

RAMAYANA

Myth or Reality ?

By

H. D. SANKALIA



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Lanka, not Ceylon

Thus to my mind the location of Lanka in the island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) or any other island in South-East Asia has been based on the uncritical reading of the Ramayana and without taking into consideration the geographical, linguistic, ethnographic and archaeological evidence.

RAMA IN PLACE AND PERSONAL NAMES FROM
INSCRIPTIONS OF SOUTH INDIA ✓

There is one more source of evidence. This is the study of place and personal names in inscriptions of South India, say the Pallava, Chola and early Pandya. Our aim here should be to ascertain how many place names have 'Rama' as the first part of the name. My feeling is that places like Rameshwaram are comparatively very late. At the Deccan College two of my pupils have studied the place and personal names from the Pallava and early Chola records.²³ This study shows that there are no personal names after Rama in the Pallava records, whereas in the early Chola records there are not more than four. The Pandya records yet remain to be similarly examined.

RAMA AS GOD ✓

And among the gods and goddesses Rama does not figure at all, Siva is most prominent, then comes Visnu and other indigenous gods and goddesses.

Rama temples and panels depicting Ramayana scenes

This question of the introduction and popularity of Rama worship may also be examined by mapping the distribution of (a) Rama temples, (b) temples having Ramayana panels in different parts of India. Though I have not studied this problem as thoroughly as it should be, from my general knowledge, I would say at present that though Visnu worship became popular under the Early Guptas (c. A.D. 350), as yet Rama was not worshipped as god or as Visnu. However his

exploits were now familiar and these are found portrayed in sculptures on the walls of early Gupta temples at Devghar, Nachuakuthar, Bhita and other places in eastern M.P. and western U.P. (See Fig.). And if the small terracotta plaques from Kosambi do portray Sita's kidnapping by Ravana as interpreted by some scholars,²⁴ then we have additional archaeological proof that the story was known by this time. Four or five centuries afterwards there are found sculptures in the Chalukya temples at Pattadakal in Karnataka. Rama appears to be unknown or not so popular to the Pallavas who were familiar with the Mahabharata, as some of the scenes such as Arjuna's penance are depicted at Mahabalipuram near Madras.

The early Cholas, the successors of the Pallavas, do not yet seem to have taken to Rama worship, but it was not far now. Soon after we have some of the finest Chola bronzes portraying Rama and Sita. This sketch of the development of the Rama worship, if confirmed by detailed mapping, will establish conclusively the point I am making here, viz that the Rama worship is of a considerable late date and in South India not earlier than the 10th century A.D.²⁵

✓ RAMAYANA IN TAMIL NADU

The view here put forward is also corroborated by the fact that by the 7th century A.D. the Ramayana, as known in the north, was sung by a Saivite Saint Jnanasambandar in his Devaram hymns. It is also at this time that the temple of Rameshwaram was probably first built, because according to the saint it was built by Rama to expiate the sin of killing Ravana. I am informed that the present temple is late, it stands on the ruins of a small 8th-9th century temple. However, this is a much later tradition, and does not figure in any form in the Valmiki Ramayana.

Two centuries later the Ramayana stories are found sculptured in the Nagesvara temple at Kumbakonam, Sadaiyar Koil, etc. These are small.²⁶ (See figs. 12, 13.)