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

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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 – Valmiki’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,” 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 Valmīki’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.

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. 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. 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. 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 Mahābhārata 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.” 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.” 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, 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.” However, van Nooten then posits that this “theory [of a complete Indo-Aryan military takeover] is highly speculative and probably false.” 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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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 \textit{Vedas}, as the \textit{mantra} texts are said to be divinely inspired, and thus were passed down reliably from priests in oral tradition.\textsuperscript{18} The \textit{Ṛigveda}, as part of the \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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 Veda, 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. 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.”

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. 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 Brahmans 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. 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. 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.

1.4 The Vedic Characteristics of Valmiki’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. 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. 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.

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 Rāmāyaṇa 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. Rākṣasis 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 Lakśmaṇa 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 Lakśmaṇa 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.”

David Brick says that:

Sitā’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 Sitā’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.

The telling of Sitā’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. Sitā is “assailed by false slander,” accused “before a large crowd” and so attempts to clear her name to everyone in audience. 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!

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!

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. Sitā 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. Sitā supports her husband by following his command even while she knows he is wrong, showing the ideal woman as a subservient, obedient one. Sitā 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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{39}

1.5 Implications of Vedic Characteristics

Though the narrative is known across the globe, the ultimate origins of the \textit{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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{41} Many scholars of Sanskrit view the \textit{Rāmāyaṇa} to be extremely metrically advanced and to be the work (mostly, possibly excluding the later additions) of a single skilled metrician.\textsuperscript{42} Agreed to stem from Vedic periods, the germ of the \textit{Rāmāyaṇa} is said to represent the eastern districts of a limited Northern India.\textsuperscript{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 Valmiki’s version being cemented before or during the others.

The actual poetry exhibited in this epic is held up by commentators as unique, with Valmiki’s “versification...possess[ing] a polish and grace, a quiet elegance, that markedly differentiate it from anything known before.” 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.” 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 Valmiki, 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. 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.” 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.
Valmiki’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). Valmiki 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 Valmiki 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. Valmiki is “moved profoundly with grief, [and then] pronounced a curse, without knowing what he was doing, condemning the hunter to hell for eternity.” This curse leads to Valmiki’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. In the Uttara-Kāṇḍa, Valmiki again makes his appearance as a sage ascetic who brings Sītā and her now-grown twin sons, Kuṣa and Lava, to Ayodhyā to sing the story of their father.
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 dharma bhṛtaṁ varah, 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).

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1.7 Kampan’s *Rāmāyaṇa of South India*

Kampan, 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 Valmīki, 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. In the legend surrounding the poet, he was the son of one Adita, an *uvaccaṇa* responsible for ringing the bell in a Kāḷī temple in Tanjore district. 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.

K.V. Raman and T. Padmaja depict Kampan as a worshipper of Rāma and Sītā as incarnations of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmi, and as a devoted fan of Valmīki’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.” Raman and Padmaja do not assert that Kampan’s *Rāmāyaṇa* was derivative of Valmīki’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 Valmīki and Kampan lies in the disparate tellings of the Ahalyā saga in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Valmīki’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.” 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.” The corresponding punishments
given to Indra and Ahalyā by Gautama reflect North and South Indian cultural concerns and their greater poetic themes. While Valmiki’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…Kampañ, here, and elsewhere, not only makes full use of his predecessor Valmiki’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 Kampaṇ’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 Kampaṇ 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. 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, Kampaṇ 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 Kampaṇ’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 Kampaṇ 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 Kampan he is the all-loving
and all-forgiving Supreme Lord, known thus to everyone including Rāvana:

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 āḻvār bhakti poets like Kulacekara Āḻvār.72 The āḻvārs’
works comprise over 4000 songs of devotion, and often dote on Rāma’s virtuous
characteristics. The poet Nammāḻvār 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, Kampan’s Rāma is characterized as the compassionate reincarnation of
Viṣṇu, Rāma does not continue fighting Rāvana 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 Rāvana is motivated throughout the narrative by a love of glory and
power, he is described by Kampan as intelligent and noble, cultured and
exalted.75 A. L. Basham for this reason claims that “[I]ike Milton, Kampan was of
the devil’s party without knowing it.”76 Rāvana’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. Kampaṇ 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 Lakṣmana 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. Kampaṇ’s devotional Rāmāyaṇa makes elaborate efforts to avoid any suggestion of impropriety on Rāma’s point as he is so reverentially depicted.

Kampaṇ composed his Rāmāyaṇa during a period when Rāma was fully deified as Viṣṇu, and Sītā as Laksmi. 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-parīkṣā 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 Kampan’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 Kampan to denigrate the hypocritical Hindu population, that lived in opposition to traditional virtues.

Kampan’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, Kampan’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,” 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,” and this is evident in the Rāmāyaṇas of Valmiki and Kaṇaḍa.

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,” the Rāmāyaṇa offers a literary and religious basis – or vehicle – for every group to promote their cultural agenda: Vaisnavites against Śaivites, Brahmans 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. 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. 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.”

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. The Dravidian Movement began under British colonial rule. Though described by Marguerite Barnett as ‘Cultural Nationalism,’ 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;” 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. 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.”

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.” 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].” 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 Rāmāyana and the treatment of
Rāvana 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. 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.”

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 Nadu 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.” 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”\textsuperscript{106}, and Rāvaṇa, the King of Laṅkā, as Southern Dravidian.

One major event that Periyar examines in his reading is Sītā’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 \textit{Rāmāyaṇa} as an antagonistic piece of fiction.

It is not only Periyar that finds the \textit{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 \textit{Ramayana},” and Swami Vivekanada and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru have “stated unambiguously that the \textit{Ramayana} is a myth depicting the lifelong struggle between the ancient Aryans and Dravidians.”\textsuperscript{107}

\section*{2.4 Anti-Brahmanism and Rāvaṇa as the Hero}

Zvelebil traces a change in the accepted analysis of the \textit{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 *Rāmāyana* 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

Kampaṇ “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.” 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.” 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.”

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.” 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 Rāvana.”

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,” 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.” In Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa, Rāvana’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 Rāvana. This functions as a way to give the Rāma and Rāvana 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. In the Jain tradition, a counter-narrative Rāmāyaṇa features Rāvana as a hero and staunch Jain monk whose plotline “denounced Brahmins as heretics who subverted the actual story for their own spiritual convenience.”

Dravidian voices contextualize the Rāmāyaṇa conjunction within contemporary public discourse. Sundaram Pillai reimagines Valmiki’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.” 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,” 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 Brahmans 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.”

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 Laksmana 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 Sītā 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?

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 Kṣhatriya caste. Sītā is the adopted daughter of King Janaka, which makes her Kṣhatriya as well. Although Kṣhatriya 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.” 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. 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, Khaśa, 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 Pulāstya, the fourth son of Brahman, and Kaikasi, 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. 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 Tulsidās in his Rāmacaritamānasā. 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.’”

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. 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.” 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?” 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. 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). 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.” 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.

Thiruvarur K. Thangaraju’s play in Tamil, Rāmāyaṇa Nāṭakam (Rāmāyaṇa Drama) came about from viewing a traditional Rāmāyaṇa performance. Thangaraju was once a member of the Indian National Congress, but left in the 1940s to join Periyar’s Dravida Kazhagam; with Rāmāyaṇa Nāṭakam, 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.”

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 Rāvana as stand-ins. 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.\textsuperscript{143} Thangaraju, born into a prestigious and wealthy jāti, but still considered Śūdra by northern Brahmin, writes his Śambūka self-reflectively.\textsuperscript{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’ Shudra, ‘unclean’ Śūdra, and untouchables. The majority of Tamil Nadu are classified as lesser compared to the more populous “twice-born” shastra 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.\textsuperscript{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:

\textit{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 *Tapasvi* 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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Recourse to scriptures alone} \\
\text{will not help decide the right deed.} \\
\text{A thoughtless act can only do harm to dharma.}^{150}
\end{align*}
\]

The Brahmin then has his moment of realization:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I have been hidebound} \\
\text{warped by the texts,} \\
\text{blinded by prejudice.} \\
\text{Does fire worry about} \\
\text{the caste of its fuel?} \\
\text{A sage is to be honored} \\
\text{regardless of his birth.} \\
\text{Humility leads to grace} \\
\text{while scorn corrupts the soul.}^{151}
\end{align*}
\]

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.” 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 Kampañ 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.” 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 Valmiki. Kampañ’s nuanced view of Rāvaṇa is not at odds with his devoted worship of Lord Rāma. Instead, Kampañ 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,” Kampañ humanized Rāvaṇa while extolling the god-like qualities of Rāma. Kampañ 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 Kampaṇ’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 Valmiki’s Rāmāyaṇa.

The Rāmāyaṇa has outlasted even some mountains and rivers, 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 reimagined 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.
Bibliography


Endnotes

3 Goldman is also the William and Catherine Magistretti Distinguished Professor of Sanskrit and Indian studies at the University of California, Berkeley.
5 Goldman *Bāla-Kāṇḍa*, 4.
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.
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.
24 Ibid.
25 Sunder Raj, 10; Kulke and Rothermund, 35.
26 Kulke and Rothermund, 35.
27 Ibid.
28 A. Senthilamilan (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*).
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
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.
Austin 60

39 Brick, 37.
43 Ibid.
48 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 *Bākakāṇḍa* 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 Bhat, 220.
53 Ibid., 655-6.
54 Ibid., 658.
55 Ibid., 662.
56 Valmiki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, 2.27.29, as translated by John Brockington in “The Concept of Dharma in the Rāmāyana,” 662.
57 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 Śūdra s from the behind.
58 Ibid., 147.
59 An *uvaccaṇa* is a member of a caste of non-Brahmin temple servants responsible for drumming and performing rites on the images. See Zvelebil, 146.
60 Zvelebil, 147.
63 Kamba Rāmāyaṇa, sarga 553, translated by Brick.
64 Kamba Rāmāyaṇa, sarga 555, translated by Brick.
65 Richman, 31-32.
66 Ibid., 32.
68 Zvelebil, 130.
69 VI. 37.135 trans. V.V.S. Aiyar, as quoted in Zvelebil, 147.
70 II.1.38, trans. V.V.S. Aiyar, as quoted in Zvelebil, 148.
71 Zvelebil, 147.
72 Ibid.
73 VI.36.216, trans. V.V.S. Aiyar, as quoted in Zvelebil, 149.
74 Zvelebil, 148.
75 A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, Picador, 1967, 477.
76 VI.28.10-11 trans. V.V.S. Aiyar, as quoted in Zvelebil, 148.
This is an old Indian poetic trope to evoke the *koel*, whose flute-like voice is associated with springtime and birds.

V3, trans. V.V.S. Aiyar, as quoted in Zvelebil, 153.

Zvelebil, 153.


Gangatharan, 877.

Ibid., 878.

Ibid., 881.

Hopkins, 49.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Modern Brahmins are often placed in roles of leadership, occupying positions as lawyers, writers, professors, and legislators.

Ram, 381.


Ibid.

Kulke and Rothermund, 349.

Richman, 177.

Revolt, June 23, 1929, cited by Irschick, 331.

Richman, 177.

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.

A.S. Venu, as cited in Harrison, 1960: 127.


Ramaswami, i.

Ramaswami, vi.

Zvelebil, 127.

Zvelebil, 128.

M. S. Purnalingam Pillai as quoted in Zvelebil, *A History of Indian Literature*, p. 134

Zvelebil, 134.

Ibid., 124.

Ibid., 132.

Ibid., 133.

Ibid., 159.

Gangatharam, 878.

Ibid., 880.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., 883.

Ibid., 885.

Richman, 12-13.
124 Ramaswami, 2.
125 Ibid.
126 Hopkins, 38.
127 Ibid., 39.
128 The *Rāmāyana* shows Rāvana 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.
133 Hein, 280.
134 Ibid.
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.
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.