

The Ramayana in Assam of India with reference to the Thai Ramakien

Nripen Chandra Das*

Abstract

Assam is one of the states of North East India. The Ramayana in Assamese verse written by Madhava Kandali in the fourteenth century A.D. was based on Valmiki's Sanskrit Ramayana. This was the first Ramayana written ever in any languages of the North East India and one of the oldest Ramayanas written in provincial languages of India. The complete Ramayana consists of 7 kandas (chapters), but two kandas of Madhava Kandali's Ramayana could not be recovered. So the Assamese Ramayana of Madhava Kandali was later on completed by Uttarakanda and Adikanda written by medieval Vaishnava saints Sankardeva and Madhavadeva respectively. There are two more Ramayanas in Assamese: Durgabari Ramayana (musical Ramayana) and Kathaa Ramayana (prose Ramayana). Ananta Kandali wrote the Bhakti Ramayana. But it is a fact that in Assam Ramayana tradition as a whole is older than the Ramayana in written form. So the tradition literary as well as folk has been continuing in the state uninterruptedly. The influence of the Ramayana is found in all aspects of the Assamese society. Among the tribal people of the state also Ramayana legends are prevalent in written as well as oral tradition. Comparatively the impact of the Ramayana on Thailand in a remarkable way is a phenomenon of eighteenth century A.D. In folk performing art and life this influence on both the lands is very profound and this is the main aspect emphasized in this paper.

Keywords: North East India, Madhava Kandali, Ramayana tradition, Thailand.

Introduction

One of the oldest epics of the world literature is the Ramayana written by sage Valmiki. The impact of the Ramayana is all pervasive in Indian culture. The tremendous impact made by any epic as the Ramayana in different countries of Asia has made is nowhere seen in the world. For about two thousand five hundred years the Ramayana is an inseparable part of Indian culture and tradition.

The Ramayana is considered as one of the literary sources for the ancient history of Assam. One of the states of India Assam is situated in North Eastern part of India. Earlier during the British rule (1826-1947 AD) Assam was a big territory which comprised most of the states of N.E. India. Most ancient name of the state was Pragjyotisha. Later on during the rule of the Varmans who were contemporary with the Gupta rulers of North India in ancient period the land was known as Kamarupa. With the advent of the Ahoms in the early part of the 13th century A.D. the name of the kingdom became Asom. It is noteworthy that the Ahoms, one of the longest ruling dynasties of world history ruled the state from 1228 AD to 1826 AD.

*Ph.D., Principal, Dr. B.K.B. College, Gauhati University, Assam, India

The mighty river Brahmaputra has been flowing through Assam from east to west. At present total area of the state is 78,438 square km and total population is 30.94 million. On the other hand total area and population of present Thailand are 513,120 square km and 67.96 million respectively. In Assam, one-seventh size of the landmass of Thailand has given shelter to almost half of the size of the Thai population. The climate and geography of Assam is much akin to Thailand and other South East Asian countries. Culturally also Assam is much similar to the South East Asian countries. The river Brahmaputra has been passing through Assam and this resulted in the birth of the Brahmaputra valley civilization. The Ahoms under the leadership of Sukapha entered into Assam in early part of the thirteenth century in search of a new abode. They originally came from Brahmadesha or present Myanmar. The Ahoms ruled Assam for about six hundred turbulent years. The dynasty of the Ahoms is one of the longest ruling dynasties in the world. They gave the Assamese society a new identity in socio-cultural and economic front. The political system devised by them continued even during the British rule which started after the Yandaboo Treaty (1826) after the first Anglo-Burmese war. The Burmese were responsible to a great extent for the downfall of the Ahoms. It is interesting to note that the Burmese are also responsible for the downfall of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya. So there was ample possibility of cultural exchanges between the Ahoms and the Thais in future course of history.

Geographically and culturally Assam, one of the states of the North East India and Thailand, one of the South East Asian countries, is very much akin. The influence of the Ramayana is tremendous on both the lands and is now inherent in socio-cultural arena. A comparative study of the impact exerted by the great epic Ramayana on both the lands will widen our horizon of knowledge.

A pool of literature is available on the Ramayana tradition in Asia. In India also all scholars of repute in Indian culture and civilization produced remarkable corpus of research works on many facets of the great epic Ramayana. H.D. Sankalia, A.K. Ramanujan, Indira Goswamy, etc. are a few of the notable names in Ramayana scholarship from Indian side. The list of scholars past and present throughout the world in Ramayana study will be a long one. From the study of the scholars what basic understanding we get about the epic Ramayana is that this epic has not remained a text only to be enjoyed by reading and reciting; it has given to a great mass of people of Asia a way of life to be cherished.

However, the Ramayana tradition solely on folk art and life is scarcely studied. All scholars have given emphasis on literary beauty and value of the Ramayana. The influence of it on the folk life is not thoroughly discussed. With the help of observation method for collection of data in this research, I studied the folk art forms and objects of Ramayana tradition preserved and displayed in different museums and archives of Thailand. I watched the puppet show on the Ramakien called Nang Yai and the Thai Ballet called Khon on the Ramakien. Later on the materials procured are compared and analysed with the folk art forms and objects of the Ramayana tradition found in Assam.

There is only not one Ramayana; there are hundreds of Ramayana across the Asian continent. The Ramayana is written in almost all major languages of India. There are about three hundred versions of the Ramayana in different languages of Asia. Though the original Ramayana was written in Sanskrit by Valmiki, but later on the Ramayana tradition crossed the Indian boundary long back. Influence exerted by the Ramayana in South East Asian countries remained indelible. In the new countries the tradition acquired new idioms and forms.

The Thai version of the Ramayana legends was first written down during the period of Ayutthaya kingdom in the eighteenth century. Most editions of the epic were lost when the Ayutthaya city was destroyed in 1767 by the Burmese Army. Later on King Rama I of the Chakri dynasty wrote a complete version of the Ramayana called Ramakien or Ramakirti in 1797.

Ramayana in literature of Assam

Ramayana literature in Assamese language is recognizably rich. The Ramayana tradition in Assam as well is very strong since the early medieval age of the history of the land.

One of the oldest Ramayana written in major provincial languages of India is the Assamese Ramayana written by poet Madhava Kandali. Madhav Kandali wrote his Ramayana based on Valmiki's original Sanskrit Ramayana in the 14th century A.D. Madhava Kandali was the court poet of Barahi King Mahamanikya of Assam and under the patronage of this king he wrote the original story in verse in seven kandas(big chapters). He flourished more than one century prior to Neovaishnavite saint Sankardeva. Among the seven kandas of this Ramayana five kandas are at present available. Madhava Kandali's Ramayana was completed by medieval Assamese Vaishnava saints Sankardeva and Madhavadeva writing Uttarakanda and Adikanda of the Ramayana respectively.

There are two more Ramayanas in Assamese: Durgabari Ramayana and Kathaa Ramayana. Durgabari Ramayana is the anthology of portions of songs based on the Ramayana legends. It occupies a significant place in the Ramayana literature of Assam. According to distinguished Assamese scholar of Indology Banikanta Kakati Giti-Ramayana or Durgabari Ramayana (musical Ramayana) is a rural version of the Ramayana written by Valmiki. So the Ramayan scholarship in Assam is also not lagging behind.

The story of the Ramayana was expressed in prose for the first time by Raghunath Mahanta of Daiyang Satra, Golaghat. The Kathaa Ramayana or prose Ramayana was written in the first decade of eighteenth century. It is noteworthy that before Raghunath Mahanta nobody had written a prose Ramayana in Indian literature. As far as in selection of subject matter is concerned he has relied on the Ramayana of Madhav Kandali.

Apart from these on the basis of the Ramayana themes Kavyas(elaborate poems) known as Ramayana Kavyas were written. Among them Ayodhyakanda is

written by Raghunath Dwij and Lakhmiram Dwij, Kiskindhakanda by Srinath Dwij, Raghunath Dwij and Devinanda, Aranyakanda by Rudraram Sarmah, Sitar Vanavas and Sitaar Paataal Pravesh by Gangaram or Gangapati Das, Sriramchandra Abhisekh by Bhavaninath Dwij, etc.

Ramayana among different tribes

Among the tribal people of Assam Ramayana legends are prevalent in written and oral tradition. The Karbi is one of the important tribes of Assam. Among the Karbis Chabin Alun is there setting a glorious example of impact of

Ramyana tradition among the tribes in hinterland. Chabin Alun is the Karbi Ramayana written in Karbi language. The main story of this Ramayana written in ballad form is associated with the tribal features and episodes. As the Karbis live near the birth place of Madhava Kandali so the Chabin Alun got inspiration from his Ramayana. In the myths prevalent among the Lalungs or Tiwas it can be noticed that there was impact of the Ramakatha among them. One major tribe of Assam is the Bodos. Among them also the Ramayana has exerted influence.

Ramayana tradition among the folks

When Ramananda Sagar made one block buster Television serial on the Ramayana consulting different Ramayanas including Madhav Kandali's Ramayana people watched the serial en masse. Before the start of the serial people burn incense sticks with much reverence

The Ramayana tradition did not remain confined in written form, oral form and performing art forms alone, it proliferated to all domains of communication with the folk. Different art forms evolved on the themes of the Ramayana with the passage of time. Some of the forms already became extinct, some forms are still extant. It is important to note that majority of these forms evolved in the folk level. The extant forms are mostly found in performing arts of the land.

Influence of the Ramayana tradition impacted the Indian 'great tradition' and 'small tradition' and so we find urban art as well as folk art in Ramayana tradition.

The impact of Ramayana tradition is found in all aspects of the socio-cultural life of the Assamese society. In the folk life of the Assamese society Ramayana tradition has made great impact which can be observed in different aspects of the culture. People are named with names of different characters of the Ramayana. People express exclamation with expressions like 'He Rama', 'Iss Rama', and others which give the corresponding meaning 'Oh god!' Even slangs associated with the Ramayana are current among folks. Clips of the Ramayana videos with slang are found uploaded in the internet.

Raghupath(reading of the Ramayana) is one of the religious events of Assam particularly in Nagaon district where Madhava Kandali, the writer of the Assamese Ramayana and Saint Sankardeva were born. That is why the Ramayana tradition is potent in this district among the Hindus. In Raghupath the Ramayana of Assamese

version written by Madhava Kandali is recited ceremoniously and reverently in a gathering of devotees. This tradition perhaps evolved in an illiterate society where literate persons who were very few wanted to disseminate the ideals of the Ramayana reciting it among the illiterate villagers.

Ramayana traditio in folk art

Study of folk art of the state will remain incomplete if we avoid impact of the Ramayana tradition in it. It is noteworthy that the Ramayana of Madhav Kandali is imbued with many folk elements of the Assamese society of that period. Characters depicted in the Ramayana are rooted in folk ways. The impact of the Ramayana tradition in different forms of folk art of Assam can be enumerated as follows:

1. Folk Songs:

Ramakatha is rendered in a good number of folk songs which are still prevalent in the state. Baaramahi geet, Dharmiya geet, Huchori naam or Huchori Keertan, Dhol, Mridang aaru Ojaapaali raagar maalita, Nao Khelowa geet or Nawariya geet, Biyaa naam, Nichukani geet, Holi geet, Tulasi geet are a few of this type of folk songs.

2. Devotional Songs:

Bargeeta, Vandanas, Ankiya geet, Keertana ghosaa or Kirtana, Naamghosaa, Bhatima, Naam are a few of the devotional songs with which Ramakatha is associated.

3. *Mantraputhir pad*: We find Ramakatha in some of the ancient texts of charms or incantation.

4. Raaghapaath: Ramayana is recited in a congregation with much devotion.

5. Performing art forms:

Ojaapaali, Dhuliyaaar chong, Putalaa naach, Khuliyaa Bhaoriyaa, Bhoanaa, Kushaan Gaan and Bhari gaan are important forms of performing art where Ramayana tradition is an inseparable part.

6. Sculptures:

There is free standing as well as bas-relief sculptures and puppets belonging to the Ramayana tradition found in different parts of the state.

6. Paintings:

Assam has a rich heritage of manuscript paintings earliest date of which goes to medieval period. Manuscript paintings and calendar paintings vividly portray deep impact of the Ramayana tradition made on the culture of the state.

Assamese Bhaona which was the vehicle for dissemination of Vaishnava faith in the medieval period is enacted adapting different episodes of the Ramayana among others. In Assamese Bhaona dramas based on the Ramayana of Madhava Kandali are still staged in different parts of Assam. Masks of Ramayana characters like that of Ravana, Jatayau, etc. are frequently used in Bhaona.

Performing folk drama forms like Bhari Gaan, Kushan Gaan, Ojaa Paali, Dhuliyaa, Holi songs are all based on Rama-katha. In Raas of lower Assam we find a few of the themes of Rama-katha represented. In Assamese biyaa naam Bridegroom and bride are compared with Rama and Sita.

It is noteworthy that there are not many temples for Rama in Assam though he is considered one of the Avatars of Vishnu and he exerts tremendous influence on Assamese Hindu society. Stone panels of ancient period depicting different episodes of the Ramayana are found in different parts of Assam. Five notable panels are found in the temple ruins of Deopahar in Golaghat district. Sculptures on the Ramayana tradition in media mainly stone and wood are found in Asvaklanta temple at North Guwahati, Khatara Satra in Darrang district, Sri Sri Ram Lakshman Satra at Ramdiya of Kamrup District, etc. Wooden sculptures of Hanuman and Gaduda of Bardowa Satra are remarkable. It is noteworthy that Bardowa is the birth place of medieval Neovaishnavite saint Srimanta Sankardeva. On the doors of Namghars (Vaishnaite prayer hall) in different parts of Assam Ramayana episodes are also carved or depicted in colour along with others.

Making of puppets is one of the aspects of the Assamese folklore. Wood, bamboo strip and clay were used for making these puppets. Puppetry is almost a dying art in Assam. With the inspiration from the Kandali Ramayana folk artistes made puppets of the Ramayana characters like Ram, Lakshman, Sita, Lava-Kusha, Hanuman, Gaduda, Ravana, Maricha, etc. Folk artistes of the bygone era were also adept in making masks of the Ramayana characters. The masks of ten headed Ravana, Gadudapakshi, Jambavanta, Hanuman, etc. are still used in the performing dramatic art forms.

Depiction of the Ramayana episodes in the manuscript paintings of Assam is very remarkable. A good number of manuscripts are scattered all over Assam. Proper exploration may lead to discovery of more paintings of the Ramayana tradition. A version of the illustrated Sundarakanad Ramayana by Madhava Kandali is preserved in the archives of the Gauhati University. The paintings belong to the satriya style. One version of the illustrated Lankakanda Ramayana by Madhava Kandali is preserved in the archive of the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti. The Paintings of this Ramayana also belong to the satriya style.

Another illustrated version of the Lankakanda Ramayana by Madhava Kandali is preserved in the house of Annadananda Goswami of Devananda satra in Darrang district. The date of this manuscript is 1706 A.D.

In this age of computer revolution the Ramayana is transformed into digital forms. This resulted in the decreasing popularity of the traditional art forms based on the Ramayana in the state. In the changing circumstances the art forms of the state have to be adapted with the techniques provided by the development of modern science and technology to the tune of the tests of the present generation. Impact of the Ramayana tradition has now surpassed time. Due to the development of audio-visual technique the parody version of the Assamese Ramayana is also made to enthrall the audience. In the internet clips of different Ramayanas are available.

The impact of the Ramayana in Thailand is also deep and indelible. Though the religion of the Thai people is Buddhism, the impact of this epic is irrespective of religion very sweeping. This has enriched the national culture of Thailand.

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