

Reading *The Rámáyan of Válmiiki* as a Grand Folktale: A Structural Folkloristic Study

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Abstract: This study reinterprets Valmiki's *Ramayana*, translated into English as *The Rámáyan of Válmiiki*, as a folk epic shaped by long-standing oral traditions rather than as a historical record. Drawing on structural folkloristic and motif analysis, the paper argues that the epic's narrative is constructed from recurring motifemes—miraculous birth, stepmother persecution, villainous disguise, animal helpers, and life-secret motifs—that appear widely in Indian tribal tales, Jataka stories, and global folktale traditions. Engaging with the work of A. K. Ramanujan, Paula Richman, Camille Bulcke, Alan Dundes, Vladimir Propp, Lauri Honko, and the Princeton Critical Edition scholars, the study situates the *Ramayana* within a dynamic and diverse tradition of retellings shaped by regional, cultural, and ideological influences. Through comparisons with Kadar, Santali, Jain and Greek folklores, the analysis demonstrates that the narrative structure of the *Ramayana* reflects oral epic compositional patterns rather than historical events. The paper concludes that recognizing the *Ramayana* as a finely woven folktale fabric—layered, adaptive, and modular—enhances our understanding of its literary artistry while clarifying the distinction between mythic imagination and historical discourse.

Key Words: *Ramayana*, folk epic, motifs, mythology, Valmiki, oral tradition.

I. Introduction

The '*Ramayana*' of Valmiki has long been revered as one of India's foundational epics, celebrated for its poetic grandeur and its profound influence on Hindu religious

thought, art, and cultural imagination. Yet, modern scholarship increasingly recognizes that the epic did not emerge fully formed as a singular literary creation, nor can it be read as a historical chronicle. Rather, it is a layered narrative shaped through centuries of oral transmission, cultural adaptation, and regional retellings. Studies by A. K. Ramanujan, Paula Richman, Camille Bulcke, John Brockington, and the editors of the Princeton Critical Edition have demonstrated that the *Ramayana* exists in hundreds of forms across South and Southeast Asia—each shaped by local beliefs, political concerns, and narrative preferences. This diversity points unmistakably to the epic’s deep grounding in folklore.

Building on this understanding, the present study approaches *The Rámáyan of Válmiki*¹, translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith, as a folk epic whose narrative structure emerges from a constellation of recurring folkloric motifs. Drawing upon the structural folkloristics of Alan Dundes, Vladimir Propp, and Lauri Honko, this paper argues that the plot of the *Ramayana* can be read as a sequence of interconnected motifemes—miraculous births, villainous disguises, stepmother persecution, animal helpers, and life-secret revelations—that parallel motifs found in Indian tribal stories, Jataka tales, and global folktale traditions. These motifs do not appear at random; rather, they form stable narrative patterns characteristic of orally derived epics.

Understanding the *Ramayana* as a text woven from such folkloric elements allows us to appreciate its narrative elasticity, cultural adaptability, and enduring symbolic force. At the same time, this perspective clarifies the distinction between mythic imagination and historical discourse, a distinction often blurred in contemporary political and cultural debates. By treating the *Ramayana* as a grand folktale fabric—layered, adaptive, and modular—this study seeks to illuminate both its artistic architecture and its place within the wider landscape of world folklore.

Review of Scholarship

Scholarly engagement with the *Ramayana* over the past century has emphasised its composite nature, textual fluidity, and deep entanglement with oral and folk traditions. Goldman and the team responsible for the Princeton Critical Edition highlight the layered composition of Valmiki’s text, noting numerous interpolations, regional variations, and narrative expansions across centuries. Their introductions argue that the epic bears traces of earlier oral cycles and that its narrative architecture reflects a long period of accretion rather than single authorship.

A. K. Ramanujan’s (1999) seminal essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas” underscores the diversity of the Rama tradition across South and Southeast Asia. Ramanujan demonstrates how motifs, episodes, and characterisations differ depending on the cultural, linguistic, and religious context in which the story is retold. Paula Richman’s edited volumes *Many Ramayanas* (1991) and *Questioning Ramayanas* (2001) further document how folk, tribal, regional, and sectarian communities reshape the story to reflect their own social and moral worlds.

Historical approaches by John Brockington (*The Sanskrit Epics; Ramayana: A Historical Introduction*) investigate how the epic evolved textually, offering evidence that Valmiki’s composition drew from pre-existing material circulating orally. Camille Bulcke’s

¹ Diacritics are used only for the names or terminologies specifically mentioned in the translated work of Ralph T. H. Griffith. For instance, Griffith uses ‘Ráma’ whereas other writers and folklorists use the names Rama, Ramar or Ram, although all these refer to the same character. The diacritic marks used by Sen in his *Bengali Ramayanas* are retained in this study.

Ramkatha: Utpatti aur Vikas remains a foundational study tracing over 300 early forms of the Rama story, many of which predate Valmiki.

Anthropological and performance-based studies, particularly by Philip Lutgendorf and Velcheru Narayana Rao, show how living Ramayana traditions—ranging from *Ramlila*² enactments to village performances—continue to function as folklore in practice. Wendy Doniger and Sheldon Pollock have also contributed to understanding how Sanskrit narrative traditions absorb, transform, and sometimes suppress local folk narratives. Collectively, this scholarship affirms that the *Ramayana* cannot be understood solely as a literary epic but must be viewed as a dynamic folkloric tradition shaped through constant retelling.

Methodology

This study approaches the *Ramayana* through a folkloristic lens, employing motif analysis as the primary methodological tool. Drawing on Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* and Alan Dundes' work on structural folklore, the study identifies recurrent narrative motifs—such as miraculous births, villainous disguises, animal helpers, stepmother persecution, and life-monster patterns—and examines how these shape the structure of the epic. Because motifs operate at the level of narrative action rather than linguistic nuance, English translations provide a reliable basis for identifying these elements.

The study also incorporates insights from Vladimir Propp's morphological analysis, which argues that folktale narratives operate through stable sequences of functions. While the *Ramayana* is an epic rather than a simple folktale, many of its narrative units align with Proppian functions, suggesting that the story was woven from older folkloric blocks. Lauri Honko's concept of epic layering further guides this analysis, emphasising how oral epics emerge from the accumulation and textualization of smaller folklore units.

The methodology therefore proceeds in three steps: (1) studying the *Ramayana* as a folk epic; (2) identifying narrative motifs within the Valmiki narrative; (3) comparing these motifs with those found in Indian tribal, regional, and classical folktales; and (4) analysing how the shared motif structures support the argument that the *Ramayana* is rooted in folklore rather than historical fact. This approach positions the epic within the broader framework of folk-epic evolution, demonstrating its relationship to oral traditions across cultures.

Note on Translations Used

This study relies on English translation of the *Ramayana* because the researcher does not work with Sanskrit. Since the aim here is not a linguistic or philological analysis but a structural examination of the plot as a sequence of recurring folk motifs, translation does not hinder the methodology. The earliest complete English translation of the *Ramayana* was produced by Ralph T. H. Griffith between 1870–1874, and his version *The Rámáyan of Válmiki* remains widely circulated and accessible. This study therefore uses Griffith's translation. While the limitations of translation—loss of Sanskrit metre, stylistic nuance, and formulaic diction—are acknowledged, these do not affect the identification of narrative motifs, which remain consistent across translations and retellings.

II. The *Ramayana* as a Folk Epic

The Epic is of two types: The Epic of Growth or the Folk Epic, and the Epic of Art or the Literary Epic. A folk epic cannot be attributed to a single creator. Long before it assumes the form of a coherent literary work, it exists for centuries as scattered narrative pieces

² Dramatic folk-reenactment of the life of Rama

performed and transmitted by itinerant minstrels and storytellers. These fragments, preserved and reshaped through oral tradition, are gradually woven into a continuous tapestry of legend passed down across generations (Prasad 1999). The epic poet's role is not to invent a new tale but to refine, reinterpret, and reorganise an inherited narrative. The poet's artistry lies in giving shape to a story that already exists within the community, rather than creating an entirely original account (Sen 1920).

This section analyses *Ramayana* as an epic gathered from scattered folklore and examines its adherence to epic conventions. It has been observed that by the time England's first epic 'Beowulf' was composed, a number of northern legends about Beowa—a semi-divine hero—and the monster Grendel were already circulating among early storytellers (Long 1909). In a similar manner, scholars note that the *Iliad* likely originated as a collection of separate heroic tales performed by minstrels long before these narratives were attributed to Homer (TED-Ed, 2017). Such examples illustrate a broader pattern in the development of national epics: they often emerge from pre-existing oral fragments that are later shaped into a cohesive literary work.

A comparable process can be seen in the Indian tradition. The existence of the Rama-story before Valmiki's composition of the *Ramayana*, particularly in the *Daçaratha*³ *Jātaka*⁴ and other *Jātakas*, suggests that Valmiki inherited an earlier narrative rather than creating it anew (Sen 1920). According to the *Daçaratha Jātaka*, *Daçaratha*, the king of Benares, has sixteen thousand queens, and the chief queen bears *Rāma*, *Lakshmana-kumāra*, and a daughter named *Sita*. After the chief queen's death, the king selects another queen as his favourite, and she later gives birth to *Bharata-kumāra*. *Daçaratha* grants her a boon, which she defers until *Bharata-kumāra* reaches the age of six. She then demands the kingdom for her son. The king initially refuses—criticizing her for being selfish—but eventually yields out of fear for the safety of the children of his first wife. After consulting astrologers and learning that he has twelve years left to live, he sends *Rāma*, *Lakshmana*, and *Sita* to the forest, instructing them to return only after twelve years. The siblings travel north to the Himalayas and live there as ascetics. Nine years later, *Daçaratha* dies of grief. *Rāma*, however, declines *Bharata-kumāra*'s request to assume the throne, sending his sandals as a symbol of authority instead. He returns to Benares only after the full twelve years have passed, at which point he is crowned king and *Sita* becomes the chief queen. He is said to rule Benares for sixteen hundred years. This earlier narrative framework demonstrates that the foundational *Rāma*-story originates in the *Daçaratha Jātaka*, and that Valmiki later expanded and transformed this older folktale into the epic form now familiar across South Asia (Sen 1920).

Further evidence of the epic's composite nature appears in regional variations of the Ravana legend. Southern traditions portraying Ravana—often regarded as a Dravidian Buddhist king—developed independently and were later attached to an older northern narrative centred on Rama (Sen 1920). A similar view has been expressed that court bards in Ayodhya likely recited multiple heroic tales celebrating Rama's achievements long before Valmiki's work took shape. Moreover, Valmiki's contribution lay in unifying these circulating stories into a single coherent composition before the fifth century BCE (Iyengar 1925). Notes by Gorresio's likewise record earlier traditions that describe an episode in which Karttavírya attacks Lanka and captures Rávan, indicating that the Ravana featured in heroic cycles are not originally associated with *Rāma* (Griffith 1870–1874). Such evidence challenges the widespread belief that Rama was the only hero to defeat Ravana.

³ Dasaratha. The 'Daçaratha' form is used by Sen in his book *The Bengali Rámayanas*.

⁴ Buddhist birth story

These northern legends may have entered southern folklore between 480 BCE and 184 BCE, a period marked by the gradual Aryanization of southern India through the efforts of *Brahmin*⁵ priests (Farquhar 1912). The merging of northern and southern traditions during this time underscores the complex interplay of oral narratives, regional folklore, and cultural adaptation that shaped the evolution of the Ramayana into the epic known today.

Zacharias P. Thundy⁶, in his introductory note to the *Kadar*⁷ tale “The *Ramayana*: Kadar Remember,” proposes that Kadar recollections of the Rama story may represent folktales that predate Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, adaptations of epic narratives borrowed from the Hindu communities of the plains, or a combination of both. Thundy’s suggestion implies that legends about Rama may have been in circulation among forest communities even before the Sanskrit epic assumed literary form. To support these two possibilities, he presents the Kadar version of the Ramayana, which broadly follows the familiar structure in which Rama and Sita are separated due to Ravana’s abduction of Sita. However, several elements of the Kadar narrative differ significantly from the Sanskrit epic. Instead of being discovered in a furrow, the Kadar Sita is found by farmers inside a box containing a bow, and she is later presented to the king. She marries *Ramar*⁸ after he bends the bow with which she was discovered as an infant. Interestingly, the Kadars claim that *Ravanar*⁹—not Ramar—was the one who bent the bow and married Sita, reversing the better-known attribution found in most traditions. In this telling, *Bali*¹⁰, *Sugreeva*, and *Hanuman* are not members of a different race but are instead presented as Ramar’s brothers. During Ramar’s absence, Ravanar arrives disguised as a mendicant and carries Sita away to his kingdom beyond the seven seas, asking her to marry him. She requests a twenty-day waiting period, hoping that Ramar will come to rescue her. As in the Sanskrit epic, Ramar ultimately crosses the sea, defeats Ravanar, and brings Sita back. Yet the conclusion also diverges in notable ways. When a pregnant Sita is later accused of infidelity during Ramar’s absence, she is sent away and eventually recovered by one of Ramar’s brothers. On the return journey, the axle pin of the chariot breaks; Sita steadies the vehicle by inserting her finger into the hole, and the tale ends with her reunion with Ramar, praised for her virtue.

It is found that the earliest manuscripts of the *Ramayana* do not contain the *Lakshmana-rekha*, the protective circle supposedly drawn by Rama’s brother *Lakshmana* before leaving Sita in the forest in order to look for Rama in Book III (*Aranyakāṇḍa*) (Pattanaik 2024). However, the Telugu Ramayana, *Ranganatha Rámayanamu* by Gona Budda Reddy, includes the part in which Lakshmana draws seven lines around Sita’s hut. It is therefore possible that the Kadars borrowed this detail from the Telugu epic tradition. Additional deviations in the Kadar narrative—such as portraying Sugreeva, Bali, and Hanuman as Rama’s brothers—may reflect their dissatisfaction with the Valmiki version known to the plains people. The ancient legends of Rama may have influenced the Kadars independently, but their narrative variations also register their disapproval of Brahminical

⁵ The highest order of the Hindu society ordained in the *Manusmṛti* (*The Laws of Manu*)

⁶ Thundy, Z. P. 1983. *South Indian folktales of Kadar*. Archana Publications, 33

⁷ An indigenous group on the Western Ghats, Southern India

⁸ Tamil form of ‘Ráma’, a respectful way of calling or addressing one’s name. The other form is ‘Raman’. The Kadars also call Ravana ‘Ravanar’.

⁹ See note 7

¹⁰ Bali or Váli, Sugreeva (*Sugriva*) and Hanuman are monkey-like characters, belonging to the forest kingdom of Kishkindha, in the epic. Hanuman and Sugreeva later help Ráma (in the epic) in finding Sita.

traditions, which they describe as a new religion¹¹ introduced from the north (Thundy 1983, 19).

Epic Conventions in Valmiki's *Ramayana*

An invocation to the muse appears in *Balakanda*, the first book of the *Rámayana*, where Valmiki himself is honoured as the inspired poet. The sage *Nárad* is the one who narrates Ráma's story to Valmiki, thus establishing the convention of divine or semi-divine mediation.

The poem also states its proposition or theme at the outset. In Griffith's translation, the declared purpose of the *Rámáyan* is "*The whole wide world from sin and stain to free*" (Griffith 1870–1874, 3). This proclamation aligns with the epic norm of presenting a world-altering narrative of moral and cosmic significance.

Epic heroes are typically depicted as superhuman and closely associated with the gods who govern their destinies. The characters of an epic exhibit extraordinary powers befitting their elevated roles (Prasad 1999). Rama conforms fully to this pattern: he is a renowned hero in the Sanskrit tradition, endowed with divine attributes and destined to conquer evil. In *Aranyakanda* (Book III), when Sítá fears for Ráma's safety after he pursues the magical deer, Lakshman reassures her by emphasizing Ráma's invincibility (Griffith 1870-1874, 996). The antagonist Rávan is described as ten-headed, a clearly supernatural attribute (Griffith, 1870-1874, 1000). *Nárad* is portrayed as a divine sage, the son of *Brahma*¹² and messenger of the gods, while Hanuman is the son of the wind-god Vayu—demonstrating the constant interplay of mortal and divine agents typical of epic tradition (Griffith 1870-1874, 27, 1672).

The narrative itself is propelled by divine intervention. It is observed that the events of Rama's life unfold in accordance with Vishnu's cosmic play, the god choosing to be born as a human (Neelakantan 2025). Dasaratha's childlessness, the supernatural nature of Ráma as Vishnu's incarnation, his miraculous birth, and his final triumph over Rávan are all framed as the will of the gods. The gods also form a distinct group of dramatis personae with their own passions and conflicts. In Book I (*Bála-Kāṇḍa*), for instance, *Indra*¹³ falls in love with *Ahalyá*, the wife of the sage *Gautama*. His seduction of her leads Gautama to curse both offenders. Ráma's superhuman nature is revealed when he liberates Ahalyá from the curse.

Epics are typically divided into books, and the *Rámáyan* follows this convention with its seven books or *kāṇḍas*¹⁴. In the Sanskrit work, each book is named for its principal setting except the first and last: *Bála-Kāṇḍa* and *Uttarakāṇḍa*¹⁵. *Ayodhyá-Kāṇḍa*¹⁶ unfolds in the capital city of Ayodhyá; *Aranya-Kāṇḍa*¹⁷ in the forests of Dandaka; *Kiṣkindhá-Kāṇḍa* in Kishkindhá, the territory of the Vanaras; *Sundara-Kāṇḍa* largely in Lanka; and *Yuddha-Kāṇḍa* narrates the climactic war against Rávan. These divisions encompass a story that spans more than three decades. Ráma and Sita live in Ayodhyá for twelve years before Ráma's stepmother Kaikeyi secures the throne for her son Bharat, leading to Ráma's fourteen-year exile. After Sítá's abduction, several months pass before Ráma reaches Lanka,

¹¹ Tale no 14, 'Creation, Sin and Punishment' from Thundy's *South Indian Folktales of Kadar* (1983)

¹² The creator-god in Hindu mythology

¹³ The Vedic Sky-god

¹⁴ Griffith does not use the Sanskrit titles in his translation.

¹⁵ The final book of the Sanskrit *Rámayana*.

¹⁶ The books of the *Rámayana* are: *Bālakāṇḍa*, *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, *Aranyakāṇḍa*, *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa*, *Sundarakāṇḍa*, *Yuddhakāṇḍa* and *Uttarakāṇḍa*.

¹⁷ 'Aranya' means Forest in Sanskrit

defeats Rávan, and returns to Ayodhyá. The story concludes only in Book VII, when Ráma's sons recite the tale of their father's life to him.

Furthermore, Griffith's translation employs a metrical pattern of four iambs—unstressed followed by stressed syllables—per line, forming rhyming couplets. For instance, the illustrious lineage of Ráma is described in Book I:

*“Ikshvá | ku's sons | from days | of old
Were ev | er brave | and migh | ty-souled”* (Griffith 1870–1874, 35).

Despite drawing upon borrowed legends, the events of the *Ramayana* are thought by some to reflect historical realities, much like the siege and fall of Troy in the *Iliad* (Prasad 1999). The epic may be read as a historical allegory. Many of its settings—Ayodhyá in the kingdom of Kosala, Videha, the Dandaka forest (Dandakaranya in Chhattisgarh¹⁸), and Lanka (Sri Lanka)—are identifiable geographical locations. In the narrative, Ráma of the Aryan lineage goes to war against Rávan of Lanka. Following their settlement in India, the Aryans engaged in prolonged struggles with the indigenous peoples (Clayton 1913; Iyengar 1925). The aboriginal inhabitants of northern India belonged to the Dravidian race and were the creators of the Indus Valley Civilization (Rajasekhar 1995). Their language was largely Dravidian (Mukhopadhyay 2021; Winters 1990), and some scholars assert that their written language was Tamil (Winters 2012). Over time, the Dravidians and other indigenous tribes were pushed southward (Hewitt 1888; Oppert 1888; Farquhar 1912; Clayton 1913; Winters 2012). The Aryans referred to the civilized peoples of the south as “destroyers”, and the *Laws of Manu* or *Manusmṛti* calls those living beyond the Vindhya “barbarians” (Clayton 1913; Bühler 1886). The Aryan tribes constantly fought with the aboriginal people of India, gradually defeating them and establishing kingdoms in the south (Farquhar 1912; Das 1921).

Although victorious, the Aryans were deeply apprehensive of the aboriginal populations. The scattered traditions and institutions of Brahminical India, threatened by the surrounding non-Aryan world, were consolidated into the epics and early Sanskrit literature (Iyengar 1925). In Book I, Rávan is seen as the enemy of the gods and is feared (Griffith 1870-1874, 83). The fear of the gods over Rávan's domination of the world may symbolize Aryan anxieties about Dravidian power. Tamil traditions maintain that a great Dravidian empire flourished in the south and neighboring islands, and that Ravana ruled contemporaneously with Rama (Iyengar 1925, 14). Whether Ravana was a historical king or a mythic figure remains debated, but there is evidence that the Dravidians engaged in long-standing trade with the Middle East and regions associated with the Lemuria¹⁹ hypothesis.

Modern anti-Brahminical movements claim that the *Ramayana* was composed to demonize a Dravidian Buddhist king, portraying Ravana and Hanuman as a demon and a monkey-faced being, respectively—characterizations they view as derogatory (Ambedkar 1995). Within this interpretive framework, Valmiki's epic becomes an allegorical depiction of the Aryan–Dravidian conflict, presenting Ráma as the Aryan hero triumphing over Rávan, a demonized Dravidian adversary.

¹⁸ A state in central India

¹⁹ The theory of the existence of a submerged continent named Lemuria was proposed in the 19th century by European and American scholars. Tamil literary scholars of the twentieth century claimed the theory to be true as it matched their statements about an ancient Tamil civilisation lost to the sea. It is also claimed that Ravana was a Dravidian king who once ruled the vast landmass called ‘Kumari Kandam’ or ‘Kumari Continent’ that stretched between Madagascar and Australia. Kumari Kandam is claimed to have submerged into the Indian Ocean. (Wikipedia)

III. Factors Bearing on the Historicity of the Rama Story

The foregoing features collectively invite a reconsideration of the Rama story's status as a historical narrative. The question of the historicity of the Rama story may be approached through several narrative and folkloric features embedded within the tradition. These include the presence of recurrent folk motifs, the emergence of folklore inspired by the epic, the attribution of similar feats to dissimilar characters across traditions, and etiological tales such as that of the squirrel's stripes. Together, these factors point toward patterns of oral transmission rather than a strictly historical account.

1. Folklore Motifs

Besides the influence of folklore and contemporary history, nearly all the major events in the *Ramayana* correspond to well-known folk motifs. This section analyzes the parallels between Valmiki's narrative and Indian folktales, demonstrating that the story's structure and episodes are fundamentally folkloric rather than historical.

a. The Birth of the King's Sons

King Dasaratha remains childless until he performs a sacrificial rite, during which a vast form robed in red presents him with a golden vase containing divine nectar and declares: *"Approach and take, O glorious King... For it shall give thee sons and wealth... Give it to those fair queens of thine... And they the princely sons shall bear Long sought by sacrifice and prayer"* (Griffith 1870–1874, 86). Only after consuming the nectar do the three queens conceive.

The motif of a childless royal couple²⁰ receiving a promised heir through divine intervention, sacred food, or austerities is widespread in folklore. Similar themes are found in Kannada tales such as "Bride for a Dead Man" and "The Dead Prince and the Talking Doll," where couples perform penance to obtain a child from Śiva. This motif of supernatural conception is widely attested in folklore and appears in numerous traditions, suggesting that Valmiki's narrative participates in a much older storytelling pattern.

b. The Adopted Heroine

In Canto 66 of Book II, Janak, Sítá's father, recounts the miraculous discovery of Sita: *"Once, as it chanced, I ploughed the ground... An infant springing from the earth, Named Sítá"* (Griffith 1870-1874, 261). Though not abandoned, Valmiki's Sita²¹ is a foundling²², conforming to the widespread folklore motif of female infants discovered in fields or at sea and adopted by a childless king or queen (Neelakantan 2025). The Kadar narrative similarly describes Sita as found in a box with a bow by farmers and then brought to the king (Thundy 1983, 33). The Kadar tale of "Kovalan and Kannaki" also contains this motif: "Kannaki was found as a little girl in a box by the sea . . . wearing a gold anklet" (Thundy, 28–29). Greek folklore echoes this in "The Three Fates," where a baby destined for royalty is cast into the sea and later raised by a childless queen (Wilson 1956). In the Jain

²⁰ T548. Birth obtained through magic or prayer. T548.3. Magic elixir to procure a child. T548.2. Magic rites for obtaining a child. (Thompson, 1955 – 1958)

²¹ 'Sita' in Sanskrit means 'furrow'

²² S351.2. Abandoned child reared by herdsman. Buddhist myth: Malalasekera I 458.S351.2.1. Abandoned princess, brought up by herdsmen, becomes wife of king. Irish myth: *Cross; Buddhist myth: Malalasekera I 378; S354.2. Travelers find exposed baby girl and take her to emperor's court. India: Thompson-Balys. S354.1. Abandoned child adopted and found by queen.

version, Sita is born to Mandodari²³ after she eats the rice-ball, is discarded by Ravana, and adopted by Janaka. In Kannada folklore, Sita is born from Ravula's²⁴ sneeze and is left in a place where another couple may find her (Ramanujan 1999; Neelakantan 2025). The recurrence of this motif across cultures establishes its deep folkloric roots.

c. The Stepmother's Demand

In Book II of the *Rámayan*, Kaikeyi invokes a boon to secure the kingdom for her son Bharat and commands Ráma's fourteen-year exile. Though Kaikeyi loves Ráma, she is persuaded by her maid Manthará, who warns: "*First Ráma will the throne acquire... While Bharat... Excluded from the royal line*" (Griffith 1870-1874, 335). The motif of a stepmother²⁵ scheming against her stepchildren is universal. The motif is seen in the Indian tale "Sukhu and Dukhu", a Hungarian variant "The Diligent Girl and the Lazy Girl" and in "Cinderella" (Ramanujan 1991, Hungarian Folk Tales 2017, Zipes 2014). These narratives depict stepmothers depriving children of their rights, pushing them into exile or servitude. Kaikeyi's actions follow this deeply entrenched folklore pattern.

d. The Villain's Disguise and Deception

The abduction of a beautiful wife through trickery and disguise²⁶ is another widespread motif. In Valmiki's epic, Rávan, urged by his sister, orders Marichá to become a golden deer to lure Ráma away. After the distraction succeeds, "*The ten necked Rávan... A mendicant in guise he came*" (Griffith 1870-1874, 1000). This motif appears in the Santali tale "The Seven Brothers and the Bonga Girl," where a mendicant abducts the heroine, and in the Kadar tales "The Princess and the Elephant" and "The Dragon and the Snake," where disguise and deception enable abduction. The pattern is unmistakably folkloric.

e. The Hero Aided by the Demon's Relative

A common folktale theme involves a demon's relative revealing secrets that enable the hero to kill the villain. In "The Ogress Queen," the ogress's mother reveals that the queen's life resides in a parrot, which the hero steals to destroy her (Ramanujan 1997). This motif appears in Book VI when Vibhishan, Rávan's brother, supports Ráma and promises: "*Thy conquering army will I guide... And aid the tyrant's overthrow*" (Griffith 1870-1874, 1555). In the *Adhyatma Rámayana*, he reveals Ravana's life-secret: "*In his navel is the water*

²³ Ravana's wife

²⁴ Ravana

²⁵ K2213.11. *Treacherous queen tricks king into bestowing kingdom upon her son*. Irish myth: *Cross (fuller text).

²⁶ F402.1.4. *Demons assume human forms in order to deceive*. Kittredge Witchcraft 223f., 530 nn. 98-101.— Irish myth: Cross; India: Thompson-Balys; Mono-Alu: Wheeler 4, 6f., 18f., 32, 39, 41f., 46, 49, 51f., 60f., 61, 188.

K869.2. *Deceptive hide and seek game*. Hide and seek game proposed by seven demons so as to kill hero. India: Thompson-Balys.

R11.2.2. *Abduction by demon*. India: Thompson-Balys; Buddhist myth: Malalasekera II 507, 1053; Tuamotu: Stimson MS (z-G. 3/1386)

K1827.0.1. *Ogre disguised as holy man*. India: Thompson-Balys

R16. *Abduction by transformed person*

R24. *Abductor in disguise*. (Cf. K1310.) India: Thompson-Balys.

R24.1. *Prince disguised as holy man abducts princess*. India: Thompson-Balys

of life... do thou dry it up... then his death shall take place” (Nath 1913, 166). This is identical to the demon-life-secret motif²⁷ in world folklore.

f. Hero Guided by Animals

In many folktales, animals guide the hero. In Canto 69 of Book III, the dying Jatayus reveals: “*Fierce Rávan... Stole Sítá... And to the southern region flew*” (Griffith 1870-1874, 1098–1099). Later, in Book IV, Hanuman, of the monkey race locates Sítá in Lanka. Ráma’s army of monkeys aids him in battle. The Santali tale “The Seven Brothers and the Bonga Girl” features a squirrel guiding the hero to his mother, echoing the animal-helper motif (Bompas 1909).

g. The Lifestyle of Demons

Folktales frequently portray demons²⁸ as cannibalistic beings with unusual sleep patterns. In the *Rámayan*, Rávan orders that Kumbhakarna be awakened: “*Let mightiest Kumbhakarna rise... He, slumbering... for months has lain*” (Griffith, 1870-1874, 1662). The Kadar tale “The Princess and the Elephant” features a cannibal who eats one woman daily for six months and then hibernates²⁹ for the next six months.

The presence of these widespread motifs—miraculous conception, founding heroines, stepmother persecution, villainous disguise, guidance by animals, demon-life secrets, and peculiar demon behaviour—demonstrates that the *Ramayana* is built upon a foundation of folklore shared across cultures. Thus, the prevalence of shared folk motifs complicates attempts to read the narrative as historical.

2. Folklore Inspired by the Epic

Folkloric influence surrounding the Rama-story operates in multiple directions across time. While Valmiki’s epic drew upon earlier oral traditions, later tribal folktales sometimes display plotlines that parallel the Ráma–Sítá–Rávan–Lakshman narrative cycle. The Kadar stories “The Princess and the Elephant” and “The Dragon and the Snake,” recorded in the 1970s by Zacharias P. Thundy, contain episodes whose structure resembles the epic pattern, though it cannot be claimed with certainty whether these similarities arise from direct influence or from shared narrative conventions within Indian folklore.

The Rama tradition has significantly influenced the Indigenous folklore of central India. The tribal communities of this region possess several narratives derived from or shaped by the Rama-story (Mishra 1993). Two such folk epics are *Kotrabaina–Ramela* and *Laxman Jati*. The tale of *Kotrabaina–Ramela*³⁰ centres on Kotrabaina, a farmer who earns his living by selling milk and curd. His wife Ramela is strikingly beautiful, and he forbids her from travelling to Bendul city, whose king is known for his desire to abduct beautiful women.

²⁷ G530. *Ogre's relative aids hero*; D838.2. D838.2. *Magic object taken from ogre's house*. Hartland Perseus III 201; Icelandic: *Boberg; Japanese: Ikeda; India: *Thompson-Balys. D838.10. D838.10. *Prince procures magic object from bathing fairy when he steals her clothes*. India: Thompson-Balys.

E715.1.3.1. E715.1.3.1. *Ogre's life in parrot's feather in man's pocket*. India: Thompson-Balys.

²⁸ B524.1.11. *Hero contests with demons, using fighting animals: cock, goat, bull, horse, wild bull, peacock*.—India: Thompson-Balys

B563. *Animals direct man on journey*. Type 400 (Thompson, 1955 – 1958)

B563.3. *Squirrel points out road*. India: Thompson-Balys.

²⁹ F564.3.6. *Twelve years' sleep customary to demons*. India: Thompson-Balys.

³⁰ From the Gaur caste of Kalahandi

After Kotrabaina departs to visit his sister, Ramela travels to Bendul and is forcibly taken to the king's palace. Warned in a dream by a deity, Kotrabaina journeys to Bendul, kills the king, destroys the city with his sheep and cattle, and rescues Ramela. However, her community doubts her purity until she undergoes a fire-ordeal, after which she is accepted—closely paralleling Sita's ordeal in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

In the folk epic *Laxman Jati*³¹, although the original names are retained, the narrative centres on the celibate Lakshmana³², who is tested when the seductive Indrakamini attempts to deceive him. Lakshmana is subsequently accused of impurity, prompting him to undergo a trial by fire to prove his chastity. Though he emerges innocent, he beseeches Mother Earth to take him, leading to his disappearance beneath the ground. This reworking illustrates how the epic's characters and motifs are adapted to express new cultural values and concerns within local storytelling traditions.

Together, these examples show that the Ráma-story has generated new oral and written narratives with diverse themes and moral implications. A tale that continues to inspire such widespread adaptation and reinvention across regions and communities cannot be treated as historical fact, but must instead be understood as a dynamic folkloric tradition.

3. Feats Ascribed to Dissimilar Characters

In Canto XI of Book II of Valmiki's epic, Kaikeyi reminds Dasaratha of the oath he swore to her in the past (Griffith 1870–1874, 356). While the exact back story of the boon is not narrated in the epic, the episode is discussed in *Many Ramayanas, many lessons* in which Kaikeyi saves Dasaratha's life after he is wounded in battle against the demon Sambara (Neelakantan 2025). Moreover, Vimalasuri's *Pauma Chariyam*³³ presents this battlefield episode with greater detail: when an enemy arrow breaks the axle pin of the chariot, Kaikeyi supports the wheel by inserting her left index finger into its place. It is for this act of bravery that Dasaratha grants her the two boons which Kaikeyi used later to secure Ráma's exile (Neelakantan 2025). However, in the Kadar version of the story, this heroic feat is reassigned to Sita. When Rámar attempts to bring Sita back from the forest, the axle pin of the chariot gives way, and Sita steadies the wheel by placing her index finger in its place (Thundy 1983).

Such variations—where the same extraordinary deed is attributed to different characters across traditions—underscore the fluidity of oral narrative and make it difficult to treat any single version as historically factual.

4. The Squirrel's Stripes

In India, the marking of the squirrel with stripes is popularly attributed to Ráma. In Tamil, the stripes are called *Ramakodu*, meaning “the lines drawn by Rama.” The tale “How Squirrel Got Its Stripes” is introduced as “A Tale from the Ramayana, the ancient Hindu epic poem of India, which narrates the struggle of the divine prince Sri Ráma to rescue his wife Sita from the demon king Ravana” (Simms 2001, 1). Several other writers and storytellers assert that the story originates from the *Rámayan* (Das 2023, Simms 2021, and Perera (2019). The term *Ramayana*, meaning “the journey of Rama” in Sanskrit, originally referred specifically to Valmiki's composition—a long poem recounting Rama's life. Thus, when modern sources cite “the Ramayana,” they invariably mean Valmiki's epic.

³¹ Told by the Baiga tribe, a sub-tribe of Gonds who belonged to the Dravidian group (Mishra, 1993)

³² The name as mentioned by Mishra (1993)

³³ Jain retelling of the Ramayana, around 3rd-5th century AD

However, no such episode appears in Valmiki's *Rámayan*. Nor is it found in Kambar's *Ramavatharam* (12th c.) or Tulsidas's *Rámacaritamanasa* (16th c.). The familiar story of Rama granting stripes to the squirrel survives as a moral tale illustrating that the strong should not underestimate the weak.

A similar motif occurs in the Santali folktale "The Seven Brothers and the Bonga Girl" (Bompas 1909). In this story, the youngest of seven brothers marries a Bonga³⁴ woman who is abducted by a *jogi*³⁵. When the *jogi* transforms the brothers into stones, the woman's son sets out years later to rescue his father and uncles. Along the way, a squirrel guides him, and he rewards it by marking its back with stripes. The youngest brother thus parallels Ráma, although it is the son—not the father—who rescues the abducted woman, inverting the epic's pattern.

The *Ranganatha Rámayanamu*, a Telugu composition by Gona Budda Reddy³⁶ written between AD 1200–1210³⁷, is the only epic version to mention the Ram–squirrel episode ("Gona Budda Reddy" 2024). It is therefore possible that Reddy borrowed this motif from existing folktales and incorporated it into his epic, further supporting the view that written epics absorb folkloric material rather than serve as its sole source.

Native American folklore explains the origin of the squirrel's stripes through tales told by various tribes. Among the Karok³⁸ Indians of California, the stripes result from burns incurred while the squirrel carried burning wood as part of a scheme to steal fire from two witches (Chamberlain 1896). This story is retold as "How the Cahrocs Got Their Fire" in a recent Native American folktale collection (Srinivasan 2014).

The Iroquois tradition recounts an argument between a chipmunk and a bear over whether the sun will rise. When the chipmunk wins, the bear "ran after the chipmunk, who succeeded in escaping, but not without the huge paw of the bear . . . leaving the black stripe we see there today" (Chamberlain 1896, 49). A similar version is documented under the title "Determination of Night and Day" (Thompson 1925). In the tale discussed by Chamberlain, animals get angry at man's dominance and are infuriated by the ground-squirrel because it does not perceive humans as dangerous. The squirrel escapes but "bears the marks of the struggle to this very day" (Chamberlain 1896, 49). An identical version can be read as part of the tale "Origin of Disease and Medicine" (Mooney and Larned 2019). For the Mi'kmaq people of Nova Scotia, the squirrel was once larger than the bear, but Glooskap—hero of the Mi'kmaq—reduced its size by smoothing it in his hand (Chamberlain 1896). Glooskap³⁹, a culture hero and trickster, functions in Native American mythology in a role equivalent to that of Ráma in Indian tradition.

Given the widespread distribution of stripe-origin stories across cultures, and the absence of the episode in early Ramayana texts, the attribution of the squirrel's stripes to Rama reflects a folkloric development rather than historical fact. Its presence in later traditions, including the *Ranganatha Ramayanamu*, illustrates how epics absorb pre-existing

³⁴ (Female) spirit or deity associated with nature in Santali culture

³⁵ A mendicant

³⁶ Gona Budda Reddy (known as 'Ranganatha') was a ruler of the Gona dynasty. He was loyal to the Kakatiya dynasty that ruled the Deccan region between 12th and 14th centuries, with their capital as present day Warangal, a city in Telangana, a state in southern India.

³⁷ The Wikipedia source about 'Ranganatha Rámayanamu' by Gona Budda Reddy, mentions the date of composition as 1300 – 1310 AD.

³⁸ Cahrocs

³⁹ The creator god of the Micmacs, Malseet, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot and Abenaki (First peoples of Canada)

folklore motifs, reinforcing the conclusion that the Ráma-story is shaped more by storytelling traditions than by historical events.

IV. Structural Integration of Motif Clusters into Epic Form

Building upon the methodological foundation outlined above, it is essential to demonstrate how the identified motifs in the *Rámáyan* function not as isolated narrative elements but as interconnected structural units that are characteristic of oral-derived epics. In the terminology of Alan Dundes, these recurring motifs may be understood as motifemes—abstract narrative functions that can be filled by different allomotifs across cultural variants. For example, the deceptive lure used to separate the heroine from the hero—whether a golden deer, a mendicant, or a disguised king in tribal narratives—constitutes a single motifeme expressed through culturally specific allomotifs.

Following Vladimir Propp's structural insights, the *Rámáyan* reveals a recognizable sequence of epic functions. The Villainy function is fulfilled when Máricha and Rávan collaborate to abduct Sita through magical deception. The Deception function emerges when Rávan assumes the guise of a mendicant, a structural parallel to numerous Indian folktales in which disguised antagonists lure heroines away. The Donor Sequence, another Proppian function, is embodied by helpers such as Jatáyus and Hanuman, each of whom provides the hero with critical information or aid. These episodes demonstrate how folkloric structures underlie the narrative even when elaborated into epic scale.

Lauri Honko's concept of the "epic unit" is also relevant here. Honko argues that oral epics are constructed from modular narrative units that storytellers assemble and expand according to cultural context. In the *Rámáyan*, clusters such as the miraculous birth, exile, abduction, search, battle, and fire ordeal can be seen as epic units stitched together into an overarching narrative fabric. Their widespread presence across South Asian and tribal traditions suggests an underlying folkloric reservoir from which Valmiki's composition drew.

Thus, the convergence of motif analysis, structural folklore theory, and comparative epic studies affirms that the *Rámáyan* exhibits the characteristic signatures of a folk epic—rooted in oral tradition, shaped by narrative functions, and enriched by culturally variable motifs that maintain a stable structural core.

V. Conclusion

The combined evidence of motif analysis, structural folkloristics, and comparative epic studies underscores that the *Rámáyan of Válmiki* is best understood not as a historical chronicle but as a richly woven folk epic emerging from earlier oral narrative traditions. The recurrence of stable motifemes—miraculous births, exile enforced by a stepmother figure, deceptive abduction, the hero's quest aided by animal helpers, the demon's life secret revealed by a relative, and the ordeal of fire—signals a deep continuity with the structures found in Indian tribal tales, Jataka narratives, and global folktale traditions.

When these motifs are viewed through Propp's functional analysis, they reveal a coherent underlying structure: villainy initiates the action; deception enables the separation of hero and heroine; donor figures support the hero's search; and final recognition and reintegration resolve the narrative. Dundes' concept of motifemes explains the persistence of these functions even when their surface expressions vary across cultures and centuries. Honko's theory of epic layering further supports the argument that the *Ramayana* was formed through the gradual aggregation of folkloric units into an extended poetic composition.

By positioning the *Rámáyan* within this folkloristic and structural framework, the present study demonstrates that its narrative power derives not from historical factuality but from its ability to synthesize widely shared human stories into an enduring epic. The tale's many retellings, over three hundred identified versions, attest to its adaptability, cultural resonance, and oral roots. Recognizing the epic's folkloric foundations not only enriches our understanding of its artistry but also encourages a clearer distinction between mythic imagination and historical discourse. This distinction is crucial in contemporary cultural and political contexts, where myth is often invoked as historical truth. Understanding the *Rámáyan of Válmiki* as a grand folktale allows us to appreciate its universality, symbolic richness, and ethical insights without conflating literary tradition with historical reality.

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