

The people's Ramayana: Voices across castes and regions in Karnataka

Dr Jyothi Shankar, KSOU Kannada professor,

Vidushi in Karnataka classical music

Ramayana is the **Adi Kavya-Amara Kavya** of our nation. The Ramayana authored by Maharshi Valmiki has influenced all the geographical parts and languages of our country. This is because of Ramayana's meaningful messages, principles and Darshana. It completely exalts Satya and Dharma, and thus is relevant across ages and areas. We can find the temples of Rama - Sita, and particularly the temples and shrines dedicated to Hanuman across the length and breadth of our country. To bring Samanvaya in society, Rameshwara-Raamesha-Ramalingeshwara deities are also present. We can find at least ten persons who are named after the characters of Ramayana in every city/village. The legends of Ramayana are thus available starting with folk traditions all the way till formal literary works. It is also the torch bearer of our culture. Ramayana based Dance, Drama, Music, Bhajan, Devaranama – all of these are being performed from time immemorial. Ramayana is inherently bred within the hearts and minds of people, especially in Karnataka. The people of Karnataka have been loving Ramayana incessantly. Rama Taraka Yajna, Samrajya Pattabhisheka Mahotsava and Sita Kalyanotsava are celebrated with vigor during Rama Navami.

The Ramayana tradition of Karnataka can be widely classified as follows:

- Formal literary Jain Ramayanas
- Ramayanas apart from that of Jain Ramayanas
- Ramayanas written in the modern times
- Ramayanas in folk literature
- Ramayana in various forms

Ramayana has created an impact on the whole of Karnataka. We have various Ramayanas that belong to Jaina Ramayana Kavya category during the era where Jainism was predominantly thriving in Karnataka. The foremost Kavya among them is the “**Ramachandra charita Purana**”, also known as “**Pampa Ramayana**”. (Latter part of 11th Century – Early parts of 12th

Century). It describes the Ramakatha through Jaina parampara and has the story of Udatta Raghava. The content of this Kavya differs from that of the Valmiki Ramayana in many ways. The Rama from this Kavya is Baladeva, one among the **Tri Shashti Shalaka Purushas**, Lakshmana is Vasudeva, and Ravana is Prati Vasudeva. Here, Lakshmana is the one who kills Ravana, and not Rama. Sita is not depicted as Ayonije, rather she is the sister of Prabhamandala, and the actual daughter of Janaka. Sugriva, Hanuman et al are not Kapis, rather bear the flag of Kapi and thus are **Kapi dhwajas**. They cross the ocean as they know **Akashagamini Vidya**. Kapi dhwajas are the relations of Rakshasas. Hanuman is described as the son-in-law of Ravana's sister. Ravana is the king of **Khecharas**, the people who move in Akasha, and not the king of Rakshasas. Hanuman is not Brahmachari (celibate) here, rather is a Grihasta. There is no mention of Putra Kameshthi Yaga, Maya Jinke and Manthara episodes. Ravana is an ardent follower of Jainism. All of his battles are for the establishment of Jainism. Ravana is depicted as one who is virtuous and follows the rule of **Parangana virativrata**. Uparambhe, the wife of Nalakubara of Durlanghyapura had heard of Ravana's qualities and got infatuated with him. However, Ravana advises her to live with her husband. But, his Vrata got broken when he saw Sita. This is because of the plot of **Vidhi**, and not because of Ravana's bad qualities. In the end, he develops respect towards Sita and plans to hand her over to Rama after winning the war. But the same Vidhi's deceit makes Lakshmana kill Ravana. Kumudendu Ramayana too is written among similar lines. Thus, Jaina Ramayanas take creative liberty and have developed their own versions of Ramayana.

Torave Ramayana (1500 A.D) was authored by Kumaravalmiki. This Kavya is very close to the original Valmiki Ramayana and based on Vaidika Tattva. Veerashaiva **Battaleshwara's Ramayana** reflects Shaivism. It is also called as **Koushika Ramayana**. Kanakadasa's "**Ramadhanya Chaitre**", though do not depict the story of Ramayana directly, has the story of a fight between **Bhatta** (paddy) and **Ragi** (millet), to which Rama himself gives a judgement. This is a direct depiction of the clashes between social stratification. Rama finally decides that the Ragi itself is the greatest one.

In the modern era, **Ramayana Darshanam** by Kuvempu is another great epic which accepts the Avatara tattva of Rama. Though it has the same story of

Valmiki Ramayana more or less, the pattern of Putrakameshthi Yajna is performed in a different way, the character of Manthara takes a different course and she is shown as the whirlpool of Mamata. Female characters like Vibhishana's daughter Anale, Lakshmana's wife Urmila are characterized beautifully. It has other legends like Dashanana Swapna siddhi which make it popular. In the end, Rama too does the Agni Pravesha along with Sita, and this is the major change from Valmiki Ramayana. **Shudratapaswi** by Kuvempu takes Rama into a different version. Shambooka is accepted as a tapaswi by Rama.

Ramayana is deeply rooted in the folk traditions of Karnataka too. Various art forms are performed by different castes and creed of the society, such as Yakshagana, Bayalata, Doddata, Sutrada Bomeyata and Togalu Gomebeyata have themes deeply ingrained in the Ramayana. Though they have their own versions, distinctive from Valmiki's Ramayana, each art form gives a fresh perspective on the characters. It also helps better understand the viewpoint of the common man who sees and extrapolates the characters of his/her fellow human beings on the characters of Ramayana. Each art form's Ramayana gives an insight into the sociological aspects of those art forms and their respective regions. The Lavanis sung by the village folk and tribes often highlight the prowess the female characters of Ramayana like Sita and Kausalya.

Yakshagana is a traditional art form deeply rooted in the folk tradition of Karnataka. It is a beautiful blend of dance, drama, music and dialogue. This art form takes inspiration from the Itihasas and Puranas. There are many Prasangas which are inspired from the Ramayana. The characters and their various shades are explored elaborately, leading to deeper appreciation of the subtleties of those characters. Many prasangas are performed for five to six hours, and sometimes may start from night and go on till dawn. Many popular prasangas like Kausalya Parinaya, Krauncha Shambooka, Sita Parityaga, Mandodari Parinaya, Ramashwamedha yaga are widely known.

Togalu Gombeyata is another traditional folk art form of Shadow puppetry. Leather puppets are intricately made and are translucent so that it can

be manipulated behind a screen. This art form too is deeply indebted to the Ramayana. The stories and presentations are often based on the popular stories from Ramayana like Rama's exile and Ravana's defeat.

“The art of leather shadow puppetry flourished in different parts of India, including Odisha, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and in Kerala, but gained much popularity particularly in the Southern India, possibly originating as early as twelfth century CE based on the Kamba Ramayana. In Kerala, the leather puppets are called as Tolpava Koothu, while the counterparts in Andhra Pradesh are the Tholu Bommalattam and Togalu Gombeyatta marionettes belong to Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Similar kinds of tradition are followed in Odisha, called as the Ravanachhaya, and the Charma Bahuli Natya in Maharashtra.” ([Visual Manifestations of Ramayana in Folk Performances | Sahapedia](#)).

Karnataka shares a very special connection with Rama. It is widely accepted that the Kishkindha kingdom was in present day Karnataka. Hampi, which is the erstwhile capital of the Vijayanagara Kingdom, is considered sacred because of the same reason. Many temples in Hampi have intricate carvings of stories from Ramayana. Anjanadri Hill which is located on the banks of the Tungabhadra river has a beautiful Hanuman temple at the summit and is considered the birthplace of lord Hanuman. The Rushyamooka Hill too is said to be located near the same region. Pampa Sarovara, which is considered divine in the Ramayana, too is present near Hospet. Pampa Sarovara is the region where Shabari, the devotee of the highest order, served Rama. There are many places across Karnataka, where Rama is set to have set his foot during his exile. Though historical records cannot be provided for these, the emotion behind these legends prove that every place wants to establish a connect with Rama. This is specifically seen in Karnataka, which prides itself to be the birthplace of Hanuman. Lots of regional folk songs, tribal songs and Haridasa Keertana represent different Vritti dharmas based on Ramayana.

“Some historians say that Lord Ram gave Lakkundi village to pundits and scholars during his Vanavasa and it is mentioned in Srimad Lokkigundi

inscription. The sculpture depicting Hanuman carrying three hillocks is rare as in many other places Hanuman is depicted as carrying a single hillock. Hence there is a demand for more research.”([Karnataka: Lakkundi's connect with Ramayana](#))

Ramayana is ingrained in the hearts and minds of people across Karnataka. Ramayana can be seen in all aspects, from formal literature, folk traditions, traditional vrata and ceremonies, rangoli patterns to temple architecture and grand Ramanavami celebrations. Though the storylines differ from version to version, the core values of Ramayana remain intact. Ramayana is revered and relevant across timescales. It is the **Itihasa** of our nation and is rightfully leading the moral compass of our country.