

Is there an Indian way of thinking? An informal essay

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A.K. Ramanujan

Walter Benjamin once dreamed of hiding behind a phalanx of quotations which, like highwaymen, would ambush the passing reader and rob him of his convictions.

I

Stanislavsky had an exercise for his actors. He would give them an everyday sentence like, 'Bring me a cup of tea', and ask them to say it forty different ways, using it to beg, question, mock, wheedle, be imperious, etc. My question, 'Is there an Indian way of thinking?', is a good one for such an exercise. Depending on where the stress is placed, it contains many questions—all of which are real questions—asked again and again when people talk about India. Here are a few possible versions:

Is there an Indian way of thinking?
Is there *an* Indian way of thinking?
Is there an *Indian* way of thinking?
Is there an Indian way of *thinking*?

The answers are just as various. Here are a few: There *was* an Indian way of thinking; there isn't any more. If you want to learn about the Indian way of thinking, do not ask your modern-day citified Indians, go to the pundits, the *vaidyas*, the old texts. On the contrary: India never changes; under the veneer of the modern, Indians still think like the vedas.

The second question might elicit answers like these: There is no single Indian way of thinking; there are Great and Little Traditions, ancient and modern, rural and urban, classical and folk. Each language, caste and region has its special world view. So, under the apparent diversity, there is

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really a unity of viewpoint, a single supersystem. Vedists see a vedic model in all Indian thought. Nehru made the phrase 'unity in diversity' an Indian slogan. The Sahitya Akademi's line has been, 'Indian literature is One, though written in many languages'

The third question might be answered: What we see in India is nothing special to India; it is nothing but pre-industrial, pre-printing press, face-to-face, agricultural, feudal. Marxists, Freudians, McLuhanites, all have their labels for the stage India is in, according to their schemes of social evolution; India is only an example. Others, of course, would argue the uniqueness of the Indian Way and how it turns all things, especially rivals and enemies, into itself; look at what has happened to Indo-Europeans in India, they would say: their language gets shot with retroflexes, their syntax with nominal compounds, they lose their nerve—the British are only the most recent example (according to Nirad Chaudhuri). Look what happens to Buddhism, Islam, the Parsis. There is an *Indian* way, and it imprints and patterns all things that enter the continent; it is inescapable, and it is Bigger Than All of Us.

The fourth question may question whether Indians think at all: It is the West that is materialistic, rational; Indians have no philosophy, only religion, no positive sciences, not even a psychology; in India, matter is subordinated to spirit, rational thought to feeling, intuition. And even when people agree that this is the case, we can have arguments for and against it. Some lament, others celebrate India's un-thinking ways. One can go on forever.

We—I, certainly—have stood in one or another of these stances at different times. We have not heard the end of these questions—or these answers.

II

The problem was posed for me personally at the age of 20 in the image of my father. I had never taken a good look at him till then. Didn't Mark Twain say, 'At 17, I thought my father was ignorant; at 20, I wondered how he learned so much in three years'? Indeed, this essay was inspired by contemplation of him over the years, and is dedicated to him.

My father's clothes represented his inner life very well. He was a south Indian Brahmin gentleman. He wore neat white turbans, a Śri Vaiṣṇava caste mark (in his earlier pictures, a diamond earring), yet wore Tootal ties, Kromentz buttons and collar studs, and donned English serge jackets over his muslin *dhotis* which he wore draped in traditional Brahmin style. He often wore tartan-patterned socks and silent well-polished leather shoes when he went to the university, but he carefully took them off before he entered the inner quarters of the house.

He was a mathematician, an astronomer. But he was also a Sanskrit scholar, an expert astrologer. He had two kinds of exotic visitors:

American and English mathematicians who called on him when they were on a visit to India, and local astrologers, orthodox pundits who wore splendid gold-embroidered shawls dowered by the Maharajah. I had just been converted by Russell to the 'scientific attitude'. I (and my generation) was troubled by his holding together in one brain both astronomy and astrology; I looked for consistency in him, a consistency he didn't seem to care about, or even think about. When I asked him what the discovery of Pluto and Neptune did to his archaic nine-planet astrology, he said, 'You make the necessary corrections, that's all.' Or, in answer to how he could read the *Gītā* religiously having bathed and painted on his forehead the red and white feet of Viṣṇu, and later talk appreciatively about Bertrand Russell and even Ingersoll, he said, 'The *Gītā* is part of one's hygiene. Besides, don't you know, the brain has two lobes?'

The following poem says something about the way he and his friends appeared to me:

Sky-man in a man-hole
with astronomy for dream,
astrology for nightmare;
fat man full of proverbs,
the language of lean years,
living in square after
almanac square
prefiguring the day
of windfall and landslide
through a calculus
of good hours,
clutching at the tear
in his birthday shirt
as at a hole
in his mildewed horoscope,
squinting at the parallax
of black planets,
his Tiger, his Hare
moving in Sanskrit zodiacs,
forever troubled
by the fractions, the kidneys
in his Tamil flesh,
his body the Great Bear
dipping for the honey,
the woman-smell
in the small curly hair
down there.

(Ramanujan 1986: 24)

III

Both Englishmen and 'modern' Indians have been dismayed and angered by this kind of inconsistency. About twenty years ago, *The illustrated weekly of India* asked a number of modern Indian intellectuals to describe the Indian character—they did not seem to be daunted by the assignment and wrote terse, some quite sharp, columns. They all seemed to agree on one thing: the Indian trait of hypocrisy. Indians do not mean what they say, and say different things at different times. By 'Indians' they did not mean only servants. In Max Müller's lectures (1883) on India, the second chapter was called 'Truthful character of the Hindus', in answer to many complaints.

Recently I attended a conference on *karma*, a notion that is almost synonymous in some circles with whatever is Indian or Hindu. Brahminical texts had it, the Buddhists had it, the Jainas had it. But when I looked at hundreds of Kannada tales, I couldn't find a single tale that used *karma* as a motif or motive. Yet when their children made a mess, their repertoire of abuse included, 'You are my *karma*!' When Harper (1959) and others after him reported that many Indian villagers didn't know much about reincarnation, such a discrepancy was attributed to caste, education, etc. But the 2,000 Kannada tales, collected by me and others over the past twenty years, were told by Brahmins, Jainas (both of whom use *karma* in their explanations elsewhere quite readily), and by other communities as well. What is worse, Sheryl Daniel (1983) independently found that her Tamil village alternately used *karma* and *talaividi* ('headwriting') as explanations for the events around them. The two notions are inconsistent with each other. *Karma* implies the self's past determining the present, an iron chain of cause and consequence, an ethic of responsibility. *Talaividi* is one's fate inscribed arbitrarily at one's birth on one's forehead; the inscription has no relation to one's prior actions; usually in such explanations (and folktales about them) past lives are not even part of the scheme (see also Wadley, in this volume).

Another related characteristic seems to preoccupy observers. We have already said that 'inconsistency' (like my father's, or the Brahmin/Jaina use of *karma*) is not a matter of inadequate education or lack of logical rigor. They may be using a different 'logic' altogether. Some thinkers believe that such logic is an earlier-stage of 'cultural evolution' and that Indians have not developed a notion of 'data', of 'objective facts'. Edward Said's *Orientalism* cites many such European stereotypes about the 'Third World'. Here is Henry Kissinger's explanation:

Cultures which escaped the early impact of Newtonian thinking have retained the essentially pre-Newtonian view that the world is almost completely *internal* to the observer . . . [Consequently] empirical reality has a much different significance for many of the new [old?] countries

than for the West because in a certain sense they never went through the process of discovering it (Said 1978: 47).

Such a view cannot be dismissed as peculiar to Kissinger's version of Newtonian optics. One meets with it again and again in travelogues, psychological writings, novels. Naipaul quotes Sudhir Kakar, a sophisticated psychoanalyst, deeply knowledgeable in matters Indian as well as Western, an insider/outsider:

Generally among Indians there seems to be a different relationship to outside reality, compared to the one met with in the West. In India it is closer to a certain stage in childhood when outer objects did not have a separate, independent existence but were intimately related to the self and its affective states The Indian 'ego' is underdeveloped; 'the world of magic and animistic thinking lie close to the surface; so the grasp of reality is 'relatively tenuous' (1977: 107).

In a memorable and oft-quoted section of Foster's *A passage to India*, Mrs. Moore muses vividly on the relations between inside and outside in India; the confounding of the two is not special to humans in India:

Going to hang up her cloak, she found the tip of the peg was occupied by a small wasp. She had known this wasp or his relatives by song; they were not as English wasps, but had long yellow legs which hung down behind when they flew. Perhaps he mistook the peg for a branch—no Indian animal has any sense of an interior. Bats, rats, birds, insects will as soon nest inside the house as out, it is to them a normal growth of the eternal jungle, which alternately produces houses, trees, houses, trees. There he clung, asleep, while jackals bayed their desires and mingled with the percussion of drums (1952: 35).

And sympaticos, like Zimmer, praise the Indians for not being hung up on an objectivity that distinguishes self from non-self, interior from exterior; what for Naipaul is a 'defect of vision', is for Zimmer vision itself:

India thinks of time and herself . . . in biological terms, terms of the species, not of the ephemeral ego We of the west regard world history as a biography of mankind, and in particular of Occidental Man Our will is not to culminate in our human institutions the universal play of nature, but to evaluate, to set ourselves against the play, with an ego-centric tenacity (1946: 21).

A third trait should be added to 'inconsistency', and to the apparent inability to distinguish self and non-self. One has only to read *Manu* after a

bit of Kant to be struck by the former's extraordinary lack of universality. He seems to have no clear notion of a universal *human* nature from which one can deduce ethical decrees like 'Man shall not kill', or 'Man shall not tell an untruth'. One is aware of no notion of a 'state', no unitary law of all men.

Manu VIII.267 (quoted by Müller 1883) has the following: A Kshatriya, having defamed a Brahmana, shall be fined one hundred (*panas*); a Vaisya one hundred and fifty or two hundred; a Sudra shall suffer corporal punishment.

Even truth-telling is not an unconditional imperative, as Müller's correspondents discovered.

An untruth spoken by people under the influence of anger, excessive joy, fear, pain, or grief, by infants, by very old men, by persons labouring under a delusion, being under the influence of drink, or by mad men, does not cause the speaker to fall, or as we should say, is a venial not a mortal sin (Gautama, paraphrased by Müller [1883: 70]).

Alexander Wilder adds, in a footnote, further extensions:

At the time of marriage, during dalliance, when life is in danger, when the loss of property is threatened, and for the sake of a Brahmana . . . Manu declared . . . whenever the death of a man of any of the four castes would be occasioned by true evidence, falsehood was even better than truth (Müller 1883: 89).

Contrast this with Kant's well-known formulation of his imperative: 'Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a Universal Law of Nature' (Copleston 1946: 116).

'Moral judgements are universalizable', says Mackie (1977: 83). Universalisation means putting oneself in another's place—it is the golden rule of the New Testament, Hobbes' 'law of all men': do not do unto others what you do not want done unto you. The main tradition of Judeo-Christian ethics is based on such a premise of universalisation—Manu will not understand such a premise. To be moral, for Manu, is to particularise—to ask who did what, to whom and when. Shaw's comment, 'Do not do unto others as you would have they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same' (Mackie 1977: 89) will be closer to Manu's view, except he would substitute 'natures or classes' for 'tastes'. Each class (*jāti*) of man has his own laws, his own proper ethic, not to be universalised. Hegel shrewdly noted this Indian slant: 'While we say, "Bravery is a virtue," the Hindoos say, on the contrary, "Bravery is a virtue of the Cshatriyas"' (Hegel *ca.* 1827: First part, Sect. 2, 'India').

Is there any system to this particularism? Indian philosophers do not

seem to make synoptic 'systems' like Hegel's or Kant's. Sheryl Daniel (1983) speaks of a 'tool-box' of ideas that Indians carry about, and from which they use one or another without much show of logic: anything goes into their 'bricolage' (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 16–36). Max Weber, in various writings, distinguished 'traditional' and 'rational' religions. Geertz summarises the distinction better than other writers:

Traditional religions attack problems opportunistically as they arise in each particular instance . . . employing one or another weapon chosen, on grounds of symbolic appropriateness, from their cluttered arsenal of myth and magic . . . the approach . . . is discrete and irregular Rationalized religions . . . are more abstract, more logically coherent, and more generally phrased The question is no longer . . . to use a classical example from Evans-Pritchard, 'Why has the granary fallen on my brother . . .?' but rather, 'Why do the good die young and the evil flourish as the green bay tree?' (Geertz 1973: 172).

IV

It is time to step back and try a formulation. The grammarian sees grammar in all things; I shall be true to my bias and borrow a notion from linguistics and try it for size.

There are (or used to be) two kinds of grammatical rules: the context-free and the context-sensitive (Lyons 1971: 235–41). 'Sentences must have subjects and predicates in a certain relation' would be an example of the first kind of rule. 'Plurals in English are realised as -s after stops (e.g., dog-s, cat-s), -es before fricatives (e.g., latch-es), -ren after the word *child*, etc.'—would be a context-sensitive rule. Almost all language rules are of the latter kind.

I think cultures (may be said to) have overall tendencies (for whatever complex reasons)—tendencies to *idealise*, and think in terms of, either the context-free or the context-sensitive kind of rules. Actual behaviour may be more complex, though the rules they think with are a crucial factor in guiding the behaviour. In cultures like India's, the context-sensitive kind of rule is the preferred formulation. Manu (I have already quoted a law of his) explicitly says: '[A king] who knows the sacred law, must imagine into the laws of caste (*jāti*), of districts, of guilds, and of families, and [thus] settle the peculiar law of each' (Manu 7.41).

In an illuminating discussion of the context-sensitive nature of *dharma* in its detail, Baudhāyana enumerates aberrant practices peculiar to the Brahmins of the north and those of the south.

There is a difference between the South and the North on five points. We shall describe the practices of the South: to eat with a person not having received Brahmanical initiation; to eat with one's wife; to eat food prepared the previous day; to marry the daughter of the maternal

uncle or paternal aunt. And for the North: to sell wool; to drink spirits; to traffic in animals with two rows of teeth; to take up the profession of arms; to make sea voyages.

After this admirable ethnographic description, he notes that all these practices are contrary to the precepts of *śrutī* or *smṛti*, but these *śiṣṭas* (learned men) know the traditions and cannot be blamed for following the customs of their district. In the north, the southern ways would be wrong and vice versa (Lingat 1973: 196).

Add to this view of right and wrong behaviour, the ethical views of the *āśramadharmā* (the conduct that is right for one's stage of life), *svadharmā* (the conduct that is right for one's station, *jāti* or class, or *svabhāva* or given nature), and *āpaddharmā* (conduct that is necessary in times of distress or emergency, e.g., one may even eat the flesh of dogs to save oneself from death by starvation, as sage Viśvāmītra did). Each addition is really a subtraction from any universal law. There is not much left of an absolute or common (*sādhāraṇa*) *dharma* which the texts speak of, if at all, as a last and not as a first resort. They seem to say, if you fit no contexts or conditions, which is unlikely, fall back on the universal.

I know of no Hindu discussion of values which reads like Plato on Beauty in his *Symposium*—which asks the initiate not to rest content with beauty in one embodiment but to be drawn onward from physical to moral beauty, to the beauty of laws and mores, and to all science and learning, and thus to escape 'the mean slavery of the particular case'. (I am reserving counter-instances for later.)

Or take Indian literary texts. No Indian text comes without a context, a frame, till the 19th century. Works are framed by *phalaśrutī* verses—these verses tell the reader, reciter or listener all the good that will result from his act of reading, reciting or listening. They relate the text, of whatever antiquity, to the present reader—that is, they contextualise it. An extreme case is that of the *Nāḍiśāstra*, which offers you your personal history. A friend of mine consulted the Experts about himself and his past and future. After enough rupees had been exchanged, the Experts brought out an old palm-leaf manuscript which, in archaic verses, mentioned his full name, age, birthplace, etc., and said suddenly, 'At this point, the listener is crossing his legs—he should uncross them.'

Texts may be historically dateless, anonymous; but their contexts, uses, efficacies, are explicit. The *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* open with episodes that tell you why and under what circumstances they were composed. Every such story is encased in a metastory. And within the text, one tale is the context for another within it; not only does the outer frame-story motivate the inner sub-story; the inner story illuminates the outer as well. It often acts as a microcosmic replica for the whole text. In the forest when the Pandava brothers are in exile, the eldest, Yudhiṣṭhira, is in the very slough of despondency: he has gambled away a kingdom, and is in

exile. In the depth of his despair, a sage visits him and tells him the story of Nala. As the story unfolds, we see Nala too gamble away a kingdom, lose his wife, wander in the forest, and finally, win his wager, defeat his brother, reunite with his wife and return to his kingdom. Yudhiṣṭhira, following the full curve of Nala's adventures, sees that he is only halfway through his own, and sees his present in perspective, himself as a story yet to be finished. Very often the Nala story is excerpted and read by itself, but its poignancy is partly in its frame, its meaning for the hearer within the fiction and for the listener of the whole epic. The tale within is context-sensitive—getting its meaning from the tale without, and giving it further meanings.

Scholars have often discussed Indian texts (like the *Mahābhārata*) as if they were loose-leaf files, rag-bag encyclopaedias. Taking the Indian word for text, *grantha* (derived from the knot that holds the palm leaves together), literally, scholars often posit only an accidental and physical unity. We need to attend to the context-sensitive designs that embed a seeming variety of modes (tale, discourse, poem, etc.) and materials. This manner of constructing the text is in consonance with other designs in the culture. Not unity (in the Aristotelian sense) but coherence, seems to be the end.

Tamil (and Sanskrit) lyrics are all dramatic monologues; they imply the whole 'communication diagram': who said what to whom, when, why, and often with who else overhearing it. Here is an example:

What his concubine said about him (within earshot of the wife's friends, when she heard that the wife had said disparaging things about her):

You know he comes from
where the fresh-water shark in the pools
catch with their mouths
the mangoes as they fall, ripe
from the trees on the edge of the field.

At our place
he talked big.

Now back in his own
when others raise their hands
and feet,
he will raise his too:

like a doll
in a mirror

he will shadow
every last wish
of his son's dear mother.

Kuruntokai 8
(Ramanujan 1967: 22)

The colophons give us the following frames for this poem:

Genre: *Akam*, love poetry, the 'interior'.

Landscape: agricultural, with pool, fresh-water fish, mango trees.

Mood: infidelity, sullenness, lover's quarrels.

The poetry of such a poem (see Ramanujan 1967 for details) depends on a taxonomy of landscapes, flora and fauna, and of emotions—an ecosystem of which a man's activities and feelings are a part. To describe the exterior landscape is also to inscribe the interior landscape. What the man has, he is: the landscape which he owns, in which he lives (where sharks do not have to work for the mango, it falls into its open mouth) re-presents him: it is his *property*, in more senses than one. In Burke's (1946) terms, *Scene and Agent* are one; they are metonyms for one another.

The poem does not use a metaphor. The human agents are simply *placed* in the scene. Both parts of the comparison (the man and shark) are part of one scene, one syntagm; they exist separately, yet simulate each other. The Tamils call such a figure *ullurai* 'inward speaking'; it is an 'inset', an 'inscape'. In such a metonymic view of man in nature—man in context—he is continuous with the context he is in. In Peircean semiotic terms, these are not symbolic devices, but indexical signs—the signifier and the signified being in the same context (Peirce 1931–58).

One might say, from this point of view, that Hindu ritual (e.g., vedic sacrifice, or a coronation; see Inden [1978]) converts *symbols*, arbitrary signs (e.g., sacrificial horse), into *icons* where the signifier (the horse) is *like* what it signifies (the universe) and finally into *indexes*, where the signifier is *part* of what it signifies: the horse is the Universe is Prajāpati, so that in sacrificing and partaking of it one is sacrificing and partaking of the Universe itself (see the passage on the Horse in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, First Adhyāya, First Brāhmaṇa).

Neither in the Tamil poem nor in the upaniṣadic passages (e.g., the Horse), does the Lévi-Straussian opposition of nature-culture make sense; we see that the opposition itself is culture-bound. There is another alternative to a culture vs. nature view: in the Tamil poems, culture is enclosed in nature, nature is reworked in culture, so that we cannot tell the difference. We have a nature-culture continuum that cancels the terms, confuses them even if we begin with them.

Such container-contained relations are seen in many kinds of concepts and images: not only in culture-nature, but god-world, king-kingdom, devotee-god, mother-child. Here is a *bhakti* poem which plays with many such concentric containments:

My dark one

Stands there as if nothing's changed,

after taking entire

into his maw

all three worlds

the gods

and the good kings

who hold their lands

as a mother would

a child in her womb –

and I, by his leave,

have taken him entirely

and I have him in my belly

for keeps.

* Nammālvār 8.7.1

(Ramanujan 1980)

Like the Nala story in the Mahābhārata, what is contained mirrors the container; the microcosm is both *within* and like the macrocosm, and paradoxically also contains it. Indian conceptions tend to be such concentric nests: the view of the 'sheaths' or *kośas*, the different 'bodies' or *kāyas* (Egnor 1975) are examples. Such impressions are so strong and even kinesthetic that analysts tend to think in similar terms: one example is Dumont's (1970: Sects. 31, 34, 106, 118; App. E, F) notions of hierarchic encompassment, where each higher category or *jāti* encompasses all the earlier ones: the Kṣatriya is distinct from but includes the Vaiśya, as the Brahmin encompasses the Kṣatriya. Many Indian lists, like *dharma-artha-kāma* tend to be successive encompassments. (For the separation of *mokṣa*, see below.)

Even space and time, the universal contexts, the Kantian imperatives, are in India not uniform and neutral, but have properties, varying specific densities, that affect those who dwell in them. The soil in a village, which produces crops for the people, affects their character (as liars, for instance, in E.V. Daniel's village (1984); houses (containers par excellence) have mood and character, change the fortune and moods of the dwellers. Time too does not come in uniform units: certain hours of the day, certain days of the week, etc., are auspicious or inauspicious (*rāhukāla*); certain units of time (*yugas*) breed certain kinds of maladies, politics, religions, e.g., *kaliyuga*. A story is told about two men coming to Yudhiṣṭhira with a case. One had bought the other's land, and soon after found a crock of gold in it. He wanted to return it to the original owner of the land, who was arguing that it really belonged to the man who had now bought it. They had come to Yudhiṣṭhira to settle their virtuous dispute. Just then Yudhiṣṭhira was called away (to put it politely) for a while. When he came back the two gentlemen were quarrelling furiously, but each was claiming the treasure for himself this time! Yudhiṣṭhira realised at once that the age had changed, and *kaliyuga* had begun.

As hour, month, season, year, and aeon have their own properties as contexts, the arts that depend on time have to obey time's changing moods and properties. For instance, the *rāgas* of both north and south Indian classical music have their prescribed appropriate times. Like the Tamil poems, the genres and moods are associated with, placed in, hours of the day and times of the season. Even musical instruments have their caste properties: a *vinā*, no less than the icon of a god, has to be made by a particular caste, or family, after observing certain austerities (*vratā*), made on an auspicious day; the gourd from which it is made has to be taken from certain kinds of places. Their *gunas* (qualities of substance) affect the quality of the instrument, the music.

The same kind of contextual sensitiveness is shown in medical matters: in preparing a herbal medicine, in diagnosis and in prescription. As Zimmermann's work (1980) is eloquent on the subject, I shall say little. The notion of *rtusātmya* or appropriateness applies to poetry, music, sacrificial ritual, as well as medicine. As Renou (1950a, 1950b) points out, *rtu*, usually translated as 'season', means articulation of time; it is also the crucial moment in vedic sacrifice. *Rtā* ('order', the original notion behind *dharma*) is that which is articulated. *Kratu*, sacrifice, is a convergence of events, acts, times and spaces. The vocabulary of *rtusātmya* 'appropriateness', *rasa* 'essences, flavours, tastes', *doṣa* 'defects, deficiency', and of landscapes is common to both medicine and poetry: the arts of man reading and re-forming himself in his contexts.

Thus, all things, even so-called non-material ones like space and time or caste, affect other things because all things are 'substantial' (*dhātu*). The only difference is that some are subtle (*sūkṣma*), some gross (*sthūla*). Contrary to the notion that Indians are 'spiritual', they are really 'material minded'. They are materialists, believers in substance (Marriott 1976, 1980): there is a continuity, a constant flow (the etymology of *saṁsāra*!) of substance from context to object, from non-self to self (if you prefer)—in eating, breathing, sex, sensation, perception, thought, art, or religious experience. This is the grain of truth glimpsed by many of the stereotypes cited in the earlier parts of this essay. Zimmermann (1979) points out that in Indian medical texts, the body is a meeting-place, a conjunction of elements; they have a physiology, but no anatomy.

Where Kissinger and others are wrong is in not seeing that this view has nothing to do with Newtonian revolution, education, or (in)capacity for abstract thought. Cognitive anthropologists like Richard Shweder (1972) have studied descriptive phrases used by highly intelligent Oriya and American adults and shown that they describe persons very differently: Americans characterised them with generic words like 'good', 'nice', Oriyas with concrete contextual descriptions like 'he brings sweets'. The psychoanalyst Alan Roland (1979) suggests that Indians carry their family-context wherever they go, feel continuous with their family. He posits a

familial self, a 'self-we regard', sees no phase of separation/individuation from the parental family as in modern America; hence there seems to be no clear-cut adolescent phase through which one rebels, and thereby separates and individuates oneself in opposition to one's family (the exceptions are in 'modern' urban-centred families). Roland remarks that Indians develop a 'radar' *conscience* that orients them to others, makes them say things that are appropriate to person and context. (No wonder Max Müller had to insist that Indians were truthful!) Roland also found that when directions to places are given, Indians always make reference to other places, landmarks.

Such a pervasive emphasis on context is, I think, related to the Hindu concern with *jāti*—the logic of classes, of genera and species, of which human *jātis* are only an instance. Various taxonomies of season, landscape, times, *gunas* or qualities (and their material bases), tastes, characters, emotions, essences (*rasa*), etc., are basic to the thought-work of Hindu medicine and poetry, cooking and religion, erotics and magic. Each *jāti* or class defines a context, a structure of relevance, a rule of permissible combinations, a frame of reference, a meta-communication of what is and can be done.

It is not surprising that systems of Indian philosophy, Hindu, Buddhist, or Jaina,

confine themselves to the consideration of class-essences (*jāti*) called genera and species in Western philosophy. They never raise the question of whether there are universals of other types, namely identical qualities and relations. The assumption seems to be that qualities and relations are particulars, though they may be instances of universals (Dravid 1972: 347).

The most important and accessible model of a context-sensitive system with intersecting taxonomies is, of course, the grammar of a language. And grammar is the central model for thinking in many Hindu texts. As Frits Staal has said, what Euclid is to European thought, the grammarian Pāṇini is to the Indian. Even the *Kāmasūtra* is literally a grammar of love—which declines and conjugates men and women as one would nouns and verbs in different genders, voices, moods and aspects. Genders are genres. Different body-types and character-types obey different rules, respond to different scents and beckonings.

In such a world, systems of meaning are elicited by contexts, by the nature (and substance) of the listener. In *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* 5.1., Lord Prajāpati speaks in thunder three times: 'DA DA DA'. When the gods, given to pleasure hear it, they hear it as the first syllable of *damyatā*, 'control'. The antigods, given as they are to cruelty, hear it as *dayādhvam*, 'be compassionate'. When the humans, given to greed, hear it they hear it as *dattā*, 'give to others'.

V

All societies have context-sensitive behaviour and rules—but the dominant ideal may not be the 'context-sensitive' but the 'context-free'. Egalitarian democratic ideals. Protestant Christianity, espouse both the universal and the unique, insist that any member is *equal* to and *like* any other in the group. Whatever his context—birth, class, gender, age, place, rank, etc.—a man is a man for all that. Technology with its modules and interchangeable parts, and the post-Renaissance sciences with their quest for universal laws (and 'facts') across contexts intensify the bias towards the context-free. Yet societies have underbellies. In predominantly 'context-free' societies, the counter-movements tend to be towards the context-sensitive: situation ethics, Wittgensteinian notions of meaning and colour (against class-logic), the various relativisms including our own search for 'native categories' in anthropology, holistic movements in medicine (naturopaths who prescribe individually tailored regimens) are good examples. In 'traditional' cultures like India, where context-sensitivity rules and binds, the dream is to be free of context. So *rasa* in aesthetics, *mokṣa* in the 'aims of life', *sannyāsa* in the life-stages, *sphoṭa* in semantics, and *bhakti* in religion define themselves against a background of inexorable contextuality.

Where *kāma*, *artha* and *dharma* are all relational in their values, tied to place, time, personal character and social role, *mokṣa* is the release from all relations. If *brahmacārya* (celibate studentship) is preparation for a fully relational life, *gṛhasthāśrama* (householder stage) is a full realisation of it. Manu prefers the latter over all other states. *Vānaprastha* (the retiring forest-dweller stage) loosens the bonds, and *sannyāsa* (renunciation) cremates all one's past and present relations. In the realm of feeling, *bhāvas* are private, contingent, context-roused sentiments, *vibhāvas* are determinant causes, *anubhāvas* the consequent expressions. But *rasa* is generalised, it is an essence. In the field of meaning, the temporal sequence of letters and phonemes, the syntactic chain of words, yields finally a *sphoṭa*, an explosion, a meaning which is beyond sequence and time.

In each of these the pattern is the same: a necessary sequence in time with strict rules of phase and context ending in a free state.

The last of the great Hindu anti-contextual notions, *bhakti*, is different from the above; it denies the very need for context. *Bhakti* defies all contextual structures: every pigeonhole of caste, ritual, gender, appropriate clothing and custom, stage of life, the whole system of homo hierarchicus ('everything in its place') is the target of its irony.

Did the breath of the mistress
have breasts and long hair?

Or did the master's breath
wear sacred thread?

Did the outcaste, last in line,
hold with his outgoing breath
the stick of his tribe?

What do the fools of this world know
of the snares you set,
O Rāmanātha?

Dāsimaṃyā, 10th century
(Ramanujan 1973)

In European culture, one might mention Plato's rebellion against (even the limited) Athenian democracy. Or Blake in the technocratic democracy of the 19th century railing against egalitarianism, abstraction, and the dark Satanic mills, calling for 'minute particulars', declaring 'To generalize is to be an idiot' (generalising thereby); and framing the slogan of all context-sensitive systems: 'one law for the lion and the ox is oppression'. I would include the rise of minute realism in the 19th century novel, various 'indexical' movements of modern art in this counter-thrust towards particularism in the West.

Neither the unique, nor the universal, the two, often contradictory, concerns of western philosophy, art and polity, are the central concern of the Indian arts and sciences—except in the counter-cultures and modern attempts, which quickly get enlisted and remolded (witness the fate of *bhakti* movements) by the prevailing context-sensitive patterns.

VI

In conclusion, I would like to make a couple of observations about 'modernisation'. One might see 'modernisation' in India as a movement from the context-sensitive to the context-free in all realms: an erosion of contexts, at least in principle. Gandhi's watch (with its uniform autonomous time, governing his punctuality) replaced the almanac. Yet Gandhi quoted Emerson, that consistency was the hobgoblin of foolish minds. Print replaced palm-leaf manuscripts, making possible an open and egalitarian access to knowledge irrespective of caste. The Indian Constitution made the contexts of birth, region, sex and creed irrelevant, overthrowing Manu, though the battle is joined again and again. The new preferred names give no clue to birth-place, father's name, caste, sub-caste and sect, as all the traditional names did: I once found in a Kerala college roster, three 'Joseph Stalins' and one 'Karl Marx'. I have also heard of an Andhra named 'Bobbili Winston Churchill'.

In music, the *rāgas* can now be heard at all hours and seasons. Once the Venkateśasuprabhātam, the wake-up chant for the Lord of Tirupati, could be heard only in Tirupati at a certain hour in the morning. Since M.S. Subbulakshmi in her devotion cut a record of the chants, it wakes up not only the Lord, but anyone who tunes in to All India Radio in faraway places.

Cultural borrowings from India to the West, or vice versa, also show interesting accommodations to the prevailing system. The highly contextualised Hindu systems are generalised into 'a Hindu view of life' by apologues like Radhakrishnan for the benefit of both the Western and modern Indian readers. The individual esoteric skills of meditation are freed from their contexts into a streamlined widely accessible technique. And when T.S. Eliot borrows the DA DA DA passage (quoted earlier) to end 'The wasteland' (1930), it becomes highly individual, introspective, as well as universal:

Then spoke the thunder

DA

dattā: what have we given?

My friend, blood shaking my heart

The awful daring of a moment's surrender

Which an age of prudence can never retract

By this, and this only, we have existed

Which is not to be found in our obituaries

Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider

Or under the seals broken by the lean solicitor

In our empty rooms

DA

dayādhvam: I have heard the key

Turn in the door once and turn once only

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

Only at nightfall, aetheral rumours

Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus

DA

damyatā: The boat responded

Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar

The sea was calm, your heart would have responded

Gaily, when invited, beating obedient

To controlling hands

In reverse, Indian borrowings of Western cultural items have been converted and realigned to fit pre-existing context-sensitive needs. When

English is borrowed into (or imposed on) Indian contexts, it fits into the Sanskrit slot; it acquires many of the characteristics of Sanskrit, the older native Father-tongue, its pan-Indian elite character—as a medium of laws, science and administration, and its formulaic patterns; it becomes part of Indian multiple diglossia (a characteristic of context-sensitive societies). When Indians learn, quite expertly, modern science, business, or technology, they 'compartmentalize' these interests (Singer 1972: 320ff.); the new ways of thought and behaviour do not replace, but live along with older 'religious' ways. Computers and typewriters receive *ayudhapuja* ('worship of weapons') as weapons of war did once. The 'modern', the context-free, becomes one more context, though it is not easy to contain.

In modern thought, William James with his 'sub-universes', or Alfred Schutz with his 'finite provinces of reality' and 'relevance' as central concepts in any understanding, should be re-read in the light of what I have said about context-sensitive and context-free modes. The most recent kinds of science can hold together inconsistent systems of explanation—like wave and particle theories of light. The counter-movements in the West toward Schumacher's 'small is beautiful', appropriate technologies, and the attention paid to ethnicity rather than to a melting pot, though not yet successful, are straws in the wind—like the ethnography of communication in linguistics.

My purpose here is not to evaluate but to grope toward a description of the two kinds of emphases. Yet in each of these kinds of cultures, despite all the complexity and oscillation, there is a definite bias. The Buddha (who said 'When we see a man shot with a poisoned arrow, we cannot afford to ask what caste he or his enemy is') also told the following parable of the Raft: Once a man was drowning in a sudden flood. Just as he was about to drown, he found a raft. He clung to it, and it carried him safely to dry land. And he was so grateful to the raft that he carried it on his back for the rest of his life. Such was the Buddha's ironic comment on context-free systems.

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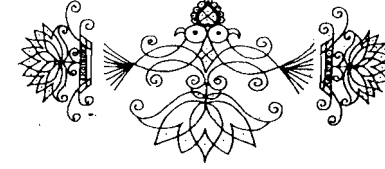
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poetry; with the practice of translation as a process of structural rather than verbal mimicry; and, ultimately, with a leap of the poetic imagination.

Finally, 'From Classicism to *Bhakti*', an essay that Ramanujan co-authored with Norman Cutler, takes up the issue of how classical Tamil poetry and culture, emerging on the periphery of the epic and classical worlds of Sanskrit in north India, historically shape the subsequent poetry and culture of *bhakti*, as the latter appears in the works of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava *ālvārs*, especially Nammālvār. Taken together with the essays on the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, and the other three essays on classical Tamil culture included here, this essay indicates why, even in the first millennium of the common era, there can be no simple formula for 'unity' or 'diversity'—or for 'unity in diversity'—in the Indian subcontinent.

Three Hundred *Rāmāyaṇas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation



How many *Rāmāyaṇas*? Three hundred? Three thousand? At the end of some *Rāmāyaṇas*, a question is sometimes asked: How many *Rāmāyaṇas* have there been? And there are stories that answer the question. Here is one.

One day when Rāma was sitting on his throne, his ring fell off. When it touched the earth, it made a hole in the ground and disappeared into it. It was gone. His trusty henchman, Hanumān, was at his feet. Rāma said to Hanumān, 'Look, my ring is lost. Find it for me.'

Now Hanumān can enter any hole, no matter how tiny. He had the power to become the smallest of the small and larger than the largest thing. So he took on a tiny form and went down the hole.

He went and went and went and suddenly fell into the netherworld. There were women down there. 'Look, a tiny monkey! It's fallen from above!' Then they caught him and placed him on a platter (*thāli*). The King of Spirits (*bhūt*), who lives in the netherworld, likes to eat animals. So Hanumān was sent to him as part of his dinner, along with his vegetables. Hanumān sat on the platter, wondering what to do.

While this was going on in the netherworld, Rāma sat on his throne on the earth above. The sage Vasiṣṭha and the god Brahmā came to see him. They said to Rāma, 'We want to talk privately with you. We don't want anyone to hear what we say or interrupt it. Do we agree?'

'All right,' said Rāma, 'we'll talk.'

Then they said, 'Lay down a rule. If anyone comes in as we are talking, his head should be cut off.'

'It will be done,' said Rāma.

Who would be the most trustworthy person to guard the door? Hanumān had gone down to fetch the ring. Rāma trusted no one more than Lakṣmaṇa, so he asked Lakṣmaṇa to stand by the door. 'Don't allow anyone to enter,' he ordered.

Lakṣmaṇa was standing at the door when the sage Viśvāmītra appeared and said, 'I need to see Rāma at once. It's urgent. Tell me, where is Rāma?'

Lakṣmaṇa said, 'Don't go in now. He is talking to some people. It's important.'

'What is there that Rāma would hide from me?' said Viśvāmītra. 'I must go in, right now.'

Lakṣmaṇa said, 'I'll have to ask his permission before I can let you in.'

'Go in and ask then.'

'I can't go in till Rāma comes out. You'll have to wait.'

'If you don't go in and announce my presence, I'll burn the entire kingdom of Ayodhya with a curse,' said Viśvāmītra.

Lakṣmaṇa thought, 'If I go in now, I'll die. But if I don't go, this hot-headed man will burn down the kingdom. All the subjects, all things living in it, will die. It's better that I alone should die.'

So he went right in.

Rāma asked him, 'What's the matter?'

'Viśvāmītra is here.'

'Send him in.'

So Viśvāmītra went in. The private talk had already come to an end. Brahmā and Vasiṣṭha had come to see Rāma and say to him, 'Your work in the world of human beings is over. Your incarnation as Rāma must now be given up. Leave this body, come up, and rejoin the gods.' That's all they wanted to say.

Lakṣmaṇa said to Rāma, 'Brother, you should cut off my head.'

Rāma said, 'Why? We had nothing more to say. Nothing was left. So why should I cut off your head?'

Lakṣmaṇa said, 'You can't do that. You can't let me off because I'm your brother. There'll be a blot on Rāma's name. You didn't spare your wife. You sent her to the jungle. I must be punished. I will leave.'

Lakṣmaṇa was an avatar of Śeṣa, the serpent on whom Viṣṇu sleeps. His time was up too. He went directly to the river Sarayū and disappeared in the flowing waters.

When Lakṣmaṇa relinquished his body, Rāma summoned all his followers, Vibhiṣaṇa, Sugriva, and others, and arranged for the coronation of his twin sons, Lava and Kuśa. Then Rāma too entered the river Sarayū.

All this while, Hanumān was in the netherworld. When he was finally taken to the King of Spirits, he kept repeating the name of Rāma. 'Rāma Rāma Rāma . . .'

Then the King of Spirits asked, 'Who are you?'

'Hanumān.'

'Hanumān? Why have you come here?'

'Rāma's ring fell into a hole. I've come to fetch it.'

The king looked around and showed him a platter. On it were thousands of rings. They were all Rāma's rings. The king brought the platter to Hanumān, set it down, and said, 'Pick out your Rāma's ring and take it.'

They were all exactly the same. 'I don't know which one it is,' said Hanumān, shaking his head.

The King of Spirits said, 'There have been as many Rāmas as there are rings on this platter. When you return to earth, you will not find Rāma. This incarnation of Rāma is now over. Whenever an incarnation of Rāma is about to be over, his ring falls down. I collect them and keep them. Now you can go.'

So Hanumān left.¹

This story is usually told to suggest that for every such Rāma there is a *Rāmāyaṇa*. The number of *Rāmāyaṇas* and the range of their influence in South and Southeast Asia over the past twenty-five hundred years or more are astonishing. Just a list of languages in which the Rāma story is found makes one gasp: Annamese, Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan—to say nothing of Western languages. Through the centuries, some of these languages have hosted more than one telling of the Rāma story. Sanskrit alone contains some twenty-five or more tellings belonging to various narrative genres (epics, *kāvya*s or ornate poetic compositions, *purāṇa*s or old mythological stories, and so forth). If we add plays, dance-dramas, and other performances, in both the classical and folk traditions, the number of *Rāmāyaṇas* grows even larger. To these must be added sculpture and bas-reliefs, mask plays, puppet plays

and shadows plays, in all the many South and Southeast Asian cultures.² Camille Bulcke (1950), a student of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, counted three hundred tellings.³ It's no wonder that even as long ago as the fourteenth century, Kumāravyāsa, a Kannada poet, chose to write a *Mahābhārata*, because he heard the cosmic serpent which upholds the earth groaning under the burden of *Rāmāyaṇa* poets (*tinikidanu phaṇirāya rāmāyaṇada kavigala bhāradali*). In this paper, indebted for its data to numerous previous translators and scholars, I would like to sort out for myself, and I hope for others, how these hundreds of tellings of a story in different cultures, languages, and religious traditions relate to each other: what gets translated, transplanted, transposed.

VĀLMĪKI AND KAMPAṆ: TWO AHALYĀS

Obviously, these hundreds of tellings differ from one another. I have come to prefer the world *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur-text*—usually Vālmiki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*, the earliest and most prestigious of them all. But as we shall see, it is not always Vālmiki's narrative that is carried from one language to another.

It would be useful to make some distinctions before we begin. The tradition itself distinguishes between the Rāma story (*rāmakathā*) and texts composed by a specific person—Vālmiki, Kampan, or Kṛttivāsa, for example. Though many of the latter are popularly called *Rāmāyaṇas* (like *Kamparāmāyaṇam*), few texts actually bear the title *Rāmāyaṇa*; they are given titles like *Irāmāvatāram* (The Incarnation of Rāma), *Rāmcaritmānas* (The Lake of the Acts of Rāma), *Ramakien* (The Story of Rāma) and so on. Their relations to the Rāma story as told by Vālmiki also vary. This traditional distinction between *kathā* (story) and *kāvya* (poem) parallels the French one between *sujet* and *écrit*, or the English one between story and discourse (Chatman 1978). It is also analogous to the distinction between a sentence and a speech act. The story may be the same in two tellings, but the discourse may be vastly different. Even the structure and sequence of events may be the same, but the style, details, tone, and texture—and therefore the import—may be vastly different.

Here are two tellings of the 'same' episode, which occur at the same point in the sequence of the narrative. The first is from the first book (*Bālakāṇḍa*) of Vālmiki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*; the second from the first canto (*Pālakāṇṭam*) of Kampan's *Irāmāvatāram* in Tamil. Both narrate the story of Ahalyā.

THE AHALYĀ EPISODE: VĀLMĪKI

Seeing Mithilā, Janaka's white
and dazzling city, all the sages
cried out in praise, 'Wonderful!
How wonderful!'

Rāghava, sighting on the outskirts
of Mithilā an ashram, ancient,
unpeopled, and lovely, asked the sage,
'What is this holy place,

so like an ashram but without a hermit?
Master, I'd like to hear: whose was it?'
Hearing Rāghava's words, the great sage
Viśvāmītra, man of fire,

expert in words answered, 'Listen,
Rāghava, I'll tell you whose ashram
this was and how it was cursed
by a great man in anger.

It was great Gautama's, this ashram
that reminds you of heaven, worshipped
even by the gods. Long ago, with Ahalyā
he practised *tapas*⁴ here

for countless years. Once, knowing that Gautama
was away, Indra (called Thousand Eyes),
Śacī's husband, took on the likeness
of the sage, and said to Ahalyā:

"Men pursuing their desire do not wait
for the proper season, O you who
have a perfect body. Making love
with you: that's what I want.
That waist of yours is lovely."

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.

And then, her inner being satisfied,
she said to the god, "I'm satisfied, king
of the gods. Go quickly from here.

O giver of honour, lover, protect
yourself and me."

And Indra smiled and said to Ahalyā,

“Woman of lovely hips, I am
very content. I’ll go the way I came.”

Thus after making love, he came out
of the hut made of leaves.

And, O Rāma, as he hurried away,
nervous about Gautama and flustered,
he caught sight of Gautama coming in,
the great sage, unassailable
by gods and antigods,

empowered by his *tapas*, still wet
with the water of the river
he’d bathed in, blazing like fire,
with *kuśa* grass and kindling
in his hands.

Seeing him, the king of the gods was
terror-struck, his face drained of colour.
The sage, facing Thousand Eyes now dressed
as the sage, the one rich in virtue
and the other with none,

spoke to him in anger: “You took my form,
you fool, and did this that should never
be done. Therefore you will lose your testicles.”

At once, they fell to the ground, they fell
even as the great sage spoke

his words in anger to Thousand Eyes.

Having cursed Indra, he then cursed
Ahalyā: “You, you will dwell here
many thousands of years, eating the air,
without food, rolling in ash,

and burning invisible to all creatures.

When Rāma, unassailable son
of Daśaratha, comes to this terrible
wilderness, you will become pure,
you woman of no virtue,

you will be cleansed of lust and confusion.

Filled then with joy, you’ll wear again
your form in my presence.” And saying
this to that woman of bad conduct,
blazing Gautama abandoned

the ashram, and did his *tapas*
on a beautiful Himalayan peak,
haunt of celestial singers and
perfected beings.

Emasculated Indra then
spoke to the gods led by Agni
attended by the sages
and the celestial singers.

“I’ve only done this work on behalf
of the gods, putting great Gautama
in a rage, blocking his *tapas*.
He has emasculated me

and rejected her in anger.

Through this great outburst
of curses, I’ve robbed him
of his *tapas*. Therefore,

great gods, sages, and celestial singers,
help me, helper of the gods,
to regain my testicles.” And the gods,
led by Agni, listened to Indra

of the Hundred Sacrifices and went
with the Marut hosts
to the divine ancestors, and said,

“Some time ago, Indra, infatuated,
ravished the sage’s wife
and was then emasculated
by the sage’s curse. Indra,
king of gods, destroyer of cities,

is now angry with the gods.

This ram has testicles
but great Indra has lost his.

So take the ram’s testicles
and quickly graft them onto Indra.

A castrated ram will give you
supreme satisfaction and will be
a source of pleasure.

People who offer it
will have endless fruit.
You will give them your plenty.”
Having heard Agni’s words,

the Ancestors got together
and ripped off the ram's testicles
and applied them then to Indra
of the Thousand Eyes.

Since then, the divine Ancestors
eat these castrated rams
and Indra has the testicles
of the beast through the power
of great Gautama's *tapas*.

Come then, Rāma, to the ashram
of the holy sage and save Ahalyā
who has the beauty of a goddess.
Rāghava heard Viśvāmitra's words

and followed him into the ashram
with Lakṣmaṇa: there he saw
Ahalyā, shining with an inner light
earned through her penances,

blazing yet hidden from the eyes
of passersby, even gods and antigods.

(Sastrigal and Sastri 1958, *kāṇḍa* 1, *sargas* 47–8;
translated by David Shulman and A.K. Ramanujan)

THE AHALYĀ EPISODE: KAMPAN

They came to many-towered Mithilā
and stood outside the fortress.
On the towers were many flags.

There, high on an open field,
stood a black rock
that was once Ahalyā,

the great sage's wife who fell
because she lost her chastity,
the mark of marriage in a house. [Verse 547]

Rāma's eyes fell on the rock,
the dust of his feet
wafted on it.

Like one unconscious
coming to,
cutting through ignorance,

changing his dark carcass
for true form
as he reaches the Lord's feet,
so did she stand alive
formed and coloured
again as she once was. [548]

Rāma then asks Viśvāmitra why this lovely woman had been turned
to stone. Viśvāmitra replies:

'Listen. Once Indra,
Lord of the Diamond Axe,
waited on the absence
of Gautama, a sage all spirit,
meaning to reach out
for the lovely breast
of doe-eyed Ahalyā, his wife. [551]

Hurt by love's arrows,
hurt by the look in her eyes
that pierced him like a spear, Indra
writhed and cast about
for stratagems;

one day, overwhelmed
and mindless, he isolated
the sage; and sneaked
into the hermitage
wearing the exact body of Gautama
whose heart knew no falsehoods. [552]

Sneaking in, he joined Ahalyā;
coupled, they drank deep
of the clear new wine
of first-night weddings;
and she knew.

Yet unable
to put aside what was not hers,
she dallied in her joy,
but the sage did not tarry,
he came back, a very Śiva
with three eyes in his head. [553]

Gautama, who used no arrows
from bows, could use more inescapable
powers of curse and blessing.

When he arrived, Ahalyā stood there,
stunned, bearing the shame of a deed
that will not end in this endless world.

Indra shook in terror,
started to move away
in the likeness of a cat. [554]

Eyes dropping fire, Gautama
saw what was done,
and his words flew
like the burning arrows
at your hand:

"May you be covered
by the vaginas
of a thousand women!"
In the twinkle of an eye
they came and covered him. [555]

Covered with shame,
laughingstock of the world,
Indra left.

The sage turned
to his tender wife
and cursed:

"O bought woman!
May you turn to stone!"
and she fell at once

a rough thing
of black rock. [556]

Yet as she fell she begged:
"To bear and forgive wrongs
is also the way of elders.
O Śiva-like lord of mine,
set some limit to your curse!"

So he said: "Rāma
will come, wearing garlands that bring
the hum of bees with them.
When the dust of his feet falls on you,
you will be released from the body of stone." [557]

The immortals looked at their king
and came down at once to Gautama
in a delegation led by Brahmā
and begged of Gautama to relent.

Gautama's mind had changed
and cooled. He changed
the marks on Indra to a thousand eyes
and the gods went back to their worlds,
while she lay there, a thing of stone. [558]

That was the way it was.
From now on, no more misery,
only release, for all things
in this world.

O cloud-dark lord

who battled with that ogress,
black as soot, I saw there
the virtue of your hands
and here the virtue of your feet.' [559]⁵

Let me rapidly suggest a few differences between the two tellings. In Vālmiki, Indra seduces a willing Ahalyā. In Kampan, Ahalyā realises she is doing wrong but cannot let go of the forbidden joy; the poem has also suggested earlier that her sage-husband is all spirit, details which together add a certain psychological subtlety to the seduction. Indra tries to steal away in the shape of a cat, clearly a folklore motif (also found, for example, in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, an eleventh-century Sanskrit compendium of folktales; see Tawney 1927). He is cursed with a thousand vaginas which are later changed into eyes, and Ahalyā is changed into frigid stone. The poetic justice wreaked on both offenders is fitted to their wrongdoing. Indra bears the mark of what he lusted for, while Ahalyā is rendered incapable of responding to anything. These motifs, not found in Vālmiki, are attested in South Indian folklore and other southern Rāma stories, inscriptions and earlier Tamil poems, as well as in non-Tamil sources. Kampan, here and elsewhere, not only makes full use of his predecessor Vālmiki's materials but folds in many regional folk traditions. It is often through him that they then become part of other *Rāmāyaṇas*.

In technique, Kampan is also more dramatic than Vālmiki. Rāma's feet transmute the black stone into Ahalyā first; only afterwards is her story told. The black stone standing on a high place, waiting for

Rāma, is itself a very effective, vivid symbol. Ahalyā's revival, her waking from cold stone to fleshly human warmth, becomes an occasion for a moving *bhakti* (devotional) meditation on the soul waking to its form in god.

Finally, the Ahalyā episode is related to previous episodes in the poem such as that in which Rāma destroys the demoness Tātakā. There he was the destroyer of evil, the bringer of sterility and the ashes of death to his enemies. Here, as the reviver of Ahalyā, he is a cloud-dark god of fertility. Throughout Kampan's poem, Rāma is a Tamil hero, a generous giver and a ruthless destroyer of foes. And the *bhakti* vision makes the release of Ahalyā from her rock-bound sin a paradigm of Rāma's incarnatory mission to release all souls from world-bound misery.

In Vālmīki, Rāma's character is not that of a god but of a god-man who has to live within the limits of a human form with all its vicissitudes. Some argue that the references to Rāma's divinity and his incarnation for the purpose of destroying Rāvaṇa, and the first and last books of the epic, in which Rāma is clearly described as a god with such a mission, are later additions.⁶ Be that as it may, in Kampan he is clearly a god. Hence a passage like the above is dense with religious feeling and theological images. Kampan, writing in the twelfth century, composed his poem under the influence of Tamil *bhakti*. He had for his master Nammālvār (ninth century?), the most eminent of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava saints. So, for Kampan, Rāma is a god who is on a mission to root out evil, sustain the good and bring release to all living beings. The encounter with Ahalyā is only the first in a series, ending with Rāma's encounter with Rāvaṇa the demon himself. For Nammālvār, Rāma is a saviour of *all* beings, from the lowly grass to the great gods:

BY RĀMA'S GRACE

Why would anyone want
to learn anything but Rāma?

Beginning with the low grass
and the creeping ant
with nothing
whatever.

he took everything in his city,
everything moving,
everything still,

he took everything,
everything born
of the lord
of four faces,

he took them all
to the very best of states.

Nammālvār 7.5.1 (Ramanujan 1981, 47)

Kampan's epic poem enacts in detail and with passion Nammālvār's vision of Rāma.

Thus the Ahalyā episode is essentially the same, but the weave, the texture, the colours are very different. Part of the aesthetic pleasure in the later poet's telling derives from its artistic use of its predecessor's work, from ringing changes on it. To some extent all later *Rāmāyaṇas* play on the knowledge of previous tellings: they are meta-*Rāmāyaṇas*. I cannot resist repeating my favourite example. In several of the later *Rāmāyaṇas* (such as the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, sixteenth century), when Rāma is exiled, he does not want Sītā to go with him into the forest. Sītā argues with him. At first she uses the usual arguments: she is his wife, she should share his sufferings, exile herself in his exile and so on. When he still resists the idea, she is furious. She bursts out, 'Countless *Rāmāyaṇas* have been composed before this. Do you know of one where Sītā doesn't go with Rāma to the forest?' That clinches the argument, and she goes with him (*Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* 2.4.77-8; see Nath 1913, 39). And as nothing in India occurs uniquely, even this motif appears in more than one *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Now the Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa* of Kampan generates its own offspring, its own special sphere of influence. Read in Telugu characters in Telugu country, played as drama in the Malayalam area as part of temple ritual, it is also an important link in the transmission of the Rāma story to Southeast Asia. It has been convincingly shown that the eighteenth-century Thai *Ramakien* owes much to the Tamil epic. For instance, the names of many characters in the Thai work are not Sanskrit names, but clearly Tamil names (for example, R̥ṣyaśṛṅga in Sanskrit but Kalaikkōṭu in Tamil, the latter borrowed into Thai). Tulsi's Hindi *Rāmcaritmāna*s and the Malaysian *Hikayat Seri Ram* too owe many details to the Kampan poem (Singaravelu 1968).

Thus obviously transplantations take place through several routes. In some languages the word for tea is derived from a northern Chinese dialect and in others from a southern dialect; thus some languages, like

English and French, have some form of the word *tea*, while others, like Hindi and Russian, have some form of the word *chā(y)*. Similarly, the Rāma story seems to have travelled along three routes, according to Santosh Desai: 'By land, the northern route took the story from the Punjab and Kashmir into China, Tibet, and East Turkestan; by sea, the southern route carried the story from Gujarat and South India into Java, Sumatra, and Malaya; and again by land, the eastern route delivered the story from Bengal into Burma, Thailand, and Laos. Vietnam and Cambodia obtained their stories partly from Java and partly from India via the eastern route' (Desai 1970, 5).

JAIN TELLINGS

When we enter the world of Jain tellings, the Rāma story no longer carries Hindu values. Indeed the Jain texts express the feeling that the Hindus, especially the brahmans, have maligned Rāvaṇa, made him into a villain. Here is a set of questions that a Jain text begins by asking: 'How can monkeys vanquish the powerful *rākṣasa* warriors like Rāvaṇa? How can noble men and Jain worthies like Rāvaṇa eat flesh and drink blood? How can Kumbhakarna sleep through six months of the year, and never wake up even though boiling oil was poured into his ears, elephants were made to trample over him, and war trumpets and conches blown around him? They also say that Rāvaṇa captured Indra and dragged him handcuffed into Lanka. Who can do that to Indra? All this looks a bit fantastic and extreme. They are lies and contrary to reason.' With these questions in mind King Śreṇika goes to sage Gautama to have him tell the true story and clear his doubts. Gautama says to him, 'I'll tell you what Jain wise men say. Rāvaṇa is not a demon, he is not a cannibal and a flesh eater. Wrong-thinking poetasters and fools tell these lies.' He then begins to tell his own version of the story (Chandra 1970, 234). Obviously, the Jain *Rāmāyana* of Vimalasūri, called *Paumacariya* (Prakrit for the Sanskrit *Padma-carita*), knows its Vālmīki and proceeds to correct its errors and Hindu extravagances. Like other Jain *purāṇas*, this too is a *pratipurāṇa*, an anti- or counter-*purāṇa*. The prefix *prati-*, meaning 'anti-' or 'counter-', is a favourite Jain affix.

Vimalasūri the Jain opens the story not with Rāma's genealogy and greatness, but with Rāvaṇa's. Rāvaṇa is one of the sixty-three leaders or *śalākāpuruṣas* of the Jain tradition. He is noble, learned, earns all his magical powers and weapons through austerities (*tapas*), and is a devotee of Jain masters. To please one of them, he even takes a vow that

he will not touch any unwilling woman. In one memorable incident, he lays siege to an impregnable fort. The queen of that kingdom is in love with him and sends him her messenger; he uses her knowledge of the fort to breach it and defeat the king. But, as soon as he conquers it, he returns the kingdom to the king and advises the queen to return to her husband. Later, he is shaken to his roots when he hears from soothsayers that he will meet his end through a woman, Sītā. It is such a Rāvaṇa who falls in love with Sītā's beauty, abducts her, tries to win her favours in vain, watches himself fall, and finally dies on the battlefield. In these tellings, he is a great man undone by a passion that he has vowed against but that he cannot resist. In another tradition of the Jain *Rāmāyaṇas*, Sītā is his daughter, although he does not know it: the dice of tragedy are loaded against him further by this oedipal situation. I shall say more about Sītā's birth in the next section.

In fact, to our modern eyes, this Rāvaṇa is a tragic figure; we are moved to admiration and pity for Rāvaṇa when the Jains tell the story. I should mention one more motif: according to the Jain way of thinking, a pair of antagonists, Vāsudeva and Prativāsudeva—a hero and an antihero, almost like self and Other—are destined to fight in life after life. Lakṣmaṇa and Rāvaṇa are the eighth incarnations of this pair. They are born in age after age, meet each other in battle after many vicissitudes, and in every encounter Vāsudeva inevitably kills his counterpart, his *prati*. Rāvaṇa learns at the end that Lakṣmaṇa is such a Vāsudeva come to take his life. Still, overcoming his despair after a last unsuccessful attempt at peace, he faces his destined enemy in battle with his most powerful magic weapons. When finally he hurls his discus (*cakra*), it doesn't work for him. Recognising Lakṣmaṇa as a Vāsudeva, it does not behead him but gives itself over to his hand. Thus Lakṣmaṇa slays Rāvaṇa with his own cherished weapon.

Here Rāma does not even kill Rāvaṇa, as he does in the Hindu *Rāmāyaṇas*. For Rāma is an evolved Jain soul who has conquered his passions; this is his last birth, so he is loath to kill anything. It is left to Lakṣmaṇa, who goes to hell while Rāma finds release (*kaivalya*).

One hardly need add that the *Paumacariya* is filled with references to Jain places of pilgrimage, stories about Jain monks, and Jain homilies and legends. Furthermore, since the Jains consider themselves rationalists—unlike the Hindus, who, according to them, are given to exorbitant and often bloodthirsty fancies and rituals—they systematically avoid episodes involving miraculous births (Rāma and his brothers are born in the normal way), blood sacrifices, and the like. They even

rationalise the conception of Rāvaṇa as the Ten-headed Demon. When he was born, his mother was given a necklace of nine gems, which she put around his neck. She saw his face reflected in them ninefold and so called him Daśamukha, or the Ten-faced One. The monkeys too are not monkeys but a clan of celestials (*vidyādharas*) actually related to Rāvaṇa and his family through their great grandfathers. They have monkeys as emblems on their flags: hence the name Vānaras or 'monkeys'.

FROM WRITTEN TO ORAL

Let's look at one of the South Indian folk *Rāmāyaṇas*. In these, the story usually occurs in bits and pieces. For instance, in Kannada, we are given separate narrative poems on Sītā's birth, her wedding, her chastity test, her exile, the birth of Lava and Kuśa, their war with their father Rāma, and so on. But we do have one complete telling of the Rāma story by traditional bards (*tambūri dāsaiyyas*), sung with a refrain repeated every two lines by a chorus. For the following discussion, I am indebted to the transcription by Rāmē Gowḍa, P.K. Rājaśēkara and S. Basavaiah (1973).

This folk narrative, sung by an Untouchable bard, opens with Rāvaṇa (here called Ravaḷa) and his queen Maṇḍodari. They are unhappy and childless. So Rāvaṇa or Ravaḷa goes to the forest, performs all sorts of self-mortifications like rolling on the ground till blood runs from his back, and meets a *jōgi*, or holy mendicant, who is none other than Śiva. Śiva gives him a magic mango and asks him how he would share it with his wife. Ravaḷa says, 'Of course, I'll give her the sweet flesh of the fruit and I'll lick the mango seed.' The *jōgi* is skeptical. He says to Ravaḷa, 'You say one thing to me. You have poison in your belly. You're giving me butter to eat, but you mean something else. If you lie to me, you'll eat the fruit of your actions yourself.' Ravaḷa has one thing in his dreams and another in his waking world, says the poet. When he brings the mango home, with all sorts of flowers and incense for the ceremonial *pūjā*, Maṇḍodari is very happy. After a ritual *pūjā* and prayers to Śiva, Ravaḷa is ready to share the mango. But he thinks, 'If I give her the fruit, I'll be hungry, she'll be full,' and quickly gobbles up the flesh of the fruit, giving her only the seed to lick. When she throws it in the yard, it sprouts and grows into a tall mango tree. Meanwhile, Ravaḷa himself becomes pregnant, his pregnancy advancing a month each day.

In one day, it was a month, O Śiva.
In the second, it was the second month,
and cravings began for him, O Śiva.
How shall I show my face to the world of men, O Śiva.

On the third day, it was the third month,
How shall I show my face to the world, O Śiva.
On the fourth day, it was the fourth month.
How can I bear this, O Śiva.
Five days, and it was five months,
O lord, you've given me trouble, O Śiva
I can't bear it, I can't bear it, O Śiva
How will I live, cries Ravaḷa in misery.
Six days, and he is six months gone, O mother,
in seven days it was seven months.
O what shame, Ravaḷa in his seventh month,
and soon came the eighth, O Śiva
Ravaḷa was in his ninth full month.
When he was round and ready, she's born, the dear,
Sītā is born through his nose.
When he sneezes, Sitamma is born,
And Ravaḷa names her Sitamma.

(Gowda et al. 1973, 150-1; my translation)

In Kannada, the word *sītā* means 'he sneezed': he calls her Sītā because she is born from a sneeze. Her name is thus given a Kannada folk etymology, as in the Sanskrit texts it has a Sanskrit one: there she is named Sītā because King Janaka finds her in a furrow (*sītā*). Then Ravaḷa goes to astrologers, who tell him he is being punished for not keeping his word to Śiva and for eating the flesh of the fruit instead of giving it to his wife. They advise him to feed and dress the child, and leave her some place where she will be found and brought up by some couple. He puts her in a box and leaves her in Janaka's field.

It is only after this story of Sītā's birth that the poet sings of the birth and adventures of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. Then comes a long section on Sītā's marriage contest, where Ravaḷa appears and is humiliated when he falls under the heavy bow he has to lift. Rāma lifts it and marries Sītā. After that she is abducted by Ravaḷa. Rāma lays siege to Lanka with his monkey allies, and (in a brief section) recovers Sītā and is crowned king. The poet then returns to the theme of Sītā's trials. She is slandered and exiled, but gives birth to twins who grow up to be warriors. They tie up Rāma's sacrificial horse, defeat the armies sent to guard the horse and finally unite their parents, this time for good.

One sees here not only a different texture and emphasis: the teller is everywhere eager to return to Sītā—her life, her birth, her adoption, her wedding, her abduction and recovery. Whole sections, equal in length to those on Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa's birth, exile and war against Rāvaṇa, are

devoted to her banishment, pregnancy and reunion with her husband. Furthermore, her abnormal birth as the daughter born directly to the male Rāvaṇa brings to the story a new range of suggestions: the male envy of womb and childbirth, which is a frequent theme in Indian literature, and an Indian oedipal theme of fathers pursuing daughters and, in this case, a daughter causing the death of her incestuous father (see chap. 22, 'The Indian Oedipus', below). The motif of Sītā as Rāvaṇa's daughter is not unknown elsewhere. It occurs in one tradition of the Jain stories (for example, in the *Vasudevahiṃḍi*) and in folk traditions of Kannada and Telugu, as well as in several Southeast Asian *Rāmāyanas*. In some, Rāvaṇa in his lusty youth molests a young woman, who vows vengeance and is reborn as his daughter to destroy him. Thus the oral traditions seem to partake of yet another set of themes unknown in Vālmiki.

A SOUTHEAST ASIAN EXAMPLE

When we go outside India to Southeast Asia, we meet with a variety of tellings of the Rāma story in Tibet, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Java and Indonesia. Here we shall look at only one example, the Thai *Ramakirti*. According to Santosh Desai, nothing else of Hindu origin has affected the tone of Thai life more than the Rāma story (Desai 1980, 63).⁷ The bas-reliefs and paintings on the walls of their Buddhist temples, the plays enacted in town and village, their ballets—all of them rework the Rāma story. In succession several kings with the name 'King Rama' wrote *Rāmāyaṇa* episodes in Thai: King Rama I composed a telling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in fifty thousand verses, Rama II composed new episodes for dance, and Rama VI added another set of episodes, most taken from Vālmiki. Places in Thailand, such as Lopburi (Sanskrit Lavapuri), Khidkin (Sanskrit Kiṣkindhā), and Ayuthia (Sanskrit Ayodhyā) with its ruins of Khmer and Thai art, are associated with Rāma legends.

The Thai *Ramakirti* (Rāma's glory) or *Ramakien* (Rāma's story) opens with an account of the origins of the three kinds of characters in the story, the human, the demonic, and the simian. The second part describes the brothers' first encounters with the demons, Rāma's marriage and banishment, the abduction of Sītā, and Rāma's meeting with the monkey clan. It also describes the preparations for the war, Hanumān's visit to Lanka and his burning of it, the building of the bridge, the siege of Lanka, the fall of Rāvaṇa, and Rāma's reunion with Sītā. The third part describes an insurrection in Lanka, which Rāma deposes his two youngest brothers to quell. This part also describes the banishment of Sītā, the birth of her

sons, their war with Rāma, Sītā's descent into the earth, and the appearance of the gods to reunite Rāma and Sītā. Though many incidents look the same as they do in Vālmiki, many things look different as well. For instance, as in the South India folk *Rāmāyanas* (as also in some Jain, Bengali and Kāshmiri ones), the banishment of Sītā is given a dramatic new rationale. The daughter of Sūrpaṅkhā (the demoness whom Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa had mutilated years earlier in the forest) is waiting in the wings to take revenge on Sītā, whom she views as finally responsible for her mother's disfigurement. She comes to Ayodhya, enters Sītā's service as a maid, and induces her to draw a picture of Rāvaṇa. The drawing is rendered indelible (in some tellings, it comes to life in her bedroom) and forces itself on Rāma's attention. In a jealous rage, he orders Sītā killed. The compassionate Lakṣmaṇa leaves her alive in the forest, though, and brings back the heart of a deer as witness to the execution.

The reunion between Rāma and Sītā is also different. When Rāma finds out she is still alive, he recalls Sītā to his palace by sending her word that he is dead. She rushes to see him but flies into a rage when she finds she has been tricked. So, in a fit of helpless anger, she calls upon Mother Earth to take her. Hanumān is sent to subterranean regions to bring her back, but she refuses to return. It takes the power of Śiva to reunite them.

Again as in the Jain instances and the South Indian folk poems, the account of Sītā's birth is different from that given in Vālmiki. When Daśaratha performs his sacrifice, he receives a rice ball, not the rice porridge (*pāyasa*) mentioned in Vālmiki. A crow steals some of the rice and takes it to Rāvaṇa's wife, who eats it and gives birth to Sītā. A prophecy that his daughter will cause his death makes Rāvaṇa throw Sītā into the sea, where the sea goddess protects her and takes her to Janaka.

Furthermore, though Rāma is an incarnation of Viṣṇu, in Thailand he is subordinate to Śiva. By and large he is seen as a human hero, and the *Ramakirti* is not regarded as a religious work or even as an exemplary work on which men and women may pattern themselves. The Thais enjoy most the sections about the abduction of Sītā and the war. Partings and reunions, which are the heart of the Hindu *Rāmāyanas*, are not as important as the excitement and the details of war, the techniques, the fabulous weapons. The *Yuddhakāṇḍa* or the War Book is more elaborate than in any other telling, whereas it is of minor importance in the Kannada folk telling. Desai says this Thai emphasis on war is significant: early Thai history is full of wars; their concern was survival. The focus in the *Ramakien* is not on family values and spirituality. Thai audiences are more fond of Hanumān than of Rāma. Neither celibate nor devout, as in the Hindu

Rāmāyaṇa, here Hanumān is quite a ladies' man, who doesn't at all mind looking into the bedrooms of Lanka and doesn't consider seeing another man's sleeping wife anything immoral, as Vālmiki's or Kampan's Hanumān does.

Rāvaṇa too is different here. The *Ramakīrti* admires Rāvaṇa's resourcefulness and learning; his abduction of Sītā is seen as an act of love and is viewed with sympathy. The Thais are moved by Rāvaṇa's sacrifice of family, kingdom and life itself for the sake of a woman. His dying words later provide the theme of a famous love poem of the nineteenth century, an inscription of a Wat of Bangkok (Desai 1980, 85). Unlike Vālmiki's characters, the Thai ones are a fallible, human mixture of good and evil. The fall of Rāvaṇa here makes one sad. It is not an occasion for unambiguous rejoicing, as it is in Vālmiki.

PATTERNS OF DIFFERENCE

Thus, not only do we have one story told by Vālmiki in Sanskrit, we have a variety of Rāma tales told by others, with radical differences among them. Let me outline a few of the differences we have not yet encountered. For instance, in Sanskrit and in the other Indian languages, there are two endings to the story. One ends with the return of Rāma and Sītā to Ayodhya, their capital, to be crowned king and queen of the ideal kingdom. In another ending, often considered a later addition in Vālmiki and in Kampan, Rāma hears Sītā slandered as a woman who lived in Rāvaṇa's grove, and in the name of his reputation as a king (we would call it credibility, I suppose) he banishes her to the forest, where she gives birth to twins. They grow up in Vālmiki's hermitage, learn the *Rāmāyaṇa* as well as the arts of war from him, win a war over Rāma's army, and in a poignant scene sing the *Rāmāyaṇa* to their own father when he doesn't quite know who they are. Each of these two endings gives the whole work a different cast. The first one celebrates the return of the royal exiles and rounds out the tale with reunion, coronation and peace. In the second one, their happiness is brief, and they are separated again, making separation of loved ones (*vipralambha*) the central mood of the whole work. It can even be called tragic, for Sītā finally cannot bear it any more and enters a fissure in the earth, the mother from whom she had originally come—as we saw earlier, her name means 'furrow', which is where she was originally found by Janaka. It also enacts, in the rise of Sītā from the furrow and her return to the earth, a shadow of a Proserpine-like myth, a vegetation cycle: Sītā is like the seed and Rāma with his cloud-dark body the rain:

Rāvaṇa in the south is the Pluto-like abductor into dark regions (the south is the abode of death); Sītā reappears in purity and glory for a brief period before she returns again to the earth. Such a myth, while it should not be blatantly pressed into some rigid allegory, resonates in the shadows of the tale in many details. Note the many references to fertility and rain, Rāma's opposition to Śiva-like ascetic figures (made explicit by Kampan in the Ahalyā story), his ancestor bringing the river Ganges into the plains of the kingdom to water and revive the ashes of the dead. Relevant also is the story of Rśyaśṛṅga, the sexually naive ascetic who is seduced by the beauty of a woman and thereby brings rain to Lomapāda's kingdom, and who later officiates at the ritual which fills Daśaratha's queens' wombs with children. Such a mythic groundswell also makes us hear other tones in the continual references to nature, the potent presence of birds and animals as the devoted friends of Rāma in his search for his Sītā. Birds and monkeys are a real presence and a poetic necessity in the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*, as much as they are excrescences in the Jain view. With each ending, different effects of the story are highlighted, and the whole telling alters its poetic stance.

One could say similar things about the different beginnings. Vālmiki opens with a frame story about Vālmiki himself. He sees a hunter aim an arrow and kill one of a happy pair of love-birds. The female circles its dead mate and cries over it. The scene so moves the poet and sage Vālmiki that he curses the hunter. A moment later, he realises that his curse has taken the form of a line of verse—in a famous play on words, the rhythm of his grief (*śoka*) has given rise to a metrical form (*śloka*). He decides to write the whole epic of Rāma's adventures in that metre. This incident becomes, in later poetics, the parable of all poetic utterance: out of the stress of natural feeling (*bhāva*), an artistic form has to be found or fashioned, a form which will generalise and capture the essence (*rasa*) of that feeling. This incident at the beginning of Vālmiki gives the work an aesthetic self-awareness. One may go further: the incident of the death of a bird and the separation of loved ones becomes a leitmotif for this telling of the Rāma story. One notes a certain rhythmic recurrence of an animal killed at many of the critical moments: when Daśaratha shoots an arrow to kill what he thinks is an elephant but instead kills a young ascetic filling his pitcher with water (making noises like an elephant drinking at a water hole), he earns a curse that later leads to the exile of Rāma and the separation of father and son. When Rāma pursues a magical golden deer (really a demon in disguise) and kills it, with its last breath it calls out to Lakṣmaṇa in Rāma's voice, which in turn leads to his leaving Sītā

unprotected; this allows Rāvaṇa to abduct Sītā. Even as Rāvaṇa carries her off, he is opposed by an ancient bird which he slays with his sword. Furthermore, the death of the bird, in the opening section, and the cry of the surviving mate set the tone for the many separations throughout the work, of brother and brother, mothers and fathers and sons, wives and husbands.

Thus the opening sections of each major work set into motion the harmonics of the whole poem, presaging themes and a pattern of images. Kampan's Tamil text begins very differently. One can convey it best by citing a few stanzas.

THE RIVER

The cloud, wearing white
on white like Śiva
making beautiful the sky
on his way from the sea
grew dark

as the face of the Lord
who wears with pride
on his right the Goddess
of the scented breasts. [2]

Mistaking the Himalayan dawn
for a range of gold,
the clouds let down chains
and chains of gleaming rain.

They pour like a generous giver
giving all he has,
remembering and reckoning
all he has. [15]

It floods, it runs over
its continents like the fame
of a great king, upright,
infallible, reigning by the Laws
under cool royal umbrellas. [16]

Concubines caressing
their lovers' hair, their lovers'
bodies, their lovers' limbs,
take away whole hills
of wealth yet keep little
in their spendthrift hands

as they move on: so too
the waters flow from the peaks
to the valleys.

beginning high and reaching low. [17]

The flood carrying all before it
like merchants, caravans
loaded with gold, pearls,
peacock feathers and rows
of white tusk and fragrant woods. [18]

Bending to a curve, the river,
surface coloured by petals,
gold yellow pollen, honey,
the ochre flow of elephant lust,
looked much like a rainbow. [19]

Ravaging hillsides, uprooting trees,
covered with fallen leaves all over,
the waters came,

like a monkey clan
facing restless seas
looking for a bridge. [20]

Thick-faced proud elephants
ranged with foaming cavalier horses
filling the air with the noise of war,

raising banners,
the flood rushes
as for a battle with the sea. [22]

Stream of numberless kings
in the line of the Sun,
continuous in virtue:

the river branches into deltas,
mother's milk to all lives
on the salt sea-surrounded land. [23]

Scattering a robber camp on the hills
with a rain of arrows,

the scared women beating their bellies
and gathering bow and arrow as they run,

the waters assault villages
like the armies of a king. [25]

Stealing milk and buttermilk,
guzzling on warm ghee and butter
straight from the pots on the ropes,
leaning the *marutam* tree on the *kuruntam*,
carrying away the clothes and bracelets
of goatherd girls at water games,
like Kṛṣṇa dancing
on the spotted snake,
the waters are naughty. [26]

Turning forest into slope,
field into wilderness,
seashore into fertile land,
changing boundaries,
exchanging landscapes,
the reckless waters
roared on like the pasts
that hurry close on the heels
of lives. [28]

Born of Himalayan stone
and mingling with the seas,
it spreads, ceaselessly various,
one and many at once,
like that Original
even the measureless Vedas
cannot measure with words. [30]

Through pollen-dripping groves,
clumps of champak,
lotus pools,
water places with new sands,
flowering fields cross-fenced
with creepers,
like a life filling
and emptying
a variety of bodies,
the river flows on. [31]⁸

This passage is unique to Kampan; it is not found in Vālmiki. It describes the waters as they are gathered by clouds from the seas and

come down in rain and flow as floods of the Sarayū river down to Ayodhya, the capital of Rāma's kingdom. Through it, Kampan introduces all his themes and emphases, even his characters, his concern with fertility themes (implicit in Vālmiki), the whole dynasty of Rāma's ancestors, and his vision of *bhakti* through the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Note the variety of themes introduced through the similes and allusions, each aspect of the water symbolising an aspect of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story itself and representing a portion of the *Rāmāyaṇa* universe (for example, monkeys), picking up as it goes along characteristic Tamil traditions not to be found anywhere else, like the five landscapes of classical Tamil poetry. The emphasis on water itself, the source of life and fertility, is also an explicit part of the Tamil literary tradition. The *Kural*—the so-called Bible of the Tamils, a didactic work on the ends and means of the good life—opens with a passage on God and follows it up immediately with a great ode in celebration of the rains (*Tirukkural* 2).

Another point of difference among *Rāmāyaṇas* is the intensity of focus on a major character. Vālmiki focuses on Rāma and his history in his opening sections; Vimalasūri's Jain *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Thai epic focus not on Rāma but on the genealogy and adventures of Rāvaṇa; the Kannada village telling focuses on Sītā, her birth, her wedding, her trials. Some later extensions like the *Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa* and the Tamil story of *Śatakanṭharāvaṇa* even give Sītā a heroic character: when the ten-headed Rāvaṇa is killed, another appears with a hundred heads: Rāma cannot handle this new menace, so it is Sītā who goes to war and slays the new demon (see Shulman 1979). The Santals, a tribe known for their extensive oral traditions, even conceive of Sītā as unfaithful—to the shock and horror of any Hindu bred on Vālmiki or Kampan, she is seduced both by Rāvaṇa and by Lakṣmaṇa. In Southeast Asian texts, as we saw earlier, Hanumān is not the celibate devotee with a monkey face but a ladies' man who figures in many love episodes. In Kampan and Tulsī, Rāma is a god; in the Jain texts, he is only an evolved Jain man who is in his last birth and so does not even kill Rāvaṇa. In the latter, Rāvaṇa is a noble hero fated by his karma to fall for Sītā and bring death upon himself, while he is in other texts an overweening demon. Thus in the conception of every major character there are radical differences, so different indeed that one conception is quite abhorrent to those who hold another. We may add to these many more: elaborations on the reason why Sītā is banished, the miraculous creation of Sītā's second son and the final reunion of Rāma and Sītā. Every one of these occurs in more than one text, in more

than one textual community (Hindu, Jain or Buddhist), in more than one region.

Now, is there a common core to the Rāma stories, except the most skeletal set of relations like that of Rāma, his brother, his wife and the antagonist Rāvaṇa who abducts her? Are the stories bound together only by certain family resemblances, as Wittgenstein might say? Or is it like Aristotle's jack-knife? When the philosopher asked an old carpenter how long he had had his knife, the latter said, 'Oh, I've had it for thirty years. I've changed the blade a few times and the handle a few times, but it's the same knife.' Some shadow of a relational structure claims the name of *Rāmāyaṇa* for all these tellings, but on a closer look one is not necessarily all that like another. Like a collection of people with the same proper name, they make a class in name alone.

THOUGHTS ON TRANSLATION

That may be too extreme a way of putting it. Let me back up and say it differently, in a way that covers more adequately the differences between the texts and their relations to each other, for they *are* related. One might think of them as a series of translations clustering around one or another in a family of texts: a number of them cluster around Vālmiki, another set around the Jain Vimalasūri, and so on.

Or these translation-relations between texts could be thought of in Peircean terms, at least in three ways.⁹

Where Text 1 and Text 2 have a geometrical resemblance to each other, as one triangle to another (whatever the angles, sizes, or colours of the lines), we call such a relation *iconic*. In the West, we generally expect translations to be 'faithful', i.e., iconic. Thus, when Chapman translates Homer, he not only preserves basic textual features such as characters, imagery and order of incidents, but tries to reproduce a hexameter and retain the same number of lines as in the original Greek—only the language is English and the idiom Elizabethan. When Kampan retells Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* in Tamil, he is largely faithful in keeping to the order and sequence of episodes, the structural relations between the characters of father, son, brothers, wives, friends, and enemies. But the iconicity is limited to such structural relations. His work is much longer than Vālmiki's, for example, and it is composed in more than twenty different kinds of Tamil metres, while Vālmiki's is mostly in the *śloka* metre.

Very often, although Text 2 stands in an iconic relationship to Text 1

in terms of basic elements such as plot, it is filled with local detail, folklore, poetic traditions, imagery, and so forth—as in Kampan's telling or that of the Bengali Kṛttivāsa. In the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma's wedding is very much a Bengali wedding, with Bengali customs and Bengali cuisine (Sen 1920). We may call such a text *indexical*: the text is embedded in a locale, a context, refers to it, even signifies it, and would not make much sense without it. Here, one may say, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is not merely a set of individual texts, but a genre with a variety of instances.

Now and then, as we have seen, Text 2 uses the plot and characters and names of Text 1 minimally and uses them to say entirely new things, often in an effort to subvert the predecessor by producing a counter-text. We may call such a translation *symbolic*. The word *translation* itself here acquires a somewhat mathematical sense, of mapping a structure of relations onto another plane or another symbolic system. When this happens, the Rāma story has become almost a second language of the whole culture area, a shared core of names, characters, incidents, and motifs, with a narrative language in which Text 1 can say one thing and Text 2 something else, even the exact opposite. Vālmiki's Hindu and Vimalasūri's Jain texts in India—or the Thai *Ramakirti* in Southeast Asia—are such symbolic translations of each other.

One must not forget that to some extent all translations, even the so-called faithful iconic ones, inevitably have all three kinds of elements. When Goldman (1984–) and his group of scholars produce a modern translation of Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, they are iconic in the transliteration of Sanskrit names, the number and sequence of verses, the order of the episodes, and so forth. But they are also indexical, in that the translation is in English idiom and comes equipped with introductions and explanatory footnotes, which inevitably contain twentieth-century attitudes and misprisions; and symbolic, in that they cannot avoid conveying through this translation modern understandings proper to their reading of the text. But the proportions between the three kinds of relations differ vastly between Kampan and Goldman. And we accordingly read them for different reasons and with different aesthetic expectations. We read the scholarly modern English translation largely to gain a sense of the original Vālmiki, and we consider it successful to the extent that it resembles the original. We read Kampan to read Kampan, and we judge him on his own terms—not by his resemblance to Vālmiki but, if anything, by the extent that he differs from Vālmiki. In the one, we rejoice in the similarity; in the other, we cherish and savour the differences.

One may go further and say that the cultural area in which *Rāmāyaṇas*

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 Rāma story. When someone is carrying on, you say, 'What's this *Rāmāyaṇa* now? Enough.' In Tamil, a narrow room is called a *kiṣkindhā*; a proverb about a dim-witted person says, 'After hearing the *Rāmāyaṇa* all night, he asks how Rāma is related to Sītā'; in a Bengali arithmetic textbook, children are asked to figure the dimensions of what is left of a wall that Hanumān built, after he has broken down part of it in mischief. And to these must be added marriage songs, narrative poems, place legends, temple myths, paintings, sculpture, and the many performing arts.

These various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through this common code or common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context. The great texts rework the small ones, for 'lions are made of sheep,' as Valéry said. And sheep are made of lions, too: a folk legend says that Hanumān wrote the original *Rāmāyaṇa* on a mountain-top, after the great war, and scattered the manuscript; it was many times larger than what we have now. Vālmiki is said to have captured only a fragment of it.¹⁰ In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling—and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text. In India and in Southeast Asia, no one ever reads the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. The stories are there, 'always already'.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU LISTEN

This essay opened with a folktale about the many *Rāmāyaṇas*. Before we close, it may be appropriate to tell another tale about Hanumān and Rāma's ring. But this story is about the power of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, about what happens when you really listen to this potent story. Even a fool cannot resist it; he is entranced and caught up in the action. The listener can no longer bear to be a bystander but feels compelled to enter the world of the epic: the line between fiction and reality is erased.

A villager who had no sense of culture and no interest in it was married to a woman who was very cultured. She tried various ways to cultivate his taste for the higher things in life but he just wasn't interested.

One day a great reciter of that grand epic the *Rāmāyaṇa* came to the village. Every evening he would sing, recite, and explain the verses of the

epic. The whole village went to this one-man performance as if it were a rare feast.

The woman who was married to the uncultured dolt tried to interest him in the performance. She nagged him and nagged him, trying to force him to go and listen. This time, he grumbled as usual but decided to humour her. So he went in the evening and sat at the back. It was an all-night performance, and he just couldn't keep awake. He slept through the night. Early in the morning, when a canto had ended and the reciter sang the closing verses for the day, sweets were distributed according to custom. Someone put some sweets into the mouth of the sleeping man. He woke up soon after and went home. His wife was delighted that her husband had stayed through the night and asked him eagerly how he enjoyed the *Rāmāyaṇa*. He said, 'It was very sweet.' The wife was happy to hear it.

The next day too his wife insisted on his listening to the epic. So he went to the enclosure where the reciter was performing, sat against a wall, and before long fell fast asleep. The place was crowded and a young boy sat on his shoulder, made himself comfortable, and listened open-mouthed to the fascinating story. In the morning, when the night's portion of the story came to an end, everyone got up and so did the husband. The boy had left earlier, but the man felt aches and pains from the weight he had borne all night. When he went home and his wife asked him eagerly how it was, he said, 'It got heavier and heavier by morning.' The wife said, 'That's the way the story is.' She was happy that her husband was at last beginning to feel the emotions and the greatness of the epic.

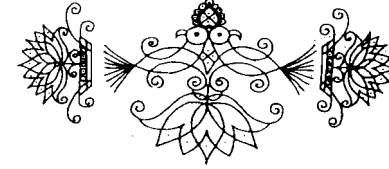
On the third day, he sat at the edge of the crowd and was so sleepy that he lay down on the floor and even snored. Early in the morning, a dog came that way and pissed into his mouth a little before he woke up and went home. When his wife asked him how it was, he moved his mouth this way and that, made a face and said, 'Terrible. It was so salty.' His wife knew something was wrong. She asked him what exactly was happening and didn't let up till he finally told her how he had been sleeping through the performance every night.

On the fourth day, his wife went with him, sat him down in the very first row, and told him sternly that he should keep awake no matter what might happen. So he sat dutifully in the front row and began to listen. Very soon, he was caught up in the adventures and the characters of the great epic story. On that day, the reciter was enchanting the audience with a description of how Hanumān the monkey had to leap across the ocean to take Rāma's signet ring to Sītā. When Hanumān was leaping across the

ocean, the signet ring slipped from his hand and fell into the ocean. Hanumān didn't know what to do. He had to get the ring back quickly and take it to Sītā in the demon's kingdom. While he was wringing his hands, the husband who was listening with rapt attention in the first row said, 'Hanumān, don't worry. I'll get it for you.' Then he jumped up and dived into the ocean, found the ring on the ocean floor, brought it back, and gave it to Hanumān.

Everyone was astonished. They thought this man was someone special, really blessed by Rāma and Hanumān. Ever since, he has been respected in the village as a wise elder, and he has also behaved like one. That's what happens when you really listen to a story, especially to the *Rāmāyana*.¹¹

Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*



I

No Hindu ever reads the *Mahābhārata* for the first time. And when he does get to read it, he doesn't usually read it in Sanskrit. As one such native, I know the Hindu epics, not as a Sanskritist (which I am not), but through Kannada and Tamil, mostly through the oral traditions. I've heard bits and pieces of it in a tailor's shop where a pundit used to regale us with *Mahābhārata* stories and large sections of a sixteenth-century Kannada text; from brahman cooks in the house; from an older boy who loved to keep us spellbound with it (and the Kannada *Arabian Nights* which he was reading in the Oriental Library) after cricket, in the evenings, under a large *neem* tree in a wealthy engineer's compound; from a somewhat bored algebra teacher who switched from the binomial theorem to the problems of Draupadī and her five husbands. Then there were professional bards who 'did the Harikathā Kālakṣepam', redeeming the time with holy tales (and not always holy ones). They were invited into a neighbourhood by a group or a wealthy man, and they would recite, sing and tell the *Mahābhārata* in sections night after night, usually under a temporary canopy (*pandāl*) lit by petromax lanterns, with a floating audience sitting on rugs on the street and on the verandas of houses that lined the street now turned into a makeshift auditorium. They sang songs in several languages, told folktales, sometimes danced, quoted Sanskrit tags as well as the daily newspaper, and made the *Mahābhārata* entertaining, didactic and relevant to the listener's present.

The *Mahābhārata* provides materials and allusions to every artistic genre—from plays to proverbs, from folk performances to movies and TV. Indeed, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana* have appeared as serials, week after week in popular Tamil weeklies. C. Rajagopalachari, the veteran statesman, who was dedicated to bringing traditional wisdom