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RELIGION AND MYTHOLOGY

Why the rest of India should read Wayanad adivasis' retelling of the Ramayana

Their version of the Ramayana is less black-and-white, more feminist, and they reflect difficult histories.

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For the adivasis of Wayanad, Kerala's northeastern border district, the Ramayana is not a scholarly import from the Hindi belt, as is popularly imagined. It is a story they own, which is set in their villages, where Rama and Sita live a tribal life and suffer the same injustice and abuse they do as a marginalised community.

Wayanad's adivasis make up about 38% of Kerala's tribal population and their histories and identities are as varied as their telling of the Ramayana. Azeez Tharuvana, a Malayalam scholar and teacher who has written extensively on Wayanad's Ramayana, had encountered this fascinating episode told by Mathe Vaidyar, the late elder of the Adiya (slave) tribe. As the story opens, Pakkathappan, the lord of Pakkam – a local area – is talking to Sita, a tribal woman. He orders her to leave his country with all her belongings. Tharuvana has an explanation for this unique story: the Adiyas had for generations been slave labourers for landlords in Thrisseleri and Thirunelli in Wayanad, and Kodagu in neighbouring Karnataka. Being bullied and thrown out of their homes and lands was a familiar story.

Ramayana traditions of Wayanad



Ramayana traditions of Wayanad. Credit: Sahapedia.

Poverty and landlessness are woven into the epic. “The rich people exhibited their wealth by bringing exquisite clothes in bullock carts and buffalo carts,” says the recounting of an Adiya Ramayanam story in Tharuvana’s book, *Wayanadan Ramayanam*. “The poor, who had no clothes except the ones they wore, stayed away watching all this drama. They did not lose any tree, because they were landless.” This is the point where Hanuman is setting fire to the trees of Lanka.

Tharuvana's book has just been made into an award-winning documentary and was shown recently at a seminar at the history department of Delhi University. It reaffirms the point made so strongly by scholar and poet AK Ramanujan in his much-debated essay, [*Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation*](#), that the Ramayana has always been open to interpretation by the communities that own it. It may be recalled that seven years ago the essay was [dropped](#) from the Delhi University syllabus after protests from hardline Hindu groups.



(Right) The late Mathe Vaidyar was an expert on Adiya Ramayanam.

“These stories are particularly significant in the times we live in when multiculturalism is under threat,” said Tharuvana, an assistant professor at Farook College in Kozhikode. “Ramayana is a literary text in the hands of Valmiki, Kamban, Tulsidas and Ezhuthachan, but it is a living oral tradition for many like the adivasis of Wayanad. The stories change with time and change

from one village to another, staying fluid and real for those who believe in them. There are tellings where Sita is serving kaapi (coffee) to Rama, or taking a bullock cart to Lanka, or commanding Hanuman to bring kerosene to set fire to Lanka.”

Wayanad’s Ramayana stories are entirely orally transmitted. How they came into the adivasi folklore tradition is an interesting story as well. Up until the 1950s, temples and other sacred spaces where Ramayana readings took place were closed to all but the high upper castes. So where did the tribals, who did not have the education to read the text, encounter the epic? Likely, said Tharuvana, they heard them being recited at some distance as they worked as slaves in the homes of the upper caste landlords.

A good 18% of Wayanad’s population is adivasi and they are divided into around 12 communities – Adiya, Kurichiya, Kurumar, Karimbalan and Chetti among them – many of which migrated from neighbouring Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Like most tribal pockets in India, they have been subject to denial of human rights across Kerala as the recent story on the [lynching](#) in Attapady showed. Up until 1975, Tharuvana said, there was no ban on the sale of slaves on the occasion of Valliyoorkaavu temple festival in Wayanad.



Valmiki Ashramam, Ashramakolly.

“Some of what is reflected in these stories could then be seen as a defiance of the mainstream narrative of the epic,” Tharuvana said. “For instance, Rama, Sita and Hanuman are not at the head of the divine hierarchy in Wayanad’s Ramayana. That position is reserved for the local deities like Nenjappan, Mathapadevva and Siddhappan.”

Sita, believe the Adiyas, called for the intervention of the local gods when her twin sons tied up the Ashwamedha horse let loose by Rama to establish his imperial might. The boys, according to local legend, also tied Rama and Lakshmana to a tree. The tribal deities arrive and hold court and question Rama on why he abandoned his pregnant wife. “This is almost unheard in any other Ramayana tradition,” Tharuvana pointed out.

Since the adivasis here led a fairly insular life up until recently, and Wayanad

itself is sealed in by its geography, the stories are all set in a 40 sq km area stretching from Muthanga and Pulpalli, according to Tharuvana.

Valmiki's ashram is in Ashramkoly and Sita is believed to have gone plucking flowers in Irulam (place of darkness). As Rama vainly clutches at her when she is being drawn into the earth, all he is left with is a fistful of hair. Jaddayettakavu is the grove where Sita lost her tresses. And Sita is called Chaddetilamma after the site of the story.





Papanashini pond, where Rama and Lakshmana performed rituals as per folklore

Irulam and Althara are both sites where local belief says a distressed Sita rested in her lone journey into the forest. Rampalli is where Rama stopped on his way to Alinkulam, where his sons had captured his Ashwamedha horse.

Every aspect of the adivasi life is pencilled into these Ramayanas – the rich biodiversity of the land, the hills, the medicinal herbs, local rivers and sacred groves. In Tharuvana’s *Wayanadan Ramayanam*, when Hanuman sets Lanka aflame what goes up are coconut trees, areca, coffee plants and banana plantations. When Sita and her children start life afresh at the ashram, it is rice, elephant yam, taro, coffee and pepper they grow, along with bitter gourds and beans.

In some of these adivasi interpretations, you don’t see the stark black-and-white strands of stories as in the classical Ramayana – Ravana himself is not an arch villain and Sita, says *Adiya Ramayanam*, met him long before she met Rama, peaceably travelling to Lanka with him till Hanuman arrives on the scene to tell her of Rama’s love for her.

“These stories are ever-changing for Wayanad’s tribals,” said Tharuvana. “The bullock cart in the stories may make way for the auto – because Ramayana reflects everyday life.”

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