Democratising The Ramayana: Local Myths And Legends In Wayanad

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Abstract: This literary paper explores the presence of the Ramayana in the folklore of Wayanad, Kerala. It will delve into the local myths and legends woven into the epic, reshaping its narrative contours. The study will look into how the folklore tradition of Wayanad has helped make Ramayana a more inclusive epic for people who are part of the tradition. By examining the fluid nature of oral traditions, the geographical variations, and the pro-woman stance within Wayanad's 'Ramayanas,' this study will look at the mythical significance of the locales of Wayanad play to explore how the folklore of Wayanad has made multiple Ramayanas and has connected people who are outside the structure of conventional Hinduism to it. It will also look at how these localised parts of the epic differ from the canonical version of the Ramayana.

Index terms: Ramayana, Folklore, Wayanad

1. Introduction

Rooted in the religious traditions of North India, the Ramayana, a timeless epic, traces the life of Prince Rama and his steadfast wife, Sita. The narrative transcends its textual origins to become a vibrant and evolving narrative in the folklore of Wayanad, Kerala. In this part of south India, the Ramayana undergoes a metamorphosis, shedding the constraints of rigidity and formality that often accompany written texts. It embraces the fluidity of oral traditions and entwines itself with the cultural nuances of Wayanad's diverse communities. By trying to unravel the interplay between the Ramayana and the vibrant folklore of Wayanad, local myths and legends can be examined to find how they democratically shape and redefine this ancient narrative.

Oral traditions play an important role in making the distant tale of a prince and his wife a relatable and democratised tale for the people of Wayanad. Unlike written texts, which bear the stamp of an individual author, oral traditions find their roots in the collective spirit of communities and the resonance of tradition. This communal authorship imparts a dynamic quality to the narrative, constantly reshaped and reinterpreted through the voices of storytellers across generations. (UNESCO, 2023)

Wayanad has been home to various sects of people for ages; the district has the largest tribal population in Kerala. Tribals make up about 17.34% of the total population of Kerala. The tribal history of Wayanad has been marked with subjugation and denial of basic human rights to periods as recent as 1975. It was only in 1975 that the practice of slave trade of Adiya and Ponniya communities during the Valliyookavu temple festival was banned by law. Scholar Azees Tharuvana remarks that their history is a history transmitted through oral literature. He says,

> not a single Adivasi community in Wayanad has an objectively written history; stories told in their oral literature, beliefs and myths are counted as their history. These myths and folklores, it is believed, have their roots in the tribal community's need to reconstruct identity and overcome an existential crisis which comes from living on the margins of civilisation for long. Most tribal communities in Wayanad possess a rich treasure of oral literature. For centuries, they have been transmitting their literary tradition from one generation to the next through various mediums like folk songs, folk tales and legends (Tharuvana)

Wayanad has also seen migration from different parts of Kerala and neighbouring areas going back centuries. Jains, Hindu castes like Nairs, Nambiars, Thiyyas, Ezhavas, Brahmins and Chetttis have all migrated to Wayanad during different periods in history and have contributed to the composite culture of Wayanad. Of these communities, the Adiyas and Chettis are of particular interest to this study for birthing their own versions of the Ramayana called the Adiya Ramayana and the Chetti Ramayana.

The Chettis migrated to Wayanad from Coimbatore and belong to 18.5 sects, including the Wayanadan Chettis, Maandaan Chettis and Idanadan Chettis; among these, the Wayanadan Chetty is the half-sect (Tharuvana)

This influx of people has shaped the district's folklore and oral tradition. The folklore and oral tradition have touched Ramayana and have given rise to multiple versions of the epic that are attributable to certain caste groups of the districts. The presence of these versions can potentially mean two things: first, how the canonical version of the Ramayana was alien and unrelatable to these groups. Second, various versions of the Ramayana demonstrate its adaptability and position it as a living text.

2. Ramayana: A Look at Non Homogenity

The Ayodhya and Babri Masjid controversy in northern India has spurred efforts to confine and canonise the epic into certain geographies of the Indian subcontinent on one side and an effort to contest the canonical idea of the Ramayana on the other side. The latter effort calls for a remapping of geographies, while the first effort aspires to define the cultural contours of the Ramayana in north India and its culture. The remapping of geographies can also support efforts to define a centralised version of Hinduism where subjects on the periphery are devoid of agency to define the belief system to better suit themselves. The centralisation efforts will thus add to the centre's assault on the periphery. However, in the face of these contestations, Wayanad stands as a distinctive locale, not merely a passive recipient of a reshaped narrative but an active participant in the evolutionary process of the epic. The region's many Ramayanas, with their unique nuances and adaptations, challenge the homogeneity of the conventional North Indian version.

Archaeologist H.D. Sankalia's study of geographical sites mentioned in Valmiki's Ramayana illuminates the possibility that the epic's basis might lie in an incident between tribes in present-day Madhya Pradesh. This revelation serves as a cornerstone for understanding the varied roots of the Ramayana. Sankalia's findings drive home the point of Ramayana's origin as a north Indian epic. But Wayanad, with its divergence from the

traditional narrative, emerges as a ground for the cultivation of alternate interpretations, reinforcing the notion that the epic's resonance is deeply entwined with regional specificities. It also emphasizes that the epic's origins are not bound by a singular narrative thread.

3. Oral Traditions and the Ramayana

The oral traditions breathe life into the Ramayana, offering an alternative lens through which the epic is perceived. The absence of a fixed script liberates the narrative from the constraints of written ideology, allowing it to be a malleable entity that is part of the collective memory and is subject to creative reinterpretation of the community. Thus, Ramayana in the folklore of Wayanad transcends its role as a static tale; it becomes a living entity, adapting to the changing cultural landscape and reflecting the diverse perspectives of its storytellers.

Moreover, the fluidity of oral traditions allows for the negotiation of cultural meanings. As each storyteller imparts their unique perspective, the Ramayanas of Wayanad become a site of ongoing negotiation and reinterpretation. This adaptability is not a deviation from tradition but a testament to its vibrancy and relevance in a changing cultural landscape.

The oral dynamism of the Ramayanas in Wayanad also speaks to the communal agency in shaping cultural narratives. The two versions of the Ramayana unique to Wayanad, the Adiya Ramayana and Chetti Ramayana, have been synthesised from caste groups low in the caste hierarchy of Hinduism. Adiya Ramayana, the adaptation of the epic by the Adiya tribe, includes relevant cultural elements that stand out as an account that is similar to the canonical text by just its core. The Chetti Ramayana is closer to the canon in terms of plot and events but includes local deities and communities to maintain its uniqueness. What these accounts achieve for their respective communities are varied. The accounts allow these groups to build their agency independent of the rigid and exclusionary bounds of Hinduism. The absence of a fixed script empowers the community to actively participate in the construction of their cultural identity. The stories become a shared space for collective imagination, reflecting the values, aspirations, and challenges of the community.

4. Sacred Geographies of Wayanad and the Ramayana

A point of divergence from the argument of a single sacred geography can be found in the mythical significance of the Thirunelli in Wayanad. Thirunelli is known as the Kashi of South India, and its temple holds critical importance in Wayanad's Hindu beliefs. The Thirunelli temple stands as a testament to the fusion of the Ramayana with the local landscape. Dedicated to Lord Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana, the temple is built on a legend that Lord Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana traversed the surrounding forest during their exile, leaving a mark of sacredness to the geography of Thirunelli. The belief about Thirunelli is that Rama heard of his father Dasharatha's demise and performed his last rites at the Papanasini stream, which flows through the temple lands. Papanasini has been granted the status of the Ganga for its ability to cleanse humans of their sins. Hindus believe that the last rites performed for ancestors at Papanashini will take souls to heaven. Pilgrims and devotees now revere the purported footprint of Rama and perform last rites for ancestors at the temple, transforming it into a spiritual pilgrimage site (Priyadershini, "Wayanad, Where Stories").

In the case of the Thirunelli temple, the land itself becomes a repository of sacred memories, intertwining the narrative of the Ramayana with the topography of Wayanad. This localised interpretation transcends the traditional boundaries of the epic, making it a lived experience for the devotees who engage with the sacred

space. Moving on from Thirunelli, the Ponkuzhi Temple diverges from canon and presents an oft-repeated part of folklore.

The myth associated with Ponkuzhi says that Sita's tears formed the temple pond when Rama abandoned her. The Ponkuzhi temple myth presents an interesting facet of myths relating to Ramayana in Wayanad. There is no mention of the sea in any of the tales. Being a highland sea is an alien concept. The tribespeople, originators of most of the myths, believed that most of Ramayana happened in the 40 km stretch between Pulpally and Ponkuzhi. The Ponkuzhi temple thus holds a prominent place in the folklore of Wayanad and is an important fixture in Sita's emotional journey.

To comprehend the significance of the Ponkuzhi myth, it is imperative to delve into the intersection of myth and emotion. As anthropologist Catherine Lutz and psychologist Andrew J. Weaver argue, emotions are culturally shaped and play a pivotal role in shaping community narratives. In the context of the Ramayana, emotions are not confined to the characters alone but extend to the collective emotional experiences of the community engaging with the epic.

The significance of the Ponkuzhi myth is that it is also an opening into the pro-feminist stance of Wayanad's Ramayana folklore. Sita's emotional journey and tales of her abandonment are narrated in a way that disrupts the conventional narrative that does not dwell on the topic and is oriented towards conventional heroism.

The emotional resonance of the Ponkuzhi myth also aligns with the Hindu concept of the immanent divine, where the divine is not distant and transcendent but present in the everyday experiences of life. The tears of Sita, forming a pond in Wayanad, signify the immanence of the divine within the natural world. In this sense, the Ponkuzhi myth contributes to the democratisation of the Ramayana by making it immanent and intimately connected to the emotional landscapes of the local community. The temple becomes a space where the divine is not distant and unapproachable but where devotees can encounter it in their own emotional experiences, fostering a sense of inclusivity and shared humanity.

Pulpally, an agrarian town, features prominently in the Ramayana myths and folklore associated with Wayanad. The place is where Sita raised Lava and Kusa, and also Valmiki had an ashram. The location where the sage's ashram stood is now called Ashramkolly. The Sita temple at Pulpally is where it is believed that Sita plunged into the Earth after she was faced with the prospect of going with Rama. Thirunelli, Ponkuzhi, Pulpally and various other locations of Wayanad find varied levels of prominence in the Adiya and Chetti Ramayana. A look through both narratives can inform questions about how the epic has been transformed into a local narrative with close links with the local people, flora and fauna, and local deities and topography.

5. The Various Ramayanas of Wayanad

5.1. Adiya Ramayana

The Adiya Ramayana posits that Rama and Lakshmana are warrior brothers who find Sita in the forest of Pulpally. The Adiya Ramayana has no mention of the sea and says Ravana wooed Sita and took her to Lanka in a bullock cart. The version of the epic mentions Lanka as a city that lay beyond a river. The epic's timeline is also different from the canon, as Rama and Sita are not married when Ravana takes her to Lanka. Sita stayed in Lanka as Rama and Lakshmana scoured the forests of Pulpally and Thirunelli for Sita. The brothers enlist Hanuman's help to find Sita at Pakshipathalam. Hanuman finds Sita when he notices an Adiya woman washing

Sita's clothes in Lanka. Reframing the epic to include familiar locales and people is a way that the Adiyas have used to make the Ramayana a narrative that is their own. (Tharuvana, 3)

Hanuman persuades Sita and takes her with him to Rama, who marries her and starts a life with her. Allegations against Sita's fidelity create ruptures in the marriage, and Rama orders Lakshmana to kill Sita. It is in the forests of Pulpally that a distraught Lakshmana leaves a pregnant Sita, as he was unable to carry out Rama's order to kill her. As Lakshmana wept from his dilemma, Sita asked him to make a cut on the Malabar Kino tree and smear its red secretion on his sword to fool Rama. The mentions of the Kino tree, Jackfruit, and the Koli tree make the tale relatable and remove the veil of unfamiliarity that perhaps the canonical Ramayana might present to the readers in the Adiya community.

The Adiya Ramayana says that Sita gave birth to twins at Ashramkolly near Pulpally. The twins started farming in the lands near the ashram; the crops were as close it could get to Wayanad as it could be, the twins grew rice, elephant yam, bitter gourd, beans, coffee and pepper. It is when a horse belonging to Rama encroaches on their land and destroys crops that Lava and Kusa meet their father (10).

Coffee and pepper still continue to be the main crops for farmers in Wayanad. Moreover, Lava and Kusa are not far removed from Adiya youths; they are also not the warrior twins that the canonical Ramayana paints them as. It is also a reflection of the domesticated life that the horse is not part of an Ashwamedha as per the canon. The detail connects to the life of the community, and members can find Lava and Kusa as relatable as opposed to how strange they might have felt hearing about a yajna kings offer that is led by an untethered horse. The twins' reaction to the encroachment of their farm is also typical of Wayanad, with the district reporting a large number of human-animal conflict incidents. (Balan, "Deaths in").

The aftermath of tying up the horse did not lead to war but a scrabble between the parties. There ensues a scrabble, and a concerned Sita sent letters to the local deities for help. The petitioned deities are Valliyoorkavu Bhagavathy, Pulpally Bhagavathy, Pakkam Theyyam, Kottiyoor Perumal, Sidhappa, Nanchappa and Mathappa Daivam. The deities resolve the conflict while directing Rama and Lakshmana to accept Sita and the kids while also respecting their lands. The conflict comes to a close when Sita and Rama unite and go on to live in Iruppu in present-day Karnataka (12).

The resolution style is also typical of the local councils that tribes have within their communities, where elders play the role of mediators who resolve disagreements and at times, pass punitive judgements. The backdrop of Lava and Kusa meeting Rama and Kusa is fit into the environs of Wayanad, and the circumstances leading up to it are also distinctly local with the land encroachment. The deities' council and the reconciliation between Rama and the twins also carry a local mark. Mention of deities the Adiya community worships adds communal ownership to the narrative of Ramayana while also democratising the tale from being a savarna tale to one that is accommodative of the diverse caste formations of Wayanad. The direct mention of Adiyas in the narrative also gives the tribe an opportunity to fashion their agency with pride and dignity within the structures of Hinduism.

5.2. The Wayanad Chetti Ramayana

The Wayanad Chetti Ramayana is another version of the epic that displays its flexibility to accommodate diversity. The Chetti Ramayana brings in Wayanad as the place that Lakshmana takes Sita to abandon. He abandoned Sita in the forest and a distraught Sita ended up under the care of the sage Valmiki. Even though safe at the ashram, SIta's grief knew no bounds, and her tears collected to form the 'Sitakulam' a lake at

Ponkuzhy on the Wayanad border. At the ashram, Sita gave birth to a baby boy who was named Lava. Kusa is created only later when Valmiki cannot find Lava and makes an identical baby to escape SIta's wrath. There is also an episode of Sita cursing leeches and banishing them from Pulpally (25).

According to the Chetti Ramayana, Sita, Lava, and Kusa were gifted lands by Vanavedans, a forest-dwelling group of hunters. Meanwhile, Rama ruled from Ayodhyapuri and conducted the Ashwamedha and Lava, and Kusa tied the horse as it entered Wayanad from Ponkuzhy. Hanuman is the first from Rama's camp to set out in search of the horse, and he consults the Vandevathas (forest deities) - Athirukalan, Arupuli, Kandanpuli, Dammadan, Kaikkolan and Thampuratti. In the unfolding incidents, Rama is reunited with his kids and Sita. Sita wasn't prepared to go back to Ayodhya and prayed to Mother Earth to receive her back. The earth split open, and she plunged into the Earth. Rama could only grab a clump of her hair as she descended; the spot where Sita disappeared had come to be Pulpally's Jadayattakavu (20).

The Chetti Ramayana shares many parallels with the canonical version of the epic. The portrayal of Rama, Lakshmana, Lava and Kusa as warriors is a point of similarity. But the Chetti Ramayana too establishes the agency of the Chetti community with the mentions of forest deities that hold a sacred place in the folklore and myths of the community. More instances of the narrative being reframed into the geography and society is when it can be found that it is women from the Uralikuruma community who take care of her post-delivery. After the birth of Lava, it is the gods Nagarajan and Kuruman that Valmiki designates to protect Sita (26).

Much like what Adiya Ramayana achieves for its community, the Chetti Ramayana also delivers a spirit of inclusion with its reflection of local customs, deities, geographies and communities. The Chetti Ramayana also attributes divinity to various geographies with their association with the epic.

> Kannarampuzha is a tributary of the river Kabani. The traditions among the Wayanad Chetti, Mandadan Chetti, and Edanadan Chettis connect this stream with the story of Sita's abandonment by Rama. The tributary is believed to be formed of the stream of tears that flowed from Sita's eyes as she sat alone in distress. It is also called Kannuneerpuzha, the stream of tears. The water in the Kannarampuzha was once yellow in colour. Some devotees believe that was because Sita had bathed in this river with turmeric smeared all over her body. Fifteen kilometres away from Meppadi, near the town of Mundakai, is a place called Sitammakuzhy (Sita's valley). There is a beautiful waterfall and a pond here. Devotees connect Sitammakuzhy to Jadayattakavu. It is believed that this is the spot where the earth split and Sita went down into it. Kappikunnu is a village near Manikkavu, in central Wayanad. There is a perennial spring here. The locals believe that this is the flow of tears from Sita's eyes.
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> Kandathuvayal is situated near Vellamunda, in the northern part of Wayanad district. The name is derived from the instance where Rama came across Sita in a rice field many years after he had abandoned her, on suspicions of her purity (kandathi means discovered, and vayal means paddy field). As soon as she saw Rama, the one who had deserted her, Sita fervently prayed to Mother Earth, 'Divine Mother, kindly take me back into your womb. Save me from those who insulted me.' At once, the earth split, and as Sita went down, Rama tried to grab and pull her back by the hair. A tuft of her hair came out and later on became the mani grass. People use this plant to make brooms (31 - 32)

6. The Democratization of the Ramayana

Apart from the Chettis and Adiyas, the folklore of many other communities contains allusions to the Ramayana. The Kurichya origin myth posits that their lands were given to them by Rama's brother Bharatha. There are also similar myths that can be found in the folklore of Kurumas, Mullukuruma and Kusavas. What is common in these stories is that as the communities draw parallels with the epic, there are efforts that try to slot in their place in the fold of Hinduism. Thus the versions can also be seen as an attempt at creating an identity and agency by these groups in the rigid and exclusionary structures of Hinduism. By creating linkages with their culture and its artefacts like farming practices or customs or familiar geographies, groups try to find proximity with the divine. The practice of ascribing divinity to the local geography and the resultant worship of these geographies create a shared symbol for its practitioners. This shared symbol helps in the democratisation of the Ramayana by making it an integral part of the lived reality of the people, irrespective of their adherence to conventional Hinduism. While these efforts cannot be judged as an attempt solely directed to create agency within Hinduism, communities have found placement in the broader Hindutva narrative with the versions of the epic and have provided them with identities and cultural practices observed even today.

What the various versions of the epic succeed in doing is in creating hybrids of the mainstream Hindu culture and myth. These hybrids, where characters and geography change to the people and locales of Wayanad that gives the versions standing in the local context, as they embody and draw strength from local values and perspectives. Homi Bhabha's theories about cultural hybridity can help content with these hybrids. Bhabha's construction of a Third Space of Enunciation, where cultural identities emerge, makes a claim for superiority for any version of the Ramayana to be suspect (Bhabha, 37).

The claims about narrative purity are fragile because the identities always factor in and borrow from the "Other" inevitably to construct themselves. With calls for purity and canonical status suspect, the Ramayana becomes a living text, and the Adiyas and Chettis and various other communities can construct agency within Hinduism that fights back against assault from caste hierarchies and establishes identities that are rooted in pride. It is this result of the various Ramayanas of Wayanad produce that enables the democratisation of the epic.

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