

The Uniqueness of *Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa*: An Overview

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Abstract

Rāmāyaṇa was first written in Sanskrit in ancient India by *Vālmikī*. Gradually this epic gained considerable popularity and the legends of *Rāmāyaṇa* spread to different parts of India. As a result, the *Vālmikī Rāmāyaṇa* was translated into different languages and many regional *Rāmāyaṇas* developed independently based on the story of the original *Rāmāyaṇa*. *Krittivās Ojhā* first translated the *Rāmāyaṇa* into Bengali in the 15th century CE. From the 16th century CE onwards, there are many references to other regional *Rāmāyaṇa* compositions. We forget about an 18th century man who wrote the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the Bengali language, named *Advuta Rāmāyaṇa*. He was *Jagadram Roy*, who lived in the village of *Bhului* in *Bankura* district of *West Bengal*. He was fully assisted by his son in composing the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The *Rāmāyaṇa* composed by *Jagadram Roy* and his eldest son *Ramprasad Roy* is now known as *Rāmprasādī- Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa*. This *Rāmāyaṇa* is very important to know the social and cultural history of medieval Bengal. So, in this article, I will try to shed light on the historical importance and uniqueness of *Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa*.

Keywords: *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Jagadram*, *Ramprasad*, *Krittivas Ojha*, *Bankura*, *Puṣkarkāṇḍa*, *Sītā*.

Introduction

The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* are well known as two outstanding epics of ancient India. *Vālmikī* is known as the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Vyāsadeva* is the author of the *Mahābhārata*. Both epics were compiled over several centuries. Therefore, it would not be right to think that one author composed an entire epic. These epics are considered priceless treasures of Indian history. It must be remembered that the epics were transmitted orally for a long time and were later preserved in written form. Here I will mainly discuss the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, and try to shed some light on how this epic became so popular at the regional level. I will try to emphasise the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* in particular and discuss how this epic found its place in the Bengali tradition and culture. Naturally, when we talk about the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Bengal, the first thing that comes to our mind is the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* written by *Krittivās* for the first time.¹ Although the *Krittivāsī Rāmāyaṇa* is very popular in Bengal, there are other few Bengali *Rāmāyaṇas* that are not discussed much. One of them is known as *Advuta Rāmāyaṇa* by *Jagadram Roy* (or, *Jagatram Roy*).² The overall structure of this *Rāmāyaṇa*, composed in Bengal in the 18th century CE, is largely different from the *Vālmikī Rāmāyaṇa* and other regional *Rāmāyaṇas*. *Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa* is therefore very unique from other *Rāmāyaṇas*.

Now the question has been arising, who was *Jagadram Roy*? And, why is *Rāmāyaṇa* considered very significant in the history of Bengali tradition and culture? *Jagadram* was born in the early 18th century in the village of *Bhului* in the present-day *Bankura* district of *West Bengal*. He devoted himself to writing the *Rāmāyaṇa* as per the advice of his elder brother *Jitram Roy*. *Jagadram* was fully assisted in its composition by his son *Ramprasad Roy*.³ The *Rāmāyaṇa* composed by *Jagadram Roy* in 18th century Bengal, was not a translation of the original *Vālmikī Rāmāyaṇa*. Even he did not follow the *Srīrām Pāñchālī* by *Krittivās Ojha* very much in this regard.⁴ The uniqueness of the *Rāmāyaṇa* he has composed is that it uses eight *kāṇḍas* instead of seven *kāṇḍas*. The eighth *kāṇḍa* which he added is

titled, *Puṣkarkāṇḍa*. He even added a small part called *Rāma-Rāsalīlā* in between the *Puṣkarkāṇḍa* and *Uttarākāṇḍa*. Surprisingly, this *Rāmāyaṇa* talks about the thousand-headed *Rāvaṇa* and represents the appearance of *Sītā* either as a form of goddess *Kālī* or *Durgā*. That's why this *Rāmāyaṇa* literature seems to be quite distinct and unique from other regional *Rāmāyaṇas*.

Multifarious Bengali Ramayana:

The *Rāmāyaṇa* was first translated into the Bengali language by Krittivās Ojhā, around the 15th century CE. The *Rāmāyaṇa* was later composed in the Mymensingh region of present-day Bangladesh around the middle of the 16th century CE. It was composed by Chandrabati and it cannot be called a translation of the original *Rāmāyaṇa*.⁵ Chandrabati's *Rāmāyaṇa* has been identified as the first Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* written by a woman in Bengal, where Chandrabati also re-arranged the legends of the *Rāmāyaṇa* according to her vision. Around the 17th century CE, under the patronage of the Malla kings of Bishnupur, the poet Shankara Chakraborty was engaged to compose one another *Rāmāyaṇa* work.⁶ He was commonly known as 'Kabichandra' and his *Rāmāyaṇa* was known as *Bishnupurī Rāmāyaṇa*. Even at that time Gangaram Dutta, Mahananda Chakraborty, Dwija Laxman Das, Bhabani Das and many others started to compose *Rāmāyaṇa* in their way.⁷ Jagadram Roy and Ramprasad Roy of Bankura composed one another *Rāmāyaṇa* in the 18th century CE. Jagadram gave the name of this book as the *Advuta Rāmāyaṇa*, but now it is known as *Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa*.⁸ This book is too unknown to many people, but even today the popularity of this *Rāmāyaṇa* exists in different areas of Bankura at the local level.

The epic *Rāmāyaṇa* has been translated into various Indian and foreign languages, and various regional *Rāmāyaṇa* stories have developed over the centuries. There are several legends based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* scattered throughout South and Southeast Asia.⁹ In the 16th century CE, the text called *Rāmācharitmānas* by Tulsidas became very popular in Northern India. This literature, perhaps, is largely responsible for the development of various regional forms of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, I have mainly discussed the *Rāmāyaṇas* of Bengal here and it is, therefore, worth mentioning here the various unknown *Rāmāyaṇa* of Bengal composed mainly in medieval times.

Rāma Kathā has gained great popularity among the Indian people since ancient times. The effect of this popularity is also observed in Bengal and history is presented through various regional *Rāmāyaṇas* of Bengal. The objectives of all these *Rāmāyaṇas* are different from the original *Vālmikī Rāmāyaṇa*. These texts reflect the personal thoughts and philosophies of various authors. However, the *Rāmāyaṇas* contain not only the imagination of authors but also reveal the nature of contemporary society and culture through several legends. Various such Bengali *Rāmāyaṇas* composed in medieval Bengal may be briefly recalled here. *Rāmāyaṇas* Such as *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, *Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa*, *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa*, *Bhūśaṇḍī Rāmāyaṇa*, etc. still reflects the dynamic history of society, culture, and tradition of medieval Bengal.

Jagadram Roy – His personal life and contemporary backdrop:

We have already mentioned Jagadram Roy as the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa* under discussion here. He was born in the 18th century CE in the Bankura district of present-day West Bengal. He was born in the village of Bhului under the Mahisara Pargana of the Shikharbhum State, now known as the Bhului village under Mejia Police Station. Jagadram Roy and his son Ramprasad Roy were born and brought up here. Raja Monilal Sekhar Simhadeo, also known as Raghunath Narayana was the ruler of this Shikharbhum or Gara Panchkot kingdom at the time when Jagadram composed his *Rāmāyaṇa*. The rulers of this royal family patronized the Vaishnava religion and there is various scattered evidence of

it. Even their chief deity was Raghunāth Jiu.¹⁰ At that time, the attraction of people towards Vaishnavism in the surrounding environment must have touched the mind of Jagadram. Hence, Vaishnava's devotion is clearly expressed in his literature.

While Jagadram Roy composed the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the influence of the *Ramāyet* sect (followers of *Rāmānanda*) spread over the different areas of Bankura. He belongs to a Brahmanical family by birth and they had also worshipped *Śālagrām Silā* as Raghunāth Jiu. They adopted the epithet 'Roy' as their surname from the contemporary rulers of Bankura. Jagadram's father was Raghunath Roy and his elder brother was Jitram Roy. Jitram encouraged Jagadram to compose the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* and introduced Jagadram to a book known as *Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa* which was popular in Bengal at that time. Jagadram left the structure of *Krittivāsi Rāmāyaṇa* and developed a new kind of *Rāmāyaṇa* framework. In this regard, he was influenced by the *Adbhuta Rāmāyaṇa* as well as various other regional *Rāmāyaṇas*.

He was also devoted to Shaktism in his personal life; That's why he composed another piece of literature called *Durgā Pāñcharātri*. His devotion to Shaktism is also revealed in his *Rāmāyaṇa*. In both literary works, he was actively assisted by his illustrious son Ramprasad Roy. This *Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa* was edited and published in 1906 by Kashibilas Bandyopadhyay, a resident of Kalikapur, a neighbouring village of Bhului in Bankura.¹¹

***Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa* - Text and Context:**

Vālmikī Rāmāyaṇa is an epic poem of some 24,000 verses, divided into seven *kāṇḍas*; which are – *Bālakāṇḍa*, *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, *Arāṇyakāṇḍa*, *Kiṣkindhyākāṇḍa*, *Sundarākāṇḍa*, *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, and *Uttarākāṇḍa*. But a vernacular *Rāmāyaṇa* composed in Bengal in the 18th century CE, long after *Vālmikī's Rāmāyaṇa*, did not follow exactly this structure. Jagadram Roy, a resident of the village named Bhului under Mejia police station of present-day Bankura district, composed this unique *Rāmāyaṇa*. He named it the *Advuta Rāmāyaṇa*, although it is now known as *Rāmprasādī- Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa*; because it was written by both Jagadram and his son Ramaprasad. In this part of the article, I will try to shed light on the subject of this *Rāmāyaṇa* and its context.

Why I have to claim that *Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa* is very unique from other *Rāmāyaṇas* can be understood by discussing the text and context of this book. First of all, the verses of *Ādikāṇḍa* written by Jagadram in his *Rāmāyaṇa*, are very rare in medieval literature. This part can be called the prologue or introduction to the *Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa*.¹² At the beginning of this book written in the form of verse, the duties and responsibilities that people must fulfil in their lives have been reminded. Even the complex aspects of esoteric psychology are brought out through wonderful consonance. Jagadram mentions here that the right actions in life can guide people in the right direction.¹³ Needless to say, such a statement is not found in medieval literature and especially in other regional *Rāmāyaṇas*. Also, in this *kāṇḍa*, *Rāmachandra* is declared as 'Hari' i.e., an avatar of Lord Vishnu. Even in this *kāṇḍa*, Jagadram expresses his gratitude to his elder brother, as he got inspiration from him to compose this text.

In *Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa*, the character of *Sītā* is given more importance than in other *Rāmāyaṇas*. The greatness of *Sītā's* character is in *Ādikāṇḍa* itself and further glorified in the other *kāṇḍas*. There are several legends in this book, which are not mentioned in *Vālmikī* and *Krittivāsi Rāmāyaṇa*; such as the legend of *Śrīmatī*, *Nārad's* regret about *Sītā's* birth, excessive *Lakshmī Vandanā*, anecdote of *Bhūṣandī* crow, etc. Among these, the story of *Sītā's* birth is very interesting, as she is said to be the

child of *Mandodari*, who will destroy *Rāvaṇa*.¹⁴ However, there is a similar story of *Sītā*'s birth in the *Chandrabatī Rāmāyaṇa* and Jagadram Roy likely collected it from that *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The real uniqueness of *Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa* is that it has eight *kāṇḍas* instead of seven *kāṇḍas*. This eighth *kāṇḍa* is known as *Puṣkarkāṇḍa*. Jagadram even added another part called *Rāma-Rāsālīlā* between *Puṣkarkāṇḍa* and *Uttarākāṇḍa*. In *Puṣkarkāṇḍa*, *Sītā* told *Agastya* about the thousand-headed *Rāvaṇa*, who ruled in the *Puṣkar* region. According to the legend of this *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Rāmachandra* marched to *Puṣkar* with a huge army and there engaged in battle with thousand-headed *Rāvaṇa*. But in the battle with thousand-headed *Rāvaṇa*, *Rāmachandra* was gradually losing, and at one point he fainted. At that time *Sītā* appeared as *Mahākālī* and went to the battlefield, and started again the battle with *Rāvaṇa*. *Sītā* in the form of *Mahākālī* kills *Rāvaṇa* and after regaining consciousness, *Rāmachandra* attempts to pacify the terrible goddess by praising goddess *Kālī*. Apart from Goddess *Kālī*, the origin of *Ādyā Śakti* and *Mātrikās* are also discussed here.¹⁵ This *Rāmāyaṇa* shows allegiance to the Vaishnava and Śākta sects simultaneously. Jagadram Roy was devoted to Shaktism in his personal life; That's why the female characters in his *Rāmāyaṇa* got more importance. Besides composing *Puṣkarkāṇḍa* he had tried to elaborate on the characters of goddesses *Durgā*, *Kālī*, *Chañḍī*, *Lakshmi*, etc.¹⁶ The legend of the slaying of *Rāvaṇa* by *Sītā* is found in the one and only *Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa*. Jagadram Roy's attraction to the sect of Shaktism elevated the female characters in his *Rāmāyaṇa* to the status of goddesses. In short, this *Rāmāyaṇa* can be said to be a combined manifestation of Vaishnavism and Shaktism.

Apart from the eight *kāṇḍas*, *Jagadrāmī Rāmāyaṇa* has another short section called *Rāma-Rāsālīlā*.¹⁷ In this section, *Rāma*'s *Rāsālīlā* is presented identically with *Krishṇa*'s *Rāsālīlā*.¹⁸ Although, *Rāma*'s *Rāsālīlā* is not mentioned in any other *Rāmāyaṇas*. The Vaishnava devotional aspect of Jagadram emerges behind this emphasis on *Rāma*. At the time Jagadram and his son Ramaprasad were writing the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Vaishnavism and Shaktism were gaining prominence in Bengal. Both Jagadram and Ramaprasad were influenced by the Vaishnava and Śākta religions of Bengal. So, this *Rāmāyaṇa* written by them represents the mixed heritage form of medieval Bengali culture.

Conclusion:

The epic *Rāmāyaṇa* has gradually carved its place in the folk culture of various regions of the Indian subcontinent since ancient times. As a result, several regional *Rāmāyaṇas* have been developed and in them, the evolving forms of society, culture, religion, and tradition of that region have emerged. All these aspects are also seen in the *Jagadrāmī Rāmprāsādī Rāmāyaṇa*. This text provides a glimpse of the dynamic regional history of medieval Bengal. This *Rāmāyaṇa* should be considered a very momentous material in the study of the history of Bengal.

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