



Epic Narratives and Cultural Memory Dharma in Transition: Eastern Indian Retellings of the Rāmāyaṇa as Cultural and Ethical Narratives

Ishwaria Prabhakaran

Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages
Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore Campus



Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-SPL4-Mar26-ES-055

Subject: English Studies

Received: 22.12.2025

Accepted: 08.01.2026

Published: 17.03.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bij.v10si4.26.Mar055

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Abstract

The Rāmāyaṇa, far from being a fixed or monolithic text, survives as a dynamic cultural continuum shaped through translation, transcreation, oral performance, and regional adaptation. This paper examines the Eastern and North-Eastern Indian Rāmāyaṇa traditions—particularly Madhav Kandali's Saptakanda Rāmāyaṇa (Assamese) and Krittivas Ojha's Rām Panchali (Bengali) to demonstrate how dharma functions as a unifying ethical principle across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Drawing upon literary history, oral tradition studies, and comparative textual analysis, the study foregrounds the role of semi-oral poetic forms, performative modes, and colloquial diction in making the epic accessible to non-elite audiences. The paper argues that these regional retellings privilege moral action and social consciousness over doctrinal rigidity, thereby reflecting localized cultural values while retaining the epic's core philosophical intent. Through close readings of selected narrative episodes and phrases, the analysis highlights how deviations from Valmiki's Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa—such as the incorporation of goddess worship in Krittivas's text or the pastoral and ethical focus in Kandali's rendering—reinforce righteous conduct within specific socio-historical milieus. Ultimately, the study contends that the paradoxical play of words, images, and narrative choices across Eastern Rāmāyaṇa traditions does not dilute the epic's meaning but reaffirms dharma as a stable moral condition that offers ethical coherence and cultural continuity across time, language, and region.

Keywords: Eastern Ramayana, Krittivas Ramayana, Madhav Kandali Ramayana, Dharma, Bhakti

Introduction

The Ramayana story witnessed through the works of Indian Languages is transposed across national boundaries in the form of Iramavataram, Saptakanda Ramayana, Adhyatma Ramayana, and Ram Panchali. The story permeated into different regions, interlaced with regional nuances, and reflects the cultural heterogeneity. "Ramayana, which is popular all over the world, is not the Sanskrit text of Valmiki, as it is confined to a small group of readers. The conventional idea of a fixed text fails to explain the

phenomenon of continuity of the Ramayana and being always texts-in-transition, changing and restructuring themselves in each century by each linguistic group." (Das 49). Survival and continuity have been possible through translations, transcreations, adaptations, and reorganizations, as well as through other modes of transmission such as storytelling, singing, performing, and visualizing. It is not the linguistic text that is important to readers, but a text composed of various semiotic codes that constructs a culture through the language of paradox.



The Ramayana remains one of the Hindu epics, and sages have embraced the concept of Dharma (righteousness). Taken together and separately, both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are artistic expositions of the philosophy of Dharma. The entire corpus of the Dharmasastras regards the two epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata) as treatises on Dharma.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative literary methodology grounded in translation studies, cultural memory theory, and epic reception studies. Primary texts include Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, Madhav Kandali's *Saptakanda Rāmāyaṇa* (Assamese), and Krittivās Ojha's *Rām Panchali* (Bengali), read alongside selected English translations. Close textual analysis is employed to examine narrative episodes, diction, performative features, and deviations from the Sanskrit source. The study also draws on secondary scholarship on oral tradition, bhakti, and regional poetics to contextualize these retellings socio-historically. Through this approach, the paper evaluates how dharma is rearticulated across Eastern Indian cultural milieus.

Discussion

Why do we read classics? Classics really embody national character in all aspects. A study of classics raises the quality of public judgment and conduct, and reconciles the disorders of modern life. The Ramayana, one of the classics, provides youth with the fundamentals of culture. It is a literature that fosters fellowship and reconciliation. "There are indeed in the Ramayana examples of prodigious austerities, but these have nothing to do with the religion called bhakti, and spring from another cause, a principle more profound. They appear to have originated by an inner feeling, deeply rooted and of great antiquity in India, that is to say that expiation was to restore fallen human nature." A study of this great epic helps us treat human beings with understanding and generosity, as it contains a code of life and a philosophy of social and ethical relations. The lessons from the Ramayana are thus valuable. The Indian literary tradition hails Valmiki as the

primal poet and the Ramayana he composed as the primal epic or History, 'Itihasa' in the Sanskrit language. The etymology of the term "Itihasa" offers clues about the nature of the work and its contents. It consists of three components: Iti+ha+asa, which means "verily did exist thus" (Mahadevan 71). Itihasa is a text that teaches the four goals of life: Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha, and which deals with the stories of historical happenings. Itihasa is not merely a collection of stories about past events but an attempt to interpret them through the lens of the four purusharthas. Ramayana has inspired texts on governance and Nitisastra (Mahadevan 99). Indians revere every variation of Ramayana as "books which exercise a particular influence, both when they hide in the layers of memory disguised as the individual's or the collective unconscious" (Calvino 9). Researchers have also found that Valmiki's epic was first heard in various regions of India in oral form by bards and literary scholars, and was later transcreated into the respective regional languages and circulated. During this stage, when Rama's story was heard, learnt, and taught, several changes and new additions to the episodes, their locations, and the characters were effected. "Valmiki's hero is a man who finds himself to be a god by hearing and living out his story, and is graced by moments of anamnesis. Kampan's protagonist is a god who discovers repeatedly, often to his own amazement, the painful cognitive and emotional consequences of being human. This process of discovery is reversed. This aspect of awareness- the god's hero's own recognition of his "true" identity, apparently veiled by his humanity, is not presented to us by Kampan." (Richman 108).

The first section of this article presents the scope of medieval-era efforts to translate classics to reach the public. Next, the write-up focuses on dharma as the binding thread of the Indian versions of the Ramayana. The conclusion presents an analysis of various phrases selected from texts. The paradox of words is finally analyzed to conclude that every poet intends to convey the righteous act. Dharma is the stable condition that gives humans perfect satisfaction.



It is difficult to determine the exact number of premodern Rāmāyaṇa versions created in northeastern India, as many still exist only as manuscripts; however, there may be more of them in this region than in others. Most of these are popular poetic retellings meant for general audiences, and because of that, linguistically “elitist” often didn’t value them much — a bias that continues to some degree today. In contrast, in other parts of India, poets writing in languages such as Marathi and Brajhasha crafted more refined Ramayana texts that closely adhered to the formal literary standards of Sanskrit.

At the other extreme are texts such as the Rāmāyaṇa of **Chandravati** in Bengali, which was passed down orally for about three hundred years before being written around a hundred years ago. Like many popular Rāmāyaṇas, it was written in rhyming couplets—called *payār* in Bengali, *pada* in Assamese, and *dandīa* in Oriya. These straightforward rhythmic forms, often described as rhymed prose, facilitated the composition and improvisation of stories. Most of these Rāmāyaṇas existed in a semi-oral form: they weren’t read silently but were performed aloud, either sung or recited. Performers were often professional singers known in Bengali as *gāyak* or *gāyen*, and many of these poets were performers themselves. For example, **Durgāvāra**, who wrote the sixteenth-century *Gīti Rāmāyaṇa* in Assamese, was a professional singer (*ojā*) and also composed a song based on the legend of the snake goddess **Manasā**. (Smith 88)

Analysis

The Saptakanda Ramayana of Madhav Kandali

The Assamese language reached the zenith of linguistic excellence in terms of expressions, metre, and words. Madhav Kandali, who lived in the mid-fourteenth century, composed the Saptakand Ramayana in Assamese. He refrained from depicting religious doctrines in his epic, although he lived during the spread of Vaishnavism. He has not altered the basic features of the source text while rendering the Ramayana as an epic story rich in moral and

literary nuance. He gave colloquial expressions a new sense to the language. Religious matters did not overshadow the artistic compulsion. Therefore, his imagination was free in the selection of words, figures, and images. A pastoral significance replaces the heroic narrative of the original in the Assamese Ramayana. An excerpt from the English translation of Madhav Kandali’s Saptakanda Ramayana illustrates Hanuman’s witness of luxury in Ravana’s Harem.

Kato nari nritya kari shutia bhagare.

Hatat Kendra paye sonar ghung-ghure.

Kame nidra jailek mridanga dhari kole.

Swami bull buli tamke nidrat sambhola. (Sharma 301)

This portrays the behaviour of Ravana’s wives as they relax in the Harem, which Hanuman regards as an act of adharma (immoral) and warns Ravana of his demonic temptations. The Assamese Ramayana can be portrayed as an idyllic narrative accessible to the common man, in the language of the common man. ‘Nari’ means women, ‘Nritya’ means dance, ‘Nidra’ means sleep, words that pertain to luxurious intoxication, which is not an expected behavior of a leader. This engrossing act has led to the blurring of Ravana’s intellect, resulting in the downfall of the Kingdom.

The regional poets picked up their Rama lore in various ways. A potential poet would most likely hear his first version of the story of Rama sitting on grandmother’s knee and then, as he progressed through life, would come into contact with it in other forms: folktales, dramatic performances, paintings, and sculpture, as well as written versions in his own language, and, if well educated, Sanskrit and even perhaps versions in other languages. We can feel sure that the first complete version of the Ramayana that any poet heard or read was one in his own language. Each of our three languages possesses a written version of the epic that has dominated the local tradition since its first appearance; these three renderings are also the first full versions written in their respective languages. Because of their later influence, any stories selected by the three earliest Rama poets tended to be included in the Ramayana



by their successors. The oldest of them is the fourteenth-century Assamese rendering of Madhava Kandali.

About 150 years after **Mādhava Kandali's** *Rāmāyaṇa* first appeared, the devotional *bhakti* movement was brought to **Assam** by the reforming poet-saint **Śaṅkaradeva**. During this period, some Vaishnava reformers felt that Kandali's poem lacked a strong devotional emphasis, and one of them, **Ananta Kandali**, declared his intention to rewrite the epic to align more closely with *bhakti* (devotional) ideals.

The Ram Panchali of Krittivas Ohja

The late fifteenth-century poet Krittivasa dominates the Ramayana as tradition in Bengal in a very different way. Krittivasa's original Ramayana garnered so much prestige that, before long, other poets began writing new material under his name. As a consequence, several diverse Ramayanas bearing Krittivasa's signature were eventually in circulation.

Krittivasi Ramayana, or Ram Panchali as it is called in West Bengal, was composed in the fifteenth century in Bangla by Krittibas Ohja. He has contributed significantly to the formation of Bengal's literary and social culture. Krittivas Ohja, a Bengali poet who translated the Valmiki Ramayana into Bangla, is equally popular with the illiterate and the learned. Krittivas wrote for simple village folk who understood neither Sanskrit nor Bangla, based on Sanskrit vocabulary. He adopted a simple style, easy language, literary embellishment, and shared ideals.

The Rama cult in West Bengal was not as popular as the Chandi (Paniker 53) cult in Bengal, the story of Goddess Chandi's victory over Mahishasura (Radhakrishnan 412-413), a brief tale by Markandeya (Paniker 53). Durgapuja commemorates Durga's victory over Mahishasura. Bhavani Prasad's translation of Chandi reflects the community's pervasive belief. The following is a quote from the Chandi translation,

“Thou, O, Goddess, that dwells in all, manifesting thyself in the intelligence of the created beings, a hundred times do I salute Thee.” (Nagar 40).

A cursory glance at the original Valmiki Ramayana and its transcended form demonstrates that social consciousness inspired Krittivas to implement specific innovations absent from the original. In the Valmiki Ramayana, there is no trace of Rama's Durga worship. Sage Agastya instructed Rama to recite hymns addressed to Aditya (Griffith 40) in the YuddhaKanda, the sixth Canto of the War of the Valmiki Ramayana. Sage Agastya advises Rama to recite the Adityahrdaya (Griffith 489-490) to gain victory over Ravana:

āditya hrdayam puṇyam sarvaśatru vināśanam.

jayāvaham japennityam akṣayyam paramam śivam. (Valmiki Ramayana 6.107.4)

This holy Aditya Hrudayam can destroy all enemies and ensure victory at all times. But in Lankakanda or Yuddhakanda (The Book of War) of the Ramayana of Krittivas, Rama is required to adore the goddess Mahisasuramardini or Durga for nine days, as prescribed in the “Devimahatmya” (Nagar 40-41) of the Markandeya. Thus, the deviation from the main text lies in Krittivas's invocation of the goddess Chandi and the episode's aim of reinstating the practice of moral conduct in medieval Bengal as a marker of regional culture. Krittivasa's Ramayana is a medley of poetic and philosophical associations. The below illustration is an extract from the English translation of Ram Panchali, focusing on Janaki, another connotation to the daughter of Janaka, Sita is called as Janaki says to Hanuman that “under any circumstances or be it in prosperity or in the midst of great danger the powerful Fate binds everybody with a rope and that nobody can overcome the grip of fate”. In a conversation with Indrajith, son of Ravana, Hanuman warns him, saying that the entire demon clan has immoral behavior, calling it ‘aunaachar’.

Conclusion

The **bhakti (devotional) movement** was a significant force shaping religious ideas, and its influence was mediated mainly through Sanskrit texts such as the Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, the Bhusundi Rāmāyaṇa, the various *Purāṇas*, and other writings. Because **Mādhava Kandali** composed his



Rāmāyaṇa before the devotional movement became influential in Assam, his work shows little sign of *bhakti* influence. Likewise, the *Gīti Rāmāyaṇa* by **Durgāvāra**, from the early sixteenth century, does not reflect devotional ideas, nor does the original, now lost, version of **Kṛttivāsa's** *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, in the Bengali poem, *bhakti* themes were added later and are now prominent in widely circulated editions. By the time **Balarāma dāsa** was writing, things had begun to shift, and his *Rāmāyaṇa* is where some of the most familiar devotional themes first appear in eastern India. Later biographers describe Balarāma dāsa as a follower of **Caitanya Mahāprabhu** who spent the final years of his life in **Puri**. After this point, devotional influence continued to grow steadily, so that, in general, the more recent *aRāmāyaṇa* was composed, the more strongly it reflected devotional (*bhakti*) ideas. In many cases, these devotional concepts were expressed in powerful and striking ways. Although *Kṛttivāsa's* version is the most famous and most complete *Rāmāyaṇa* in **Bengali**, the story has been retold many times from early periods up to the present, with authors choosing different parts of the narrative and sometimes focusing on various religious themes—from full versions of the entire plot to individual episodes, and ranging from **Vaishnava** devotional interpretations to *Śākta* celebrations. *Kṛttivāsa* consistently reshaped the original *Vālmīki* story to highlight **Rāma's divinity**, yet he remained closely faithful to the epic's core structure and the vast majority of its details. In doing so, he placed Rāma firmly at the heart of devotional Hindu belief. His changes to *Vālmīki's* plot were clearly intended to support the devotional (*bhakti*) emphasis of his rendition. However, because there is no single definitive text of his work, it's essential to

be cautious when making firm claims about *Kṛttivāsa's* specific authorial intent.

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