

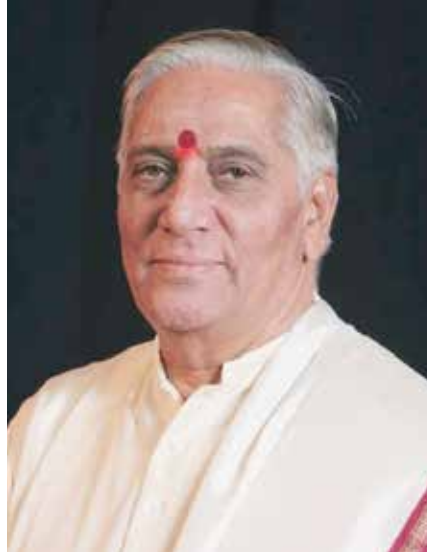
In the quest for Rama

V.A.K. Ranga Rao

Malladi Ramakrishna Sastri pointed out the path and Arudra whipped me along, with corrections, suggestions, and yes, admonitions. Many other men too, authorities in their fields, led me up to a higher storey. If women of such stature took me to be an intellectual dwarf and were kind, that was *vatsalyam* (fondness), the men were impressed by my curiosity and honest admission of ignorance, that was *karunyam* (compassion).

All I knew about the Ramayana when young was through stories in school texts and the films I saw in Telugu and two in Hindi—Prakash Pictures’ engaging *Ram Rajya* (Bharatanatyam Kamala is seen as a child dancing in this) and enthralling *Bharat Milap*. Incidentally the former was the first film to be dubbed into Tamil from Hindi (by AVM). Tulsidas’s *Sriramachandra kripalu bhajamana* as a chorus is the title music in *Ram Rajya* and in Tamil it is Arunachala Kavi’s *Enakkunnirupadam* from the *Ramanatakam* (sung by D.K. Pattammal).

A serious interest was ignited by the series of ballets (*nriya natakam*) staged under the aegis of Kalakshetra by Rukmini Devi. I reviewed some of them for the *Indian Express*. In this, the help of Bhagavatula Seetarama Sarma was considerable. On the Kalakshetra staff, he was a treasure trove of music, dance and Sanskrit and was my Golden Fleece. The extent of my Sanskrit knowledge was limited to *Meghairmeduramambaram*, the first sloka in *Geeta Govindam*. Despite this, Sarma patiently



Seetarama Sarma

explained the slokas. Out of the twenty or so I imbibed from him, I found *Na ham janami kundale* most memorable and poignant. While being abducted by Ravana, Seeta ties up some of her jewellery in a bundle (not all, as her tiara—*choodamani*—is with her to be given to Hanuman in Asokavana) and drops it while over Rishyamuka. Sugreeva shows them to Rama and asks whether he can identify them. Rama tells Lakshmana, “My eyes are blurred with tears. Can you say if they are Seeta’s?” His reply: “I know not her earrings or armbands but I do recognise her anklets, made familiar by my daily *namaskaram* to her feet”.

Valmiki is known as a contemporary of Rama, the first to author the *Ramayana*, tune and teach it to Kusa and Lava, making him the first *vaggeyakara* and also a teacher of music. After that there have been innumerable versions in all Indian languages—Tulsi (Avadhi),

Kamban (Tamil), Molla (Telugu), and Pampa (Kannada) being those I have heard of.

There are many minor and a few major deviations from Valmiki’s, in the later ones and I hold only his as the ‘documentary’ truth. A man whom I admire (I think his translations from Kannada, Tamil and Telugu devotional poetry, are the final word; and afterwords in those volumes, are master keys to unravel the Eternal Truth) A.K. Ramanujan, holds a different view. In *Many Ramayanas*, essays edited by Paula Richman, he states categorically that all Ramayanas are equally valid and cites his reasons.

Most films show incidents which are not from Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. According to Valmiki, Ahalya is not turned into a stone and she does not regain her human form when touched by Rama’s foot. Gautama’s curse says she will be invisible (*adrisyaroopa*) and become normal when Rama enters the precincts of the hermitage. Similarly, Seeta *Swayamvaram* is not a choice by the bride as the name implies, one at which dozens of suitors, including Ravana, are present on a particular advertised date. It is a conditional marriage (as is Draupadi’s and Lakshmana’s where the suitors—Arjuna, Krishna—are to bring down the image of a fish revolving above); only Rukmini’s, Damayanti’s and historical Samyukta’s are true self-chosen pairings), ‘Whoever strings the bow of Siva, given to Janaka, shall wed Seeta’.

As per the licence suggested by Ramanujan, dancers too have taken the liberty to interpolate their own

thoughts. Sathyanarayana Raju of Bengaluru, while interpreting a Dasarpadam *Hanumantadeva namo* during the season at Chennai, showed that even at the first meeting with Hanuman, Rama knew that she was abducted by Ravana. If this was the case, why would Sugreeva have to send men in different directions to locate her? A further liberty Raju took pertained to Siva. His lady devotee asks him to shed his elephant skin clothing so that she could come closer to him! It is possible that he did not understand the implication.

Parshwanath Upadhye, also from Bengaluru, presented vignettes from the *Ramayana*, along with wife Shruti and another male dancer Aditya. It was beautiful in a pointillistic fashion but for one visual incongruity. While abandoning Seeta on the order of her husband and his brother Rama, who is more worried about what people would say than about a proven fact, Lakshmana is shown ferrying her across in a boat. This immediately brought to mind an image of what happened fourteen years earlier, Guhan rowing the three across the river Sarayu.

A dance performance is a fleeting event, seen by a few hundred people and forgotten in time. What about essays in books/magazines published by respected institutions, written by distinguished personages?

One such instance. In *Art Connect* (Jan-June 2012, a special issue about the *Ramayana*) published by IFA, Bengaluru, veteran writer C.S. Lakshmi says: “When asked to prove her chastity, she (Kamban’s Seeta)” According to Tamil scholar S. Raghuraman, she is not asked to do so by anybody in Kamba *Ramayanam*. In Valmiki too. Rama tells Seeta: “As a kshatriya should, I released you from captivity. Now you can choose to live with whomever you wish,” and names some men around. Aghast at his heartless implication, Seeta asks Lakshmana to light a fire so that she can immolate herself. When she jumps into the pyre, Agni emerges carrying her, saying that he cannot bear the heat of her purity; only then does Rama accept her.

An episode from Valmiki which I have not seen on stage or screen or heard from a public platform is this. When Lakshmana swoons hit by Indrajit’s weapon, Rama thinks he is dead and laments, “Wives are dime a dozen but where can I get a brother like him? Why did I have to wage a war to free my wife and lose such a brother?”

Doctorates in Telugu literature are sore with me for not being cowed down by their degrees. One such, Dr. Paidipala, poked fun at my ignorance, when I quoted a film song of Arudra,

Asokavanamuna Seeta, Sokinche viyogamu cheta, meaning ‘In the Asokavana (garden) Seeta wept at her separation (from Rama)’. While commenting on it, I wrote that she was under the Asoka (Saraca asoca) tree. He spewed fire and brimstone. “Ranga Rao is wrong. He doesn’t know anything about *Ramayana*. She was under a Simshupa (*Dalbergia sissoo*) tree, not Asoka!” he thundered.

I turned to scholar Mudumbai Narasimhachary, once the head of the Department of Vaishnavism, University of Madras, as I did earlier when I needed guidance about Valmiki’s work. He was my master key to open Valmikian chambers. Off the cuff he told me many things and asked me to go through a reliable, sloka to sloka Telugu translation. I did and it was clear that there were many interpolations, saying the same

M. Narasimhachary



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thing in a slightly different way. I deduced this: Seeta was under an Asoka (Saraca asoca) tree. Hanuman alighted on a Simshupa (Dalbergia sissoo) tree opposite, from where he could have a good look at her. Once she gets under a Simshupa for a while. This is what I could glean from the translation.

Some scholars opine that Valmiki was not the author of the Bala and Uttara kandas, where Rama is treated as a god. In Valmiki's view as illustrated by the in-between kandas, they say, he was only a purushottama, a superior human being.

The Sahitya Akademi, in their *Makers of Indian Literature* series, brought out a monograph on Valmiki, by Ilpravuluri Panduranga Rao (translations were published in many Indian languages; in Telugu by R. Ananta Padmanabharao). In this book of 94 pages, less than two are about Valmiki and the rest is about the *Ramayana*. Understandable because so little is really known about him. Some scholars dismiss as legends the tales of his being a waylayer, robbing travellers and the 'Manishada' episode (his cursing a hunter who killed the male of a pair of birds, in sloka form), though *Adhyatma Ramayanam*, *Padma* and *Skanda Puranas* mention it. There is no consensus about his period too, in spite of his appearance as a character in Uttara Kanda!

Madurai N. Krishna Iyengar was the spiritual advisor of the Ratnam Sisters (Anita, Pritha) and Sudharani Raghupathy. Through these dancers I came to know him well. That is how I am obliged to these dancers. He was a special kind of benefactor who responded to my musical yearning. A singer, musician exposed to Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, and a composer of musical pieces



N. Krishna Iyengar

for dance, he could easily judge that my interest in dance songs was immense and knowledge of music, infinitesimal.

His first blessing: I published a book of Kandukuri Rudra Kavi's *Janardhanashtakam* at the behest of my guru Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry, with a dozen paintings by Bapu and Arudra's detailed introduction. What's more, I had the book released in Kandukuru, and danced to them in the local Janardhana temple that evening. Seeing the book and learning of what happened, Krishnan took three verses and turned them into a sabdam. Sudharani Raghupathy, whose parents and mother-in-law were my friends, had the good fortune of staging it for the first time. From then I have been a beneficiary of his support. Once his disciple had the tarangam sung as *Govardhana giridhaara*. I told her it should be 'giridhara' to be grammatical Sanskrit. She wouldn't listen. Krishnan told her "Rao is right. Change it". This was before the publication of the two-volume *Srikrishna Leela Tarangini* by scholar B. Natarajan, with lyrics in Devanagari, explanations in English. It is the Kamadhenu now for seekers

of the *Krishna Leela Tarangini* by Sivanarayana Teertha.

Using the soft corner he had for me, I asked Madurai N. Krishnan to compose a jatiswaram in Manavati. As nothing happened for months, I reminded him and he said there was little in the raga to be the capital of a jatiswaram. Then I recalled that B. Rajanikantha Rao had tuned a film song in *Manavathi* (Telugu, Tamil, 1952), *Tana panthame* sung by Ko Lanka Rani R. Balasaraswathi Devi. This was in Rasali. The only known song in this raga at that time was Tyagaraja's solitaire, *Aparadhamula*. I knew this kriti through the 78 rpm record from the film *St. Thyagaraja* (Tamil, 1937) sung by Natesa Iyer in the lead role. I suggested this raga and presto! the jatiswaram emerged like Excalibur in no time.

I was insatiable. Why not beg for another favour when Krishna was so giving! It let my imagination soar. I wanted a tillana in Saraswati Manohari in which only *Enta vedukondu O Raghava* of Tyagaraja is well-known. For the sahitya, I went to Arudra, another kalpataru. I gave him the gist: Vishnu has kept his consort on his chest. Siva gave Parvati half his body. But Brahma lodged Saraswati on his tongue so that dance could flourish. He took 24 hours to do my bidding. This is the song I turned over to Krishnan and that tillana is a thrill to hear, thrall to see.

Maguva nuramupai dalchina hari, tana

Sagamu menu sathikeeya sivudu,

Magadu naalukapai niluputache natya

Jagathisaraswathimanoharamougada

Blessed are those who lead the ignorant into light.

(The author is a dance critic, film historian and collector of gramophone records)