

The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India, Volume VI: Yuddhakāṇḍa. Translation and Annotation by Robert P. Goldman, Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, and Barend A. van Nooten; Introduction by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman. Princeton Library of Asian Translations. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-691-06663-9 (hardcover), xviii, 1655 p.

The sixth part of the *Rāmāyaṇa* translation project, the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, is an awesome volume of 1655 pages: introduction pp. 3–118, translation pp. 119–494, notes pp. 495–1551, three glossaries (Important Sanskrit Words, Proper Nouns, and Epithets; Flora and Fauna; and Weapons) pp. 1552–1560; a substantial bibliography pp. 1563–1578; and, finally, a most valuable index pp. 1579–1655. The whole weighs in total 1961 grams, about half of the weight of the Baroda critical edition of the same *kāṇḍa*. Just to read through this heavy and impressive book is a kind of *tapas*. How much more to produce it! The general editor Robert P. Goldman, along with Sally J. Sutherland Goldman and Barend A. van Nooten have all accumulated *puṇya* for many lives to come as a reward for this gigantic *oeuvre*.

Like the five preceding volumes, the most striking quality is that the translation is accurate *and* eminently readable, in spite of the colossal length and the many similar scenes, especially the numerous descriptions of battles which is the main theme of the aptly named *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, the Battle Book.

Severed arms, legs and head fly around along with 14 kinds of arrows, spears, tridents, hammers, javelins, darts, cudgels and various missiles, not to speak of the millions of boulders, uprooted trees, mountain tops – these three latter items constitute the monkey army's main weapons. Judging by the millions and millions of fighting monkeys there couldn't have been a single tree left standing in Laṅkā after these fierce battles. And where did all the mountaintops come from? The text doesn't exactly describe Laṅkā as mountainous. However, in an epic of this kind realism has no part. We are entirely in an aggrandized fantasy world:

“Thus, in the eighth part of the day, did Rāma with his arrows like flames of fire single-handedly annihilate the forces of the *rākṣasas*, ... : a host of ten thousand chariots as swift as the wind, eighteen thousand mighty war-elephants, fourteen thousand battle-steeds along with their riders, and a full two hundred thousand *rākṣasa* foot soldiers.” (6.81.28–30)

Impressive numbers, indeed!

The general slaughter can also be described in poetic terms, or as the Goldmans put it more elegantly “Vālmīki seems to delight in graphic descriptions of massive and sanguinary violence” (Intr. p. 91):

“Indeed, the battleground resembled a river. Masses of slain heroes formed its banks, and shattered weapons, its great trees. Torrents of blood made up its broad waters, and the ocean to which it flowed was Yama. Livers and spleens made up its deep mud, scattered entrails its waterweeds. Severed heads and trunks made up its fish, pieces of limbs, its grass. It was crowded with vultures in place of flocks of *haṃsas*, and it was swarming with adjutant storks instead of *sārāsa* cranes. It was covered with fat in place of foam, and the cries of the wounded took the place of its gurgling. It was not to be forded by the faint of heart. Truly, it resembled a river at the end of the rains, swarming with *haṃsas* and *sārāsa* cranes” (6.46.25–28).

As always, there are of course some minor points to discuss. For instance, I do not see the necessity of the many explanatory notes that

Sanskrit passive phrases have been rendered as active. Most first year Sanskrit students know that *tenoktam* is normally translated as “he said” – no need to explain it actually says “by him it was said”. The frequency with which Goldman refers to this utterly banal syntactic phenomenon takes up unnecessary space in the already voluminous notes.

The concentration on syntactical and semantic, not to mention the theological issues in the notes is sometimes to the disadvantage of other little clarifications that would have been welcome. How many readers remember that Caitraratha and Nandana in 6.30.8 are names of Indra’s and Kubera’s celestial gardens? And who remembers that Pināka (6.81.32) is Śiva’s bow? Or is it his trident? There’s no explanation in the notes.

Sanskrit words for gemstones always pose a problem. The word *vaidūrya* is rendered as ‘lapis’ in 6.15.2, further explained as ‘dark blue’ in the notes p. 611, again as ‘lapis’ in 6.3.13 and 6.67,13, but then the notes explain that “it could also be translated as ‘cat’s eye beryl’ or ‘emerald’ ...” (p. 1152). I believe that *vaidūrya/vaidūrya* is normally understood as ‘cat’s eye beryl’, which usually is yellowish and brown, rather than ‘lapis’, which has been adopted here.

I do not quite agree with the interpretation of 6.3.19. The Sanskrit text reads:

lanākāpurī nirālambā devadurgā bhayāvahā |
nādeyam pārvataṃ vanyam kṛtrimam ca caturvidham ||

which is rendered as:

“The citadel of Lanākā is not to be scaled. It is inaccessible even to the gods. It is fearsome with its fourfold defences: its rivers, mountains, forests, and defensive constructions.”

I would prefer interpreting *caturvidham* as a qualifying adjective to *kṛtrimam*, which is also metrically defensible (8+8 syllables). The four man-made things (*kṛtrimam*) are already mentioned in the preceding *ślokas*: the ramparts (*prākāra* 3.13), the moats (*parikhā* 3.14), the gates (*dvāra* 3.15) and the bridges (*saṃkrāma* 3.15–16).

One could discuss minor issues like these *ad infinitum*, but that seems rather superfluous. However, it will be impossible in the future to teach a single *śloka* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* without having access to these excellent notes provided in this and all the preceding volumes of this colossal and admirable translation project.

In the introduction the Goldmans aptly observe that many scenes are highly visual, almost made for a cinematic rendering (pp. 90 ff.) However, the references to American films and to the British cult-figure Monty Python are incomprehensible for anyone outside the English-American cultural sphere. I have hardly heard of any of the many American – and some Japanese – films mentioned, and I have only seen fifteen minutes of a Monty Python movie once – I found it too idiotic to spend more time watching it. Surely it would have been more interesting and useful to refer to renderings of the epic in Indian films, not to speak of the seemingly interminable TV series that ran for one and a half years every Sunday morning all over India in all the regional languages in the 1980s.¹ It would have been more to the point to dwell a little longer on the numerous representations of the *Rāmāyana* found in illuminated manuscripts, in temples friezes, in popular calendar art and so forth. True, the “Jagat Singh *Rāmāyana*” is mentioned (p. 94). Unfortunately the current volume of the *Rām*. must already have gone to the printers before the British Library in London put on the exhibition called “The *Ramayana*: Love and Valour in India's Great Epic” (16 May to 14 September 2008).² The “Jagat Singh *Rāmāyana*” was indeed the centerpiece in this exhibition with 120 paintings. But Vidya Dehejia’s beautiful book *The Legend of Rāma: Artistic Visions*, published already 1994,³ is sadly missing from the bibliography. Furthermore, this book contains an article by J. P. Losty “Sahib Din’s Book of Battles. Rana Jagat Singh’s Yuddha-kanda” (pp. 101–116) with numerous illustrations in colour. A mention of this article along with other references to the representations of the *Rāmāyana* in art would have been more useful than the names of American films.

By and large, the scholars involved in the *Rāmāyana* translation

- 1 See my article “The Ramayana – cultural heritage as TV soap”, in the *Toronto South Asia Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Winter 1990, p. 57–64; and Romila Thapar: “The Ramayana Syndrome” in *Seminar* 353, January 1989, Delhi, pp. 71–75.
- 2 2008 seems to have been the year of the *Rāmāyana*. Museum Rietberg in Zurich had an exhibition called “Rama und Sita: Das Ramayana in der Malerei Indiens” from 29 June to 28 September 2008. There is an excellent catalogue with the same title put together by the curators Eberhard Fischer and Jorritt Britschgi (ISBN 978-3-907077-39-9).
- 3 *The Legend of Rama. Artistic Visions*, ed. by Vidya Dehejia, Marg Publications 1994.

project seem more interested in pure philology – and at times theology – than in art.

The most astonishing event in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* is the dramatic meeting between Sītā and Rāma once the war is over. Hanumān is sent to Sītā to tell her about Rāma’s victory. She is speechless, overcome by joy: “When I heard the wonderful news concerning my husband’s victory, I was overwhelmed with joy and momentarily speechless.” (6.101.15) and she wishes she had something to reward Hanumān. Hanumān offers to kill the evil *rākṣasa* women who have guarded her, but she tells him “who ... could be angry at servant women, for, as mere functionaries and dependent on the king, they are obedient and act only on the orders of another” (6.101. 30), thereby demonstrating her noble character. Finally she simply says: *draṣṭum icchāmi bhartāraṃ vānarottama* “I wish to see my husband, O best of monkeys” (6.101.40). Hanumān relays her message to Rāma, who then order Vibhiṣaṇa to bring her: “Have Sītā Vaidehī come here anointed with celestial unguents, adorned with celestial ornaments, her hair freshly washed.” This is rather peculiar, since Sītā herself wishes to come unwashed and unadorned in front of her husband, but she submits to Rāma’s orders and arrives, her hair washed and “adorned with costly garments and ornaments”, in “a shining palanquin that was draped in costly fabrics” (6.102.13–14). In other words she arrives like a queen – as if she had been Rāvaṇa’s queen? There is no discussion whatsoever in the learned notes *why* Sītā initially wishes to appear before her husband in the dishevelled state she has been in since she was abducted. However, in 6.23.16, Sītā refers to herself as a *tapasvinī*: *mām vihāya tapasvinīm*, which is rendered “having abandoned me to my misery”. Although the adjective *tapasvin* most often means just ‘miserable’ in the epic, I wonder if we shouldn’t take *tapasvinī* here as meaning that Sītā refers to the fact that she has lived like an ascetic ever since she was abducted by Rāvaṇa. This is uttered when Sītā is made to believe that Rāma has been killed, and Sītā blames herself not to have been virtuous enough: “When a husband dies first, they say it is because of the wife’s lack of virtue. But even though my conduct has been exemplary (*sādhuvṛttāyāḥ ... mama*), you, who were so virtuous, departed before me.” (6.23.9) Appearing before Rāma without washing and adorning herself could then mean that this is a proof of

her chastity. Then Rāma's insistence that she should be washed and dressed up in finery could imply that he wants her to appear as if she had been Rāvaṇa's queen during her stay in Lankā, something which makes his rejection of her more defensible, at least to himself.⁴

Rāma then tells her in no uncertain terms that he has waged the whole war to wipe out the insult to his honour, and that she does not really count. All is about his honour: "I have wiped clean the affront, and so my wrath is appeased. For I have eliminated both the insult and the enemy at the same time" (6.103.3) and he continues angrily to the devastated, weeping Sītā "Bless you, but let it be understood that it was not on your account that I undertook the effort of this war" ... "Instead I did all this in order to protect my reputation and in every way to wipe clean the insult and disgrace to my illustrious lineage" (6.103.15–16). And he continues, "Since, however, your virtue is now in doubt, your presence has become as profoundly disagreeable to me as is a bright lamp to a man afflicted with a disease of the eye" (6.103.17). He then tells her to marry Lakṣmaṇa (whose marriage to Urmilā in Bālakāṇḍa 72.18 seems to have been totally forgotten ever since the brothers went into exile), or Vibhiṣaṇa, or Sugrīva or whoever. The devastated Sītā asks Lakṣmaṇa to prepare a funeral pyre for her from which she is miraculously rescued by Agni, thereby proving her chastity. Later on Rāma says: "For surely had I not put Jānakī to test, the virtuous would have said of me, 'Daśaratha's son Rāma is a lustful fool'" (6.106.12). The text says: *bālīsaḥ khalu kāmātmā rāmo daśarathātmajaḥ / iti vakṣyanti mām santo jānakīm aviśodhya hi //* As a matter of fact it was not Rāma who put her to test, it was Sītā herself who demanded a funeral pyre (6.104.18–19) and by the intervention of Agni her innocence was proven. So Rāma's

4 There's a peculiar rite in present-day Kashmiri Hindu weddings: a few days before the actual wedding the unwashed bride with dishevelled hair is carried in by a maternal uncle (*māmā*) to a waiting priest, and a ritual, called in Hindī *deogun/devgun*, is performed. The ritual is meant to invoke the blessings of the gods before the wedding. It takes place in the bride's house, and only the bride's relatives are present. I have not managed to get any explanation why the bride-to-be has to be unwashed and generally unkempt, but my guess is that she is meant to appear like an ascetic to underline that she is chaste and pure. After this ceremony the bride is washed in *besan* and *dahī*, i.e. chickpea flour and yoghurt, a traditional cleansing method which actually works very well.

speech is rather hypocritical. This ought to have been noted in the commentary.

Rāma's treatment of Sītā tells a lot about the values of a male-dominated society, where women are disposable and, like chattel and cattle, easily replaceable. In the beginning of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* Rāma refers to Sītā's "full and close-set breasts" (6.5.14), as a "lady of lovely thighs" (6. 5.16), and worries about "her youth slipping away" (6.5.5) (he clearly doesn't want an aging wrinkled Sītā), but later, seeing his beloved brother Lakṣmaṇa lying wounded beside him, he laments: "What do I care for Sītā or even for my life itself now that I see my brother lying defeated in battle? Were I to search the world I could find another woman like Sītā, but never a brother, a companion, or a warrior equal to Lakṣmaṇa" (6. 39–5–6). So Sītā is decidedly just a sex object replaceable with another sex object, but a brother, an equal, is a different matter.

There is naturally nothing odd about Rāma's attitude: he is part and parcel, even the supreme representative of the feudal society over which he reigns.

And this whole episode illustrates the humanness of Rāma, and also of Sītā.

The main problem with the *Rāmāyaṇa* remains the question of the divinity of Rāma in the epic. I have already discussed this in my review of the *Aranyakāṇḍa*,⁵ and I have not changed my mind about this issue. Just as Pollock in his intr. to *Aranyakāṇḍa* (and elsewhere), the Goldmans seems to subscribe to the idea that Rāma is an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu already in the Vālmīki *Rām*. Both Pollock and the Goldmans base this notion on the commentators, who all wrote more than a thousand years after the composition of the epic, and who all were devout Vaiṣṇavas. This does not solve the problem of how the epic was perceived and received in the beginning. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are found in temple friezes since the first century A.D.⁶ but that *per se* does not prove he was considered an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. To insist that Rāma was a Vaiṣṇava god already in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* reduces the epic from a powerful human drama to a desiccated, syrupy and

5 In *Acta Orientalia*, Vol. 55, Copenhagen 1994, pp. 255–261.

6 See *The Legend of Rama. Artistic Visions*, ed. by Vidya Dehejia, Marg Publications 1994, Fig. 6, p. 11.

often absurd theology,⁷ however clever the commentators' theological somersaults are. Take for instance sargas 37–38 when Sītā is flown in the “flying palace” Puṣpaka to see the unconscious Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa lying on the ground. Sītā naturally assumes they are dead, and laments (*vilalāpa bhṛśaṃ sītā* 6.38.1). The note to this *śloka* reads: “Several of the commentators feel compelled to explain how the omniscient goddess Sītā could give way to lamentation when Rāma is not really dead. Cm⁸ argues that, although she knows the truth, she laments in order to deceive the *rākṣasas* ... Ct⁹ adds that she laments as an actress might in order to firmly establish in the *rākṣasas*' minds the notion of her humanity...” (p. 798).¹⁰ These theological “explanations” are patently absurd in their assumption that Sītā also was an omniscient goddess already in the epic. Although they do not say so, the Goldmans clearly realize that this is utter nonsense, but worth quoting for its involuntary humour. So why then do they take the commentaries so seriously when it comes to the notion of Rāma as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu and dwell on it at great length?

This difference of opinion does not in any way lessen the immense merit of this latest contribution to the gigantic *Rāmāyaṇa* translation project. This annotated translation of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* is not just an *opus magnum*, it is an *opus magnificum*.

Does the Government of India really have to wait until the *Uttarakāṇḍa* is published to give a collective, well-deserved Padma Bhushan to the whole *Rāmāyaṇa* translation project team?

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- 7 See my article “A Good Story Spoiled. Tulasīdāsa's Rendering of the Vālmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*”, in *Corolla Torontonensis*. Studies in Honour of Ronald Morton Smith, ed. by Emmet Robbins and Stella Sandahl, Toronto 1994 pp. 199–224.
- 8 The commentary *Taitvadīpikā* by Maheśvaratīrtha from the mid-sixteenth century.
- 9 The commentary *Rāmāyaṇatilaka* by Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa from the early eighteenth century.
- 10 For a lucid discussion of the commentaries see Rosalind Lefebvre's Introduction to the *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa* (1994) pp.17–28.