

Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation

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

One day when Rama 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, Hanuman, was at his feet. Rama said to Hanuman, "Look, my ring is lost. Find it for me."

Now Hanuman 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 (thali). The King of Spirits (bhut), who lives in the netherworld, likes to eat animals. So Hanuman was sent to him as part of his dinner, along with his vegetables. Hanuman sat on the platter, wondering what to do.

While this was going on in the netherworld, Rama sat on his throne on the earth above. The sage Vasistha and the god Brahma came to see him. They said to Rama, "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 Rama, "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 Rama.

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

Laksmana was standing at the door when the sage Visvamisra appeared and said, "I need to see Rama at once. It's urgent. Tell me, where is Rama?"

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

"What is there that Rama would hide from me?" said Visvamisra. "I must go in, right now."

Laksmana 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 Rama 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 Visvamisra.

Laksmana thought, "If I go in now, I'll die. But if I don't go, this hotheaded 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.

Rama asked him, "What's the matter?"

"Visvamisra is here."

"Send him in."

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

Laksmana said to Rama, "Brother, you should cut off my head."

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

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

Laksmāna was an avatar of Sesa, the serpent on whom Visnu sleeps. His time was up too. He went directly to the river Sarayu and disappeared in the flowing waters.

When Laksmāna relinquished his body, Rama summoned all his followers, Vibhisana, Sugriva, and others, and arranged for the coronation of his twin sons, Lava and Kusa. Then Rama too entered the river Sarayu.

All this while, Hanuman was in the netherworld. When he was finally taken to the King of Spirits, he kept repeating the name of Rama. "Rama Rama Rama . . ."

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

"Hanuman."

"Hanuman? Why have you come here?"

"Rama'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 Rama's rings. The king brought the platter to Hanuman, set it down, and said, "Pick out your Rama's ring and take it."

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

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

So Hanuman left.

This story is usually told to suggest that for every such Rama there is a Ramayana .^[1] The number of Ramayanas 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 Rama story is found makes one gasp: Anamese, 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 Rama story. Sanskrit alone contains some twenty-five or more tellings belonging to various narrative genres (epics, kavyas or ornate poetic compositions, puranas 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 Ramayanas grows even larger. To these must be added sculpture and bas-reliefs, mask plays, puppet plays and shadow plays, in all the many South and Southeast Asian cultures.^[2] Camille Bulcke, a student of the Ramayana , counted three hundred tellings.^[3] It's no wonder that even as long ago as the fourteenth century, Kumaravyasa, a Kannada poet, chose to write a Mahabharata , because he heard the cosmic serpent which upholds the earth groaning under the burden of Ramayana poets (tinikidanuphanirayaramayanadakavigalabharadali). 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.

Valmiki and Kampan: Two Ahalyas

Obviously, these hundreds of tellings differ from one another. I have come to prefer the word 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 Valmiki's Sanskrit Ramayana , the earliest and most prestigious of them all. But as we shall see, it is not always Valmiki'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 Rama story (ramakatha) and texts composed by a specific person—Valmiki, Kampan, or Krttivasa, for example. Though many of the latter are popularly called Ramayanas (like Kamparamayanam), few texts actually bear the title Ramayana ; they are given titles like Iramavataram (The Incarnation of Rama), Ramcaritmanas (The Lake of the Acts of Rama), Ramakien (The Story of Rama), and so on. Their relations to the Rama story as told by Valmiki also vary. This traditional distinction between katha (story) and kavya (poem) parallels the French one between sujet and recit , or the English one between story and discourse.^[4] 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 (Balakanda) of Valmiki's Sanskrit Ramayana ; the second from the first canto (Palakantam) of Kampan's Iramavataram in Tamil. Both narrate the story of Ahalya.

The Ahalya Episode: Valmiki

Seeing Mithila, Janaka's white
and dazzling city, all the sages
cried out in praise, "Wonderful!
How wonderful!"
Raghava, sighting on the outskirts
of Mithila 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 Raghava's words, the great sage
Visvamisra, man of fire,
expert in words answered, "Listen,
Raghava, 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, worshiped even
by the gods. Long ago, with Ahalya
he practiced tapas^[5] here
for countless years. Once, knowing that Gautama
was away, Indra (called Thousand Eyes),
Saci's husband, took on the likeness
of the sage, and said to Ahalya:
'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 honor, lover, protect
yourself and me.'
And Indra smiled and said to Ahalya,
'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 Rama, 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 kusa grass and kindling
 in his hands.
 Seeing him, the king of the gods was
 terror-struck, his face drained of color.
 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
 Ahalya: 'You, you will dwell here
 many thousands of years, eating the air,
 without food, rolling in ash,
 and burning invisible to all creatures.
 When Rama, unassailable son
 of Dasaratha, 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 on to 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, Rama, to the ashram
of the holy sage and save Ahalya
who has the beauty of a goddess."

Raghava heard Visvamitra's words
and followed him into the ashram
with Laksmana: there he saw
Ahalya, shining with an inner light
earned through her penances,
blazing yet hidden from the eyes
of passersby, even gods and antigods.^[6]

The Ahalya Episode: Kampan

They came to many-towered Mithila and stood outside the fortress. On the towers were many flags.	
There, high on an open field, stood a black rock that was once Ahalya,	
the great sage's wife who fell because she lost her chastity, the mark of marriage in a house.	547

Rama'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 colored again as she once was.	548

In 550, Rama asks Visvamitra why this lovely woman had been turned to stone. Visvamitra replies:

"Listen. Once Indra, Lord of the Diamond Axe, waited on the absence Lord of the Diamond Axe,	
of Gautama, a sage all spirit, meaning to reach out for the lovely breast of doe-eyed Ahalya, 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 Ahalya; 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 Siva 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, Ahalya 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 Siva-like lord of mine, set some limit to your curse!'	
So he said: 'Rama 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 Brahma 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. while she lay there, a thing of stone. 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." ^[2]	

Let me rapidly suggest a few differences between the two tellings. In Valmiki, Indra seduces a willing Ahalya. In Kampan, Ahalya realizes 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 Kathasaritsagara, an eleventh-century Sanskrit compendium of folktales).^[8] He is cursed with a thousand vaginas which are later changed into eyes, and Ahalya 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 Ahalya is rendered incapable of responding to anything. These motifs, not found in Valmiki, are attested in South Indian folklore and other southern Rama stories, in inscriptions and earlier Tamil poems, as well as in non-Tamil sources. Kampan, here and elsewhere, not only makes full use of his predecessor Valmiki's materials but folds in many regional folk traditions. It is often through him that they then become part of other Ramayanas.

In technique, Kampan is also more dramatic than Valmiki. Rama's feet transmute the black stone into Ahalya first; only afterward is her story told. The black stone standing on a high place, waiting for Rama, is itself a very effective, vivid symbol. Ahalya'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 Ahalya episode is related to previous episodes in the poem such as that in which Rama destroys the demoness Tataka. There he was the destroyer of evil, the bringer of sterility and the ashes of death to his enemies. Here, as the reviver of Ahalya, he is a cloud-dark god of fertility. Throughout Kampan's poem, Rama is a Tamil hero, a generous giver and a ruthless destroyer of foes. And the bhakti vision makes the release of Ahalya from her rock-bound sin a paradigm of Rama's incarnatory mission to release all souls from world-bound misery.

In Valmiki, Rama's character is that not 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 Rama's divinity and his incarnation for the purpose of destroying Ravana, and the first and last books of the epic, in which Rama is clearly described as a god with such a mission, are later additions.^[9] 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 Nammalvar (9th C.?), the most eminent of the Srivaisnava saints. So, for Kampan, Rama 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 Ahalya is only the first in a series, ending with Rama's encounter with Ravana the demon himself. For Nammalvar, Rama is a savior of all beings, from the lowly grass to the great gods:

By Rama's Grace

Why would anyone want
to learn anything but Rama?
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.
Nammalvar 7.5.1^[10]

Kampan's epic poem enacts in detail and with passion Nammalvar's vision of Rama.

Thus the Ahalya, episode is essentially the same, but the weave, the texture, the colors 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 Ramayanas play on the knowledge of previous tellings: they are meta-Ramayanas . I cannot resist repeating my favorite example. In several of the later Ramayanas (such as the AdhyatmaRamayana , 16th C.), when Rama is exiled, he does not want Sita to go with him into the forest. Sita 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 Ramayanas have been composed before this. Do you know of one where Sita doesn't go with Rama to the forest?" That clinches the argument, and she goes with him.^[11] And as nothing in India occurs uniquely, even this motif appears in more than one Ramayana .

Now the Tamil Ramayana 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 Rama 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, Rasyarnga in Sanskrit but Kalaikkotu in Tamil, the latter borrowed into Thai). Tulsi's Hindi Ramcaritmanas and the Malaysian Hikayat Seri Ram too owe many details to the Kampan poem.^[12]

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 cha(y) . Similarly, the Rama story seems to have traveled 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."^[13]

Jaina Tellings

When we enter the world of Jains tellings, the Rama story no longer carries Hindu values. Indeed the Jaina texts express the feeling that the Hindus, especially the Brahmins, have maligned Ravana, made him into a villain. Here is a set of questions that a Jaina text begins by asking: "How can monkeys vanquish the powerful raksasa warriors like Ravana? How can noble men and Jaina worthies like Ravana 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 blow around him? They also say that Ravana 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 Srenika goes to sage Gautama to have him tell the true story and clear his doubts. Gautama says to him, "I'll tell you what Jaina wise men say. Ravana 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.^[14] Obviously, the Jaina Ramayana of Vimalasuri, called Paumacariya (Prakrit for the Sanskrit Padmacarita), knows its Valmiki and proceeds to correct its errors and Hindu extravagances. Like other Jains puranas , this too is a pratipurana , an anti- or counter-purana . The prefix prati , meaning "anti-" or "counter-," is a favorite Jaina affix.

Vimalasuri the Jains opens the story not with Rama's genealogy and greatness, but with Ravana's. Ravana is one of the sixty-three leaders or salakapurusas of the Jaina tradition. He is

noble, learned, earns all his magical powers and weapons through austerities (tapas), and is a devotee of Jaina 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, Sita. It is such a Ravana who falls in love with Sita's beauty, abducts her, tries to win her favors 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 Jaina Ramayanas, Sita 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 Sita's birth in the next section.

In fact, to our modern eyes, this Ravana is a tragic figure; we are moved to admiration and pity for Ravana when the Jainas tell the story. I should mention one more motif: according to the Jaina way of thinking, a pair of antagonists, Vasudeva and Prativasudeva—a hero and an antihero, almost like self and Other—are destined to fight in life after life. Laksmana and Ravana 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 Vasudeva inevitably kills his counterpart, his prati. Ravana learns at the end that Laksmana is such a Vasudeva 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. Recognizing Laksmana as a Vasudeva, it does not behead him but gives itself over to his hand. Thus Laksmana slays Ravana with his own cherished weapon.

Here Rama does not even kill Ravana, as he does in the Hindu Ramayanas. For Rama is an evolved Jaina soul who has conquered his passions; this is his last birth, so he is loath to kill anything. It is left to Laksmana to kill enemies, and according to inexorable Jaina logic it is Laksmana who goes to hell while Rama finds release (kaivalya).

One hardly need add that the Paumacariya is filled with references to Jaina places of pilgrimage, stories about Jaina monks, and Jaina homilies and legends. Furthermore, since the Jainas 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 (Rama and his brothers are born in the normal way), blood sacrifices, and the like. They even rationalize the conception of Ravana 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 Dasamukha, or the Ten-faced One. The monkeys too are not monkeys but a clan of celestials (vidyadharas) actually related to Ravana and his family through their great grandfathers. They have monkeys as emblems on their flags: hence the name Vanaras or "monkeys."

From Written to Oral

Let's look at one of the South Indian folk Ramayanas. In these, the story usually occurs in bits and pieces. For instance, in Kannada, we are given separate narrative poems on Sita's birth, her wedding, her chastity test, her exile, the birth of Lava and Kusa, their war with their father Rama, and so on. But we do have one complete telling of the Rama story by traditional bards (tamburidasayyas), sung with a refrain repeated every two lines by a chorus. For the following discussion, I am indebted to the transcription by Rame Gowda, P. K. Rajasekara, and S. Basavaiah.^[15]

This folk narrative, sung by an Untouchable bard, opens with Ravana (here called Ravula) and his queen Mandodari. They are unhappy and childless. So Ravana or Ravula goes to the forest, performs all sorts of self-mortifications like rolling on the ground till blood runs from his back, and meets a jogi, or holy mendicant, who is none other than Siva. Siva gives him a magic mango and asks him how he would share it with his wife. Ravula says, "Of course, I'll give her the sweet flesh of the fruit and I'll lick the mango seed." The jogi is skeptical. He says to Ravula,

"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."
Ravula 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 puja, Mandodari is very happy. After a ritual puja and prayers to Siva, Ravana 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, Ravula himself becomes pregnant, his pregnancy advancing a month each day.

In one day, it was a month, O Siva.
In the second, it was the second month,
and cravings began for him, O Siva.
How shall I show my face to the world of men, O Siva.
On the third day, it was the third month,
How shall I show my face to the world, O Siva.
On the fourth day, it was the fourth month.
How can I bear this, O Siva.
Five days, and it was five months,
O lord, you've given me trouble, O Siva.
I can't bear it, I can't bear it, O Siva.
How will I live, cries Ravula in misery.
Six days, and he is six months gone, O mother,
in seven days it was seven months.
O what shame, Ravula in his seventh month,
and soon came the eighth, O Siva.
Ravula was in his ninth full month.
When he was round and ready, she's born, the dear,
Sita is born through his nose.
When he sneezes, Sitamma is born,
And Ravula names her Sitamma.^[14]

In Kannada, the word sita means "he sneezed": he calls her Sita 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 Sita, because King Janaka finds her in a furrow (sita). Then Ravula goes to astrologers, who tell him he is being punished for not keeping his word to Siva 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 Sita's birth that the poet sings of the birth and adventures of Rama and Laksmana. Then comes a long section on Sita's marriage contest, where Ravula appears and is humiliated when he falls under the heavy bow he has to lift. Rama lifts it and marries Sita. After that she is abducted by Ravana. Rama lays siege to Lanka with his monkey allies, and (in a brief section) recovers Sita and is crowned king. The poet then returns to the theme of Sita's trials. She is slandered and exiled, but gives birth to twins who grow up to be warriors. They tie up Rama'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 Sita—her life, her birth, her adoption, her wedding, her abduction and recovery. Whole sections, equal in length to those on Rama and Laksmana's birth, exile, and war against Ravana, are devoted to her banishment, pregnancy, and reunion with her husband. Furthermore, her abnormal birth as the daughter born directly to the male Ravana 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.^[15] The motif of Sita as Ravana's daughter is not unknown elsewhere. It occurs in one tradition of the Jaina stories (for example, in the Vasudevahimdi) and in folk traditions of Kannada and Telugu, as well as in several Southeast Asian Ramayanas. In some, Ravana 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 Valmiki.

A Southeast Asian Example

When we go outside India to Southeast Asia, we meet with a variety of tellings of the Rama 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 Rama story.^[18] 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 Rama story. In succession several kings with the name "King Rama" wrote Ramayana episodes in Thai: King Rama I composed a telling of the Ramayana in fifty thousand verses, Rama II composed new episodes for dance, and Rama VI added another set of episodes, most taken from Valmiki. Places in Thailand, such as Lopburi (Skt. Lavapuri), Khidkin (Skt. Kiskindha), and Ayuthia (Skt. Ayodhya) with its ruins of Khmer and Thai art, are associated with Rama legends.

The Thai Ramakirti (Rama's glory) or Ramakien (Rama'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, Rama's marriage and banishment, the abduction of Sita, and Rama's meeting with the monkey clan. It also describes the preparations for the war, Hanuman's visit to Lanka and his burning of it, the building of the bridge, the siege of Lanka, the fall of Ravana, and Rama's reunion with Sita. The third part describes an insurrection in Lanka, which Rama deposes his two youngest brothers to quell. This part also describes the banishment of Sita, the birth of her sons, their war with Rama, Sita's descent into the earth, and the appearance of the gods to reunite Rama and Sita. Though many incidents look the same as they do in Valmiki, many things look different as well. For instance, as in the South Indian folk Ramayanas (as also in some Jaina, Bengali, and Kashmiri ones), the banishment of Sita is given a dramatic new rationale. The daughter of Surpanakha (the demoness whom Rama and Lakshmana had mutilated years earlier in the forest) is waiting in the wings to take revenge on Sita, whom she views as finally responsible for her mother's disfigurement. She comes to Ayodhya, enters Sita's service as a maid, and induces her to draw a picture of Ravana. The drawing is rendered indelible (in some tellings, it comes to life in her bedroom) and forces itself on Rama's attention. In a jealous rage, he orders Sita killed. The compassionate Lakshmana leaves her alive in the forest, though, and brings back the heart of a deer as witness to the execution.

The reunion between Rama and Sita is also different. When Rama finds out she is still alive, he recalls Sita 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. Hanuman is sent to subterranean regions to bring her back, but she refuses to return. It takes the power of Siva to reunite them.

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

Furthermore, though Rama is an incarnation of Visnu, in Thailand he is subordinate to Siva. 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 Sita and the war. Partings and reunions, which are the heart of the Hindu Ramayanas, are not as important as the excitement and the details of war, the techniques, the fabulous weapons. The Yuddhakanda 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 Hanuman than of Rama.

Neither celibate nor devout, as in the Hindu Ramayanas, here Hanuman 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 Valmiki's or Kampan's Hanuman does.

Ravana too is different here. The Ramakirti admires Ravana's resourcefulness and learning; his abduction of Sita is seen as an act of love and is viewed with sympathy. The Thais are moved by Ravana'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.^[49] Unlike Valmiki's characters, the Thai ones are a fallible, human mixture of good and evil. The fall of Ravana here makes one sad. It is not an occasion for unambiguous rejoicing, as it is in Valmiki.

Patterns of Difference

Thus, not only do we have one story told by Valmiki in Sanskrit, we have a variety of Rama 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 Rama and Sita to Ayodhya, their capital, to be crowned king and queen of the ideal kingdom. In another ending, often considered a later addition in Valmiki and in Kampan, Rama hears Sita slandered as a woman who lived in Ravana'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 Valmiki's hermitage, learn the Ramayana as well as the arts of war from him, win a war over Rama's army, and in a poignant scene sing the Ramayana 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 Sita 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 Sita from the furrow and her return to the earth, a shadow of a Proserpine-like myth, a vegetation cycle: Sita is like the seed and Rama with his cloud-dark body the rain; Ravana in the South is the Pluto-like abductor into dark regions (the south is the abode of death); Sita 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, Rama's opposition to Siva-like ascetic figures (made explicit by Kampan in the Ahalya 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 Risyasringa, the sexually naive ascetic who is seduced by the beauty of a woman and thereby brings rain to Lomapada's kingdom, and who later officiates at the ritual which fills Dasaratha'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 Rama in his search for his Sita. Birds and monkeys are a real presence and a poetic necessity in the Valmiki Ramayana, as much as they are excrescences in the Jaina 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. Valmiki opens with a frame story about Valmiki himself. He sees a hunter aim an arrow and kill one of a happy pair of lovebirds. The female circles its dead mate and cries over it. The scene so moves the poet and sage Valmiki that he curses the hunter. A moment later, he realizes that his curse has taken the form of a line of verse—in a famous play on words, the rhythm of his grief (*soka*) has given rise to a metrical form (*sloka*). He decides to write the whole epic of Rama's adventures in that meter. This incident becomes, in later poetics, the parable of all poetic utterance: out of the stress of natural feeling (*bhava*), an artistic form has to be found or fashioned, a form which will generalize and capture the essence (*rasa*) of that feeling. This incident at the beginning of

Valmiki 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 Rama story. One notes a certain rhythmic recurrence of an animal killed at many of the critical moments: when Dasaratha 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 Rama and the separation of father and son. When Rama pursues a magical golden deer (really a demon in disguise) and kills it, with its last breath it calls out to Laksmana in Rama's voice, which in turn leads to his leaving Sita unprotected; this allows Ravana to abduct Sita. Even as Ravana 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 Siva, 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 colored 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 sacred 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 Krsna 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. ^[20]	31

This passage is unique to Kampan; it is not found in Valmiki. It describes the waters as they are gathered by clouds from the seas and come down in rain and flow as floods of the Sarayu river down to Ayodhya, the capital of Rama's kingdom. Through it, Kampan introduces all his themes and emphases, even his characters, his concern with fertility themes (implicit in Valmiki), the whole dynasty of Rama's ancestors, and his vision of bhakti through the Ramayana .

Note the variety of themes introduced through the similes and allusions, each aspect of the water symbolizing an aspect of the Ramayana story itself and representing a portion of the Ramayana 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 Ramayanas is the intensity of focus on a major character. Valmiki focuses on Rama and his history in his opening sections; Vimalasuri's Jaina

Ramayana and the Thai epic focus not on Rama but on the genealogy and adventures of Ravana; the Kannada village telling focuses on Sita, her birth, her wedding, her trials. Some later extensions like the *Adbhuta Ramayana* and the Tamil story of *Satakanthavana* even give Sita a heroic character: when the ten-headed Ravana is killed, another appears with a hundred heads; Rama cannot handle this new menace, so it is Sita who goes to war and slays the new demon.^[21] The Santals, a tribe known for their extensive oral traditions, even conceive of Sita as unfaithful—to the shock and horror of any Hindu bred on Valmiki or Kampan, she is seduced both by Ravana and by Laksmana. In Southeast Asian texts, as we saw earlier, Hanuman is not the celibate devotee with a monkey face but a ladies' man who figures in many love episodes. In Kampan and Tulsi, Rama is a god; in the Jaina texts, he is only an evolved Jaina man who is in his last birth and so does not even kill Ravana. In the latter, Ravana is a noble hero fated by his karma to fall for Sita 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 Sita is banished, the miraculous creation of Sita's second son, and the final reunion of Rama and Sita. Every one of these occurs in more than one text, in more than one textual community (Hindu, Jaina, or Buddhist), in more than one region.

Now, is there a common core to the Rama stories, except the most skeletal set of relations like that of Rama, his brother, his wife, and the antagonist Ravana 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 *Ramayana* for all these tellings, but on 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 Valmiki, another set around the Jaina Vimalasuri, and so on.

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

Where Text 1 and Text 2 have a geometrical resemblance to each other, as one triangle to another (whatever the angles, sizes, or colors of the lines), we call such a relation iconic.^[22] 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 Valmiki's *Ramayana* 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 Valmiki's, for example, and it is composed in more than twenty different kinds of Tamil meters, while Valmiki's is mostly in the sloka meter.

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 *Krttivasa*. In the Bengali *Ramayana*, Rama's wedding is very much a Bengali wedding, with Bengali customs and Bengali cuisine.^[23] 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 Ramayana 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 countertext. 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 Rama 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. Valmiki's Hindu and Vimalasuri's Jaina 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 and his group of scholars produce a modern translation of Valmiki's Ramayana, they are iconic in the transliteration of Sanskrit names, the number and sequence of verses, the order of the episodes, and so forth.^[24] 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 Valmiki, 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 Valmiki but, if anything, by the extent that he differs from Valmiki. In the one, we rejoice in the similarity; in the other, we cherish and savor the differences.

One may go further and say that the cultural area in which Ramayanas are endemic has a pool of signifiers (like a gene pool), signifiers that include plots, characters, names, geography, incidents, and relationships. Oral, written, and performance traditions, phrases, proverbs, and even sneers carry allusions to the Rama story. When someone is carrying on, you say, "What's this Ramayana now? Enough." In Tamil, a narrow room is called a kiskindha; a proverb about a dim-witted person says, "After hearing the Ramayana all night, he asks how Rama is related to Sita"; in a Bengali arithmetic textbook, children are asked to figure the dimensions of what is left of a wall that Hanuman 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 Valery said. And sheep are made of lions, too: a folk legend says that Hanuman wrote the original Ramayana on a mountaintop, after the great war, and scattered the manuscript; it was many times larger than what we have now. Valmiki is said to have captured only a fragment of it. 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 Ramayana or the Mahabharata for the first time. The stories are there, "always already."

What Happens When You Listen

This essay opened with a folktale about the many Ramayanas. Before we close, it may be appropriate to tell another tale about Hanuman and Rama's ring.^[26] But this story is about the power of the Ramayana, 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 Ramayana 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 humor 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 Ramayana. 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 Hanuman the monkey had to leap across the ocean to take Rama's signet ring to Sita. When Hanuman was leaping across the ocean, the signet ring slipped from his hand and fell into the ocean. Hanuman didn't know what to do. He had to get the ring back quickly and take it to Sita in the demon's kingdom. While he was wringing his hands, the husband who was listening with rapt attention in the first row said, "Hanuman, don't worry. I'll get it for you." Then he jumped up and dived into the ocean, found the ring in the ocean floor, brought it back, and gave it to Hanuman.

Everyone was astonished. They thought this man was someone special, really blessed by Rama and Hanuman. 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 Ramayana.

Twenty four years later, the essay, Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation, finds itself at the centre of a . It has been dropped from the history syllabus of Delhi University after protests from hardline Hindu groups and a number of teachers. They believe the many versions recounted in the essay offend Hindu beliefs. As Dr Ramanujan tells the story, the number of versions of the epic which have existed in India and the rest of south-east Asia for the past 2,500 years or more is simply "astonishing". Though Valmiki's Sanskrit poem Ramayana is the Rāmāyaṇa: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation, begins with the question: How many Ramayanas? Three hundred? Although there exists more than three hundred versions of the Ramayana, Ramanujan concentrates his attention on the five important versions of the Ramayana, -the original Sanskrit version, the Jain version, the Tamil version, Kampan, the Thai Ramakhen and the South Indian folk versions of the epic. Ramanujan not just depicts the different telling of the Indian Epic, Ramayana, but, explores the difference that exists between these telling and the original version of the Epic.