Fieldwork Report: The Dangi Ramakatha: An Epic acculturated?

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Abstract: The adoption of the pan-Indian epic of Ramayana by the Dangi tribal community is the focal point of this research paper. The bards of Kunkana community of the Dang district in Gujarat narrate the Ramayana in such a way that it becomes a narration of their own social history. Set in a creolized tribal dialect its understanding calls for a special knowledge on the region’s history, inter tribal relations between Kunkanas and Bhils and their bearing on the timber politics of the region. This research paper deals with how the colonial period politics imposed itself on the lives of the tribal people of this region and how they are still struggling to come to terms with it.

Ramakatha, the saga of Rama, has remained alive and popular for over two thousand years virtually throughout the entire Indian subcontinent. Its spread as well as adaptation has been phenomenal; hundreds of versions of the story of Rama, the great hero and sometimes an incarnation, have been popular in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, China, Tibet, Burma or Myanmar, Japan, Laos or Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Turkey, even while not mentioning Pakistan and Bangladesh separately as they share the cultural history with India till too recently. There have been hundreds of versions of the story in scores of languages and quite innumerable adaptations in various genres of literature and performative traditions. The Ramakatha has been adapted to religious literature and scriptures that follow the brahmanical (later Hindu), the Buddhist as well as the Jaina religious traditions in all their heterogeneous sects or sampradayas.
According to scholars, the story of the hero Rama was initially sung by bards in its various strands and episodes through ‘gathas’ and ‘aakhyanas’ which were popular events at the time of yajnas and other congregations, perhaps as early as the 4th to 6th c. B.C. It is believed by scholars that these scattered strands were for the first time compiled and composed into a consistent narrative, into a Prabandha-kavya by Valmiki in around 300 B.C. Since then, the Ramayana has grown in size and scope and evolved into what has for centuries been known as the Valmiki-Ramayana, of which again there are three main versions popular: the Gaudiyar version, the north-western version and the southern version. At the same time, the story of Rama has been adapted by generations, each time molding it, adding to it, acculturating it to suit the imagination, taste and demand of the audience it was supposedly addressed to. The influences of local culture and social aspects as well as the particular trends and beliefs of each region or sect on the version of the Ramakatha it produced are truly interesting.

In his extraordinary work on the narrative history of the Ramakatha, Fr. Camille Bulke discusses elaborately the 107 different versions of Ramakatha or literary works entirely based on it. However, the work only mentions and occasionally refers to some variations of a number of episodes from the Ramakatha among some Indian tribes, especially the Birhors and the Mundas. It does not refer to any complete written or documented text of ‘adivasi’ version of the katha. In other works on variations of Ramayana there is hardly any mention of the variations of Ramakatha amongst any of the adivasi communities. The first text of any tribal version of the Ramakatha to come into the public domain was through Dr. Bhagwandas Patel’s enormous effort of documenting and compiling the Ramakatha popular among the Dungari Bhils of the Sabarkantha region of north Gujarat. He published the Bhili Lokakhyan : Roam Sitma ni Varata in 1995 (Gujarat Sahitya Akademi, Gandhinagar) along with the abridged translation in Gujarati. Perhaps, inspired by this, Dahyabhai Vadhu, a man from another tribal community - the Kunkana or Konkana - started collecting the versions of Ramakatha he had heard of since his childhood from the narrator-priests of his own community. The Kunkana Ramakatha published in Gujarati, along with Gujarati translation, in 2003 by the Meghani Lokvidya Sanshodhan Bhavan, Ahmedabad was an incomplete but authentic documentation. Therefore, the work of documenting the Dangi Ramakatha was taken up more scientifically and audio-visually, by the author and Dahyabhai Vadhu together. In this project, aided by the National Folklore Support Centre, two complete narrations of the entire Ramakatha in the Dangi tradition by two different pairs of narrator-priests have been recorded and transcribed. Along with this, five public programmes of the Ramakatha narration in the traditional style of the community were arranged at different villages and the live narration and total interaction between the narrators and the village audience has been audio-visually documented for a better understanding of
the various nuances of the practice as also for a documented record of the tradition for future generations. Based on this documentation, this article tries to present the essence of this particular tradition.

The Region and the People

The small district of Dangs is situated on the southeastern border of Gujarat. Leaning onto Maharashtra, it is surrounded by the Khandesh region of Maharashtra on the east, Nasik and Surgana in the southeast and south, Valsad district of Gujarat on the southwest, Surat on the west and the Narmada, Bharuch and Baroda Districts towards north. Dang, a geographical term in native speech meaning hilly terrain, is used for a much wider area across several districts eastward of the district. A thickly forested area, the mountainous district is home for high quality teak and other timber and is the richest forest area of Gujarat. It is the smallest district of the state, with a single taluk, and is populated almost entirely by tribal communities, mainly by Bhil, Kunkana, Varli, Gamit, Mavchi, and Dhodia.

The major occupation is agriculture since the region is a forest area and more than 60% of the land is forest land; however, the 30% land under agriculture is almost solely under tribal holding with the non-tribal population being that of some small traders, professionals and government officials. Very sparsely populated, the district has only 311 villages, only 2-3 among them including the district head quarters large enough to be called towns, with a population of 2000 or more.

The pattern of agriculture was mainly that of shifting variety in earlier times, a practice brought down by force by the British government, and settled agriculture encouraged in every manner by both British and now Indian government, mainly to restrict felling and damage to the forest. Today, even while more than 70% of the population depends on agriculture profession, after the monsoon crops, at least 30% of them turn to industrial labour migrating to the sugar belts of Khandesh or south Gujarat. In addition to this, food gathering, fishing, cattle or goat breeding and selling minor forest produce serve as supplementary professions.

The reason for this is the virtual absence of irrigation in the area till recently. The district has four rivers flowing through it – Poorna, Ambika, Gira and Khapri. Due to lack of irrigation, there can be only one crop per year – the monsoon or kharip one.

The main crops of the region traditionally have been nagli (ragi), vari and lesser varieties of rice among cereals, with jowar and maize; among pulses, traditionally there have been lentils, mung, kulith, black gram and soybean introduced recently; they have sesame, lesser groundnut and kharasani apart from the oil from Mahua seeds.
By custom, this area has been fair to the women, with a consistent working women ratio of above 98%, in a state where this rate is well below 75%. The women are strong-willed who have authority over the family but does not have legal rights unless they can bear children.

For years, the area saw quite considerable efforts of community work. However, only recently, the area has experienced a heavy demand for education and literacy as well as in taking to various community empowerment schemes, and there seems to be an urge working underneath to modernize and to have the level playing field at par with the outside world.

As for the social relations within the different tribal communities, Bhils have been the oldest inhabitants of the region, perhaps the first to populate the area. In fact, in older times, the area was divided into different administrative-political areas each carrying the term Dang (e.g. Dang Gadhvi), each under the chieftaincy of a local Bhil chief (hence the district nomenclature in plural - ‘the Dangs’), and only loosely affiliated to one or other of the surrounding major plains power heads. The Kunkanas or Konkanas, a comparatively puritan peasantry, have supposedly migrated into this thick forest region from the Surgana-Nasik-Khandesh regions and perhaps further south, due to environmental reasons. They seem to have continued to migrate into and settle in this region all through the 14th to the 18th centuries. They settled in this region with due sanction from the Bhil chieftains as their ryots and were in a position to pay a small amount of plough-tax and several other dues, and were certainly the secondary population. However, it is they who have supposedly introduced systematic agriculture to the region, in the process solving to some extent the permanent problem of food shortage for the Bhil rulers and their brotherhood. Being technologically advanced and having more elaborate religious-ritualistic convictions, they became the morally superior populace. The priests - Bhagats - for all the communities in the region are generally Kunkana though there are a few Varli Bhagats too. The Kunkana Bhagat performs all the familial as well as social-community rituals for all. Also, they were to some extent familiar with the social-political systems of the plains with which the Bhil chiefs had to deal with; they soon became the solicitors and secretaries of the chiefs helping them negotiate terms with the outside powers. The Karbhari (one who looks after matters of business) of the chiefs as well as of the village and the Patil (chief) of the village is almost a Kunkana. Thus, it has been a relationship of negotiating hegemony among the two communities being a major aspect of social life.

However, through the centuries of living together and sharing the environment and socio-political conditions, there has emerged a specifically Dangi culture with little community-distinction in the more public aspects of social life. Thus, they all share to a large extent the styles and technology.
of agriculture, cropping patterns, totems (not necessarily the taboos - traditionally the Bhils ate beef and some other meats which the Konkanas and Varlis do not, hence the distinction) and notions of the sacrosanct as well as evil, dress and ornamentation, food and cooking methods, house and village structures, working patterns both at field and as migrant labourers, the pantheon, ritual and entertainment. Though drawing upon their particular pasts, the people of Dangs have evolved their own shared annual series of community rituals as well as family ceremonies; and with these rituals are inextricably associated their forms of oral literature. Though practised as a part of the ritual they also function as forms of entertainment and are expressions of the community’s literary consciousness.

The Rituals and the Range of Literature

The rituals of the people may be divided into three main categories-

**Life cycle rituals** – jaran, paran, maran festivities

- Birth – no gender discrimination – *Panchora* ritual with narrative
- Marriage – *Pen* - in presence of five ‘*savasins’ & Madal dancers-singers
- Death – Grief celebrated, with narrative sung in the night in front of the dead person

**Social rituals**

- *Pidhi* – a homage ritual for ancestors, with songs sung to Khanderao-Baheram on Dhak
- *Holi* – A major festival – the landmark for financial transactions – marked also with the ‘*Darbar’*

**Agriculture & Environment related**

- *Akhatij*–beginning of agricultural season, after worshipping grain & soil and honouring plough and oxen
- Tera–beginning of consumption of greens
- *Panchvi*–the *Naag Panchami* –marked with wall drawings with Tantric orientation–Bhagats ritually re-capturing the mantras
- *Gahaa*-taking ritual permission from the plant goddess before harvesting the crop
- Kansari Pooja & narrative–before separating the grain from husk, absolutely mandatory in each household, done throughout the harvesting season
- *Dungardev mavli*–‘the mother - mountain goddess’–huge festival–congregation of people from outside too; should bear historical contexts – matter of investigation
**Range of Literature**

Mostly related with the rituals & ceremonies

- Religious tales – Kansari, Mavli
- Life-cycle related – Satimata, Salvan & Mansing
- General recreation – Ramakatha, etc
- At ‘Pidhi’ worship – narratives on ‘Dhak’
- Songs to propitiate rain – on ‘Dera’
- Marriage songs of different occasions and other casual songs
- Dungardev Festival songs sung by men
- Sayings, proverbs, riddles
- Stories for children and stories adapted for children

‘Tamasha’, ‘Sohong’ & ‘Lavni’ –

the performative traditions for entertainment

**The Ramakatha Narrative Tradition**

The Ramakatha among the Dangi people is not contextualized by any ritual nor is it mandatory to sing this story at any particular congregation; it has been popular only as a matter of entertainment with some religious overtone. This fact suggests that the people must have imitated the story from some outside sources at some remote point in history; in my own view, it is also possible that the populace migrating from outside could have carried it along from outer regions. However, the story of Rama is today viewed as an aspect of Dang’s own culture and the people take great pride in associating themselves and their region with Rama. The geography of Dangs and the surrounding region is dotted with places associated with the saga of Rama, especially some episodes from the period of his dwelling in the forest.

However, the peculiar and the once popular Dangi Ramakatha narrative tradition, is now a fast disappearing tradition with more ‘devotional’ versions of the Ramakatha, popularized by various Sants, Bapus and Maharajas with their increasing tribal following encroaching upon and displacing this indigenous tradition, quite encouraged by today’s socio-political conditions in the state. There is a rich tradition of varied narratives in the region and like most other religiously sanctified narratives, the Ramakatha is also told by a priest only, along with an accompanist. The accompanist joins in the narration repeating the last word/phrase of every line narrated by the Bhagat, and after every few lines, together they sing some lines with a refrain. The *katha* is sung in accompaniment of an indigenous instrument called the Thali; it is a deep round plate of bronze or even brass (the common utensil in kitchen usually used for kneading dough for rotis), in the centre of its...
surface a dry hollow stick of the stem of a plant called Bhangsar is stuck vertically with the help of a particular kind of bee’s wax (Koti – the small kind of bee which makes its hive on or near the ground at a low level, and hovers around damp, watery places). The Bhagat keeps this Thali on his lap holding it between his folded thighs, thus creating a hollow beneath the plate. He holds the stick between the thumb and the first two fingers of both his hands and moves them on the stick from top to bottom one after the other, thus producing a melodious bass drone much alike a bowed string instrument. It cannot have any variation of notes beyond adjusting the note to the voice of the narrator by shifting the placing of the stick on the surface of the Thali. However, the sound produced is certainly powerful enough to enable the Bhagat to concentrate and turn inward for invoking the narrative that sits deep within his mind. The accompanist’s repetition of the last word or phrase may perhaps be intended to help the narrator link the forthcoming lines to what has been said earlier; and the constant movement of hands in a specific manner, too, may be an expression of the singers’ effort to churn out the narrative sitting dormant within.

The Bhagat first invokes the deities – natural, animistic, mythical – and then turns to the narrative itself as if searching for the next lines and pulling them out from deep within as he goes on singing and narrating lines after lines spontaneously. The story line is generally fixed and certainly defined in each line of narrators, but the original narration – the words and lines sung at every performance are spontaneous. The length as well as the excellence and exuberance of narration may vary at every performance; in this sense it may very well be called a still alive bardic tradition!

The Storyline
With the two versions of the narrative we have documented from two different pairs of narrators; we can note the major features of the story with its common and differing portions.

Ramubhai Pawar, the disciple of Bhilyabhai Chaudhari-the first Bhagat we knew, gave his first ever performance before us with the participative accompaniment of Bandyabhai Gangurde. He dedicatedly sang a full length version at the when his own Guru was in physical paralysis. Gulububhai Chaudhari, the very old Bhagat presented, a very authentic but a bit hurried version rather skeptically along with a temporary accompanist, Badhyabhai.  

Ramubhai’s narrative opens with invocation and honour to a number of deities and gods. He opens his narrative with the origin of the instrument Thali and how the Kunbi-Kunkana received instruction from Bhagwan himself (in the guise of a sanyasi speaking Hindi) and started singing narratives on it, and then goes on to the Ramakatha starting from the account of the ancestors and siblings of Ravana. In both the cases Ravana is the youngest of seven brothers, and a lame child frowned upon by all.
Ramubhai goes into the details of how the six brothers of Ravana, along with their six wives, barely survive by cutting wild grass and selling it in the nearby towns. One day, the eldest brother tells the child with no legs or arms that they cannot feed him anymore idly, and that he should take refuge with the Bhagwan who gave him such a life.

The lame child then reaches, creeping and tumbling, the abode of Bhagwan or Mahadeva and worships the Pind or lingam, prays to him to grant a normal and healthy body so that he can work and earn for his life. However, as he is made to wait for a while by Bhagwan, in Ramubhai’s version, he gets frustrated and, against the warning given by Bhagwan, desperately enters the forbidden room with death awaiting there.

However, the room has a pond of Amrita, which he falls into and drinks some drops of it, and thus becomes Ravana with ten heads and twenty arms. In Gulbubhai’s version he does this accidentally, and gets a kundi (vessel) of Amrita filled up in his chest. Now, as consolation for this monstrosity he gets the throne or Gadi / Raj of the golden Lanka and also asks for Parvati, whom he sees fetching water into Mahadeva’s house, and gets her.

On his way to Lanka, Krishna stops him in the disguise of a Bhil and complains that he has been deceived by Mahadeva and been offered a sterile buffalo as a reward for the basketfuls of fish and crabs he gave, and pleads that Ravana, too, must have been deceived in a similar fashion. Thus, Ravana returns and exchanges Parvati with Mahadeva against a duplicate of Parvati created by him out of a female toad–Mandodari also called Mandaldhar Kanya–the Lady with an Aura. Before going with Ravana, she conceives from Mahadeva through meeting of the eyes (this is somewhat ambiguous linguistically, the word sov nijra–nijar or najar meaning look–being quite close to sahanidra–sleeping together).

In Ramubhai’s version (R), he also argues, as per Krishna’s advice, for the throne of death (Maran murti ni gadi) and gets it irreversibly in spite of him changing his mind. In the old man’s version (G), he asks for Muktı ni gadi, and that granted, is assured that Rama will bring him death. He realizes that he has been deceived but it is too late.

On his way again, Ravana sleeps and Mandaldhar gets down to bathe in the pond along with other frogs. On waking Ravana gives a very loud call which makes her frightened and she drops the embryo in the pond. It flows in the stream, and reaches a sterile orchard of a childless gardener. In version (G), it is kept in a box–sandook–and flown into the stream. The sterile orchard blooms with flowers and fruits, the gardener takes the now fully grown baby home. However, the king of the town – Raja Janki – comes and adopts the girl himself, takes her to his queen and they name her Sita. In version (R), the owner of the orchard - Mali Raja or Jambu Mali – takes her to his
wife and they rear her up till she is seven years old. Now she goes for the ritual of Gaurai and starts singing and playing and dancing with ‘tipur’ (small stick, like ‘Dandia’) with her seven friends at the riverbank. There are other three hundred and sixty girls from the region of Raja Janki, who too are playing alongside. During the dancing, Sita hits a girl from the other group with her tipur by mistake, a quarrel begins and soon, they start fighting. Sita fights with the three hundred and sixty girls from Jankipur nagar alone, and beats them up badly. And then, on their complaint, Raja Janki comes with his army to fight Jambu Mali who hardly knows any warfare, so he surrenders Sita to Janki on his threats and demand. Later, she grows up as the daughter of Janki and his wife.

In version (R), Janki is visited by his brother-in-law Dasharatha who finds Sita playing with the huge bow as her play horse and the arrow as the stick to hit it. He asks Janki to marry the girl only to a very able person on a specific condition and leaves the bow, arrow and the ida as well as there itself, for the event in future.

Ravana invites Dasharatha for consultation on how to run the Raj in harmony. However, the equation of hegemony is different in the two versions; as per (G), Dasharatha is supposed to observe Ravana’s good governance and learn from him. While in version (R), Ravana has become arrogant and has been harassing and imprisoning the gods. He asks Dasharatha to come to his kingdom to enact laws but locks him up cunningly inside a box to avoid the birth of Rama. The box has sharp blades inside and is thrown into the ocean. In version (R), this has been advised by Narandev, who wants to take Dasharatha out of the custody. In version (G), goddess Kansari gets furious and reprimands Ravana that Rama will still be born and kill him. Then, Dasharatha’s destined wife, Gori Lakshmi of the heavens, daughter of Indra, is also thrown into the ocean on a float, and the ocean is requested to bring the two together, and take them to the other shore. So, Gori Lakshmi rescues Dasharatha; in (R) Bhagwan stitches the body back into proper form, in (G) she puts his soul back in his body and then they marry.

In version (G), Dasharatha craves for a child, but he is told that he will get a child only if he hunts humans. In version (R), as he approaches the Bhagwan in Dwaraka and asks for a child, he is told that it is destined for him that he will not get a child till he kills two men and a woman with a single arrow.

Rukmaai and Vaasudeva are Dasharatha’s sister and her husband. One day Vaasudeva Pita (as he is addressed) goes for a hunt and kills a deer from a mating pair of deers who actually are a sage and his wife in disguise, wishing to have a child at an auspicious good time which they are not destined to get in the human life. The stag is killed right when he is about to mate (This seems an allusion to a similar situation in the Mahabharata –
that of Pandu killing a stag); and the deer curses Vaasudeva of becoming blind along with his wife as soon as he eats the meat of the killed stag. Then there is a lengthy digression of the well-known episode of Shravana, the son of Vaasudeva and Rukmaai. The narrators take great interest in describing the cunning deeds of Kengaai, wife of Shravana, whose harassment and ill treatment of her blind in-laws prompt Shravana to take them on a pilgrimage to Kashi in a Kaavada.

Dasharatha, while on a hunt, mistakenly aims at Shravana fetching water and the old couple dies of grief after cursing. In (G), the death of Dasharatha’s wife on the 12th day after childbirth occurs and thus the condition of the earlier curse is fulfilled. In (R), the curse is that when he dies, Dasharatha will not get any place of rest on earth; in (G) it is an additional curse that he will have leprosy because of which he will not get any place of rest.

In version (R), Dasharatha completes the last rites of the three dead persons, and floats six out of nine pindas along with other materials in the river, and takes three back home in a plate. While he walks home with the plate in his hands, one of the pindas is carried away by a kite and dropped in the praying hands of Anjana, a chaste maiden. She consumes it thinking it to be the boon from God and thus conceives Hanumana. The remaining portion is taken home by Dasharatha (consuming which, Gori Lakshmi, too, conceives; however, this is not stated). In this version, the earlier portion of Dasharatha’s captivity, death and rebirth come after this entire long episode.

Now Rama is born, Ravana gets fearful and approaches the king-god of the Pataal, Shukadev Bhagwan and asks for his eldest son for adoption as the prince, saying that he can rule both the kingdoms in the future. However, he takes the prince with him and tells him that he will be made the prince of Lanka on the condition that he kills baby Rama. As the snake prince, Nagisar in (G), or Nagude Kunwar in (R), hides under the bathing place where Gori Lakshmi is about to bathe the baby, as per (G), water from Rama’s bath enters into his mouth, while as per (R), he recognizes the incarnation and changes his mind to serve Rama for life, and turns into a baby himself who is adopted by Gori Lakshmi and Dasharatha as another son – Lakshmana. In (G), on the 12th day the queen dies and for a while Dasharatha brings up the two sons with great difficulty. In (R), Bhagwandeva, worried about how the purpose of Rama’s birth be fulfilled, sends Kaalayavana (a character from Krishna’s life in Hindu mythology) to take out the soul of Gori Lakshmi.

Later he thinks of marrying some old woman so that she would cook, clean and care for him and the two children without harassing them as any other young stepmother perhaps would do. So he finds Koshlya in (G),
Kaikovchala in (R), (a combination of Kaikeyi and Kausalya of Ramayana, where the names actually suggest the regions the two ladies come from, namely Kekaya and Kosala) – a 100 year old lady with a hunch, and at her condition, declares he has no children.

To cover up the lie, he now hides the two boys and feigns that there are two family gods who have to be propitiated every day with food before anybody else eats. Thus they grow in hiding. In version (G), Dasharatha prays for her becoming a beautiful young woman. In version (R), the queen is unhappy because Dasharatha always sleeps separately. One day, as she goes to fetch water, she watches her face in the water and realizes her ugliness and prays to Mahadeva to metamorphose her, and so she returns as a beautiful young lady. Now they start sleeping together; she conceives and gives birth to twins. This whole episode is seen, in (G), as a blessing of the two gods; however, one day in his absence, she goes to offer food to the gods and finds out the truth. She condemns him for putting the young ones to such misery; he urges her to accept them as their children, which she does, and so, the four now grow together.

The gods Suryadev and Suksen have a fight over supremacy where Dasharatha is called upon. The queen helps him win by maintaining the balance of his broken ratha using her hands and legs to support it. To keep this as a secret he grants her a boon by which she asks for vanawasa to Rama-Lakshmana and gadi or crown for Bharata and Shatru in (G), and the two leave immediately. In (R), she accepts the boon which she would demand at a later point of time and, demands fourteen years of vanawasa for Rama at the time when he is to be crowned. Dasharatha collapses and Rama-Lakshmana leave the place flanked by Bharata and Shashrata. Being called out by Dasharatha, Rama looks back at him exactly at the point where Vaasudeva-Rukmaai-Shravana were cremated, and the lady’s curse hits Dasharatha and he dies at that moment. Rama sends the two younger brothers back saying they should help him if they hear any threatening sound from the skies or from within the earth.

In both the versions, Janki announces a peculiar condition for anyone desiring to marry Sita; the person should stand on the edges of a huge frying pan containing twelve tins of boiling oil, take the huge bow and arrow of Dasharatha and, look at its image in the boiling oil, aiming at the eye of the rotating fish hung above and shoot it in such a way that it falls in the oil. After that the aspirant should have seven dips in the oil, then chew upon the pungent ida – the betel leaf with filling – and spit out the juice which would burn the flora and fauna around.

Janki invites Ravana who fails and falls with the bow upon his chest, chanting Rama’s name. Rama-Lakshmana who are already in exile drink water putting the mouth straight to the stream, and there they listen, in (R),
the music and noise at Sita’s swayamwara, while in (G) they listen to the chanting of Ravana; and Lakshmana forcefully brings Rama to the place.

Lakshmana rushes to the place and picks up the bow from Ravana’s chest with a light kick of his left foot, and then fulfils the condition, however, he offers Sita to Rama as he is the elder one.

The vanawasa of the three, Ravana’s plotting and the episode of Suparnakha (Shurpanakha) are all present in the narration. Her son, who is doing tapa for twelve years, with his body covered with anthills and bamboo shoots, is beheaded by Lakshmana by mistake. To avenge his killing, she comes to him as a beautiful young lady, ‘Subhadra’ in (R), and tries to seduce him. Lakshmana sends her to Rama, who is alarmed as Lakshmana’s fate does not allow a wife for him. He sends her back to Lakshmana with a note to him stuck to her back revealing her reality, and so Lakshmana beats her, chopping off her nose (as per (G), the place where the nose falls comes to fame as the city Nasik which is close by).

The episode of the golden deer sent by Ravana dancing and alluring Sita, Rama’s hunting it and Sita’s abduction by Ravana, in the guise of a fakir calling out ‘Allah!’ and speaking Hindi can be found in (G). Here, Lakshmana leaves her alone in the hut marking the descending steps of the hut as the steps of Dharam (duty), Sat (holiness), Yesh (credit) and Paap (sin), in that order. Sita climbs down only three of these at the insistence of Ravana but he pulls her out and abducts her.

The scenes of Sita giving away ornaments to creatures around, the signs they bear even today and the peacock (instead of Jatayu) confronting Ravana can be seen only in version (G); Ravana takes Sita to Lanka and keeps her in Aarsi Mahal (a hall with mirror work - instead of the Ashokawana) in version (G) whereas it is Kude Mahal in the Moti Baag in version (R). Hanumana approaches Rama and Lakshmana as soon as he is born to serve them in version (R). The event of building the Shivasoot (Shivasetu?) with Rama’s name scribed on each stone and calling in Sugreeva as well as the monkeys and all the gods joining in can be found in version (R). Incidents such as Hanumana appearing before Sita as a child with Rama’s ring; his destroying the orchard; being captured and the tail lit with fire and burning the Lanka can be observed in version (G).

In some episodes, Makari is shown swallowing the tired Hanumana’s fallen semen and giving birth to his son Makaradhwaja. Then, there are Rama and Lakshmana being captured by Ravana’s aides Ahiravana and Mahiravana, and Hanumana rescuing them with the help of Makaradhwaja; and of the wives of Ahiravana and Mahiravana demanding Rama and Lakshmana on their bed. But the bed not being strong breaks with the two leaving the place immediately, as per version (G) after promising the women of giving companionship in the next incarnation at Gokul!
Then, Rama wages war allying with Vibichand (Vibheeshana) and Sugreeva, as per (R). In (G), there are references to Ravana’s brothers along with Kumbhakarna as well as Indrajit, who makes specific sacrifices and hurts Lakshmana with the Shakti. In (R), Ravana’s son Meghanatha is killed by Lakshmana for which Ravana revenges by shooting his arrow on Lakshmana. Then, on a Rishi’s advice, Hanumana goes to find the remedial herb failing which he lifts up the whole mountain with medicinal plants (Vansi) on it. On his way back, the sound of his gigantic movement is heard and is seen by Bharata who aims at his ankle out of fear. He is given the whole explanation and sent back immediately to the battlefield. According to (G), the squeezed herb still lives on – as the plant of tobacco. With none of the aides left, Ravana fights alone. But when he gets beheaded, he develops another and continues to fight. Finally he is aimed at heart destroying the vessel of Amrita because of which he dies. In (R), he is buried right there and Makaradhwaja is appointed to keep a watch lest he may wake up some time. In (G), however, Mandaldhar laments and asks to extend life for him, and the demon is blessed to turn into ‘Petrol and Ghastel (kerosene)’ down in the earth, on which the ‘Sarkar’ would levy ‘tax’, and with which an old lady would burn lamp and eat her meals in lightness!

In (G), at the end of the war, Hanumana who keeps Rama-Sita in his heart, is given the honour of becoming the ‘Angrez’ (the Englishman) and rule for 100-200 years. The eunuch, too, is assured a rule in future when women would become officers and collectors, and when lawyers would be rampant turning true into false.

In (R), Sita’s ‘sat’ is tested in fire for which she condemns Rama. In (G), once proven blemish-free, she joins Rama. To test her in fire, Rama creates Unai - the hot water spring in Dangs. Then, in (G), there is the episode of the washerman’s blame which causes Rama order Lakshmana to kill Sita and bring her right hand as an evidence. On the way, she informs her pregnancy, and requests water to quench her thirst. While Lakshmana brings it, she falls asleep, and thus he decides to leave her there alive, keeping two bowls of water at her head and feet. While in sleep she tilts those bowls, from which the Ganga and the Yamuna flow. The weeping Sita is reassured by Mahadeva and Parvati and given a bamboo to eat (which turns into sugarcane). After nine months of pregnancy, Sita, attended to by the goddesses of forest and of prosperity – Vansaa and Dhansaa gives birth to a boy, Kush and takes refuge with the old rishi Athoba.

In version (R), however, when Sita is proven blemish-free, they once again start living together in the Aayude nagari, where Sita soon becomes pregnant. Once again, the stepmother Kaikovchala’s jealousy comes into action when she writes a note as if by Sita saying that Rama was only a small king with modest belongings, whereas Ravana was a big king, who would keep her in great luxury. She also writes that ‘with this one her sleep...
(suggesting desire) would never be complete, and, how fulfilled it was with Ravana!’ This note is kept specifically to be noticed by Rama and the same happens. Rama orders Lakshmana to behead her in a forest and bring back her head as a confirmation. Lakshmana pities Sita and gets a very realistic statue (head) of her made and presents that to Rama. On seeing that, Rama grieves and blames Lakshmana for carrying out his orders literally. Sita who is wandering in the forest reaches the Rishipur nagar of the old rishi where she delivers the baby boy.

One day, as Sita goes to take bath in the river leaving the baby in the rishi’s custody, a she-monkey taunts her for leaving the baby, which makes her take the baby along to the river. The rishi finds the cradle empty, creates another baby from redwood, who is named as Lahu.

The boys grow up brave, in (G), kill one Ek Singe Rishi, and then confront Rama’s ‘battle-horse’ (not sacrificial horse – Yajnashva). In (R), they grow up strong, demand bows and arrows for themselves with which they would hunt small birds. Sometimes they start stealing chicken and goats of others, as well as the fruits from the orchard Motibaag of Rama. One day they are caught by the guard, but it is they who end up beating up the guard. In either version, as they do not get either scared or defeated by anybody, even by Rama, he apprehends and inquires with Lakshmana who admits of having left Sita alive. Sent for through Lakshmana – in (G) and Hanumana – in (R), she again condemns Rama and runs away, but, in (G), Rama runs after her along with the sons, and then they unite and go to ‘Dwaraka’ (Dwaraka being the Kunkana metaphor for the happy town of gods!). However, in (R), she runs away towards the riverbank and descends into the earth. Lakshmana, in great grief decides to leave for the next life, and immerses himself in water. Later Rama hands over the raj and the world to Hanumana and, embraces him where he leaves the world and Hanumana, stuck with Rama’s arrow, takes now Rama’s place and consoles the world by telling that Rama exists in everybody’s heart. And then the narrator addresses Rama saying that he has been narrating about Him for quite a while, in whichever humble manner he could, and hopes to have Rama-Lakshmana-Sita with him when he hopes to ‘read’ them again and again. There he ends the narration requesting ‘the forgotten words’ to be with him and give him power when he reads them again and again, and lastly he mentions his own as well as his accompanist’s name with their villages, and declares the end.

In (G), with Dwaraka, the old man also refers to the next incarnation, with the town Mathura’s Kans Raja being an equivalent of Ravana, with whom the ‘Ram Bhagwan’ now would have to deal with. There he ends the narration, mentioning the place, the narrators, the listeners and the ‘saheblok’ (the towns people).
History in Brief

Before any analytical discussion of the narrative, it is worth to look at a very brief account of the history of the region, as it may have some implications for the expression of the people.

The first reference one finds specifically to this region (not with this name) is during the Maratha King Shivaji’s times. In 1664, Shivaji crossed through this jungle region enroute Junnar to carry out the famous historical incident of ‘Plunder of Surat’. In 1672, the fort of Saler (or Salher) was won by the Marathas as an important bastion to keep control over the region at large.

For long, there were only few small settlements under Bhil chieftains – the Naiks, and no clear method of governance or administration was known in the region. There were several such chieftaincies which are meant for negotiation of power and authority. However, it is generally accepted that the chieftaincy of the Dang Gadhvi was the oldest known or the ‘original’ seat of power or ‘gadi’, the other heads of settlements having branched out from that in one or other way. These chieftaincies were loosely associated among themselves as ‘bhauband’ (a brotherhood) and were acknowledged by the major rulers or their representatives at Khandesh, Songadh and Surat. The Bhil chiefs levied a small amount of plough-tax and other dues to be paid in kind on the little peasantry made up of Kunkanas, Bhils and others. They also levied some border-tax on the cartloads of timber or other goods that any outside traders would carry from these forests. However, plundering the plains villages often in the neighbouring regions under the major rulers was a known and established way for them to acquire extra provisions and wealth they required, and to negotiate the equations and terms of power-relations with those rulers. Thus, the relationship between the Bhil chiefs and the major rulers – the representatives of Peshwa or earlier, the moghuls in Khandesh and the Gaikwads of Baroda – had always remained uncertain even while being acknowledged.

In 1818, at the fall of the Peshwa, the regions of Khandesh and Dangs came under the British rule. This period saw a tremendous increase in the plundering activities of the chiefs and the bhaubands, which proved to be a major harassment for the plains villages acquired by the British. This was seen as an expression of protest from the Bhils as also a known way of negotiating one’s power-equation. However, the plundering of the chiefs was always seen by the British governance as illicit which was dealt with stringent actions.

In 1842, the British carried out the first leases of the forest with the chiefs in Dangs, for undeterred extraction of timber for their navy and railway tracks. To serve the purpose of negotiation, they formalised the ‘Gadis’ – the ‘seats of power’, and finalised 5 ‘kings’ (this, for the first time, even though
earlier the *naiks* carried the term ‘Raja’ in their names) and 14 *naiks*. The *Gadi* was a matter of pride and therefore, of negotiation and scuffle within the brotherhood as well as with the rulers; and now that it was to be finalised once for all, this certainly was a period of continual negotiation with the new rulers, and deception and conniving within the brotherhood.

By this act, the British formally accepted the symbolic authority of the chiefs; however, practically they lost their control over the forest through the leases. To maintain a good rapport with these newly authorised *rajas* and *naiks*, the British authorities used to hold formal meetings at regular intervals, where all the *rajas*, *naiks*, their *bhaubands*, the village *patils* and *karbharis* appointed by the government would be given special honours and endowments apart from the regular installment of the decided lease money to the chiefs. The showy congregations – the *darbar* – as called by the British and the honours offered to them was a mockery of the authority of the chiefs, a fact which they realised soon but helplessly. The leases created a monopoly of the government over the extraction of timber, and it became more effective after the banning of all major activities of the local people in the leased forests. Also, with these two-party leases, the British cut the chiefs’ earlier collaborations with the major powers. Further, from 1879 to 1901, the British carried out the demarcation of the forest into ‘restricted’ and ‘protected’ forest tracts for executing ‘scientific forestry’, and the scope of activity for the local people including the chiefs shrunk degraded. This was the reason behind the tremendous unrest, especially among the chiefs and *bhaubands*, and from 1830 to 1914, the region saw several localised uprisings and rebellions.

**Observations and Comments**

The first and immediate observation one can make is that this is certainly a story learnt or borrowed from the mainstream Ramayana story, with certain episodes improvised by the indigenous imagination, others laced with tribal imagery. Conceptually, there is little deviation seen in the approach and attitude towards the major happenings of the Ramakatha. Nevertheless, Rama is seen as a god, an incarnation by both the narrators; in version (R) it is less evident in the beginning though it develops as the story proceeds. The other major characters such as Sita, Lakshmana and Hanumana too, are seen as godly figures living a human life among other human characters. Thus, it has to be concluded that this narrative quite emphatically carries the brahmanistic notions to some extent.

It can be observed that the deviations and improvisations from the popular Ramayana occur mainly with the episodes relating to secondary characters or with episodes comparatively less important to the storyline of the Ramakatha. Thus, the dwelling in the forest, the golden deer episode and Sita’s abduction, the finding of Sita by Hanumana, the crossing of the
ocean, burning of Lanka and the killing of Ravana are altered with little improvisation, whereas Ravana’s tapa, Sita’s birth, Dasharatha’s wives and Rama’s childhood, the relations between different characters and the ways of incarnation are happenings where we encounter utmost novelty.

Parallel with other Ramakathas

It is a matter of interest to know that when the episodes of these two versions are compared to the episode-wise discussion of the hundred plus versions of Ramakatha by Bulke, it is established that these variations are mostly corresponding to those in the fifteenth century text of Anandaramayana. To some extent, with these two texts composed just prior to and had great influence upon the Adhyatmaramayana and the Adbhutaramayana; the Marathi text influenced by all these is ‘The Bhavartharamayana’ by Eknath (16th century). These versions also show some resemblances with the Kathasaritsagara, the Nrisimhapurana, and quite strikingly, with the Seri Rama of Indonesia and the Rama Kiyen of Thailand. The following episodes demonstrate this correspondence with one or more of the above texts:

- The young son of the rishi killed by Dasharatha being named Shravana;
- Dasharatha cursed of having children only after killing a certain odd number of people;
- Rama writing a note to Lakshmana to deform Shurpanakha, i.e. to cut her nose;
- The Ravana-Jatayu war where both declaring their own weak points; Ravana cunningly telling it to be his toe, while Jatayu honestly declaring it as the tip of his wing;
- The demon disguised as golden deer alluring Sita, Ravana coming as a sanyasi (here as a fakir in one of the versions);
- Hanumana entering Lanka in the form of a monkey, approaching Sita as a child;
- The stones for the bridge to Lanka floating with the name of Rama on them;
- Lakshmana being hurt with Indrajit’s shakti, Hanumana bringing the whole mountain with herbs, on way back getting hurt and falling with Bharata’s arrow, and after explanation, being sent to Rama by Bharata riding his arrow;
- Lakshmana remaining without food for all the years of the vanawasa after being mistakenly overlooked by Sita and Rama;
- Ravana having a store of Amrita within his body, only on destroying which he would die;
- Ravana being still alive, his body still burning (therefore turned into petrol here);
The fire-test or *Agnipariksha* of Sita to prove her purity;
Rama-Lakshmana being taken into custody by Ahiravana & Mahiravana, taken to the *patal*, rescued by Hanumana with the help of his son Makaradhwaja;
The *makari* consuming Hanumana’s fallen semen and conceiving Makaradhwaja;
Lakshmana unknowingly killing Shurpanakha’s son in penance, covered with anthill; to take revenge Shurpanakha approaches Rama and Lakshmana;
Ravana obtaining the *lingam* from Mahadeva, Vishnu persuading him of the real Parvati being with Mahadeva and then in exchange, he gets the Mandodari (here, Mandaldhar) created by Vishnu;
Hanumana being conceived by penancing Anjana who receives a share of the *payasa* (here, the *pinda*) through a vulture (here, a kite), and thereby, he being an incarnation himself;
The washerman denouncing his wife, alluding to Sita; on this, Rama deserting Sita;
Kusha being created by Rishi Valmiki (here, Athoba or Rishi), after Sita’s taking away her own son because of the taunting of the female monkey;
Lava and Kusha waging war against Rama’s army capturing his horse (G), the duo entering into Ayodhya’s gardens and taking flowers (here fruits from orchards) and defeating Rama’s guards, thereafter Rama recognising them;
At the end, Sita condemning and leaving Rama, entering into the earth, but after being followed by Rama, the union (only in (G); in (R) she goes away).

This narrative also corresponds to the Jaina *Paumacariyam* which begins with the description of Ravana’s family with the names of his brothers not definite. Ravana’s queen Mandodari actually being a female toad, for whom he exchanges the real Parvati, alludes to a South Indian variation among several others.

The popularity of the Ramakatha versions mentioned above in the central Maharashtra region supports my view that the people migrating from the south into Dangs must have carried this narrative with them. However, it is to be noted that, there is no notion existing about *Yajna*, whether it is Dasharatha’s *Putrakameshti* or Rama’s *Ashwamedha* while carrying the mainstream storyline of the Ramakatha to a large extent. The brothers Rama and his brothers are not born because of the *payasa* from the *Yajna*; Dasharatha performs the last rites of Shravana and his parents by making nine *pindas*, out of which, he floats six in the river and takes home three for his single wife. One of these is carried away by the kite and eventually falls
in Anjana’s hands to cause Hanumana’s conception. Also, towards the end, Lava and Kusha, in version (G), encounter Rama’s ‘battle horse’. In fact, ‘yajna’ and ‘tapa’ are given a physical meaning more close to the tribal life, where Ravana has to strive hard and undergo hardships to reach Bhagwan instead of the static ‘tapa’ and Dasharatha has to fulfill that nearly impossible condition for having children, which is more difficult than a ‘yajna’.

It is also noteworthy that both the versions of the narrative consist of prominent elements from the other epic, the Mahabharata. These elements might have been evolved through hearsay by individuals from this community mixing up with corresponding incidents or elements in this narrative from sources not being particular about where they belong. This further strengthens my conviction that this is a narrative not borne out of the people’s own consciousness, but a learnt and acculturated one.

The tribal acculturation and alteration

This brings us to the mainstream non-tribal story being laced with tribal imagination. Here we can find characters being mostly the same as in the popular versions, but their lifestyle, actions and behaviour depicted are more identical to that of the Dangi people. We see, in version (R), Ravana’s brothers and their wives surviving by selling wild grass in the towns. All the ‘queens’ here, including goddess Parvati, fetch water on their head, clean and grind grain, and cook rice or rotis for their husbands and guests. Men are greeted with a ‘ram ram’, seated on country cots, offered ‘chai-pani’ and ‘ida’-the ‘paan’. They always carry their bows and arrows, hunt even crabs and tiny fowl to eat. Women, at the time of childbirth are served by the ‘suvarins’ by massaging oil, Dev Vansa (goddess of herbs) comes to help in Sita’s labour, and Lakshmana is treated with ‘Vansi’ (the local herbal medicine).

There are some episodes which demonstrate a tribal understanding of things essentially non-tribal in nature and associated solely with the concept of State. Thus, the images of war, the court, the office or the meeting that we witness here are very different, very casual and easy-going as compared to what they ought to be otherwise. In version (G), the sabha (court) or the Kachri (the office) is always described as where the “Hasi Musi / Teli Tamboli / Vanya Bamun / Disay Deshmukh” are all sitting together; it is a stock description for the old man, which could actually be that of a village meeting having representatives from all major castes and communities as well as important officials. In version (R), whether it is a Devasabha or a royal court, what people sitting there do is “Anga ni vaat tanga, tanga ni vaat anga” – literally, ‘telling these matters there, and those matters here’, again a superficial description of a stock. It is evident that the narrators, and perhaps the people in general, are hardly conversant with what the courts or any meetings could be all about.
The kingship and the court together is more a notion here than the reality, with no real issues to deal with; and the depiction evidently reflects the image of the Bhil rajas and naiks as described earlier. There is virtually no concept of any other offices within a court for specific duties and responsibilities; there are no courtiers of a king, if at all, there are secretaries or servants. What these narrations seem to carry and therefore convey is a visual image of a congregation, perhaps observed always from a distance, with little to do with any diplomatic or governance-related discussion. Similar is the treatment of war, where the depiction in both the versions remains too informal for any strategy or planned war; the descriptions of the final war seem to be some local scuffle where everyone is throwing arrows or stones on the other side.

Quite interestingly, the entire portion of the Kishkindhakanda of the Ramayana disappeared. Not surprisingly, the entire episode of meeting with Sugreeva to plot the death of Wali, against the promise of support to locate the whereabouts of Sita, is that of hardcore diplomacy which is missing in both these versions, with only a small mention of Sugreeva before the starting of war in version (R), and regular mentions of the Vanarasena without giving the source of information.

Both the narrators dwell upon the matters of their day-to-day experience, and almost invariably show a lot of interest in describing trivial things. Quite surprisingly, there is not a single mention of farming or agriculture of any kind in both these versions. A matter so close to their hearts, especially for the Kunkanas, that they take one of their community names – Kunbi - from this profession, is missing here. The only possible explanation could be that the life of the kings and other characters in the Ramakatha, even with their tribal understanding, could relate, at the most, to that of the Bhil chiefs and bhaubands of the region, who would rather go hungry than toil at the field.

One may notice that the emphasis seems not much on valour itself, but more on miracle verging on the impossible. This can be explained by the episode where Lakshmana fulfills Raja Janki’s condition to marry Sita. It is also noteworthy that it is Lakshmana who really wins Sita, but offers her to Rama since he is the elder one, declaring himself a servant to Rama. (This same feature has been noted in the other tribal Ramakatha, too; it could be suggested that the tribals perhaps attribute more valour and power to Lakshmana than Rama). He is further attributed with extreme humility and tolerance which is revealed when he lives without any food for fourteen years of vanawasa due to the misunderstanding between Rama and Sita.

Structures that emerge
Beyond the storyline of the Ramakatha, there seem to emerge certain kind of social structures from this narrative, which might bear some relation with
the social structures in the Dangi history. The most striking is the kingship pattern. There are several kings – Rajas, who were shown to be reigning over only a ‘nagari’ – a single town. Many of these are quite small kings - even the owner of the orchard where the embryo of Sita reaches is called a Mali Raja; while some are called ‘big kings’, as Ravana addresses Dasharatha. Some are old-time kings while others have got kingship newly, e.g. Dasharatha and Ravana. Some are not brave and expertised at battlefield, e.g. Jambu Mali in version (R). They do not seem to have any duties of governance, their courts and kachris are places where people do idle talk. However, they have a ready congregation of lokdunya around them which certainly gives the perception more of the Dangi kings than of any mythological characters.

Further, there seems to be a kind of brotherhood among these kings with the regular address to another person who is not a foe is “brother” or “sister”, and for elders, “Mama – maternal uncle”, which is the custom prevalent in this area. Dasharatha seems to be quite a central character, both Raja Janki as well as Vasudeva, Shravana’s father, being his brothers-in-law. The Mali Raja or Jambu Mali seems to be a subordinate ‘king’, while Dasharatha is invited for advocacy by the new king Ravana. Thus, all of these contain resemblances to that of the chiefs in Dangs and their history.

The settlement pattern is also evidently based on what they are conversant with in Dangs suggesting a closed geographical region. Each small or big settlement of population, even a small hamlet, is named a ‘nagar’, like the “Rishipurnagar’, the place where the rishi lives–in version (R).

In this relation, one should also note the concepts about the reign and the throne – the gadi – which is shown as a matter which is negotiable or exchangeable with others. It is not the virtual, conceptual power demonstrated symbolically through some material, a place that can be attained either through lineage or by one’s own ingenuity. Here it is a thing that can be asked for from a higher jurisdiction — in this case the Bhagwan! There seem no political implications attached to the gadi in anybody’s mind.

Along this background, there seems to emerge a quite prominent and rather disturbing motif from this imagery of the kings – the motif of deception, of being fooled, cheated and being conspired against. Ravana, after his utterly painful travel to the abode of Bhagwan, gets the miserable ‘boon’, only due to his own mistake though, of becoming the monstrous figure with ten heads and twenty arms. As a compensation, he is granted the prestigious gadi of Lanka, and on his wicked demand, even Parvati herself. But soon after, he is made to believe wrongly that he has been cheated, and after a while is actually fooled and deceived into exchanging the real Parvati for a fake one which was made out of a toad. Also about the gadi, he is first persuaded to ask for the seat of death and salvation – Maranmurti ni Gadi/ Mukti ni Gadi, but when he realises and wants to revise his demand, he is
denied that chance which made him to accept his fate. One is certainly tempted here to perceive an expression of the deep sense within the collective unconscious of being deceived into the fateful decisions by the all-powerful authorities. Yet further, we can see the newly made king Ravana inviting the established and experienced king Dasharatha as a guest, and killing him quite heinously at the end. Is this too a reflection of the cunning deeds that went on within the brotherhood of chieftains in the competition for the Gadis?

However, it is also noteworthy that all these expressions of the subjective sentiments are demonstrated in the case of Ravana, the antagonist alone. Perhaps, the narrators dare not take such radical liberties with the important and revered characters of the saga of Rama.

We witness, though, some such liberties of expressing the subjective, even personal sentiments in the really sharp, witty and humourous comments about the future of several characters or matters in version (G). It is a sheer exaltation for the personal genius of the old man Gulbubhāi to relate Ravana’s remains to petrol, to associate Hanumana to the Angrez and to turn the used-up herb Sanjivani into tobacco plant. His comment that women becoming officers and collectors holding high powerful offices would bring about the reign of eunuchs, too is a subjective expression of a tradition-bound, biased mind perhaps representing the collective. Similarly, both the narrators’ indulging descriptions of the cunningness of the daughter-in-law of the old couple, as well as of Dasharatha’s taking a new wife so that there would be somebody to cook, clean, wash and keep the house for him, too, is very much a reflection of the collective attitude towards womanhood and the position given to a woman.

The Linguistic Aspect
Another very important aspect, demanding a close study and systematic analysis, is the language as exhibited in these narratives. I suggest that the language as we witness here, is one that encompasses an entire span of linguistic evolution of a particular speech variety. It is medieval as well as contemporary. It has to be kept in mind that this is a traditional narrative having some religious element. It is learnt with great effort by a learner from the guru who is a practising narrator-priest by accompanying him in the ritual as well as the narration for several years. Therefore, the language usage in these narratives is a rather aged, formal kind of language while the actual narration is a spontaneous rendering by the narrator. This is true with all literary works of this nature, in any language.

We have two versions on hand, one by a very old narrator, in his eighties, having practised this narration in his younger days; the other by a middle-age pair around fifty years in age, having a much larger exposure to modern aspects. The language Dangi–Kunkana is closely related to Marathi,
with complex influences of Gujarati and Hindi vocabulary as well as grammar. Especially the old man’s version is a language having resemblance to the Marathi of several generations earlier.

As such, there had been a quite lengthy debate over the status of Dangi language, and of Dangs, at the time of the formation of our linguistic states as whether it is a dialect of Marathi or of Gujarati. Dangi is a very complex combination with many nouns commonly used in Marathi changing their forms according to Gujarati grammar, or Gujarati verbs having forms as per the rules of Marathi or Hindi. Sometimes a verb close to the Gujarati one as well as a verb close to the Hindi one with the same meaning being used by the people simultaneously, interchangeably, working according to Marathi grammar. Instead of presuming the language to be a dialect of one of the major languages, I would suggest a different proposition. The particular speech variety – Kunkana - may possibly be a sister language of the two main languages, a younger one having branched out from Marathi at a very early stage of its evolution (soon after the twelfth century) but developed alongside, in the course absorbing influences of the evolutions of Marathi as well as Gujarati on the other side which had separately established itself just prior to Marathi (eleventh century). The dialect of the people migrating to this area may have merged with that of the people settled already in the region carrying more Gujarati and Hindi influence, and in the process the creole that is known locally today as Dangi must have evolved. Comparing the two versions, we can see the general vocabulary shifting more towards Gujarati in the younger narrator’s version as compared to that in the old man’s.

Interestingly, a little older variety of Marathi is used which are either too close to their Sanskrit counterparts, or the same as used in the Marathi of that period. For example, ‘yehiin’ – the instrumental plural form which means ‘by these’ or ‘they’ as subject in active speech, is straight from old Marathi. ‘Manyi’ or ‘manii’, an instrumental singular, meaning ‘by me’ is found regularly in old Marathi and derives from the Sanskrit ‘mayaa’; and ‘dhanwa’, a plural noun meaning ‘bows’ is not known in Marathi, but is directly related to the Sanskrit ‘Dhanwah’-the plural form of ‘Dhanuh’ meaning ‘a bow’. There is a certain address throughout both these versions for women – ‘wa’ (Kaja wa Aayaa?); this bears very direct relation to the old Marathi form ‘wo’ found in Jnaneshwara’s poetry so often – “Jalamadhi ekawli kaali wo maay!” In the same manner, we find in both these versions and in daily usage, forms like ‘karjo’, ‘dharjo’, which are requesting or suggesting forms in singular, meaning ‘please do’ or ‘you should hold’ (in singular). Long back, in Jnaneshwara’s poetry Marathi forms like “Avadharijo jee”, pleading the Goddess Saraswati, or “Bhajijo Aadipurukhii” are found. The contemporary Gujarati also has commanding forms with the suffix ‘jo’; but it is a plural form of command, the singular having the suffix ‘je’. Whether the form here is associated with the contemporary Gujarati or the old Marathi in the evolutionary stage when the two languages had many more terms and forms
in common, is a matter of focused linguistic research, which would help
giving leads into the history of this language.

We may notice several words in both these versions which suggest of
being taken from a reasonably ‘high’ language, common in the upper caste
or formal language, which have more colloquial counterparts commonly
used in the people’s speech and used even within these narratives. Thus we
find them used often: ‘bandhu’, ‘kanya’, ‘sandrook’, ‘bhojana’, and the deflected
forms of ‘prasoot’ or ‘prasanna’. Quite interestingly and amusingly, we find
words and phrases here which bear connection with modern-life concepts,
such as ‘Tel na dabba’ (‘tins of oil’ – in Rama’s times!), ‘line’ – the Indianised
English word, or ‘Bandook’ (the gun). In the younger man Ramubhai’s version
(who has travelled sometimes outside the region and has been watching the
TV bought third-hand by his sons specifically to watch news and cricket
matches and movie CDs), we find the river ‘Panganga’ of version (G) turning
into ‘Nadi Narmada’ and the seven-fold Lanka of Ravana becoming ‘Srilanka’!
This can be an example of how a person’s vocabulary and verbal imagination
may get influenced and altered in time, which highlights the need of
comparative historical study of the language.

Yet another aspect of language to note here is the syntax and the sentence
structure in a paragraph or the association of sentences in a section. We
witness here, in prose as well as in the basic verse that come alternately, the
use of very short, abrupt sentences, which are associated with one another
structurally. They may be termed as incomplete sentences according to the
modern grammar, but they are complete through their association of meaning.
Thus, the incomplete sentence carries much inherent meaning and gives a
very dramatic effect, enhanced by the narrator’s style of speech during the
actual performance (could it be termed ‘vaachika abhinaya’?). This style of
dramatic abrupt narration, which is invisible now, reminds me of the narrative
style of the famous didactic stories of the Mahanubhava sect, the followers
of Chakradhara, which supposedly set the beginning of Marathi literature.

The issue of the status of this language mentioned above was a much
politicised one. However, it was all about deciding of which dialect this
language belongs to; and was discussed only on the contemporary usage as
expressed by the habitually multilingual population of the region. No
considerable documentation or research on the literary expression of the
people had taken place till then, and no variation spatially or temporally
had ever been recorded that could be considered in such a debate. Language
is never a static entity; it is a fluid, constantly changing phenomenon, both
 spatially and temporally; and its historical development can be traced only
through as many samples as possible from different periods and different
places. Various documentations such as this one can make the picture more
clear and vivid, and give a more real, balanced and apolitical image as well
as understanding of a marginalised language.
Thus, after examining all aspects together, one may conclude that here is a narrative that is born not out of the experience incurred by the narrators, but a narrative which is adopted, taken over from a different world view that produced it. Later, it is adapted in such a manner that the very concept of that adaptation has been dissolved. Now the culturally appropriated narrative is deeply embedded both in people’s consciousness as well as in their social life. At the conceptual level, the germ of this narrative is not an expression of their own collective conscious; however, at the level of depiction, it is certainly the expression of their own imaginative genius. This is not an example of tribal expression showing the influences of sanskritisation. On the other hand, this may be called the appropriation and acculturation of a completely non-tribal theme, i.e. the tribalisation of an epic by a collective mind quite willing to get sanskritised yet to suit its own cultural ethos, very much in tune with its history full of negotiations of hegemonies, seeking alliances and, at the same time, resisting control.

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