

# Ramayana and the world: Kerala academic Azeez Tharuvana explores plurality of the epic



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Topic | Wayanad

How many versions of Ramayana are there in the world? Belgium-born Jesuit priest Camille Bulcke, who was known for his mastery over Hindi and Sanskrit, had put the number at 300 in his 1950 book, *Ramkatha: Utpathi aur Vikas* (The tale of Rama: origin and development).

The number has been increasing since then with researchers culling out different Ramayana versions from South Asian countries and subaltern

societies in India.

The list got a few interesting entries from Kerala too, with Dr Azeez Tharuvana, an academic from northern hilly district of Wayanad, recording the oral traditions of Ramayana that are popular among different Adivasi tribes. Wayanad, which is part of the ecologically sensitive Western Ghats, is home to the largest Adivasi population in Kerala.

The research, conducted between 2003 and 2007, earned Azeez a doctorate from University of Calicut. The thesis was titled *Ithihasa Kathakalude Nadodi Roopangal Wayanad Jillaryil*, or Folk Versions of Epic Stories in Wayanad District.

The research was very tough, remembers Azeez. “In the absence of existing literature on the topic, I spent most of my research period on the field. I studied the culture of all 12 Adivasi tribes in Wayanad district during that period,” he says.

The extensive research yielded many interesting results.

He found out that each Adivasi tribe has its own Ramayana version which is being spread through word of mouth.

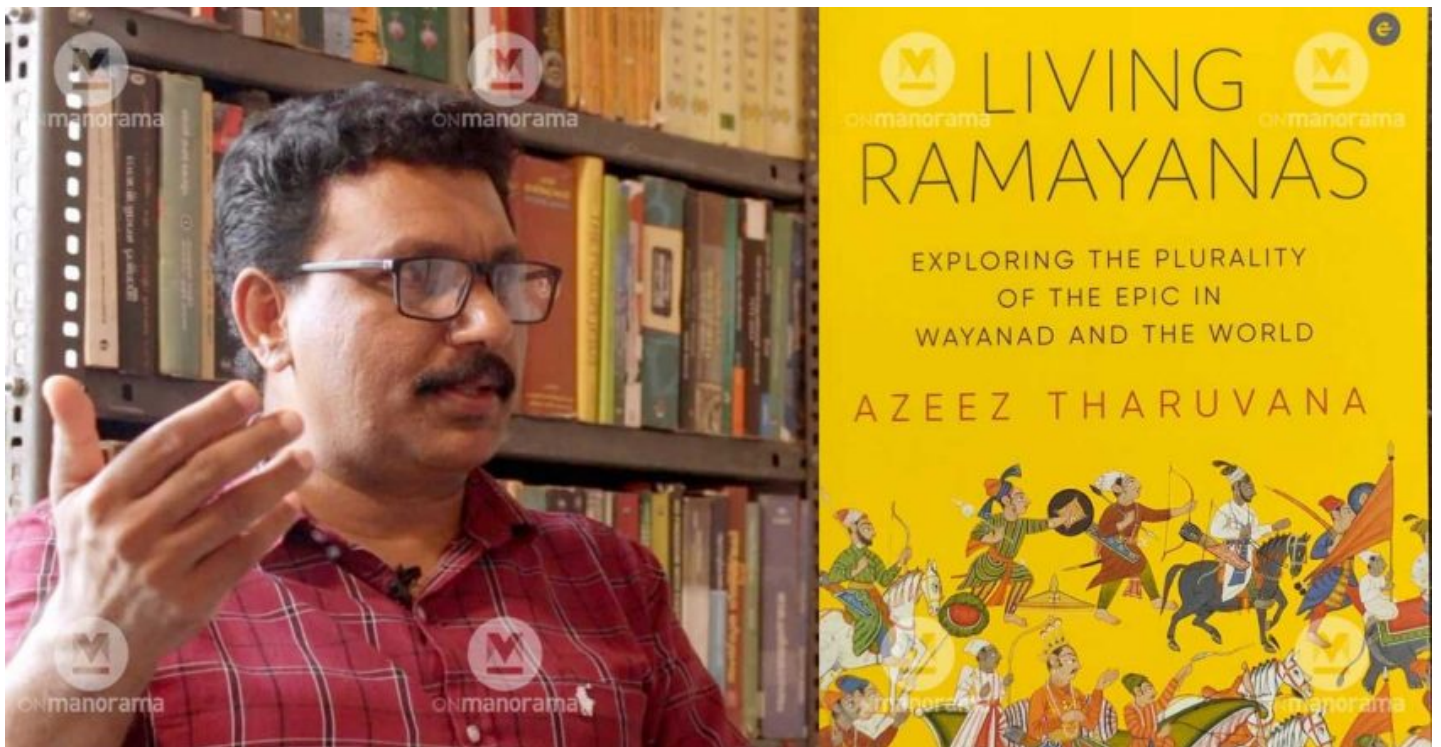
The Ramayana version popular among the Adiya tribe is known as Adiya Ramayana. What makes it peculiar is the absence of war and the presence of the Gods and Goddesses of the tribe as characters in the story. The Gods and Goddesses are even questioning Lord Rama in the tribal court. They ask him whether it is correct to abandon his pregnant wife Sita in the forest and is it the duty of the husband to look after the children.

Azeez found a maximum number of Ramayana stories from the Mullukuruma tribe whose folk arts, such as Kolkkali and Vattakkali, use songs from Ramayana and Mahabharatha stories. He got Ramayana stories from Kurichiyas, the most developed Adivasi tribes. However, he could not find any Ramayana stories from Paniyas, the largest Adivasi

tribe in Kerala.

The research also found that names of 30 places in Wayanad (mostly in the Pulpally - Sulthan Bathery stretch) are believed to have links with the epic.

Legend has it that Ponkuzhi got its name from Penkili, the male and female pair of *Kraunca* birds, which were killed by a hunter. Alinkalam got its name because Lava and Kusha tied the Yagashwam (horse of the sacrifice) to a banyan tree here. Jadayattakavu in Pulpally is believed to be the place where Sita Devi vanished into the Earth. Ashramam Kolli has a rock where Sage Valmiki is believed to have observed penance. Sasimala is believed to be the place where Sage Valmiki taught Lava and Kusha archery. Banasuramala (Banasura Hill) is believed to be the place where Banasura fought Sri Krishna.



Dr Azeez Tharuvana and his book 'Living Ramayanas: Exploring the Plurality of the Epic in Wayanad'.

Azeez's research was published as a book titled 'Wayanadan Ramayanam'. The English version of the book - Living Ramayanas: Exploring the Plurality of the Epic in Wayanad - has been published recently.

The first part of the book dwells into the oral versions of Ramayana that are prevalent among the Adivasis in Wayanad while the second part deals with the Ramayana versions popular among the Jain, Buddha, Muslim and subaltern communities.

In an interview with *Onmanorama*, Azeez explains many interesting aspects of Ramayana. Watch the full interview [here](#).

**Edited excerpts from the interview:**

**Question: You have done a lot of research on Ramayana. What do you think about the existence of different versions of the epic?**

Oral versions of Ramayana were popular even before Adikavi Valmiki wrote the epic. Apart from Valmiki, 19 other saints also wrote Ramayanas. Valmiki Ramayana is a Brahminical text. The Buddhist Ramayana was written in Pali language. Jain monk Vimalasuri wrote a Ramayana version titled 'Paumacariya' in Prakrit language. Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia and Philippines too have their own Ramayana versions. Prominent among them is Indonesian Ramayana, known as 'Hikayat Seri Rama'. Muslims in Kerala have Mappila Ramayanam. Plenty of Ramayana versions exist among Adivasi and Dalit communities in India. The plurality of Ramayana is not a recent discovery. This has been mentioned in Ramayanas itself. Tulsidas states in his 'Ram Charit Manas' that Rama is born in countless ways and there are tens of millions of Ramayanas.

**Question: What is Wayanadan Ramayana and how popular is it?**

I worked on my doctoral thesis on the folk versions of Ramayana between 2003 and 2007. In the beginning, I was a bit anxious on how to go about it because of the absence of literature. So I worked on the field, meeting Adivasis and those who know about the oral traditions. What I found was each Adivasi tribe has its own Ramayana version and names of around 30 places in Wayanad are linked with the epic.

**Question: What are the differences between the Adivasi Ramayanas and the one written by Valmiki or Tulasidas?**

Many people see other Ramayanas as the extended versions of Valmiki Ramayana. That is not correct. Ramayana versions written during the Bhakthi movement were based on Valmiki's Ramayana. But popular Ramayanas in foreign countries were found to be the continuation of Buddha Ramayanas. Buddhists played a key role in taking the Ramayana abroad. So the Ramayana versions do not have the same structure.

For example, according to Valmiki Ramayana, King Dasharatha's palace is in Ayodhya. But in Buddha Dasratha Jataka (Buddha Ramayana), the palace is in Varanasi. In the Ramayana that is popular in Kotan in Turkistan, Sita is the wife of both Sri Rama and Lakshmana. In Buddha Dasratha Jataka, Sita is the sister of Sri Rama.

Let me tell you about Ram Sethu. Legend has it that Lord Rama's Vanara Sena built the bridge to facilitate the latter's travel to Lanka. In certain Ramayana versions, Hanuman's tail is acting as a bridge. Another version has it that water evaporated when Sri Rama stood on the banks, and he walked into Lanka. Some other versions say that Sri Rama reaches Lanka by Pushpaka Vimana.

Historian H D Sankalia said that Lanka is in Madhya Pradesh. If Lanka is in Madhya Pradesh, then why did Sri Rama cross the Samudra? That is a confusion in linguistics. Because Samudra in Sanskrit means pond, river or ocean. So everything is different in Ramayana. The only constant is the names of Sri Rama and Sita. Even those names have slight differences in foreign Ramayanas.

### **Question: Will you briefly tell us about Muslim Ramayanas?**

We consider Ramayana as the Hindu religious text. But Ramayana versions exist among Muslims too. Firstly, I would like to mention the Persian translations of Ramayana during Emperor Akbar's reign. We can see a lot of variations in it because the stories are intertwined with Muslim culture. Many Mughal paintings were also inspired by the Ramayana.

After India, the country with the highest acceptance of the Ramayana is Indonesia . The Indonesian Ramayana was written by an Adivali or sufi saint, Sunan Kalijaga. He was an Islamic preacher. The name of the Indonesian Ramayana is ‘Hikayat Seri Rama’, or Story of Sri Ram. In that version, both Sri Rama and Ravana offer prayers to Allah. The story has mentions about the prophets of Islam and their disciples. Its neighbouring country, Malaysia, too has Ramayana connection. Ramayana is popular among the Muslims in the Philippines too. Their Ramayana refers ‘Brahma’ as ‘Allah’. A prominent Islamic scholar from Egypt translated Ramayana to Arabic.

In Kerala, Mappila Ramayana is the folk version of the epic. It is a lyrical text similar to the conversational style of the Mappila songs (Muslim folk songs). It was written in the 1970s and has 143 stanzas. It tells the Ramayana story in the context of Mappila life in Malabar. What makes it interesting is its style of narration.

**Question: Why does Wayanad have so many Ramayana versions?**

Wayanad is a hilly terrain and is home to natural forests. It is easy to create myths because of this peculiar geography. But these myths are being historicised now. It is a dangerous trend.