deserved."¹⁵⁵ However, he included both Masti's review and his own rebuttal in subsequent editions of his play, so that readers would be able to judge for themselves.

2.7 Slippery Issues of Rāvaṇa's Past

Through several examples of modern re-imaginings, Gangatharan seeks to prove that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is far from just a remote, ancient textual tradition, it is an active force in the political discourse of our modern world, and can be a valuable cultural weapon. Dravidian anti-Brahmanical factions found their torchbearer in Rāvaṇa. By lifting him up and redefining his characterization, Dravidians claimed a shared heritage with a past of oppression. This shared oppression allowed leaders of the Dravidian Movement to garner support for political movements that would regain control over their fragmented identity. Surprisingly, they chose to reclaim one of the only Brahmin characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, while espousing the view that contemporary Brahmins are malicious. While Rāvaṇa's position as antagonist was reimagined, his caste identity remained. Not just that, but Rāvaṇa's Brahmin-status was reinforced by various studies into his genealogy. This was not just because Periyar, well known as an iconoclast, often attempted to create societal upheaval through 'shock

treatment'. Periyar chose to acknowledge Rāvaṇa's Brahminhood in passing, in order to expand on his righteousness and chivalry as opposed to the "hypocritical and knavish" behavior of Rāma.¹⁵⁶

In his creation of an anti-*Rāmāyaṇa*, Periyar divorced notions of religion and caste from notions of just rulership and the assumed status quo of good and evil, and focused his efforts on creating a shared Dravidian ideology. While his identity was anti-Brahmin as well as atheist, Periyar understood the potency of folklore and myth in Indian tradition, and attempted to craft a new character of the South. The publicity from this strategy was monumental, and the controversy furthered his message into many homes in both southern and northern India.

3. Conclusions

The close historical contact of India with the rest of Asia through trade and diplomatic relations led to a transmission of the epic, wherein local communities appropriated the story for themselves. It assisted groups wishing to culturally assimilate themselves to Indic tradition, which formed the basis for righteous Hindu kingship. However, it also was pushed onto various groups in a bid for religious, political, and economic control by Brahmins and other elites aligned with them.

This Brahmanization has persisted for centuries, to the chagrin of the Dravidian people. After the ossification of Brahmin-enacted hierarchy over India – in part through the *Rāmāyaṇa* – various detractors have spoken out against this perceived status quo. Included in this list are the political activist, atheist,

and anti-Brahmin Periyar, the writers of works that reevaluate Rāvaṇa, Sundaram Pillai, Kulantai Pulavar, and the writers who reevaluated the Śūdra Śambūka: Chaudari, Thangaraju, and Kuvempu. I consider Kampan̄ to be one of the original writers who recharacterized Rāvaṇa, however, all the writers examined fall in line with the pattern of Indian literary retellings, as Kuvempu once stated, “there is a Ramayana poet in every village.”¹⁵⁷ Gangatharan argued that the *Rāmāyaṇa* functioned as an ideological tool to construct cultural hegemony over society; several writers and activists understood this instinctively.

The differences between these figures and their ideological tools lies in their individual counterpoints to the tradition of Valmīki. Kampan̄’s nuanced view of Rāvaṇa is not at odds with his devoted worship of Lord Rāma. Instead, Kampan̄ reevaluates Rāvaṇa to create more dramatic intensity, showing Rāma as a merciful, generous, passionate god, who must deal with the less-than-perfect creatures of Earth. By showing a villain who was “generous” as well as “cruel,” Kampan̄ humanized Rāvaṇa while extolling the god-like qualities of Rāma. Kampan̄ may have tinted his view of Rāvaṇa with an understanding of the Dravidian comparison to Lanka’s people, but overall, his *Rāmāyaṇa* is a poetic *bhakti* devotional piece to Lord Rāma.

Periyar championed a South India that was devoid of Brahmin oppression. As the leader of the Self-Respect Movement, he acknowledged the tyrannical structures that enabled northern Brahmin to dominate over South India’s Śūdra-classified population, and vehemently spoke out against them. Through the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and his didactic pamphlet, “The Ramayana: A True Telling,” Periyar

complicated the character of Rāvaṇa, Rāma, Sītā, and Śambūka (among others), to bring light to the inhumane treatment of Dravidian people due to their dark-skin and South Indian heritage. He wished to create a public awareness of, and resistance to, this subjugation.

Sundaram Pillai painted Rāvaṇa in a brighter light as well, showing him as a smart ruler, noble warrior, who was cultured and knowledgeable about the *Vedas*. By inputting Tamilian codes of warfare and etiquette alongside Rāvaṇa's actions, Pillai highlighted how unfair previous portrayals of Rāvaṇa truly were. He traced the dissemination of Brahmanical aspects of the *Rāmāyaṇa* into cultural values, and echoed the Dravidian feeling of resentment at their lack cultural and religious power from Indo-Aryan North Indian tradition. His academic view allowed for the continuation of discourses around a new regional *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the implications thereof.

Kulantai Pulavar went farther than most, by completely reinterpreting the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and switching the roles of protagonist and antagonist. His new creation featured tragic heroes and despicable traitors, and offered a harsh challenge to the “tendentious pack of lies” of Valmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. His version did not see Rāma and Rāvaṇa as traditional embodiments of *dharma* and *adharma*, but instead as stand-ins for Indo-Aryans and Dravidians. Through this capsizing, he reimagined good and evil in terms of oppressor and oppressed, and through this offered a different conception of *dharma*. His work allowed for the belief in social mobility, self-respect, and resistance.

The Telugu playwright Chaudari examines the morality of Śambūka's slaying. An unambiguous statement against Brahmins, Chaudari's Śambūka is

innocent, preyed upon by evil Brahmins who wish to neutralize the threat they perceive a lowly Śūdra plays to their systems of control. Chaudari's criticisms demonstrate the weakness of Brahmin-control, and the conspiracies and lies they sell to the non-Brahmins of South India.

Thangaraju, who wrote his play in Tamil, was a member of Periyar's *Dravida Kazhagam* party, and worked closely with Periyar – as his mentee. His views were influenced by the strong opinions of Periyar. Thangaraju unreservedly saw the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a tool of Brahmanical domination, used to justify atrocity and maintain power. He took the side of the Śūdras – his side – and rewrote the Śambūka episode to show Śambūka as an educated and worthy man, who is wrongfully accused by Brahmins and slain by a corrupt Rāma. His play furthers the goals of Periyar, and extends the Dravidian Movement into realms it would not have entered without this creative work.

Kuvempu's Kannada play worked similarly to Kampan's rendition of *Rāmāyaṇa* as *bhakti*. From his background as both Śūdra and Rāma-worshipper, Kuvempu reinvents Rāma as a more compassionate god-figure. He uses his Rāma to help the bigoted Brahmin-accuser find empathy. Through this character arc, Kuvempu highlights caste issues, discrimination, and questions the ethics of the status quo. His play allowed for Brahmin and Śūdra discussion, which he printed in a new edition of his play and circulated among Kannada speakers in India.

The choice of Rāvaṇa as torchbearer for the Dravidian Movement – claiming a shared heritage of oppression that allowed for popular political support to reclaim a fragmented identity – is at odds with Rāvaṇa's caste. Rāvaṇa is Brahmin. Periyar's discussion of Rāvaṇa's Brahmin-status is brief, though it

confirms the fact. Periyar shows Rāvaṇa as the ideal Brahmin, a far cry from how he saw contemporary Brahmins acting and preaching. His atheism comes through in his depiction of “knavish” Rāma, as the incarnation of Viṣṇu. But Periyar’s overall goal in attacking the *Rāmāyaṇa* was to assemble a Dravidian identity built on shared oppression. Even while Rāvaṇa is depicted as the perfect Brahmin, Periyar claims that because of his Dravidian identity, he is vilified by Indo-Aryan Brahmanical culture. While this answer is not exhaustive, and leaves questions as to Periyar’s true intent on ennobling a Brahmin, it attempts to respond to the intense popularity of Valmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* has outlasted even some mountains and rivers¹⁵⁸, and will continue to be a tool for reflecting on and reconstructing identity in India and beyond. Reexamining *dharma* allowed for the reexamination of cultural norms and caste inequalities. These creative figures reimaged the *Rāmāyaṇa*, either through characters, events, or political analysis, to form conclusions about India’s history of Brahmanical cultural hegemony. These conclusions were used as political messages, circulated to create an awareness of discord and bolster resistance to engrained inequalities. They reconstructed the *Rāmāyaṇa* from tool of ‘domestication’ to a tool of opposition.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Valmiki. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki Book 1: Bāla-Kāṇḍa*. translated by Robert Goldman. Princeton University Press, 1985, sarga 2 verse 35.
- ² Robert Goldman. *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki Book 1: Bāla-Kāṇḍa*. Foreward. p. 3.
- ³ Goldman is also the William and Catherine Magistretti Distinguished Professor of Sanskrit and Indian studies at the University of California, Berkeley.
- ⁴ Kathleen Maclay. "Ramayana Translation Project turns its last page, after four decades of research." *Berkeley News*, 17 November 2016.
- ⁵ Goldman *Bāla-Kāṇḍa*, 4.
- ⁶ Sheldon Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination in India" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 52, no. 2 (1993): 262.
- ⁷ Paula Richman. *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. University of California Press, 1991, 32.
- ⁸ Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund. *A History of India*. Routledge Publishing, 1990, 152.
- ⁹ Kulke and Rothermund, 52-54.
- ¹⁰ Kulke and Rothermund, 154-155.
- ¹¹ I speak of Indo-Aryan and Dravidian as linguistic and cultural categories, not racial categories as popular vernacular would understand them.
- ¹² Kulke and Rothermund, 97.
- ¹³ B. A. van Nooten. "Introduction," in *Ramayana*, ed. William Buck, xiii. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, xvi.
- ¹⁴ Kulke and Rothermund, 33.
- ¹⁵ B. A. van Nooten, xvii.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Kulke and Rothermund, 33.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 30-31.
- ²³ Tony Joseph, "How Genetics Is Settling the Aryan Migration Debate," *The Hindu Science*, June 16, 2017, , accessed February 4, 2018, <http://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/science/how-genetics-is-settling-the-aryan-migration-debate/article19090301.ece>.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Sunder Raj, 10;
Kulke and Rothermund, 35.
- ²⁶ Kulke and Rothermund, 35.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ A. Senthannmilan (pseudonym for A. Subbiah, prominent Madras banker), "Cultural Conflicts in Tamilnad," *Quest*, October 1955. A report of an American visiting India in 1958 comments on the arrogant nature of light-skinned north Indians who "would always refer to South Indians in a sarcastic manner....contemptuous of them because they were so black" (from John Day and Company's *Scratches on Our Minds*).
- ²⁹ Devdutt Pattanaik, *Vishnu: The Protector*. Penguin UK, 2016, 1.
- ³⁰ For a detailed account of the general acceptance of this position, see Goldman (1984: 42-47).
- ³¹ Goldman, *Bāla-Kāṇḍa*, 2.2.18-22
- ³² David Brick, "The Court of Public Opinion and the Practice of Restorative Ordeals in Pre-Modern India," 2009: 35.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.
- ³⁵ *mithuapavadahata* (Brick's translation, Ram. 6.104.18); *jane mahati* (Brick's translation, Ram 6.104.2), 36.
- ³⁶ Brick's translation, Ram 6.104.24, 36.
- ³⁷ Brick's translation, YDh 2.104, 36.

- 38 Valmiki. *Ramayana*. Trans. William Buck. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- 39 Brick, 37.
- 40 Goldman, *Bāla-Kāṇḍa*, 5.
- 41 Goldman, *Bāla-Kāṇḍa*, 5-6.
- 42 E. Washburn Hopkins. *Epic Mythology*. Strasburg: Verlag Von Karl J. Trubner, 1915, 1.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Sheldon Pollock. "Foreword" in *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki Book 3: Aranyakāṇḍa* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, 43.
- 45 Goldman, *Bāla-Kāṇḍa*, 5.
- 46 Sheldon Pollock. "Foreword" in *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki Book 2: Ayodhyākāṇḍa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, 37.
- 47 B. A. van Nooten, Introduction in *The Rāmāyaṇa*, xv.
- 48 Pollock, *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, 44.
- 49 Goldman, *Bāla-Kāṇḍa*, 22. The first and seventh books of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are heterogenous in their contents, and much of this content is tangential to the main narrative. This unique characteristic can be paired with the books' general inferiority, stylistically, when compared to the other five books. For recent scholarship, the *Bālakāṇḍa* and the *Uttarakāṇḍa* are agreed to have been later additions. See Hermann Jacobi's *Das Ramayana, Geschichte und Inhalt nebst Concordanz nach den gedruckten Rezensionen* for more in-depth discussion of this dating.
- 50 G. K. Bhat, "The Genius of Valmiki," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 67, no. 1/4, 1986, 220.
- 51 Bhat, 220.
- 52 Robert Goldman, Introduction in *Rāmāyaṇa Book 7: Uttar-kāṇḍa*, Princeton University Press, 2015, 70.
- 53 John Brockington. "The Concept of Dharma in the Rāmāyaṇa." *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 2004, 655.
- 54 Ibid., 655-6.
- 55 Ibid., 658.
- 56 Ibid., 662.
- 57 Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, 2.27.29, as translated by John Brockington in "The Concept of Dharma in the Rāmāyaṇa," 662.
- 58 Kamil V. Zvelebil, *A History of Indian Literature*, Otto Harrassowitz Publishing, 1974, 146. Described as a "pyramid of color snobbery [that] stands in the midst of the Hindu social structure" (from Selig S. Harrison's *India: the Most Dangerous Decade*, 1960), colorism can be found in Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, as the origins of caste (as claimed in the *Bāla-kāṇḍa*, stem from the cow: the Brahmins from the head of the cow and the Śūdras from the behind.
- 59 Ibid., 147.
- 60 An *uvaccaṇ* is a member of a caste of non-Brahmin temple servants responsible for drumming and performing rites on the images. See Zvelebil, 146.
- 61 Zvelebil, 147.
- 62 K.V. Raman and T. Padmaja, "Rama Temples and Traditions in Tamilnadu," in: *Indian Epic Values: Rāmāyaṇa and Its Impact: Proceedings of the 8th International Rāmāyaṇa Conference, Leuven, 6-8 July 1991*, ed. by Gilbert Pollet, Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1995, 83.
- 63 Goldman, *Bāla-Kāṇḍa*, sargas 115-120.
- 64 *Kamba Rāmāyaṇa*, sarga 553, translated by Brick.
- 65 *Kamba Rāmāyaṇa*, sarga 555, translated by Brick.
- 66 Richman, 31-32.
- 67 Ibid., 32.
- 68 V. V. S. Aiyar, *Kamba Ramayanam – A Study*, Bharatiya Vidya Dhaven, 1965, 1.
- 69 Zvelebil, 130.
- 70 VI. 37.135 trans. V.V.S. Aiyar, as quoted in Zvelebil, 147.
- 71 II.1.38, trans. V.V.S. Aiyar, as quoted in Zvelebil, 148.
- 72 Zvelebil, 147.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 VI.36.216, trans. V.V.S. Aiyar, as quoted in Zvelebil, 149.
- 75 Zvelebil, 148.
- 76 A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, Picador, 1967, 477.
- 77 VI.28.10-11 trans. V.V.S. Aiyar, as quoted in Zvelebil, 148.

- ⁷⁸ This is an old Indian poetic trope to evoke the *koel*, whose flute-like voice is associated with springtime and birds.
- ⁷⁹ V3, trans. V.V.S. Aiyar, as quoted in Zvelebil, 153.
- ⁸⁰ Zvelebil, 153.
- ⁸¹ *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmīki Book 6: Yuddhakāṇḍa*. Trans. Robert Goldman, S.S. Goldman, and B.A. van Nooten. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, sargas 115-120
- ⁸² Gangatharan, 877.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*, 878.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 881.
- ⁸⁵ Hopkins, 49.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁷ "Mahishasur Martyrdom Day: Satiating Your Curiosities," Forward Press India, September 27, 2016, accessed April 04, 2018, <https://www.forwardpress.in/2016/09/mahishasur-martyrdom-day-satiating-your-curiosities>.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*
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- ⁹¹ Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, "Mahisasur Has Become the Rallying Point of Dalits and Tribals in Bengal," Hindustan Times, October 24, 2017, , accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/mahisasur-has-become-the-rallying-point-of-dalits-and-tribals-in-bengal/story-n2gCRLTEK3kv2Qf1y7v120.html>.
- ⁹² Kamil V. Zvelebil, "Ravana the Great in Modern Tamil Fiction," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* no. 1, 1998, 126.
- ⁹³ Marguerite Ross Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.
- ⁹⁴ N. Ram, "Dravidian Movement in Its Pre-Independence Phases," *Economic and Political Weekly* 14, no. 7/8, 1979, 380.
- ⁹⁵ Modern Brahmins are often placed in roles of leadership, occupying positions as lawyers, writers, professors, and legislators.
- ⁹⁶ Ram, 381.
- ⁹⁷ *Madras Mail*, August 21, 1878. Cited by Suntharalingam, 15.
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁹ Kulke and Rothermund, 349.
- ¹⁰⁰ Richman, 177.
- ¹⁰¹ Revolt, June 23, 1929, cited by Irschick, 331.
- ¹⁰² Richman, 177.
- ¹⁰³ By Hinduism, here, I mean the modern label that can be traced to the north Indian-style of high-caste doctrines and practices, ie. Sanskritic.
- ¹⁰⁴ A.S. Venu, as cited in Harrison, 1960: 127.
- ¹⁰⁵ E.V. Ramaswami, "The Ramayana: a True Reading," Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution Publications, 1958, i and iv.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ramaswami, i.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ramaswami, vi.
- ¹⁰⁸ Zvelebil, 127.
- ¹⁰⁹ Zvelebil, 128.
- ¹¹⁰ M. S. Purnalingam Pillai as quoted in Zvelebil, *A History of Indian Literature*, p. 134
- ¹¹¹ Zvelebil, 134.
- ¹¹² *Ibid.*, 124.
- ¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 132.
- ¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.
- ¹¹⁶ Gangatharam, 878.
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 880.
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 883.
- ¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 885.
- ¹²² Richman, 12-13.

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- ¹²³ Ajith Pillai and A.S. Panneerselvan, ‘Good or Evil? The Politics of Ravana,’ *Outlook*, November 2 1998, <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/good-or-evil-the-politics-of-ravana/206444>.
- ¹²⁴ Ramaswami, 2.
- ¹²⁵ Ibid.
- ¹²⁶ Hopkins, 38.
- ¹²⁷ Ibid., 39.
- ¹²⁸ The *Rāmāyana* shows Rāvaṇa brother Kumbhakarna as the only one of the typical ogre-type that Rākṣasas are commonly portrayed as (as in the *Mahābhārata*); the other Rākṣasas of Lanka are of higher class, too gentlemanly to be considered ogre.
- ¹²⁹ Hopkins, 39.
- ¹³⁰ Ibid., 41.
- ¹³¹ Ramaswami 6-7, 28, 41-43.
- ¹³² Hein, “The Rām Lilā,” 279.
- ¹³³ Hein, 280.
- ¹³⁴ Ibid.
- ¹³⁵ As quoted by Paula Richman. I. Ve. Ramacami. [1930] 1972. *Irāmāyaṇappattirankal* [*Characters in the Rāmāyaṇa*] Tricchy: Periyar Self-Respect Publishers: 41.
- ¹³⁶ Richman 2004, 125.
- ¹³⁷ Ibid., 127.
- ¹³⁸ Ibid.
- ¹³⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 129.
- ¹⁴¹ Ibid.
- ¹⁴² Ibid.
- ¹⁴³ Ibid., 131.
- ¹⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 132.
- ¹⁴⁶ Kuvempu, *Sudra Tapasvi*, as translated by Paula Richman in “Sambuka in Modern South Indian Plays,” 1990: xii.
- ¹⁴⁷ Kuvempu, 12.
- ¹⁴⁸ Richman, 134.
- ¹⁴⁹ Kuvempu, 19.
- ¹⁵⁰ Kuvempu, 20.
- ¹⁵¹ Ibid.
- ¹⁵² Richman, 137.
- ¹⁵³ Richman, 137.
- ¹⁵⁴ Richman, 137.
- ¹⁵⁵ Richman, 138.
- ¹⁵⁶ Ramaswami, 49.
- ¹⁵⁷ Kuvempu, xii.
- ¹⁵⁸ Like the Hilary Step of Mt. Everest and the Slim River in Canada.