“Rama Katha of the Hills and Terrains”: A Study of the Tradition of Rama Katha of the Communities of North-East India

Mrittika Ghosh
Assistant Professor
Department of Basic science & Humanities
IEM Kolkata

Dr. Samapika Das Biswas
Assistant Professor
Department of Basic science & Humanities
IEM Kolkata

Dr. Bonani Chakrabarty
Assistant Professor
Department of Basic science & Humanities
IEM Kolkata
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Abstract

Rama-Katha has always been a prime subject of interest and experiment in both literary forms and performative arts. It is said that it was prevalent even before the first scribe of the Ramayana, Valmiki took the initiative to document and ascribe the story a certain form. After this the Rama-Katha was not only translated in different languages, but also underwent changes in form and shape. Rama-Katha still exist in the oral form, especially among the communities of north-east India. The objective of this paper is to explore different versions of oral Rama-Katha of the communities, dwelling in north-east India, which are both homogeneous and heterogeneous in overtone.

Key words: Ramayana, Katha, oral tradition, communities, narratives.

It is difficult to trace the origin of oral tradition. It must have taken birth with the emergence of the word itself or the first utterance of man; and if we abide by the popular belief that the “word” has been formed by the manipulation of breath, where breath is regarded as the most essential component of life then one can even arrive at an illation that the oral tradition, which has evolved out of verbally uttered word, has merged with identities of the people of some communities where it is considered as pertinent as life itself. A popular oral tradition, which has been prevalent since time immemorial, is the infusion of the Rama-Katha and it is quite intriguing as in some communities, particularly those of north-east, the Rama-Katha has traveled from written to oral.

As already mentioned the tradition of Rama-Katha must have been prevalent in India since time immemorial. The stories of Ramayana were already floating before it took a written shape. Historic songs, in the course of centuries, have condensed to form the famous Mahakavya; the Ramayana. The Adikavi, Valmiki, is believed to have provided a unified shape to the scattered form of the Rama-Katha and from the internal evidences, within the Mahakavya itself, it can be proved that even before it was reduced to the written form it was being sung in the assemblies. Its first recitation, according to the Ramayana, was before the gathering of the sages in the forest. The second one is in the thorough fares of Ayodha. Finally, it was recited in the court of Rama, at the conclusion of horse sacrifice. From this one can infer that the tradition of Ramayana started through oral performance.

Rama-Katha has existed in the parts of north-east India (Chakraborty, 273) for a long time. The different ethnic communities dwelling in this region have not only accepted the Rama-Katha in their tradition but also have gone to the extent of creating legends linking their origins with characters and episodes from it. It is also quite interesting to note that in some cases the reception of the Rama-Katha was conducted through Buddhist connections. Even
before the time of Madhav Kandali; who is credited for translating the Ramayana into Assamese verse during the reign of Varahi king Mahamanikya, an oral tradition of Rama-Katha was found in this region. It was transmitted in form of songs, verbal prosaic narratives, myths, legends, ritualistic mantras, proverbs, riddles and beliefs. (Tanya, 2)

The Karbis, dwelling in the north-east, believe that the origin of their community is intricately linked with the Rama-Katha. They trace their origin to the Treta Yuga when the Ramayana battle took place. A Karbi village head, who was believed to have lived for hundred and fifteen years, recalled that during Treta Yuga their clan had sided with Rama and they used to carry the arrows or kar for Rama and this is how their community came to be known as Karbi. So, from the beginning only the Rama-Katha was the part of recollection for the Karbis, which was transmitted orally. Tales from the Ramayana are part of the traditional folklore of the Karbis and these tales have been preserved in the memories of the traditional singers and storytellers, who recite them. There are two different ways in which Rama-Katha is recited. It may be in the form of prose, or in the form of lyrics sung by the lunse or the traditional singers. The tales in prose are called Rama-Lakhan Atomo or stories of Rama and Lakshmana. The songs or lyrics are called Sabin-Alun – the songs of Sabin. In certain regions Sabin is pronounced as Sabi. Theories about why these songs are known as Sabin Alun are diverse. One explanation is offered on the basis of the traditional Karbi songs, in which the lead character is usually the heroine rather than the hero. Ha-ee, Romir, Mir Tahin, Deng Samet and other such traditional songs have woven around the heroine. The Karbi Rama-Katha emphasizes on the character of Ita or Sinta Kungri, which is Sita. The name Sabin is a poetic version of Sita. An indication of this is found in the following lyrics; “Niso Sabin mir lori / Jonok recho asopi”; i.e; Sister Sabin daughter of king Janka, is a beautiful flower. Accordingly, Sabin Alun can also mean Sita's song, or the story of Sita. Another popular belief is that the composer of the Sita Kungripi Alun or song of princess Sita, was a poet called, Sabin, who most probably lived in the Kandali area of Nagaon district. It is also believed that the name is derived from a class of Brahman poet, who were scholars of medieval Assam to whose names the epithet Kandali was suffixed. I have already mentioned earlier that Madhav Kandali rendered the Valmiki Ramayana into beautiful Assamese verse in the first half of the 19th century. So, some even believe that the story of Sita came to the Karbis via this Assamese version of the Ramayana. Another theory is that this Rama-Katha is not the composition of a single poet but legend has it that parts of this great mahakavya are by members of the Bey clan in the orchard of the great social reformer Irukasen. It is said that the legendary singers of the Karbis, Chedu and Longbi, belonged to the Bey clan, which is the fisherman clan of the Karbis. Probably, fishermen singers have gone up into the hills and assimilated into Karbis. This may have introduced the story of Ramayana to them. The Karbis claim that Sabin-Alun or Rama-Lakhan Alun is the first song of the Karbi community. According to a legend there was no such song as Sabin-Alun earlier.
so the supreme God of this community Hemphu asked Rangsina, the divine musician to compose songs. Rangsina took the human form and after composing Sabin-Alun he taught it to the Mirjeng brothers. This accords with both Valmiki and Tulsidas who are said to have received an oracle to compose their works. Sabin-Alun is not just the only instance of Rama-Katha in the Karbi community but the Rama-nam is also found in the sutras of the mantras, chanted during the course of rites and rituals of the Karbis. However, neither are prayers offered directly to Rama-Sita, nor are they worshipped as idols. In some pujas, mantras infused with Rama-nam are addressed to a particular deity. Yet a mantra, such as; “Rama kuru Lakhan kuru/ Rama kuru Lakhan kuru/ Rama kuru kangtang Lakhan kuru kangtang /Rama beni Lakhan beni/ Rama beni mukrang Lakhan beni mukrang/ Rama Beni kangtang Lakhan beni kangtang” (Kandali, 20); elevates Rama, indirectly, to the status of a Karbi god, as the above mantra a Rama-nam, which is chanted during the puja of some supreme deities of the Karbis, like the Arnam pharo. Besides this Rama-nam can still be heard in the incantations of the bez, who is the traditional Karbi medicine man, and he is supposed to chant it when he is engaged in healing his patients. Thus, the Rama-Katha in the Karbi society has a rich oral tradition attached to it.

Besides the Karbi reception of Sabin-Alun a Lalung version of it can also be found as the Lalungs, also known as Tiwas, not only concentrated in the districts of Nagaon, Kamrup and Lakhimpur, but also a sizeable number of them are found in the hilly confines of the Karbi Anglong and Khasi Hills. So, it is quite natural that as neighbour of the Karbis the Lalungs are familiar with Sabin-Alun. Although it was not possible to locate a complete version of the Lalung Ramayan, quite a number of tales have been found in verbal circulations, especially among the lalungs, living in the hilly tracts of Karbi Anglong, adjacent to the border of the Nagaon district and a field investigation has proved that Lalungs still preserve the custom of telling the story of Rama, occasional in the form of folksongs or hymns. (Kandali, 22)

The Missings, living in the riverine tracts of upper Assam, have also deeply imbibed the spirit of Rama-Katha, which is ceremoniously recited while keeping ritualistic vigil after a death in a family till the final purification rites. There is another popular verbal transmission of Rama-Katha among the Missing, i.e.; the “oi nitoms” or the love songs depicting the episodes of the Ramayana; one such example is as follows; “Rama kampo igela/ garput epuk jangela/ayet gilai banaba” (when translated it comes to mean that “I shall be like Rama and go into exile with you, / with bow and arrows on my back.” (Ghosh, xii)

The Manipuri reception of Rama-Katha leans heavily on the Krittivasi Ramayana. However, it is quite intriguing to note this reception is one of the finest exemplar of the transformation of a text (Baranwal, 1) from a written to an oral form. The popular theme of Rama-Katha is heard in the lips of the wariliba or the traditional Manipuri storytellers. The Rama-Katha is even being sung by penasakpa, or singers, singing with the accompaniment of pena, a single
stringed instrument. *Rama-Katha* even finds place in *khonjomparva*, where a narrative is sung to the accompaniment of a *dholak*. Moreover, reverence for Rama as a god has percolated to such a level in some places, particularly in a village in *Bishenpur* area, where Rama is worshipped as one of the *umang-lais* or sylvan deities and invocations, such as; “*Rama-krishna narayana/ hari he narayana,*” is chanted during the course of the worship. (Konwar, 15)

The Mizo reception of the *Rama-Katha*, which is an elaborate tale called *Khena-Ramate Unao Thawnthu* or the story of *Lakshmana* and *Rama* can be sighted as an interesting reception of the *Rama-Katha*. As compared to the other communities the *Mizos* settled in the north-east at a recent date and prior to this migration they occupied the Chin hill area of Burma. It is difficult to ascertain exactly when the tradition of *Rama-Katha* was properly received by the *Mizos*. It is possible that they became acquainted with it even while they were in their Chin hill habitat or during the course of their migration to Mizoram through their contacts with the neighbouring *Hindu* or *Buddhist* groups in *Chittangong* and *Tripura*. There are some folklores which allude to such outside contacts which eventually became a part of their traditional narrative. Unlike some of its neighbouring communities the *Mizos* have ascribed divine status to *Rama* and *Lakhsmana*. *Rama-Katha* has even penetrated into the day to day works and tasks of the *Mizo* community; one such being the plantation of the rice, which is attributed to *Rama* and *Lakhsmana*. This is evident from, an invocation recited by a *Mizo Bawlpu* (the traditional priest) while practicing divination with the help of a few grains of clean rice put on his palm; the translated version of the incantation is as follows:

You, the mother and father of paddy,/ Your roots covered vast land,/ Your shoots pierced the sky; when *Thalanrawkpa* celebrated *khuwanchawi,* while the slow-paced lemur took fire from the original source/ while earth-worm took earth for shaping the world,/ while mother nature modeled the world,/ you were created by *Khena* and *Rama* to predict the truth./ You should predict the truth../ You should sing the truth/ and not forewarn deception. (Konwar, 14)

Even the folktale of the Mizo Ramayana is a part of verbal circulation.

The study of *Rama Katha* of the different communities of north-east *India* reveals a repertoire of plural narrative forms and structure. This tradition, in the north-east, is a sort of vocal means; almost like a vehicle of culture, through which the members of the social groups co-operate and interact. Therefore, through the interactions and contact *Rama Katha* has been integrated with the societal mores, beliefs and cultural practices of these communities.
Running Head: Rama Katha

Works cited:


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