



The Rāmāṅā Tradition of Odisha

Laxman Majhi

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Sanskrit, Utkal University, Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India.

Abstract – Rāmāṅā a popular form of traditional theatre in the state of Odisha. It provides a detailed analysis of the historical evolution of Rāmāṅā and its unique features that distinguish it from other forms of theatre. The paper also delves into the various aspects of Rāmāṅā, including its music, dance, and elaborate stage design. The research paper focuses on the theatrical tradition of Rāmāṅā in the Indian state of Odisha. It explores the history and evolution of this popular form of traditional theatre, and its unique features and characteristics that set it apart from other forms of theatre. The paper delves into the music, dance, and stage design that are integral to Rāmāṅā, and how they contribute to the overall experience of the performance. The author also examines the social and cultural significance of Rāmāṅā, and how it has been used as a medium for cultural expression and social commentary. Through this research, the author aims to promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of Rāmāṅā as an important component of Odisha's rich cultural heritage.

Keywords: Rāmāṅā, theatrical tradition, Odisha, Rāmāyaṅa, festival, pāṅḍāṅs, Odissi music, mardala, dholak, cymbals, actors, costumes, makeup, dance, dialogues, stunts, acrobatics, cultural expression, social commentary, morality, justice, good over evil.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rāmāṅā is a popular form of traditional theatre that has been a part of the theatrical tradition in the Indian state of Odisha for centuries. The term 'Rāmāṅā' literally means the 'play of Rāma', referring to the epic Hindu mythological character Rāma, and his story as told in the epic poem, the Rāmāyaṅa. Rāmāṅā is typically performed during the festival of Rāma Navamī, which commemorates the birth of Rāma, and is also performed during other festivals throughout the year. The performances are usually held in open-air theatres called 'pāṅḍāṅs', which temporary structures are made of bamboo, thatched roofs, and decorated with colorful cloths and lights. The performance of Rāmāṅā is a collaborative effort, with actors, musicians, and dancers all playing an important role in bringing the story to life. The musical aspect of Rāmāṅā is particularly noteworthy, with traditional Odissi music and instruments such as the mardala, dholak, and cymbals being used to create a mesmerizing soundscape.

The actors in Rāmāṅā usually wear elaborate costumes and makeup to depict the various characters from the Rāmāyaṅa, such as Rāma, Sītā, Lakṣmaṅa, and Rāvaṅa. The performances are marked by intricate dance sequences, dramatic dialogues, and impressive stunts and acrobatics, all of which make for a captivating experience for the audience. In addition to its entertainment value, Rāmāṅā also has a significant cultural and social significance in Odisha. It serves as a medium for cultural expression and social commentary, with themes such as morality, justice, and the triumph of good over evil being explored in the performances. Overall, Rāmāṅā is a vibrant and captivating form of traditional theatre that continues to be an important part of Odisha's rich cultural heritage.

2. RĀMAKATHĀ IN SCULPTURE, PAINTING AND LITERATURE

When the character 'Rāma' was known in the Odiā speaking regions is in question. However, he was in local folklore and his līlās became conspicuous in temple architecture and paintings of Odisha. Stories of the Rāmāyaṇa, i.e, Abduction of Sītā, Friendship between Rāma and Sugrīva, Death of Bali, Monkes and Bears Engaged in the Making of Setubandha and images of Hanuman, Sugrīva, Jaṭāyu, Mārica, Surpaṇakhā, Māyamṛga and many more are elaborately chiseled on the panels of temples between eighth and fifteenth century A.D.¹



Fig -1: Svarṇajalesvar Temple, 8th Century

During those days there was also the tradition of decorating temple walls and domes with the images of epic and purāṇic characters and deities. But these sculptures have been victims of the vagaries of harsh climate over a long period of time. And, they fail to say the exact time they were born. Colour- paintings seen on the walls of Jagannath temple, another small Jagannātha temple at Maṅikarnikāsāhi, Gangamaṭha, Bada Odiāmaṭha at Puri are age- old witness of the name Rāma. There are few other temples; i.e, Virañcinārāyaṇa temple (18th century A.D., Buguda), Śrīkurma temple (18th century, Odisha and Andhra boarder), Jagannātha temple (19th century, Dharakot) where facets of Rāma's life are diligently painted.²



Fig -2: Wall -painting, Virañcinārāyaṇa temple, Guguda



Fig -3: Wall Painting, Bada Odiāmaṭha, Puri

Besides, Rāma is also enlivened on the surface of palm- leaves and patas (specially made clothes) indicate typical style of Odishan paintings. The oldest palm- leaf manuscript is Gītagovinda of Jayadev where the text is scribed along with illustrations on lines and colours by Dhanañjaya in 17th century A.D. Though this is a text about eternal love affairs between Radha (Prakruti) and Kṛṣṇa (Puruṣa), Rāma is invoked as seventh incarnation of Parambrahma among the rest.³



Fig -4: Palm-Leaf Painting, Gītagovinda, Fighting between Rāma and Rāvaṇa

Further, paṭacitra have a history of more than five hundred years where lives of gods and goddesses are painted on the surface of specially made clothes.⁴



Fig -5: Paṭa Painting, Puri, Ahalyā Udharaṇa, Puri

However, there seem to be a striking resemblance among all the three different styles of painting, i.e. mural painting, palm- leaf manuscript and paṭa- painting. Most of them are profile-shaped having sharp outlines to illustrate the contour of different parts of body, heavy costume, jewelries and motifs of flowers, creepers, leaves, animals and birds are neatly elaborated. And, the artist's favorite colours are usually black, blue and red.⁵

The writing of the Rāmāyaṇa across India took new course in eleventh century A.D. The forerunners amongst the galaxy of poets are Kampan, Raṅganātha and Sāraḷā Dāsa – the great trio who translated the Sanskrit text into Tamil, Telugu and Odia languages respectively.⁶ They started reconstructing the classic in their own way to make the natives aware of their status as human beings. These poets are honored as the strong voice of protest against Brahminic hegemony and are regarded as great champions of a society of fellow-feeling and good- governance.

However, it is the fact that the philosophers, pundits, creative artistes and practitioners of different schools of religion, such as, the Jainas, the Buddhists, the Śāktas, the Shaivaites and the Vaishnavites have been reinterpreting the master text through various genres and languages as suited to their ideology.⁷ A.N. Jani has prepared an exhaustive list of the Rāmāyaṇas in Sanskrit of varied ideology.⁸ However, scholars of different schools of religion, dalits and women have also questioned Rāma's attitude towards women and the people at the lowest strata of the society and have alleged the Rāmāyaṇa as the voice of Brahmanical hegemony.⁹ Interestingly, when Kampan and Tulasī Dās see Rāma as nirguṇabrahma, the Rasikasampradāya conceives him not as a hero, but an icon of love and lust in nature.¹⁰ The Rāmāyaṇa has also been transported to south- east Asian countries and Sri Lanka, Japan and surprisingly it embraced regional cultures, religious beliefs, languages and literatures.¹¹ But Darius L Swann's comments that the Rāmāyaṇa is, "the voice of Hindu society" and "the vision of what national life might be". In my opinion this seems to be a wrong interpretation.¹² This is, rather, a grand narrative of humanistic ideals and ideal statesmanship.



Looking at the textual diversities and varied philosophical discourses, Paula Richman has rightly pointed out that their differences intrigue us because they testify to the diversities of Indian culture, indicating that throughout history multiple voices were heard within the Rāmāyaṇa tradition¹³. And the narratives of the texts developed in later period are not faithful to Vālmīki, but articulation of social aspirations and ideological concerns of various social groups. The Rāmāyaṇas of Odisha should be discussed on the basis of aforesaid concept.

Among the north-east Indian languages, Sāraḷā happens to be the first translator of Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa as Vicitra Rāmāyaṇa – a product of contemporary socio-cultural and political milieu. This text is unique for two reasons; first, the poet has authored the narratives of the Rāmāyaṇa in flash-back style remarkable in episodes of "Sītā in exile in Vālmīki's ashRāma" and second, in the story of the cowherd couple quarrelling among themselves. Hearing an unpleasant remark on her chastity by the husband, the enraged milk-maid flared in rage and retaliated strongly saying that blaming one's wife who uses to move around village streets selling milk and at times making pleasant gossip with other male folk for the purpose would rather be appreciated, than blamed. And, she can never a Sītā relishing the arrogance of her husband Rāma for no fault of hers¹⁴. There is another text available as Vilaṅkā Rāmāyaṇa whose authorship is in question. This text speaks of the atrocity of Sahashrasira, a thousand-headed demon king of Vilaṅkā. On the request of the devatās (gods), Rāma along with Lakṣmaṇa and Hanumāna went to Vilaṅkā to punish the demon, but they failed. And, in the end, Sītā could effortlessly overpower and killed the demon. This text bears likeness to Advuta Rāmāyaṇa, a piece of work in which śakti has been portrayed as the primordial deity, the symbol of eternal womanhood and the energy that controls the happenings of the whole universe.¹⁵ Besides, Sāraḷā's weakness for the Rāmāyaṇa is also exposed in his great work the Mahābhārata where Rāmakathā is narrated in brief in Banaparva.¹⁶ But the crux of Sāraḷā's creative excellence lies in looking into the properties of the universe, both the nonliving and the living and his humanly approach helps the people of all walks of life understanding the reality of worldly living. In later years, Odisha witnesses Sāraḷā's ideological praxis manifesting through the works of Bala Rāma Dāsa, Arjuna Dāsa, Dhanañjaya Bhañja, Upendra Bhañja and many others in different genres¹⁷.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Rāmāyaṇa tradition of Odisha is a significant cultural and religious practice that has been passed down through generations. This tradition is centered on the retelling of the Hindu epic Ramayana through musical performances, which often involve colorful costumes, elaborate sets, and lively dances. The Rāmāyaṇa tradition of Odisha has deep roots in the state's history and is an essential part of the region's cultural heritage. The tradition has evolved over time, incorporating new elements and adapting to changing social contexts. Today, it continues to be a popular form of entertainment and a way for people to connect with their cultural and religious roots. Despite the challenges posed by modernization and changing social mores, the Rāmāyaṇa tradition of Odisha remains a vibrant and important part of the state's cultural landscape. Its enduring popularity is a testament to its significance and the deep connections it fosters between people and their traditions.

REFERENCES

- [1] See, Joanna Williams, 1986, *The Two-Headed Deer: Illustrations of The Rāmāyaṇa in Orissa*. The last portion of this book contains plates of Rāmakathā carved on the panels of temples. Figure no281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 286.



- [2] To Dinanath Pathi, the mural painting style of Odisha is as such "Orissan murals look distinctive with bright colours, bold lines with a powerful but stiff delineation of forms xx. The line plays important role and the quality of the work is often judged from the sweep, surety and even delicacy of the lines. Even though much of the paintings are lost, it shows a regional style which has evolved through the centuries to give a separate identity in the context of Indian mural painting history." Mural Paintings in Orissa, 1981, p.30
- [3] Gītagovinda of Jayadev, a twelfth century Sanskrit text enunciates the love affair of the divine -deo, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. This text begins with invocatory ślokas in praise of ten incarnations of Vishnu. And, Rama is one of them. Dhanañjaya of Odisha has prepared a commentary of this text along with pictorial illustration on the surface of palm- leaves. Besides, paintings on Rāmakathā is also seen in Bhāgavatpurāṇa (artist; Brajanātha Badajenā, 18th/19th c), Durgā-Hanumānstuti (Sārathi Maṇḍala), Vaidehīśavilāsa (Upendra Bhañja, artist:Sātrughna of Baripada , 1832), Lāvaṇyavatī (Upendra Bhañja, artist : Raghunātha Prsty of Nayagarh, 19th century) See, Gītagovinda, Bhagyalipi Malla, ed. 2009, p.13
- [4] The history of paṭa -painting is associated with Jagannātha temple. Therefore, its tradition is age- old. To B. Mohanty," the totem like appearance of Sri Jagannātha, as it is represented on iconographic paintings, is a pointer to this direction. At the same time, it should be noted that the relationship of paṭa-painters and paṭa-paintings with Sri Jagannātha is more than structural and is associated with worship and rituals." Paṭa-paintings of Orissa, 1984, P. 5.
- [5] For details of Palm-leaf Manuscript tradition of Orissa, see, Citra-pothi: Illustrated Palm-leaf Manuscripts From Orissa, J.P. Das, 2007. Introduction
- [6] The full length Telug Rāmāyaṇa penned in the past are Raṅganth Rāmāyaṇa (first half of 13th century A.D.), Bhaskar Rāmāyaṇa (14th Century A.D.) , Molla Rāmāyaṇa (15th Century A.D.). Kṛṣṇacaitanya, History of Telug Literature, 1971.
- [7] See the following papers: a. Rāmāyaṇa in Jaina Tradition : Umākānta P. Shah, The Prakrit and Apabhramsa Rāmāyaṇa : H.C. Bhayani, in, Asian Versions in Rāmāyaṇa, K.R. Srinivas Iyengar,ed.,1994, pp. 57-82: Jaina Rāmāyaṇa and their Sources : V. M. Kulkarni, in, The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition in Asia, V. Raghavan,ed.,1998, pp. 226-241.
- [8] A.N. Jani provides details of Rāmakathā in different forms in Sanskrit literature in his paper, Different Versions of Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa in Sanskrit, in, Assian Variations in Rāmāyaṇa, K.R. Srinivas Iyengar, ed., 1994. The sections are, 1. The Ramopakhyana in the Mahābhārata, 2.Riligious literature on Rāma, 3. Rāma story in purāṇic literature and Appendix. He has also mentioned some independent versions of the Rāmāyaṇa as such, The Yogavāsiṣṭha Rāmāyaṇa, The Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa, The Advuta Rāmāyaṇa, The Ananda Rāmāyaṇa, The Bhuṣundi Rāmāyaṇa, The Moha Rāmāyaṇa, The Mantra Rāmāyaṇa, The Vedanta Rāmāyaṇa etc. in, Different versions of Vālmiki's Rāmāyaṇa in Sanskrit.pp.28-56
- [9] See, A Rāmāyaṇa of their own :Women's Oral Tradition in Telug , U.N. Roa, in, Many Rāmāyaṇas, Paula Richman,ed,1991, pp.133-34 and E.V. Ramaswami's Reading of the Rāmāyaṇa, Paula Richman, in, Many Rāmāyaṇas, pp, 175-201
- [10] See, Many Rāmāyaṇas, Paula Richman,ed,1991, p. 127
- [11] How the Rāmāyaṇa has been transported to South -East Asian Countries the following works may be gone through. a. Glimpses of Early Indo-Indonesian Culture : Himansu Bhusan Sirkar ,2001, The Migration of the Rāmāyaṇa Story to Indonesia and Some Problems Connected with the Structure and Contents of the Old Javanese Rāmāyaṇa, pp274-286, b. Rāma-Legends and Rāma-Reliefs in Indonesia : Willem Stutterheim ,1989, c. The Rāmāyaṇa in Indonesia: Malini Saran and Vinod C. Khanna ,2004, chapter 1, The Beginning and Chapter 2, The Cultural Journey, pp. 1-31
- [12] When writing about Rāmālīlā, Darius L Swann states that" it is a national drama also because it has been the vehicle of promoting the story of Rāma and Sītā, whose images are powerfully moulded by Indian ideals of manhood, womanhood and whose mythical rule has come to exemplify the ideal Indian state. Through the Rāmālīlā, a mass education takes place with annual renewals in collective Hindu mind, a notion of the integrity of Hindu society and vision of what the national life might be. In, Indian Theatre: Tradition and performance, eds. 1991, Parley P Richmond et el, p215.
- [13] See, Many Rāmāyaṇas, ed., 1991, Paula Richman, Introduction, p. 13.
- [14] Sāraḷā Dāsa's Vicitra Rāmāyaṇa,ed.1984, S. Mishra
- [15] See, Sāraḷā Dāsa's Vilāṅkā Rāmāyaṇa text is exclusively written in praise of Shakti , Vilāṅkā Rāmāyaṇa,ed. B. Pattnaik.
- [16] See, Sāraḷā Dāsa's The Mahābhārata ,ed.2007,1964, Vana parba, pp.1601-16
- [17] From mid-16th to mid-19th century more than twenty Rāmākāvya and thirty cautiṣā are written. Note-worthy among them among them are Ramabibha (Arjuna Das: 16th c), Rāmāgāthā (Govinda Bhañja: 17th c), Tīkā Rāmāyaṇa (Maheswar: 17th c), Advuta Rāmāyaṇa (Haladhar:17th c), Jānakīvilāsa (Rāma



Dāsa (18th c), Rāmarasāmṛtasindhu (Kahnu Dāsa: 18th c), Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa (Gopāla Telanga 18th c), Tīkā Rāmāyaṇa (Maheswar : 18th c), Raghunāthavilāsa (Dhanañjaya Bhañja : 18th c), Vaidehīśavilāsa (Upendra Bhañja : 18th c), Rāghavavilāsa (Jadumañi : 19th c) and Kauśalyāvilāpa cautiṣā (Raghunātha), Jānakīvicheda, Sītākāruṇya (Rāma Dāsa), Rāmakrodha (Viśvanātha), Sītākāruṇya (Viṣṇu Dāsa), Jānakīśaraṇa (Lokanātha) and many more. This list is prepared relying upon the information provided by Sudarsana Achariya, in, Odia Kāvyaakauśala ,1983 , and Raṅga O Rekhā re Cautiṣā ,2014,See, Appendix.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Das, J.P, 2007. Chitra-Pothi: Illustrated Palm-leaf Manuscripts from Orissa, New Delhi, Niyogi Books.
2. Das, Sarala, VichitraRāmāyaṇa, Sachidananda Mishra, (ed),1984.Chhatrapur, Sachidananda Mishra.
3. Dash, Suryanarayan, 1976, Jagannath Mandira O Jagannatatwa, Cuttack, Friends Publishers.
4. Dehejia, Vidya, 1980, Early Stone Temples in Orissa, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd.
5. Gargi, Balawanta, 1991, Folk Theatre of India, Calcutta, Rupa & Co. Pvt. Ltd.
6. Khuntia, Viswanath,(n.d.) VichitraRāmāyaṇa, , Cuttack, Dharmagrantha Stores.
7. Kulke, Hermann, 2005/1978. Royal Temple Policy and the Structure of Medieval Hindu Kingdoms, in, The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa , Eschmann, et al,(eds) New Delhi, Manohar.
8. Malla, Bhagyalipi, (ed.) 2008, Sri Jayadeva's Gitagovinda, Bhubaneswar, Orissa State Museum.
9. Mishra, Bhskar, 2012, Matha Parampara, Cuttack, Friends publishers.
10. Mishra, Nilamani,(ed.)1982, Ramalila, Bhubaneswar, Orissa Sahitya Academi.
11. Mohanty, B, 1984. Pata-paintings of Orissa, New Delhi, Publication Division, Government of India.
12. Raghavan, V. (ed.) 1998/1980, The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition In Asia, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi.
13. Rath, Mrutunjaya, 1923.VichitraRāmāyaṇa, in, Utkal Sahitya-Vol.27, No 4 and 6