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A note on Vālmīki's poetical technique to build his Rāmāyaṇa on the basis of the Rāma- Stories of oral literature

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An Abstract

If an avid reader goes through between the lines of the text of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, he obviously often encounters such a context from which it appears that a vast multitude of tales and legends mostly dealing with the rise and fall of Rāma's ancestors over many generations have been memorized.

Key words: *Introduction, Rāmāyaṇa, writing method of Vālmīki and manuscriptology*

If an avid reader goes through between the lines of the text of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, he obviously often encounters such a context from which it appears that a vast multitude of tales and legends mostly dealing with the rise and fall of Rāma's ancestors over many generations have been memorized. To warrant such an inclusion of these stories to the main corpus of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which ordinarily consists of the narratives of Rāma's later military adventures¹, it may, however, be said that about the innermost thoughts and feelings of the poet bent upon to sketch his literary art, one does not possess adequate knowledge other than the little that can, perhaps, be inferred from the poet's method of selection of the subject-matter for his work. And hence, there is a scope for undertaking such a discussion in the present article as to throw some new light on the technique applied by Vālmīki in composing his immortal literary work called *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Even from a cursory look into the three first cantos of the *Adikāṇḍa* it, however, appears that poet Vālmīki was not as weary about the dearth of material for the composition of the literary epic as was about the right choice of a worthy hero. The enormous bulk of the stories, which belonged to the epic tradition and were sung by the wandering bards all through the country in Vālmīki's times, might have blinded the poet's visionary predilection for someone whom he could fit in with the heroic character of his literary composition called *Kāvya*.

It is, therefore, that the *Rāmāyaṇa* commences with a description that Nārada's visitation of Vālmīki's hermitage. It, however, paved the way for the poet to collect the proper material for a newly-invented composition belonging to the *Kāvya* style. As Vālmīki's concern was to find a hero for his work,² [Nārada] gave him a detailed plan for the new poem. The following verse (*Rmn.1.1.7*), however, constitutes the introductory part of Nārada's long speech in this matter.

bahavo durlabhbāś caiva ye tvayā kīrtitā guṇāḥ/
mune vaksāmy aham buddhyā tair yuktaḥ śrūyatām narah //

--- ' O sage, convergence of the multifarious qualities, which are on your order, is a rarity. Nevertheless, I shall cultivate my mind to make you listen about such a person who, indeed, is endowed with these qualities.'

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Though [Nārada's] speech may be accounted for a very ingenious and fitting introduction to a long poem about the deeds of Rāma, modern scholars are, however, of the opinion that Nārada's well-pruned synopsis of the poem neglected the spirit of the original story of Rāma, which had been prevalent in the community of the people who had already seen the rise of the oral tradition of singing the Rāma-songs.³ The difference between the adherents of the oral tradition of the Rāma-songs and the exponents of the literary genre that perfected the ornate Kāvya-style, may, however, be summed up by saying that to the communities, where the songs of Rāma were sung, the central figure i.e. Rāma was not the hero of a poem, but the living manifestation of the divine.⁴ It is, therefore, that Nārada, who was, perhaps, a chief exponent of the Kāvya - ideal which had begun to captivate the minds of a literate élite, truncated the enormous bulk of the epic material to keep the main portion of the story of Rāma intact and thereafter, suggested to Vālmīki an outline of a compilation of Rāma's adventures i.e. Rāma-carita under the title of *Rāmāyaṇa* ie the Journey of Rāma, which had chiefly included Rāma's banishment, his struggle against Rāvaṇa and his victorious return to Ayodhyā. Quoted below are the two verses (*Rmn* 1.1.98-99) which occur at the concluding part of Nārada's long speech to Vālmīki.

idam pavitram pāpaghnam punyam vedaiś ca sam-mitam/
yah pathed rāma-caritam sarva-pāpaiḥ pramuyate//
etad ākhyānam āyuṣyam pathan rāmāyaṇam narah/
sa-putra-pautrah sa-gaṇah pretya svarge mahīyate//

--- 'He, who will read the adventures of Rāma, which are spiritual, the destroyer of sins, meritorious, and as worthy as the Vedas, frees himself from all terrible evils. The person, who undertakes the study of the *Rāmāyaṇa* the narrative that endows him with a long life that enables him to see the birth of sons, grandsons and other relatives, (finally) ascends heaven to enjoy greatness there.'

In these two verses mentioned above, it was indicated that the subject-matter of the Kāvya and a suitable title of it ie 'Rāma-carita' were provided. So, it is not surprising that such important and indispensable requisites as characterized by the instructions for adopting the writing methods to compose a Kāvya were greeted with the poet's experience of intuition or inspiration which might have become his undertaking to enter into communication with the transcendental reality which, because it was the ground and essence of all empirical existence, remained active with him even after the moment of 'vision'. It is, therefore, said that the continuous effort to transcend the empirical level is one of the most striking characteristic of Indian cultural history.⁵ Of special interest in our present discussion may be the Canto 2 of the *Ādikāṇḍa*, which, however, gave significance to the early morning as the moment which was especially proper to the manifestation of visions, that is, to receiving inspiration.⁶ The cruel death of the amorous Krauñca bird filled the poet's heart with compassion and under the impact of deep emotion his speech turned into poetry. It is also said there that through the intermediary of the divine powers of the four-faced god

Brahman (=Brahmā) the inspired poet equipped himself with all such details which were necessary to fill in the outline given by Nārada. The following verse (*Rmn.* 1.2.33), however, gives some support to the aforesaid contention.

vṛttam kathaya rāmasya yathā te nāradāc chrutam!
Krauñca ca Krauñca ca yad vṛttam tasya dhīmataḥ॥

-- "[Brahman (= Brahmā) says to Vālmīki] 'O one, give expression to whatever Nārada has told you about the stories of Rāma, the talented one, which were either kept secret or arranged to be made public.'"

When the poetic rendering of the full account of Rāma's adventures had not yet been undertaken, it evidently, however, occurred to Vālmīki that the big moment for this entire poetic output must presuppose another close investigation by way of collating the well-pruned material, which were already under his control, and side by side the Rāma -stories which were still in currency among the people.⁷ It is said that with this end in the view he initiated a certain kind of methodical analysis of the full story as he went again and again to enquire about it from the people. The following verse (*Rmn* I.3.1.), however, bears a testimony to it.

śrutvā vastu-samagram tad dharmartha-sahitam hitam |
Vyaktam anveṣate bhūyo yad vṛttam tasya dhīmataḥ ||

--- 'After having heard the stories as a whole, which were auspicious and were enhanced both religious merit and worldly prosperity, he (ie. Vālmīki) again went to search after those stories which enjoyed currency among the people and were about Rāma, the talented one.'

It is said almost in the same breath in the very next verse that it was only after the completion of the analysis of stories about Rāma that the inspired poet took up the task of writing the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The verse (*Rmn.* I.3.2), however, runs thus.

upa-sprśyodakam samyañ munih sthitvā kṛtāñjalih!
prācīnāgṛeṣu darbheṣu dharmenānveṣate gatim ||

--' The sage sipped the water according to the religious custom and took a seat on the Darbha grass whose tips were turned eastward, while his hands were folded, he began to think in a deep concentrated way as to what had actually once been the course of the events.'

From the discussion held above, one may, however, draw up the following conclusion. Vālmīki desired to write down a literary epic and through an incidental communication with Narada, the divine sage, the poet got the subject-matter of his work of art, which was entitled *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is said that the cruel death of the amorous Krauñca bird opened up to his saddened heart the exceptional faculty of acquiring a sudden knowledge of transcendent truth and its materialized form and that became a piece of poetry. Because the inspired poets generally expect to receive intuition from the divine powers it, however, occurred that there came about Brahman (=Brahmā), the four-faced god, who visited Vālmīki's hermitage to stimulate the poet's vision and thereafter, gave approval to Nārada's outline of the work the poet wished to

write down. A few lines may, however, be inserted here about the psychology of such inspired poets who probably wanted, right from the Vedic age, to lay claim to the recognition of their works of art in the backdrop of the generations of poets who must have preceded those to whom we owe the present work of art. In ancient India it would appear that a particular work of art was sung and recited while exerting a hold both on the reciters and listeners through their sounds, sense and rhythm evoking a feeling of mystery which might have helped the inspired poet lay his claims to fame, recognition and adequate rewards. Many old oral versions must have been replaced and sunk into oblivion. But it might at the same time be supposed that the inspired poet to whom we owe the composition of the present work of art, imitated the themes and techniques of composition of their predecessors rather than faithfully copied their poems and probably to give support to this traditional symbolical interpretation the presentation of stimulation of Valmiki's vision by way of the boons of the four-faced god Brahman (= Brahmā) was introduced in the Canto 2 of the *Adikānda* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*^[8].

When the poet had not yet sat down to write his poem it, however, occurred to him that before the entire poetical output became a reality, he must again go to the people among whom the singing of the Rāma-songs had still enjoyed currency. This was necessary in view of collating the well-pruned material of his work of art with the Rāma -stories belonging to the oral tradition. He initiated a methodical analysis of the full story to bring about a harmony between his work of art and the songs of Rāma, which still bore the distinct marks of the oral tradition. It was only after the process of collation and application of his ability for higher criticism of all the materials available to him for composition of the epic that did he sit down to compose his immortal work of art.

1.1 Footnotes

- Cf. Albrecht Weber, *The History of Indian Literature*, First edition 1852, Tr. John Mann and Theodor Zachariae, London, 1882, pp.58ff; *On the Rāmāyaṇa*, Berlin, 1871, Tr. D.C. Boyd, Bombay/London, 1873, pp.19-21 ff; A.B. Keith, 'The date of the Rāmāyaṇa' (in) *JRAS*, 1915, pp.326 ff; 'Indian Mythology' in the series *The Mythology of All Races*, Vol.VI, ed. Louis Herbert Grey *et alii*, Boston, 1917, pp.68 ff; A. Guruge, *The Society of Rāmāyaṇa*, First edn, 1953, First published in India (New Delhi), 1991, p.129; Khan, Benjamin, 'The Concept of Dharma in Valmiki Ramayana' Delhi, 1965, pp.50 ff.; Ramashraya Sharma, *A Socio-Political Study of the Rāmāyaṇa*, Delhi, 1971, pp.9 ff; J.L. Brockington, 'Religious attitude in Valmiki's Rāmāyaṇa' (in) *JRAS*, No.2, 1976, pp.128ff; *Righteous Rāma: The Evolution of an Epic*, New York, 1984, p.218.; Robert P Goldman, 'Introduction' (in) *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki : An Epic of Ancient India*, Vol.1 (Bala-Kanda), Delhi, 1984, Tr. Delhi/ Bombay/ Calcutta/Madras, pp. 23 ff.
- Cf. *Rmn.* I.1.2ab, ko nvasmin sāmpratam loke guṇavān kaś ca vīryavān – '(O one), who you can recommend is considered as a gifted and brave hero in the present world of ours'

- Cf. Robert Antoine, (*Rāma and the Bards: Epic Memory in the Rāmāyaṇa*), Calcutta, 1975, pp.19 ff.
- Cf. Robert Antoine, (*Ibid*), 24.
- Cf. Jan Gonda, 'Vedic Literature (Samhitas and Brahmanas)' (in) *A History of Indian Literaturer*, Vol-1, Wiesbaden, 1975, p.65 ff.
- Alex Wayman says that though the two ancient religious traditions, called 'truth' and 'silence' borrowed from each other, they even maintained sufficient contrast to allow the later philosophical schools to treat them as though distinct. About the characteristic features of these two traditions, he dwells upon one of Manu's citations '*maunāt satyam vi-sísyate*' – 'Truth is superior to 'silence', and the other texts of the Buddhistic religion and points out that the mere fulfilling of the duty was not sufficient for the person belonging to the 'truth' tradition, but it was further necessary for him to verbalize this fact. He elaborates this point, saying that the tradition of 'truth' is followed by those who would be inspired by or would command the deity. On the other hand, however, the tradition of 'silence' is followed by those who, out of their own resources, could rise to the status beyond ordinary mankind. On the evidence of the *Manu-Smṛti*, he further relates that the silent ascetics try, like the Buddha, to be enlightened just prior to dawn. 'Two traditions of India-truth and silence' (in) *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. XXIV, 1974, pp.389, 393-395 ff. Here, is a point that is worth mention. Though, according to the above reputable scholars, the munis and ṛṣis are to be placed in two separate groups, there is, however, no hard and fast distinction between them, at least in the view of their respective nomenclatures in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for, there might already have occurred considerable overlapping between these two groups and it is thus available in the *Rāmāyaṇa* that both the terms 'muni' and 'ṛṣi' were equally applied to the religious personages belonging to the 'truth' tradition as to the ones who adhered to the tradition of 'silence'. Nevertheless, it transpires from their accounts in the *Rāmāyaṇa* that both these groups maintained sufficient contrast to each other in the matter of their individual names, their modes of worship, religious altitudes etc. which are strong evidence in favour of their classification into two separate categories.
- About the higher criticism of a work partly based on oral tradition, the manuscriptological analysis adopted by modern scholars too, considers the oral version of a certain text as an indispensable material for collation to present a total picture of the work. Cf. P. Visalakshy, *the Fundamentals of Manuscriptology*, Thiruvananthapuram, 2003, pp. 77-78, Dravidian Linguistics Association, St. Xaviers College.
- Cf. Jan Gonda *op.cit.* 75 ff.

1.2 Abbreviations

JRAS = *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. (London)*.

Rmn = *Rāmāyaṇa*.

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- Rāmāyaṇa – Valmīkiya-Rāmāyaṇa*, Ed. Vishva Bandhu Shastri, Lahore, The D.A.V. College Research

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