

ORIENTALIA LOVANIENSIA  
ANALECTA

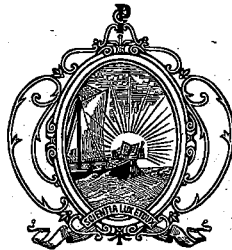
66

INDIAN EPIC VALUES  
*RĀMĀYAṆA*  
AND ITS IMPACT

Proceedings  
of the 8th International Rāmāyaṇa Conference,  
Leuven, 6-8 July 1991

EDITED BY

G. POLLET



UITGEVERIJ PEETERS en DEPARTEMENT OOSTERSE STUDIES  
LEUVEN  
1995

## THE CHARACTER OF RĀMA IN BHĀSA'S *ABHIṢEKA*

Among the 13 plays attributed to Bhāsa (date uncertain, 3rd c.A.D.?), two are more directly inspired by the *Rāmāyaṇa*: 1. *Pratimā*, "The Statue"; 2. *Abhiṣeka*, "The Coronation". It is this latter we are now concerned with.

As a matter of fact, the coronation alluded to in the title takes place for three persons:

— Sugrīva the monkey, brother of the wicked king Vālin who deprived his younger brother of his rights and his wife. Sugrīva will be restored in his position by Rāma (act 1).

— Vibhīṣaṇa the *rākṣasa* (the demon) who endured the enmity of his brother Rāvaṇa, but, after the death of this latter, was appointed by Rāma as the prince of Laṅkā (act 4).

— Rāma himself who, at the end of the drama (act 6), is acknowledged as the universal king of men and gods, because he actually is the supreme god Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa embodied in the human form.

### Act I

The first act of the *Abhiṣeka* begins at the arrival of Rāma and Sugrīva in Kiṣkindhā, the capital city of the apes, where Vālin is exerting power. But Vālin is guilty of a severe misdeed: he has abducted the wife of Sugrīva, his younger brother. And the reproaches Rāma levels against him are the theme of the first of the two only meaningful debates put forward in the play (pp. 325-27)<sup>1</sup>. Rāma, as the defender of the *Dharma*, reminds Vālin his sin. It is forbidden for the elder (*guru, agraja*) to take the wife of the younger (*anuja*), whereas the other way around is not condemned<sup>2</sup>. Vālin retorts that Rāma also is sinful because he has shot an arrow on him (= Vālin) while fighting against Sugrīva. Such a behaviour

<sup>1</sup> The second debate arises at the end of act III, pp. 345-6. Below the references are to the pages of the Bhāsa's edition by C.R. DEVADHAR, *Bhāsanāṭakacakram. Plays ascribed to Bhāsa. Crit. ed.*, Poona 1962, Reprint 1987. The standard translation is that of A.C. WOOLNER and L. SARUP, Lahore 1930, Reprint 1991, which is accurate but without literary pretension. Italian transl. by E. BECCARINI-CRESCENZI, Firenze 1915. The publisher Gallimard, Paris, plans to release a French transl. of the main works of the Indian theater in a volume of the collection "La Pléiade".

<sup>2</sup> But the victim Sugrīva is not completely innocent. When he attacks his elder brother, he is blamed by Rāma's brother Lakṣmaṇa, see act 1, *śloka* 14.

is not in keeping with the *Dharma* of a *kṣatriya*, but is fitting with a man who conceals his warrior condition under the garment of an ermit (II st. 10).

This reproach of hypocrisy towards Rāma is present all over the play. The tricky mind of Rāma is more evidenced by the following contradiction: On the one hand he allegedly has the right of shooting Vālin by any means because this latter is a beast, and as such, liable to be killed even by guile (act 1, st. 19)<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, he accuses Vālin to behave like a beast by taking over a brother's wife. But, as Vālin puts it (pp. 425-26), it is the nature of a beast to act in such a way.

On the eve of the death, Vālin hands over the power to Sugrīva and Rāma, endorsing that decision, orders to organize the first coronation of the play.

### Act II

In act 2 which takes place in Laṅkā, Rāma does not appear, but he is spoken of. While Hanumān the monkey, Rāma's messenger, is hidden in a tree, Sītā, the wife of Rāma, arrives surrounded by the she-devils. Rāvaṇa, prince of Laṅkā, joins her and invites her to love him "with all her limbs" (act 2, st. 14), because, as he puts it, Rāma is dying.

Disdainfully rejecting Rāvaṇa's proposal, Sītā even dooms him. Rāvaṇa in anger leaves her and Hanumān realizes it is the right time to speak to Sītā. The queen is first of all sceptical about his statements, but gradually takes trust again.

### Act III

Rāma does not appear on stage either during act 3. The first part of it is devoted to the threats spoken out by Rāvaṇa against Hanumān who has smashed the royal woodhill. Finally Indrajit, Rāvaṇa's son, takes him prisoner. When Rāvaṇa is going to decide on Hanumān's fate, he is warned by his own brother Vibhīṣaṇa that the punishment is nearing.

To challenge Rāma who pledged himself to kill Rāvaṇa, this latter enjoins to set ablaze the tail of his messenger (pp.344-45). As to Vibhīṣaṇa, he is ready to rally Rāma's side and so, to be in position of warding the destruction off the Rākṣasas.

<sup>3</sup> Grounds are put forward by Rāma in the Rāmāyaṇa itself for justifying his coward shoot, cf. D. DUBUISSON, *La légende royale dans l'Inde ancienne. Rāma et le Rāmāyaṇa*, Paris, 1986, ch. I; J. FEZAS, *Le voleur, le roi et la massue. Expiation et châtements dans les textes normatifs sanskrits*, in *Bulletin d'études indiennes* (Paris) 7-8, 1989-90, pp. 83-86.

*Act IV*

Soon after the beginning of act 4, Rāma steps in with his brother Lakṣmaṇa and the monkeys Hanumān and Sugrīva. They are on the seashore opposite Laṅkā and, after crossing many other natural obstacles, Rāma is stopped by the ocean. Fortunately, Vibhīṣaṇa who just left Laṅkā is alighting close by and he begs protection. Rāma welcomes him despite the fears of Sugrīva (p. 349), and even appoints him as the next king of Laṅkā. In gratitude, Vibhīṣana helps Rāma to solve the problem of reaching Laṅkā. He advises him to hit the ocean with his divine arrow.

In this passage, the solar symbolism clearly emerges for the first time in the play. Indeed, Rāma's arrows turn out to be the beams of the sun that dry up the sea water. In that context<sup>4</sup>, Rāma is given his divine title of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, a name which arises at the end of the play again (act 6). To avoid the danger, Varuṇa, the god of ocean, appears in person and declares he is ready to divide his waters to let Rāma's and Sugrīva's army move on (pp. 350-51). So the crossing to Laṅkā over a bridge as described in the Rāmāyaṇa<sup>5</sup> is replaced here by a passing by between two water walls. Before entering this unusual road, Rāma still has to decide on the fate of two demon-spies, Śuka and Sāraṇa, who infiltrate in his camp. He shows himself benevolent and enjoins them to be released, despite the fears of Vibhīṣaṇa who emphasised their wickedness. Act 4 ends up with Rāma challenging Rāvaṇa to a struggle.

*Act V*

Once more, we do not see Rāma on stage. It is Rāvaṇa who comes in the foreground. Still hoping to marry Sītā, he is prepared to everything in order to reach his aim. He repeats therefore that Rāma is dead (act 5, st. 8), and to convince Sītā, he urges his magician Vidyujjihva to fabricate the heads of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa and to exhibit them in front of Sītā<sup>6</sup>. Of course Sītā starts by fainting, but soon comes back to herself whereas the Royal Fortune (Śrī)<sup>7</sup>, who embodies and warrants the power of Rāvaṇa, is going to abandon him (p. 359). It is at this very moment that, behind the

<sup>4</sup> In st. 13. Viṣṇu has been identified with the sun since the Veda, see e.g. J. GONDA, *Les religions de l'Inde, I, Védisme et Hindouisme ancien*, Paris Payot, 1962, pp. 113sv.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Rāmāyaṇa*, VI (*Yuddhakāṇḍa*) 15 (Baroda ed.) = VI 22 in the French transl. of A. ROUSSEL (Paris, reprint 1979), III, pp. 61sv.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Rāmāyaṇa* VI 22 (Baroda ed.) = VI 31 (French tr. A. Rousssel).

<sup>7</sup> On Śrī as abode of the royal authority, see also *Raghuvamśa* XIV, 26, 63, 86.

scene, a voice is sounding "Rāma, Rāma!". And without seeing the hero, we are told that he has just killed Rāvaṇa's son Indrajit.

Having failed in his aims, Rāvaṇa is so dismayed that he threatens to kill Sītā and to pull out her entrails. Such a statement is so shocking that a demon feels obliged to recall his king to more temper. Rāvaṇa leaves the stage while claiming he will shoot Rāma dead.

### Act VI

The last act is divided into three parts:

- the decisive struggle between Rāma and Rāvaṇa. It is described in a set of stanzas put in the mouth of three fairies (*Vidyādhara*) who are watching at it,
- the ordeal of Sītā suspected of having been unfaithful,
- the glorification of Rāma after his victory and his manifestation as the supreme god Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa.

1. The combat. Rāvaṇa, driving a chariot and equipped with a spear (named *Śakti*) and arrows, is called *nairṛta* "demonic" (st. 13). Rāma starts fighting on foot. Later he will be given a celestial vehicle led by Mātali, the charioteer of Indra. The solar symbolism emerges once again (see already act 4). Both adversaries are compared with the sun.

— Rāma is said to be the noonday sun (act 6, st. 16); his weapon (*astra*) is ablaze like the sun, and, like it, returns to its departure point after smiting down Rāvaṇa (act 6, st. 17).

— Rāvaṇa also is a sun wandering in the sky and burning the earth (act 6, st. 14). In act 3, st. 2, he was already the furious sun of the doomsday. In this fantastic duel, Rāma will obviously be the winner.

2. But he has hardly gained the victory that a doubt arises in his heart: has his wife kept her vow of faithfulness (p. 365)? In any case, by staying so long in Rāvaṇa's palace, Sītā got impure and is a stain for her husband's family. Sītā, upset by that suspicion, is willing to mount the funeral pyre. She does it (act 6, st. 24), but goes down without damage. It is *Vibhāvasu*, i.e. Agni, the god of fire, who protected her and granted her salvation (p. 367). As a matter of fact, Sītā is nobody else than Lakṣmī, the divine bride of Viṣṇu (act 6, st. 28).

3. The miracle is the signal of the glorification of Rāma as Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa that concludes the play.

### Conclusion

Here is the list of the various qualifications of Rāma throughout the play.

According to Rāvaṇa, Rāma is

- *mānuṣa* (II 12, 14; III 17; V 9) “just a human/mortal (being)”
- *kṣudra* (V 16) “a little creature”
- *narādhamā* (V 10) “the worst/lowest of the men”
- *manujatāpasa* (p. 358) “ascetic mortal”
- *kutāpasa* (V 16) “wicked ascetic”
- *gatāyus* (V 8, II 14) “whose life is departed” i.e. “moribund”
- *kāmāpathān nivṛtta* (II 14) “averse from the ways of love”
- *mṛga* and *śṛgāla* (III 20) “deer” and “jackal”

According to Hanumān, Rāma is

- *iksvākukuladīpa* (II 20) “light of Ikṣvāku’s house”
- *rāghava* (III 15 etc.) “Raghu’s offspring”
- *vīrāgraganya* (III 21) “paragon of the heroes”
- *atula* (III 21) “peerless”
- *tridaśendrakalpa* (III 21) “equal to the-chief-of-the-30 (gods)/to Indra”
- *bhuvanaikanātha* (III 21) “One lord of the worlds”

According to Vibhīṣaṇa, Rāma is

- *kamalalocana* (III 27) “of lotus eyes”
- *padmapatrākṣa* (IV 11) “with eyes of lotus petals”
- *ugracāpa* (III 27) “equipped with a dreadful bow”
- *saṃśritahitaprathita* (III 27) “striving for his dependents’s good”
- *dṛṣṭadharmārthatattva* (IV 8) “versed in the very essence of the law”
- *sādhu* (IV 8) “good”
- *saṃśritavatsala* (IV 8) “kindly to dependents”

According to a *Vidyādhara*, Rāma is

- *sarvahita* (p. 364) “universal benefactor”

According to Varuṇa, the god Ocean, Rāma is Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa (IV 14)

- *mānuṣaṃ rūpam āsthāya* “having taken on a human form”
- *cakraśārṅgagadādhara* “wielder of discus, bow and mace”
- *svayaṃ kāraṇabhūta* “being the cause of himself”
- *bhagavān* (p.350) “blessed”