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COLOMBO 4, SRI LANKA

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THE TREATMENT OF OTHERS IN THE *RAMAYANA*—A POSTCOLONIAL READING

by
Sivamalar Sotheeswaran (nee Thirugnanasambandar)

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

School of Language, Arts and Media
Faculty of Arts and Law
The University of the South Pacific, Fiji

April, 2010

DECLARATION

I, Sivamalar Sotheeswaran, sincerely and solemnly declare that this dissertation is my own work and, to the best of my knowledge, does not contain any material previously published or substantially overlapping with material submitted for the award of any other degree at any institution except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.

Candidate: Mrs. Sivamalar Sotheeswaran (nee Thirugnanasambandar)

Signature: Sivamalar Sotheeswaran

Date: 09/09/2009

I was a supervisor of the research in this dissertation and, to the best of my knowledge, it is the sole work of Mrs. Sivamalar Sotheeswaran (nee Thirugnanasambandar).

Supervisor: Dr. Mohit Prasad

Signature: .....

Date: 14/10/09

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all those in Fiji who, on learning that I am a Sri Lankan, asked, with eager expectations of a positive answer, "Do you have Ravan's palace over there?" This dissertation is an attempt, by a Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu to answer that question. I believe that the epic hero/anti-hero Ravan was modelled on a real petty Dravidian chieftain, who has now been demonized, mythicized and immortalized. I believe that Ravan's palace may have been situated on Thiru-konamalai (sacred angular rock/mountain) now known by various names such as Koneswaram, Thirukkoneswaram, Thirikunaamale and Trincomalee. This rock is an ideal citadel for a chieftain's palace/fort because it commands a strategic view of one of the best natural harbours in the world. The site fits the description in Valmiki. There may be numerous other sites in Sri Lanka that Valmiki may have had in mind when he compiled his epic. It is even likely that the site existed only in the poet's imagination. Today, there is, on this rock, a temple complex dedicated to Lord Shiva. The presiding deity is Thirukkoneswaran. (Recent legend has it that the idol was rescued from the sea where it had been flung by Portuguese invaders.) The waters of the Indian Ocean splashing against the cliffs of Koneswaram provide constant music for the Lord.

It should be remembered that there were "kings" and "kingdoms" too numerous to enumerate in ancient times. Many who bore the grandiose title of "king" were merely chieftains of tiny fiefdoms.

"King" Pari, also known as Philanthropist Pari (and celebrated for generosity by Tamil poets, Tamil proverb and Tamil idiom), was king only of a hill, Parambu Malai. He is said to have benevolently left his chariot behind in the woods so that a neglected *mullai* creeper would not lack support. This seems like pointless extravagance, but the chariot may have been a ramshackle wooden affair that had seen better days. What is relevant is that Pari was king of a little known, though much celebrated, hill. Ravan too was probably king of a hill/*malai*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Kavita Nandan and Dr. Mohit Prasad, Lecturers, School of Language, Arts and Media, at the University of the South Pacific (USP) Fiji, for their invaluable and indispensable help. Dr. Nandan read and corrected my work with great care and patience when I gave it to her piecemeal in disorderly fragments. Her encouragement and instruction helped me make steady progress in the right direction. Dr. Prasad helped me during Dr. Nandan's absence from USP during her sabbatical leave. He edited the draft of the dissertation and helped me to produce a well organized and adequately argued whole. I am grateful for the prompt and unstinted guidance provided by Drs. Nandan and Prasad.

I would like to thank Dr. Akanisi Kedrayate, Acting Dean, Faculty of Arts and Law, USP, for nobly and great-heartedly coming to my rescue, on more than one occasion, when I seemed to be knocking my head against a stone wall. I would also like to thank Dr. Som Prakash, Senior Lecturer, School of Language, Arts and Media, USP, for advising me on how to iron out the administrative snags I kept encountering in the course of my work and also for calming me whenever I was agitated, which was often.

I must say a special thank you to Kala and Bala (Sundaram), who obtained by care and effort, books on the *Ramayana* in Tamil, which cannot be obtained in Fiji but can be bought in India. I must also thank the father/father-in-law of these very dear friends, who scoured the bookshops in Tamil Nadu and posted the books I needed to Fiji.

Without the timely and, apparently oxymoronically, eleventh hour advice and help of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Senior Lecturer, School of Biological, Chemical and Environmental Sciences, USP, my work might well have ended up in the dustbin. He is an expert in Information Technology, the *Ramayana* and many other things. I cannot figure out whether he is a Synthetic Organic Chemist, Inorganic Chemist or both. In brief, he is a man of many parts; not many people know this because he hides his light under a bushel. I thank Dr. Anand Tyagi, Associate Professor, School of Biological, Chemical and Environmental Sciences, who, I think, can answer questions in genetics correctly even in his sleep. He has succeeded in teaching the fundamentals of genetics to one who went to college when the double helix had not even been dreamed of by James Watson and Francis Crick helped by Maurice Wilkins and—dare I name that nameless woman, who is usually not named in the same breath as these great male scientists, who are Nobel Laureates and household names?—Rosalind Franklin.

My husband, Prof. Subramaniam Sotheeswaran, Professor of Organic Chemistry at USP, stands accused of having cajoled and persuaded me to undertake the investigation that has resulted in this dissertation—though I must confess that I enjoyed the exploration. All I can say to these and the many unnamed others who helped me in preparing this dissertation is, "May you be blessed".

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study which resulted in this dissertation was to investigate whether the *Ramayana* is a colonial discourse and to examine the nature of the cultural representation in the text.

The methodology adopted was library based and conceptual. The following were done:

(1) A close reading of the 19th Century English translation of Valmiki's *Ramayana* by Ralph T. H. Griffith was done. The purpose of this reading was to extract and highlight anything in the text that serves as a means of cultural representation.

(2) An application of postcolonial theory to the *Ramayana* as a tool of cultural representation was an important part of the reading.

(3) A link was made between examples of current cultural representation which repeat and reinforce the cultural representation in the *Ramayana* and the ethos of the *Ramayana*.

(4) An account of the culture of the hegemonic community and the culture of Others at about the time of the *Ramayana* was included in order to draw attention to the unfairness and misleading nature of the cultural representation in the text.

(5) Conclusions were drawn from the analysis and the implications of the study were put forward.

It was concluded (somewhat myopically—see epigraph) that the text is indeed a product of colonialism and that it contains an exaggeratedly favourable cultural representation of the hegemonic community and an unjust representation of Others. Moreover, the cultural representation in the text influences current cultural beliefs and practices. Challenging textual authority, it is hoped, will contribute to abolishing practices that foster injustice, humiliation and misery. So will restoring the identity of Others, which has been distorted almost out of recognition in the *Ramayana*; and so will retrieving their culture, which has been imagined out of existence in the text.

I feel that this dissertation will contribute something valuable to the relatively new discipline of understanding and appreciating literature from diverse perspectives that depart from the customary. The *Ramayana* is the collective work of *Homo sapiens*. It deserves eternal scrutiny.

It is hoped that this kind of analysis will encourage critical analyses of other sacred texts. It is also hoped that discriminatory practices sanctioned by and entrenched in sacred texts will be continued to be questioned.

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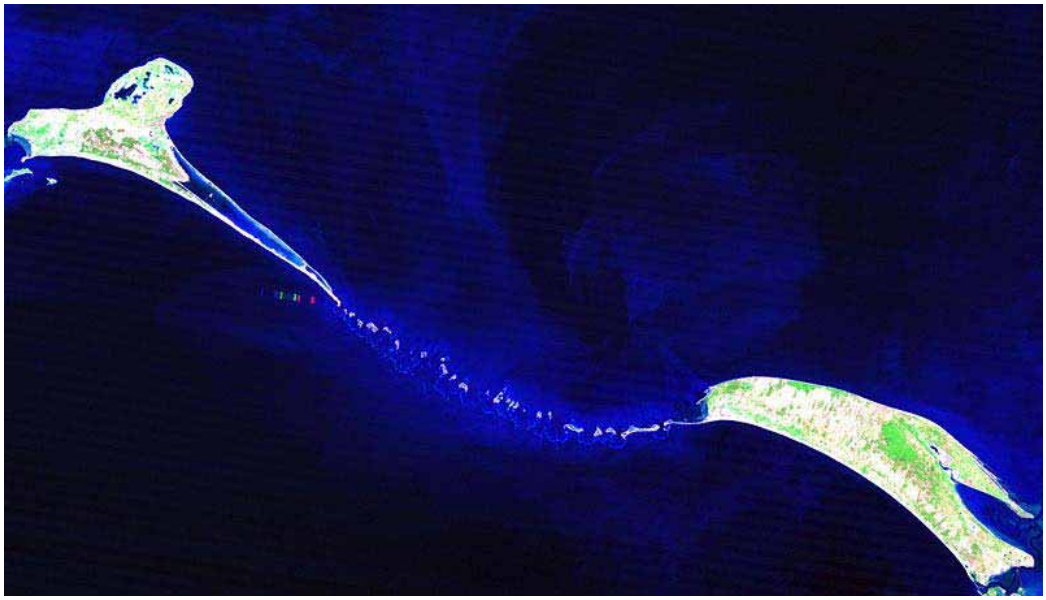
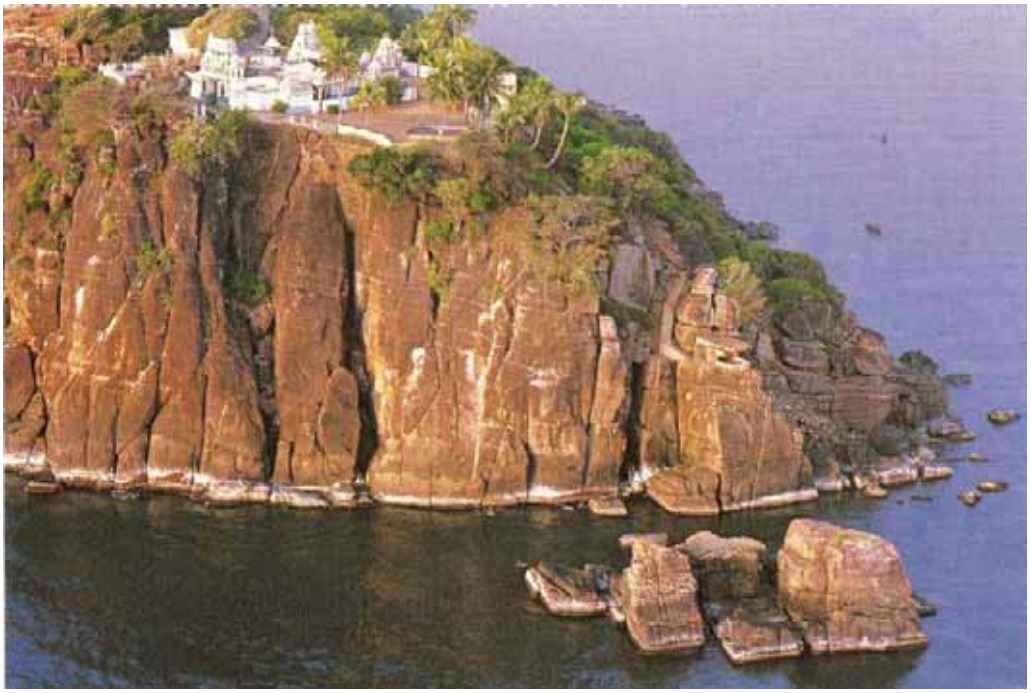
Adam's Bridge as seen from the air (also known as Rama's Bridge—see pp. 55-56)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam's_Bridge



Landsat 5 image of Adam's Bridge
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam's_Bridge



Site of Ravan's Palace or Fort?
The Cliffs of Koneswaram—Trincomalee (photograph by Dominic Sansoni)

The *Ramayana* in Thailand—the present king of Thailand can be seen on the poster in the background (see page 51 for details).

A Member of the Sri Lankan Veddah Community (centre)—as a guest in a home in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

EPIGRAPH

Is the *Ramayana* an Indo-Aryan myth or a Dravidian text? Is it a Feminist text or something that is anathema to all card carrying Feminists? Such questions are restrictive.

It is well known that Rama crossed the Ganges on his way to exile in South India and Sri Lanka. It is also known that the *Ramayana* crossed the Ganges and came to South India and Sri Lanka. The original germ of the *Ramayana* may have been cognate with the original germ of the story of Helen of Troy. That is: An alien king abducts the wife of a Prince. Naturally, there is war. The king is defeated. The prince and his wife are reunited. There the similarities end. For, though the *Ramayana* and the *Illiad* may have evolved from the same germ, they did so along very different lines in different climes, and were subjected to different cultural influences over many centuries. The *Ramayana* that evolved in North India was an Indo-Aryan tale that assimilated Dravidian, Munda and tribal influences from north India as well as influences from South India and Sri Lanka. It was already an Aryan-Dravidian-Others epic when Valmiki compiled it in Sanskrit.

The crossing of the Ganges is a very important episode in the epic. It looms large. The Ganges River is wide, but, in the lowlands, the river could not have been difficult to cross even in a frail boat in ancient times. A strong swimmer could have crossed the river without any prop. The crossing looms large because, I think, it is symbolic. The *Ramayana* is an Aryan/Dravidian/Others epic—a world heritage site.

The first major version of the epic to be created in a language other than Sanskrit is the Tamil version—Kampan's *Iramavatharam,* meaning 'the incarnation of Rama'. It is not a translation. It is a new creation by a genius who lived during the heyday of Tamil kingdoms. Critics have spilt much ink in comparing and contrasting the *Ramayanas* of Valmiki and Kampan.

It is believed that, during this medieval time of kings and kingdoms, Tamil traders went to South East Asia, and were followed by soldiers, settlers and others who carried the *Ramayana* with them as far as Bali in Indonesia and beyond. In brief, military conquest followed trade, and the *Ramayana* went along on these expeditions.

The title of a book edited by Paula Richman, *Many Ramayanas—the Diversity of a narrative Tradition in South Asia,* says it all. There are indeed many *Ramayanas*. The cover illustration shows the crossing of the Ganges. It is artless art, and the river is only twice as wide as a human being. The illustration is from a Tamil *Ramayana* serialized between 1878 and 1880.

As far as I am concerned the *Ramayana* was written by every single human being who ever lived on this planet starting from my most ancient ancestress in

Africa. I can trace my ancestry back to African Eve through a long line of maternal mitochondrial DNA. This is science. When I say *my most ancient ancestress*, I can also trace my inheritance backward through time through a long line of women to the biblical Eve. This is religion. Science and religion are one.

Being a Dravidian, I trace my recent ancestry to some unknown woman in Elam —capital Susa; or even to some unknown woman in Sumer (Southern Mesopotamia). Sumer was a land with various capitals at various times, and with various dynasties ruling over the centuries in a country with a shifting geography and geomorphology (because of the effect of various environmental forces); this *recent* woman ancestress of the Middle East probably had a cocktail of genes—Dravidian genes plus all sorts of other racial genes. These genes may have been of all sorts, but all of them would have been human genes

If I go farther back long enough I had ancestresses that I share with all apes and all humans …If I go farther back long enough I had ancestresses that I share with all animals and humans…If I go farther back long enough I had chemical forerunners I share with all fauna and flora…

If I go back to the beginning of time I share photons with everything animate and inanimate in the universe. (Reference: Sydney Perkowitz said, "Photons are immortal and intangibly perfect particles".) Photons are particles of light energy. The word immortal merely means deathless. Is not this declaration that photons are deathless and perfect the same as saying "photons are God", or "light is God", or "God is light"? Jacob Moleshitt said that life is "woven out of air by light". The elements in the air are needed in order to make life. The American Physicist William Fowler in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in December 1983 said, "…Each one of us and all of us are truly and literally a little bit of stardust." Star dust contains the ingredients for life—hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and so on.

All religions and science and philosophy and psychiatry and psychology strive to seek and to find the truth. We do not know when or whether we will know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

In the meantime, all of us from the first humans on this planet down to, or up to if you like, depending on whether one subscribes to the theory of the descent of humans (Charles Darwin) or the ascent of humans (JacobBronowski), can only play with stardust and make our hands shine with golden glitter.

It may turn out that everything, and that means the universe, is 'Maya'/non-reality/unreality. A few mind-boggling questions remain. Are there parallel universes? Will the universe as we know it collapse, and, if so, when? Men (and women) have been worried about the piddling question of life-after-death from time immemorial. This is rather self-centred. What about life after the universe? These are fertile fields for research.

As for the *Ramayana*, it is the collective work of *Homo sapiens*. I believe it is a sacred text and I feel that this text deserves eternal scrutiny. All sacred texts do.

All texts of any sort do. Our ancestors were not afraid to use their questioning minds. They groped in the dark, opened windows and let in some light. Let us not close those windows.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION—Aim, outline and context of the project.

"The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored" (Gayatri Spivak, 1989, p. 175).

The aim of this project is to make the eminent feminist cum postcolonial cum Marxist cum deconstructionist critic Spivak's words quoted above—that literature plays a significant role in the production of cultural representation—the basis of this project, and seek to show that the *Ramayana* plays just such a role.

An effort will be made to show that the cultural representation in the *Ramayana* is not something that belongs only to the past and is embalmed in the text but something that continues to influence cultural representation and cultural practice today.

Culture is the sum total of the beliefs, ways of looking at and comprehending the world, customs, way of life and institutions of a group of people. The group of people acquires a cultural identity (a group identity) through the common beliefs and conduct. This cultural identity is given expression and is represented through, among other cultural artifacts, the discourse of the group.We might expect the culture of a group to be absolute and not relative—that is, without reference to other cultures, even though it may have been influenced by other cultures and even though it is subject to evolution. We may also expect cultural representations to be neutral.

This is usually not so. A group that is in an economically and politically powerful position vis-à-vis other groups soon assumes social dominance. It produces cultural representations that are loaded with overt and covert, open and hidden, value judgments. It places a higher value on its own culture. Such value judgments require a scale, and the placement of other cultures lower down on that scale. In other words, superiority cannot exist in isolation; so Others and their cultures are represented as inferior; or, more effectively, Others are represented as brutes or savages and deemed to be cultureless. To be able to do this, the group that represents itself as culturally superior needs, and usually has, a dominant economic and political position.

Culture may be something ethereal and almost indefinable (except in vague terms such as beliefs and behaviour) but it is grounded in material things. Assumed cultural hegemony is useful in the service of sustaining and reinforcing economic and political hegemony. In the course of time, the cultural self-representations of the dominant group (produced by itself) together with the representations or mis-representations of Others (also produced by the dominant group) are exported to Others. In brief, self-representations and representations become vehicles of cultural propaganda.

Anthropologists and psychologists agree that a recognition of 'Self" is dependent on a recognition of the 'Other'.

The influence of G.W.F. Hegel is evident here. Hegel theorized the journey of the mind from sense-consciousness to absolute knowledge. One step on this journey is the attainment of self-consciousness, which requires the recognition of and also requires recognition by another. Hegel illustrates this with his master/slave dialectic: When a self encounters another, at first, it is surprised by the mirror-like other. It does not see the other as a separate self but sees itself in the other. The 'I' loses its self-centredness and importance and loses its sense of self. So it tries to re-assert itself by striving for control. Self-consciousness is regained by subordinating the other as a slave. This master/slave relationship is intrinsically unstable and threatening because the slave can refuse recognition. Moreover, the possibility of the slave enslaving the master and overturning the relationship is ever present. (Hegel, 1977, pp. 111-119.)

REFERENCE: Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. (originally published as "Phaenominologie des Geistes" in 1807.) Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1977, pp. 111-119.

Alterity is the concept that provides a definition of 'I, me, we or us' through defining 'you, they or them'. The realization and definition of Self is dependent on, and intimately and inextricably connected with, defining the Other. The Self (or a dominant group) is always in a privileged position because it is in charge of self-definition and also presumes to define the Other, and the Other is in a disadvantaged position because it is disempowered as far as defining is concerned since the right to define has been appropriated by the dominant group. The Self and Other are defined in terms of cultural practices, and in terms of historical , political and economic structures, and the cultural and other factors related to the Self are always already (to borrow a phrase from Spivak) advantaged, and those of the other always already disadvantaged. The Other may produce sporadic, feeble and largely ineffective resistance to and subversion of dominant representations. But, by and large, there is a helpless and apathetic acceptance by the Other of the dominant representations. At times, there is even complicity.

As discussed in Chapter II, Edward Said, Spivak and other postcolonial writers have used theoretical models of alterity based on binary oppositions to criticize colonial representations; these are somewhat rigid and do not acknowledge the shades, nuances and variety in the colonial experience and in the multiplicity of subjectivities (or multiplicities of binary oppositions) engendered by colonialism. Static notions of identity, homogenous opposites and polarizations resulted from the vast colonial enterprise of accumulating, recording and disseminating knowledge about the Other. Said has emphasized the fact that this enterprise was enabled by colonial power and also served as a handmaiden of that power. It is true that rigid formulations of binary oppositions have resulted in stereotypes and totalizing subjectivities. As Cedric Watts has observed, "A concentration on binary oppositions often tends to be reductive, for literary works have multiple tensions and complex oppositions". (Watts, 1983, p. 30.) Notwithstanding this drawback, these models are tools ready to hand for analysing the *Ramayana* because the subjectivities incorporated in the *Ramayana* are stereotypes, which have been accepted widely and propagated right up to the present time. Their textual genesis may have been founded on perceptions in society at the time the text was composed. This thesis aims to show that these

perceptions and their representations are unfair, unjust and unfounded on historical reality.

A superior-inferior power relation is necessary for monopolizing the development of subjectivities. Conquest and colonization provide an opportunity and scope for just such a power relation. Decolonization rocks the *status quo.*

Postcolonial theory arose in the postcolonial situation in the postcolonial age. By "post-colonial situation" is usually meant the situation after the modern colonizing powers of Europe gave up their colonies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The postcolonial situation began with the dissolution of British power in India in 1947 and was fully fashioned when the last of the European powers left their colonial possessions in the 1970's. Some scholars argue that the postcolonial situation arose at the very onset of colonialism and not after its end, and they prefer the unhyphenated term (postcolonial) to the hyphenated term (post-colonial). Postcolonial theory was developed to explain the effects of colonialism during its heyday and its persistent and lingering effects after decolonization.

Almost all writers restrict colonialism to only one historical example of it:

"…we would argue that post-colonial studies are based in the 'historical fact' of European colonialism ..." (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1995, p. 2)

This statement confines postcolonial studies to the consequences of European colonialism. In many instances, there is even a bias towards the discussion of British colonialism. This thesis argues that there is no reason to exclude the numerous other postcolonial situations which arose in the wake of ancient and not-so-ancient empires from scrutiny in the light of postcolonial theory. Examples of such postcolonial situations would be the postcolonial situation after the Romans conquered, occupied and then left Britain or after Britain colonized and established settlements in the American colonies, or after the whites gave up their internal colonization-through-slavery of minority Afro-Americans in the USA. Neither is there any reason for excluding from scrutiny in the light of postcolonial theory the postcolonial situation that arose in the wake of conquest, colonization and settlement by the Sanskrit speaking people of northern India.

The term 'colonialism' has a very narrow denotation as it is generally used. It is usually defined in terms of European colonialism in the modern period. An appropriate and more inclusive definition of colonialism is necessary: Colonialism depends on conquest, which in turn depends on military power and tactical knowledge and expertise. When a powerful people extends its power and territory by the conquest and the acquisition of dependencies and then settles in the annexed territories, either temporarily or permanently, the resulting condition is colonialism. Imperialism is extensive dominion over a large territory acquired by conquest. Imperialism and colonialism are about might and power. But they are also more than just military, political and economic dominance and exploitation. They are also about cultural control and ideological control.

This definition of colonialism will include the invasion, conquest and the territorial colonization of northern India by the Sanskrit speaking people. (Chapter VI deals

with this contentious issue.) It will also include the cultural colonization of the subjugated people. In this thesis it is also used to include the cultural colonization of those people of India over whom the Sanskrit people did not and could not extend their rule. Lack of suzerainty did not prevent the Sanskrit speaking people from creating illusions of grandeur and suzerainty in their literature. The *Ramayana* is an example of this. This thesis argues that the *Ramayana* is a product of colonialism and dreams of colonialism.

The *Ramayana*, composed by the sage-poet Valmiki about 500 B.C, exists in many versions including some unusual and non-standard versions. Valmiki's text is supposed to be the 'original' *Ramayana* but there are many variants of even this text. The version used in this project is a 19th Century translation into English of Valmiki's *Ramayana* by Ralph Griffith. (Griffith, 1870-1874.)

Though Valmiki's text is often referred to as the 'original' and 'standard' version, it should be remembered that Valmiki used a tale that had probably already existed in the oral tradition and to which many poets and storytellers including Valmiki himself must have contributed. The 'true' original, which engendered Valmiki's Ramayana, is lost in the mists of time. In any case, that original must have been only a germ or outline along the following lines: Prince banished from kingdom; in exile, his wife is abducted by a hostile king; wife is rescued after abductor is defeated in battle. Everything else in The Ramayana, no matter which version we consider, must be 'later additions', which accumulated gradually like the slow accretions of nacreous pearl around a core.

We do not have to read far in Valmiki's *Ramayana* to see how Others are denied knowledge and power. That is, we do not have to read far in Valmiki's *Ramayana* to encounter a sad instance of the reprehensible but typical treatment meted out to those of the lowest caste. In Canto I of Book I we read:

> Whoe'er this noble poem reads
> That tells the tale of Rama's deeds,
> Good as the Scriptures, he shall be
> From every sin and blemish free.
> Whoever reads the saving strain,
> With all his kin the heavens shall gain.
> Brahmans who read shall gather hence
> The highest praise for eloquence.
> The warrior o'er the land shall reign,
> The merchant luck in trade obtain;
> And Sudras listening ne'er shall fail
> To reap advantage from the tale. (I, I, p. 21.)

The *Sudras* (members of the fourth or labourer/serf caste) are not allowed or expected to be able to read but might hear the poem recited. The untouchables are not even mentioned because they were beyond the pale—allowed neither to read nor hear Rama's tale. The untouchables, it seems, are not only untouchables but also unmentionables!

According to a footnote provided by Griffith to the above lines, the translator is of the opinion that "the three *slokas* or distichs which these twelve lines represent are evidently a still later and very awkward addition to the introduction". Why he thinks they are awkward is not clear. Probably because the sentiments expressed are too openly callous in the opinion of a 19th Century scholar. Why he calls them a later addition is also not stated. The erudite translator may have had linguistic, stylistic and other compelling reasons for saying so. The important thing to remember is that it does not matter whether Valmiki himself is responsible for these lines or some later scribe/poet is. What matters is that these ignoble sentiments—that salvation is guaranteed to members of the three higher castes if they read the tale, and that even the opportunity to seek salvation is denied those of the lowest caste and the untouchables—were prevalent, and have been given expression by someone at some time.Valmiki is not so much the name of *a* poet as it is the name of a community of poets. It does not matter whether Valmiki is personally responsible for a particular part of the epic or whether a poet who came before/after him is.

The reading prohibition is a double-edged sword. It not only keeps the *Sudras* and untouchables from heaven it also keeps them in the dark. As Edward Said has pointed out, power and knowledge are the intertwined foundations of imperial authority. What is remarkable about the lines from the *Ramayana* quoted above is that a social convention (that persons of an inferior caste must not read the text) is created and legitimatized by the text itself. The convention does not lie outside or above the text but is incarnated in the text and is immanent in it. Textual authority is conferred on a prohibition for which imperial authority had an inclination.

Even the above concession granted to the *Sudras* (of listening facilities regarding the epic) was a limited concession—it was not extended to include the sacred Vedas. The Sudras were not permitted even to listen to the Vedic hymns. At least when later legal texts came to be composed, these texts laid down that "pouring molten lead" into the ears should be the punishment for *Sudras* who furtively listened to Vedic chanting (Wolpert, 2004, p. 39).

In Book VII, Rama kills a Sudra who had the impudence to perform penance and make a supplication to the Gods. It is related that this Sudra's action brought misfortune to a subject of the priestly caste—it killed the priest's son. How the two events can have a cause-effect relationship is incomprehensible. Nevertheless, Rama is said to have established righteousness in the kingdom by punishing trans-caste behaviour with death. Griffith has not included Book VII in his translation as the entire book is considered to be a 'later addition'.

Other races appear in the *Ramayana* in disguise. They appear dehumanized as monkeys and they appear demonized as *rakshasas*. It is the purpose of this project to focus attention on this area and attempt to show that it is a subtle denigration of Others. South India and Sri Lanka have been depopulated and shown as unpeopled; contemporaneously, an empire, several monarchies and a high culture are shown to be flourishing in North India. This anomaly is insupportable in the light of literary, archaeological and historical evidence, which is discussed in Chapter V. An attempt will be made to relate the text to the culture (the social structures, religious beliefs, literature, history and politics) of the colonizers and to the culture of the colonized in ancient India about the time of the composition of the *Ramayana*. The cultural

representation of the elite will be studied alongside the cultural representation of Others because each is a foil for the other.

Sanskrit literature was used to extol the virtues and culture of the Sanskrit speaking people of the priestly class and the warrior/ruling class and to denigrate Others in numerous and subtle ways. The treatment of Others in the *Ramayana* is not something isolated and personal to the author/s of the epic but follows the general trend in Sanskrit literature. Such treatment was normative in the world of the Sanskrit speaking people, not eccentric. It is a manifestation of the conquest and colonization syndrome. Thus there is justification for using the framework of postcolonial theory for reading the *Ramayana*.

There were two sets of Others:

(i) One set of Others, who were affected, were the 'natives' of northern India, who were conquered—during the second and first millennia B.C.—by the Sanskrit speaking invaders and conquerors, who called themselves 'Aryans'. The natives who were not killed or driven away adopted Sanskrit as their language and swelled the ranks of the Sanskrit speaking people. By and large, the sanskritised natives constituted the two lower castes (the mercantile caste and the labourer/serf caste) ranked below the two upper castes of the conquerors (the priestly caste and the warrior/ruling caste). It is not known how much inter-marriage or concubinage took place between the invaders and the natives. It should also be mentioned that there was an outcast class, which was beyond the pale of the caste system, and accommodated those who performed the most menial and distasteful tasks. The invaders were a light skinned people; the indigenous people were dark skinned.

(ii) The second set of Others belittled in Sanskrit texts such as the *Ramayana* are the natives of those parts of India over which the suzerainty of the Sanskrit speaking kings and emperors never extended. These were the dark skinned Dravidians speaking a proto-Dravidian/Dravidian language or languages. The dark skinned 'natives' who peopled northern India in pre-Sanskrit times and who were vanquished by the Sanskrit people are thought to have been racially and linguistically related to these denizens of the Southern regions of India. (This is a contentious issue.) Belittling and demonization also extended to the people of Sri Lanka, an island nation off the southern coast of India.

It should be mentioned that, in analysing the textual representation of Others as demons and apes and monkeys, the representation of the females of these species has not been explored in this thesis. A few demonesses are portrayed in the text—for example the domonesses who guard Sita when she is held captive in Lanka, Ravan's wife, and Ravan's sister Surpanakha. However, Rama encounters and vanquishes thousands upon thousands of demons, and we do not hear anything about the mothers, consorts, sisters or daughters of these demons. As for female apes and monkeys, apart from Bali's wife, Tara, they do not even have a walk-on part in the text. They are unseen and unheard. With regard to Surpanakha and her desire for Rama, Anita Loomba's observations regarding English representation of colonized women is revealing.

> The biblical story of Sheba arriving laden with gold at Solomon's court and willingly surrendering her enormous wealth for sexual gratification initiated a long tradition of stories in which the desire of the native woman for the European man coded for the submission of the colonized people. (Loomba, 2002, p. 153.)

The *Ramayana* is usually referred to as a Hindu epic. The Hindus themselves read the text in various complex ways. The *Ramayana* is often regarded as history by many Hindus; it is considered to be an accurate record of events that took place once upon a time, despite the fantastic nature of the narrative. Modern interpretations, by some believers, explain away the fantastic as symbolic and metaphorical. However, many believers insist that the fantastic did happen because it was possible in 'those days'. By this they mean the *treta yuga*, mentioned in the text itself as the time in which the events took place; they willingly suspend disbelief and there is no arguing with them. They are indifferent when told that human life had not evolved on earth at that time. A few believers will question the calculations of the evolutionists about the appearance of human life on earth but will not question the calculations in the *Ramayana*.

(The existence of this world and cosmos is divided into four *yugas* in Hindu texts—the first is the age of the Gods and of truth and perfection; the second, the *treta yuga* is the age of the sacred, domestic and sacrificial fires; the third is the age of doubt; and the fourth, the current age, is the age of evil. Since the duration of the third yuga is 864,000 years long and since we are now in the fourth *yuga*, the second *yuga*, in which the events related in the *Ramayana* are said to have taken place, must be considerably more than 864,000 years ago. According to the text, the author was a contemporary of Rama; so he too must have lived and composed the text at that time. However, scientists believe that modern humans appeared on earth only about 40,000 years ago.)

The *Ramayana* is also regarded as sacred history by many Hindus. Devout Hindus believe that a text is sacred if its inscription had a direct connection with God. For this reason, the text is revered as holy and true and held to be immune from questioning and criticism. Gods are participants in many of the events in the *Ramayana*, and it was Brahma, one of the Hindu trinity, who directed Valmiki to set down the tale. Valmiki, like many other privileged mortals in the text, communed with God/Gods as a matter of course. There was constant traffic between the three worlds. It is relevant and remarkable that the other great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, is believed to have been recorded by the sage Vyasa at the dictation of the God Ganesha.

The purpose of the *Ramayana* is often declared to be didactic, and it is believed that the noble lessons in the tale will help devotees to lead better lives. This being so, the *Ramayana* is considered inviolable and the efficacy of the lessons indisputable.

The universality of the *Ramayana* has been astutely written into the text itself, and durability has been conferred on the *Ramayana* by the *Ramayana* itself. Or, rather, universality and durability have been guaranteed by Brahma's prediction that the *Ramayana* will be esteemed by men and will save them from sin as long as the mountains stand and the rivers flow. This prediction is incorporated in the text itself.

In addition, the veracity of everything in the *Ramayana* is also guaranteed by the text itself, and the guarantee comes from no less a God than Brahma:

> "In all thy poem, through my grace,
> No word of falsehood shall take place.
> …….
> As long as in this firm-set land
> The streams shall flow, the mountains stand
> So long throughout the world, be sure,
> The great Ramayana shall endure. (I, II, p. 8.)

This seems like a warning—a 'No Trespassing' sign—to ward off critics. This thesis argues that the *Ramayana* is an imaginative work of fiction produced in an ancient time of prosperous kingdoms ruled by Sanskrit speaking people. It uses postcolonial theory as a strategy to read the text.

Owing to the post-colonial migrations and Diaspora of the twentieth century, large numbers of Hindus are now citizens of western countries that used to be identified as Christian nations. These Hindus have built temples, some big and some small, wherever they have gone. There are huge new Hindu temple complexes in Malibu and Philadelphia and Sydney and Neasden, England. The willingness of the Hindus to build temples with their money bears witness to their religious devotion, their tenacious attachment to Hindu culture and, what is pertinent to this project, their unquestioning belief in the cultural representation in texts such as th*e Ramayana*.

One example is given here. A brochure published by The Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Neasden, England titled *Understanding Hinduism* has nuggets of opinion and information that are relevant to this project. The brochure states under the heading 'Origins' and the sub-heading 'Roots' that "Hinduism is the world's oldest religion, over 8,500 years old. It is also the most tolerant, most resilient, most peace-loving of all religions. Its roots lie in the vast Indian subcontinent, in the Indus Valley which had 300 advanced settlements as early as 5,000 BCE (Before Common Era—CE is Common Era according to the brochure). The people living around the River Sindhu (Indus) came to be known as the Hindus. Also known as the Aryans, these people were local inhabitants and not foreign invaders."

The above statement has pushed the Indus Valley civilization back in time and handed it over to the Aryans and transformed the Aryans into non-invaders. It has also made 'Hindus' and Aryans synonyms. If Hindus are Aryans and only Aryans are Hindus and also if only the Aryans contributed to the development of Hinduism, then a great many Others are not being given the credit that is due to them. Producing cultural representation is an interminable process. It is not something exclusively ancient; it is continuing today. Past cultural representations influence and inform current cultural representations. This idea will be reiterated in this project.

Be that as it may, The Hindu temple at Neasden is beautiful and imposing. It was built by those who belong to a sect called the Swaminarayan faith. We learn from the brochure that:

> 2,828 tonnes of Bulgarian limestone and 2,000 tonnes of Italian Carrara marble were shipped to India, carved by over 1,5000 craftsmen and re-shipped to London.
>
> In all, 26,300 carved pieces, including amazing intricate ceiling of Indian marble, were finally assembled like a giant jigsaw within 3 years.

Truly the temple is a creation of art and devotion. For many reasons, the overseas Hindus have continued to cherish their faith and their books. One reason must be the sense of identity and solidarity this gives them in their strange new surroundings. However, hundreds of devotees and sight-seers visit this temple and read the misrepresentation in the brochure, little suspecting that a document issued by such a place could be misleading.

It is very strange and paradoxical that many Hindus think the *Ramayana* is sacred and inviolable but do not protest or dissent when it is revised and altered from time to time. We would expect believers to consider this tampering to be sacrilegious. Some drastically revised versions are discussed in Chapter IV. Perhaps believers are not disturbed by these changes because they feel the revisions cannot alter what the text gives them—emotional security, spiritual sustenance, and a cultural and religious identity. Moreover, the altered versions are used by those who desire those altered versions. There is no compulsion on believers to give up their allegiance to their own preferred version. There is not, and there never was, any copyright attached to the *Ramayana*. Thus it exists in many forms.

CHAPTER II
AIDS IN THE ANALYSIS OF THE TREATMENT OF OTHERS IN THE *RAMAYANA*

Two things inspired, spurred and aided the analysis of the treatment of Others in the *Ramayana* undertaken in this thesis. One was postcolonial theory; the other was current literature that echoes the textual denigration of Others in the *Ramayana*.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK—A GUIDE FOR THE ANALYSIS

It is well known that a variety of literary theories erupted in the second half of the 20th Century when a new breed of scholars and students began to question the age old assumptions of Western liberal humanists: that there is a literary canon of timeless, highly valued 'great' books; that these great books contain immutable, unimpeachable and unquestionable eternal verities—what are called universal truths—which are the common concern of all of us caught up in the human condition; that there is an essence called universal human nature; that the text holds the author's meaning, and that historical, autobiographical, linguistic and other details, though interesting, are secondary, if not extraneous, to the meaning. Third world intellectuals such as Aime Cesaire (in his book *Discourse on Colonialism*) joined these scholars in rejecting the ideas of European universality and humanism.

The new breed of scholars and students were the product of newly emerging social and political conditions. They posed unsettling questions: Who has the right to admit books to the canon—isn't it those who are powerful in academia and elsewhere? Are the criteria for stamping a book as great truly objective? May these criteria not depend on the acquired tastes and attitudes of those who have the power to arbitrate on such matters? Doesn't a book mean what it means because of what we, the readers, make of it, and doesn't what we make of it depend on our preoccupations—that in fact we re-create the book? If this is so, how can a book be the same for everyone and for all time? How can a writer of genius shake off all historical and cultural influences and write for all times and climes? Don't the forms, structures and devices (the mechanics) that the writer chooses to utilize contribute as much (if not more) to the meaning of the text as does the content?

These questions, and the academic conditions that gave rise to them, resulted in bewilderingly diverse and numerous new ways of looking at texts—that is, they resulted in new literary theories. Terry Eagleton has stated this succinctly; at the same time he disapproves of academics who elaborate theory in obscure prose:

> "Properly understood, literary theory is shaped by a democratic impulse rather than an elitist one; and to this extent, when it *does* lapse into the turgidly unreadable, it is being untrue to its own historical roots." (Terry Eagleton, 1996, p. viii.)

One of these new literary theories is postcolonial literary theory, which arose in the 1980's and which is a branch of postcolonial theory. Leela Gandhi describes postcolonial theory as the theoretical attempts to engage with a particular historical

condition (Gandhi, 1998, p. 4). The historical condition is colonialism and its aftermath following decolonization. The historical condition provides the material to be analysed and postcolonial theory provides the analytical tools. The theory deals with colonial oppression and also resistance, contestation, rejection, complicity, betrayal and acceptance, and the traces and influences of colonialism which persist after decolonization. It deals with the political, historical, economic and social effects, experiences and practices of colonialism and decolonization. It revisits the past and investigates the sometimes misinterpreted, sometimes forgotten and sometimes silent archive of the colonial encounter. It re-examines the identities of the colonizer and the colonized created by the condition of colonialism. That branch of postcolonial theory which deals with the discursive and conceptual activity that produced writing about the historical conditions of colonialism is postcolonial literary theory.

This thesis has revisited the past in which Valmiki's *Ramayana* was produced and has pointed out the manner in which an inferior dehumanised and demonised subject position has been textually constructed for, and imposed on, Others by a dominant people, who have appropriated the right of Others to define their own identity.

What are some ideas of postcolonial theory? What are its intellectual underpinnings? Though it is an eclectic theory and has borrowed ideas from many disciplines and theories, it has been most influenced by the somewhat oppositional ideas of Marxism on the one hand and Post-structuralism-Postmodernism on the other.

It is noteworthy that postcolonial literary theory looks at discourse not as something independent, isolated and neutral but in relation to the cultural and political situation (which in turn is related to the material situation) that engendered it. These notions are influenced by materialist philosophies such as Marxism (Gandhi, 1998, ix). However, many postcolonial literary theorists are aware of the imitations of modernising theories such as Marxism. This thesis has related the colonial ideology in the *Ramayana* to the cultural, political and material conditions which inspired it; Chapter V deals with the circumstances of the hegemonic and oppressed communities at about the time Valmiki's *Ramayana* was composed.

The celebration of difference and diversity in cultures and communities by postcolonial criticism is inspired by post-structuralism and postmodernism. As Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson have pointed out, J-F Lyotatrd's and Jean Braudillard's postmodern critique of the universalizing historical narratives and strategies of Western rationality have influenced postcolonial thought as have the indeterminacies and decentredness associated, philosophically, with post-structuralism and particularly deconstruction. These writers also add that the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Michel Foucault's writings on the interdependency of power and knowledge have also influenced postcolonial theory (Selden and Widdowson, 1993, pp. 188-189). This thesis argues that the *Ramayana* perceives difference as a cause for denigration rather than celebration.

Many postcolonial critics see the inevitable hybridisation of postcolonial cultures, and the postcolonial subjectivities produced by contradictions, as the result of a dialectical relationship between Europe and colonized nations—an ongoing dialectic between what were once centre and periphery, a dialectic between different

ontologies and epistemologies. The influence of Hegel can be discerned here. As elucidated by G.R.G. Mure, Hegel considered thought to be an important part of human knowledge and regarded thought as dialectical. The principle of Hegel's dialectic is the synthesis of opposites—an idea and an opposing idea, or a thesis and its antithesis, move towards a new product or synthesis (Mure, 1970, pp.114-119).The focus on the dialectic between the self and the Other in postcolonial studies is also influenced by deconstruction, which searches out the binary opposites in a text: "…the hunt for paradoxes and particularly for self-contradictions in texts has become the central preoccupation of structuralist and deconstructionist criticism…the quest for the 'janiform' or 'two-faced' text can be illuminating but also reductive…" (Cedric Watts, 1983, p 29).

The academic and intellectual conditions in which postcolonial theory arose have led it to question Western epistemology (particularly notions of rationality, equality, justice, humanity and modernity, and metanarratives of human progress and liberation engendered by Enlightenment thought) and to foreground cultural alterity. The historical condition (the colonial encounter and its aftermath) in which postcolonial theory arose has led it to enter the political fray.

A major concern of postcolonial theory is the state of those marginalized by colonialism. The marginalized lend importance to the dominant. Subaltern voices that could not and cannot speak and feeble voices that are inaudible are being encouraged to speak or—and this is a contentious issue—are being spoken for by the self-appointed authoritative investigator. The position of postcolonial theory may be marginal in Western academia but its concerns are central to the non-West, so there is also a need for facilitating a democratic colloquium between the joint but often antagonistic inheritors of the colonial aftermath (Gandhi, 1998, ix-x). This thesis has been influenced by all these ideas and has explored the alternative subjectivity of those to whom subjectivity has been denied in the *Ramayana,* laments the textual erasure of Other cultures and pleads for the celebration of diversity in unity.

Even as such a colloquium envisaged by Gandhi is underway, the task of directing the searchlight on overt, covert and evasively silent views about Others found in canonical texts must continue. Some views are openly insulting. An example is the opinion that an ape is a fit husband for a South African woman, a black woman, which comes from Edward Long, a man belonging to a culture that largely refused, in the nineteenth century, to believe in Darwin's theory of evolution and in any genetic connection between humans and other animals:

> Ludicrous as the opinion may seem I do not think that an orangutan husband would be any dishonour to a Hottentot female. (Edward Long.)

Some denigrating views are evasively silent as Edward Said has pointed out. That is, white society is shown to be superior and, at the same time, nothing much may be said of the colonial society mentioned in the text. In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen mentions, but desists from saying much about, the estates in the West Indies of the absentee owner Sir Thomas Bertram; but she describes at length the stately and orderly life of the owner and his family on their estate in England, which is supported by those estates in a British colony on which, in all probability, slave labour was disciplined and kept in order and made to toil by white taskmasters. This

last piece of information is unstated. But a postcolonial reading of the text by Edward Said interprets the evasive silence so (Said, 1994, pp. 100-116). Various ways of belittling Others found in the *Ramayana* are pointed out in Chapter VI.

It is also the task of postcolonial literary theory to rescue, recover and reclaim marginalized, occluded, silenced and even maligned texts and knowledge systems in which Other voices or those of their Western sympathizers can be heard—for there were members of the colonizing countries who did not approve of and did not take part in oppression.By delving into the history of Others in Valmiki's text, this thesis shows, in Chapter V, that there were other knowledge systems and traditions which have been obliterated in the *Ramayana.*

Aime Cesaire, the Martiniquian poet, anti-colonialist and political activist, was one of the earliest and most influential critics of colonialism and its evils. He popularized the term negritude, which came to mean a movement of black people who were determined to acknowledge and accept the fact of their being black and to take charge of their destiny, and who were vehemently opposed to Western civilization in its immoral, destructive and indefensible colonial manifestation.

> …an arrogant cultural formation which denied that there was anything of any interest or worth in the other cultures encountered in the process of colonial expansion. Indeed it was part of the same series of historical expansions which saw the development of the Atlantic slave trade and the attempts at the radical erasure of cultural identity, sense of self and rootedness. (Moore-Gilbert, Stanton and Maley, 1997, p. 9.)

Moore-Gilbert, Stanton and Maley state, in their book from which the above quotation is taken, that Cesaire's book *Discourse on Colonialism* must be viewed as a founding text for postcolonial criticism. In impassioned, lucid and resonant prose sprinkled with quotations from well documented French colonial sources, Cesaire shows the cruelty, depravity and greed of the colonizer. Whereas the earlier explorer-adventurers killed and plundered openly, the colonizers did the same but tried to cover it up with sanctimonious claims that they were bringing order and civilization to the colonized—a savage, pagan, barbarian and disorderly lot.

Cesaire's rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* shows up the fact that even the greatest English poet subscribed to the idea of colonialism-as-a-civilizing mission and became an apologist for British colonial expansion. In Chapter VI, this thesis highlights the fact that the notion of conquering for the purpose of bringing order is a part of the ideology of the dominant group in the *Ramayana*.

Cesaire quotes the following French writers, among others, to expose the cupidity and villainy of the colonizers and to assert that "no one colonizes innocently" (Cesaire, 1972, pp. 15-18.):

> We aspire not to equality but to domination. The country of a foreign race must become once again a country of serfs, of agricultural labourers or industrial workers. It is not a question of eliminating the inequalities of men but of widening them and making them into law. (Ernest Renan.)

> Humanity must not, cannot, allow the incompetence, negligence and laziness of the uncivilized peoples to leave idle, indefinitely, the wealth which God has confided to them, charging them to make it serve the good of all. (Rev. Muller.)
>
> In order to banish the thoughts that sometimes besiege me, I have some heads cut off, not the heads of artichokes but the heads of men. (Colonel de Montagnac, one of the conquerors of Algeria.)
>
> The native riflemen had orders to kill only the men; but no one restrained them; intoxicated by the smell of blood, they spared not one woman, not one child…At the end of the afternoon, the heat caused a light mist to arise: it was the blood of the five thousand victims, evaporating in the setting sun. (General Gerald on the capture of the city of Ambike.)
>
> We lay waste, we burn, we plunder, we destroy the houses and the trees. (Saint-Arnaud.)

Cesaire saw and proclaimed that colonialism brutalizes and decivilizes the colonizer and takes Europe towards savagery. He unequivocally stated that Hitler was the outcome of the acceptance by Europe of reprehensible colonial practices. Hitler was Europe's punishment for colonialism and no one should be surprised that Hitler applied to Europe colonial procedures hitherto applied to the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India and the blacks of Africa (Cesaire, 1972, pp. 13-14). Cesaire's reply to colonialism's claim that it brought modernization and eliminated local abuses is that, on the contrary, it destroyed harmonious and viable natural economies and worked with local tyrants and mercenaries to "graft modern abuse onto ancient injustice, hateful racism onto old inequality" (Cesaire, 1972, p. 24). This thesis points out that the characters from the dominant communities in the *Ramayana* revered as paragons of all virtues indulge in bloody carnage to destroy those from other communities, who are portrayed as bloodthirsty.

In his early days Cesaire had Marxist leanings but later severed his ties with the Communist Party. He felt that race and colonialism were of central concern to the colonized. The denied subjectivity of the colonized had to be affirmed and the shackles of colonialism broken before any solidarity with the world's proletariat could be contemplated.

The resistance to colonialism can be said to have started the moment colonialism commenced. Despite the coercion and seduction of the colonizing power and despite the collusion and complicity of many among the colonized, there was substantial cultural, political and armed resistance. Mahatma Gandhi and Frantz Fanon, who fought for Indian and Algerian independence respectively, have influenced postcolonial thought through their extensive writings and personal participation in liberation struggles. As is well known, Mahatma Gandhi believed in non-violent struggle whereas Fanon espoused armed resistance. Both believed and struggled for a total liberation from colonialism, which included psychic, cultural, economic and political liberation. Neither of them believed in blindly reverting to tradition and custom in the name of recovering indigenous culture. They believed in reformed and dynamic indigenous cultures transformed through creativity. Both dreamed of a

peasantry empowered culturally, economically and politically, and of the end of elitist power.

Fanon's best known works are *Black Skins, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*. In these, he describes and analyses the state of the colonized subject. Fanon showed that colonialism has deleterious psychological effects on individuals and societies. Fanon believed that "the native intellectual had thrown himself greedily upon Western culture" and outlined a three-phase strategy for withdrawal, which ends in a fighting phase. He also asserts that the intellectual must take part in liberation struggles instead of being obsessed with a mummified culture.

> You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading out little known treasures under its eyes.
>
> …
>
> The desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions back to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one's own people. When a people undertakes an armed struggle or even a political struggle against a relentless colonialism, the significance of tradition changes.
>
> …
>
> To fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible. There is no other fight for a culture which can develop apart from the popular struggle….The national Algerian culture is taking on form and content as the battles are being fought out, in prison, under the guillotine and in every French outpost which is captured or destroyed. (Frantz Fanon, 1967, pp. 92-111.)

Some critics feel that Fanon's most significant contribution to postcolonial thought lies in the fact that he linked a politics of self-emancipation with an ideology of national liberation (Moore-Gilbert *et.al.* 1997, p.13).

Albert Memmi, the Tunisian writer, has written harrowingly about oppression and suffering in the colonial situation in his fiction and non-fiction. In his well known study, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, he explores the identities of both participants in the colonial system and their perceptions of self and one another.

Numerous postcolonial critics have looked with postcolonial eyes at various works which were seemingly secure in the Western literary canon and which have been accepted widely as masterpieces. These postcolonial interpretations of masterpieces such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Tempest* have influenced the postcolonial reading of the *Ramayana* in this thesis. For example Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist and critic, has written a critical review of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which he scours the text and exposes many instances of racial hatred and contempt directed at Africans. The review, which originally appeared in *Massachusetts Review* in 1977, has been reprinted in many postcolonial readers. Achebe accuses Conrad of having

seen Africa and the Africans through blinkered, jaundiced, xenophobic eyes and does not agree that Conrad's short novel is a great piece of literature. Achebe refuses to accept Conrad's/Marlow's token sympathy for Africans exploited and then allowed to die of disease and starvation by their European masters because it is not genuine sympathy. It is a rare gesture of acquiescence towards European liberalism and does not make amends for the denial of humanity to Africans in the rest of the novel. Conrad could not see the racism on which Belgian exploitation of the Congo was founded. Conrad saw that imperialism was dominance and misappropriation but did not declare that Africans were entitled to freedom and equality. Neither can Conrad be defended as having described only what he saw, because others saw Africa otherwise in Conrad's day. Picasso and Matisse, for example, turned to African art for inspiration giving the lie to the notion that the Africans were cultureless savages. Nevertheless, the image of Africa in Conrad's book was the prevailing image in Europe. Achebe feels that Europe needed such an image to reassure itself. Such a manufactured image was an antidote to the feelings of anxiety it felt about its own civilization. This thesis puts forward the idea that a constructed image of Others must have been necessary for the dominant groups in Valmiki's time also. Achebe, like many postcolonial critics, has pointed out that colonial discourse often tends to describe Others in a mass and denies them individuality by doing so. Achebe has also shown that Conrad not only denies individuality to Africans but also goes to absurd lengths to emphasize their blackness (Chinua Achebe, 1997). In addition, there is also the metaphorical use of darkness in Conrad's novel. In Chapter VI, this thesis points out the massing together of Others and highlights the iterative imagery of blackness and darkness in describing Others which figure in the *Ramayana*.

Edward Said was a prolific writer in the postcolonial field and has influenced and stimulated other scholars in the field. Some critics who have disagreed with Said have been inspired to produce different insights and interpretations because of his work. Said has applied Foucault's ideas of the relationship between power and knowledge to imperialism and imperialist discourse. He has also pressed into service Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which analyses the use of culture by dominant groups to subordinate 'subaltern' groups. Even though Said uses Western theories, he is critical of their Eurocentrism. Two of his most influential books have been *Orientalism,* first published in 1978, and *Culture and Imperialism*, first published in 1993. Said seems to suggest that cultural production is both a cause and a result of imperialism and colonialism:

> Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and even impelled by ideological formations which include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with that domination… (Said, 1994, p. 8.)

In *Orientalism*, Said has extended the meaning of Orientalism (the study of and scholarship about the Orient from the 19th century onwards) to include the discourse about the Orient from about 4,000 years ago until the 19th century and also the discourse about the Orient which aided and abetted and went hand in hand with modern European imperial domination. According to Said, there was a desire to 'know' the Orient (to study, to research and to write about the Orient) but the knowledge was not disinterested. Knowledge about the Orient was gained and used

to further colonial dominance and hegemony. It was posited as an authoritative and expert knowledge. In the process essentialist and negative stereotypes, representations and images of the Orient and its peoples were constructed that were insulting and inimical to the subject races and re-inforced the notion that the Occident was superior and was justified in subjugating the Orient (Said, 1995, pp. 333-334). Said has influenced the interpretation of the representations of dominant and oppressed groups in the *Ramayana*. The former has monopolized learning, made knowledge its prerogative and pre-empted the representation of Others and their cultures.

Richard Fox has argued that orientalists have also produced a positive stereotype of the East as inherently spiritual, consensual and corporate and that this was used in the Gandhian cultural resistance. As for the negative stereotypes, they spurred Indian nationalists to reform the caste-dominated, despotic, patriarchal social structure in India (Fox, 1992, p.151). However, Leela Gandhi points out that Said's importance lies in his exposing the complicity between Western knowledge and Western power:

> *Orientalism* is the first book in which Said relentlessly unmasks the ideological disguises of imperialism. In this regard, its particular contribution to the field of anti-colonial scholarship inheres in its painstaking, if somewhat overstated, exposition of the relationship between colonial knowledge and colonial power. (Gandhi, 1998, p. 67.)

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said extends to other colonized territories the arguments which, in *Orientalism*, are, as he himself says, limited to the Middle East. Said fears that colonialism has not yet ended because it has reared its head in current military, political and economic exploitation. For the future, he advocates a new humanism that is based on 'actual experience' and is free from domination and that does not see ethnic, national and cultural boundaries as barriers but as something to be transgressed. Said advocates a pluralistic vision of the world, which offers opportunities for liberation from every kind of domination; a liberation which involves a transformation of social consciousness beyond national consciousness—an enlightened postnationalism:

> No one today is purely *one* thing… Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively white, or black, or Western, or Oriental… No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connection between things…But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies...(Said, 1993, p. 408.)

Said deplores the fact that the nationalist resistance in former colonies often degenerated into nativism—a search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and (occasionally) heroines, myths and religions…a redevelopment of the native

language" (Said, 1994, p. 173). After analyzing the celebration of Ireland and Irishness in the work of W. B. Yeats, Said generalizes thus:

> …there is a good deal of promise in getting beyond them, not remaining trapped in the emotional self-indulgence of celebrating one's own identity. There is first of all the possibility of discovering a world *not* constructed out of warring essences. Second, there is a possibility of a universalism that is not limited or coercive ... Third, and most important, moving beyond nativism does not mean abandoning nationality, but it does mean thinking of local identity as not exhaustive, and therefore not being anxious to confine oneself to one's own sphere, with its ceremonies of belonging, its built-in chauvinism, and its limiting sense of security. (Said, 1994, p.177.)

Other critics too have deplored the conformity and homogeneity that has been produced by anti-colonial nationalism. The nation-States that have resulted from anti-colonial, and dissenting nationalism should not practise new kinds of totalitarianism and violence against different voices that wish to be heard. This thesis presents evidence that is a cause for such concerns in the second part of this chapter and in Chapter III.

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak has championed the cause of the marginalized in colonial and postcolonial society and especially the cause of the female subaltern, who is doubly disadvantaged. She is a feminist who has criticized main stream feminism for being Eurocentric. For example, she has responded to the French feminist Julila Kristeva's *About Chinese Women* (Kristeva, 1977.) very critically. She argues that Kristeva speaks merely about Chinese women—and, in the process, reveals much about herself—but does not allow the Chinese women to articulate their experience. (Spivak, 1987.)

Spivak argues in *Three Women's Texts and Imperialism* that main stream feminism reflects the interests of colonialism.

> It seems particularly unfortunate when the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism. A basically isolationist admiration for the literature of the female subject in Europe and Anglo-America establishes the high feminist norm. (Spivak, 1989, p. 175.)

Spivak states that Bronte's *Jane Eyre* celebrates the empowerment of a white female individual, Jane Eyre, at the expense of the colonial Bertha. And, though Jean Rhys rescues the marginalized Creole settler colonial Antoinette/Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and gives her a voice and empowers her, she does not do as much for the black descendant of slaves, Christophine. Christophine is a 'commodified person', a wedding present that Antoinette's mother received from Antoinette's father and can speak only incorrect English. Spivak points out that Christophine is driven out unceremoniously in mid-story. Though Christophine defies the Man/ Edward Rochester verbally and proudly proclaims that she is a free woman, she is defeated by the forces of law and order that the Man invokes. Spivak complains that the western intellectual of today, in constructing the subject position of the marginalized, is influenced inevitably and inescapably by the constructions of imperialism.

> As I mentioned above, Christophine is tangential to the narrative. She cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native. No perspective *critical* of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidated the imperialist self. (Spivak, 1989, p. 186.)

Spivak is credited with being a pioneer in bringing feminist theories to bear on postcolonial issues and of nimbly using various western intellectual and philosophical insights (from psychoanalysis, Marxism and post-structuralism besides feminism) in her work. In doing so she has modified the theories she has used with great versatility. The notion that the colonizer constructs the subject position of the colonized put forward by Said and Spivak has influenced the analysis of representation in this thesis.

Homi Bhabha is a critic who has spent a great deal of time in probing the identity of the colonized subject. Whereas, for many critics such as Said, this identity—though hybridized—is in a binary oppositional relationship with the identity of the colonizer, for Bhabha the matter is not so simple and straightforward. For Bhabha the identities of the colonizer and the colonized are not fixed, unitary and warring but complex, shifting, dynamic and inter-dependent. Colonized individuals are neither sovereign subjects nor the products of colonial discourse lacking agency. The subjectivity of the colonized is not entirely and solely produced by a consciously driven intentionality on the part of the colonizer. For Bhabha, there is a subtle and insidious psychic resistance to colonial dominance. Colonial power and authority have the inevitable potential to engender, like all power and authority, hostility and resistance. This is an ever present menace to the power and identity of the colonizer. The colonizer's identity is partially dependent on the identity of the potentially hostile colonized Other. This is also a menace. Perhaps it is this dependency, which is a menace, that drives the colonizer to take on the task of constructing an identity for the Other in the *Ramayana*.

Bhabha is also very concerned with the fact that the colonial masters adopted the strategy of reforming and disciplining a class of natives so that they could serve in administering the empire effectively. T. B. Macaulay's "Minute on Education" has gained notoriety for heaping scorn on Oriental knowledge and for putting forward a scheme of English education to create a native human buffer between the rulers and the ruled:

> …a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions and in intellect. (Macaulay, 1835.)

The transformed natives are flawed copies of the masters. Bhabha calls them mimic men. These mimic men, according to Bhabha are 'almost the same but not quite', 'almost the same but not white'. They are merely anglicized and could never become English. The desire to resemble and become authentic is foiled by ineradicable traces of difference. Difference had to be maintained so that power could be exercised over the Other. This maintenance by the dominant group of a distance between itself and

the befriended Other in the *Ramayana* is discussed in Chapter VI. Mimicry is a representation of difference, of a process of disavowal and, of an incompleteness. It is a partial representation. There is always the danger that the Other might answer the gaze of surveillance from the colonizer with a defiant, disconcerting and displacing return gaze. There is also the danger that there might be a refusal to return the gaze and thus destabilize the dominant power which is dependant on the recognition held out by the Other (Bhabha, 1983).

Bhabha has been criticized for not giving sufficient weight to class and gender differences and differences in the material situations of communities within a larger culture in identity formation, and for ignoring the importance and effectiveness of active resistance in the interests of psychic resistance. However, Bhabha has extended our understanding of identity formation in the colonial setting.

Bhabha has written a great deal on the effect of colonial history, its aftermath, neocolonialism in its many forms and traditional discourses of race nation and ethnicity on postcolonial cultural relations. He is wary of a 'going-back-to-roots' nativism as are all liberal postcolonial critics. He is also wary of postcolonial cultural diversity if it culminates in a binary opposition with western culture; or if it culminates in a competition for equality with this formerly dominant culture. Following Fanon, he cannot welcome 'a unified family of Man' which is based on the perceived cultural supremacy and racial typology of the West and which ignores others. Bhabha's conception of cultural difference requires dominant narratives to respect, to incorporate and to preserve the many histories of the historically marginalized. (Bhabha, 1991).

Said, Spivak and Bhabha have been greatly respected and admired for their extensive contribution to postcolonial studies and for establishing their importance in the Western academy. Often they have been self-critical. However, younger critics have not hesitated to criticize these critics. The three have been faulted for being too dependent on Western intellectual traditions, and for speaking almost exclusively to the West for and about the subaltern in the Third world. For example, Spivak examines the problems of representation in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and concludes that the subaltern cannot speak. Critics have questioned the need for Spivak to speak for the subaltern and disagreed with her declaration that the subaltern cannot speak. Spivak has defended her conclusion by giving an example of continuous and continuing subaltern resistance by Bengali peasants, which was futile and ineffective both in colonial and postcolonial times.

> Now what we have here is the story of continuous subaltern insurgency, always failing, but continuous to this day. This is a spectacular example of the subaltern not being able to "speak". (Spivak, 1996., p 291.)
>
> …
>
> So, "the subaltern cannot speak," means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act. (Spivak, 1996, p.292.)

There is also some uneasiness that marginality studies in the West may confirm and prolong the marginal position of oppressed communities. Critics such as Arif Dirlik and Aijaz Ahmad think that postcolonial theory is too abstract, theoretical and intellectual, and divorced from the real world of struggle and suffering that is the lot of the marginalized in Asia and Africa after decolonization. Dirlik is rather scathing when he states that postcolonial theory occurs "when Third world intellectuals have arrived in the First world" (Dirlik, 1994, p.329.) Ahmad is no less scornful when he describes postcolonial intellectuals as "radicalized immigrants located in the metropolitan university" who exhibit "a combination of class origin, professional ambition, and a lack of prior political grounding in the social praxis" (Ahmad, 1992, p. 86.) It may be true that this criticism is not baseless, but, despite its shortcomings, postcolonial theory has drawn attention to postcolonial problems. Solving these may require much political activism and a great deal of social and economic reform.

As Bill Ashcroft says, postcolonial theory is not merely confrontational and oppositional, it is also transformative. It has transformed the way in which postcolonials see themselves and the world; it has also influenced and transformed the way in which once dominant and newly dominant powers see themselves, Others and the world. This transformation could be a first step in actually transforming social, political and economic conditions in the world.

> However, most significantly, post-colonial writing, because it is conceived in a dynamic of political and cultural engagement at both the discursive and institutional level, is peculiarly placed to initiate cultural transformation. Political and social change only occur because they occur in the minds of those who imagine a different kind of world. (Ashcroft, 2001, pp. 20-21.)

I consider the *Ramayana* to be a text produced by a hegemonic people—in other words a product of the historical condition of conquest, colonization, settlement and rise to power of the Sanskrit speaking people—and have read it in the light scattered by numerous postcolonial theorists, who have examined various postcolonial issues. A postcolonial reading of the *Ramayana* and a rescuing of the Others (from the lowly representation) in the *Ramayana* will get two birds with one stone. Imbalances in the text will be highlighted, and, simultaneously, the lowly representation of Others in current literature will be combated; for the same Others who are now being denigrated and written out of history, or textually exterminated; examples of such current writing, which impelled the analysis of the *Ramayana* undertaken in this thesis are discussed in the rest of this chapter.

DEROGATORY CURRENT WRITING—AN INCENTIVE FOR THE ANALYSIS

In almost all versions of the *Ramayana*, certain classes of people are depicted in a very favourable light. Now this is all very well and may be good for those who are extolled in the *Ramayana* but not so good for the Others, who are depicted unfavourably in the same text. It is imperative to analyse the past as represented in a historical, imaginative and religious work by a dominant people in order to reclaim the future for those unjustly and wrongly denigrated.

As Epeli Hau'ofa has said, the superior attitudes of those in superior positions affects those in inferior positions very adversely. Those in inferior positions actually begin to accept the distorted versions of themselves and see themselves as those above them perceive them. This reinforces the fabrications of grandeur created by the superior community for itself (Hau'ofa. Eds. Waddell et. al. 1993, p. 3).

It is now a cliche to say that history is written by dominant people and by conquerors; this does not necessarily make it true. It is often a compendium of selected memories, biased interpretations, exaggerations and belittling of Others. Moreover, those who are the biological and/or cultural descendants of the conquerors have no qualms about adding to the fantastic fabrications of their ancestors (as shown already in the case of the Neasden temple brochure). It is therefore essential to tell the other side of the story not only to set the record straight and achieve some balance (that is to offer a counter-narrative to the totalizing imperial narrative) but also to generate some self-respect in those who have been genuflecting before their so called superiors. Those who have been belittled in texts written by conquerors should become conscious of the fact that a cultural cringe is uncalled for.

The urgent need to tell the other side of the story will be evident when it is shown that the downgrading of Others inaugurated more than two thousand years ago in Sanskrit literature is being renewed with fresh vigour today. Indeed the downgrading has gone so far down, both then and now, that the culture of Others is regarded not merely as inferior but non-existent. It is necessary to tell the other side of the story not so much to defend a little scrap of culture that is pure and unadulterated—all cultures are hybrid because they have borrowed and incorporated cultural traits from various cultures, but at the same time are distinctive because of the unique kaleidoscopic results—but to show that something distinctive and different is not inferior, much less a non-existent nothingness.

Certain attitudes and prejudices can easily become settled ways of thinking and inflexible opinions, and they can survive intact for centuries. It is not too far fetched to say that the prejudices embedded in the *Ramayana* have survived to this day and influence current opinion and behaviour. Producing cultural representation, as already stated, is an interminable process it would seem; past cultural representations influence and inform current cultural representations.

In an expanded version of a seminar paper, obnoxiously and misleadingly titled *Vedic Roots of Early Tamil Culture* Michel Danino (Danino, 2001) concludes:

> It should now be crystal clear that anyone claiming a separate, pre-Aryan or secular Dravidian culture has no evidence to show for it, except his own ignorance of archaeology, numismatics and ancient Tamil literature. (Emphasis added.)

Dravidian culture is not secular, though some of its literature is definitely secular. Religion has been a part of Dravidian culture as it has been of all cultures. This will become evident in the following refutation of Danino's thesis. That ancient Dravidian culture was separate and Pre-Aryan (pre-Vedic) is argued in Chapter V. In the course of time it has been greatly influenced by, and has itself exerted influence on, Aryan culture.

Danino bases his argument for obliterating Dravidian culture on the Sanskrit and Vedic (Aryan/Brahmanical) influence in Dravidian literature and culture. This influence is a function of history; it resulted from the missionary influence of priests (of Buddhism and Jainism and later of Hinduism) and the influence of migrants from North India to the South. Indeed Danino himself calls the influence "fusion" on more than one occasion.

Danino mentions the names of Dravidian Gods such as Cheyon/Murugan, Korravai, Mayon and Ventan, and gives (in parentheses) the Vedic or Puranic equivalents. He goes on to say: "Thus from the earliest times we have a fusion of non-Vedic deities, Vedic Gods and later Puranic deities. Such a system is quite typical of the Hindu temperament. It is also as remote as possible from the separateness we are told is at the root of so-called "Dravidian culture"". The use of "so-called" and the enclosing of "Dravidian culture" within quotation marks are obnoxious and misleading. Danino contradicts himself when he talks of fusion and then claims there was no separate Dravidian culture. There can be no fusion if there was no separateness. Danino commits a sin of omission when he ignores the fact that some of the later Puranic Gods evolved from earlier Dravidian originals, sometimes with fusion with Vedic Gods, sometimes without. The later Puranic Gods were not evident at the time of the Vedic period and they were suddenly there in the Puranic period (in some cases altogether ousting some of the Vedic Gods in popularity).

At this point it would be very instructive to see how a local Dravidian deity becomes Sanskritised and incorporated into popular Hinduism. The process has been thoroughly researched in the following instance by Hermann Kulke, who studied Sanskrit and History at University and went on to do his PhD thesis on the *Chidambaram Mahatmya*. Chidambaram is a temple city in South India; a *Mahatmyam* is a text which gives the legends and historical details associated with a temple.

Today, Chidambaram is dedicated to the cult of Shiva as Nataraja ('King of Dancers'). Originally, a stone by a pond was worshipped as a Shiva *lingam* (the phallic form of Shiva). Nearby was a shrine known as Perampalam ('Great Hall') where a goddess was worshipped. There was also a Chidampalam ('Little Hall'), where priests who served the God Murugan would dance in a trance. The group of shrines was called Puliyur (Tamil for 'Tiger village' or 'Tiger town').

There is no mention of Chidambaram in Tamil literature prior to the 5th century A.D. The God in the second shrine was identified with Shiva in a dancing form by about the 6th century A.D., and two of the Tamil poet-saints of the Southern *Bhakti* movement (devotional movement), Thirunavukkarasu and Thirugnanasambandar, have sung in praise of the dancing god, in the 7th century A.D. Let us now hear the intriguing story of divine transformation in Kulke's own words:

> The *Chidambaram Mahatmya* composed in the twelfth century provides insights into the subsequent evolution of the cult and also shows the process of Sanskritization. The upgrading of the cult of the lingam and the Sanskritization of the name of the temple town were the first achievements. Both were accomplished by inventing a legend, according to which a North Indian Brahmin, Vyagrapada, a devout *bhakta* of Shiva, came to worship the *Mulasthana* ('The Place of Origin') lingam. A Brahmin by that name—meaning 'Tiger foot'—was mentioned in Late Vedic texts and so, by making this saint the hero of the legend, the Tamil name Puliyur ('Tiger town') was placed in a Sanskrit context.
>
> In the tenth Century, the 'King of Dancers' was adopted by the powerful Dravidian kings of the Chola dynasty as their family god, which meant that the reputation of the cult of the dancing Shiva had to be enhanced by inventing a new legend. Viyagrapada's worship of the *Mulasthana lingam* was now regarded as a mere prelude to the worship of the divine dancer who manifested himself at Chidambaram by dancing the cosmic dance, *Ananda Tandava*. The fact that the cult had originated in the 'Little Hall' while the neighbouring hall of the goddess was called the 'Great Hall' was felt to be somewhat embarrassing; the legend had to correct the imbalance. The Tamil word Cid-ambalam ('Little Hall') was therefore replaced by the Sanskrit word Cid-ambaram ('Heavenly abode of the Spirit')—nearly a homophone, but much more dignified in meaning. Shiva's cosmic dance performed for both Chola kings and humble *bhaktas* now had a new setting in keeping with the greatness of the god. This etymological transformation, so typical of Hinduism's evolution, then provided metaphysical perspectives… By this kind of Sanskritization, the autochthonouos cult of a local god was placed within the context of the 'great tradition'. At the same time the heterodox *Bhakti* movement was reconciled with the philosophical system of the Brahmins, who had taken over the temple (Kulke and Rothermund, 1998, p. 135**.** N.B. Though the book was written by two authors, the material discussed here was written by Kulke).

Kulke goes on to give other examples of the integration of local gods of the Dravidians into popular Hinduism by priests. Three examples are: the identification of Meenakshi, the 'fish-eyed goddess' of the Pandyas of Mathurai with Shiva's wife Parvathi; the transformation of a tribal god of Puri in Eastern India into Jagannath ("Lord of the World') and his identification with Vishnu; and the incorporation of Krishna, originally a god of the herdsmen around Mathura in Northern India into the Hindu pantheon as an incarnation of Vishnu. (Kulke and Rothermund, 1998, p. 136.)

Let us look at the effects of the Sanskritization of a deity:

> 'Royal' gods owed their career to the dynasty with which they were associated, and their cult was usually completely Sanskritized. Nevertheless, the legends about their origin and the shape of their icons often showed clear traces of their autochthonous descent. These traces were at the same time the mainspring of a distinctive regional culture. The special traits of such gods were highlighted and embellished by many legends which formed the core of regional literature and enriched the regional tradition…Many scholars have written about the deification of kings, but for medieval India the converse evolution of a 'royalization of gods' is as important. The legitimacy of a ruler was enhanced in this way. The more 'royal' the cult of the territorial god, the more legitimate the claim of the king—represented as the deity's temporal embodiment—to rule that territory on behalf of the god. (Kulke and Rothermund, 1998, p. 137.) (Emphasis added)

It is worth reiterating Kulke's point (underlined above), which is relevant for a rebuttal of Danino's thesis. Here is Kulke saying that the autochthonous nature and quality of the Dravidian gods were the mainspring of a distinctive regional culture and also that the legends about these gods formed the core of regional literature. Let us dwell on the imagery contained in the phrases "were the mainspring" and "formed the core". I believe that the core at the centre, or the heart at the centre, of regional Dravidian literature, and the palpitating nerve at the centre of that heart of regional Dravidian literature, including Tamil Literature, are native to the region. Regional Dravidian culture is also native to the region. If we adopt the currency of Danino's imagery we would re-title his paper as 'The Indigenous Roots of Early Tamil Culture'. Let us now see how this idea is stood on its head in Danino's imagery. We have a Michel Danino presenting a seminar paper titled 'The Vedic Roots of Early Tamil Literature' and the title itself does the overturning.

We need hardly wonder how the priests from Northern India became a powerful class in Southern India. They did not, usually, come as mere migrants. They did not come as proselytizers either—Brahmanism after all is not a proselytizing religion. They came at the invitation of kings. Kings were encouraged to build large and elaborate temples, often at the spot where a small shrine used to be, as a form of thanksgiving for victory in battle and also as a symbol of regal power and prosperity.

Many powerful kingdoms emerged in Medieval India. In South India, according to Kulke, there were three stages in the emergence of a powerful regional king. Initially, the chieftain of a tribe would rise to the status of a local Hindu princeling, who would be surrounded by tributary chieftains and would be the ruler of an 'early kingdom'. There were numerous such petty kingdoms.

Then, during the second stage, any petty ruler who managed to defeat neighbouring petty kings would become a king, with the defeated petty kings becoming tributary princes; the petty kingdoms of the latter were not annexed by the victorious king but treated as tributary realms. However, there was agrarian extension of the nuclear kingdom and the displacement of tribal people, who were either pushed into infertile or inaccessible regions or retained as Sudras, or serfs, in the Brahmanical caste system imported from the north. During this stage, the kings invited more and more Brahmans to settle in their kingdoms, endowing them with land grants and

immunities and often establishing whole Brahman villages (*agraharas*). This is well documented.

Subsequently, during the third stage, a great regional or imperial kingdom emerged following the conquest of one or more second phase kingdoms and some of their tributary principalities by one of the kings. The appropriation of the surplus agricultural and other produce from the newly acquired areas "was necessary to defray the cost of the army, of a large number of retainers and Brahmins and of the 'imperial temple', which usually marked the centre of such an imperial kingdom" (Kulke and Rothermund, 1998, pp. 123-124).

Let us see what Kulke has to say on the fascinating matter of how the king's precarious hold on power was strengthened by emphasizing his divine role and by sanctifying his sovereignty:

> The Brahmins were instrumental in providing the necessary ideology for this purpose. Many documents recording land grants to Brahmins show this very clearly … Whereas previously single families or, at the most, small groups had received such grants, the records of the tenth and eleventh centuries suddenly mention large numbers of Brahmins. A ruler of the Gahadavala dynasty, for instance, granted one and a half revenue districts with more than a hundred villages to 500 Brahmins in 1093 and 1110 … The new function of the land grants became even more obvious in the South in the context of the rise of the great royal temples which symbolized the power and religious identity of the respective realm … For the performance of the rituals hundreds of Brahmins and temple servants were attached to these temples…The Linga, the phallic symbol of Shiva, in the sanctum of the temple was often named after the king…Paintings in the temple and sculptures outside it showed the king depicted like a god and the gods in turn were decorated with royal attributes. In order to gain additional legitimacy, some kings even solemnly transferred their realm to the royal god and ruled it as the god's representative or son … The settlement of Brahmins and the establishment of royal temples created a ritual, political and economic network. (Kulke and Rothermund, 1998, pp.128-130.)

Dynasties rose and fell. But the priests remained a rich and powerful force in South India. Brahmanism assimilated Dravidian elements, and popular Hinduism evolved. Actually this assimilation had begun when the Aryans encountered the indigenous people in North India in the Pre-Vedic period. Today, this amalgam of Dravidian culture and Brahmanical culture is denied by writers like Michel Danino. He talks of fusion but denies the very existence of a separate Dravidian culture.

What is more, Danino does not give due importance to Dravidian culture even when he pays vague compliments, which he cannot avoid paying. In the seminar paper already referred to above, he lists archaeological findings of the Megalithic period in South India—stone slabs arranged in the form of swastikas and stone, iron, bronze and terracotta artefacts such as figures of Ganesha, Shiva, the mother goddess, the buffalo, tridents and spears. He goes on to quote the archaeologist I. K. Sarma, who observed that such objects were intimately connected with the worship of Brahmanical Gods of the historical period (Sarma, 1987, p. 33). Danino does not

elaborate how they were intimately connected; what Danino obliterates is the fact that the connection came about through borrowings from Dravidian culture by Brahmanism. Danino's vague explanation is that "certain practices and artifacts were at least compatible with the Vedic world and may well have prepared for a ready acceptance of Vedic concepts". Danino does not mention that the acceptance was a two way process. The Vedic world accepted these megalithic practices of Dravidian culture and incorporated them into its own practices and thereby made Brahmanical concepts acceptable and palatable to the Dravidians. Compatibility was accomplished by incorporation. There was nothing compatible *per se* in the megalithic practices and artifacts with the Vedic world.

Danino also says that Megalithic practices (of the South) are evocative of later Hinduism. There is elision and erasure here. The reason for the evocativeness is that these practices were integrated into Vedic Brahmanism. How this was done in the earliest stages we do not know. It must have been achieved in ways similar to the processes outlined by Kulke with regard to the transformations at Chidambaram/Chidampalam during the medieval period, which are very revealing. It is accurate to say that later Hinduism is evocative of Dravidian Megalithic practices, and not the other way around, as Danino has done. Danino is guilty of putting the cart before the horse in his statement. He also flouts chronological decorum in his statement.

Danino's compliments to Dravidian traditions and literature are worse than insults for they appear under the sub-heading "The Myth of Dravidian Culture". He damns—not with faint praise, but with metonymic half-truths—when he quotes Swami Vivekananda as having said, "The region played a role in preserving many Sanskrit texts better than the North was able to do." He elides the fact that the preservation was done not so much by the region as by the Hindu priests in the South, who were indulged by the Dravidian kings and had sufficient wealth, leisure and motivation to preserve Sanskrit texts. Danino may not be aware of the fact that Dravidian poets and writers were without comparable royal patronage during the heyday of the Dravidian empires.

Danino quotes from the works of many archaeologists, numismatists and historians but his interpretation—that there never was a separate Dravidian culture or a Dravidian people—is skewed.

Danino's conclusion also has the following:

> Not only was there never such a culture, there is in fact no meaning to the word "Dravidian" except in the old geographic sense and in the modern linguistic sense; racial and cultural meanings are as unscientific as they are irrational, although some scholars in India remain obstinately rooted in the colonial mindset.

A race is merely a group of people with shared genotypic and phenotypic characteristics, owing to common descent, which distinguish it from other races. People of a race not only share genes and physical characteristics but also, often, a common language and culture. Of course a race can lose its language by adopting those of another race. This is what happened to many of the languages of the

indigenous people of North America. A race can also lose its distinctive physical characteristics after a prolonged period of gene mixing. This is what happened to the African slaves of ancient Greece and Rome.

Since Danino admits that Dravidian exists in the linguistic sense, and since it is certainly not Aryans who speak it, the conclusion that it is Dravidians who speak it is inevitable. Of course the Hindu priests who came South because of lucrative royal patronage adopted the Dravidian languages and brought Sanskrit influence to bear on their adopted languages. Many of them must be given due credit for having enriched the Dravidian languages by their contributions to literary and other texts. But they are a small, though powerful, minority. The millions who speak the Dravidian languages must be, racially, Dravidians. Caliban was without language. The Dravidians, at the whim of pro-Aryans like Danino, are now cultureless. And what is worse, they are a non-existent race. It requires great audacity to say that a distinctive group of people more than 100million strong, mainly concentrated in a distinctive geographical region (Southern India) and speaking languages that belong to the fifth or sixth largest language family in the world (Dravidian) do not have a racial or cultural identity.

Danino's conclusion includes the following statement, in which he refers to a "central Indian spirit"; but he does not expatiate on what it is:

> The simple reality is that every region in India has developed according to its own genius, creating in its own bent, but while remaining faithful to the central Indian spirit."

Danino's erasure of difference and distinctiveness may be well-intentioned. He may be aiming at uniting all the people of India. If national cohesion is his aim, his methods are misguided and will surely produce just the opposite effect as well as resentment. There is in India today a desire to forge a new and common identity for its citizens. This is laudable and desirable. But it cannot be done by denying differences. Specific localities and specific communities treasure their distinctive cultures. They treasure differences. Treasuring differences is a worthy project so long as it is not allowed to, and it should not be allowed to, set up hierarchies of superior and inferior relationships or a desire to dominate and homogenize. Differences should be valued and respected.

It would be proper to speak of the Vedic grafting on Tamil culture instead of the Vedic roots of early Tamil culture as Danino has done. This grafting was slight in early Tamil culture. This grafting became more widespread as the priestly caste, carriers of Vedic culture, became more entrenched in South India and Aryanized the kings. The kings, many of whom must have been usurpers and adventurers, needed the impressive Vedic rituals performed by the priests to legitimatize their kingships. The kings even invented mythical Aryan lineages for themselves. Danino mentions this and seems to think it is an acceptance on the part of the Dravidian kings of the superiority of Vedic practices and a rejection of Dravidian values. What it really means is that the kings clutched at every stratagem to survive and legitimatize their sovereignty. A distant, ancient and fantastic lineage and the adoption of Aryan names helped. And the priests were well rewarded for their services. The grafting of Vedic

and Sanskrit traits that was meager and almost imperceptible in early Tamil literature and culture became considerable and obvious as the centuries wore on.

To say that there was no Dravidian culture is like saying that there is no English culture because of the widespread influence of Latin and Romance languages in English. More than half the lexical items in English come from foreign sources, and the State religion comes from the Middle East via Greece and Rome. Influences in the Arts come from all over the world. The root of English culture is English no matter how much grafting has taken place. And the heterogeneous product of grafting is unique and English.

We would do well to ruminate on the following observation by the linguist, philologist and ethnologist Murray Emeneau: "The only type of description that is adequate *qua* description, for any body of data, is one that attempts to identify all similarities that are to be found in the data, and to organize the similars into classes and these into more inclusive classes, and so on until the most inclusive classes of classes are found" (Emeneau, 1980, p. 22).

The right way to forge an all inclusive Indian cultural identity is to recognize all locally specific cultural identities, then identify all similarities and organize similars into classes and these into more inclusive classes until the most inclusive class of all—a national Indian identity—is found. The wrong way is to deny differences and to subsume different cultural identities under one dominant cultural identity. What is needed by way of a national Indian identity and national cohesion is not a palimpsest but a tapestry of all constituent cultural identities.

Danino, though he has denied the existence of Dravidian culture, has fortunately admitted that Dravidian languages do exist. However, R. Nagaswamy has asked "…so what and where is the Dravidian language?" (Nagaswamy, 2002.) Nagaswamy is the former Director of Archaeology in Tamil Nadu and his question appeared in the open page of the widely read Indian newspaper, *The Hindu*. These particulars would give wide circulation and credence to the misleading implications of his question. The common belief is that the contents of a newspaper are ephemeral. This is not so. Sensational notions, even if ill-conceived, have potential immortality. More people read *The Hindu* than, say, a scholarly journal, and they remember and pass on sensational news.

Nagaswamy's rhetorical question might give rise to the idea that there never was a Dravidian language. The answer to the second part of the above question ("where is the Dravidian language?") is obvious. It is extinct. And it has left no written record. But it has left descendants—genetically and evolutionarily related descendants — which are the thirty or more living Dravidian languages. If there are descendants there must have been a common ancestor, and that common ancestor of the modern Dravidian languages is the Dravidian language—and that is the answer to the first part of the question ("what is the Dravidian language?").

Nagaswamy arrives at the indefensible conclusion that "The existence of Dravidian language before say 3rd-4th century B.C. is purely based on conjectural evidence". He is mistaken. It is based on circumstantial evidence; neither purely nor impurely but *merely* on circumstantial evidence. Circumstantial evidence is evidence that tends to

lead to an unavoidable conclusion, because the known facts cannot be explained otherwise. More than one murderer has been hanged on the strength of circumstantial evidence.

Just for a moment let us suppose that Latin had died without leaving any written records. Linguists would still be able to infer its existence in the past from its genetically related descendants—the Romance languages of today. Only a language that died without leaving linguistic descendants (either because all its speakers died at once in some catastrophe or because all its speakers adopted another language), and also died without leaving any written records, only such a language, is dead without a trace. Dravidian does not fit this specification.

The fact that the earliest extant recorded poetry in Tamil (a Dravidian language), which was composed in the 1st century A.D., as well as the fact that archaeological findings going back to about the 2nd or 3rd century B.C. contain loan words from Sanskrit (very few indeed) is not surprising because, by then, migrants, merchants, Brahman priests and Buddhist and Jain missionaries from the North had brought Sanskrit words directly, and through Prakrits indirectly, to the Dravidian languages. This does not make Dravidian non-existent.

It is worth mentioning that the earliest Sanskrit composition, the Rig Veda, has about twenty loan words from Dravidian. According to Emeneau "The greatest interest attaches to the items that occur in the earliest Sanskrit recorded, the Rig-Veda. Burrow finds some twenty words, a very mixed lot including the 'peacock' word mentioned before and one or two other labels for specifically Indian phenomena. Most of them however are much more general" (Emeneau , 1980, p. 92) .

Loan words from another language do not make a language non-existent or characterless. In fact it makes the language copious in lexical items and rich in synonyms. In any case, Dravidian borrowings in Sanskrit are evidence for the presence of Dravidian speakers in the Punjab when the earliest Sanskrit speakers were present there. As time marched on, more and more Dravidian words entered Sanskrit. Not surprisingly these are names of flora and fauna which are native to India and were new and nameless to the Aryans. They have been identified by applying the following stringent rules explained by T. Burrow:

(1) The Sanskrit word should have no Indo-European etymology; (2) there should be a wide currency of the etymon in the Dravidian languages; (3) a word is shown to be Dravidian in origin if it is clearly to be derived from some Dravidian root; (4) the word should be of some antiquity in Dravidian; (5) comparative lateness of appearance of the word in Sanskrit increases the probability of its being a borrowing; (6) in each case possible phonetic criteria should looked for; (7) likewise, semantic developments can sometimes be used as criteria (Burrow, T., 1946, pp. 13-18). Emeneau adds that if the word denotes something peculiar to the Indian geographical or social scene, a Dravidian origin is more probable than an Indo-European one.

The ancestors of the modern speakers of the Dravidian languages could not but have spoken Dravidian. Sanskrit has been a pan Indian language of Hindu priests and scholars. However, Sanskrit was never a pan Indian language of the people in ancient times or at any other time. Nevertheless, that is what the *Ramayana* implies. Rama

had no difficulty in communicating with Others on his trek from Ayodhya to Sri Lanka. Monkeys and Demons either had no language or are implied to have spoken Sanskrit.

A remark made by Emeneau is relevant here. "The profound and sophisticated linguistic scholars of ancient India seem never to have had any interest in the bilingual, since their linguistic preoccupation was directed chiefly to "the language of the gods", Sanskrit, and other languages and their relationships with Sanskrit were in a sense aberrancies that could be safely neglected and that consequently remained outside the limits of Hindu scholarship" (Emeneau, 1980, p. 38). Scholars have every right to choose and limit their fields of study; that does not make matters excluded by them non-existent. It should be remembered that all living languages have an antique and respectable ancestry—they were not invented suddenly and recently.

There is indeed an inchoate yearning among scholars in India today for an inchoate pan Indian identity. Such an identity cannot be constructed by blaming Indologists for inventing an Aryan—Non-Aryan dichotomy and the Indian elite for accepting it. This is what Dilip K. Chakrabarti has done in *Colonial Indology and Identity* (Chakrabarti, 2000, pp. 667-671). The Indologists did not invent this dichotomy. They merely described what they found. And it is not much help to say that the notion is textual. The texts only reinforced what the authors found in the real world, and the texts imbued what was described with textual authority.

Neither can a common Indian identity be created by downgrading the distinctive cultures of specific communities, as Chakrabarti has done. He actually calls Other identities in India "secondary identities" and bemoans their "emergence". One is tempted to ask, "Emerging from where?" and "Why secondary?" Perhaps they are emerging from silence, and their formerly suppressed voices are now being heard. For Others, their cultures are primary to them; An Indian national identity should be an inclusive identity—not a primary identity.

Chakrabarti blames politicians of modern India for the "emergence" of these identities. "In some cases, especially in border zones, where separate political niches can be carved out reasonably easily, much is made of ethnic differences." Just because politicians exploit ethnic differences is no reason for wishing differences away or for exterminating differences. Chakrabarti concludes thus:

> It is, however, not enough to dismantle the old colonial Indological identity of India. It is imperative to put in its place a sense of identity shared by all categories of Indians. (Emphasis added)

So Chakrabarti does think there are "categories" of Indians (underlined in the quotation). He doesn't say whether or not they were created by Indologists or himself. Chakrabarti has a new but somewhat vague, impractical and quaint suggestion for forging a common identity:

> It is only by focusing on the grassroots archaeological investigation, of how communities have adapted themselves to the Indian landscape, that we can escape the bondage of a textual, racist, casteist past and forge a broad-based Indian identity.

In the midst of all this, it is heartening to read that the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Manmohan Singh, paid a handsome tribute to Tamil. "Your language, Tamil, rivals Sanskrit in antiquity and in its beauty. Our government is proud of the fact that we have restored to Tamil its ancient glory by recognizing it as a classical language on a par with Sanskrit. We are committed to the full development of this great language of a great people" (Singh, 2006). Cynics might say that this was said by a politician canvassing votes and campaigning for his party men. The complimentary words are generous but there is no need to make comparisons. Comparing the beauty of two languages is unnecessary and there is no rigorous method for doing it.

It is interesting that two BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) leaders, L.K. Advani and Rajnath Singh are on record as saying, without specifying any particular case, that the government was "indulging in the politics of minority appeasement". Their own intention is to "defend national unity from the divisive politics of minorityism" (Advani and Singh, 2006). These politicians should realize that national unity need not mean that alterity must be swept under the carpet?

What Leela Gandhi has said of European imperialism applies equally to any other kind of domination:

> By attending more carefully to the silence of the archive we need to interrogate this construction of history as certain knowledge, to ask, in other words: 'Who gets known in and as history?'—or—'Who are those groups and events of whom "colonial" history is ignorant?' (Gandhi, 1998, p. 172.)

Equally pertinent is the following observation by the same writer:

> …pious protestations of postcoloniality from once-colonial nations such as India must engage with the differences between internal histories of subordination, kept in place by the continuing exclusions of postcolonial civil society. (Gandhi, 1998, p. 170.)

A few instances of the current denial of the achievements of Others and the misappropriation of their culture have been discussed in some detail above. There are many others.

Brief mention will be made of two more instances, which have received wide publicity in recent times. One is the California school text-book controversy. Groups of Americans of Indian origin mounted a protest and took legal action against the depiction, in text-books used in schools in California, of Aryans as outsiders who came into India. The lessons were not changed as radically as the protesters desired but a statement that the coming of the Aryans into India is the subject of controversy was included.

The other is the infamous but entertaining 'Harappan horse' controversy. Michael Witzel, Steve Farmer, Richard Meadow, Romila Thapar and other eminent scholars have ably contested the loud and persistent claims (made in several quarters) that the Aryans are an indigenous people and are responsible for the Indus Valley, or

Harappan, Civilization. In some cases, these claims rest on the fantastic notion that the horse, an animal intimately connected with the rituals and the conquests of the Aryans, was known to the Harappans. In one such case, N.S. Rajaram and N. Jha have claimed, in their book *The Decipherment of the Indus Script,* to have identified a horse on a Harappan seal. Witzel and Farmer have exposed the computer fraud perpetrated by N.S. Rajaram and N. Jha in their reproductions of pictures of the seal. A unicorn bull on a broken seal has been transformed into a Harappan horse through 'computer enhancement' of the image. They comment that propagandists like Rajaram "perpetrate, in twisted half-modern ways, medieval tendencies to use every means possible to support the authority of religious texts. In the political sphere, they falsify history to bolster national pride. In the ethnic realm, they glorify one sector of India to the detriment of others" (Witzel and Farmer, 2000).

The 'Harappan horse' has now been dubbed the 'Piltdown horse' and laughed out of court. However, neither scholarly rebuttal with clear proof of deceitful practice nor ridicule has dampened the enthusiasm of those who repeat the claims, and abuse anyone who contradicts them. It is interesting that those who wish to misappropriate the Indus Valley Civilization and hand it over to the Aryans always brush aside reliable and compelling linguistic evidence that happens to go against their notions. N.S. Rajaram has highhandedly dismissed linguistics as a pseudo-science.

A current practice based on discriminatory practices sanctioned in ancient texts such as the *Ramayana* is the appointment of only persons of the highest caste as priests in Hindu temples. Recent attempts at reformation and the appointment of persons of other castes as priests have been contested in the courts of law. In the case in which the appointment as priest in a temple in Kerala of K.S. Rakesh, a non-Brahmin, was contested, the Supreme Court judgment of 03/10/2002 ruled that "any custom, irrespective of any proof of their existence in pre-constitutional days, cannot be countenanced as a source of law to claim any rights when it is found to violate human rights, dignity, social equality and the specific mandate of the Constitution and law by Parliament" (Editorial, *Deccan Herald* October, 8, 2002). The judges ruled that any properly trained Hindu of any caste could be appointed as a priest in a Hindu temple and threw out as archaic and unjust the practice of reserving Hindu priesthood on the basis of birth and caste. The Supreme Court judgment endorsed the judgment of the Kerala High Court, which had upheld the appointment.

However, the Supreme Court judgment has not stopped upper caste protesters from debating such appointments, questioning the boards that make such appointments and proclaiming that "the common Hindu belief that temple rituals should be performed by Brahmins has been there since time immemorial" (*Deccan Herald* of 05/01/2006). The protesters see the much needed and long overdue reforms as a violation of Hindu customs, practices and rituals and an interference with religious freedom. The so-called "common Hindu beliefs" and practices of today repeat and reinforce the beliefs and practices enshrined in and enjoined by texts such as the *Ramayana*.

The examples discussed above of current writing and current practices show that colonial ideologies are not dead in the postcolonial world of today. The effects of colonialism linger on, and colonial ideology itself manifests itself in new ways.

CHAPTER III
SOME REVISIONS AND READINGS OF THE *RAMAYANA* THAT ARE POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUES AND OTHERS THAT EXPLOIT IT AS A COLONIAL TEXT

The *Ramayana* is not one text because it has undergone numerous transformations and exists in numerous shapes and genres. The protean capacity of the *Ramayana* is astonishing.

Two books that have appeared recently, both edited by Paula Richman, contain research articles by scholars who have investigated some of the tellings of the *Ramayana*. The titles of these books—*Questioning Ramayana: A South Asian Tradition* and *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*—are self-explanatory.

This re-telling of the *Ramayana* has been going on from the time Valmiki's text was compiled—that is, for more than two millennia. The *Ramayana* is more than a Hindu text because there are Buddhist, Jain and even Islamic versions. It is more than an Indian epic because there are Malay, Indonesian, Thai and other versions. No wonder then that A.K. Ramanujan has called the *Ramayana* a pool of signifiers into which any author may dip and bring out "a unique crystallization, a unique text with a unique texture and a fresh context". (Ramanujan, 1991, p. 46).

The Indian historian Romila Thapar has this to say about the diverse tellings of the *Ramayana:*

> The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning. (Thapar, 1989, p. 72.)

Paula Richman has pointed out that each telling has connections with a particular religious, social, political, regional, performance and gender context. (Richman, 1991, p. xi). This means that the tellings have different meanings for different groups. As A.K. Ramanujan says "some shadow of a relational structure claims the name of Ramayana for all these tellings, but on closer look one is not necessarily all that like another" (Ramanujan, 1991, p. 44).

Ramanujan goes on to classify the translation-relations between various *Ramayana* texts in three ways following the ideas of C.S. Peirce (Peirce, 1955, pp. 88-119). Ramanujan says, that when Text 2 is a "faithful" translation of Text 1 then the relation is 'iconic'. If the plot, events, characters and names in text 2 are retained from Text 1 but if local details, folklore, poetic traditions and imagery are incorporated then the relationship is 'indexical'. "Now and then, as we have seen, Text 2 uses the plot and characters and names of Text 1 minimally and uses them to

say entirely new things, often in an effort to subvert the predecessor by producing a counter-text. We may call such translation 'symbolic' (Ramanujan, 1991, p. 45). Ramanujan concludes that "…no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling—and the story has no closure, although it may be enclosed in a text" (Ramanujan, 1991, p. 46).

Some unusual tellings can actually be seen as a subtle, sometimes provocative, 'writing back' to Valmiki's text or some other dominant version. The relationship between these variant revisions and Valmiki's vision can be considered to be similar to that between Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. These tellings are the result of a lively and vigorous tradition of questioning some of the values regarding power relations, social status and so on in the text. These variants are oppositional tellings that constitute a creative rejection and a subtle subversion of the dominant version. They constitute a critical reading (disguised as a new telling) of the dominant text.

Since so many variant versions of the *Ramayana* exist and since some of them are not only subtle questionings but also rejoinders and answers, one wonders whether there is any room for an overt questioning of Valmiki's text as intended in this thesis. There is.

With the wealth of literary, archaeological and numismatic findings now available it will be possible to compare the advanced ethical, spiritual and cultural climate in which the central characters in the text are said to have lived (and in which the text was compiled) and the abject and benighted climate in which Others are said to have lived contemporaneously in the same land and to show that the representations are incongruous and untenable. The oppositional tellings do not relate the representations in the text to the milieux of the dominant and exalted groups and the deprecated and disparaged groups. In this thesis an attempt will be made to do so.

An awareness of the variant versions of the *Ramayana* is usually confined to restricted regions or to particular groups in those regions. The versions that are oppositional tellings oppose only specific aspects of some dominant version. More often than not, even in those regions, the public is more aware of the dominant version than the local one. Today, more people know Ramanand Sagar's TV re-telling for Indian National TV than any other version. Paula Richman's books, mentioned above, deal with some of the variants. These two books have made a wider public aware of the blend of criticism and creativeness generated by Valmiki's *Ramayana.*

THE *RAMAYANA* OF THE RAMNAMI SAMAJ

One extraordinary and critical as well as an ever expanding telling of the *Ramayana* has been fashioned by the Ramnami Samaj of Chattisgargh in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. (Chattisgarh is now a separate state.) The majority of the Rama devotees of this sect are untouchables.

Ramdas Lamb has spent many years among the members of the Ramnami sect, and what follows below about this sect and its work is derived from his extensive and thorough study (Lamb, 1991, pp. 235-255). The beliefs and attitudes of the Ramnami sect may throw some light on the perplexing question of how devotees can, at one and the same time, view the *Ramayana* as sacred and inviolable and yet view with equanimity even major and drastic changes made to the text.

The Ramnami sect was established by Parasuram, a man who belonged to the lowly leather-worker caste. Oral tradition has it that Parasuram was stricken by leprosy when he was a young man and that a miracle performed by an ascetic devotee of Rama cured him. Thereafter, at the behest of the ascetic, he took to performing Ramnam, or reciting the name of Ram. He also recited verses from the *Manas*, which he had memorized in his youth. As taught by the ascetic, he considered the text to be a symbol of God. Soon Parasuram had followers in the village, most of them illiterate untouchables, and thus the Ramnami Samaj was established in the 1890s.

The most popular Hindi version of the *Ramayana* is *Ramcaritmanas,* often referred to as *Manas*, composed by Tulsidas in the 16th century. Since it is in an old Hindi dialect known as Avadhi it is not widely understood, and various versions of it exist in modern Hindi. The custom of the Ramnami sect is for groups of devotees to recite *Manas* verses, anyone able to join in the recitation doing so. The chorus is a chanting of the name of Ram, and the chorus comes after the chanting of each verse. Once a year, there is a festival that goes on for a number of days, and all night chanting is a feature of the festival. Chanting is from memory. The *Manas* is placed reverently in the midst of the group and is regarded as a representation of Ram. The *Manas* and Ramnam are believed to have miraculous powers and are regarded as equal to the Vedic texts, the eternal and uncreated holy books of orthodox Hindus.

In the very early days of the Ramnamis, group chanting consisted almost exclusively of practicing Ramnam, and Ramnam had a higher status than even the *Manas.* Gradually, more and more Ramnamis were able to memorize and recite verses from the *Manas*. As the years went by, the number of young Ramnamis who were able to read and understand the text, instead of merely reciting from memory, increased.

With increasing comprehension came the realization that the *Ramayana*, though still considered to be a sacred text, was not unblemished as far as the Ramnamis were concerned. The text praised the priestly caste and the ruling caste and insulted the low born. The Ramnamis found this to be intolerable and unacceptable. They promptly and courageously began to get rid of verses that were incompatible with their outlook and beliefs, and which they had unwittingly recited earlier because they had been ignorant of their import.

The Ramnamis did not stop with the deletion of what they regarded as unsavoury verses. To their selection of *Manas* verses that they approved of, they have added verses from other Hindu texts and even included some verses created by individual Ramnamis themselves. In including non-*Manas* material, the Ramnamis have seen to it that the metrical pattern of the new verses are compatible with the metrical pattern of the *Manas* and that their meanings are in keeping with the faith and values of the sect.

The Ramnamis also modify *Manas* verses by re-directing towards the practice of Ramnam the praise directed at Brahmins. They also modify *Manas* verses by replacing the other names of Rama, such as Hari and Raghuvir, with Ram or RamRam or Ramnam according to the metrical demands of the verse. The Ramnamis do not worship the human/divine Ram of the *Manas* but a formless and eternal Ram.

Ramdas Lamb writes as follows about this elimination of material offensive to the Ramnami faith:

> Conspicuous by their almost complete absence are verses containing references to Brahmins, adherence to caste distinctions, ritual observances, image worship, and devotion to deities other than Ram, as well as those that criticize low castes and women. Most sect members ignore such verses, although some have gone to the extent of actually deleting offensive couplets from their personal copies of the text. (Lamb, 1991 pp. 241-242.)

Ramdas explains the seemingly contradictory attitude of the Ramnamis to the *Manas* thus:

> Ultimately it is the Ramnam that infuses the *Manas* verses with *mantric* power and thus gives the *Manas* its sacred status as *struti* in the Ramnami community. Ramnam is, moreover, the only irreducible, unalterable element in the *Manas.* The narrative content of the text is significant in that it conveys the Ram story, but on the level of narrative the text is *smriti*, not *sruti*. Therefore it can be selectively cited, reinterpreted, elaborated and even at times altered. (Lamb, 1991, p.251.)

(*Mantric* power can be explained as the power to bring about miraculous results by merely being chanted. Any sound or sound sequence that has this power is a mantra. *Sruti* refers to any uncreated, eternal and unquestionable sacred text; *smriti* is an open-ended holy text.)

The Ramnamis have reacted to the social/political iniquities sanctioned by *Manas*; their own version is a social/political criticism of their source book. It is also a philosophical/theological criticism of the complicated rituals performed by the priestly caste, which confers authority on that caste, and a criticism of the complexity, abundance and exuberance of the Hindu pantheon.

We can only be awed and filled with admiration at the creative way in which the Ramnamis have made the *Ramayana* their own and the sophistication and ingenuity with which they have clarified the theological implications of their text. The Ramnamis had the courage of their convictions and expurgated a sacred text.

The Ramnamis have shown that the world-view in the master discourse of the Hindi *Ramayana* is not universal. They have negotiated with it and transformed it. They have used the dominant discourse of the powerful elite as a tool. Power may be coercive and extensive and pervasive but individuals need not concur with, and be imprisoned by, the master discourse that transmits that power. As Bill Ashcroft argues, self-empowering counter discourse can be created through interaction, engagement and re-articulation:

> Power is positive in that it *produces* subjects, but we discover that power does not *inevitably* produce subjects, nor does it immobilize the subjects it produces. A discourse is comprehensive in its effects but fragile in its structure. (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 111.)

The Ramnamis' version of the *Ramayana* can be regarded as a postcolonial counter discourse created as a result of a postcolonial reading and criticism of a dominant text.

KAMPAN'S *IRAMAVATHARAM* AND THE KERALA PUPPET THEATRE

Equally contradictory is the attitude of some Ram devotees in the southern Indian state of Kerala to the treatment the text receives at the hands of puppeteers in the shadow puppet theatre. The following information about the shadow puppet Ramayana play of Kerala is from Stuart H. Blackburn, who has investigated the genre (Blackburn, 1991, pp. 156-172).

The text used by the Kerala puppeteers is the 12th century version of the *Ramayana* written in Tamil verse by Kampan and titled *Iramavatharam*. The commentary of the puppeteers, which follows the recitation of each verse from their source text, is in a Tamil dialect. The puppeteers use only about a tenth of Kampan's 12,000 verses. They supplement these with verses from other sources. The puppet play is usually built around the Rama-Ravan war. Characters and events not found in Kampan are introduced. Some of these are not found in any other version either.

The text is patently regarded as sacred because the performance takes place in the precincts of temples in central Kerala. All night performances stretching over more or less twenty nights take place during the festival in honour of the Goddess Bhagavati, to whom the performance is dedicated. The lamps used by the puppeteers to cast the shadows of the puppets on the screen are lit ritually from the temple lamp. The screen is received ritually from the temple priest. Hundreds of devotees make donations before the play and expect to have their prayers answered and their supplications granted. On the first night, the temple priest blesses the performance.

Despite all this, the devotees rarely attend the performance. Their indifference has been explained in many ways: They speak Malayalam and cannot understand either Kamban's poetry or the exposition, both of which are in Tamil; unlike in other puppet play traditions, in Kerala, the screen hides the puppeteers from the audience and the audience is alienated; the commentaries of the puppeteers seem interminable—this slows down the action; the commentaries are often superfluous and irrelevant to the action.

The puppeteers perform in pairs and the play is in the form of dialogue. A character/puppeteer may suddenly call the attention of his partner to something the poet has said—actually referring to the poet—and can then launch into a commentary on semantics, syntax, grammar, philosophy, current affairs and so on. Instead of listeners losing themselves in the story and stepping inside the story, here the characters are invited to step out of the story. There is no pretence of creating dramatic illusion; illusion is deliberately shattered. The play can come to a standstill for as long as two hours.

Blackburn interprets these tactics thus:

> By exaggerating and playing on the difference in pace between the rambling commentary and the imminent battle of the text, and not, as one might expect, hiding this discrepancy to maintain the illusion of narrative reality, the puppeteers establish the primacy of speech over action, of their interpretation over Kampan's text. And even their exegesis is cast in the form of dialogue, spoken by one epic character to another. (Blackburn, 1991, p. 162.)

Dialogue plays a central role in the puppet play. Reported speech in Kampan is turned into dialogue. Even description is turned into conversation by inserting a vocative or imperative such as "Lakshmana" "look" or "notice". Vocatives also helps a silent partner, whose attention may have wandered during a long harangue and who has forgotten what character he has assumed—for the puppeteers are few in number and each plays many parts. One puppeteer, while still maintaining the persona he has assumed, can admonish another for digressing for too long. The one admonished may stubbornly go on, using a number of tactics including pretending not to hear. Thoughts are also turned into dialogic speech by the character resorting to soliloquy after accosting his inner self as "O, heart" or "O, mind". This is a convenient strategy for giving vent to feelings and emotions that are usually not candidly expressed.

As already mentioned, the puppet play has characters, such as the standard bearer, not found in Kampan or any other version. These characters make fun of the important characters, their magical/divine weapons, their preoccupation with war and so on. Some characters openly denounce war. One character refuses to join in the victory celebrations and hints that the victory is hollow since it has come at the cost of many lives. One character suggests to another that discretion is the better part of valour and that they should become deserters.

Blackburn does not bemoan the absence of an audience at the Kerala shadow puppet play but thinks it has made a positive contribution to the distinctive nature of the art in Kerala:

> But the absent audience may have contributed to the complexity of the puppeteer's art. Converting Kampan's text to dialogue, the puppeteers created internal audiences: every word spoken by a Brahmin, an epic character or a god is addressed to another puppet; every speaker is paired with a listener with whom he interacts. And the most important audience for the Kerala puppet plays is the puppeteers themselves. In commentary, in chanting verses, and in manipulating the puppets, these men constantly interact with each other, responding to jokes, jibes and personalities. (Blackburn, 1991, pp. 170-171)

We can see that, like the Ramnamis of central India, the puppeteers of southern India have taken great liberties with a sacred version of the *Ramayana*.

It is well known that Kamban's *Iramavatharam* is the creation of an affectionate, admiring and intensely devout worshipper of Rama. Whereas, in Valmiki, Rama is more human than divine, in Kamban, he is all divine. Kamban even denigrates other Gods of the Hindu pantheon in order to raise Rama to a position of pre-eminence.

The Kerala puppeteers have turned Kamban's text into a light-hearted and irreverent version. Their version is a social, political and philosophical criticism in that they mock the martial traditions celebrated in the epic, but it is also a literary criticism because they puncture the pomposities and pretensions of not only the important characters and their beliefs but of the epic genre itself.

Though the Ramnamis and the Kerala puppeteers use different stratagems to criticize different aspects of the *Ramayana*, their versions can be regarded as postcolonial counter discourses or postcolonial critiques that arose out of a postcolonial reading of a dominant text.

SOME TAMIL READINGS OF THE *RAMAYANA*

A recurrent theme in many Tamil readings of the *Ramayana* is that it is an alien text by an alien people who wished to dominate Others.

Though many oral folk versions of the *Ramayana* had been circulating in Tamil for a long time a complete telling was produced about the 12th century A.D. by Kamban and is called *Iramavatharam* (The Rama Incarnation). This telling popularized the Rama story and also contributed to establishing Rama as a divinity among the Tamils.

However, Kampan does not lack critics. I.M. Subramaniam Pillai, who used the pseudonym Chandrasekarapavalar, has berated the poet for dissipating his talents on the story of an alien people when his creativity could have been better spent on indigenous themes. He has accused Kampan of trying to curry favour with the prosperous and hegemonic Aryans and of having forgotten his duty to his own people. He has also berated the poet for suppressing the details of obviously Aryan practices such as the horse sacrifice because the critic feels that the poet must have been aware that these details were foreign and distasteful to the Tamils (Subramaniam Pillai, 2003, p. 14).

Paula Richman has this to say about the Tamil politician and writer E.V. Ramasami's (known as E.V.R. and *Periyar*, or Respected Elder) interpretation of the *Ramayana*: "For E.V.R. The *Ramayana* was a thinly disguised historical account of how North Indians, led by Rama, subjugated South Indians, ruled by Ravana. Although his ideas were radical—and potentially disorienting—to a population of devout Hindus, many people responded enthusiastically" (Richman, 1991, p. 178).

Ramasami reads the text very literally and is derisive of the mythical and fantastic elements of the story—he refers to these as lies. Moreover, he charges the creators of the *Ramayana* with having "stolen" the plot and many characters from the story of God Skanda. It is true that the stories of the God Skanda and Rama have many parallels. Scholars also feel that Skanda is the Sanskritized version of the Dravidian God Murukan. However, Ramasami does not cite any reliable evidence to show in which direction the borrowing took place. He asserts that their own imaginative work has been used in the *Ramayana* against the Dravidians (Ramasami, 2004, p. 46).

THE USE (AND ABUSE) OF THE *RAMAYANA* AS A COLONIAL TEXT BY INDIAN KINGS

At the end of a paper titled "*Ramayana* and Political Imagination in India", Sheldon Pollock concludes as follows:

> If the grand *Ramayana* continues to be a language of mythopolitics—not because it is inherently such a language but because there is now a history of its doing that specific symbolic work—available for encoding the paired forces of xenophobia and theocracy, one way to begin to neutralize those forces is through analysis of the construction and function of such a meaning system, and of its contemporary redeployment. (Pollock, 1993, p.293)

Pollock's meaning in the conclusion quoted above is somewhat obscured by the discreet and cautious courtesies of the refined and scholarly language that he uses. Xenophobia is a learned term for fear and dislike of the Other, and theocracy for the power and rule of God-kings or God-priest-rulers. And these two forces are paired forces as Pollock calls them—they go well together. They can be used to control and manipulate people. They can be used to unleash violence. They are handmaidens of colonizing powers. In the parenthesis, Pollock hesitates to say that the *Ramayana* contains any mythopolitical symbolic meaning but implies that kings have found this meaning in the text and used it in the past.

In the body of his article, Pollock gives a number of well documented historical instances when the themes and semiotics of the *Ramayana* were used to legitimatize the sovereignty of various Indian kings. He cites examples from temple inscriptions, secular inscriptions and texts to show that kings likened themselves to Rama in valour, and likened their victories over enemies to Rama's victory over *his* enemies. In some cases, the king is described as an incarnation of Rama or Vishnu. A few kings took on one of Rama's many names after assuming power, even though some of them continued to be devout worshippers of Shiva. The examples that Pollock gives are predominantly from about A.D. twelfth century to the fourteenth century and the enemies are mainly Turks from the North-west.

It is notable that the king becomes superimposed on Rama and the enemies are superimposed on Rama's foes. To reinforce the identity of king and God, many temples and shrines were built to Rama during this period. Pollock shows that, though there had been a Rama cult earlier than this period, it was during this period that Rama became an autonomous God in his own right with temples dedicated to him. Thus, by building temples to Rama with dedicatory inscriptions to the effect that the temple was built by such and such a king who was as valorous and victorious as Rama had been, the king not only becomes identified with Rama, he is also himself on the way to becoming something of a God. In other words, the deification of Rama leads to the deification of the king. No king is averse to being considered God. A touch of divinity helps. The notion of the divine right to rule legitimizes the power of conquerors and rulers. What a king covets most is power, and who could be more powerful than God? And other desirable attributes of God such as justice, mercy, goodness and love also accrue to the God-king.

Devotees expect God to protect them from evil and from their enemies. Kings too are expected to do this. So it is not difficult for subjects to identify kings with Rama/God.
From there it is a short step to identifying current enemies with Rama's enemies. Since Rama's enemies were demons, current enemies become automatically demonized.

THE EXPLOITATION OF THE *RAMAYANA* AS A COLONIAL TEXT BY INDIAN POLITICIANS

The language of mythopolitics continues to be discovered in the *Ramayana*, mined from the text and utilized in contemporary India for politico-cultural representation. Even today, a politician needs only to suggest, through symbols, that he is connected to Rama and he will easily be seen as a protector of Hindus and, consequently, Others (non-Hindus) will easily be transformed into demons in the minds of people. The *Ramayan*a is replete with fantastic and nebulous demonic Others, and they can be identified with just about any group.

L.K. Advani, the president of the BJP (The Bharatiya Janata Party) and his political allies exploited the *Ramayana* for what many see as political purposes. In October 1990, he rode in a Toyota truck decked out as a chariot from Gujerat to Ayodhya. The epic hero Rama was portrayed on the sides of the Toyota-chariot. Advani himself was pictured as Rama (complete with bow and arrow and a quiver with spare arrows) on the cover of *India Today* of May 15, 1991. Advani had put on invisible clothes—the emperor's clothes—during the ride. The action was for the purpose of mobilization of Hindu opinion for personal political power. It is easy to mobilize opinion by appealing to the emotions, especially religious emotions, rather than to the intellect. And religious symbols supply a handy metaphorical language that is easily comprehended by the masses. Advani's action suggests that he, like Rama, is a protector of Hindus.

At the time of Advani's retrieval of Rama, there was a dispute about the site in Ayodhya on which a 15th century mosque was situated. Hindus claimed that, earlier, there had been a temple to Rama at that very spot and that it was at that very spot that Rama had been born. It is well known that the mosque was torn down by Hindu militants on December 6, 1992 and that about 3,000 people were killed in "Hindu-Muslim riots" over a wide area in North and Central India from December 1992-January 1993. The demons in the *Ramayana* are a one-size-fits-all-enemies brand of demons, and Advani has made use of this to demonize Muslims.[In this connection, we might refer to the Laotian Buddhist version of the *Ramayana* known as *Phra Lak/Phra Lam*, in which a demon (Ravana) is made to fit a historical individual. In the Laotian version, Rama and Ravana are depicted as cousins, and Ravana is represented as a previous incarnation of Devadatta, who was the Buddha's cousin. Devadatta was an ambitious and learned religious scholar who was very envious of the Buddha. Rama is identified as a previous incarnation of the Buddha (Reynolds, 1991, p. 54) .

Though Pollock mentions these recent political events, he is reluctant to speculate about the cause/s of the widespread violence. However, he points out that there is a "symbolic nexus" between these events and the *Ramayana*. Pollock gives enough evidence to show that the *Ramayana* was pressed into service by Indian kings of the medieval period to promote xenophobia and theocracy. However, Pollock fights shy of saying that there is something inherently suitable in the *Ramayana* for this kind of mythopolitical use. However, the kings couldn't have exploited th*e Ramayana* and politicians today cannot exploit it unless it lends itself to such exploitation—unless it embodies colonial ideologies and lends itself to a colonial use. This exploitation of the *Ramayana* can be regarded as a ploy of colonialism, if we recognize that

colonialism is the exploitative relationship between a powerful and privileged hegemonic community or figure and an Other.

This colonial use and exploitation of the text has a corollary. This corollary is the exposure of a submerged, latent and potential postcolonial meaning in the text. Pollock's findings and Advani's action have stimulated the postcolonial interpretation of the *Ramayana* attempted in this thesis.

The meaning of a text like the *Ramayana*, which has existed for hundreds of years and which has been re-told in diverse ways, cannot be pinned down. Meaning becomes historical; meaning is what individuals and communities assign to the text at various times, and is not exclusively something in the text itself. However, meaning cannot be assigned willy-nilly—it cannot be assigned unless the text allows it. The *Ramayana* could be any of the following for different people: It is a story of love, separation and re-union; it is a tale of good overthrowing evil; it is a tale of divine order, benevolent governance, the smooth handing over of power, and the maintenance of power; it is a story about right behaviour and correct etiquette; it is a tale of superhuman beings; it is a tale of geographical annexation and imperial expansion; it is a tale of power, dominance and control; it is also a tale of xenophobia and theocracy, even though Pollock does not like to discredit the *Ramayana* for the opportunities and prospects that medieval kings and politicians of today have seen in it.

RAMAKIEN—A BUDDHIST-HINDU THAI TELLING OF THE *RAMAYANA,* AND ITS EXPLOITATION AS A COLONIAL TEXT BY THAI KINGS.

It is remarkable that not only Indian kings but even Thai kings exploited the *Ramayana* to consolidate their power. Frank E. Reynolds has described how Thai kings too have used the *Ramayana* for political purposes (Reynolds, 1991, pp. 50-57). Thai versions of the *Ramayana,* known as *Ramakien*, evolved around the turn of the first millennium of the Christian era. It is significant that a powerful Thai king of an early Thai kingdom (14^{th} to 18^{th} centuries) took the name Ramkenheng, and that Rama was a part of the names adopted by many of his successors. The capital of this Thai kingdom was named Ayudhya after the capital of Dasaratha. The founder of a new Thai dynasty (to which the present Thai king belongs) established Bangkok as the capital in the 18^{th} century. The kings of this dynasty are invariably named Rama—the first king was Rama I, and the present king is Rama IX. The Thai kings who ruled from Bangkok were devout Buddhists and supporters of Buddhism; the present king follows them in this regard.

Ramakien is compatible with Buddhist beliefs; some Hindu elements from the *Ramayana* have been removed, though others have been retained. However, the distinctly Buddhist elements and textual links with the Buddha himself, which are present in the Buddhist Dasaratha Jataka and the Laotian Phra Lak/Phra Lam, are absent in Ramakien. Even though *Ramakien* has no direct links with the Buddha in the tale itself, external links were created by the Thai kings. The Emerald Buddha now installed in the royal temple in Bangkok is an image which has been moved from one capital to another during the rule of various Thai dynasties. The image itself and various temple rituals were associated with the rulers. The rituals are believed to have conferred divine sanction on regal power and authority. When Rama I had a temple built for the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok, he retained the traditional rituals that legitimatized royal power. He also, in addition, used *Ramkien* to bolster this power. He had episodes from *Ramakien* painted on the temple walls and made performances of episodes from the text a part of temple festivals. Thus Rama's glory was connected with the temple, the Buddha and Buddhism, and some of it rubbed off on the Thai kings. It is remarkable that *Ramakien* is also known as *Ramakirti*, which means Rama's glory. Thus *Ramakien* was used to consolidate the power and authority and glory of the kings.

As Reynolds points out*, Ramakien*, in its textual, iconic and performance versions, endorses and exploits the political sentiments in the the *Ramayana*. It is used to link the Thai kings to Rama and the *Ramayana* itself; and it is also used to link the *Ramayana*, through the Thai (Buddhist) kings, to Buddhism.

RAMAYAN—THE TELE-SERIAL AND ITS EXPLOITATION BY INDIAN POLITICIANS

Another recent event, which is not mentioned by Pollock, also reveals a symbolic nexus between itself and the *Ramayana*. This event was the screening of the television serial *Ramayan* by the Government of India from January 1987. At that time there was only one television channel and the government had a monopoly in the medium; almost everybody in India watched the serial and it proved to be more popular and a greater success than its producers had expected it to be. It is worth mentioning that Rama's rule was shown to be perfect and the land and its people were shown to have enjoyed a utopian golden age at that time. Indeed the term Ramraj literally means Rama's rule but is synonymous with perfect rule. But what is disturbing is that certain details not found in any other version of the *Ramayana* crept into the TV version. The *Ramayana* has always been open to retelling. However, one of the changes introduced is a scene in which Rama, now in exile, takes out a lump of earth from his waistband and worships it—the earth is from his birth place. This could not have gone unnoticed by those who were in the forefront of the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement (Ram's Birthplace Movement or, literally, Ram's Birth-earth Movement) and whose aim was to liberate Rama's perceived birthplace from Muslim usurpers—from demonic Others.

In a hard hitting article colourfully and evocatively titled "Saffronising the Mind of India", Roshni Sengupta demonstrates a connection between the following: Actions of BJP politicians like Advani; the Hindutva ideology promoted by the text books used in schools run by the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and also in state schools in those states in which the BJP is in power; the manipulation of the media by what she calls the saffron conglomerate/ the Hindutva conglomerate/the RSS-BJP combine; the fostering of Hindu-Muslim hatred by vested interests; and the tele-serial Ramayan (Sengupta, 2004, no pagination).

The Hindutva ideology mentioned above, and which is reflected in RSS authored textbooks, is encapsulated in the term 'Hindutva' (Hindu-ness) itself, which was coined by Vinayak Damodar Sarvakar in 1923 and was described by him thus: "Hindutva, as a continuous historically stable cultural essence, unifies India. All those who live outside its orbits are non-Indian or enemies." Sengupta quotes from the RSS authored textbooks to show that the rewritten history in them is biased, often fabricated or distorted and encourages hatred. "Demons and Mughals flow into each other, and the Muslim becomes a free-floating signifier completely detached from concrete historical context" (Sengupta, 2004).

There was a general euphoria among Hindus after the screening of the tele-serial Ramayan. However, perceptive critics like the historian Romila Thapar and the anthropologists Arjun Appadurai were two of the many persons alarmed at the pernicious effects the serial might have. Sengupta points out that Thapar was one of the first critics to link the serial to the Indian State's desire to iron out socio-cultural diversities and fabricate a homogenized culture that would be easier to control (Sengupta, 2004).

It was S.S. Gill, the then secretary to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting who commissioned the production of the tele-serial *Ramayan* by Ramanand Sagar.

Gill defended the serial and tried to ward off criticism by stating that, "The *Ramayan* is basically a secular epic which portrays a bewildering range of human relationships and socio-political situations". However, he contradicted himself by adding, "You take away the *Ramayan* from the consciousness of the Hindus and you leave them socially and morally maimed. The fact of the matter is the Hindus constitute 83% of the country's population, and the large Indian ethos is predominantly Hindu and the *Ramayan* is its centerpiece" (Sengupta, 2004).

Gill's statement that Hindus make up 83% of the population is debatable because it is not quite accurate. One oppressed Other in India, the so called lower castes have been renamed so many times that that they are referred to by various synonymous terms. Officially they are Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes; The British referred to them as Depressed Classes; Mahatma Gandhi, who believed in a common Indian identity though not, mercifully, in a common Hindu Indian identity, large-heartedly renamed them Harijans (God Hari's people). He wanted those on the fringes of the Hindu fold to be included. The Harijans themselves decidedly and decisively rejected the name Harijans and have named themselves Dalits (the oppressed). Many Dalits do not want to be counted as Hindus because they feel that being included only to be subsumed or submerged by the larger community defeats the purpose of being included. Some of them are converting to Buddhism and Christianity to make sure they are not counted as Hindus. Those like Gill who claim that 83% of Indians are Hindus forget that about the same percentage of these so called Hindus are Dalits, many of whom do not want to be called Hindus. Moreover, not many Hindus of the various Hindu sects will endorse Gill's statement that for the Indian Hindu ethos "the *Ramayan* is its centerpiece".

A desire to fashion a common national identity for India is evident in Gill's statement that "the *Ramayan* is basically a secular epic"; and he seems to think that it can be achieved through the symbolic use of the *Ramayana* and a popular TV telling of it. The desire to forge a common identity for Indians is praiseworthy. However, this identity needs to be a tolerant, non-divisive pluralistic identity that respects differences. It is doubtful that the *Ramayana* can be manipulated for the creation of a common identity with success. This yearning to shake off the shackles of western imperialist ideologies and myths and substitute homegrown ones by reverting to the past (a pristine, glorious, mythical and non-existent indigenous past) is what Edward Said has termed nativism.

And a singular identity for a country like India with its numerous castes, classes, creeds and languages is impossible to achieve even with violence, coercion and manipulation. As Said points out, no culture is single, pure and monolithic. All are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic. What is required is not a unified, uniform identity subsuming or eliminating differences but a richly varied and complex identity (Said, 1994, p.49). If a hegemonic community in a country such as India that has experienced European colonialism now tries to impose its identity (and ideologies and rule) on the culturally diverse communities in the land it would merely repeat colonial oppression—an internal or intra-national colonialism. Those who use the *Ramayana* to achieve this intra-national colonialism are making a colonial use of the text.

Zee TV began telecasting a teleserial titled *Ravan* from November 2006. This serial seems to pay sufficient compliments to the demons, perhaps to win over those such as the Dravidians and the Sudras and the tribals who have hitherto been irked that they have been portrayed as demons in the *Ramayana* and to bring these disaffected communities into the Hindu fold. It is profitable for those seeking power in a democracy to swell the ranks of the majority by inventing an elastic and uniform identity that will fit as many people as possible. This is somewhat disturbing because Hindus are now being mobilized against new demons. Any state or central government that does not toe the Hindutva line becomes an enemy of the Hindus. The event described in the following sub-section is notable in this regard.

HINDU IDENTITY DERIVED FROM THE *RAMAYANA,* AND NEW ENEMIES

The Central Government of India in association with the State Government of Tamil Nadu has a plan to deepen the channel that separates South India from North Sri Lanka in order to allow ships to pass from the west coast of India to the east coast without having to circumnavigate Sri Lanka. The dredging and deepening will also include blasting away part of the underwater bridge of rocks known as Rama's Bridge.

There is some controversy regarding the environmental effects of the project. But there is a greater and more heated controversy regarding the sacred nature of the bridge. The bridge figures in the *Ramayana* and is said to have been built by monkeys and apes led by the monkey God Hanuman, who were allies of Rama and fought against Ravan.

V. Sundaram, who identifies himself as a retired IAS officer, has written a series of articles denouncing the sacrilegious nature of the project. The language used is intemperate, and the writer presumptuously speaks for all Hindus. Upper case letters are used liberally to highlight what the writer feels is important:

> In this context all the Hindus of India wholeheartedly welcome the heroic statement made and the ultimatum given to the following effect to the Government of India by DWARAKA PEETH'S SHANKARACHARYA SWAMI SWAROOPANAND SARASWATI on the overriding public need for the protection of RAM SETU at Narsinghpur, Madhya Pradesh, on 7 June, 2007. (Sundaram, 2007, p.2.)

Here is part of the Swami's ultimatum:

> We hereby warn the Government of India that we would launch a massive and unprecedented National agitation from Himalayas to Kanyakumari and from the Rann of Kutch to the Bay of Bengal if the decision of the Government of India to demolish and destroy the Ram Setu off Rameshwaram coast is not withdrawn forthwith or at any rate withdrawn within a period of two weeks…Government of India have created a situation today wherein only those who resort to violent means are heard… (Swami Swaroopanand Saraswati, 2007, p. 2.)

Sundaram is not clear about the identity of the architects of the bridge. Though he says, "There is considerable scientific evidence available to the effect that the Rama Setu Bridge is man-made", he does not give us the scientific evidence (Sundaram, 2007, p. 3). However, he reports that another holy man, Dandi Swami Sri Vidyananda Bharati, has declared that the bridge is "sacredly viewed as a creation of Lord Rama and his Vanara army led by Lord Hanuman" (Sundaram, 2007, p. 5).

Such writing should not be dismissed as mere sabre rattling for it can have deleterious effects. It reaches a large number of people; and many Others may be intimidated and made speechless by it. In this instance too, the *Ramayana* is being used as a colonial tool.

In the *Ramayana*, there is a ruling group with a distinct and assertive identity and a powerful priestly group that allies itself with the former. There are also Others with a subservient identity and yet Others with an abominable identity. The attractive identities are created through self-representation and the repulsive identities through representation (or mis-representation) of Others. It is the aim of this project to analyse the *Ramayana* for mytho-politico-cultural representations, which cultivate and foster xenophobia and theocracy. As Pollock hopes, analysis and understanding may nullify the pernicious effects of their misuse.

CHAPTER IV
CULTURE AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Since the basis of this project is the notion that literature plays a significant role in cultural representation, the word 'culture' will have to be defined.

It is best not to define culture in isolation. Basil Davidson defines culture with acuity, in the course of defining 'History', as something insubstantial, almost ethereal—a mediation—that grows out of very substantial and earthly matters:

> History…unfolds in the mind and the imagination and takes body in the multifarious responses of a people's culture itself the infinitely subtle mediation of material realities, of underpinning economic facts, of gritty objectivities. (Davidson. 1994, pp. 236-237)

This description recognizes the twin characteristics of culture: Culture is non-material but at the same time it grows out of material realities, and, inevitably, is influenced by their nature.

Having defined culture in general, it is necessary to describe the specific culture that is represented in a favourable light in the *Ramayana*—the culture of the Sanskrit speaking people. Before their specific culture can be described, it is important to establish who these people were and to describe their social, political and economic structures. It is also necessary to identify the Others and their culture, which have been distorted by the text. This will be done in the next chapter. It is generally accepted that persons belonging to the literate castes, that is, the two elite castes, of the Sanskrit speaking people contributed to the creation of the *Ramayana* and are responsible for the flattering self-representation in the text.

It is pertinent to quote at length what Edward Said has to say about the connection between politics and cultural representation during the heyday of western imperialism:

> We live of course in a world not only of commodities but also of representation, and representations—their production, circulation, history and interpretation—are the very element of culture. In much recent theory the problem of representation is deemed to be central, yet rarely is it put in its full political context, a context that is primarily imperial. Instead we have on the one hand an isolated cultural sphere, believed to be freely and unconditionally available to weightless theoretical speculation and investigation, and, on the other, a debased political sphere, where the real struggle between interests is supposed to occur. To the professional student of culture—the humanist, the critic, the scholar—only one sphere is relevant, and more to the point, it is accepted that the two spheres are separated, whereas the two are not only connected but ultimately the same. (Said. 1994, pp. 66-67)

Not only does Edward Said emphasize the connection between politics and culture (as well as cultural representation) he goes on to state that a separation of the two would obliterate the connection between the past and the present and also clear culture of any complicity with power (Said, 1994, p.67). It seems to me that the past and the then current political situation shaped the cultural representation in the *Ramayana* and that this continues to affect the politics of today. Moreover, the culture of the elite castes and the cultural representation in the text are tied up with the power exerted by the two elite castes.

Said's opinion that what an author leaves out of a text contributes to the meaning, and his opinion that, in order to get the whole meaning of a text, the original vision of the author must be considered alongside later revisions are very relevant to a reading of the *Ramayana* (Said, 1994, p. 79). In the text, whole populations in an extensive geographical region of India have been left out; they have been displaced by beasts and demons. In addition, there are indeed actual revisions (variant versions), which could have arisen only from re-seeing of the *Ramayana* with new eyes and new perceptions. It is hoped that the reading of the *Ramayana* in this project within the framework of postcolonial theory will prove to be yet another revision (re-vision) that will add to its already complex mesh of meaning.

It seems to me that the history, politics, economic and social structures of the Sanskrit speaking people have left an imprint on the cultural representation in the *Ramayana*. The perceptions of the Sanskrit speakers regarding the history, politics, economic and social structures of Others have also contributed to the cultural representation in the text. Perceptions and representation in the text affect current perceptions.

CHAPTER V
THE SANSKRIT SPEAKING PEOPLE AND OTHERS OF VALMIKI'S TIME

Who were the Sanskrit speaking people? For well nigh four millennia, not many people asked this question. And then (after four millennia) the questioners came with modern European colonialism. The questioners were mainly British soldiers and colonial administrators, and European missionaries, linguists and archaeologists such as Gordon Childe, Max Mueller, T. Burrow, John Marshall, Mortimer Wheeler and Stuart Piggott. Their answer was that the Sanskrit speakers were a people who called themselves Aryans and who entered India over the northwest passes. According to Murray B. Emeneau "There seems to be no reason to distrust the arguments for it…" (Emeneau, 1980, p. 85).

The imperialist questioners have come and gone. Today, the question of whether the Sanskrit speakers came into India from outside or not is being debated. The people of north India generally consider themselves to be the cultural and biological descendants of the Sanskrit speaking people of ancient north India. They speak modern Indo-Aryan languages that have descended from Sanskrit. Many among them reject the notion that they are descendants of invaders and insist that their ancestors never came from outside India and that these ancestors were responsible for the pre-Sankritic Indus civilization.

The description of Others has been violently appropriated and incorporated into the *Ramayana*—a discourse of the dominant Sanskrit speaking people. An attempt will be made to identify the Others depicted in the *Ramayana* as primitives, animals, demons and cannibals. This thesis argues that the Others are the Dravidians of South India and Sri Lanka and the indigenous peoples of North India. A description of the South Indian country, its people and culture at about the time Valmiki's *Ramayana* was composed will help contest the misrepresentation of the Dravidians in that text ; the Sanskrit speaking people, their origins, history, political beliefs and social structures at that time will also be described.

Critics like E.V. Ramasami, who have objected to the misrepresentation and denigration of South Indians in the *Ramayana*, have had a tendency to take over the villain of the piece, Ravan, and to attempt a complete make-over. They have scoured the text itself for redeeming qualities in the demon, highlighted these, and concluded that he was a cultured Dravidian (Ramasami, 1972, pp. 67-69).

This seems to be an exercise that defeats its own purpose—the purpose being to protest against wrong representation. The exercise allows people to say, mockingly, that the Dravidians themselves are claiming ties of kinship with demons. It is more useful to investigate the nature of the people and the condition of South India at the time Valmiki composed his epic.

The *asuras*, monkeys and *rakshasas* in *The Ramayana* have been equated by numerous readers with this or that group of tribals and Dravidians. Rajagopalachari

has declared this identification to be baseless and has blamed foreigners for what he considers to be a misinterpretation:

> The conjecture of foreigners that the *Raakshasas* were the Dravidian race is not borne out by any authority in Tamil or other literature. The Tamil people are not descendants of the *Asuras* or *Raakshasas*. (Rajagopalachari, 1979, p. 41.)

Of course the Tamils (and other Dravidians) are not descendants of Rakshasas. Rajagopalachari's reassurance is irrelevant and needless. The question is whether Valmiki represented the people of South India and Sri Lanka as beasts and demons and what the motives for such depiction could be.

This thesis takes the position that these *asuras*, monkeys and *rakshasas* are Others and not poetic personifications of evil as claimed by those who would defend the *Ramayana* as a noble text unsullied by such base attitudes and feelings as xenophobia. In other words, they are indeed real people though their identity is not openly revealed in the text. Though the ethnicity of Others is veiled and their very humanity is erased in the text, their habitation and territory are explicitly stated. Geographic regions, hills, mountains and rivers of South India are named in the *Ramayana*—the poet has not gone to the trouble of inventing imaginary locations and inventing imaginary names for the places where the Others are said to have lived. One investigator, Jonah Blank, has actually retraced Rama's footsteps by travelling to the places mentioned in the *Ramayana* and he has recounted his experience in "Arrow of the Blue-skinned God—Retracing the *Ramayana* through India" (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2000).

Real places in South India are named in the *Ramayana*. The land is idyllic. The descriptions are lyrical. It is nature unspoilt by humans, who have been textually eliminated. The land the poet sings of is probably a land he has heard of but in all likelihood not set eyes upon. For example, about seven pages of verse describe Pampa and its surroundings (III, LXXVI, p. 318 and IV, I, pp. 319-324). The following lines are a sample:

> 'See, Lakshman, how the breezes play
> With every floweret on the spray
> And sport in merry guise with all
> The fallen blooms and those that fall.
> See, brother, where the merry breeze
> Shakes the gay boughs of flowery trees;
> Disturbed amid their toil, a throng
> Of bees pursue him, loud in song.
> The koils mad with sweet delight
> The bending trees to danc invite;
> And in its joy the wild wind sings
> As from the mountain cave he springs.' (IV, I, p. 319.)

It is necessary to show (and an attempt will be made in this chapter to do so) that, far from being unpeopled, South India in Valmiki's time was the site of civilized and

prosperous populations and that this must have been known to Valmiki and his contemporaries. There is sufficient evidence for this.

For example, the *Ramayana* itself refers to the pearls and corals of South India as well as to other economic resources such as sandalwood, betel and pepper (III, XXXV, p. 270). However, of the pearl divers, husbandmen and traders there is no mention. Katyayana, the Sanskrit grammarian, mentions the Pandyans and the Cholas. Megasthenes (fourth century B.C.), the Greek envoy at the court of Chandragupta Maurya, mentions that the Pandyan kingdom extended south to the sea, had a powerful army, and great wealth obtained from its pearl-fisheries (Rawlinson, 1965, p. 178). Megasthenes himself may not have traveled to South India and what he reports may be hearsay, but his report shows that South India, its people and its resources were not unknown in the North.

As Rama journeys south from Ayodhya every prospect pleases and only humans are found to be vile—or rather, men and women are first othered by being dehumanized and demonized and then they appear to be vile. Conquerors (and virtual conquerors) have a habit of idealizing nature and the land they covet and of barbarianizing its inhabitants. It is all about appropriating and possessing real estate and justifying the usurpation.

The following comment by Raymond Williams could well be applied to what he has termed a structure of attitudes and feelings, and which can be found in *The Ramayana*:

> "One touch of nature may make the whole world kin, but usually, when we say nature, do we mean to include ourselves? I know some people would say that the other kind of nature—trees, hills, brooks, animals—has a kindly effect. But I've noticed that they often contrast it with the world of humans and their relationships" (Williams, 1997, p. 67.)

As geographical knowledge expanded in Europe during the Renaissance and in the post-Renaissance periods thanks to the voyages of adventurous sailors, and as wondrous tales of exotic countries and islands in the distant corners of the world trickled back to Europe, a literature of virtual conquest and occupation and the subjugation and civilization of savage 'natives' preceded or accompanied actual conquest. In brief, dreams of conquest led or went hand in hand with conquest. Wars of conquest were won and savoured in the libraries, classrooms and drawing rooms of Europe. Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* and Fennimore Cooper's tales of the American frontier are examples of this kind of writing.

The fact that real places situated thousands of miles away from Valmiki's home in North India are mentioned in great and vivid detail in the *Ramayana* is evidence that knowledge of these places had filtered back to the composer of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. By the time the text was composed (about 500 B.C.), there was much human traffic between North and South India. This was related to the trading ventures of merchants and the missionary activities of Buddhist and Jain monks more than to conquest by rapacious kings. Large distances and the difficult terrain that separated North and

South India did not deter intrepid merchants and other-worldly monks from undertaking hazardous journeys.

It is hardly surprising that South India, Sri Lanka and the bridge of boulders in the Palk Strait, which Rama and his army of South Indian monkeys are said to have constructed and used to invade Sri Lanka, were known in North India in Valmiki's time. The same route or a similar route must have been used by merchants and adventuresome travelers. In the 3rd century B.C. Buddhism was propagated to Sri Lanka by the emissaries of Emperor Asoka (Wolpert, 2004, p. 64). Two of the missionaries were a prince and a princess, the children of no less a person than the emperor himself. Some of the missionaries must have followed one of the several routes from North India to South India and then crossed the Adam's Bridge/Rama's Bridge to Sri Lanka. The bridge is now under water but is said to have been above water before sea levels rose. It is believed that it was even possible to wade to Sri Lanka until the 15th century, when storms deepened the gulf.

Asoka's second rock edict inscribed in the 3rd century B.C. is very revealing:

> Everywhere within the Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadisi's domain, and among the people beyond the borders, the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Satyaputras, the Keralaputras, as far as Tamraparni and where the Greek king Antiochos rules, and the kings who are neighbours of Antiochos, everywhere has Beloved-of-the-Gods, Piyadisi made provision for two types of medical treatment: medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals. Whenever medical herbs suitable for humans or animals are not available I have had them imported and grown. Whenever medical roots and fruits are not available I have had them imported and grown. Along roads, I have had wells dug and trees planted for the benefit of humans and animals. (Asoka, 257 B.C.)

What this edict reveals is that in those parts of South India which lay beyond his kingdom, King Asoka (Piyadisi) was able to do good deeds. There were humans (as the edict mentions) in South India at that time. And there were roads. The roads were already there—King Asoka did not build them; he only had wells dug and plants grown. If there was a network of roads, there must have been much human traffic and communication in South India. The king's emissaries must have been welcomed and provided with hospitality in South India. The roads may have been only footpaths, bridle paths and cart tracks, and not superhighways, but they connected the villages and towns in a vast area of South India. Some of these roads must have come into being long before King Asoka's time. Thamraparni has been identified as Ceylon (Sri Lanka) by many translators of the edicts. However, it should be pointed out that there is a river by that name in the southernmost part of South India and the edict may well refer to the land up to the borders of that river.

It is related that Rama, on his fourteen year journey southwards from Ayodhya, hardly ever met normal human beings as he wandered over South India. He met hordes of monkeys and demons; many of them were thoroughly and unredeemably malevolent and needed to be annihilated. Occasionally, Rama met untouchables and a few hermits. However, at the time the *Ramayana* was composed, South India was not virgin land and it was not unpeopled.

Archaeologists have shown us that, long, long before Valmiki's time, there were numerous prehistoric stone-age settlements in South India. Stone-age sites and tools have been found at the edges of forests and open river valleys where hunting and gathering were relatively safe and rewarding. The stone-age sites in South India, as elsewhere in India, "were almost exclusively found in areas which were not centres of the great empires of the later stages of history" (Kulke and Rothermund, 1998, p. 1). In South India, they were found in such widely distributed sites as the valley of the Narmada river, the eastern slopes of the Western Ghats, the country between the Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers, the highland areas near the east coast to the north of Madras, and the rim of the Chota Nagpur Plateau. The descendants of those stone-age people must have been widespread when Rama came on a journey south of the Vindhyas. Many of these descendants, we can safely assume, judging by what we know of South India during the historic period, had taken to agriculture in fertile, alluvial river valleys and cleared forests and had learnt to live settled lives in villages, some of which later expanded to become towns and cities.

These aboriginals of the stone-age in South India seem to have shared the script used by the people of the Indus Valley civilization and may even have shared their language judging by the little evidence that has come to light. *The Hindu* newspaper of 01/05/2006 (Subramanian, 2006, p.1) reported that a Neolithic hand held stone axe with four characters from the Indus script had been found in a village near Mayiladuthurai in Tamil Nadu. Archaeologists are reported to have been delighted with the axe, which was found along with another unmarked stone axe, by a teacher in his back garden when he was digging pits to plant banana and coconut saplings. One of the four characters on the axe is the famous seated skeletal deity on Indus seals, which has also been found on later pottery shards in two different locations in Tamil Nadu and one in Kerala State. This character on later pottery engraving is considered to have survived, not as a component of a script, but as a mythological or religious symbol.

According to the reckoning of demographers, in 500 B.C., the population of the earth must have been about one sixteenth to one tenth of what it is today. The population of India must have been about a hundred million during that time, and a good proportion of it must have been in South India.* But Valmiki imagined a land devoid of humans. This is a characteristic of the colonial attitude—'virgin' territory, or a blank space, is conceptualized, on which colonial desires are enacted.

[* J.M. Datta has estimated the population of India to be 181 million at the end of the 4th century B.C. His suggestion is based partly on Greek sources which have described the size of the Indian army at that time (Datta, 1962). However, Romila Thapar thinks that the Greek descriptions could have been exaggerated and feels that 100 million or less would be a more reasonable figure (Thapar, 1969, p. 27).]

Of course the writers of imaginative writing have a right to imagine anything, especially if the story is set in some ancient time. And the *Ramayana* is set in ancient times. So that even if the composer were aware of human habitation in South India (and there can be no doubt that he must have been), he had the poetic license to depopulate it and textually exterminate the inhabitants. But what is jarring and inconsistent is that in that distant past, in which the events of *The Ramayana* are said

to have occurred, North India is portrayed as the site of a high civilization with prosperous kingdoms, while simultaneously South India is said to have been teeming with monkeys, demons, cannibals and untouchables. This is as if Homer had described the wonders and prosperity and urbanity of Greece and depicted contemporaneous Troy as the home of demons and monsters—a chronological aberration.

Neither can we excuse the othering and denigration of tribals and Dravidians in the *Ramayana* as something demanded by the exigencies of the plot. If mythical villains and monsters were needed for the plot, they could easily have been located in mythical locations. The imagination of a poet who could conjure up so many hideous and obnoxious monsters need not have failed when it came to inventing mythical habitats for them—unless, of course, the failure was willed and deliberate.

Mixing fact and fiction, mixing reality and fantasy is far from being uncommon in creative writing. The elements of reality lend verisimilitude to the entire story (including the fantastic) and the fantastic elements give free reign to the creative impulse. The result is magic realism as, for example, in J.K. Rowlings' Harry Potter stories. Hogwarts, the school of wizardry, and all those evil magicians led by Voldemort wouldn't seem so plausible if Harry Potter had not lived in 20th century London and left for his implausible school from a very real railway station. But mercifully, all the evil magicians are not from any identifiable group in English society. Think of J.K. Rowlings making them all West Indian, Indian or Pakistani immigrants!

Othering the enemy is a justification for unprovoked aggression and the annexation of other people's territory. The whole exercise can be disguised and represented as the conquest of evil by good. In today's terms, it is the conquest of tyranny and totalitarianism by democracy and is undertaken in the name of making the world safe for democracy. In terms of European colonialism, conquest was undertaken so that the white man could shoulder the burden of civilizing natives.

Unless the enemy is othered, the will to kill will falter. This is what happened to the warrior Arjuna on the eve of the Kaurava-Pandava war in the *Mahabharata*. His enemies were his cousins and he could not other them. Unbeknown to him, one valiant and noble enemy, Karna, was his half-brother. The dramatic irony lies in the fact that the reader knows that he has to other his own brother. Arjuna became despondent and let slip his bow. It took all of Krishna's powers of persuasion and argument to urge and to coax Arjuna to fight. And the Pandava victory enveloped the victors in gloom, for it was a Pyrrhic victory.

The behaviour of the main characters of the *Ramayana* is imbued with qualities such as love, sacrifice, renunciation, obedience, loyalty, dutifulness and so on. However, in their dealings with Others, the main characters are selfish, brutal, hasty, devious, avaricious, unjust and opportunistic. These dealings are represented as courageous, valiant, discreet and inevitably necessary. This is because the Others do not count. They are Others. They are evil. They have to be destroyed and the end justifies the means.

In Valmiki's time, internecine warfare between powerful Aryan tribes was a thing of the past. Prosperous kingdoms and tribal principalities were flourishing in North India. The kings were powerful. The priests were prosperous. The lower castes were kept in their place to labour for the higher castes. There was order. There was enforced submission to authority. Texts such as the *Ramayana* helped to nurture such compliance. Hanuman is glorified for his subservience and colossal labours and his willingness to serve.

How could Indian kings (and poets) not have been inspired by the imperial exploits of Cyrus the Great of Persia (558-530 B.C.) whose Persian Empire stretched from Syria to the northwest border of India or, later, by Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.) who dreamed of world conquest and who swept through northern India as far as the Punjab? Imperial designs must have been in the air:

> By the 6th century B.C., Buddhist sources named sixteen major kingdoms and tribal oligarchies in North India, from Kamboja in Afghanistan to Anga in Bengal. The most powerful of these *mahajanapadas* ("great tribal regions") were Magadha and Kosala, the former commanding the eastern Gangetic plain south of the Ganga, the latter controlling the domain slightly to the west and north of the great river artery of Aryan settlement and trade. (Wolpert, 2004, p. 46.)

About two centuries later, North India was unified under its first imperial ruler, Chandragupta Maurya (reign, 324-301 B.C.):

> Chandragupta spent the last quarter century of his life in consolidating his grip over all North India, extending Magadha's power to the Indus and beyond. (Wolpert, 2004, p. 57)

The *Ramayana* is just right for the times. It captures the spirit of the times. It also supplies a foretaste of things to come. It was only two generations later that Asoka, Chandragupta Maurya's grandson, headed towards South India on a conquering spree and then established benign rule in vanquished areas with the help of a new religion, Buddhism. The oft-quoted lines from Joseph Conrad from *Heart of Darkness* will bear repetition here:

> The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to… (Conrad, 1972, p.7)

The *Ramayana* too is sustained by an idea. The idea is that other people live in darkness and disorder. Evil Others are deemed to need total annihilation and alien ways of life are shown to be lawless. It is incumbent on a powerful king to go on a conquering mission and to establish order and to enforce compliance with the imperial law. This is very much a colonial enterprise. The obligation is openly and unabashedly stated in the *Ramayana* itself (IV, XIII, p. 346.) and is discussed in Chapter VI.

It was Alexander the Great who instituted the novel policy of handing over responsibility to subject races. He re-instated the defeated Paurava king who had ruled part of the Punjab as his viceroy (Rawlinson, H.G., 1965, p. 60). At a time when travel and communication over vast distances was slow and cumbersome and bureaucratic control of the periphery from the centre of an empire was unwieldy and impractical, this was a shrewd innovation which could be touted as generosity and idealism. The handing over of power to Sugriva and Vibishana by the all conquering Rama anticipates Alexander's action.

Beneath the thin veneer of doing unsolicited good is the desire for conquest. Aggression is the mark of this desire for conquest. Royalty had a place in the social organization of North India and conquest was the destiny as well as the duty of kings. The expanse of land in the South must have seemed to be waiting to be conquered.

The impression created by the *Ramayana* is that the principal diversion of the Others, whose abodes were South of the centres of civilization in North India, was to harass ascetics and Brahmans. At the time Valmiki's *Ramayana* was composed, not many Brahmans had ventured as far South as Tamil territory. They had sufficient patronage under the Hindu kings of North India. They would be tempted to come south later, in the second half of the first millennium and in the second millennium of the Christian era, pushed by the ascendancy of Moslem rulers in the North and pulled by the rising power and patronage of South Indian kings. Kings and warriors from the North India had not invaded the South in Valmiki's time. In any case no North Indian king ever succeeded in conquering all of South India. Even the great Mauryan ruler Asoka (who reigned from 269 B.C. to 232 B.C.) did not conquer the southernmost parts of India. His rock edicts were inscribed only as far south as Mysore (Rawlinson, 1965, p. 75).

However, monks of the heretical religions, Buddhism and Jainism, must have penetrated to the deep South at least by the 3rd century B.C. because they (by and large Jain monks) were well established in cave hermitages in all parts of Tamil country by the 2nd century B.C. and could count numerous royal patrons, wealthy benefactors and local converts among their disciples. Several Jain cave hermitages of that age are scattered over a wide area in Tamil territory.

SOUTH INDIA AND ITS INHABITANTS IN VALMIKI'S TIME

The Jain monks did not come to an unpeopled land or to a benighted land in South India. They must have followed the beaten track from town to town or village to village. They were certainly not devoured by cannibals or harassed by demons. The locals, no doubt, would have striven valiantly to retaliate if an invading army had encroached upon their land but they were hospitable to genuine visitors. The inhabitants of South India close to Valmiki's time were humans and they were not all yokels and bumpkins.

Until the 20th century A.D. it was thought that the Tamils did not have writing before the modern Tamil script was developed by the Pallavas in the 7th century A.D. This was puzzling because a body of literary works from the 1st century A.D. was known and these works referred to a rich literary tradition and a civilization that stretched to still earlier centuries. Much of this was dismissed as myth.

During the 20th century, rock inscriptions in Tamil were discovered (or perhaps rediscovered) in two different scripts in various parts of South India, mainly in Tamil Nadu. One script (now called Tamil-Brahmi) was used from the late 3rd century B.C. or the early 2nd century B.C. to the 4th century A.D. and the other script (now called Vatteluttu—literally round lettering) was used from about A.D. 400 to the 6th century A.D. The reading and decipherment of these inscriptions during the 20th century brought to light the story of nearly a whole millennium in the life of the Tamils and corroborated details from literary sources. The findings were confirmed by numismatic and archaeological evidence. The endeavours of numerous scholars resulted in these brilliant achievements, which are not as well known as the spectacular discoveries of the cities of the Harappan/Indus civilization or James Prinsep's decipherment of the Asokan pillar and rock inscriptions in a Brahmi script and in a middle Indo-Aryan language (that is, in one of several Prakrit languages).

The eminent epigraphist Iravatham Mahadevan has discussed 20 inscriptions in Early Vatteluttu from 11 cave sites. The inscriptions range from the startlingly unusual to the expected: One inscription is on a boulder jutting from the bed of a river in Kerala State (that is, outside the present border of Tamil Nadu State). The inscription records the existence of a dam across the river. The dam is no more, but the inscription has withstood centuries of weathering and is often submerged when the water level in the river is high. A matchless find is the inscribed stone stopper used for plugging the vent in a sluice—such stoppers may not have been uncommon but an inscribed stopper is. Unusual are the inscribed and illustrated memorial stones erected by villagers in honour of fighting cocks—the finds in two different sites corresponds to literary evidence that cock-fighting was a popular sport in the Tamil countryside. More usual are the many inscriptions on the walls of cave shelters, on hero stones erected as memorials to heroes, on rocky outcrops and on a rock cut shrine (Mahadevan, 2003, pp. 27-33).

Of greater interest are the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions. Mahadevan has studied a total of 89 inscriptions in 30 cave sites. Of these, 18 sites contain inscriptions that belong to the Early Tamil-Brahmi category (2nd century B.C. to the 1st century A.D.) It is remarkable that two sites are separated by about 400km.—Marukaltalai is in the far

south and Jambai lies to the southwest of Chennai (Madras). Surely, there must be other yet undiscovered sites in between and elsewhere. About the discovery of the inscription in the Jambai cave, Mahadevan has this to say: "… is exceptionally well preserved as it is engraved on the rear rock wall deep inside the cave. Selvaraj, a young trainee student in The Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology, stumbled on the inscription in October 1981 during a routine field survey" (Mahadevan, 2003, p.23). It is noteworthy that 26 sites are concentrated in the Madurai region.

It is worth pointing out that the inscriptions are on rough stone surfaces and in most cases have been weather beaten and, in a few cases, even vandalized. A dot above a consonant in the Tamil script is a vital mark and was missed by the early discoverers, who mistook the mark for pockmarks in the rock. This was one of the many factors that contributed to initial difficulties and errors in decipherment, and the obstacle was overcome when the sites were revisited and more accurate observations were made. Mahadevan has isolated a total of 307 word stems from the 89 Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions from 30 sites. He reports that 213 stems are Dravidian, 81 Indo-Aryan and 13 of doubtful etymology (Mahadevan, 2003, pp. 103-104). The language of the inscriptions is Tamil. What is pertinent is that the statistics do not give an indication of the kind of vocabulary borrowing from Prakrit into Tamil, but Mahadevan's close examination of the loanwords does. "The Indo-Aryan loanwords are all nouns. Apart from personal names, the vocabulary comprises mostly religious or cultural terms." The frequency of occurrence of the Dravidian words is higher than that of the loanwords (Mahadevan, 2003, p. 109).

So the Tamils had a language as well as a script in the early 2nd century B.C. if not the late 3rd century B.C. and their language, like most other languages, could accommodate and acclimatize and be enriched by loanwords from an alien language—the Prakrit of the Jains. It is a mark of the resilience and sturdiness of Tamil that, though it has undergone changes over two millennia, the difference between old Tamil and modern Tamil is not very great. Old Tamil can be understood today with a little effort and study on the part of a Tamil speaker. The gulf is not as great as that between Old English and current English. The hospitality with which the Tamil language welcomed Prakrit loanwords is a reflection of the hospitality with which the Tamil people received the Jain missionaries and their religion.

A warm reception and generous munificence was extended by chieftains, kings and merchants of Tamil territory to Jain monks. Jain influence came to Tamil territory from Magadha in North India through Karnataka. Many of the later Jain monks were locals who converted to the new faith. Not only the affluent but even the ordinary people were generous and must have been devout. Mahadevan cites the relevant inscription in the case of a collective gift of a hermitage by the people of a village—the cave shelter designated 'B' in Sittannavasal (Mahadevan, 2003, p. 27).

Until about 100 years ago, nothing was known about these more or less 2,000 year old Tamil inscriptions in Tamil-Brahmi and Vatteluttu scripts on stone. Until about 50 years ago, nothing was known about the equally old inscriptions in Tamil in the Tamil-Brahmi script on pottery. A vast number of inscribed pottery shards in 20 excavated or explored sites in all parts of Tamil Nadu have been found since the fist were discovered in Arikamedu between 1941 and 1944. Various methods of dating

can be used to date pottery, and so pottery dating is remarkably accurate. The evidence from the pottery shards corroborates evidence from inscriptions on stone. A few shards with inscriptions in the Vatteluttu script have been found. A very small number of these inscriptions are in Prakrit languages. However, the vast majority of pottery inscriptions are in Tamil and in the Tamil-Brahmi script.

What is noteworthy is that shards with Tamil inscriptions in Tamil-Brahmi have also been found at Quseir al-Qadim and Berenike, the sites of ancient Roman settlements on the Red Sea coast of Egypt (Mahadevan, 2003, p. 61). At last, the references in ancient Tamil literature to foreign trade with the Romans and foreign merchant settlements in the Tamil country were declared to be fact and not fiction. Another remarkable fact is that the inscribed shards have been found over a large area of the Tamil country—from Kanchipuram in the north to Korkai about 500km away in the south and from Poompuhar in the east to Poluvampatti about 300km away in the west. They have been found not only in urban and commercial centres such as Karur, Madurai and Uraiyur and ports such as Korkai and Arikamedu but also in hamlets such as Alagarai and Poluvampatti. Moreover, the inscriptions are secular in nature (Mahadevan, 2003, p. 52).

These facts can only mean one thing as has been pointed out by Mahadevan—literacy was widespread among all strata of society over a wide territory and not confined to a ruling political or religious elite. And the reason for this, argues Mahadevan, is that the Tamil country, unlike Upper South India, was then politically independent of the empires of North India. An alien language, Prakrit, was not adopted by an alien bureaucracy or an alienated local bureaucracy that had monopolized learning. Other reasons put forward by Mahadevan for widespread literacy in the Tamil country include the following: the presence of a strong bardic tradition in the Tamil country; the absence of a priestly hierarchy in early Tamil society, which, like a political elite, might have monopolized learning; a strong tradition of local autonomy as attested by the operation of self-governing village councils (these, known as *ambalam, potiyil* and *manram,* were constituted before the Sanskrit term *panchayat* was imported) and also attested by merchant guilds known as *nigama* (Mahadevan, 2003, pp.160-163).

Inscribing on pottery seems to have ceased in the 3rd century A.D. Until about 25 years ago, pottery shards were the only objects known to have Tamil inscriptions in the Tamil-Brahmi script. Then suddenly, inscribed coins, seals and rings from about two millennia ago came to light. Let Mahadevan tell us the rest of the story:

> The situation has changed dramatically since then and a virtual numismatic revolution has taken place in Tamil Nadu with the discovery of a flood of coins, seals and rings with Tamil-Brahmi legends. These have been discovered mostly from the dry bed of the river Amaravathi at Karur, the ancient Cera capital (3). Footnote 3: I visited Karur for field study in March 1991. I was amazed to see in the glass cases of jewellery shops in the town hundreds of coins, mainly of the Ceras of the Cankam age, not known earlier. I was told that all of them had been picked up from the river bed. I walked along the dry bed of the river Amaravathi and could see several small groups of tribals digging shallow pits in the sand and panning for coins and gold pieces. On an impulse, I asked one of them to dig at a point chosen by me at

> random. A shallow circular pit was dug to a depth of one metre when water level was reached. Out of the pit came, in the next few minutes, a square copper coin of the Cera dynasty, a Roman copper coin and a gold ring made of wire! (Mahadevan, 2003, p. 50.)

An ancient silver seal and lead coins from South India have also been found in North and South Sri Lanka (Mahadevan, 2003, p. 50). The earliest coins among those found so far are Pandyan coins from the 2nd century B.C. (Mahadevan, 2003, p. 62).

In brief, the people of the early 2nd century B.C. in South India had a language and a script and widespread literacy and a monetary system and they traded with foreigners, according to palaeographic evidence from caves, rocks, pottery shards and coins.

The South Indians of that time also had social order and occupations (other than harassing or devouring characters in the *Ramayana*). We learn that traders in cloth, salt, oil, ploughshares, unrefined sugar and gold are mentioned in stone inscriptions in Alagarmalai and Pugalur. Two inscriptions at Mankulam refer to merchant guilds. An inscription at Mankulam refers to a superintendent of pearl fisheries and one at Alargarmalai to a chief of scribes who was also an accounts keeper. The place name Pakanur mentioned in an inscription in Kongarpuliyankulam probably means village of mahouts. A goldsmith is mentioned as one of the donors in an inscription in Alagarmalai and a mason, a master mason and a carpenter are mentioned in inscriptions from Kongarpuliyankulam, Pillaiyarpatti and Mamandu respectively. An inscription at Varichiyur refers to an endowment of paddy to the Jain monks (Mahadevan, 2003, pp. 141-142). Various ancient kings, princes and chieftains known only from literary works until a century ago are also mentioned in various inscriptions (Mahadevan, 2003, pp. 115-122).

Moreover, there were, among the people of ancient South India, artists capable of exercising their creative faculty and producing beautiful works of art that must have engendered aesthetic appreciation and been inspired by such appreciation. A rare and exquisite object found accidentally in Karur in 1990 is a gold ring with an amorous couple engraved on an oval flat face. Fortunately it was photographed and also seen by experts, who have assigned it to the 2nd century A.D. It has, most unfortunately, since disappeared "into the 'underground' art market" (Mahadevan, 2003, p. 158). The artwork has been described as follows by R. Nagaswamy:

> The absolutely perfect proportions of the figure, the concept of symmetry as delineated in the legs, face and body, the flowing limbs, the composition and use of space, the remarkably agreeable contours, mark this as one of the most outstanding pieces of Indian art. (Nagaswamy, 1995, pp. 66-69)

This one outstanding example of an anonymous engraver's art surely allows us to surmise that there may have been others from the same and other hands. We do not know whether some are still waiting to be found or have been melted down long ago.

The ancient Tamils also produced literature. A body of ancient Tamil literary works known as *Sankam (Cankam)* literature has been assigned to the first three centuries of the Christian era after much study, discussion and controversy. Evidence from the

cross references to poets and patron-kings in the texts themselves, the linguistic and stylistic evidence in the texts, references in Roman and Greek texts and epigraphic, archaeological and numismatic evidence have helped in the dating. The term '*Sankam* literature' was first used in the 7th century A.D. The term *'Sankam'* means academy, fraternity or community and the poet, translator, folklorist and Professor of Linguistics A. K. Ramanujan calls it a spurious term because it is not justified by history but by poetic practice (Ramanujan, 1994, p. 115).

The common fraternal poetic practice that Ramanujan refers to was a complex set of conventions used for about three centuries by poets scattered widely over the Tamil country. Such a commonly and widely accepted and mature practice bespeaks a long tradition of literary effort. There is a belief among the Tamils that there were two earlier *Sankams* and that their poetry was lost in a Great Flood. Ramanujan feels that these beliefs arise from the notion that the texts that have survived come "from a long and lost tradition of poetic composition" (Ramanujan, 1994, p. 99).

What has survived of early Tamil literature consists of eight anthologies of lyrics, ten long poems and a grammar called *Tolkappiyam*. The collections are differentiated, according to their content, into *akam* and *puram* poems. *Akam* poems deal with the inner world and *puram* poems deal with the outer world—the terms literally mean "inner portion" and "outer portion". Five of the eight anthologies contain *akam* poems while the other three anthologies and the longer poems deal with the outer world. One of the *puram* anthologies, *Paripatal*, is the only one that deals with religious matters. The conventions for each category are distinctive, though a poet could write in both modes. The traditions must have been long and strong for some 500 *Sankam* poets to share it.

Convention allows *puram* poetry to name real persons and places and events and is about good and evil, important persons, the community, the kingdom, wars, death, poverty and prosperity. "The poem is placed in a real society and given a context in history" (Ramanujan, 1994, p. 101):

> "The love of man and woman is taken as the ideal expression of the 'inner world', and *akam* poetry is synonymous with love poetry in Tamil. Love in all its variety—love in separation and in union, love before and after marriage, in chastity and in betrayal—is the theme of *akam*." (Ramanujan, 1994, p. 104.)

The landscape is divided into five ecotypes and each is symbolically associated with certain periods of the day and certain times of the year as well as with certain flora, fauna, food, occupations, music and with a particular phase of love. Thus lovers' union is associated with the mountains, arid land with separation, patient waiting with the forests, anxious waiting with the seashore and a lover's infidelity and the beloved's resentment with pastoral land. Persons and places should not be named in *akam* poetry and the persons treated in the poems are few in kind: the hero, the heroine, the hero's friend(s) or messenger(s), the heroine's friend, the mistress or concubine and the passer-by. Ramanujan points out that the rigid-seeming conventions are anything but stifling:

> The poet's language is not only Tamil; the landscapes, the personae, the appropriate moods, all become a language within language. Like a native speaker, he makes 'infinite use of finite means', to say with familiar words what has never been said before; he can say exactly what he wants to, without even being aware of the ground-rules of his grammar. If the world is the vocabulary of the poet, the conventions are his syntax. (Ramanujan, 1994, p. 114)

Ramanujan describes the distinctive characteristics of early Tamil poetry thus:

> In their antiquity and in their contemporaneity, there is not much else in any Indian literature to equal these quiet and dramatic Tamil poems. In their values and stances, they represent a mature classical poetry: passion is balanced by courtesy, transparence by ironies and nuances of design, impersonality by vivid detail, leanness of line by richness of implication. These poems are not just the earliest evidence of the Tamil genius. The Tamils, in all their 2,000 years of literary effort, wrote nothing better. (Ramanujan, 1994, p. 115.)

Here are three *Sankam* poems, one *akam* poem and two *puram* poems, translated into English by Ramanujan, which display—within their compact contours—suggestiveness, emotion, action, placidity, immediacy and timelessness:

WHAT HE SAID

What could my mother be
to yours? What kin is my father
to yours anyway? And how
did you and I meet ever?
But in love our hearts are as red
earth and pouring rain:
mingled
beyond parting.

(Poem 40 by Cempulappeyanirar from the anthology *Kuruntokay*) (Ramanujan, 1994, p. 17.)

WHAT A HERO'S MOTHER SAID

You stand against the pillar
of my hut and ask me:
where is your son?

I don't really know.
My womb is only a lair
For that tiger.
You can see him now
Only in battlefields.

(Poem 87 from the anthology *Purananuru*) (Ramanujan, 1994, p. 101.)

THE KING IN COMBAT

With the festival hour close at hand
his woman in labour
a sun setting behind pouring rains

the cobbler with a needle in his hand
is in a frenzy of haste
stitching thongs for the cot of a king:

Such was the swiftness
of the Great Cola's tackles,
an *atti* garland round his neck,
as he wrestled with the enemy
come all the way
to take the land.

(Poem 82 from the anthology *Purananuru*) (Ramanujan, 1994, p. 102.)

It is worth noting that one *Sankam* poet was a Sri Lankan—Eelaththup Pothaththevanar (Thamilverl, 2005, pp. 17-19).

Thus the ancient South Indians had division of labour and skilled workers and merchants and officials and guilds and artists and poets and religious minded persons, and chieftains and kings, and they point to civil organization and order and an appreciation of aesthetic creations. These people established trade relations with foreign countries. Their allusions to foreigners in the literary texts are matter of fact and not tainted with hatred borne of fear and ignorance. Their world was not narrow, their horizons were wide.

Today, hardly anyone would disagree that every person has a 'culture'—the culture of the community to which he or she belongs. 'Civilization' is merely a more complex and larger development of culture, and there should be no value-judgments attached to these words. Stuart Piggott defines civilization thus:

> We should surely not be far from the mark if we thought of civilized societies as those which worked out a solution to the problem of living in a relatively permanent community, at a level of technological and societal development above that of the hunting band, the family farmstead, the rustic self-sufficient village or the pastoral tribe, and with a capacity for storing information in the form of written documents or their equivalent. Civilization, like all human culture at whatsoever level, is something artificial and man-made, the result of making tools (physical and conceptual) of increasing complexity in response to the enlarging concepts of community life developing in men's minds (Piggott, 1965, p. 7).

Even today, there are people who choose to live or happen to live in patterns of culture that cannot be described as civilized because they lack sufficient bulk and

complexity. They are vestiges of patterns of culture that preceded civilization. One pattern is 'savagery' and the other is 'barbarism'. 'Savagery' is the pattern of culture followed by people who live in woods and forests—that is, by hunter-gatherers. The word is derived from *silva*, a wood, in Latin. 'Barbarism' is the pattern of culture followed by agriculturalists and herders. The word is derived from the Greek *barbaroi* meaning *barbarophoni* and referred to alien people on the frontiers of the Greek world, who followed pastoral and agricultural practices and who spoke incomprehensible languages that went 'bar! bar!' The Greeks knew what they meant by barbarians says the archaeologist and anthropologist Glyn Daniel and adds the following wry comment:

> The barbarians whom the Greeks met had many things in common—they were illiterate, they didn't live in towns, some of them were nomadic and drank mare's milk, and some of them, surprisingly, wore trousers. But their worst crime was that they didn't speak Greek—and that showed clearly how barbarian they were. (Daniel, 1968, p. 33)

Professor Clyde Kluchohn's criterion for identifying a society as civilized is that the society must have any two at least of the following three: towns upward of 5,000 people, a written language and monumental ceremonial centres. (Kluckhohn, 1960, no pagination available.)

Tamil society of the 2nd century B.C. was civilized if we apply the above criterion to it. Enough evidence exists to show that these ancient Tamils had a written language. The palaeographic information in Tamil-Brahmi reveals that there were Pandyan kings ruling from Madurai from the early 2nd century B.C. (Mahadevan, 2003, pp. 115-116.) The fact that there are 26 cave sites in the Madurai region with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions is significant. The urban centre of Madurai must have had a population of well over 5,000 to be able to support so many monastic cave shelters besides having the distinction of being a regal capital.

This civilization could not have appeared suddenly. The evolution of civilization in the Tamil country must have been gradual and not the result of some sudden, astonishingly catalytic event. Civilized society must have been evolving autochthonously for several centuries before the early 2nd century B.C. What Jonathan Mark Kenoyer has said of the evolution of the Indus Valley civilization applies to all ancient urban civilizations. First there are scattered village settlements and nomadic camps. Then various crafts are invented and there is exchange of goods between regions. It is only then that there is an integration of regional cultures and the development of cities (Kenoyer, 2005, p. 25). Civilization evolves slowly though, at times, there may be growth spurts and accelerated developments. Thus, we can extrapolate from the second century B.C. and estimate that the South Indians could not have been brutal and monstrous three centuries earlier about the time the *Ramayana* was composed.

The Pandyan dynasty was not the only dynasty in South India mentioned in Tamil epigraphic and literary sources. The Cera dynasty and the Chola dynasty are also mentioned. Madurai was not the only centre of urban civilization. There was Karur, the capital of the Cera kings and the ports of Tondi, Muciri, Arikamedu and Alagankulam.

There was trade with Sri Lanka and the Roman Empire. An uncivilized people could not have traded with foreigners in the kind of merchandise that the ancient Tamils imported and exported in great quantities. Wine sealed in amphorae and gold were imported from the Roman Empire, and pearls, pepper, ginger, rice, sandalwood, precious stones, incense, ceramics, glass and stone beads and textiles were exported. The Greek words for rice, pepper, ginger and cinnamon are loanwords from Tamil. The English word 'rice' comes from the French 'ris' from the Italian 'ris' from the Latin 'ris' from the Greek 'oruza' from the Tamil 'arisi' (Rawlinson, 1965, p. 178). Judging from the gold Roman coins unearthed in Tamil territory we know that the trade was substantial and that meticulous records must have been kept.

Roman ships called at seaports on the west and east coasts of South India. Lionel Casson, an expert on ancient Greco-Roman ships, has identified the ship represented on a piece of broken pottery unearthed in the port city of Alagankulam in 1996-1997 as a three-master sailing ship used from the 1st to the 3rd century A.D., the largest type of Greco-Roman merchantmen used on the strenuous voyage to India and back. Though only the stern of the ship is seen on the shard, enough fine details are found on it such as steering oars, stern-mast and its rigging, mainmast and latticed bulwark for identification (Casson, 1997).

Roberta Tromber, who has taken part in excavations in Berenike, Quseir-al-Qadim and other sites in Egypt has this to say about Indo-Roman trade which flourished in the 1st century A.D.:

> At present, the evidence suggests that during the period in question south India was of main importance to the trade with Egypt. Both the west and east coasts appear to have played an important role but further evidence, from both India and Egypt, is needed to refine our understanding of the routes and mechanisms employed, and on-going work at both Berenike and Myos Hormos has much to contribute to this debate. (Tromber, 2000, pp.624-631.)

Arikamedu in Tamil Nadu was an important port city from which goods were sent to the Mediterranean. Excavations at Arikamedu by Vimala Begley and other archaeologists have shown that the port flourished not only during the first two centuries of the Christian era as estimated earlier but was founded much earlier—in the 3 rd century B.C.—and was a maritime trading centre with Mediterranean contacts even before the period of Indo-Roman trade (Begley, 1983, pp. 461-481).

Long before the Indo-Roman trade, South India traded with the Mediterranean. Ophir mentioned in the Bible is believed to be Sopara on the west coast of the Deccan and the source of timber and precious stones imported by Hiram, king of Tyre, for king Solomon's temple. Ivory, apes and peacocks were also imported from India; the Hebrew word for peacock is a loanword from Tamil (The Bible. I Kings x, 22 and II Chronicles, ix, 21).

This detailed account of the land and people of South India a little after the time the *Ramayana* was composed shows that the land was populated by a people with an advanced cultural pattern, which must have been gradually evolving from long before Valmiki's time and which is contrary to much that is represented in the text. South India could not have been awash with cannibals, monkeys and demons in

Valmiki's time, judging from the ancient foreign trade and the evolution of a civilized society.

'Tamil' and 'Dravidian' are not synonyms. Kannada and Telugu are Dravidian languages spoken by large sections of the Dravidian people and have as long a history of oral literature as Tamil. However, a script was not adopted for these languages until almost a millennium after one was adopted for Tamil. Written literary compositions in Karnataka and Andhra were confined to Prakrit and practiced by the elite because of greater North Indian influence in Upper South India (Mahadevan, 2006, pp. 160-161).

NORTH INDIA AND ITS INHABITANTS IN VALMIKI'S TIME

North India was a region of numerous kingdoms about Valmiki's time (and these will be described in a while). The dominant groups there called themselves Aryans. The Aryans loom large in the *Ramayana*; the first set of Others in the *Ramayana* are the non-Aryans of North India and the second set of Others are the non-Aryans of South India and Sri Lanka.

Since it is the contention of this writer that the Aryans came to North India around 2,000 B.C. and came in more than one expedition spread over a period of time and spread over an extensive region, a brief history of the local inhabitants prior to the coming of the Aryans will be useful.

In the early twentieth century, the pre-Aryan history of North India was equated with the account of the Indus Valley civilization. But since then, numerous scholars have studied even earlier human societies in the area of the Indus civilization, often located at the very same sites on which Indus cities arose later, and we now realize that the Indus civilization was built on the cultural inheritance from those earlier societies. As pointed out already, ancient urban civilization did not spring up suddenly—it was based on earlier cultures.

Flood plains are appropriately named, and the Indus flood plains were subject to the accumulation of silt, and the river itself, with the passage of time, shifted its course due to silting. Thus, over several centuries, the Indus settlements and cities were rebuilt from time to time on higher and higher strata. Therefore, archaeologists have been able to study the changes in the sites over several centuries and identify distinct phases, continuity in culture or discontinuity in culture and to assign dates to the different phases and developments.

The Indus civilization has now been studied for more than eighty years by a large and distinguished list of archaeologists, philologists, paleo-biologists, historians and others aided by such modern techniques as radiocarbon dating and thermo-luminescence dating. The discovery of over 1,000 sites of large urban centres and smaller settlements spread over an area of over 68,000 kilometres in Northwestern South Asia, which flourished between about 2,600 and 1,900 B.C., was followed by excavation and intensive study of many of these sites by numerous scholars and specialists, so that the following information taken mainly from Gregory Possehl (Possehl, 2002, pp. 23-99) and Nayanjot Lahiri (Lahiri, 2002, pp. 2-5), is well known.

The Indus civilization was similar in some ways and notably different in other ways to the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations, with which it was contemporaneous. The Indus people do not seem to have had a taste for monumental objects or monumental architecture or monumental sculpture. Unlike the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians, they did not build large and magnificent palaces, temples or tombs. The rich and the famous were not buried with valuable articles and materials. There is hardly any evidence in their art or artifacts for military conflicts or martial

exploits. As Kenoyer points out, subsistence, occupations and technology may be dictated by the environment, but religious beliefs, burial customs and social and political organizations arise from various choices made by the people. And the Indus people made distinctive choices (Kenoyer, 2005, pp. 15-17) . Kenoyer explains the distinctive features in the Indus civilization thus:

> These distinctive features can be attributed to the fact that the Indus cities evolved from local cultures that had roots extending back thousands of years to the earliest farming and pastoral communities. (Kenoyer, 1991, p. 331-385.)

The Indus cities seem to have been well planned and well built, and there was a common system of writing, a common system of weights and measures and common building and trading practices over a vast region. Trade networks were both regional and foreign. The cities were protected. Jewellery made of gold, silver, precious stones, beads and shells, tools made of bronze as strong as steel and painted pottery are among the many material objects that have been discovered at the Indus sites. The people seem to have been technological innovators and developers, especially in architecture and in water management.

The Indus civilization was an integrated culture until about 1,900 B.C. From then onwards it disintegrated. The settlements did not disappear overnight but continued to exist without the earlier regional and overseas communication networks and without the earlier wealth and prosperity. Writing was forgotten through disuse.

We do not know who the rulers of the cities were. They may have been one or a group of leading merchants, landowners or priests. We do not know what the Indus civilization's social and political organizations were like, but we can be sure that there was organization and efficiency because some of the cities were large, were well supplied with water and had waste and sewage disposal systems. Until the writing on some 3,700 objects discovered so far in about sixty sites is deciphered, we can only conclude that an indigenous people were responsible for the Indus civilization. What their relationship was to the people of Mesopotamia or the rest of South Asia we cannot say.

We do not know who these people were but we can infer that they were a dark-skinned, flat nosed people who performed phallic worship (Shiva *linga* worship), reared cattle and lived in fortified settlements or *puras* (cities) because it was such a people that the Aryans encountered when they moved into the Sind and Punjab around 2,000B.C. The Aryan immigrants have left a record of their encounters and experiences in India in sacred Sanskrit texts preserved through a rigorous and meticulous oral tradition. From the earliest texts, the *Vedas*, we know that their chief gods were Indra, Varuna and Agni (Fire).

We learn that Indra was praised as *Purandara*, destroyer of the fortified cities of the dark-skinned *Dasas* (later, this word came to mean slaves). We learn of a city called Narmini destroyed by fire and a battle on the banks of the river Ravi at Hariyupiya, which scholars identify with Harappa. Some celebratory verses in the Vedic Texts are unambiguous and cannot be misinterpreted: "Through fear of thee the dark-coloured inhabitants fled, not waiting for battle, when, O Agni, burning brightly for

Puru (an Aryan tribe), and destroying the cities, thou didst shine" (Rig Veda VII. 5. 3); "Strike down, O Maghavan (Indra) the host of sorceresses in the ruined city of Vailasthanaka, in the ruined city of the Mahavailastha (Rig Veda I. 133. 3); "The people to whom these ruined sites belonged, lacking posts, these many settlements, widely distributed, they, O *Agni*, having been expelled by thee, have migrated to another land (Taittiriya Brahmana (II. 4,6,8) (Allchin, Bridget and Raymond, 1968, pp. 154-155). The *Rig Veda* is dated about 1,400 B.C. by Sanskrit scholars.

The literary evidence in the Sanskrit texts must be considered together with the inscriptional evidence from other countries and with the archaeological evidence. Bridget and Raymond Allchin state, "It is generally agreed that the expansion of the Indo-European languages in some way coincided with the domestication of the horse and its subsequent use with light war chariots" (Allchin and Allchin, 1968, p. 144). The horse was widespread in the Caucasus and in Central Asia at some time before 2,000 B.C. and domestication must have begun much earlier.

Inscriptional evidence for the expansion of the Indo-European languages comes from Syria, Babylon and Iran and can be dated around 1,800, 1,600 and 1,380 B.C. Archaeological evidence is sparse but not entirely lacking. Thick layers of burnt material in settlements in northern Baluchistan denote violent destruction. Intrusive elements such as copper stamp seals and copper shaft-hole axes dated about 1,800 B.C. similar to Iranian artifacts and hitherto not found on the Indian sub-continent have been discovered in southern Baluchistan. At several Indus Civilization sites in Sind including Amri, Chanhu-daro, Jhukar and Lohumjo-daro occupation is continuous, but, in the later strata, intrusive foreign artifacts of a distinct culture have been discovered. Indus Civilization artefacts belonging to the same occupational strata and period have also been discovered at some sites. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that there was intrusion if not invasion and also that a significant number of the local population must have survived the intrusion. Copper and bronze objects with Iranian parallels and of Iranian or Caucasian origin have been found in upper strata and have been dated to about 1,800 to 1,600 B.C. Many historians have concluded that Indo-Aryans lived alongside the original inhabitants in these later strata at Indus civilization sites in Sind. Similar findings that lead to similar conclusions have been found at sites in the Punjab. Findings linked to Indo-Europeans in the North West Frontier belong to later dates in the first millennium B.C (Allchin and Allchin, 1968, pp. 144-152). About the findings in the North West frontier, the Allchins have this to say: " …the outline is beginning to emerge of a series of waves of immigration from the direction of Iran during the second half of the millennium, some penetrating deep into the valleys of the northern mountains" (Allchin and Allchin, 1968, p.152).

The *Rig Veda* was composed about 1,500 B.C. though the latest portions of the text are assigned to 1,100 B.C. Its geographical focus is the Punjab and the five tributaries of the Indus in the Punjab. The western tributaries of the Indus river, the Indus itself, the Saraswati and Yamuna rivers are mentioned, and, in the later portion, the Ganga is mentioned once. The later Vedic texts, which are assigned to a period from 1,000 to 500 B.C., show an eastward shift in geographical focus to the doab of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers and later, to the Gangetic valley and then the land to the south east. This reflects a gradual push towards the east by the Sanskrit speaking people and is supported by archaeological evidence.

In 600 B.C. we approach a time when more and more historical evidence becomes available. We also approach a time that is close to Valminki's time. Since the focus of this thesis is the *Ramayana* and since it names and describes numerous kingdoms in North India, it is essential to find out when kingdoms first emerged in North India. The *Ramayana* is, among other things, a story of kings and kingdoms and conquest.

It was only after 600 B.C. that a new urban civilization was born in North India in the Ganga and Yamuna river valleys. Scholars believe that different groups of Indo-Aryans who came to the Indus Valley in the second millennium B.C. moved east to establish settlements, then cities, then kingdoms and empires. The process took over a thousand years.

The Indo-Aryans borrowed technologies, building practices, artistic symbols and aspects of social organization from the Indus Civilization people (Kenoyer, 1989, pp. 183-192 and 1994, pp. 141-157). It can be assumed that they must have also borrowed technologists, architects, artists and artisans. The Indo-Aryans not only borrowed but also left behind, in the upper strata of the Indus sites, evidence of their own distinctive cultural contribution to the local culture.

The earlier notion that the Indo-Aryans came as a well organized and mammoth army and destroyed the Indus sites in one fell swoop is no longer acceptable. However, the notion now gaining ground that the Indo-Aryans are the aboriginal inhabitants of North India and that they even created the Indus civilization errs, according to this thesis, in the opposite direction. The Indian archaeologist B.B. Lal has dismissed the notions that the Aryans came to India from outside and that non-Aryans were responsible for the Indus Civilization as false hypotheses (Lal, 2002, pp. 83-94; Lal, 2007). The anthropologists Kenneth Kennedy and Edmund Leach are two of the many scholars who agree with him; other scholars, for example P.R. Deshmukh, Michael Witzel and R. Meadow disagree. Lahiri says, of the diverse readings on the subject edited by her, that they "…do not offer any *definite* answers. But they do remind us that what applies to most historical debates—there always remains a *for* and an *against,* and perhaps to bring the two into a stable equilibrium is not even possible—also holds true for the end of India's first cities" (Lahiri, 2002, p. 29).

This thesis takes the position that the Indo-Aryans probably came to India from the direction of Iran. They must have gone east because the sites of the Indus civilization—perhaps for one reason or perhaps a combination of more than one reason such as flooding, desiccation, tectonic disturbances, drying up of rivers, changes in the course of rivers, ecological damage and conflict—could no longer support an urban civilization. Some of the newcomers must have stayed behind in the Indus sites. Some of the older inhabitants must have gone east with the newcomers as slaves, guides and partners. There must have been genetic mingling as well as cultural exchange. In more or less a millennium, Sanskrit speakers became politically dominant and Sanskrit became the dominant language in north India. Such dominance could not have come without military dominance.

It is pertinent to remark here that in many versions of the *Ramayana*, Ravan is depicted as either the son of a god or the son of a Brahman. Ravan is also said to be

well versed in the *Vedas* and other sacred Hindu texts. Only his mother is a demoness. What are we to make of the child of such a union? Defenders of Ravan make much of the fact that he is half-brahman—indeed they make much too much of it because they often leave out the 'half' in 'half-brahman' and go on to list his good Brahman qualities. They do not ask what inspired the author to create an evil monster and a Lord of southern regions out of the offspring of such a marital union. Valmiki may have wanted a worthy foe worthy of being defeated by Rama—the greater the foe, the greater Rama's glory—and so given Ravan some Brahman ancestry.

Or the reason may be something entirely different. I read this birth-tale of Ravan as a cautionary tale of miscegenation. It is no secret that the Aryans who settled in India encountered people of a dark-skinned race, whom they described with contempt as dasas. 'Dasa', as already pointed out, later came to mean servant/slave. Those who discredit the Aryan invasion/migration theories are wont to ask, derisively, what happened to the original people if any such had lived in North India in pre-Aryan times. Part of the answer is captured in the word 'dasa'. Some of them became slaves. Or rather, they were enslaved, for slaves are not the outcome of natural metamorphosis or the voluntary assumption of slavehood. People are turned into slaves—a very valuable commodity indeed for slave owners. Some of the original people would have been killed; some would have fled to peripheral regions; and let us not forget that some would have been absorbed by the Aryans—thus changing the genes, or 'racial purity', and the 'purity' of the language of the Aryans. These changes of course were viewed with horror as corruption.

As the centuries of early settlement rolled on, a few Brahmans would have wandered south and may have even married indigenous women of South India. Miscegenation was frowned upon by the Aryans, but rules were made anyway to deal with it because it could not be entirely prevented. If a man of an upper social group married a woman of a lower group, the children became members of the dominant group. However, if a man of a lower caste married a woman of an upper caste, the children were doomed from birth to a lower social status. The rules provided for all kinds of new sub-castes to accommodate children of mixed marriages and mixed unions between members of widely divergent castes. For example, the illegitimate child of a Brahman woman and a Sudra man would be an outcaste of the Chandala caste (Rawlinson, 1965, p. 41).

Women may deem that such rules are in their favour—they provided for the upward social mobility of women only but not of men. The flip side of the coin is that the rules also provided for gender discrimination against women. What such rules actually did was re-enforce the dominant position of men. A woman always became a member of her husband's household in a patriarchal system. The children would have been brought up as members of the father's social group but, inevitably, their speech would have been 'corrupted' by that of their mother's speech, just as their genes were 'corrupted' because half their genes would have been inherited from their mother. This is one of the many ways in which, in a bi-lingual or perhaps multi-lingual situation, Sanskrit diverged into many Prakrits.

Recent research by geneticists such as Michael Bamshad adds genetic evidence to what many archaeologists, philologists and historians believe—that the Aryans in due course intermingled with the indigenous people (Bamshad, 2001). In the light of

all this, we can see the urgent need for a cautionary tale of miscegenation such as the one about Ravan's ancestry. One moral of the tale is that miscegenation will produce evil monsters. So anyone contemplating a mixed marriage beware!

Let us now go back to North India in 600 B.C. in order to understand some of the History of the times as put together by historians in order to understand the interplay of History and cultural representation (and misrepresentation) in the *Ramayana*. After 600 B.C., prominent centres of small Aryan settlements (tribal republics and tribal kingdoms) developed into the first cities of the second phase of urbanization in North India (the first phase being the Indus urbanization). Almost all of these cities were in the central Gangetic plains, and they later became the capitals of major regional kingdoms: Rajagriha became the capital of Magadha, Varnasi of Kasi, Kausambi of Vatsa, Sravasti of Kosala and Champa of Anga; Kosala boasted a second city in Saketa, which may have been the capital of a separate kingdom that was later absorbed by Kosala; Ayodhya, the capital city that figures in *The Ramayana*, was also in Kosala. Ujjain was the capital of Avanti in central India and Taxila that of Gandhara in the northwest. Kosala and Magadha were the most prosperous and powerful kingdoms.

The cities were fortified; from about the 5th century B.C. baked bricks were used in ramparts and city walls; there were well planned networks of streets from the 4th century B.C.; punch marked coins and standardized weights were in use; around 500 B.C. a new type of black polished ceramic ware was developed. There is no evidence of writing but the Brahmi script used in the Asokan inscriptions (3rd century B.C.) must have evolved at this time. These cities were truly urban unlike the earlier centres of the Aryan settlements in the Ganga-Yamuna doab in the late Vedic period. Even Hastinapura (capital of the Kauravas in the Mahabharata) shows no evidence of fortification or of the use of bricks or of town planning.

The move eastwards (and southwards and northwards also) was punctuated by battles with aboriginal people, conquest and subjugation, for there was a highly developed chalcolithic culture in what is now modern Bihar and also in adjoining areas. There was also internecine warfare (Kulke and Rothermund, 1998, pp. 49-51).Thus the 6th century B.C. was the beginning of farther expansion principally towards the east by the Aryans, the establishment of cities and kingdoms and increasing economic, social and political power. However, it was also a time of intellectual, religious, social and political ferment. Two heretical religions—Buddhism and Jainism—were founded in the 6th Century B.C. The founders of both these religions were princes of tribal kingdoms that were later absorbed by Kosala and Magadha respectively.

A new development took place in the time of the Buddha (563 – 483 B.C.) in the kingdoms of the Gangetic plains. There was a struggle for political supremacy. There was aggression and annexation. Numerous wars conducted with success resulted in the emergence of Maghada as a leading power:

> Kosala and Magadha followed a particularly aggressive policy which was not only aimed at victory over their neighbours but at annexation of their territory as well. Bimbisara of Magadha seems to have started this struggle. During his long reign he laid the foundations for the rise of Mahgadha as the greatest power in India…Bimbisara died a miserable death; his son Ajatshatru

> imprisoned and starved him….Ajatshatru continued the aggressive policy of his father but soon suffered defeat at the hands of his uncle, the king of Koshala. But this king was soon removed by his own son, Virudhaka. Koshala and Magadha then fought against the northern tribal republics. Koshala vanquished, during the Buddha's lifetime, the tribe of the Sakhya, to which the Buddha himself belonged (Kulke and Rothermund, 1998, p. 54).

By the reign of Bimbisara (about 540-490 B.C.), Magadha was the foremost kingdom in North India. It had annexed Kosala, it controlled the eastern Gangetic trade and the Bengali kingdom of Anga came under its suzerainty.

As stated already, Cyrus, who died in 529 B.C., was the ruler of a Persian empire that came up to an area just beyond the northwestern border of India. In 518 B.C., Gandhara in northwestern India with its capital Taxila fell under the Persian control of Darius (558 – 485 B.C.) and, according to Herodotus, paid tribute in gold dust. Valmiki would have known of these imperial exploits by neighbouring foreign kings. In the meantime, Indian kings were getting stronger and richer and dreams of empire were not exactly wild, because, a few generations after Valmiki's time all of North India came under the sway of Chandragupta Maurya (reigned: 324 – 301 B.C.) and, just two generations after that, Asoka extended Mauryan rule as far south as Mysore. The centre of the Mauryan empire was Magadha. Chandragupta Maurya's contemporary Alexander the Great of Macedonia invaded India and came as far as the Punjab on his expedition to conquer the world.

We know a great deal about Chandragupta Maurya because Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador at the imperial capital at Pataliputra in Magadha spent many years in India and left an account of his experiences. Though the original is lost, extracts survive in the works of other writers. Details of life at the Magadhan court give us an idea of what life must have been like in other courts during the earlier centuries of state formation in India:

> Chandragupta, like most usurpers, went in daily fear of his life, and his unpopularity was enhanced by his oppressive government…He took elaborate precautions against assassination. He never slept twice in the same bed, and all food and drink was carefully tested in order to guard against poisoning…no methods were considered to be too unscrupulous for getting rid of enemies of the state. (Rawlinson, 1965, p. 67.)

It is in this vibrant and turbulent atmosphere that Valmiki lived and the *Ramayana* took its epic shape. We may conclude that the story itself , of Rama, is set in this time and place. The kingdoms and cities mentioned in the *Ramayana* had not arisen before the 6th Century B.C. Thus, Dasaratha and Rama, the epic kings of Kosala, who ruled from Ayodhya, could not have done so before the 6th century B.C. *The Ramayana* would not be situated in a time after the 5th century B.C. because, by then, Kosala was no longer a leading power.

Dreams of conquest and colonization are an occupational hazard of powerful kings and not just of Alexander the Great alone. The *Ramayana* is a rousing tale of things as they might have been, but were never to be, for Kosala. Expansionist dreams were

realized later to a good extent by Maghada, a rival of Kosala for leadership, but, by then, Kosala was subjugated and absorbed by its rival.

Valmiki would have known about the first set of Others mentioned in Chapter I—indigenous people of North India who had been absorbed low down in the Aryan caste system and those aboriginals who lived on the periphery of Aryan settlements. He must have also heard about the second set of Others mentioned in the introductory chapter—the indigenous people of South India and Sri Lanka.

CHAPTER VI
A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF THE *RAMAYANA*

DEMONS AND VANARS

The first time we come across Others in hordes in the *Ramayana* is during Rama's first journey away from home, which he undertook well before his celebrated fourteen year journey as an exile. Rama is now sixteen and well versed in the arts of war as becomes a warrior prince. Rama sets out from Ayodhya in the kingdom of Kosala to Mithila in the kingdom of Videha to marry the Videhan princess Sita. However, the prime purpose of the journey is to kill the demons who defile the holy rites of hermits, especially those of the great hermit-saint Visvamitra. It is at the request of Visvamitra that Rama as well as his brother Lakshman undertake this journey, during which Visvamitra is their mentor and guide. This thesis argues that these Others are the first set of Others described in Chapter I—the aboriginal people of north India.

This journey can be regarded as an initiation ceremony, a rite of passage, for Rama. It is an opportunity for him to display against demon enemies, for the first time, his valour, and to test his strength and skills in the martial arts.

Now Mithila is about 300 kilometres east of Ayodhya, and, to get there from Ayodhya, the travellers have to cross the Sarayu and the Sone, which are tributaries of the Ganga, and the Ganga itself. They pass through several kingdoms, territories, forests, woods and cities.

Visvamitra, Rama and Lakshman seem to have travelled on foot for many a day, because Sumati, the ruler of Visala, upon greeting them, asks Visvamitra, "How have they reached on foot this place?" (I, XLVIII, p. 60.) However, there are boats and barges when they cross rivers and, at one point, when they are close to the cities of Visala and Mithila, there are servants driving a hundred carts. It is not clear from where the servants appear suddenly—they are mentioned in passing and remain shadowy inconsequential figures, though their services must have been essential.

> And servants from the sacred grove
> A hundred wains for convoy drove. (I, XXXIII, p. 45.)

We are not told what the carts hold. We may conjecture that, now that the princes will visit cities in which royal personages live in palaces, an impressive retinue and various accoutrements will be needed, and that these were provided by the hermits they met on their way.

The journey is made pleasant and the main tale is embellished and made absorbing by many legends recounted by Visvamitra on the way. These legends relate to ancient and mythical happenings connected with certain places they pass through. Some of the events involve Rama's distant royal ancestors and also hermits, Gods, demi-Gods and demons. Ordinary people do not put in an appearance in these stories. They are, as the well worn phrase goes, conspicuous by their absence. Examples of

these stories within the main story are the birth and descent to earth of the river Ganga (Canto XXXI titled "The Birth of Ganga" through to Canto XLIV titled "The Descent of Ganga" of Book I) and the birth of the Goddess Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu, from the ocean when the Gods churn it in search of nectar .(Canto XLV of Book I titled "The Quest of Amrit".)

The main purpose of the journey is fulfilled in due course, when Rama puts an end to demon hordes. The most fearful of the demons is the monstrous female demon Tadaka, who is as strong as a hundred elephants, can disguise herself and assume a thousand different shapes, is adept at using magic arts and feeds on humans. She lives in a hideous and wild forest, which was once fertile land. (Cantos XXVI-XXVIII of Book I titled "The Forest of Tadaka", "The Birth of Tadaka" and "The Death of Tadaka".)

Rama also wounds Tadaka's son Maricha and kills Suvahu and a whole host of demons, who disturb the rituals of Visvamitra and other hermits in a pleasant wood. As related by Visvamitra, this is the location in which Lord Vishnu, in his reincarnation as a dwarf, killed the demon Mahabali. Thus Lord Vishnu made the land holy and lovely, and the hermitage there is known as 'The Perfect Hermitage'. It is noteworthy that Rama kills off all the demons in the vicinity on this occasion. He is aided by the spells that Visvamitra has taught him; by using these spells Rama can summon, manipulate and restrain animated, celestial weapons. These weapons have various wondrous powers and seem to be the offspring of demi-Gods. The annihilation of demons in this area is almost complete. We do not know what becomes of their numerous corpses. They must have been left to the jackals and vultures. At least one demon, the wounded Maricha, we learn, is propelled into the sea when he is felled in the air and falls from there:

> And, hurled an hundred leagues away
> In the ocean's flood he fell. (I, XXXII, p. 45.)

We have to consider two matters simultaneously. One is that there is no account of the ordinary people who populated the Gangetic plains that the travellers traverse from Ayodhya to Mithila. During this long journey, the travellers do not meet any ordinary person. Since it is a somewhat leisurely journey on foot, the chances of meeting ordinary people ought to be high. The other is that a couple of localities on the way seem to be the haunts of evil demons—and plenty of them.

The travellers seem to follow what must have been a well beaten track because they don't have to hack their way through even when they pass through woods and forests. Hermitages dot the way, where the travellers stop conveniently for the night—for rest and for performing daily rituals and, no doubt, for refreshments, though there is no mention whatsoever of the travellers being hungry or of their partaking of any food. The focus is on the princes and Visvamitra and numerous hermits in the hermitages in the woods on the way, though there is no detailed description of these holy men. The travellers may have walked briskly but the leisurely pace of the descriptions and sub-stories create the impression that they too are strolling leisurely.

The impression we get is of a beautiful and pleasant land of streams and rivers and hills and woods. It is a lush and luxuriant land. It is an expansive land. It is also a tranquil and serene land—except for the demons. It is a storied land, but the stories are all set in ancient times—in fact, thousands if not millions of years ago. Visvamitra has no harrowing tale of recent political upheavals, of espionage and of envious, avaricious and ambitious kings or of wars between the various kingdoms and annexation of territories. Neighbouring kings are portrayed as friendly and everything is pictured as being amicable. There is no mention of other wayfarers, or of people engaged in food production, wood cutting, iron smelting or any such mundane activity. There is no mention of the weather. It must have been such weather as is ideal for tramping and roaming, with no scorching sunlight, no bitter winds and no heavy rains.

There is a dearth of ordinary folk, but there is no dearth of demons. The princes meet and vanquish plenty of demons. Could these demons, who impede Rama's journey, be the creation of Valmiki? Are they the products of his imagination only? Or were there earthly models for the demons? The terms used for demons are Asurs, Yakshas and Rakshasas. The equivalent terms used in English translations are demons, fiends, monsters, titans and giants, and the terms are used interchangeably. The demons are certainly not human or divine, though some of them do seem to be of mixed demon-divine or demon-human parentage. What all of them have in common are the following characteristics, which are reiterated throughout the text: The demons are dark in colour, ugly, monstrous, physically powerful, vicious, evil and ruthless. They relish human flesh and blood. They are devious and can change their form and size at will. They are polluting and unholy because they lurk in evil forests and dart out to disturb the holy rites of priests. These characteristics, it is worth repeating here, are repeated throughout the text. The best thing you can do to demons is destroy them.

It is relevant to state here that the habit of eating human flesh, which is a characteristic of demons that Valmiki makes known, should be termed anthropophagy because his representation of the demons makes it clear that they belong to a non-human species. If the demons are, as this thesis believes, demonized Others, then the practice can be termed cannibalism—the eating of one's own species. It should be remembered though, that the word cannibal is derived from the Spanish word that Spanish colonizers coined to describe the indigenous Caribbeans. Anita Loomba reports that postcolonial research has unearthed the fact that cannibalism was at first, and on many subsequent occasions, attributed to those in the Caribbean and Mexico who were resistant to colonial intervention, and among whom no cannibalism had in fact been witnessed (Loomba, 2002, pp. 58-59).

The demons are not only widespread in the text, they are also widespread in the land. Their numbers are legion and they fill the vast land and spill over into Sri Lanka as well. Here is just one of the many descriptions of these Others with which the text is replete—these are the words of a hermit who complains to Rama about a demon and his multitude of followers:

> "For Ravan's brother, overbold,
> Named Khara, of gigantic mould,
> Vexes with fury fierce and fell
> All those in Janasthan who dwell

Resistless in his cruel deeds.
On flesh of men the monster feeds.
……
And looks with special hate on thee
Since, thou beloved son, hast made
Thy home within this holy shade,
The fiends have vexed with wilder rage
The dwellers of the hermitage." (II, CXVI, p. 225.)

We know from archaeological and historical evidence that by the time the *Ramayana* was composed, the Sanskrit people had extended their occupation from the Punjab to the Ganga-Yamuna doab and then from there to the Gangetic plains. Rama's first journey is confined to the Gangetic plains. He travels as far East as Videha (modern Bihar).

If we look at the southern and south eastern confines of Bihar today we find that the Chota Nagpur plateau is home to people classed as tribals. Indeed their homeland extends to the western parts of West Bengal, northern Orissa, Jharkhand (formerly a part of Bihar) and Chattisgharh. These tribals are also called 'adivasis', which is a Sanskrit term that means 'first inhabitants'. Their homeland spans about 35,000 miles, and about a quarter of India's tribals live here. There are about 30 different tribal groups speaking as many different languages. These are mutually incomprehensible languages and not dialects. What is pertinent is that these languages belong to the Munda (a branch of the Austroasiatic language family) and Dravidian language groups. It is remarkable that despite the advance, over many hundreds of years, of Sanskrit and its Indo-Aryan descendants, these tribals still speak Dravidian and Munda languages. For example the Gonds, Khons, Korwas, Koras and Oraons speak Dravidian languages; Santali, Mundari, Ho, Korku, Sora and Bumij are some of the Munda language spoken in the Chota Nagpur plateau. (Bookrags, 2007.)

With a few exceptions, these tribals are short, dark-skinned, curly haired and broad nosed and are different from their non-tribal neighbours. Most of the tribes live near forests and a few live in hilly areas. A few tribals still practice hunting and gathering but most are agriculturalists, and paddy is the most cultivated crop. Most of the tribals live in harmony with other tribals. Barter is still practised.

Anthropologists, archaeologists and linguists have been fascinated by the tribals of Chota Nagpur plateau. Researchers say that the region is an ancient site of continuous human habitation and that the Munda languages are autochthonous. Hand-axes and blades, and cave paintings from prehistoric, pre-Aryan times have been found in the Pathalgarwa region and in Isko village respectively. Customs differ from tribe to tribe and their social structures are distinctive and well organized. Indeed some aspects of their social structure are unique. For example, among the Oraon, who speak the Dravidian language Kurukh, it is customary for children over ten to be housed in separate dormitories—known as *dhumkuria*—for girls and boys. The girls sleep under the care of an elderly widow. Older, more experienced youth train the younger ones and teach them various skills and responsibilities. Oraon parents deem it undesirable to have older children see them sleeping together. The Santals maintain separate apartments in which the elderly are housed and cared for.

The Asurs and the Lohras are skilled blacksmiths. Researchers believe that the Asurs were India's first iron smelters and that they were driven from the Gangetic plains to the Chota Nagppur plateau (Indiasite, 2007).

It is tempting as well as reasonable to conclude that the Sanskrit speakers retained those iron smelters who were not driven away and profited from their iron technology. Iron implements played a large part in the advance and prosperity of the Sanskrit speakers in the Gangetic plains. It also contributed to the production of superior weapons and success in warfare and territorial expansion. It is also reasonable to conclude that the iron smelting Asurs who moved away were not easily subdued and may have proved to be formidable enemies. Their very survival to this day makes this conclusion compelling. Is it then not reasonable to submit to the temptation to conclude that the Asurs were one of the earthly models for the Asurs of the *Ramayana*? Is it merely a phonetic accident that the demons in the text and the dark skinned iron smelting 'natives' have the same name; is not the one a demonization of the Other?

At the time the *Ramayana* was composed, the many battles fought with dark-skinned indigenous peoples must have figured large in the folk memory of the Sanskrit people. It is quite likely that battles were still being fought. It was a continuing process that is referred to in the earliest Sanskrit text, the *Rig Veda*, as well as in the *Ramayana*. As already mentioned in the last chapter, in the earliest texts, the conquest of the indigenous people is celebrated openly, and the vanquished are described with great contempt as dark skinned slaves, who lived in imposing cities. They are not demonized. The God Indra is credited with having conquered these enemies and he is referred to as 'Purandara'—destroyer of forts/cities.

The apellation has stuck, and even in the *Ramayana*, composed many centuries after the enemies' cities were destroyed, when there were no longer enemy cities, Indra is thus referred to on several occasions (e.g. I, XLV, p. 58 and I, XLVII, p. 59). Ayodhya preparing for Rama's installation as Regent is compared to Indra's city in Heaven; here too, the appellation is the familiar one:

> The town as fair in festive show
> As his who lays proud cities low. (II, XIV, p. 108.)

Below, the poet having celebrated Rama's defeat of Khara and no less than fourteen thousand demons of Dandak forest single-handed, says how it came about. The whole Rama incarnation was undertaken at the request of the God Indra for this kind of destruction, and, here too, Indra's outstanding attribute is the familiar one:

> For this, Lord Indra, glorious sire,
> Majestic as the burning fire,
> Who crushes cities in his rage,
> Sought Sarabhanga's hermitage. (III, XXX, p. 265.)

A peculiar feature of the demons in Valmiki's text is that he makes the demons very mobile, and we learn with surprise that the demon Maricha, whom Rama wounded on his way to Videha (Bihar), helps Rama abduct Sita from Janasthan. A few demons

who escaped massacre at the hands of Rama in Janasthan later appear in Lanka. Demons popping up in widely separated terrain seem to be related—the demon Khara and the demoness Surpanakha, whom we first encounter in Janasthan, are siblings of Ravan of Lanka. Ravan of course can fly, with or without a chariot—divested of his chariot by the valiant Jatayus, Ravan flies unaided through the air with Sita. If not related by blood, Demons separated by thousands of miles of land and sea seem to be friends and acquaintances—one big family.

We can only speculate that in Valmiki's mind all the dark skinned people south of the settlements of the Sanskrit people were one and the same—undesirable unless they are tamable. Valmiki may have only heard of the indigenous inhabitants of Lanka but they seem to be equated with aboriginals nearer home (Kosala), and all such people seem worthy candidates for demonization. They are all one mass of undifferentiated Other. This massing together and denying individuality to members of alien races is characteristic of colonial discourse, which recognizes only the binary construction of 'Us' versus the evil 'Other'. In the *Ramayana*, alien communities have become homogenized. They have become the objects of knowledge asserted with certainty and finality, and this epistemological exploitation is at the heart of the exploitative relationship that is colonialism. Here is Albert Memmi's comment on stereotyping:

> Another sign of the colonized's depersonalization is what one might call the mark of the plural. The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity. (Memmi, 1965, p. 85.)

Another peculiar characteristic of the demons in the *Ramayana* is that they are said to grow in strength after dark, and there are many references to this characteristic. Repeatedly, the demons are referred to as "rovers of the night", "children of the night' and "sons of the night" by the poet, by Rama and his allies and even by the demons themselves. This last is a nice touch—the poet makes the demons collude and accept in their description. This is something postcolonial critics point out happens in real life—the defeated accept the demeaning estimations and evaluations of themselves made by their conquerors. (Epeli Hau'ofa is quoted elsewhere in this connection.)

The association of demons with the night sounds menacing and gives the demons an aura of villainy and stealth. Below are three examples—in the first, Visvamitra urges Rama to kill the demoness Tadaka before darkness sets in, in the second, Kausalya believes that Rama will not suffer at the hands of demons, who roam in the dark and, in the third, Rama speaks to Lakshman about the demons of Sri Lanka:

> "For, see the twilight hour is nigh
> And at such joints of night and day
> Such giant foes are hard to slay." (I, XXVIII, p. 41.)
>
> "Fear not, by mightier guardians screened,
> The giant or night-roving fiend." (II, XXV, p. 124.)
>
> "And those dark rovers of the night

Like shattered clouds shall turn in flight." (VI, V, p.431.)

The repeated association of demons with the night is often allied with repeated mention of their dark skin colour, as in the second quotation above. And this is often contrasted with the brightness, the golden colour and the sun-like appearance of the main characters and the sheen of their gold ornaments.

It is remarkable that the skin colour of the fiends is often contrasted with the skin colour of the main characters. The colour of the fiends is repeatedly compared to the colour of dark rain clouds and of elephants; in contrast, the skin of Rama and Sita and their kith and kin is said to be golden. Here is the poet describing Sita and Ravan on their way to Lanka:

The lady with her golden hue
O'er the swart fiend a luster threw,
As when embroidered girths enfold
An elephant with gleams of gold. (III, LII, p. 291.)

Here is the fiend Maricha describing himself, and the poet describing Ravan respectively:

"Like some vast sable cloud I showed." (III, XXXVIII, p. 273.)
Like some dark cloud the monster showed. (III, XLIX, p. 286.)

It is tempting to speculate that the tribals on the periphery of Aryan settlements mounted raids under cover of darkness and thus gained a reputation for near invincibility at night. It is tempting to surmise that indigenous people, who are ousted by settlers with superior arms, often make a habit of raiding by night; for example, the American-Indian tribes did so. The American poet H. W. Longfellow addresses the The Driving Cloud, who was a chief of the Omahas, in a poem titled "To The Driving Cloud", and in two lines encapsulates how the white settlers pushed the Indian tribes ever westwards as they settled a land that had sustained the Indians for centuries; these tribes usually attacked white settlers at night:

Ha! how the breath of these Saxons and Celts, like the blast of the east-wind,
Drifts evermore to the west the scanty smokes of thy wigwams! (Longfellow)

In the earliest Sanskrit texts, as already mentioned, the humanity of Others was not eliminated. They were merely regarded with contempt. However, in the *Ramayana*, the dark skinned people are, I believe, demonized and portrayed as demonic savages and cannibals (except for one instance, which will be mentioned farther on). These people though skilled and humane (as we can assume, for example, from the ways of their descendants in Bihar today) were not urbanized. The now urbanized Sanskrit speakers would have had greater contempt for these tribals than they had had for the urbanized 'natives' they had vanquished many centuries earlier in the Indus Valley. It must have been tempting to demonize these people.

Rama destroys the demonized Others, and the Gods themselves in heaven approve and applaud. This is what happens on Tadaka's death:

Soon as the Lord who rules the sky
Saw the dread monster lifeless lie,
He called aloud, Well done! well done!
And the Gods honoured Raghu's son.
Standing in heaven, the Thousand-eyed
With all the immortals, joying cried:
"Lift up thine eyes, O Saint and see
The Gods and Indra nigh to thee.
This deed of Rama's boundless might
Has filled our bosoms with delight." (I, XXVIII, p. 41.)

And so it goes on. The Sanskrit speakers, in their texts, have made the Gods fight for them or cheer them on. This turns aggression into a just occurrence. I think the demons were created (or rather, the tribals were transformed into demons) because they were necessary in order to justify aggression and territorial expansion. Usurpation and enslavement do not seem culpable or reprehensible acts, indeed they seem justified, if the victims are demons and not humans. If the Gods approve, why, that is an additional bonus. If the killing is transferred to Gods, then it is even much better. This demonization of the Other in order to justify aggression and conquest is a characteristic of colonial ideology.

As in the case of the destruction of Tadaka quoted above, the Gods applaud whenever demons are destroyed by Rama. "The Perfect Hermitage is made more perfect", as the poet hyperbolically states, when the place is rid of demons. (I, XXXII, p 45.) If the Gods themselves approve, then destroying demons must be a most desirable thing. It must also be just and right. This is the representation in the *Ramayana.*

Not only do the Gods cheer the royal warriors when they demolish their enemies, they (the Gods) even provide considerable material aid. In the long drawn out battle between Rama and Ravan, Indra's help turns the tide in Rama's favour. The following describes the aid Indra gives through his charioteer Matali:

"Haste, Matali" he cried, "descend;
To Raghus's son my chariot lend.
With cheering words the chiefs address
And all the Gods thy deeds will bless."
……
And (Matali) stayed the car by Rama's side.
"Ascend, O Chief" he humbly cried,
"The chariot which the God's provide.
The mighty bow of Indra see,
Sent by the Gods, who favour thee;
Behold this coat of glittering mail,
And spear and shafts which never fail." (VI, CIII, p. 491.)

The Gods and the godly are prayerful and hope earnestly for Rama's victory:

God and gandharva, sage and saint

Cried out, with grief and terror faint:
"O, may the prince of Raghu's line
Give peace to Brahmans and to kine,
And rescuing the worlds, o'erthrow
The giant king, our awful foe." (VI, CIII, p. 493.)

This effect of the mounting power of demons on Gods is noteworthy. When an Other such as Ravan remains unsubdued, there is disorder not only on earth but perturbation and disturbance even in Heaven. Social order on earth, established by the elite race, is represented as being essential for cosmic order. Ravan, as is made clear in the above quotation, is a universal enemy and disturber of peace—"our awful foe". The representation of "us" and "them" is thus sharply contrasted.

In addition, the killing of powerful demons is done by God-men or *avatars*. Just as, in the *Rig Veda*, Indra is credited with killing the enemies of the Sanskrit people and destroying enemy cities, here too the killing is done by God—with the difference that this time the God is Vishnu, and he has taken on the earthly forms of Rama and his brothers. The elimination of demons/Others is transferred to God. This will deter anyone inclined to question the killings from doing so. Some of the demons are assigned provoking actions. Ravan abducts Rama's wife; and many of the demons, according to the text, ruin the rituals of the hermits and generally molest them. However, some Others do not seem to have done anything deserving punishment except that they are simply there and merely, impertinently, exist. For example the Abhiras/Ahirs, as will be recounted in a while, only exist, look different and utilize river water, and this is enough to annoy and infuriate Ocean, who prompts Rama to kill them.

As already pointed out, the poet puts demeaning descriptions of demons and Vanars in the mouths of the narrator and of important characters as well as in the mouths of these very beings, who are portrayed as inferior and non-human. Here is the demon Vibishan, a brother of Ravan, describing his own kind:

"Within his city Lanka dwell,
Ten million giants fierce and fell,
Who wear each varied shape at will
And eat the flesh of those they kill." (VI, XIX, p. 441.)

Here is the demon spy Suka making a derogatory report about the Vanars to Ravan:

"So fickle, wrathful, rough and rude
Is the wild forest multitude." (VI, XXIV, p. 446.)

Bharat is not careful enough to be courteous to the messenger Hanuman and insults the entire Vanar kind when he addresses Hanuman as follows:

Hast thou, uncertain, like thy kind,
A sweet delusive guile designed?" (VI, CXXIX, p. 505.)

The ancestors of today's tribals in Bihar must have been present during Rama's journey to Videha (Bihar). These unsubdued Others—living in woods and forests at

the edge of the civilized world of the Sanskrit speakers—must be the models for some of the demons in the text. Their subdued kin, who served the ruling class and the priestly class and who would have been accommodated low down in the Aryan caste system are not even mentioned at this point.

It is worth stressing that the demons on Rama's way to Videha and also those he conquers in Dandak live in menacing forests and woods as must have the ancestors of the modern tribals—indeed as some of the modern tribals themselves still do. The demons do not make an appearance in the cities of the Sanskrit speakers. For example, they do not disturb the elaborate horse sacrifice performed by Rama's father in Ayodhya; neither do they appear during the ceremonies performed by king Janak in Mithila. Ravan and his cohorts are exceptional demons in that they live in a city.

In enumerating the dangers of the woods, to which Rama will be banished, the poet gives us to understand that they are the haunt and habitat of demons:

> There mighty monsters play,
> And in their maddened onset slay
> The hapless wretch who near them goes. (II, XXVIII, p. 128.)

An author has the right to select whatever material he/she is going to deal with and exclude other matters. However, the absence of ordinary people in the *Ramayana* during Rama's first journey is a gaping omission. And the appearance of fantastic demons to fill the gap seems like a ploy that has turned ordinary people into demons. The ancestors of the tribals of Bihar are suitable candidates for demonization.

If, as the poet relates, peaceful relations obtained among the various kingdoms of North India, the rigorous martial training of warriors and princes seems too much of something which is necessary for internecine warfare and the expansion of kingdoms by the conquest of neighbouring kingdoms. In the *Ramayana,* the power of the warriors and priests is used exclusively against demons, whose main diversion is to pollute the ritual of hermits. Indeed during the fourteen year absence of the rightful king, Rama, from Ayodhya, there is no uprising in Kosala; there is no invasion of the kingdom by avaricious neighbouring kings.

The one instance in the *Ramayana* where another race is not dehumanized or demonized but insulted in the most reprehensible manner and dealt with mercilessly occurs when Rama is about to cross the ocean to reach Sri Lanka. At first Rama makes ready to shoot an arrow into the ocean, dry it up and thus clear the way to Lanka. However, Ocean pacifies him and dissuades him. Thereupon Rama informs Ocean that, once his bow is drawn, the arrow must be discharged, and asks Ocean to suggest a target. Ocean's prompt answer reveals the attitude of the poet and the Sanskrit people towards the indigenous people of North India.

> "Shoot"' Ocean cried, "thy arrow forth
> With all its fury to the north.
> Where sacred Drumakulya lies,
> Whose glory with thy glory vies;
> There dwells the wild Abhira race,

As vile in act as foul of face,
Fierce Dasyus who delight in ill,
And drink my tributary rill.
My soul no longer may endure
Their neighbourhood or touch impure." (VI, XXII, p. 444.)

This is a very revealing passage indeed. The aboriginals are named ("wild Abhira race") and described as ugly slaves, or "Dasyus". Their habitation is named ("north"), and their crime is elaborated (different facial characteristics, branded as "foul of face"; and perceived impurity—their very touch is "touch impure"). Rama discharges his arrow as instructed by Ocean, and we are told that the action dries up the territory. We are not told what happens to the outcasts/barbarians, but the implication is that they perish without water. However, we are told that Rama blesses the parched land and it begins to flourish again.

The Abhiras or Ahirs are a sub-group of the Yadav caste. The people of the Ahir tribe are traditionally cow-herds and shepherds. Today, they are found all across north India from Gujerat to Bihar and also as far north as Nepal (Wikipedia, 2007). The tribal people of Gujerat, Rajasthan, Maharastra and Karnataka are said to have origins in India which precede those of the Vedic Aryan people of the north and the Dravidians of the south (Wikipedia, 2007).

No matter what their origins, the dark skinned ancestors of the dark skinned Ahirs of today must have been present in Valmiki's time and must have been perceived as a threat and obstacle to the territorial expansion, prosperity and well being of the Sanskrit people. Their eradication is justified by their *difference*. Valmiki makes Ocean nominate an aboriginal race as the target for Rama's arrow, and makes Rama summarily dispatch that race, miles away in the north, with just one arrow shot from the distant southern coast of India.

Valmiki's original text was not written down but recited and orally transmitted. The early audience of Sanskrit speakers, most of them of the upper castes, would have approved of the sentiments (and dreams of extermination) expressed in the above lines. They would have applauded the unlimited, marvelous and miraculous power of Rama, which would have represented for them the power of a whole people—the Sanskrit people.

In the above incident involving the Abhiras, infertility, barrenness and lack of water in the land results from the punishment meted out to the aboriginals by Rama. After these people are eliminated and the land is blessed, fertility is restored. This is not the first instance in which infertility and desolation in the land is associated with demons/Others, and fertility and prosperity is associated with their elimination. The land infested by the demoness Tadaka and her relatives and cohorts was once fertile and had gone to seed because of the presence of the demons; fertility and perfection are regained after the extermination of the demons.

Visvamitra's encounter with the demonized tribals in the forests in the vicinity of The Perfect Hermitage is not his first encounter with Others. Long years before this, he had encountered a wide variety of tribals and foreign savages, and that encounter is related by King Janak's high priest Satananda to Rama and Lakshman. Here is the

'flashback'. Visvamitra was, at first, neither a Brahman nor a hermit but a king. On one occasion, on discovering that the hermit-saint Vasishtha owned a Dapple-cow with magical powers, Visvamitra wished to buy the cow and was willing to pay vast riches for it. Indeed the king more than merely *wished* to buy the cow. He demanded it and peremptorily pointed out that, being the king, he had a right to it.

> "To me, her rightful lord, resign
> This Dapple-skin thou callest thine." (I, LXXX, p. 64.)

Vasishtha, however, refused to part with the cow. The king, in his pride and anger, fought a battle with the saint. He even used celestial weapons, which he had received as a boon from the Gods after having performed severe penances once, but was nevertheless worsted. All of the king's hundred sons but one, and all his soldiers were killed by the forces called forth by the magical cow. The fighters were created "by her mere desire" and poured forth in vast numbers from her udders, every pore and every hair-producing cell. (I, LIV, p. 66.) When the king himself attacked Vasishtha with his most powerful weapon, it was deflected and annihilated by the hermit-saint's staff. The king was humiliated and decided to perform more penances to achieve the status of a hermit-saint. But Brahma granted him only the status of a raja-rishi, or royal-saint. The disappointed supplicant performed more austerities and was finally granted the status of Brahma-rishi, the highest degree of hermit-sainthood, usually accorded only to those of the priestly caste.

Commentators have remarked on this story as being relevant to the rivalry for dominance between the priestly and warrior castes. The story is obviously designed to show the moral and spiritual superiority of the first caste. According to the magic cow:

> "The Brahman's might is mightier far,
> For Brahmans strength from Heaven derive
> And warriors bow when Brahmans strive." (I, LIV, p. 66)

The following is according to Vasishtha himself:

> "Nay stand, O Warrior thou, and show
> What soldier can 'gainst Brahman foe."
> ……..
> "How shall a Warrior's puissance dare
> With Brahman's awful strength compare?
> Today, base warrior, shall thou feel
> That God-sent might is more than steel."
> He raised his Brahman staff, nor missed
> The fiery dart that near him hissed. (I, LVI, p. 67)

The humbled and chagrined Visvamitra concedes defeat and acknowledges the superiority of the Brahman:

> "Ah! Warrior strength is poor and slight;
> A Brahman's power is truly might.
> This Brahman staff the hermit held

The fury of my darts has quelled.
This truth within my heart impressed
With senses ruled and tranquil breast
My task austere will I begin
And Brahmanhood will try to win." (I, LVI, p. 67.)

However, there is a detail in this story that is often overlooked as being of little or no consequence. The armies that the magic cow calls forth are named by Valmiki. Some are composed of foreigners, and, what is relevant to this project, some are made up of indigenous peoples. The cow calls forth Sakas, Pahlavas, Kambojas,Yavanas and Barbars—that is, Central Asians, Persians, Middle Easterners and people west of the Middle East such as the Greeks and the so-called Barbarians—as well as Mlechchas, Karitas and Haritas. (I, LIV, p. 66.) The last three are some of the names that the Aryans used contemptuously to refer to the non-Aryan non-Sanskrit speaking indigenous people and aborigines of North India. The term Mlechcha was widely used as blanket term to refer all such people.

It is remarkable that the magic cow summons this mixed bunch of troops to aid a Brahman hermit-saint in his battle against a Kshatriya king. The troops consist of named and known, in other words already existing, ethnic stocks. In real life, the Warrior caste must have waged unceasing battle with the indigenous people for centuries. They must have also feared foreign invasions. This anxiety and fear of the rapacious foreigner and the hostile local Other is reflected in this story. In this case the foreigners and Others are allowed to give a drubbing to the Warrior caste. But, let it be remembered, they are controlled by an all powerful Brahman. So long as they are willing to serve and to submit to control, Others are found to be useful.

It is not at all clear whether the magic cow in the story created the ethnic groups out of nothing—in which case this could even be considered to be a 'creation story' or an 'origin myth'. Neither is the fate of the troops after the battle narrated. Some of the fighters died, slain by the thousands, at the hands of Visvamitra's army at the beginning of the battle, but a vast number of the multitude survived. Did they vanish into thin air? Or did they go back to their local and foreign habitations? The answers to these questions are unobtainable. What is clear is that the foreigners and the indigenous Others were victorious, but the victory is assigned to Vasishtha. Nothing more is heard of those who served him by fighting for him.

We may assume that the Mlechchas, Karitas and Haritas mentioned in the story returned to the wilderness on the periphery of the land settled and urbanized by the Aryans. Most of the numerous hermits, in the story as well as in real life, oscillated between urban centres and the wooded semi-periphery. Some members of the priestly caste served as priests, advisors and teachers in urban areas but a large majority visited these areas only during festivals and sacrifices when thousands of priests were needed. When these events were completed, the visiting hermits returned to their abodes in the woods to lead a life punctuated by ritual observances, prayer, penance and the teaching of novices.

There may have been an uneasy truce between the hermits and the un-subdued indigenous people. The hermits usually returned with fabulous gifts given to them by kings and may have been the target of raiders. The hermits and the hermitages seem

to have been well endowed as a consequence of royal munificence, which will be dealt with later on.

Besides the above encounter, Visvamitra's has had more adventures with Others. Satananda recounts the strange and fantastic tale of Trisanku, a former king of Ayodhya and one of Rama's ancestors. Trisanku was so in love with his corporeal form that he wished to ascend to Heaven in his earthly shape. He sought Vasishtha's help to do this, but the saint said it was an impossibility, whereupon the king sought the help of Vasishtha's sons. The sons were enraged that the king should ask them to do something that their revered father had declared to be impossible. They pronounced a curse upon the king and he was turned into a Chandala—an abominable outcast, the offspring of an upper caste woman and a Shudra, or low caste, man.

This transformation is remarkable because a Kshatriya and a Chandala differ in outer appearance. The Chandala has a dark skin and, no doubt, is short and has a flat nose, phenotypical characteristics which are manifestations of the genes he inherits from his Shudra father:

> That night Trisanku underwent
> Sad change in shape and lineament.
> Next morn, an outcast, swart of hue,
> His dusky cloth he round him drew. (I, LVIII, p. 69.)

Trisanku then sought the aid of Visamitra, now a Brahma-rishi. This saint readily agreed to help the demoted king and prepared for sacrificial ceremonies and invited sages from far and wide. However, Vasishtha and his one hundred sons express their contempt and rudely refuse to attend. One of their reasons for doing so is racial prejudice and disdain for the Other:

> "How will the Gods and saints partake
> The offerings that the king would make,
> And he a vile and outcast thing,
> His ministrant, one born a king?
> Can we, great Brahmans, eat his food,
> And think to win beatitude,
> By Visvamitra purified? (I, LIX, p. 70.)

The Gods refused to accept the offerings made by Visvamitra and also refused entry into Heaven to Trisanku, who is now a Chandala and, therefore, impure and a pollutant. The God Indra sends Trisanku headlong back to earth. But Visvamitra transfixed Trisanku in mid-air and began to create new stars, new Gods and another Indra, who would accommodate Trisanku. The alarmed Gods pleaded with Visvamitra:

> "Lord of high destiny, this king,
> To whom his master's curses cling,
> No heavenly home deserves to gain
> Unpurified from curse and stain. (I, LX, p. 72.)

It is clear from the attitude of the Gods and upper-caste folk that some human beings are undeserving of grace because of their inherited racial characteristics. Physical difference is called 'stain'. Such racial prejudice is a hallmark of the colonial attitude.

In the *Ramayana*, the wilderness always offers a danger to the ever struggling saints and hermits, who struggle for self-mastery. This self-mastery provides the power to master others, both individuals and groups such as the lower orders and outcastes on the margins of civil society. This is characteristic of colonial discourse. Alien cultures are characterized as savage and in need of mastery. The *Ramayana* is a colonial discourse that swings back and forth from the civilized, mastered and subjugated environment to the savage and lawless, which needs to be subjugated and controlled or, if recalcitrant, eliminated. The *Ramayana* reflects colonialist practices and must have also influenced and promoted such practices because it sanctions them. In brief, it has fossilized colonial practices, attitudes and beliefs. This is illustrated by the following episode:

In the south of India, Rama helps Sugriva of the Vanars to ascend the throne in Kishkinda and become the ruler of the Vanars. Bali, Sugriva's elder brother, is incredulous that Rama, a stranger to him, has fatally wounded him from a concealed position in a cowardly manner; Bali hints at covetousness and avarice:

> "My harmless life in woods I lead,
> On forest fruits and roots I feed.
> ……
> Here in the woods, O King, we live
> On roots, and fruits which branches give.
> ……..
> Canst thou desire this wild retreat,
> The berries and the fruits we eat?" (IV, XVII, p. 344.)

Rama unabashedly and nonchalantly defends his indefensible action thus:

> "This land, each hill and woody chase,
> Belongs to old Ishvaku's race,
> With bird and beast and man, the whole
> Is ours to cherish and control.
> Now Bharat, prompt at duty's call,
> Wise, just and true, is lord of all.
> ……..
> Now we and other kings of might,
> By his example taught aright,
> The land of every region tread
> That justice may increase and spread.
> While royal Bharat, wise and just,
> Rules the broad earth, his glorious trust
> Who shall attempt, while he is lord,
> A deed by Justice held abhorred.
> …….
> But thou art wild and weak of soul

And spurnest like thy race, control." (IV, XVII, p. 346.)

These words encapsulate a colonial ideology. This is the speech of a representative of a colonizing and dominant power. Valmiki has allowed Rama to take over the land verbally; and the justification for it is that justice needs to be spread among a wild, lawless and uncontrolled race. From the above lines it is clear that the self-appointed, self-declared master race and ruling caste, to which Rama belongs, considers Others inferior and in need of "control". The poet has handed over control of vast stretches of land south of the small kingdom of Kosala in the north to the rulers of Kosala.

In the lines below, Rama, in claiming that kings can do no wrong, assigns divinity to all kings and not just the rulers of Kosala, who are styled emperors. However, it is doubtful that Rama includes Bali, king of the Vanars, in the company of kings, who can do no wrong:

"For kings are children of the skies
And walk this earth in men's disguise." (IV, XVIII, p. 347.)

Rama's defense for killing from a covert position is that Bali is a Vanar, and Rama's defence is couched in arrogant and contemptuous terms:

"We take the sylvan tribes beset,
With snare and trap and gin and net,
And many a heedless deer we smite
From thicket shade, concealed from sight.
Wild for the slaughter of the game,
At stately stags our shafts we aim.
……..
They turn away their heads; we aim,
And none the eager hunter blame.
Each royal saint, well trained in law
of duty, loves his bow to draw
And strikes the quarry, e'en as thou
Hast fallen by mine arrow now,
Fighting with him or unaware—
A Vanar thou—I little care. (IV, XVII, p. 347.)

It is the Vanars, led by Sugriva, who help Rama to defeat Ravan and rescue Sita. Sanskrit scholars tell us that the term Vanar is derived from the Sanskrit word for forest and that the Vanars could very well refer to forest dwellers. Of course Valmiki uses the terms monkeys, apes and bears too to refer to the Vanars. Valmiki may have not had any compunction about representing forest dwellers as monkeys for, to his blinkered eyes, the short, dark people of the south may have seemed not unlike monkeys. Indeed, he may not have ever seen an inhabitant of South India himself. He may have based his tale on the reports of a few bigoted travelers. As for the 'bears', scholars feel that the Sanskrit term used actually refers to monkeys though the term 'bears' has been used in English translations.

In fact bears and monkeys are not distinguished as far as the text is concerned and are subsumed under the heading "Vanar" in the English translation used in this

project. The translator, Ralph Griffith, says he has done so because bears and monkeys "from some gross resemblance, probably helped by an equivoque in the language, are closely associated in the Hindoo myth…" (IV, XXXIX, footnote p. 371.)

It is worth pointing out that the Vanars are now depicted as living in Kishkinda, a city like any other metropolis, now as living in forests on fruits and roots, now as monkeys, and now as creatures of partly divine origin and possessing miraculous and fantastic powers ("The Vanars"—Book I, Canto XVI). The origin of the Vanars related in the text makes them strange hybrid products—their status is lowly but they are useful in war and for general servitude**.** They are not incarnations but creatures begotten by the lesser Gods and sages on various creatures of the earth, air and sea; thus they inherit unusual powers from the paternal side. The monarch of the bears issued from the mouth of Brahma himself:

> In each the strength, the might, the mien,
> Of his own parent God were seen.
> Some chiefs of vanar (monkey) mothers came,
> Some of she-bear and highland ape. (I, XVI, p. 28.)

However, it will not do to make them too valorous and the equals of the Kshatriyas, so they are not armed as the Kshatriyas are but according to the station to which they are born:

> Skilled in all arms in battle's shock,
> The brandished tree, the loosened rock;
> And prompt should other weapons fail,
> To fight and slay with tooth and nail. (I, XVI, p. 28.)

The Gods' woodland offspring, who were chiefs, go forth and multiply and over-run Southern India:

> So were the sylvan chieftains formed;
> Thousands on thousands still they swarmed.
> ……..
> And to each lord and chief and guide
> Was monkey offspring born beside. (I, XVI, p.28.)

In the *Ramayana*, humans are conspicuous by their absence in this region.

Be that as it may, it is unbelievable that Valmiki has put the insulting words quoted earlier into Rama's mouth, because the same Rama befriends, and then uses the help of, Sugriva and the Vanar hordes. As will be demonstrated in a while in the case of Guha, the colonialist may befriend an Other but the latter cannot trade on that friendship. At one point Rama actually asserts the following:

> "My soul accounts Sugriva dear
> E'en as my brother Lakshman here." (IV, XVIII, p. 346.)

Though Rama refers to Sugriva as a "faithful friend" and even participates in a solemn ceremony to sanctify the friendship, the poet has included many derogatory references to the Vanars in the text. The dying Bali is convinced by Rama's words that Rama has done no wrong and worshipfully abases himself thus:

> "It ill beseems a wretch like me
> To bandy empty words with thee." (IV, XVIII, p. 347.)

This self-abasement is more effective than abuse from the poet or one of the main characters.

Here is Valmiki making Sugriva, as he mourns for his brother Bali slain by Rama's arrow, berate himself and damn his entire race:

> "I, fierce and greedy, vengeful, base,
> Showed all the vices of my race." (IV, XXIV, p. 353.)

This self-condemnation by the Other is more damning than condemnation of the Other by the poet or one of the main characters.

Though some Vanars summoned from distant quarters of the land by Sugriva are described as golden, silver, white and even green, all the Vanars of Sugriva's kingdom, like Sugriva himself, are dark skinned. Here are descriptions of Sugriva and the fallen Bali respectively:

> The Vanar chief the semblance bore
> Of a dark cloud at close of day. (IV, XII, p. 339.)

> Still from that chain divinely wrought
> His dusky form a glory caught,
> As a dark cloud, when day is done,
> Made splendid by the dying sun. (IV, XVI, p.344.)

As far as skin colour is concerned, the poet does not differentiate between Vanars and demons.

It should be noted that most of the demons (Ravan and his followers are exceptions) and Vanars in Valmiki's text do not possess the superior weaponry, the well wrought bows and arrows, available to the warrior caste. Here is how Valmiki makes Bali and Sugriva fight. In these lines too, the relentless reference to skin colour is not absent:

> They warred with feet and arms and knees,
> With nails and stones and boughs and trees,
> And blows descending fast as rain
> Dyed each dark form with crimson stain. (IV, XVI, p. 343.)

It is pertinent to state here that the Vanars are allowed to take human form (their true form?) when they attend Rama's coronation ceremony in Ayodhya at the end of his exile.

Sugriva on Satrunjay came,
An elephant of hugest frame;
Nine thousand others bore behind
The chieftains of the Vanar kind,
All gay, in forms of human mould
With rich attire and gems and gold. (VI, CXXX, p. 506.)

Hanuman, who was sent ahead by Rama to meet Bharat, also assumes human form:

…and, garbed in human form,
Forth sped Hanuman, swift as storm. (VI, CXXVII, p.504.)

This ambivalence about the morphology of the Vanars is significant.

The Vanars who helped Rama are countless in number—millions upon millions. The translator informs us in a footnote that he did not attempt to translate numbers such as *arbudas* used by Valmiki (one *arbuda* equals one hundred million) and indicates the vast number of Vanars by the following stratagem:

They came: and tens of millions swell
To numbers no tongue may tell. (IV, XXXVIII, p.370.)

Sugriva and the Vanars he ruled are said by the poet to occupy that part of India now occupied mainly by the people of Kerala and Karnataka. Rama does not meet any of the ancestors of these occupants. It is known that the ancestors of the people of Kerala used to trade with the people of North Africa, the Middle East and the Mediterranean countries shortly after Valmiki's time. They must have been very normal and very ordinary people as are their descendants of today.

Valmiki certainly knew about the indigenous people and tribals of India. Many are named when the Vanars are instructed to disperse in four different directions and search for Sita among these people (IV, XL, footnote 374.4, p.374). These people are mentioned and nothing more is heard of them. As stated already, we are left with the impression that South India is over-run by Vanars and demons.

Vanars also knew the geography of South India, which is the same as saying that Valmiki knew it too. The long quotation below, in which Sugriva instructs the Vanar chiefs assigned to look for Sita in the South, is included because it shows that Valmiki was familiar with the geography of South India:

"Go forth" he cried, "with all this host
Exploring to the southern coast:
The thousand peaks that Vindhya shows
Where every tree and creeper grows;
Where Narmada's sweet waters run,
And serpents bask them in the sun;
Where Krishnaveni's currents flee,
And sparkles fair Godavari.
Through Mekhal pass and Utkal's land,
Go where Dasarna's cities stand.

Avanti seek of high renown
And Abravanti's glorious town.
Search every hill and brook and cave
Where Dandak's woods their branches wave.
Aromukh's woody hill explore
Whose sides are bright with richest ore,
Lifting his glorious head on high
From bloomy groves that round him lie.
Search well his forests where the breeze
Blows fragrant from the sandal trees.
Then you will see Kaveri's stream,
Whose pleasant waters glance and gleam,
And to the banks entice
The sportive maids of Paradise.
High on the top of Malaya's hill,
In holy musing, calm and still,
Sits, radiant as the Lord of Light,
Agastya, noble anchorite.
Soon as that lofty-thoughted lord
His high permission shall accord,
Pass Tamraparni's flood whose isles
Are loved by basking crocodiles.
The sandalwoods that fringe her side
Those islets and her waters hide;
……
Then hasting on your way behold
The Pandya's gates of pearl and gold.
Then with your task maturely planned,
On ocean's floor your feet will stand.
Where by Agastya's high decree,
Mahendra, planted in the sea
With tinted peaks against the tide,
Rises in solitary pride,
……..
One hundred leagues in fair extent
An island fronts the continent: (IV, XLI, p. 374.)

This island, of course, is Lanka. Some of these geographical features still bear the same ancient names. Examples are the Tamraparni, which flows from the Malaya hills; and the Malaya hills, which are the southern chain of hills in the Western Ghatts. Utkal was the name of what is now Orissa but Utkal is still the native name used by the people of the place.

The vast expanse of land in South India is represented as being largely unpopulated, with one exception—this is the Pandyas mentioned in passing in the line "The Pandya's gates of pearl and gold". This is the second time that the pearls of South India are mentioned by Valmiki. This highly priced and highly prized commodity was highly renowned, and merchants from the Roman Empire braved the perils of distant travel and came to the Pandya kingdom to buy them (as mentioned in the last chapter). 'Pandya' is a term used to describe the ruling dynasty, the people and the

kingdom. The Romans found merchants and other people in South India but there is no record of their having encountered demons or a land over-run by monkeys. So Valmiki has heard not only of the pearls of South India but also of the Pandya people and their kingdom and their kings. It is therefore unacceptable that despite this knowledge he continues to demonize the people.

We cannot help but conclude that the Vanars are Others—the people of South India—in dehumanized form. Sugriva is described as "sovereign of the woodland race" (IV, XXXVIII, p. 369.) and we are compelled to consider this Vanar race to be synonymous with the ordinary people of South India; they are used to fill the vacuum created by the large scale erasure of the people of South India in Valmiki's text.

Valmiki is on solid ground when he deals with the topography of South India. It is significant that, beyond Sri Lanka, the geography becomes entirely mythical, because, patently, it is an unknown area to Valmiki and his cotemporaries, as acknowledged in the following advice given by Sugriva:

> "Beyond it, dark and drear,
> Lies the departed spirits' sphere,
> And girt with darkness, far from bliss,
> Is Yama's sad metropolis.
> So far, my lords, o'er land and sea
> Your destined course is plain and free.
> Beyond, your steps you may not set,
> Where living thing ne'er journeyed yet. (IV, XLI, p. 376.)

It should be noted that though "living thing ne'er journeyed yet" beyond Lanka, this does not prevent the poet from describing with authority those unknown regions. This confident naming and describing of unknown space gives the poet and his people epistemological authority over that space.

If there is a character in the *Ramayana* who is more hated than all the other malignant characters it is Manthara. She is the architect of the palace intrigue to oust Rama from his rightful inheritance. The author has given her a twisted body to match her twisted mind. And in casting about for an evil woman, the author has picked on an Other, a member of the lowest caste. Manthara is a hump-backed, slave-born hand maid. (II, VII, p. 96.)

Visvamitra and Rama and Lakshman are not the only demon-slayers we hear about in the early books of the epic. Dasaratha too once fought the demons of the Dandak forest to the south of the settled territories. Under the leadership of Sambara, these demons once battled the Gods and mortals. It was then that Kaikeyi bore the wounded and senseless Dasaratha off the field and nursed him, as Manthara now reminds Kaikeyi. It was then that the king promised his youngest wife two boons, which she later redeems by asking that Rama be driven out and Bharat be installed in his place. (II, IX, p. 99.) Indeed it is to the distant wilds of this very forest of Dandak to the south that Rama is banished. He meets more demons there. We may surmise that, during an earlier historical war (mythicized as the God-Demon encounter), the place was not entirely ethnically cleansed of hostile tribes. Fighting the indigenous

tribes continued for centuries in real life, and is the major preoccupation of the *Ramayana.*

It is noteworthy that demons inhabit the wilderness to the south and are nowhere seen in the cities or settled territories to the north. The indigenous people of the forests towards the south as well as in the urbanized parts of South India and Sri Lanka must have been ideal candidates for demonization and dehumanization.

However, there is one character in the text, whose identity seems to be somewhere in the interstices between the Sanskrit people and the dehumamizable or demonizable Others. This is Guha, who is referred to as Chief and King of the Nishadas and as Royal Guha (II, LII, p.155). He seems to be a powerful king with considerable resources of land south of the Ganges as well as men and materials. He is an admirer and friend of Rama. However, despite a warm camaraderie and despite receiving considerable assistance from Guha's men in crossing the Ganges, Rama's friendship does not extend to accepting food from Guha. As Guha later reports to Bharat, who has come in search of the exiled Rama, the royals drank only water and refused food. Rama is reported to have said:

> "No gift, my friend, may we accept,
> Our law is 'Give' and must be kept. (II, LXXXVIII, p. 194.)

However, a little later on, Rama has no difficulty in accepting food at the hands of the hermit-saint Bharatvaja:

> The grace-gift water for their feet
> He gave and offered fruit to eat. (II, XL, p. 197.)

It is remarkable that the Nishadas were an indigenous tribe or else a tribe of mixed ancestry with several kingdoms spread over a wide area from Rajasthan in the west to Vanga and Kalinga in the east. The early Sanskrit people regarded them as outcasts. The origin myth about these people explains that they are the offspring of Sudra men and Kshatriya women (Wikipedia accessed on 11/11/2007).

We may speculate that Guha was a chief of an indigenous tribe that had declared a truce with the rulers of Kosala, accepted and acknowledged the power and superiority of the latter and was a useful ally. However, camaraderie could go only so far and no more. The Other remains a friend/but not quite an equal. Taboos regarding 'inter-dining', or the acceptance of food and eating together, would have to be strictly observed. Hence the ambivalent attitude to Guha in the text.

Such an ambivalent attitude towards befriended Others is often found in many colonial histories. Not all members of a colonized people would come into direct contact with the colonizers. However, there would be alliances with a few; some members would be invaluable in providing useful 'local knowledge' and would be handy intermediaries in effectively controlling the colonized, provided these persons proved to be loyal, subservient and willing to serve. Guha, Sugriva, Hanuman and Ravana's brother Vibishan belong to this category. This is the type of Other, "a class of interpreters between us and the millions we govern", whom T.B. Macaulay dreamed of producing in British India (Macaulay, 1961, p. 264).

Here is another revealing story. Dasaratha feels his separation from Rama is a punishment for a past act of his and recounts it to Kausalya. Dasaratha once heard a hermit filling a pitcher at a river for his blind and helpless parents. Mistaking the sound for one made by an elephant quenching its thirst, Dasaratha shot an arrow, which pierced the hermit's heart. The hermit was in agony and asked Dasaratha, who had rushed to his side, to extract the arrow so that he could quickly bleed to death instead of suffering a slow and painful death. The distraught Dasaratha was faced with a dilemma, and, as Dasaratha relates, "The hermit's son my thoughts perceived". What is the dilemma? It is a sin to draw blood and kill a Brahman, but it is acceptable to kill Others. The hermit's words helped Dasaratha to put an end to the wretched man's suffering with hardly any qualms:

> "'Now from one tear thy soul be freed:
> Thy hand has made a Brahman bleed.
> No twice-born youth am I, O King,
> For of a Vaisya sire I came,
> Who wedded with a Sudra dame.'
> …….
> Then from his bleeding side I drew
> The rankling shaft that pierced him through." (II, LXIII, pp. 169-170.)

This story has marked and striking implications. It will not do to think that it is a story which illustrates only the Hindu belief in *karma*, the belief that destiny is determined by past actions. It also sanctions the belief that it is a sin to kill a Brahman, and that the life of a Brahman is inviolable, whereas it is open season as far as Others are concerned. This scant regard for the life of colonials is a part of the colonial attitude. Cesaire, as already pointed out, has documented examples of this in Western texts produced during European colonialism. Such a belief may have been carefully nurtured in Valmiki's society by the beneficiaries of such a belief, and the *Ramayana* sanctions and helps propagate such a belief. This story is a literary and textual tool that powerfully promotes and fossilizes such a belief. It leaves a lasting impression and lends authority to a socially engendered stratagem.

Certain racial/social constructs are reiterated in the text. This belief that it is a sin to kill a Brahman (who, by this belief, becomes immune to a danger that threatens everybody else) is extended to include the killing of a king in the following instance. Even the life of a cow is deemed to be greater than that of an Other. This is cruel and preposterous. These are the words the poet makes the dying Vanar Bali's utter to Rama:

> All these, O King, must sink to hell,
> The regicide, the infidel,
> He who in blood and slaughter joys,
> A Brahman or a cow destroys. (IV, XVII, p. 345.)

Valmiki's text makes mention, in an offhand manner, more than once, that Others were often given as gifts to Brahmans by the Warrior caste for services rendered. These are slaves—no more than chattels— and the ownership of slaves changes without much ado and without the slaves having a say in the matter. They must have

been valuable but there is no special etiquette regarding their transfer. They change hands along with sheep and goats and cows and horses and gold and gems and silk and grains. It is specially mentioned that some of these slaves are women. For example, this is how Rama instructs Lakshman to recompense the priest who serves Kausalya and how Bharat pays the priests who assisted at his father's funeral rites respectively:

> "To him with women slaves present
> A chariot rich with ornament,
> And costly robes of silk beside,
> Until the sage be satisfied." (II, XXXII, p. 132.)

> Much gold he gave, and gems, and food,
> To all the Brahman multitude,
> And goats whose hair was white and fine,
> Slaves, men and damsels, he bestowed,
> And many a car and fair abode. (II, LXXVII, p. 186.)

Valmiki's representation of the callous attitude of the elite to Others is not surprising because he himself shares it. Here is an example of an unrestrained outburst against an Other by Valmiki himself. It is an example of unduly harsh representation and undeserved denigration. The story is worth recounting.

The metre in which the *Ramayana* is sung is said to have occurred involuntarily to Valmiki when he observed, on the banks of a river, the action of a fowler. Valmiki is enraged that the fowler had killed the male bird of a pair of *krauncha* birds (curlews). We can relate to his sympathy for the forlorn female bird but not to his immoderate fury. Hunting is a means of livelihood for the hunter. Neither can we understand the need for the poor fowler's caste to be used as an epithet. He seems to be an outcast—a member of the fifth caste, which is beyond the pale of the other four:

> But suddenly, with evil mind
> An outcast fowler stole behind
> And, with an aim too sure and true,
> The male bird near the hermit slew.
> ……
> The hermit saw the slaughtered bird,
> And all his heart with ruth was stirred.
> The fowler's impious deed distressed
> His gentle sympathetic breast.
> ……
> "No home be thine for endless time,
> Because, base outcast, of thy crime,
> Whose cruel hand was fain to slay
> One of the gentle pair at play." (I, II. P, 7.)

We note that Valmiki's breast is gentle and sympathetic to the fowl but harbours no similar feelings for the fowler. His curse is out of proportion to the deed. Valmiki's complaint to Brahma is in a similarly unrestrained strain:

"Woe to the fowler's impious hand
That did the deed that folly planned;
That could to needless death devote
The curlew of the tuneful throat." (I, II, p.8.)

THE PRESTIGE, POWER AND PRIVILEGE OF KINGS AND THEIR SWEEPING ASSUMPTION OF SOVEREIGNITY OVER A VAST LAND, AND THE SPIRITUAL, MIRACULOUS AND TEMPORAL POWER OF PRIESTS

No opportunity is lost in the *Ramayana* in highlighting the prosperity, power and worthiness of royal warriors and the erudition, honour, self-mastery and mystical power of priests. Some instances of such representations have been referred to already. As shown below, in two short lines, the superiority of these groups is sharply and pointedly contrasted with the abject nature of Others. When Dasaratha's party returns to Ayodhya after the marriage of his four sons to the princesses of Mithila, they are caught in a terrible storm. Here is the representation of the reactions of the upper caste males and Others:

> Kings, princes, saints their sense retained,
> Fear stupefied the rest remained. (I, LXXIV, p. 85.)

There are no exceptions. The upper caste males react differently, admirably and concertedly—in a mass. This is in sharp contrast to the objectionable and unbecoming reaction of Others—in a mass.

Sacrifices such as Dasaratha's horse sacrifice (discussed later) are described at length. These are opportunities to display the wealth, resources and munificence of royalty, and demonstrate the learning, skill and indispensability of the priests. Ceremonies such as the marriage of the princes require the elaborate recital of the genealogies of the participants. This is an opportunity for flaunting an ancient and honourable lineage. Not only is the lineage ancient, it is also divine at its commencement. For example, Rama is descended from a long line of illustrious kings of Ayodhya, the first of whom is Ishvaku. But Ishvaku himself is descended, through Marichi, Visvasvat and Manu, from the supreme God Brahma, who is described thus by Vasishtha:

> "From viewless Nature Brahma rose,
> No change, no end, no waste he knows." (I, LXX, p.81.)

No lineage could go farther back or be more pre-eminent than this. Vasishtha concludes thus:

> "No mind may soar, no thoughts can reach
> The glories of Ishvaku's line,
> Or, great Videha's king, of thine:
> None with the whole world may vie
> With them in fame and honours high." (I, LXXII, p.83.)

Janak pays the highest and most deferential compliments to the chief priests Vasishtha and Visvamitra:

> "I am your pupil ever true:
> To me high favour have you shown;
> Come sit ye on my royal throne,

For Dasaratha rules these towers
Even as Ayodhya is now ours.
Do with your own whatever you choose:
Your lordship here will none refuse. (I, LXXII, p. 83.)

Mutual respect and dependence marks the representations of the two uppermost castes. However, the primacy of the priestly caste is in some instances established, and represented, through the narration of conflicts between these two castes, which are resolved satisfactorily. Visvamitra is represented as an ambitious king who did not pay due reverence to the great priest Vasishtha, because he arrogantly considered himself to be Vasishtha's equal or even superior. However, Visvamitra is admitted to the ranks of the priest-saints once he practices the proper austerities and acquires self-mastery, and it is only thereafter that he is regarded as Vasishtha's equal.

Rama, though a creation of the poet's imagination, could well have been the namesake of a clan leader and ancestor of the incumbent king, who ruled Kosala in Valmiki's time. This choice of name for the central and heroic figure in the *Ramayana* might get more than two birds with one stone: The real king in Kosala might have been flattered by the heroic and epic exploits of the chief character, who would soon be indistinguishable from his ancestor; the imagined military exploits and conquests of the chief character might inspire the real king to attempt similar deeds.

The *Ramayana* opens with a colloquy between Valmiki and Narad. Valmiki devotes one quarter of the first canto to describing an ideal prince—a fearless and daring warrior prince who is also wise, virtuous, noble and just and asks, "If such a man breathe here below." (I, I, p. 2.) Narad poses the rhetorical question "Hermit, where/Are graces found so high and rare?" (I, I, p. 2.) But it turns out that there is indeed such a unique one—Rama—and then Narad goes on to sing Rama's praise. Narad says "In every virtue he has part" (I, I, p. 3.) So at the very outset, we learn that Rama is an extraordinary person, a paragon of all kingly virtues, a nonpareil prince with a matchless and unflawed character.

Many an exploit is narrated to show that Rama is a brave and valiant Prince. Many an incident is narrated to illustrate his noble qualities. Much praise is heaped on him by the author and by other characters. Examples are the more than sixty lines of tribute in Canto I of Book II titled "The Heir Apparent". There are more accolades in the next two Cantos delivered by King Dasaratha and the kings of the land assembled in Ayodhya. Indeed the whole text is punctuated by unstinted and somewhat extravagant eulogy to the hero. Even Kaikeyi defends Rama's excellence before she succumbs to Manthara's wiles and adopts the evil plan to have her own son Bharat installed as heir apparent and Rama banished to the wilderness. In fact Rama is praised by both friends and enemies, and when he is praised, he is praised not only as a unique individual but as the representative of the Warrior caste and as the scion of a powerful ruling family. Appellations such as "glory of Ishvaku's race" and "the best of Raghu's sons" are repeated throughout the text.

Rama is the heir apparent of King Dasaratha and a descendant of Ikshvaku. Ikshavaku was the son of Manu, who, according to Hindu myths, was the only survivor, besides seven *rishis*, of the Flood; Ikshvaku was the originator of the solar

and lunar lineages. "From old Ikshvaku's line he came" (I, I, p. 2.)—with this one line tossed into the midst of a poem of many thousand lines, the poet is able to invest Rama with a primordial and noble lineage. This is because the Flood myth of origin was well known and accepted by Valmiki's time. It was a readily available and ready- made metaphor that was also very effective. It confers great antiquity, a continuity of inherited power and accumulated dignity and legitimacy on the king Rama, the kingdom and the people.

This undiscriminating and excessive paean to Rama is the usual tribute paid to royalty and those in power. However, this inordinate praise is not warranted by what happened in history. The ancestors of the ruler of Kosala in Valmiki's time could not have been leaders of Kosala for more than 500 years (if even that long because leadership was not hereditary) because that was how long the Aryans had been in Kosala, having penetrated the Gangetic plains from the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. The first rulers must have been tribal chieftains or elders from a leading family. The Sanskrit word for king, 'raja', originally referred to an elder. Romila Thapar has commented on the effectiveness of popular government through popular assemblies in the tribal republics and tribal confederacies of pre-monarchical times:

> The corporate aspect of government was held to be the major strength of the republics. The actual procedure of government involved the meeting of the representatives of the tribes or the heads of families in the Public Assembly or Moot Hall of the capital city. The assembly was presided over one of the representatives, who took the title of raja. The office was not hereditary and he was regarded as a chief rather than a king. (Thapar, 1969, p. 51)

Besides praise of Rama, there is much praise of various kings among his forefathers, of his brothers, of his father-in-law, of Bharat's uncle and his maternal grandfather and of kings in general. A whole Canto of Book II, Canto LXVIII, titled "The Praise of Kings", sings the praise of kings. We are left in no doubt of the pomp, power and privilege of the Warrior caste and of kings. Here is Dasaratha promising to fulfill Kaikeyi's every wish no matter how unjustifiable; this may reveal the individual failings of an aged king weakened because he is enamoured of his youngest queen, but the power to make such promises derives from his power as king:

> "Speak and the guilty shall be freed,
> The guiltless be condemned to bleed.
> The poor enriched, the rich abased,
> The low set high, the proud disgraced.
> My lords and I thy will obey,
> All slaves, who own thy sovereign sway." (II, XI, p. 102.)

It is not at all likely that the power of Kosala extended to Kerala on the South-west coast of the Indian peninsula or other parts of South India—the distances were too vast and the means of transport available at the time the *Ramayana* was composed too rudimentary for such extensive power. It just did not happen in history. However, that does not stop the poet from imagining and textually proclaiming the universal power of the Kings of Kosala. Here is Vasishtha trying to persuade Bharat to accept kingship:

"Anointed king, ascend the throne.
Let vassal princes hasten forth
From distant lands, west, south and north,
From Kerala, from every sea,
And bring ten million gems to thee." (II, LXXXII, p. 190.)

Here is Rama telling Sumantra, who is about to depart to Ayodhya, what is due to Dasaratha as King:

"Whate'er the high-souled King decrees
His loved Kaikeyi's heart to please,
Without demur thou must obey.
For this alone great monarchs reign
That n'er a wish be found in vain
Then, O Sumantra, well provide
That by no check the king be tried." (II, LII, p. 154.)

Historically, the kings of Kosala did not rule a vast area. But textually, in the *Ramayana*, the sea alone seems to be the limit of their empire. Dasaratha is said to have had sway over *every* land, by Bharat, as he laments the fact that Rama slept on grass spread on the ground—it is enough to plant a potent and evocative word here and there to suggest illusions of grandeur and create impressions of power. This is Bharat lamenting:

"Chief of Raghu's sons and best,
A bed like this with Sita pressed,
Son of a royal sire whose hand
Ruled paramount o'er every land." (II, LXXXVIII, p. 195.)

The following sparse words of Rama to Lakshman and Lakshman's comment about Sita to Guha envelop the vast Indian subcontinent in the kingdom of Kosala:

"'Twere not so hard for me to gain
This broad land girdled by the main." (II, XCVIII, p. 207.)

"Cleaves faithful to her husband's side
Whose realm is girt by oceans wide." (II, XCVIII, p. 208.)

This is how the poet has Jatayus describe Rama to Ravan:

"What has the world's great master done,
That thou should steal his precious one?" (III, L, p. 288.)

As already mentioned, Rama's speech to the dying Bali (IV, ZXVII, p.346.) is a textual and verbal assumption of power over all the land known to the poet.

It is a matter for wonder that Valmiki imagined a king both valorous and virtuous when the kings of the time were rather ruthless and unscrupulous. The poet also considers Rama to be unblemished despite his treatment of Bali and Sita. The poet has represented Others as evil and bloodthirsty in order to demonstrate the power and

bravery of Rama and his brother. However, ironically, eliminating the Others in warfare involves the princes in much bloody carnage.

THE GREAT HORSE SACRIFICE AS A REPRESENTATION OF REGAL AUTHORITY AND PROSPERITY AND ALSO OF CLERICAL POWER

Dasaratha has no male heirs, when the *Ramayana* opens, and decides to perform the renowned and elaborate horse sacrifice to correct this lamentable situation. The sacrifice is an important part of the story. It is also an occasion to display the king's authority and prosperity, and the power and influence of the Brahmans. Moreover, it seems to be an occasion for the redistribution of wealth. Much wealth is also, inevitably, dissipated on the occasion.

Vasishtha, the chief priest, instructs the men around him about commandeering and redistributing food:

> And food in plenty must be found
> For guests from all the country round
> Of various viands present make,
> For honour not for pity's sake
> That fit regard and worship be
> Paid to each caste in due degree. (I, XII, p. 21.)

The horse sacrifice is a solemn yet festive occasion when a good time will be had by all, but Vasishtha is ever vigilant about caste distinctions and appropriate observances. Those who take an important part in the rite, who will be mostly Brahmins, are marked out for special respect; thus Vasishtha carefully adds:

> And let not wish or wrath excite
> Your hearts the meanest guest to slight;
> But still observe with special grace
> Those who obtain the foremost place,
> Whether for happier skill in art
> Or bearing in the rite their part. (I, XII, p 21.)

Vashishtha bids Sumantara to invite everyone, "countless thousands"—"Priest, warrior, merchant, lowly thrall" and "nobles, chiefs and lords" as well as "the princes of the earth" (I, XII, p. 21.) By "the princes of the earth" is meant only the princes of the kingdoms of North India for only the following are listed: the rulers of Mithila (a kingdom between the Himalayas and the Ganga), of Kasi (Benares), of Kekaya (in the Punjab), of Anga (in Bihar and not as previously thought in Bengal), of Surastra (Surat), of Suvira (to the West of the Indus) and of Sindhu (on the banks of the Indus). We may thus safely assume that Aryan kingdoms did not extend beyond North India in Valmiki's time or in the time of the *Ramayana*. The princes bear valuable gifts because the votive steed has wandered unchallenged, for a year, wherever it desired. This has established Dasaratha as the most powerful king—the lord of all the horse has surveyed—and the other rulers as tributaries:

> And kings began to gather fast,
> And precious gems in liberal store
> As gifts to Dasaratha bore. (I, XII, p. 21.)

And Dasaratha, the "world's great ruler" (I, XII, p. 22). goes forth to the sacred ground prepared for the crucial event to participate in "Those glorious rites wherein is shed/The lifeblood of the steed" (I, XII, p. 22).

The sacrificial ritual is indeed complex and is performed over many days and nights to the accompaniment of the chanting and reciting of hymns and formulae and much feasting and the drinking of the intoxicating extract of the soma plant. Thousands upon thousands of Brahmans perform the rites under the supervision of the officiating priest, the sage Rishyasring, who has been specially invited from Anga for the occasion. We can only wonder at the imaginative and organizing powers of the minds of the people who devised this and other highly structured and intricate rituals. For these rituals are definitely not invented by Valmiki for the *Ramayana*—they are described in the Vedas and other sacred texts and were actually performed in Aryan society. The Ramayana itself says everything was done "As texts prescribe, in Scripture found" (I, XIII, p. 23).

Impressive though the ritual is, we are aghast at the tremendous waste of materials. And we are somewhat puzzled by some of the distasteful details of the ritual. However, these are usually explained away by cultured Hindus through allegorical interpretation. The Brahmans seem to have had sufficient leisure and ease to devise the rituals and also to learn them and pass them on down the generations because wealthy kings paid them handsomely for their religious services. At the conclusion of the horse sacrifice, this is how Dasaratha rewarded the priests:

> The task was done, as laws prescribe;
> The monarch, glory of his tribe,
> Bestowed the land in liberal grants
> Upon the sacred ministrants. (I, XIII, p 24.)

But the priests decline the gifts of land saying:

> 'Tis thine alone to keep the whole
> Of this broad earth in fine control. (I, XIII, p. 24.)

So the king's munificence takes other forms:

> Gave them ten thousand kine
> A hundred millions of fine gold,
> The same in silver four times told. (I, XIII, p. 25.)

The priests generously give away even these gifts to Vasishtha and Rishyasring, and "The largesse pleased those Brahmans well". The king was prosperous; so were these sages.

The ritual itself involves the building of a sacrificial altar for the horse and the erection of twenty-one tall, well decorated sacrificial posts of ample girth, from specified timber trees, to which are tethered numerous birds and beasts that will also be sacrificed (I, XIII, p23).

To the chief queen falls the unenviable task of killing the horse. However, she seems to do it expertly and happily. The three queens are then ritually mated with the dead horse as religious custom and ritual practice prescribe. It seems that three of the priests may have also had some ritual relations with the queens:

> … Then the Queen
> Kausalya, with delighted mien,
> With reverent steps around him paced
> And with sweet wreaths the victim graced;
> Then with three swords in order due
> She smote the steed with joy, and slew.
> That night the queen, a son to gain,
> With calm and steady heart was fain
> By the dead charger's side to stay
> From evening 'til the break of day
> Then three priests led the other two
> Queens to touch the steed
> And also to attend upon Kausalya
> And lend their company and aid. (I, XIII, p. 23.)

The slaughtered horse and the other slaughtered animals are then roasted by the priests, and burnt offerings are made to the Gods. The horse sacrifice concludes successfully and without a flaw, and Rishyasring assures the king that he will have four sons. However, the sage goes on, soon after, to perform yet another sacrifice, a second rite, in accordance with Atharva Vedic texts, in order to ensure that the king has male heirs.

The *Ramayana* is a tale that is enriched by stories within stories. The story of Rishyasring, the formidable priest who oversees this formidable horse sacrifice and the second sacrifice, is one such embedded and diversionary tale. One whole canto is about this sage (Canto IX of Book I titled "Rishyasring"). He is a youthful hermit who has been brought up in isolation in a forest hermitage by his father, and has never seen a human being other than his father. The father is the great-grandson of the God Brahma. Though Rishyasring does not know the world of men and women, the world has heard about him, and of his extreme piety and goodness, partly through an ancient prophecy. The land of Anga is suffering from drought and the king is advised that the mere presence of the devout and godly Rishyasring will bring rain to the parched land. Messengers fear to approach the hermit for fear of what his father might do to them. And so a devious plan is hatched. Beautiful maidens are sent to entice the lad, the young hermit is lured and he follows the girls to Anga, where he is married to the king's adopted daughter, who is none other than the biological daughter of the king's good friend Dasaratha. The rains come down and bring a bounteous harvest.

What is remarkable about Rishyasring's story is not the diverting account of his seduction but his extraordinary powers. The learned Brahman is portrayed as being indispensable to kings. He brings the rains to one king, the king of Anga, his-father-in-law, by his presence; he brings male progeny to another king, Dasaratha, by performing special rituals (Cantos XII and XIII of Book I titled "The Sacrifice

Begun" and the "The Sacrifice Finished"). His powers are indeed exceptional and miraculous. This is the representation in the text.

Extraordinary powers are represented as the characteristic of Brahmans in many stories in the text. One of the best known is the story of the sage Gautama. Just his words were enough to bring about extraordinary results. With his words—mere words—he was able to punish his unfaithful wife, Ahalya. He proclaimed that she should disappear from sight and perform penance for many, many years until Rama stepping into their abode would absolve her of her sins. This happens and she is reconciled with her husband. The story illustrates the power of Brahmans. It also illustrates Rama's power, the power of his footsteps and presence, to cleanse a sinner. ("Indra and Ahalya" and "Ahalya Freed"—Cantos XLVIII and XLIX of Book I.)

The whole episode of the opulent horse sacrifice is more than diverting and fascinating. It is a tool for cultural representation. The ceremony confers prestige on and confirms the power of kings. The Brahmans are depicted as even more powerful and also as absolutely essential to the welfare, status and survival of kings. Rishyasring's lineage is not only ancient it is also divine. Brahmans are said to have issued forth from the mouth of the God Prajapati. In addition, Rishyasring is the descendant of the God Brahma. Rishyasring can bring prosperity, in the form of harvests and male issue, to kings. In return, he and Vasishtha receive material wealth.

Nothing much is said of the Sudras who toil to produce the wealth of the land. Apparently everyone in the land is invited to the horse sacrifice and all are fed well. However, we hear nothing of the food producers. We hear little of the labourers who contribute the labour that goes into the preparations for the ritual. Skilled craftsmen are mentioned, but no eminence or special rewards accrue to them that we hear of; the limelight is on the Brahman priest Vasishtha as far as preparations go:

> Before the saint Vasishtha stood
> All those who wrought with stone and wood,
> And showed the work which everyone
> In furtherance of the rite had done. (I, XII, p. 21.)

It is remarkable that the priests are rewarded by the king so handsomely and that the lesser priests give up their share in favour of the two chief priests. The reaction of the two at the receiving end of this bounty is not recorded. No doubt it was accepted graciously, and without demur, as their due. The textual incorporation of such details can only enhance the power and standing of the priests.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

If the *Ramayana* is only the story of the love, separation and reunion of Rama and Sita then it would be the story of the personal relationships of two individuals. However, Rama and Sita are not two isolated individuals. And they are not two ordinary individuals. They are part of a society, whose cultural representation is in stark contrast to the cultural representation of Others; and that society is described clearly in Cantos IV-VII of Book 1. The poet is candid about the social organization. This social organization seems to be well established and the power relations are more or less firm, fixed and precise:

> To Brahmans as the laws ordain
> The warrior caste were ever fain
> The reverence due to pay,
> And these the Vaisyas, peaceful crowd,
> Who trade and toil for gain, were proud
> To honour and obey,
> And all were by the Sudras served
> Who never form their duty swerved;
> Their proper worship all addressed
> To Brahman, spirits, God and guest.
> Pure and unmixt their rites remained
> Their race's honour ne'er was stained. (1, V, p. 13.)

The translator explains the last line with a footnote—their race's honour was never stained by forbidden marriages between persons of different castes. We note that the deference exacted by the Brahmans, though ordained by law (no doubt legislated and promulgated themselves), was paid gladly and, by implication, willingly by the warriors, who, in turn, were respected and obeyed by traders, for whom submission, unbelievably, was a matter of pride. The Sudras of course laboured for everyone else—their service was paid to all three castes above them. This is the representation in the *Ramayana*.

The *varna* ordering and organization of society described here is the one described in the *Rig Veda*, which was composed a good millennium or so earlier than the *Ramayana*. The *Ramayana* leaves no room for doubt about where power is located and who is at the bottom of the heap. Neither does the *Rig Veda*. The origin myth about the four *varnas* is symbolic of the pecking order. This myth provides a religious sanction and endorsement for a social ranking. The *Rig Veda* (10. XC.) relates that the four *varnas* arose from the sacrificed body of the god Prajapati—the Brahmins from his mouth, the *Kshatriyas* from his arms, the *Vaisyas* from his thighs and the *Sudras* from his feet. Thus the *varna* ranking and organization of society has had about a millennium in which to become well and truly crystallized by Valmiki's time. At the time of the *Rig Veda* the priest was a powerful figure and the chief may have played a subordinate role.

New political realities had popularized new sources of authority by Valmiki's time. With the rise of kingdoms it is now the king who is all powerful, and the Brahman has a prestigious position but less direct power. The king treats the Brahman with

great respect, and the Brahman is well rewarded for being the repository of learning and for possessing the skills necessary to perform sacred rituals. The Brahman also has the power to confer dignity and legitimacy on the king. Nevertheless, the king is at the pinnacle of power, for it is he who controls men and resources—and what is power if not the control of men and resources. Dasaratha, the king of Ayodhya (and Rama's father) is:

> A rival in his wealth untold
> Of Indra and the Lord of Gold. (1, V, p. 13.)

Dasaratha's city is:

> A city rich beyond compare (1, V, p. 12.)

At Dasaratha's command were:

> A band of godlike heroes skilled
> In every warlike weapon. (1, V, p. 12.)

Dasaratha reigned with fame and glory. His land was paradise. It was a veritable Utopia. The eight ministers of the king aided him in maintaining prosperity. There was more than prosperity. There was happiness and, even more important, there was contentment:

> They gained the people's love and trust
> And thus without oppression stored
> The swelling treasury of their lord.
> ……
> But there and in the kingdom's bound
> No thief or man impure found:
> None of loose life or evil fame,
> No tempter of another's dame.
> Contented with their lot each caste
> Calm days in blissful quiet passed;
> And all in fitting tasks employed,
> Country and town deep rest enjoyed. (1, VII, p. 14-15.)

'Fitting tasks' no doubt meant the occupations allotted to each caste in that society. It need hardly be said that no one of a higher caste would aspire to perform the *Sudra's* tasks. However, history is replete with instances of those above and those below the *Kshatriyas* aspiring to become warrior kings. Many succeeded in doing so:

> The major dynasties recorded in the *Puranas* up to the mid first millennium AD start with descendants of recognized *kshatriya* lineages, but by the mid-first millennium B.C. begin to refer to families of *non-kshatriya* origin. Some are specifically said to be *sudras*, such as the Nandas and possibly the Mauryas. Others, judging by their names, were *brahmana*, such as the Sungas and Kanvas…It required force and administrative control to establish a dynasty. Claims to territory were established through strength of arms. Legitimation through brahmanical ritual was not required since some

> dynasties are described as not conforming to Vedic rites. This may well have been due to the influence of Buddhism and Jainism at this time…If anything it points to the relative independence of the state as a political form from the clutches of traditional validation during this period. (Thapar, 1986, pp. 366-367.)

But this period was short-lived:

> With the kaleidoscopic formation of states in the post-Gupta period, new ruling families relied heavily on genealogical links, fabricated genealogies providing them with claims to being *kshatriyas* :…The acceptance by other competing families of the origin myth and of the genealogy of the family successfully installed in power was largely because political power was relatively open and individual families were concerned with succeeding to power, not altering the framework within which status was conferred. The narrowing down of legitimation to one family meant that others could aspire to the same power in changed circumstance. (Thapar, 1986, pp. 368-369.)

Of course all these upheavals pertain to the political situation a few centuries after Valmiki's time. But it is difficult to believe that such instances of overturning the caste ordering of society did not occur from the time caste ordering was devised. The tranquil and serene social scene, based on caste ranking and organization painted by Valmiki as obtaining in Kosala, is fiction obviously unfounded on fact. It may be wishful thinking. It may be current desire and perception depicted as past history. It may be a desired and desirable charter, or blueprint, for the future. It may be all three.

Indeed the values transmitted by texts such as the *Ramayana* have had a strong hold on the Hindu mind for millennia. Some of the tenacity with which these ideas have persisted is owing to texts such as the *Ramayana*.

In Dasaratha's Kosala, peace and prosperity did not come by chance. In fact the ministers did not leave anything to chance. There was an efficient system of spying, and prudent dealings with other powers, as shown below:

> In foreign land—or in their own—
> Whatever passed, to them was known.
> By secret spies they timely knew
> What men were doing or would do. (1, VII, p. 14.)
>
> With these wise lords around his throne
> The monarch justly reigned,
> …….
> With trusty agents, as beseems,
> Each distant realm he scanned,
> As the sun visits with his beams
> Each corner of the land.
> Ne'er would he on a mightier foe
> With hostile troops advance,
> Nor at an equal strike a blow

In war's delusive chance. (1, VII, p. 15.)

Thus the *Ramayana* is a political story according to Terry Eagleton's definition of political: "…no more than the way we organize our social life together, and the power relations which this involves..." (Eagleton, 1996, p. 169.)

We are told in no uncertain terms that Dasaratha is a powerful king and that his lineage is most ancient, powerful and noble. He is descended from Ikshvaku, whose sons are described thus:

The land their arms had made their own
Was bounded by the sea alone. (1, V, p. 11.)

Not surprisingly, the first of the above lines shows that the land was conquered and colonized. This makes the story a tale of a colonial power—a tale of settler colonists. Equally unsurprisingly, for a text that is intent on an exaggerated representation of the importance of the elite, the foundation of the city is mythical and is said to have been built by the only survivor of the Flood—the father of Ikshvaku. History does not support any claims to age old occupancy, possession and tenure of the kingdom of Kosala—History does not support such exaggerated representations of importance.

THE SMALL YET WEIGHTY MATTER OF THE LANGUAGE/S OF THE DEMONS AND THEIR BURIAL CUSTOMS, AND THE LANGUAGE/S OF VANARS.

One problem that faces the creator of imaginative literature whose work deals with Others is whether to give the Others a 'speaking part' and, if so, what language to put in their mouths. Do they have another language at all or are they to be represented as being language-less? For the purpose of the text, are they somehow to be shown to have learnt the language of the dominant group in the text? Are they to be allowed to use the dominant language fluently or are they to be shown ineptly and comically mal-treating the dominant language? Shakespeare solved the problem in the case of Caliban by creating him without language and then having Miranda teach him language. (Though, by the way, we are left wondering whether it is English, the language of the play, or Italian, the language of Prospero.)

The demons in Valmiki's text speak to the dominant characters and to one another in fluent Sanskrit. Nowhere in the text is any other non-Aryan language mentioned. This is remarkable. Valmiki is able to name geographical features far distant from Kosala and even name plants and trees. As Rama journeys farther and farther south, he notes the changes in the vegetation—he comes across the jak and the red hibiscus (III, XI, p. 242). The asoka tree, which is indigenous to South India, is mentioned often and admired by Rama as he wanders in the southern regions. As Ravan crosses the ocean on his flight from Lanka to India, he spots sandalwood trees and pepper and betel vines in South India (III, XXXV, p. 270). He also sees heaps of pearls on the southern shores of India as well as corals (III, XXXV, p. 270).

As already mentioned, Valmiki appears to have heard of the priceless pearls of South India. This is not surprising because, during the Epic Age or perhaps even before that, the Roman world had heard of these pearls and pearls were being exported to Rome from South India (as described in the last Chapter). The pearls that the kings and queens of North India wore probably came from South India. But there is no mention of the local inhabitants from among whom the highly skilled pearl divers must have sprung. And there is no mention of any other language/s. Rama only meets hermits and demons and Vanars on his journey. The hermits use Sanskrit; so do the demons and Vanars. This is strange:

> We may get the impression from the priestly literature of the oldest recorded Sanskrit documents that there were no linguistic contacts between Sanskrit speakers and others. But if such a situation obtained at all , it could not have been true of all classes of Sanskrit speakers—of the priestly class who jealously and desperately guarded their religious exclusiveness even against fellow speakers of Sanskrit, yes, but surely not of the landholders or their managers, who presumably came into contact with their field workers and with artisans, laborers, hunters, and others, all of which classes presumably included some aborigines and descendants of aborigines. (Emeneau, 1980, pp. 44-45.)

And it could not have been true of those members of the priestly caste or the warrior caste who wandered south. However, the impression created by the *Ramayana* is not only that there was no linguistic contact between Sanskrit speakers and speakers of

other language/s in South India but, what is worse, that there was no other language at all in existence.

Linguists believe that the Dravidian and Munda languages of India had an ancient pre-Aryan presence in India. For example, there are many members of the Dravidian language family today and they have diverged so much that the inevitable conclusion is that they must have separated millennia ago and must have had an extensive presence—both temporally and territorially—in pre-Aryan India. One member, Brahui, is still spoken today, widely separated geographically and linguistically (through differential evolution) from other members of the Dravidian family. The major Dravidian languages of today are spoken in a large area of South India where Indo-Aryan languages have not made any headway. The denizens of the southern forests could not but have had their own language/s at the time of Valmiki. Valmiki could not have been unaware of these other languages:

> That Sanskrit, even to some extent in our earliest texts and progressively more extensively as time went on down to the end of the pre-Christian period, borrowed both vocabulary and structure from the aboriginal languages, and especially from Dravidian, is clear; it will not be argued here…It is commonly admitted doctrine that extensive borrowings from one language into another can only occur through the agency of a bilingual section in the joint community (Emeneau, 1980, p. 45.)

Emeneau notes that T. Burrow, in his book *The Sanskrit Language* (1955), pp. 379-88, has given a sampling of these borrowings and a statement of the chronology involved. (Emeneau, 1980, p.109.) This means that non-Aryan languages were spoken close to Valmiki's home during his time. Moreover, the people of the South could not have spoken Sanskrit at the time Valmiki wrote, for by then Sanskrit was no longer a language of the vast majority of people even in its original homeland in the North. Only the upper castes used it. The Buddha and Mahavira, who lived during the Epic Age of Sanskrit literature, chose to preach in the Middle Indo-Aryan languages because these were the languages the majority of the people understood.

Thus the linguistic representation in the *Ramayana* is misleading; it is the outcome of a dominant people, who had nothing but contempt for other languages. Indifference, impatience and resentment towards the languages of Others are a mark of the typical colonial mentality and of the typical colonial text.

Despite all this, there is a chink in the text. Valmiki inadvertently allows us to deduce that there was/were other language/s besides Sanskrit at the time he composed the epic and the time at which Rama visited South India. The demon Ilaval is said to have assumed the form of a Brahman and spoken Sanskrit merely to dupe hermits (III, XI, p. 241). What did he speak in his own true form? His own language, no doubt. Surely this demon is a bilingual Other. A demon who could switch to Sanskrit at will could not have been language-less.

Then there is the Vanar chief Hanuman's use of language. There is no doubt that he speaks admirable Sanskrit because it is admired by no less a person than Rama, who comments thus to Lakshman:

"He must have bent his faithful ear
All grammar's varied rules to hear.
For his long speech, how well he spoke!
In all its length no rule he broke." (IV, II, p. 326.)

We know that, in fables and fairy tales, animals are given the power to speak human languages. But no one stops to comment admiringly. If the Vanars are animals who have been gifted by the author, Valmiki, with the power of speech, the matter hardly deserves comment. If Sanskrit is Hanuman's first language, there is nothing to admire in his competent use of it, for every native speaker uses his or her own language with competence. If it is an acquired second language, what is his first language? Are not the Vanars dehumanized indigenous people with a language/s of their own, so that if any one of them acquires refined Sanskrit the matter is worthy of notice and comment? As Emeneau has pointed out, right up to pre-Christian times Sanskrit was influenced and changed by indigenous languages and this could only have been done by bilingual speakers who incorporated linguistic traits from their first language into Sanskrit. The Other who spoke Sanskrit well must have been an object of admiration and approbation. Thus, Rama showing admiration and approval for Hanuman's use of a language, which could be no other than Sanskrit, is a sign that the Vanars were dehumanized Others with a language/s of their own.

When, after an arduous search, Hanuman finds Sita imprisoned in the Asoka grove he wonders how he should address her:

"Shall I, a puny Vanar choose
The Sanskrit men delight to use?
If as a man of Brahman kind,
I speak the tongue by rules refined
The lady, yielding to her fears,
Will think 'tis Ravan's voice she hears.
I must assume my only plan—
The language of a common man." (V, XXX, p. 411.)

Hanuman decides to use "the language of the common man", or what must have been regarded as debased Sanskrit, that is, a middle Indo-Aryan dialect derived from Sanskrit. We note, from Hanuman's words above, that Ravan is obviously capable of speaking refined Sanskrit. We wonder what Ravan's demon subjects in distant Lanka spoke. They seem to have had no problem in communicating with Sita, so they too must have used some form of Sanskrit. The author has erased the language used by the inhabitants of Lanka. He has extended the sovereignty of Kosala's kings to the southern shores of India, but extended the reach of their language even farther, to Sri Lanka. Not only is there conquest in the territorial sense, there is linguistic conquest; and also cultural conquest, for the demons of Lanka seem to have a priestly caste and the Vedas are chanted there as described in Valmiki's text. This is what Hanuman hears on his first morning in Lanka:

He heard the gathered giants raise
The solemn hymn of prayer and praise—
Priests skilled in rite and ritual, who
The Vedas and their branches knew. (V, XVIII, p. 405.)

It is the sage Agastya who killed Ilaval and Vatapi. Other fiends have been subdued by the sage and give a clear berth to the forest in which Agastya and his brother and other hermits have their settlements. The following lines show the manner in which the might of the sage has subdued the demons. However, from the numerous terrifying descriptions of the demons in the text, it is difficult to imagine how they were subdued without being killed. The only conclusion open to us is that these were ordinary inhabitants of the land who tried to defend it whenever there was encroachment by settlers from the North. If, weary of war or defeated in war, the indigenous inhabitants entered into a truce, they were probably tolerated; and a policy of 'live and let live' must have been adopted by the settlers. Here is what Rama says of Agastya to Lakshman:

> Checked by his might the giant brood
> Have dwelt in peace with soul subdued.
> And all this southern realm, within
> whose bounds no fiend may entrance win,
> Now bears a name which naught may dim,
> made glorious through the worlds by him. (III, XI, p. 240.)

The following intriguing incident is surely something small from which we can draw weightier conclusions: Viradha, the fierce fiend dismembered by Rama and Lakshman, eloquently pleads that his body be interred. His pleading is in Sanskrit, as are the speeches of all the demons in the text; but we are left in the dark whether Sanskrit is his second language or the adopted language of a language-less monster. In fact this particular demon speaks a great deal and even recites his own lineage. Are not the following lines a reference to the practice, among the indigenous people, of burying, and not cremating, the dead? This is very likely, and it is equally likely that Viradha and his kind are indigenous people, who have been demonized in the *Ramayana*:

> "First under earth my body throw
> Then on thy way rejoicing go.
> Such is the law ordained of old
> For giants when their days are told:
> Their bodies laid in earth, they rise
> To homes eternal in the skies." (III, IV, p. 233.)

It is amazing that Valmiki not only gives the location of distant Lanka (beyond South India, across the ocean) accurately he even mentions its length more or less correctly—but his representation of the inhabitants is distorted. Here is Ravan describing Lanka to the captive Sita:

> "This isle a hundred leagues in length,
> Encompassed by the ocean's strength," (III, LV, p. 294.)

It is worth reiterating that throughout the considerable length of Valmiki's text prominence is given to the many battles that Rama and his allies wage with demons. And the battles are waged over an enormous area stretching from south of the Aryan

settlements in the north to South India and Lanka. The demons seem to be numberless but they are all killed off or subdued in the end.

Here is Ravan boasting of his demon hordes to Sita:

> Three hundred million giants, all
> Obedient to their master's call,
> Not the young and weak and old,
> Serve me with spirits fierce and bold." (III, LV, p. 294.)

As already stated, Rama single-handedly killed Khara and fourteen thousand followers in the "twinkling of an eye" in Sita's words. (III, LIII, p. 293.)

The leaders of the demons are named and described in ghastly detail but the vast hosts are only numbers—large numbers. The revolting qualities that all demons possess in common are repeated throughout the text. We hear of these either from the poet or from the many characters. One demon, Maricha, describes his own qualities and exploits, and this description is a good sample of the rest:

> "I and two other fiends besides
> Assumed the forms of deer and strayed
> Through Dandak forest in lawn and glade
> I roamed where'er my fancy led,
> And on the flesh of hermits fed,
> In sacred haunt, by hallowed tree,
> Where'er the ritual fires might be.
> A fearful shape, I wandered through
> The wood, and many a hermit slew.
> With ruthless rage the saints I killed,
> Who in the grove their task fulfilled.
> When smitten to the earth they sank
> Their flesh I ate, their blood I drank,
> And with my cruel deeds dismayed
> All dwellers in the forest shade,
> Spoiling their rites in bitter hate,
> With human blood inebriate." (III, XXXIX, p. 274.)

One of the most hideous demons is the colossal Kabandha, who is headless and neckless and has a mouth in his stomach and a single eye in his chest. His arms are gargantuan and he uses them to capture live prey to gratify his insatiable appetite. He is killed by Rama and Lakshaman.

The dark fiends in Valmiki's text could be none other than the dark indigenous Dravidians and tribals of India and Lanka demonized in the most unacceptable manner. The poet has eliminated ordinary people and "populated" the land south of the Aryan settlements of the north with demons—not just populated but overpopulated; because, if the able-bodied demons who served Ravan numbered three hundred million, then the entire demon numbers in Lanka alone must have been astronomical. Lanka could not have borne such numbers. The poet's imagination has run riot. Not one normal human being is mentioned as having lived in Lanka.

Valmiki has wiped them out from the land and replaced them with demons. In other words, he has transformed ordinary human beings into demons.

Textual erasure and obliteration of the indigenous people and their languages is deliberate. A poet who got so many minute details of distant South India and Lanka right has got these major concerns muddled. It cannot be an accident. I call these 'major concerns' because the demons loom large in the text. Indeed the tale, from beginning to end, is one of overthrowing large numbers of demons over a long period of time over a vast area of land.

Valmiki composed his epic in the pre-Christian era when Dravidian speech "must have practically ceased to exist" in his locality, the Gangetic valley (Emeneau, 1980, p.109). This must have emboldened Valmiki to erase it textually from the rest of India and Lanka. But Dravidian languages did not cease to exist in South India or Lanka. Neither did they cease to exist in North-west India or North-east India or Central India. Major and minor Dravidian languages exist in these areas to this day. So it is surprising that Valmiki erased indigenous human beings and their non-Sanskrit languages altogether from his tale set in India and Lanka.

Valmiki's text imaginatively extends territorial conquest as far south as Lanka to areas that were never, historically, conquered by any north Indian king even after Valmiki's time. Let us see in what a facile manner Valmiki disposes of the Nishadas, who occupied an extensive area in ancient India. Garuda, the king of birds and Vishnu's vehicle is credited with this conquest. His weapon was the enormous bough of an enormous fig tree:

> And with the bough he smote the lands
> Where dwelt the wild Nishada bands.
> High joy was his because his deed
> From jeopardy the hermits freed. (III, XXXV, p. 271)

Valmiki's text celebrates past historical victories of the Sanskrit people and glorifies them. It also imagines new victories on an epic scale. These must have boosted the desire for conquest and also justified such desire. The foes are demons. They need and deserve to be annihilated.

Ancient Tamil literature belongs to a couple of centuries following the Epic Age of Sanskrit literature but it must have sprung from an earlier oral tradition contemporaneous with Valmiki's text or even much earlier than that. This literature is sophisticated (as described in the previous Chapter) and nowhere does it mention that the land was flooded with demons—there is nary a mention of demons. Neither is there any reference to cannibalism. This literature is about ordinary men and women as well as kings and chiefs and was composed by very ordinary, very human poets. More importantly, there is no mention anywhere in this literature of conquest and control by North Indian rulers. Significantly, merchants from as far overseas as the Greece and the Rome are mentioned.

CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION

Edward Said very insightfully compares Rudyard Kipling's boy-hero Kim to the typical epic hero. Said argues persuasively that Kim, the successful hero with a satisfying record of brave deeds, is made possible by British imperialism. In brief, British imperialism makes Kim a hero in the epic mould. (Said, 1993, pp. 159-196) We can go a step further and say that epics and epic heroes are made possible only by monarchy, imperialism and imperialist dreams. This argument makes the *Ramayana* a product of imperialism—a colonial text—and a postcolonial interpretation of it is meaningful.

The *Ramayana* was composed when small tribal republics were coalescing into confederacies, and large regional kingdoms were emerging from small kingdoms by a process of conquest and absorption of rival oligarchies and kingdoms. It was also a period of continuous conquest and absorption of indigenous people. It is well known that the Sakya kingdom, which gave the world a great religious teacher, the Buddha, disappeared from the stage of history because it was conquered and annexed by Kosala during the Buddha's time. In that time of ever increasing geographical expansion and increasing wealth and power a superhuman hero of heroic dimensions would have matched the optimism and buoyancy of the colonizing people.

Spivak, whose words have been quoted at the beginning of Chapter I, had a particular literature in mind when she wrote those words—nineteenth century British literature; and the cultural representation examined by her in that instance is the cultural representation of Others and of England to the English themselves; Spivak, moreover, focuses on what she considers to be an important part of that cultural representation—imperialism understood as England's social mission.

Spivak's words have been applied in this thesis to the *Ramayana*. It has been shown that this text can be considered to be a colonial discourse and that it represents the culture of the dominant group as superior and that of the Other as savage. It has been shown that the *Ramayana* is a text that has contributed to the textual production of stereotypes. This may have served the dominant race and helped it to consolidate its hegemony. In doing this, it has to be admitted that the text has done considerable epistemological violence through racial and cultural shortsightedness and blindness—perhaps even racial and cultural animosity and malice and a sad lack of humanity with regard to Others. The cultural representation in the *Ramayana* and an essential part of that representation, which is to bring law and order to the lawless, have been elucidated based on a postcolonial interpretation of the text. The eulogies and panegyrics lavished on the representatives of the two uppermost castes have been highlighted. However, much more attention was paid to the denigration of Others through a close and critical reading of the text from a postcolonial perspective.

To recapitulate, attention was focused on the following: honour and homage paid to persons of the priestly caste as their due because of their birth; belligerent, militant and exploitative deeds of warriors are praised generously as being valorous, heroic and brave. These deeds have been justified as being performed in the course of

protecting the saintly and law-abiding from evil Others and of establishing law and order among the lawless; Others are portrayed as blood-thirsty, but they are conquered, ironically, by warriors who engage in bloody slaughter. It has been shown that Others are dehumanized, demonized, disparaged and vilified in the text.

This binary cultural representation should not be ignored because the epistemological violence done in the text influences epistemological violence even today as has been shown. In other words, it should not be ignored because it has reverberated down the ages and has repercussions today. It should not be ignored because it is unjust and is based on fancy and prejudice. An analysis, understanding and recognition of the prejudiced cultural representation in the text, it is hoped, will help us to move away from its detrimental effects.

It has been shown that the *Ramayana* is a vehicle for the Hindu ideologies that the priestly caste wished to propagate; these were connected with the vested interest that this powerful class had in maintaining its position of power. It has been shown that good relations were fostered in the text between the priestly caste and the warrior caste; the priestly caste benefited by receiving lavish gifts commandeered by the kings; the kings gained legitimacy through rituals and ceremonies for the performance of which the priests were indispensable. The power of the kings would have been impressed upon the people and the rulers' hold on power strengthened by the pomp and pageantry of these elaborate ceremonies; this is part of the cultural representation in the text. This symbiotic relationship was probably cleverly encouraged and cultivated in the real world. The two elite castes had an interest in keeping the masses in their place. This was true in life and is evident in the text.

The tenets of Brahmanical Hinduism were designed to keep the lower castes in their place and then religion was evoked to keep them in their place. What were convenient social customs (convenient for some and discriminatory for others) were converted to inflexible religious beliefs with textual and divine authority.

As indicated already, the text itself prohibits the reading of the *Ramayana* by the fourth caste. The untouchables are not supposed to even hear it. Epeli Hau'ofa has said something about Tongan customs that is applicable to this situation:

> In Tonga, the term for commoners is *me'a vale*, 'the ignorant ones', which is a survival from an era when the aristocracy controlled all important knowledge in the society. Keeping the ordinary folk in the dark and calling them ignorant made it easier to control and subordinate them. (Hau,ofa 1993, p.4)

It is noteworthy that the classes denigrated in the *Ramayana* have not, for over two millennia, concertedly and persistently questioned the literary treatment meted out to them.

The reasons for this kind of apathy have been discussed by many scholars including Epeli Hau'ofa:

> …the views held by those in dominant positions about their subordinates could have significant consequences on people's self-image and on the ways they cope with their situations. Such views, which are often derogatory and

> belittling, are integral to most relationships of dominance and subordination, wherein superiors behave in ways or say things that are accepted by their inferiors who, in turn behave in ways that serve to perpetuate the relationships. (Hau'ofa, 1993, p.3)

A popular twentieth century writer of a popular Tamil version of the *Ramayana* expressed a few platitudes about the *Ramayana* in the foreword and stated complacently, "Let us keep in our minds the fact that it is the *Ramanaya* and the *Mahabharata* that bind our vast numbers together as one people, despite caste, space and language that *seemingly* divide them" (Rajagopalachari. 1979, p. 10) (emphasis added). The reader is not sure whether 'our vast numbers' and 'one people' refer only to the Hindus of India or to all Indians. C. Rajagopalachari (eminent statesman and scholar though he was) seems to have been quite oblivious of the irony in the statement and unconscious of the unsuitability of the adverb 'seemingly'.

The irony lies in the fact that the *Ramayana* does just that (that is, bind the vast numbers of India as one people) but does it only very briefly, temporarily and superficially in places such as Hindu temples and cinemas where the *Ramayana* is being related or shown. The spiritual experiences of the devotees may be profound and far from superficial. After all the *Ramayana* has provided spiritual sustenance and nourishment to believers for centuries, and continues to do so. It has inspired great sculpture, dance, drama and painting. However, any binding of India's people, referred to by Rajagopalachchari in the quotation above, is brief, temporary and superficial.

Indeed, the binding is worse than superficial in many Hindu temples in India—it is also exclusive. In fact, in modern India, which takes pride in calling itself a secular democracy, untouchables are barred from entering (and worshipping in) many Hindu temples. The Indian Constitution has made discrimination on the basis of caste illegal, but the government is helpless when owners of private property refuse admission to their premises, which they have every right to do, to a particular group of people. The question of who owns this or that temple brings forth very revealing answers. A particular temple may have been built a few centuries ago by some king (not single-handedly of course but with the labour of many, who remain nameless). The king has gone the way of Ozymandias and his descendants either cannot be identified easily or traced at all. But the temple remains. Ownership is sometimes hotly contested and settled in a court of law.

One example of such a dispute is the case in which a judge in the state of Jharkhand has issued newspaper advertisements summoning the gods Ram and Hanuman to appear before the court. The judge has followed this procedure because letters addressed to the gods had gone unanswered. A dispute revolves around the ownership of a 1.4 acre plot of land with two temples dedicated to the gods. The priest, Manmohan Pathak, claims the land belongs to him but locals say it belongs to the gods. The matter came up for trial in 1987 and has still not been settled. (*The Island*, 2007, p. 1.)

However, universal values said to be incorporated in the *Ramayana* cannot have much meaning for people who are treated disgracefully by the dominant section/s of their society. How can an untouchable who might identify with the Others (the

demonized or dehumanized Others) in the *Ramayana* subscribe to the beliefs in the *Ramayana*? The lot of those at the bottom of the caste system in India is disagreeable even more than half a century after Mahatma Gandhi stated that the untouchables too were children of God and re-named them *harijans* (the term means people of the God Hari, who is none other than Vishnu, the God who was incarnated as Rama).

Universal valuing of human beings must precede the acceptance by one and all of universal values. The sordid conditions out of which the events reported by Reuter and headlined "Hindus Convert in Protest" by the *Fiji Times* emerged seem to mirror the sordid conditions out of which some attitudes in the *Ramayana* emerged:

> Thousands of low-caste Hindus converted to Buddhism and Christianity yesterday in protest against new laws in several Indian states that makes such changes of religion difficult…Buddhist monks in orange robes and Christian priests administered religious vows in separate ceremonies to about 10,000 Dalits, the politically correct name for those called "untouchables" in the past…
>
> Several states governed by the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party has strengthened laws to stop what it says are forced conversions, mainly by Christian missionaries…
>
> Under the new laws anyone planning to leave the Hindu fold, the country's majority faith, must obtain certificates from officials and affidavits from courts stating that they were converting out of free will and not by inducements. (*The Fiji Times*, 2006, p.22.)

The dawn of a new millennium in which differences of high and low, mighty and meek, superior and inferior may cease to exist may be hastened if we critically examine past inscriptions of such differences and their dire consequences. The fact that religious-cultural texts such as the *Ramayana* offer solace, consolation and inspiration to many is no reason for accepting what is unjust or misleading in them. Any text should be open to various ways of reading. I feel that this thesis will contribute something valuable and new to the relatively new discipline of understanding and appreciating literature from diverse perspectives that depart from the customary.

An uncritical acceptance of literature as something autonomous and divorced from political, historical and social contexts is detrimental to a true understanding of literature. It is hoped that the critical approach adopted in this project to read a text of the sacred canon of the Hindus will enhance our understanding and enrich our appreciation of the text and also add to the complex ways in which the text is read. It is also hoped that this kind of analysis will encourage critical analyses of other sacred texts and that discriminatory practices sanctioned by and entrenched in sacred texts will be continued to be questioned by new ways of reading the texts.

Challenging textual authority and acknowledging discriminatory cultural representation for what it is, it is hoped, will contribute to abolishing practices that foster injustice, humiliation and misery. So, it is hoped, will restoring the identity of

Others, which has been distorted almost out of recognition in the *Ramayana*, and retrieving their culture, which has been imagined out of existence in the text.

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