

The people's Ramayana: voices across castes & regions

Ramayana Traditions in Kerala

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Ramayana is one of the foremost itihāsaḥ in Indian literature. It has been not only translated into Indian languages but also into many languages across the world and has been rewritten in various forms. In some of these retellings of the *Ramayana*, apart from Valmiki's *Ramayana*, certain additional events can also be seen.

The verse "Janani Janmabhoomischa", the story of Lakshman Rekha, the effort of a squirrel during the construction of the bridge, and the praise of Rama's virtues—these events are not found in the *Valmiki Ramayana* but can be seen in some regional or vernacular versions.

Similarly, such variations can also be seen in some literary works inspired by the *Ramayana*. However, despite these differences, the core storyline of the *Ramayana* remains unchanged.

Here, a brief introduction is given regarding the *Ramayanas* that are prevalent and propagated in the state of Kerala, along with the related literature.

Kerala is situated in the southwestern corner of India. To its east lies the Sahya Mountain range, while to the west is the vast Arabian ocean. In this narrow strip of land, Malayalam language emerged during the Sangam period. Its earliest form, influenced by Tamil and Sanskrit, is known as *Manipravalam*.

Literature written in *Manipravalam* existed in the past and is still available today. Over time, due to regional and temporal influences, Malayalam language evolved, leading to literary creations in the language. Within this rich and vast literary tradition, various versions of the *Ramayana* were also composed.

In Malayalam literature, several versions of the *Ramayana* have been composed, reflecting the cultural and linguistic adaptations of the itihāsaḥ in Kerala. Some of the most notable *Ramayanas* in Malayalam include:

1. Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu – Thunchaththu Ramanujan Ezhuthachan

- This is the most popular and widely revered Malayalam version of the *Ramayana*.
- Written in the *Kilippattu* (Bird song) style by Ezhuthachan, considered the father of Malayalam literature.
- It has had a profound impact on Kerala's culture, language, and spiritual traditions.

Although many *Ramayanas* were composed in Kerala both before and after this, Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu holds the highest literary and linguistic significance among them.

Unlike earlier works that followed *Manipravalam* (a blend of Sanskrit and Tamil), this text was written entirely in Malayalam. Additionally, Ezhuthachan introduced innovative narrative techniques in the form of Kilippattu (Bird Song), a unique storytelling style. This method later influenced many subsequent literary creations in Malayalam literature.

It presents the spiritual and philosophical essence of the *Ramayana*, emphasizing devotion (bhakti) and Advaita philosophy. This text, central to Kerala's Hindu tradition, is widely recited during Ramayana Month (*Karkidakam*). Unlike Valmiki's version, it portrays Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu, blending devotion, wisdom, and poetic elegance, making it an enduring spiritual and literary masterpiece in Malayalam literature.

2. Ramacharitam – Cheeramakavi

- One of the earliest known works in Malayalam, composed in the 12th century.
- Written in a mixture of Malayalam and Tamil, called *Paṭṭu* (a form of poetry).
- It narrates the *Yuddha Kanda* of the *Ramayana*.
- It follows the style of Champu Kavya, which blends prose and poetry.
- The language used is heavily influenced by Tamil and Sanskrit, making it a crucial text in the history of Malayalam literature.
- *Ramacharitam* provides insight into early Malayalam grammar, vocabulary, and poetic forms.

3. Kannassa Ramayanam – Niranam Ramapanikkar

- A poetic retelling based on *Valmiki Ramayana* composed in the 14th century.
- Written in the *Manipravalam* style (a blend of Sanskrit and Malayalam).
- This version follows the original Sanskrit *Ramayana* closely.

Kannassa Ramayanam is a 14th-century Malayalam retelling of the *Ramayana*, composed by Niranam Rama Panicker, one of the renowned Kannassa poets. Written in the *Manipravalam* style, blending Sanskrit and Malayalam, it follows Valmiki's *Ramayana* while incorporating regional influences and poetic elegance. The text is divided into sections and showcases deep devotion (bhakti) alongside literary brilliance. It played a crucial role in the evolution of Malayalam literature, marking a transition from Sanskrit dominance to a more accessible native poetic tradition. Kannassa Ramayanam remains a revered classic, celebrated for its lyrical beauty and spiritual depth in Kerala's literary heritage.

Additions and interpretations

Several Malayalam versions of the *Ramayana* include additional stories and interpretations that are either absent or less emphasized in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. These additions often reflect Kerala's regional traditions, Bhakti (devotional) influences, and folk elements.

Here are some of the keys added or modified stories in Malayalam Ramayana versions:

1. Lava-Kusha's Devotional Recitation (Rama Nama Japam)

- In Ezhuthachan's *Adhyatma Ramayanam*, Lava and Kusha, Rama's sons, are described as chanting "Rama Nama" as part of their daily practice.
- This aspect is highly emphasized in Kerala, aligning with the Nama Japa (chanting of divine names) tradition.

2. Hanuman's Journey to *Patala*

- Some Malayalam retellings describe an additional adventure of Hanuman in the *Patala*, where he rescues Rama's ring, which had fallen there. This story is not found in Valmiki's Ramayana but appears in later devotional versions.

3. Sita's Devotion and the Golden Idol of Sita

- Some Malayalam versions describe Rama commissioning a golden idol of Sita to perform *Ashwamedha Yaga* in her absence.
- While this is a later addition in many Bhakti-based retellings, it has a significant place in Kerala's Rama-worship traditions.

4. Hanuman's Presence at Sita's Exile

- Certain Kerala temple traditions narrate that Hanuman secretly watched over Sita during her exile in Valmiki's ashram, ensuring her safety.
- This story is an added devotional element not found in Valmiki's version.

5. The Story of Mango Tree and Sita's Chastity Test

- According to some Kerala folklore, Ravana gives Sita a mango while she is in Lanka.
- When Sita drops the mango on the ground, it withers instantly, proving that her mind is untouched by desire, reinforcing her purity.
- This story is an extension of Sita's *Agni Pariksha*.

6. Hanuman Testing Rama's Devotion

- In a Malayalam folk tale, Hanuman, wanting to test Rama's unwavering love for Sita, pretends to pluck a single strand of Sita's hair and drops it in water.
- When Rama notices this, he experiences deep sorrow, showing that even a small parting from Sita affects him.
- This story is not present in Valmiki Ramayana but is found in devotional versions.

7. Sita's Motherly Affection for Hanuman

- A unique Malayalam retelling describes Sita feeding Hanuman like a mother after the battle in Lanka.

- She blesses him as her own child, reinforcing the maternal aspect of her character, which is not explicitly stated in Valmiki's Ramayana.

8. The Kerala Connection – Lord Ayyappa as Rama's Son?

- Some Kerala folk traditions associate Lord Ayyappa (Hariharaputra) with Rama's lineage.
- While not part of mainstream Ramayana texts, there are speculative narratives linking Rama, Sita, or Hanuman to Ayyappa's divine birth.

Ramayana in Malayalam Folklore

- Pattu Ramayanam – A traditional folk song (pattu) style narration of the Ramayana, especially popular in rural Kerala.
- Thottam Pattu – These are devotional songs sung during temple rituals and performances like Theyyam, often incorporating episodes from the Ramayana.
- Vadakkan Paattu – Though primarily known for North Malabar's warrior ballads, some Ramayana episodes appear in these traditions as well.

Ramayana in Ritual & Performance Arts

- Kathakali & Koodiyattam – Many performances in these classical art forms depict major Ramayana episodes like Bali Vadham, Ravana Vadham, and Seethapaharanam.
- Ottamthullal – Satirical retellings of the Ramayana often appear in this performance art, sometimes with humorous or social commentary.
- Padayani & Theyyam – Folk deities and spirits related to Ramayana characters are honored in these traditional rituals.

Ramayana's Impact on Modern Malayalam Literature

The *Ramayana* continues to be a major literary and cultural influence in modern Malayalam literature. Writers, poets, and scholars have reinterpreted, adapted, and critically analysed the itihāsaḥ in contemporary contexts, exploring its philosophical, social, and literary dimensions.

Ramayana in Contemporary Poetry and Novels

- Many modern Malayalam poets have drawn inspiration from the *Ramayana*, reinterpreting its characters and themes in new ways.
- P. Kunhiraman Nair, Vyloppilli Sreedhara Menon, and Sugathakumari have written poems reflecting the spiritual and emotional depth of the itihāsaḥ.
- Modern Malayalam literature has re-examined the roles of Sita, Mandodari, Surpanakha, and Ahalya, questioning traditional gender narratives.
- The *Ramayana* is also used as a lens to analyze social justice, caste, and human rights issues.

Ramayana in Drama and Cinema

- The themes of the *Ramayana* have influenced modern Malayalam theatre and films, adapting the itihāsaḥ's conflicts to contemporary storytelling.
- Directors like G. Aravindan and K. G. George have used *Ramayana*-inspired themes in their works.

Ramayana Masam and Popular Culture

- The tradition of reading the *Ramayana* during *Karkidakam* (Ramayana Masam) has gained renewed interest, with audiobooks, TV adaptations, and digital platforms popularizing it among younger generations.
- Various modern translations and commentaries have made the *Ramayana* accessible to a wider audience.

Conclusion

Malayalam versions of the Ramayana, especially *Adhyatma Ramayanam*, blend Valmiki's itihāsaḥ with regional devotional elements, introducing new stories, miracles, and divine interventions. These variations emphasize Bhakti (devotion), Rama Nama Japam, and Sita's purity, making them integral to Kerala's Ramayana tradition and temple worship. The *Ramayana* remains a living tradition in modern Malayalam literature, continually evolving to reflect changing social, philosophical, and artistic perspectives. Its influence extends beyond religious devotion, shaping critical thought, gender discourse, and cultural identity in Kerala.
