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KĪRTTIBĀS AND THE PANDITS

The revision of the Bengali Rāmāyaṇa

Kṛttibās Ojhā's Bengali Rāmāyaṇa, which was written in the 15th century¹, proved to be enormously popular, possibly more so than any other medieval Bengali work, and to judge from the number of editions on the market today, it remains as much in vogue as ever. The popular or *baṭatalā* editions of Kṛttibās have been used by scholars for comparative studies of Rāmāyaṇa literature,² linguistic studies,³ and one such edition has even been translated into English.⁴ Despite the importance of Kṛttibās' poem, only three of its *kāṇḍa* have been critically edited and the reason for this, it seems, is its great popularity. Soon after it had been written singers began interpolating new matter into it, variants proliferated, numerous episodes from other folk Rāmāyaṇas were absorbed into it and, as a result, it broke up into a number of distinct geographic traditions. It has been estimated that only a small part of the original has been retained in surviving manuscripts,⁵ and even among older manuscripts, which are few, differences are considerable. As extant manuscripts number over 1500, a critical edition would be both an enormous and controversial task; the two scholars who did edit portions of it were criticized for their choice of mss.⁶ One of these editors, Hīrendranāth Datta, writes in the introduction to his *Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa* that his ms. did not correspond very well to others he looked at; when he compared it to the *baṭatalā* editions, however, he found not a single verse in common.⁷ A contemporary of his noted that "It would not be incorrect to say that those works which are sold under the name of Kṛttibās' Rāmāyaṇa are completely independent of the original."⁸ While it is not surprising to read that such popular printings are not very reliable, it is unnerving to be told that they are totally new works. The question then arises, if Kṛttibās is not the author of these popular editions, who is?

To answer this question we have to turn to the history of these printed versions and this takes us back to the very beginning of printing in Bengal.

At the turn of the eighteenth century the British East India Company felt it was necessary for its employees to learn Bengali and so a number of suitable texts were printed at the mission press set up in Serampore (Śrīrāmpur) by the famous English missionary William Carey. The first book to be printed in Bengali was the *Mahābhārata* of Kāśī-rāmdās. The second, which appeared in 1802-03⁹, was the *Rāmāyaṇ* of Kṛttibās. In 1829 the Bengali newspaper *Samācār Darpaṇ* noted that no new edition of Kṛttibās had been printed since then but informed its readers that one was being prepared by a noted pandit.¹⁰ The pandit was the Sanskrit scholar Jayagopāl Tarkālaṅkāṛ (1775-1846), a teacher at and founder of the Calcutta Sanskrit College. Carey did have pandits prepare mss. of Kṛttibās for the 1802 edition but while they did polish the language to a degree, the result was highly unsatisfactory in the eyes of Bengali purists. Jayagopāl noted that the first edition was filled with "vulgarisms", "impurities" and "inconsistencies"¹¹ and these he intended to eliminate. The first revised *kāṇḍa* appeared in 1830 and by 1834 the complete poem had been reprinted.¹²

When one compares Jayagopāl's edition with that from 1802, one notes that not a single faulty line escaped the pandit's scrutiny. There was good reason for this as there was much in the first edition which was in need of emendation. Most obvious is the meter. The bulk of the poem is written in *payār*, couplets with two feet of eight plus six syllables. In the 1802 printing the meter is very imperfect, even careless; lines contain 15, 16 or more syllables instead of the correct 14, as:

*araṇya kāṇḍa racila dviḥa phuliyāra kīrttibāsa*¹³ = 18 syllables
(The Brahman Kīrttibāsa of Phuliyā wrote the
Aranya Kāṇḍa)

which is corrected in 1834 to a perfect 14:

*racila aranyakāṇḍa dviḥa kṛttibāsa*¹⁴
(The Brahman Kṛttibāsa wrote the *Aranya Kāṇḍa*.)

A very large number of lines in the first edition are "incorrect"¹⁵ in this way and very often Jayagopāl uses the opportunity for changes

in the wording; he eliminates archaisms and dialectical words and substitutes *tatsamas* for *tadbhavas*, or more learned *tatsamas* for more familiar ones. He also corrects the spelling although the orthography of the 1802 edition is good by medieval Bengali standards. A lasting effect of these improvements is the name of the poet himself: in manuscripts and the first printing his name appears as Kṛttibās, Jayagopāl changes it to Kṛttibās and it is as Kṛttibās that he has been known ever since.

When necessary Jayagopāl also corrects defective scholarship in the original. In the first edition, for example, Rāma meets a number of sages in the forest headed by Āstika. The pandit replaces this name with Atri, the name of the sage in the Valmikian tradition.¹⁶ The mere fact that there are so many imperfections in the 1802 edition makes it clear that it is based upon a genuine, though somewhat late ms. tradition which was not radically altered by the pandits preparing it for publication.

Jayagopāl did not remain content with these changes but, being something of a poet himself, found himself unable to resist the temptation of adding verses of his own. These range from a few lines to rather lengthy passages. One of these contributions, as A.K. Bandyopādhyāya points out,¹⁷ is the famous lament of Rāma when he finds his wife has been abducted by the demon king Rāvaṇa. This is one of the best-known passages of Kṛttibās and is often included in anthologies of Bengali verse. It was largely written by Jayagopāl.

None of these alterations are substantial, Jayagopāl's inserts are lyrical and he leaves the basic story line untouched. The most interesting questions are those involving the poem's sectarian elements, i.e. the *bhakta* and *śākta* episodes so prominent in the popular editions. The medieval Vaiṣṇava reformers spread their message by composing works of their own and translating their sacred texts into the vernaculars. One such text was the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In Vālmīki's original version Rāma's status as an avatar of Viṣṇu is not stressed and most notable in the first and last books which were added later as it was composed long before the *bhakti* movement came into being or Rāma came to be considered an avatar. In Vālmīki Rāma is an ideal hero but still a thoroughly human one. In order to alter this state of affairs some time

during the 14th or 15th centuries an unknown poet wrote a new, more congenial version of the epic completely in harmony with the *bhakti* spirit. This work, the *Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, was followed by a large number of Sanskrit and vernacular versions of the epic written in a similar vein and these had a deep and ever increasing influence on the later *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. In these *bhakti Rāmāyaṇas* the human drama of the original becomes divine theatrics: Rāma is completely aware of his divine nature and goes through the motions of his human role in order to lead men to god; Sītā is Lakṣmī, the *rākṣasas* are Viṣṇu's reincarnated servants eager to die by his hand, all the action is *līlā*, divine play. Some *bhakti* elements can be found in Kṛttibās but his date makes it highly unlikely that the original version contained any; he wrote his poem in the last part of the 15th century, that is, before the birth of Caitanya who introduced the popular Vaiṣṇava movement into Bengal and around the same time as, if not before, the composition of the *Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*. Naturally his poem has absorbed some devotional matter during its transmission but such interpolations are usually obvious. When Jayagopāl set about revising the 1802 edition of Kṛttibās, this *bhakti* spirit had, of course, long since been dominant among the Bengali elite, and in Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* literature it reached its peak in the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Jagadrām and the *Rāmarasāyaṇa* of Raghunandana Gosvāmī, both of which were written in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Jayagopāl did make a few subtle changes in the 1802 text which can be explained in terms of this *bhakti* influence. For example when Rāma approaches a group of sages in one passage, he notes that for some reason they are mysteriously whispering amongst themselves. Like a Brahman-cowed Bengali villager, this makes him nervous:

*amā bāri kariyā kena karaha ŷukati/
kona doṣa karilāma āmi kona byabahāra*¹⁸

What are you talking about, leaving me outside?

What thing did I do, what fault did I commit?

When the demon Birādha captures Sītā, the poet writes,

birādhera kole sītā hāta pā āchāri/

In the embrace of Birādha, Sītā thrashes her arms and legs.

The image is a very Kṛttibāsan one; Sītā struggles in the clutches of the demon like a fish flapping in the grasp of a fisherman. These

and similar elements are carefully omitted by the pandit. In them Rāma and Sītā were described in a manner too fallibly human, too undignified for both his taste and his religious ideas. Nevertheless these changes too are subtle, minor ones. The big changes come after Jayagopāl.

The second Serampore edition sold well and Bengali publishers noted and decided to emulate its success. The first seems to have been the pioneer *baṭatalā* publisher Madhusūdan Śīl (Seal). He had thirteen pandits go over Jayagopāl's edition and brought out a new version.²⁰ As the language and meter had already been "purified", to justify their employment these pandits, and those who followed them, added (one is tempted to say interpolated) new material into the text. Other publishers followed Seal's example and numerous other printings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* poured forth from Bengali presses. Versions from 1842, 1849, 1868, 1869, 1873, 1878 and 1882 have survived²¹ and these were certainly not all which were printed. Already in 1869 it was noted that these popular editions were all based upon the second Serampore printing.²² Publishers are still doing the same today. Each adds (and sometimes deletes) material to suit himself and as a result no two popular printings are exactly alike. A number of episodes added in *baṭatalā* editions are now standard components of Kṛttibās' *Rāmāyaṇa*, others are only to be found in one or a few. Surprisingly all these editors were not all anonymous pandits but included well-known scholars of Bengali literature such as D.C. Sen, who were quite aware of the reliability of the texts they were "editing".

To illustrate the extent of these changes we can compare a few well-known episodes of the *Laṅkā Kāṇḍa* in the Serampore and later editions²³ as it is in this book that the contributions of the later revisionists are most noticeable. In the 1802 edition the *Laṅkā Kāṇḍa* consists of roughly 4800 couplets, in current popular editions it is around 6600, that is, over one third longer. First we can look at the story of the *rākṣasa* Taraṅṣen. Taraṅṣen is not mentioned in Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇas* and apparently this episode is confined to Bengal. A.K. Bandyopādhyāya believes that it was either taken from a late *purāṇa* or made up by the poet himself.²⁴

Taraṅṣen is the son of Rāvaṇa's high-minded brother Vibhīṣaṇa who went over to Rāma's camp because of his disapproval of Rāvaṇa's actions. Taraṅṣen, like his father, is a devotee of Rāma and goes forth to fight him with the intention of dying by Rāma's hand and thereby attaining *mukṭi*. The name of Rāma is written all over his chariot and emblazoned on the banners flapping over it, a sight so patently ridiculous that even Rāma's ape allies are described as laughing at it. When Taraṅṣen comes before Rāma, he is enraptured by the sight of the divine countenance and so begins a *stuti*, that is, a panegyric praising Rāma as the lord of the universe, the essence of the three worlds and the like. Unfortunately for the demon, Rāma is so impressed with his faith that he drops his bow and starts to walk from the battlefield. How can he slay such a devotee? Taraṅṣen then realizes his mistake, recovers quickly and tells Rāma he was deceiving him and then, stung by his taunts, Rāma starts the battle anew. It ends when one of Rāma's arrows strikes off Taraṅṣen's head which rolls across the battleground singing Rāma's praises. Rāma takes it into his arms and weeps. Taraṅṣen's father Vibhīṣaṇa weeps as well, not because his son has been killed, but because since he is Rama's ally he cannot have the good fortune of being slain by him as well.

Scholars have long suspected that this episode is an interpolation. To judge by the evidence of the printed editions it certainly is for it is not found in the 1802 Serampore edition. This means it was not present in the manuscripts this edition was based on and, most likely, not in the original either, the tendency being towards the steady inclusion of *bhakti* elements, not their exclusion. It certainly was not devised by an anonymous pandit in the nineteenth century, however, as it appears in other Bengali *Rāmāyaṇas*, most notably that of Śaṅkar Kābīcandra written around 1700. It has been suggested that this work is the source of the Taraṅṣen story,²⁵ but the episode as it appears in the critical edition of Kābīcandra is not the same either in language or detail.

Next we can consider the account of the death of Rāvaṇa. The story as it appears in both the 1802 and 1834 editions is rather straightforward. Before his final duel with Rāma, Rāvaṇa abruptly reveals in a conversation with his wife Mandodarī that he is aware that Rāma is the avatar of Viṣṇu and that he wants, like Taraṅṣen above, to be

killed by him. This is startling as earlier no hint of this attitude on the part of Rāvaṇa is given. The battle begins along Valmikian lines then, after the first missiles have been fired, Rāvaṇa suddenly sees that the entire world is *rāmanaya*, pervaded by Rāma. He faints at the sight and his charioteer drives him from the battlefield. Regaining consciousness he returns, gives Rāma a *stuti*, asks to be forgiven, then adds,

*sītā āniyā dii āmi karaha nistāra/
aśokabane thuilāma sītā kariyā rakṣaṇa
sei sītā laiṇā tomāra paśinu śarana/...
sītā laiṇā raghunātha yjāo nija deśa 26*

I will give Sītā back to you, free her!
I put Sītā in the Aśoka grove and guarded her.
Returning Sītā I will take refuge in you...
Go home to your own land, O Raghunātha, with Sītā!

Rāma announces that the war is over, the gods worry, and Rāvaṇa starts back to Laṅkā to fetch Sītā. As he is on his way however, he remembers that the sure way to heaven is death at Rāma's hands, so by ending the war in this way, he has deprived himself of salvation. He then turns around, makes Rāma think he has been deceived, and the fight begins again. Rāma shoots off Rāvaṇa's heads one by one, but each time they regrow; finally he is told that only the *brahma astra*, the *Brahma* weapon, can kill the demon. He fires it and Rāvaṇa falls dead.

This is the way the story appears in the first two editions. When we compare it to the *baṭatalā* versions, we find that it has been radically transformed. In the popular versions, as above, Rāvaṇa abruptly throws down his weapons and begins to praise Rāma. There the similarity ends. In the *baṭatalā* editions the gods are equal to the situation: they send Sarasvatī the goddess of speech to sit in Rāvaṇa's throat where, speaking in Rāvaṇa's voice, she insults Rāma. The battle is resumed and Rāma shoots off the demon's heads, they regrow; he splits the demon's body in two with an arrow, it grows together. Rāvaṇa, alive but demoralized, gives Devī a *stuti*, the goddess is pleased with it and comes down to the battlefield to comfort him. When Rāma sees Devī holding Rāvaṇa in his very chariot, he realises that he is fighting in vain and throws away his weapons and sits down to brood. In heaven the gods are equally upset at the turn of events, but again intervene.

Realizing that the only thing for Rāma to do is to worship the goddess himself, they advise him of this and give him instructions about how to do so. Rāma sets up a clay statue of the goddess²⁷ and offers it 1001 blue lotuses. To test the hero, Devī steals one of the flowers but Rāma is unfazed and resolves to complete the offering by giving one of his blue eyes in place of the missing flower. As he is about to gouge out his eye with an arrow, the goddess appears to tell him she is pleased with his devotion and will grant him his wish.

Meanwhile, taking no chances, Rāvaṇa instructs his priest Bṛhaspati to read the *Candī Pāṭh*, the sacred text of the goddess, in order to ensure her continued protection. Rāma is told what Rāvaṇa is up to and instructs Hanūmān to obstruct the reading, so the monkey assumes the shape of a fly and sits on a line of the text.

Bṛhaspati, however, knows the text so well he reads it correctly anyway, so Hanūmān assumes his giant form to frighten him into desisting. Displeased, the goddess then leaves Lāṅkā for Kailāsa. One more complication is added. Vibhīṣaṇa informs Rāma that there is only one weapon which can slay Rāvaṇa, the *brahma astra*, and this Mandodarī has hidden somewhere in her inner compartments. To obtain it Hanūmān takes the form of an old Brahman and tricks Mandodarī into revealing that it is secreted within a pillar. Hanūmān returns with the weapon to Rāma who then fatally wounds Rāvaṇa. In a final flourish as Rāvaṇa lies dying Rāma asks him for instructions on government (*rājanīti*) so that when he returns to Ayodhyā he can govern it properly.

The *baṭatalā* pandits have replaced the comparatively simple account of the first edition with an elaborate compound of rather disparate elements. While somewhat confused one must admit that it is far more entertaining than the earlier interpolation and this, besides its obvious religious aspects, must have played a role in its adoption. From one point of view all such inserts are regrettable corruptions, this at least would be the case when one is concerned with establishing which elements in the Kṛttibāsa tradition are genuine. We can consider Kṛttibās in two ways: on the one hand as the author of the first Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* and concern ourselves with attempting to reconstruct as much as possible of the original text. This is the frozen, the classical Kṛttibās, the Kṛttibās of libraries and manuscripts. The other Kṛttibās is the living *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition through the medium of which the great

mass of Hindu Bengalis have become acquainted with the matter of the epic. This could only remain vital by continually absorbing new ideas and adapting itself to new views, and in these terms, the Kṛttibās of the *baṭatalā* books is as interesting an object of study as the oldest manuscripts. The fact that such interpolations were added to them at such a late date is merely incidental; they are as much a part of the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition as anything added earlier.

The earliest vernacular *Rāmāyaṇas* were rather unsophisticated works based primarily on orally transmitted materials and in a wider sense provincial and limited. The *bhakti* "revolution" in eastern India resulted in Bengali literature losing much of its parochial character and its increasing receptivity for new, all-Indian currents of thought. As the *Rāmāyaṇa* came to be an important religious text, it had to accommodate itself to these new trends of thought in order to retain its relevance. This is the reason why Vālmīki was not especially influential in the medieval period; he was honored as a poet, but when Bengalis looked to Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇas*, they looked to the *Ādhyātma*, *Adbhuta* or *Ānanda* and other thoroughly *bhaktized* versions of the original work.²⁸ The continual revision of Kṛttibās reached its final stage, its flowering so to speak, in the 19th century *baṭatalā* editions. Had this not been done, he would not now enjoy the popularity and influence he does. The *baṭatalā* pandits did not arbitrarily alter the text, but revised it in the traditional manner. To illustrate this we can turn back to the episodes of the *Laṅkā Kāṇḍa* which were sketched out above. The matter which was added was not new in any sense but had been taken from other current *Rāmāyaṇa* traditions primarily, but not invariably, to illustrate religious ideas.

The Taraṅisen story displays the same motif as analogous episodes in the *Ādhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, just as does the account of Rāvaṇa's death in the 1802 Serampore edition. It was also a part of the vernacular *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. The account of Sarasvatī seating herself in Rāvaṇa's throat is another motif from *bhakti Rāmāyaṇas*, though in them it is Mantharā's, not Rāvaṇa's, throat she occupies.²⁹ Rāma's worship of Devī is very much a part of Bengali tradition and far older than Kṛttibās. It can be found in a number of *upapurāṇas* written in Bengal, including the *Bṛhaddharma*,³⁰ the *Devībhāgavata*³¹ and the *Mahābhāgavata Purāṇas*. According to the last, for example, Pārvatī instructed Viṣṇu to worship her as an earthen image during the autumn

season "according to the Vedic rites" before killing Rāvaṇa,³² an "untimely" worship as earlier she had been worshipped in the spring. Thus this episode often appears under the rubric *akāla bodhana*, "the untimely invocation (of the goddess)", in popular editions. It is perhaps the best known episode in Kṛttibās and considered to reflect the accomodation of the Bengali śākta cult with the Vaiṣṇava.

An episode involving the offering of an eye can be found in the *pātāla khaṇḍa* of the *Paḍma Purāṇa* wherein we are told that Hari once offered Śiva one of his eyes from want of a flower.³³ The story of Hanūmān spoiling the reading of the *Caṇḍī Pāṭh* is very folkish and there Hanūmān plays the role of trickster/magician so common in the vernacular literature. The formulistic air of the episode, i.e. the notion that the scrupulous adherence to ritual form is vital for its effect seems to reflect the arid legalism of late medieval Hinduism. The account of the hidden fatal arrow is a form of a familiar folklore motif. Finally the dying Rāvaṇa's instructions on government were modeled on those given by the arrow-riddled Bhīṣma in the *Bhīṣma parva* of the *Mahābhārata*. Thus all these elements were present in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and allied traditions familiar to Bengalis and a part of them probably were present in one or another of Kṛttibās' very many manuscripts, for the Kṛttibāsan tradition was a catch-all in which all sorts of popular elements found a place.

Still today editors are probably padding further editions of Kṛttibās with new lines but the process is fairly much complete, as the basic constituents of the *baṭatalā Rāmāyaṇas* have become so familiar to Bengalis that their exclusion or revision would be resented. This mass of *Rāmāyaṇa* material stamped with the name of Kṛttibās, a summation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition in Bengal, is the result of five hundred years of growth and an unknown number of contributors, and in both form and authorship, the collective product of an entire culture.

Notes

1. There is controversy about Kṛttibās' date but today most scholars place him in the last half of the 15th century.
2. As in Bulke 1962.
3. As in Zbavitel 1970.
4. Mazumdar 1958.
5. Mukhopādhyāya 1959, p. 65.
6. They are Hīrendranāth Datta who edited the *Ayodhyā* and *Uttar Kāṇḍas* (1900 & 1903) and Nalinīkānta Bhaṭṭaśālī who edited the *Ādikāṇḍa* (1936).
7. Datta 1900, p.i.
8. Praphullacandra Bandyopādhyāya, cited in Bāndyopādhyāya 1970³, p. 511.
9. On the English title page the date is 1802, on the Bengali 1803. It is not known why two dates are found.
10. In his edition of Kṛttibās (1949⁴), Pūrṇacandra De tells the story of Jayagopāl (he refers the reader to an article of his printed in *Baṅgabāṇī* in 1922) and believes that Jayagopāl who worked under Carey between 1801 and 1807 revised the 1802 edition as described here. De apparently confuses the 1802 and the 1834 editions; he seems unaware of the latter.
11. Cited in Bandyopādhyāya 1970³, p. 514.
12. The history of the printed editions is sketched in Bandyopādhyāya 1970³, pp. 514-522.
13. Volume III, p. 170. The copy consulted is that preserved in the Asiatic Society library in Calcutta.
14. Volume III, p. 128. The copy is that in the British Museum Library.
15. In Bengali mss. the meter is quite commonly irregular. This could be the result of carelessness on the part of scribes but I suspect that medieval poets were not as meticulous in this respect as their descendants.
16. 1802, III, p. 160; 1834, III, p. 120.
17. Bandyopādhyāya 1970³, p. 516.
18. III, p. 154.
19. III, p. 162.
20. De 1949⁴, p. 15.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Bandyopādhyāya 1970³, p. 514.
23. The editions used here are those of Pūrṇacandra De, Subodhacandra Majumdār (new ed., Calcutta 1961), Tārācānd Dās (9th printing Calcutta n.d.) and Aśutos Bhaṭṭācārya (Akhil Bhārat Janaśikṣā Pracār Samiti, Calcutta n.d.).
24. Bandyopādhyāya 1970³, p. 551.
25. As in Citrā Deb's introduction to Saṅkar Kabicandra's *Biśṇupurī Rāmāyaṇ*, Calcutta 1386 B.S., p. xxviii.
26. 1802, VI, p. 409.
27. The goddess is referred to and given separate *stutis* in all her popular forms: Caṇḍī, Durgā and Kālī.
28. To the medieval Hindu, of course, all these works were written by Vālmīki.
29. As in the *Ādhyātma R.* and the *Rāmācaritmanas* of Tulasīdās.
30. *Pūrvvakhāṇḍa*, 18-22.
31. *Skandha* III, 28-30.
32. 36-48; Hazra 1958, p. 269.
33. 106:34b, cited in Chatterjee 1967, p. 73.

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