

# The people's Ramayana in Tamil Nadu:

## Voices Across Castes and Regions

- Sri Jataayu, Renowned Kamba Ramayana exponent, Tamil scholar & author

From the very earliest times, the great epic of Ramayana has been embraced in the Tamil culture, across different castes, communities, and regions. It has found varied expressions in literature, temple legends, sculptures and epigraphs, classical performing arts and folklore.

### Literature:

Multifarious references to Ramayana are found in Sangam Literature anthologies of Tamil (200 BCE to 300 CE), and the subsequent early *Kavyas* of *Silappathikaram* and *Manimekalai*. *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, the collection of the hymns of *Azhwars* (6<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> century CE), hailed as the canonical Sri Vaishnava scripture is filled with rich and evocative portrayals of Ramayana legends, some of them very unique and rooted in the native Tamil soil, like the mention of squirrel helping in the building of Setu bridge by *Thondaradippodi-Azhwar*, Rama lullaby and Dasharatha-like lamentation of *Kulasekhara Azhwar* and the “*Pongaththam Pongo*” dance of the defeated Rakshasa army by *Thirumangai Azhwar*.

Kamba Ramayanam, the Tamil literary magnum opus of 12<sup>th</sup> century CE is well known. Its author Kambar lived in the Chola country and belonged to the *Uvachchar* caste who were traditional Kali temple priests (or temple musicians according to some historians). There is ample internal evidence of Kambar's wide and deep erudition in both Sanskrit and Tamil classics, philosophy and aesthetics. His chief patron was *Sadayappar*, a wealthy and generous agrarian landlord of the Vellalar caste. As per the legends, Kambar's work received divine endorsements through miraculous incidents – viz. the roar from the Narasimha deity idol in Srirangam temple when it was read out in the assembly of poets, and the coming to life of a dead Brahmana boy of the Dikshithar clan in Chidambaram. It is evident that this great Kavya has been hailed and respected by the learned people from all sections of the society.

*Rama Nataka Keerthanai* is a much-celebrated Tamil musical opera, the songs from which are still rendered in the Carnatic classical music concerts of the present times. In a sense, it can be called a musical adaption of Kamba Ramayanam, with many lively and sparkling phrases and metaphors used by common people. Its author *Arunachala Kavirayar* (1711-1778 CE) of Seerkazhi belonged to the Vaishya caste and he composed this opera on the request of two Brahmana music Vidwans, who popularized it by rendering the songs across the villages and towns in the Kumbakonam region. Kavirayar is hailed as one of the three Tamil Music Trinity composers who lived prior to the period of the famous Carnatic Music Trinity comprising Thyagaraja et al. When this opera was staged as a play, people from different castes enacted the roles of the characters. In a touching anecdotal story recorded by Thanjavur Swaminatha Athreyar, Thyagara gets immersed in one such play and prostrates to Sri Rama on the stage, played by a local blacksmith, impelled by his emotional Bhakti.

*Thakkai Ramayanam*, composed in the 1600s CE, is yet another, but a very different adaptation of Kamban's work in the Kongu region. It was meant to be sung to the accompaniment a small drum called *Thakkai*, a musical instrument resembling *Damaru*. Its author *Emperuman Kavirayar* of Sangagiri was a revenue officer and was well versed in Sanskrit and Vedanta. He was patronized by the Kongu ruler *Nallathambi Gangeyan*. This work has expressions soaked in devotion and has delightful references to local culture. For example, while describing Vanara's search for Sita in the Southern direction, the poet mentions the names of all the major hills in the Kongu region and says that Hanuman, Angada and all the Vanaras hopped on them, thus sanctifying those regions. Interestingly, the only surviving manuscript from which this work got published was preserved by the *Shantalinga Veera Shaiva* monastery in the region.

### **Sthala Puranas, Sacred Geography, Lineage legends**

With the major spread of Ramayana across *Bharata-varsha* over the centuries, every region of the Indian subcontinent wanted to associate itself with *Rama-Katha* and become a part of the Sacred Geography by creating Sthala Purana legends and stories. Tamil Nadu is no exception with many such sacred spots.

A few examples:

- Rameshwaram island, Rama Setu, Dhanushkoti and Thiruppullani have the much popular and ancient sacred association with Ramayana, as these Tirthas are mentioned in texts like Skanda Purana.
- Many sacred spots along the entire east coast, from Kodiakkarai all the way up to Rameshwaram, with big and small shrines with Ramar Paadam, or footprints of Rama.
- Multiple temple towns have the legend of Jataayu Moksham, of Sri Rama performing last rites for the bird Jataayu as part of their Sthala Puranam – Thirupputkuzhi near Kanchipuram, Vaitheeswaran Kovil (Pullirukku Velur), Jataayu Tirtham in Tirunelveli.
- Kanyakumari district has places like Villukkuri, that literally means mark made by the bow (of Rama) and Thaatakai Malai, a huge boulder resembling the fallen demoness Tataka killed by the young Rama. Marundhu Vaazh Malai, a hillock rich in rare medicinal herbs is believed to be a slice fallen from the Sanjeevini Parvata carried by Hanuman.

Like elsewhere in India, royal dynasties and warrior communities in Tamil Nadu also identified themselves with Rama's lineage. Cholas proclaimed themselves as belonging to Surya Vamsha and included Raja Shibi of the Puranic Ikshvaku dynasty among their ancestors. Vanniyars, a prominent community in the Northern Tamil Nadu identify themselves as Kshatriyas coming in the lineage of Rama in their Jati Purana legends.

### **Temple sculptures:**

Ramayana sculptures in distinct styles and Ramayana references in epigraphs and copper plates are seen in Tamil Nadu from the start of the Pallava era (6<sup>th</sup> century CE) through Chola, Pandya, Vijayanagara and Nayaka periods all the way through 19<sup>th</sup> century. The enchanting sculptures at Thirukkurungudi and Srivaikuntham Vishnu temples and Kumbakonam Ramaswamy temple are the finest examples of Rama art. It is notable that many Shiva temples also contain

depictions of Ramayana scenes, like the famed Ramayana miniature panels of the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE Alanthurai Mahadeva temple at Pullamangai near Thanjavur. Beautiful bronze idols of Rama, Lakshmana, Sita and Hanuman were created with unique aesthetic features and distinctive postures were created around 10<sup>th</sup> century CE in Tamil Nadu during the Chola era and can be seen in many temples like Paruththiyur, Vaduvur and Thillai Vilaakam. Worshipful bronze images in the same style continue to be made till the present times.

### **Folklore and folk arts:**

In the Tamil folklore, Mahabharata was more popular than Ramayana, as themes like Arjuna's multiple marriages and progeny born out of them, Draupadi's rage and her transformation as Devi and Krishna's war strategies and grace etc. captured the imagination of the Tamil masses more. The scant references to Ramayana do mention Rama, Sita, Hanuman as noble and divine personalities.

*Villuppaattu* or the "bow song" was a very popular folk storytelling art form till a few decades ago but is near extinct now. Though all kind of Puranic and religious themed stories were rendered in this art form, Ramayana was the most performed one, thanks to the bow association. *Iraama Keerthanam* was a musical composition specially written for *Villuppaattu* performances, narrating the complete Ramayana story. Its author was *Pandaaram Thiruvanantham* (1758-1828) of the Travancore region, who belonged to Saiva Vellalar community. There were similar compositions like *Ayodhi Kathai*, *Iraamar Vanavaasam*, *Vaali Vathai* etc. specially written for *Villuppaattu*.

*Thol Paavai Koothu* or the leather puppetry was an art form that was created with the purpose of taking Ramayana story to the masses. It became popular in Southern Tamil Nadu, along with the migration of the Telugu communities from various regions of Andhra. This art form, near extinct now uses richly painted leather puppets for different characters of the epic pulled by the strings. The songs sung during the performance remain oral tradition and have never been written down. This Koothu is performed over ten days in villages, covering the entire story in great detail. After the Rama Pattabisheka episode is staged, additional stories like Mayil Ravana, Matsya Vallabha, Ashvamedha (Uttara Kanda) are also performed.

It is important to note that these Ramayana folk art forms narrate a myriad set of strange and exotic stories, some of which are not part of any known Ramayana text, as these are created in the imagination of the village folks, often connected with the joys, sorrows, frustrations and grievances of their everyday lives that are expressed using *Rama-Katha* as a medium. Some of these stories are virtuous and have devotional sentiments while some of them have perverted and deliberately spiced up concoctions reflective of the weaknesses of the human minds that created them.

Since the Tamil folklore studies so far have been dominated by the academics and scholars with either Marxist or Christian Missionary outlook, all the published material on this subject attempt to portray the folklore as a revolt against the "Brahminical upper caste" hegemony or oppression of women or deliberate denigration of Hindu divinities without any sense of reverence etc. There is an urgent need to study them afresh with reinterpretations, bringing out

the harmonious and sacred aspects that form the bedrock of such folklore, along with the distortions and perversions.

**Conclusion:**

This write-up summarized the key points of the detailed presentation made by the author on this topic in the Valmiki Ramayana Conference 2025.