

PART ONE

Larger Patterns

Introduction: The Diversity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* Tradition

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In January 1987 viewers in India began to tune in each Sunday morning for a Hindi television serial based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* story. Observers estimate that over eighty million people watched the weekly broadcasts.¹ In a land where most people do not own televisions and electricity remains in short supply, many gathered at the homes of relatives or at local tea shops to view the epic, while engineers worked overtime to supply adequate current. In some places entire villages joined together to rent a television set. It was not just that people watched the show: they became so involved in it that they were loath to see it end. Despite the fact that Doordarshan, the government-run network, had only contracted with the producer for a year's worth of episodes, the audience demanded more. In fact, sanitation workers in Jalandhar went on strike because the serial was due to end without depicting the events of the seventh, and final, book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.² The strike spread among sanitation workers in many major cities in North India, compelling the government to sponsor the desired episodes in order to prevent a major health hazard. Quite apart from such militant enthusiasm, the manner in which viewers watched the serial was also striking. Many people responded to the image of Rāma on the television screen as if it were an icon in a temple. They bathed before watching, garlanded the set like a shrine, and considered the viewing of Rāma to be a religious experience.

The size, response, and nature of the television *Rāmāyaṇa*'s audience led Philip Lutgendorf, a scholar of Hindi *Rāmāyaṇa* traditions, to comment:

The Ramayan serial had become the most popular program ever shown on Indian television—and something more: an event, a phenomenon of such proportions that intellectuals and policy makers struggled to come to terms with its significance and long-range import. Never before had such a large percentage

of South Asia's population been united in a single activity; never before had a single message instantaneously reached so enormous a regional audience.³

Throughout Indian history many authors and performers have produced, and many patrons have supported, diverse tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in numerous media. Perhaps not surprisingly, enthusiasm welcomed this new entrant into what has been an unending series of *Rāmāyaṇas* in India and beyond.

The televised *Rāmāyaṇa* did, however, disturb some observers, who worried that the Doordarshan version might come to dominate other tellings of the story. Romila Thapar, a noted scholar of Indian history, is among such observers. When the state acts as patron of the arts, argues Thapar, it often favors social groups that wield relatively great influence in that society. In Thapar's analysis, Doordarshan presented a *Rāmāyaṇa* telling that reflected the concerns not of the vast majority of Indians but of what she calls "the middle class and other aspirants to the same status."⁴ For Thapar, the television *Rāmāyaṇa* possessed a dangerous and unprecedented authority. In the past, many performances of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have been sponsored by those in political power, but never before had a *Rāmāyaṇa* performance been seen simultaneously by such a huge audience through a medium which so clearly presented itself as authoritative.⁵ In addition, its broadcasters were self-consciously presenting their version of the story as an expression of mainstream "national culture." Through such a presentation, would something of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition's richness be lost?

In her critique of the television production, Thapar calls attention to the plurality of *Rāmāyaṇas* in Indian history: "The *Ramayana* does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places."⁶ Not only do diverse *Rāmāyaṇas* exist; each *Rāmāyaṇa* text reflects the social location and ideology of those who appropriate it:

The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning.⁷

Thapar emphasizes that, traditionally, local references and topical remarks play crucial roles in many performances of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Were the television *Rāmāyaṇa* and the broadly distributed videocassette tapes of it to achieve widespread acceptance as *the* version of the epic, Thapar warns of possible negative effects for Indian culture. The homogenization of any narrative tradition results in cultural loss; other tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story might be irretrievably submerged or marginalized.

The contributors to this volume desire an opposite fate—that the public discourse and scholarship stimulated by current interest in the *Rāmāyaṇa*

draw even greater attention to the manifold *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition in India.⁸ We take the popularity of the televised *Rāmāyaṇa* not as heralding the demise of other tellings but as affirming the creation of yet another rendition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the latest product of an ongoing process of telling and retelling the story of Rāma. In order to illuminate the nature of this process, our essays analyze an array of tellings, the better to display the vitality and diversity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.⁹

SYNOPSIS OF THE RĀMA STORY

Scholars familiar with the *Rāmāyaṇa* story will want to move on to the next section of this introduction. Meanwhile, for other readers, it is useful to provide an outline of the story's basic events. Such an enterprise, however, is fraught with difficulties, for "the story" is inseparable from the different forms it takes, forms which reflect differences in religious affiliation, linguistic allegiance, and social location. Nonetheless, those who are not *Rāmāyaṇa* specialists need at least a skeletal knowledge of incidents, characters, and locations in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition in order to appreciate the essays in this volume, which analyze different ways in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been told.

I have therefore chosen to present a synopsis of the story of Rāma based on Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. Most scholars would agree that Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, the most extensive early literary treatment of the life of Rāma, has wielded enormous influence in India, Southeast Asia, and beyond. Many later *Rāmāyaṇa* authors explicitly refer to it either as an authoritative source or as a telling with which they disagree. For centuries it has been regarded as the most prestigious *Rāmāyaṇa* text in many Indian circles. It has also drawn the most attention from Western scholars.¹⁰

However, I present Vālmiki's rendition here not as an *Ur*-text but only as the story of Rāma with which the majority of Western *Rāmāyaṇa* scholars are most familiar. My goal is not to privilege Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* but to give the nonspecialist reader some necessary background, since in explaining the components of other tellings of the story the contributors to this volume often take a knowledge of Vālmiki for granted. In addition, to tell other *Rāmāyaṇas* here would be to preempt the work of the rest of this volume.¹¹

In order to maintain our perspective on Vālmiki's telling as one of many *Rāmāyaṇas* rather than as the authoritative *Rāmāyaṇa*, I will summarize the story in as neutral a way as possible, avoiding, for example, moral evaluation of the characters and their actions. My aim is to present readers with the plot of an extremely influential *Rāmāyaṇa* without encouraging them to view as normative the events, characterizations, and particular ideological commitments of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*.

As the story opens the ruler of Lanka, the demon Rāvaṇa, has gained apparent invincibility by winning a promise from the gods that he cannot be

destroyed by any divine or demonic creature: he is vulnerable only to human beings, who are too weak to be of account. Meanwhile in the city of Ayodhya, we learn, King Daśaratha has no male heir. In order to remedy this problem his ministers urge him to perform a special sacrifice, which causes his three wives to conceive sons. Firstborn among them is Rāma, son of Queen Kausalyā; then come his three half-brothers, Bharata, son of Queen Kaikeyī, and Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna, the twin sons of Queen Sumitrā. Rāma begins his career as a warrior while still a youth, when he defends a sage's sacrifice by killing the demons that threaten its success. Subsequently, Rāma wins his bride, Sītā, by stringing an enormous divine bow.

When King Daśaratha decides to retire, he chooses as his successor Rāma, beloved among Ayodhya's citizens for his wisdom and compassion. Soon, however, the king's youngest queen, Kaikeyī, becomes convinced that if Rāma were to become the sovereign, her fortunes and those of her son, Bharata, would suffer disastrous consequences. So Kaikeyī calls for the king to redeem two boons that he awarded her when once she saved his life on the battlefield: she asks first that Rāma be banished to the forest for fourteen years and, second, that her own son, Bharata, be crowned in his place. Rāma willingly accepts his fate, vowing to honor his father's wishes, and sets off at once for the forest, accompanied by his wife, Sītā, and his half-brother Lakṣmaṇa. When Bharata returns from a visit to his uncle and hears of the events that have transpired while he was away, he goes to the forest to persuade Rāma to return. Rāma, however, adheres to his vow, whereupon Bharata installs Rāma's sandals on the royal throne, agreeing only to serve as regent until Rāma's return from exile.

In the forest the threesome meet ascetic sages, travel through both beautiful and frightening landscapes, and eventually settle in a little hermitage. One day there appears a demoness named Śūrpaṇakhā who falls in love with Rāma and boldly offers herself to him in marriage. When Rāma refuses her offer, she deems Sītā the obstacle to her plan and prepares to eat her. In response, Lakṣmaṇa mutilates Śūrpaṇakhā, prompting the demoness to flee to her brother, Rāvaṇa. When she complains of the cruelty of the two princes and tells of the extraordinary beauty of Sītā, her words arouse in Rāvaṇa a passionate desire for Sītā. By enlisting the aid of another demon, who takes the form of a golden deer, Rāvaṇa lures first Rāma and then Lakṣmaṇa away from their hermitage. Then, posing as a wandering holy man, Rāvaṇa gains entrance to the dwelling and carries Sītā off to his island kingdom of Lanka.

In the course of his attempt to determine where Sītā has been taken and then to gather allies for the fight against Rāvaṇa, Rāma becomes involved in the politics of a monkey kingdom. There Rāma meets Hanumān, who becomes his staunch devotee, and Sugrīva, an exiled prince who, like Rāma, has also suffered the loss of wife and kingdom. Sugrīva and Rāma make a pact: if Rāma will help Sugrīva win back his wife and throne—both currently under the control of his brother, Vālin—then Sugrīva will aid Rāma in his

search for Sītā. During a battle between Sugrīva and Vālin, Rāma conceals himself behind a tree and shoots Vālin from this position of hiding, an act that violates the warrior's code. Some time later Sugrīva sends his warriors off in every direction seeking news of Sītā's whereabouts. Finally they learn that Sītā has been imprisoned in Lanka.

Hanumān crosses the ocean to Lanka and locates Sītā, dwelling under guard in a grove near Rāvaṇa's palace. After he watches Rāvaṇa alternately threaten her life and attempt to seduce her, he gives her Rāma's signet ring, assuring her of imminent rescue. Then, when he allows himself to be brought to Rāvaṇa's court, his tail is set afire. Escaping his captors, he sets the city on fire and then returns to help Rāma's forces prepare for war, adding the intelligence about the walled city of Lanka that he has gathered to information provided by Vibhīṣaṇa, a brother of Rāvaṇa who has repudiated him to join Rāma. The monkeys build a bridge to Lanka so that the army can cross. The ensuing battle sees great losses on both sides. Rāma ultimately kills Rāvaṇa in one-to-one combat, whereupon Rāma makes Vibhīṣaṇa the new ruler of Lanka.

Rāma at first refuses to take Sītā back, since she has lived in the household of another man. After she successfully undergoes a trial by fire, however, he deems her worthy to take her place by his side. But continuing rumors questioning his wife's chastity cause Rāma to banish Sītā—who is now pregnant—from his kingdom. Banished, she finds refuge with the venerable sage Vālmīki, to whom the composition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is traditionally attributed, and in the shelter of his hermitage gives birth to twin sons, Lava and Kuśa. Eventually, Sītā abandons this world to return to the bosom of the earth, whence she came. Bereft by the loss of his wife, Rāma finally ascends to heaven with members of his retinue.

THE ASSUMPTIONS AND GOALS OF THIS VOLUME

Along with Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, there are hundreds of other tellings of the story of Rāma in India, Southeast Asia, and beyond. In confronting the diversity of the tradition, we are challenged to find ways of articulating relationships among these *Rāmāyaṇas*. In the lead essay of this volume, Ramanujan takes up the challenge by looking at five different *Rāmāyaṇas*: Vālmīki's Sanskrit poem, summarized above; Kampan's *Irāmāvatāram*, a Tamil literary account that incorporates characteristically South Indian material;¹² Jain tellings, which provide a non-Hindu perspective on familiar events;¹³ a Kannada folktale that reflects preoccupations with sexuality and childbearing;¹⁴ and the *Ramakien*, produced for a Thai rather than an Indian audience.

Ramanujan's exploration of these texts suggests several ways to conceptualize the relations between *Rāmāyaṇas*. He urges us to view different tellings neither as totally individual stories nor as "divergences" from the "real" version by Vālmīki, but as the expression of an extraordinarily rich set of re-

sources existing, throughout history, both within India and wherever Indian culture took root. Like the set of landscape conventions of classical Tamil poetry, the elements of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition can be seen as a source on which poets can draw to produce a potentially infinite series of varied and sometimes contradictory tellings.¹⁵ Ramanujan likens the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition to a pool of signifiers that includes plot, characters, names, geography, incidents, and relations, arguing that each *Rāmāyaṇa* can be seen as a “crystallization”:

These various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context.

Creation of *Rāmāyaṇas*, Ramanujan’s metaphor implies, involves both constraints and fluidity: while certain sets of codes structure expression, the fluidity of tradition accounts for the diversity of tellings. Like Thapar, he also calls attention to the fact that *Rāmāyaṇa* tellings take shape in particular contexts. They may be influenced, for example, by the beliefs of individual religious communities, the literary conventions of regional cultures, and the specific configurations of social relations.

In responding to Ramanujan’s suggestion that we explore *Rāmāyaṇa* tellings in light of their structure, diversity, and context, the contributors to this volume have both reconsidered familiar *Rāmāyaṇas* and explored lesser-known tellings of the story. Those familiar with *Rāmāyaṇa* scholarship will recognize the extent to which we have used and built upon the careful research of earlier studies that trace the historical and literary peregrinations of Rāma’s story. We are grateful to those who preceded us, scholars of extraordinary patience who meticulously charted the many tellings of the tale.¹⁶ Our present goal is somewhat different: to consider the logic that informs, and the relations that exist between, selected tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as well as the cultural contexts of those tellings.

The essays share five assumptions about the plurality of *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition in India and Thailand. First, we deem all the incidents connected with the story of Rāma and Sītā equally worthy of our attention. Philological scholarship on Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* has argued that the *Bālakāṇḍa* (the first book, which tells of Rāma’s youth) and the *Uttarakāṇḍa* (the last book, which tells of the events that transpire after Rāma’s rescue of Sītā, including her banishment to the forest) are “late” additions.¹⁷ Their status as possible interpolations into Vālmīki’s text, however, has had little effect on the popularity of their contents in Indian culture. Whether these events from Rāma’s early life and from the end of the story were original to Vālmīki’s text or not, the contributors to this volume treat them in the same way as they treat incidents from other periods in Rāma’s life.

Second, we accept the idea of many *Rāmāyaṇas* and place Vālmīki's text within that framework. Some scholars assume, either implicitly or explicitly, that Vālmīki has written *the* definitive *Rāmāyaṇa*. Hence, the diverse non-Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇas*—the “other *Rāmāyaṇas*”—have often been assessed against that standard, according to their angle of divergence from Vālmīki's version. While Vālmīki's importance is undeniable, we learn more about the diversity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition when we abandon the notion of Vālmīki as the *Ur*-text from which all the other *Rāmāyaṇas* descended.¹⁸ We need instead to consider the “many *Rāmāyaṇas*,” of which Vālmīki's telling is one, Tulsī's another, Kampan's another, the Buddhist *jātaka* yet another, and so forth. Like other authors, Vālmīki is rooted in a particular social and ideological context. His text represents an intriguing telling, but it is one among many.

Third, in part to offset the prevalent attitude toward Vālmīki, the contributors seek to foreground non-Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* texts in order to set out the key assumptions informing different tellings of the story. For example, although in many cases Vālmīki and Kampan adhere to the same basic outline of events, Kampan's rendition of particular incidents is shaped by the Tamil *bhakti* tradition, which gives radically different religious nuances to those events. Kampan's *Rāmāyaṇa* is not a divergence from Vālmīki; the two are different tellings. Their differences intrigue us because they testify to the diversity of Indian culture, indicating that throughout history multiple voices were heard within the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

Fourth, in addition to analyzing textual diversity, we want to emphasize the diversity and significance of renderings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in other genres. Recent scholarship on Indian *Rāmāyaṇa* dramas and public culture testifies to the vitality and social significance of epic-related performances.¹⁹ Building on this research, this volume highlights *Rāmāyaṇa* tellings found in puppet theater, debate, song cycles, and iconographic traditions. These tellings possess their own logic, their own intended audience, and their own richness.

Finally, we seek to demonstrate that the telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in India has included stories that conflict with one another. It is true that particular tellings have attained various degrees of dominance and/or popularity (Vālmīki, Tulsī, the televised *Rāmāyaṇa*). Nonetheless, there have always been contesting voices. Where Hindu *Rāmāyaṇas* have predominated, Jain and Buddhist *Rāmāyaṇa* poets have criticized or questioned those texts by producing their own tellings. Where male dominance has been prescribed in textual traditions, women's *Rāmāyaṇa* songs have expressed alternative perspectives that are more in keeping with women's own concerns. Our essays suggest that the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition permits endless refashioning of the story, sometimes in actual opposition to the ways in which the story has previously been told.

The influence of two competing sets of religious tellings of the Rāma story are examined in the essay by Reynolds. He points out that, despite wide-

spread privileging of Hindu tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Buddhist tellings of the story form an ancient, continuous, and coherent tradition in South Asia and beyond. He then goes on to show how both Hindu narrative elements and Buddhist values have influenced the composition of the complex and sophisticated Thai *Ramakien*, shedding light on the ways in which that text has been shaped by the multireligious diversity of the South Asian *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

TELLINGS AS REFASHIONING AND OPPOSITION

Despite the widespread belief that Rāma acts as the embodiment of righteous action, certain deeds that he performs have troubled various authors of *Rāmāyaṇa* texts over the centuries.²⁰ Because the textual treatment of these morally ambiguous deeds often involves dealing with them in creative ways, the study of such incidents can reveal some of the sources of diversity within the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.²¹ In Part Two of this volume, Kathleen Erndl and David Shulman examine how these incidents can be seen as nodes of narrative capable of generating different tellings, each pursuing its own logic.

A number of authors and commentators have puzzled over the ethically problematic way that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa treat Śūrpaṇakhā, Rāvaṇa's sister. In her chapter for this volume, Erndl brings structural analysis to bear on the mutilation of Śūrpaṇakhā, an event which ultimately leads to Sītā's abduction. The incident's ambiguities stem in various texts from the way that Lakṣmaṇa contravenes the prescription that a warrior must never harm a woman; from Śūrpaṇakhā's status as demoness and disguise as a beautiful woman; and from the attempts of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to tease and trick her. By examining the portrayal of this incident in a selected set of Sanskrit, Tamil, and Hindi *Rāmāyaṇa* texts, Erndl demonstrates how its moral ambiguities have generated a whole array of renditions and commentaries. In doing so, she reveals a fascination within the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition for Śūrpaṇakhā, a woman who moves about the forest independent of a male protector and boldly articulates her passionate feelings, as a kind of alter ego of Sītā, often considered the model of the chaste and submissive wife.²²

Shulman's essay considers another nodal incident in the narrative, the scene in which Rāma repudiates Sītā and then is informed by the gods that he is divine. Shulman juxtaposes Vālmiki's account of the incident with Kampaṇ's rendition, examining the fundamental motivations of each telling by considering two foci of ambiguity and literary creativity. One dilemma concerns Rāma's relationship to his wife, now returned from a sojourn in another male's house: her ambiguous status—there is no proof that she remained chaste—dismays Rāma's supporters. Rāma's response to her return also raises issues about his own hybrid status as a deity in human form. Vālmiki's account of the incident explores the extent to which Rāma has

forgotten his divine identity; in contrast, Kampan's account raises questions about the limited extent to which human beings can know the divine and attain union with him. Shulman brings to light both the differences in the two accounts and the ways in which these differences are embedded in different theological contexts.

If Erndl and Shulman focus upon diversity within the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition inspired by moral ambiguities, that tradition also encompasses ways of telling the story that contest the character portrayals, values, and concerns of dominant *Rāmāyaṇas*. Jain and Buddhist writers are not alone in this endeavor. Other tellings that oppose influential Hindu tellings (which I have labeled "oppositional tellings") exist as well. Two papers in Part Two explore the specific ways in which certain texts resist a dominant presentation of the story.

Narayana Rao's essay for this volume, an account of folksongs collected from Telugu women, focuses on a *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition that contests the prevailing ideology of male dominance. Narayana Rao sees these songs as statements against what he calls "the public *Rāmāyaṇas*," pointing out that the latter glorify "the accepted values of a male-dominated world," whereas the Telugu songs relate a story in which public events (coronation, war) are displaced by domestic ones such as Kausalyā's morning sickness or Rāma getting bathed by his mother. The overall emphasis in these songs differs as well. While Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, for example, concentrates on the virtues of Rāma, several of the women's folksongs question Rāma's integrity and foreground the theme of the suffering that husbandly neglect causes a wife. Gloria Raheja, an anthropologist studying North Indian women's songs, has cautioned against assuming that "the identity and self-perceptions of Hindu women depend heavily on the set of male-authored mythic themes [such as wifely devotion, subservience to in-laws, and suppression of desire for marital intimacy] condensed into the figure of Sītā."²³ Narayana Rao's analysis gives us another perspective, a way to hear another set of voices singing about the relationship between Sītā and Rāma.

Oppositional tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* also emerged from the colonial context in South Asia, as Clinton Seely's paper about Michael Madhusudan Dutt shows. Dutt's *Meghanādavadha Kāvya* reflects the complexity of contact between Indian and British culture. Dutt adored Milton, converted to Christianity, embraced blank verse, and composed some major poems in English. Yet he loved Hindu mythology and created a whole new tradition in Bengali writing. Both the rejections and the acceptances in his telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* reveal much about its author and his colonial context. As Seely points out, Dutt based the plot of his epic upon that of the dominant Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* by Kṛttivāsa. Yet at the same time he subtly subverted the image of Rāma by carefully interweaving three additional stories that serve to identify Rāvaṇa with heroic figures. As a result, the perplexed reader, expecting a

more conventional characterization, often ends up admiring or feeling sympathy for the expected villain of the story. Dutt admitted to a friend that his character portrayal was the result of his contempt for traditional Hindu values like asceticism and his admiration for the enjoyment of possessions and power that was associated with colonial Calcutta.²⁴

Such oppositional texts demonstrate the potential plurality of characterization and plot in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition; analysis of kinds of audience in performance reveals another component of the tradition's diversity. Stuart Blackburn's essay examines a shadow-puppet tradition in present-day Kerala (based on Kampan's twelfth-century Tamil *Irāmāvatāram*), focusing on the play's "internal" audience. Unlike the Rām Līlā of Banaras, performed before huge crowds, the spectators at the Kerala puppet plays are few—and those few often doze off soon after the performance begins. As a result, the puppeteers perform principally for one another. Aficionados of the genre, they strive to outdo each other in voluminous commentary and witty remarks, incorporating into the telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* verbal treatises on grammar, local references, and satire of pious ideals. This internal audience has thus shaped the many layers and frames of the drama, giving rise to yet another kind of diversity within the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

TELLINGS AS COMMENTARY AND PROGRAMS FOR ACTION

Rāmāyaṇa tellings provide a set of resources on which people have drawn—in their own way and for their own purposes—in order to accuse, justify, meditate, debate, and more. The papers in the final section of the volume, Part Three, explore how and why people select particular incidents from the *Rāmāyaṇa* to express their view of reality. Such selective tellings—ones which adopt a nontraditional perspective on otherwise familiar features of the tale—have proved an effective means for conveying political views and for inculcating religious teachings. In Indian exegesis as well as tellings, the diversity of *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition makes itself known.²⁵

Paula Richman's paper analyzes the logic of E. V. Ramasami's exegesis of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In an oft-reprinted pamphlet intended for a popular readership, he argues that morally ambiguous episodes such as the killing of Vālin, Rāma's harsh treatment of Sītā, and the mutilation of Śūrpaṇakhā constitute the real core of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Using these incidents to guide his assessment of *Rāmāyaṇa* characters and their values, he scathingly attacks Hinduism—especially the worship of Rāma—as a North Indian way of subjugating South Indians, while glorifying Rāvaṇa, whom he identifies with the values of "Dravidian" culture.²⁶ Labeling 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, he exhorts fellow South Indians to liberate themselves by rejecting belief in Rāma both as moral para-

digm and as god. Such a reading of the Rāma story functions as a clarion call to cultural separatism.

Medieval Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators used their own form of *Rāmāyaṇa* exegesis to explain a different kind of freedom: spiritual liberation. Patricia Mumme's paper shows how Teṅkalai Śrīvaiṣṇavas regard the actions of *Rāmāyaṇa* characters as revealing truths about the relationship between the devotee and the divine Lord. In contrast to theologians from the rival Vaṭakalai sect, who wrote primarily for an elite audience of learned Brahmins, the Teṅkalais addressed themselves to a broader lay audience that included women and non-Brahmin men, edifying this diverse group by incorporating incidents from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In their exegesis, the Teṅkalai commentators select what other tellings usually regard as minor incidents, remove them from their usual narrative context, and use them in unexpected ways as parables to thwart the expectations of their audience. Such incidents shock hearers into questioning their ordinary assumptions about the nature of salvation, preparing them to accept Śrīvaiṣṇava theological claims.

Selectivity generates another kind of power in the *rasik sampradāy* based in Ayodhya, a sect whose religious beliefs and meditational practices Philip Lutgendorf analyzes in his essay. The theology and practices of the *rasik* tradition assume a telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* that foregrounds the time right after the wedding of Rāma and Sītā, when the couple savors the pleasures of love in their golden palace. The *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsīdās (generally known by the shorter title *Mānas*) portrays this incident only briefly and discreetly; yet members of the *rasik* tradition elaborate on this account, prescribing various means to identify meditatively with the companions and servants of Sītā and Rāma during this period. Here we find not the heroic Rāma but the erotic one, not the long-suffering Sītā but one engaged in exploring life's pleasures. *Rasik* adepts say that the traditionally emphasized events—exile, war, coronation—constitute the conventional *Rāmāyaṇa*, which is easily known; in contrast, true devotees seek the transcendent *Rāmāyaṇa* of the love play between Rāma and Sītā, revealed only to initiates. Their interpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* enables adherents to actualize heavenly play on earth through meditation.

If selectivity enables *rasiks* to attain their meditative goals, it is also, as Ramdas Lamb shows in his essay, key to the telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* among the Rāmnāmīs, a militant Untouchable sect of the Chhattisgarh region in eastern Madhya Pradesh. Although the Rāmnāmīs view the *Mānas* as their official text, they reject some sections and stress others, reducing the text of 24,000 stanzas to a corpus of some four to five hundred individual verses. In addition, through ritual chanting and debates, members of the sect continue to personalize their *Rāmāyaṇa* text, embellishing it with verses that usually then become part of the corpus. Lamb traces this process, showing how the Rāmnāmīs began by viewing the *Mānas* as inviolate but gradually came,

self-consciously, to cull the text for material consonant with their own beliefs. His research and that of Lutgendorf attest to another kind of fluidity within the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, showing how even a single, apparently fixed text can be refashioned and thus appropriated to diverse ends.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF OUR ANALYSES

In the essays that follow we make no pretense of giving an exhaustive survey of all the *Rāmāyaṇas* in India nor do we believe that such is feasible. We thus acknowledge that many significant tellings of Rāma's story—such as the *Śakta Rāmāyaṇas*, in which Sītā slays Rāvaṇa, or the South Asian Persian *Rāmāyaṇas*—go unrepresented here. Our goal has been to be suggestive, rather than comprehensive. Nor have we attempted an analysis of the *Rāmāyaṇas* of each major region in India.²⁷ Rather, our aim has been to elucidate the compelling logic of a number of intriguing *Rāmāyaṇas*, delineate their context, and juxtapose telling with telling to reveal wider patterns within the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

Clearly, each contributor to this volume adds to our knowledge of specific *Rāmāyaṇas* in India and Thailand. For example, Shulman shows how the portrayal of Rāma's repudiation of Sītā in the *Irāmāvatāram* has been shaped by the assumptions of Tamil *bhakti*; Lutgendorf considers why scholars have neglected *rasik* tradition; Blackburn points out that the Kerala puppet plays include an antiheroic interpretation of certain events in Rāma's story; Reynolds identifies both Hindu and Buddhist elements in the *Ramakien*. In addition to reflecting specifically on individual tellings of the story, moreover, these essays reveal certain patterns across *Rāmāyaṇas*.

The essays collected here also testify to the validity of Ramanujan's claims about the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. Ramanujan argues that the *Rāmāyaṇa* has become "a second language of a whole culture area," and we have found it to be an extraordinarily eloquent language. The *Rāmāyaṇa* provides Kampan with the language to express the complex relationship between god and devotee; it furnishes the Rāmnāmīs with quotations to use in sophisticated debate; it lends Dutt the ability to articulate the colonial dilemma of cultural ambivalence; it provides Thai kings with the vocabulary of political legitimacy. Sītā's trials give Telugu Brahmin women a way to talk about a husband's neglect, while Rāvaṇa's situation enables E. V. Ramasami to polemicize about Tamil separatism. Theological, sexual, and political discourse: all emerge from the great pool of *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

The cultural uses of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are manifold and ever changing. Particular groups at particular times in history develop an elective affinity for specific characters. Vālmīki currently attracts the affection of certain *jātis* of sanitation workers,²⁸ Sītā has traditionally elicited the empathy of long-suffering wives,²⁹ and the proponents of a separate Tamil state have iden-

tified with Rāvaṇa. Clearly, the significance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* goes beyond specific texts to encompass twin processes that lie at the heart of culture. Thus some tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* affirm the hierarchy found in social, political, and religious relations, while other tellings contest that hierarchy.

Contesting often coalesces around the figure of Rāvaṇa. Seely reveals how Dutt has glorified Rāvaṇa and his fellow *rākṣasas* (demons), presenting them in a sympathetic way, while simultaneously portraying Rāma and his followers in a poor light.³⁰ The same elevation of Rāvaṇa predominates in the telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* assumed in E. V. Ramasami's interpretation, but within a political context. There Rāvaṇa stands as a paragon of South Indian virtue.

Even if Dutt and Ramasami were the only ones who presented Rāvaṇa in this way, their telling would be significant. But they are not. Many "non-mainstream" groups have laid claim to Rāvaṇa at different times in history and in different parts of India. Ramanujan's essay outlines how certain Jain *Rāmāyaṇas* portray the story from Rāvaṇa's perspective. The Dalits, a group of militant Mahars (considered Untouchables by higher *jātis*) in Maharashtra, have embraced Rāvaṇa as one of their heroes.³¹ The Nadars, a low *jāti* that was composed primarily of impoverished toddy-tappers until some of its members converted to Christianity, claimed Mahodara (Rāvaṇa's prime minister) as their ancestor.³² A number of Dravidian tribals and lower *jātis* of southern and central India have caste traditions that connect them with Rāvaṇa and/or Lanka.³³

Our conclusions about Rāvaṇa suggest ways of looking at other *Rāmāyaṇa* characters as well. In a male-dominated society, Telugu Brahmin women's songs present Sītā as finally victorious over Rāma. The same songs also tell of Śūrpaṇakhā's revenge on Rāma. Perhaps someday Śūrpaṇakhā will be claimed as a symbol of the physical violence that has been unjustly perpetrated upon women who seek independence from constraining social norms. Similarly, several characters in the Kerala puppet play express the anger of those low in the social hierarchy against those in positions of power and decision making. In the oppositional tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, then, we encounter the traditions of those set apart from the mainstream by religious persuasion, social location, or gender, who struggle against an understanding of themselves as presented through the lens of a religious text. Non-Hindu males, men labeled "low-caste," and women of many communities have created and maintained counter-*Rāmāyaṇas*. These groups take the story of Rāma and use it to express their own perception of "the way things are."

In addition to resistance expressed through nontraditional perspectives on characterization, other groups have contested dominant *Rāmāyaṇa* traditions by selectively dismembering particular tellings of the story of Rāma. In such cases, less is often more. When, for their own reasons, particular groups metonymize, appropriate, or abridge parts of the Rāma story, these incidents