

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

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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 *Lakshmana*. *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 *Lakshmana*. 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.

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