



Research Paper

## Folk elements in the Epic Ramayana: Story of Mahiravana in Ramayana Tradition of Assam, India

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### Abstract:

No epic of any land of the world has made such tremendous impact as the Ramayana of India written by sage Valmiki has made across the countries of the Asian Continent. Wherever the Ramayana has gone the epic has imbibed the cultural elements of that area. Throughout the centuries it has acquired many folk elements into the main story of the Epic. The Epic has so vast a canvas that every culture coming into its contact has found colourful space for it.

In Assamese language the first Ramayana which was rendered in verse and based on Valmiki's Ramayana was written by Madhava Kandali in fourteenth century A.D. Story of Mahiravana is absent in this Ramayana as it was not a part of the story in Valmiki Ramayana. A few more Ramayanas and works based on the Ramayana were written in Assamese and other languages of the North-Eastern India later on. In some of these works the story of Mahiravana has become an integral part. This story came out of a folk mind engulfed by the Hindu Tantrik and Shakti cult developed and nurtured in ancient Kamarupa kingdom.

**Keywords:** Valmiki, Madhava Kandali, Mahiravana, Tantrik and Shakti cult, Kamarupa kingdom.

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### I. Introduction:

Indian culture is a conglomeration of diversified and multiethnic colours. In the epic Ramayana we can see a reflection of confluence and assimilation of different cultures of the country. With the passage of time the story of the Ramayana became popular among different cultures across the Asian continent due to its universal appeal. So the people moulded the story in their own way as the culture demands.

Assam is one of the states of North-East India. Here the Ramayana tradition is strong since the early medieval time. One of the oldest Ramayanas written in a vernacular language is the Assamese Ramayana written by Madhava Kandali in the fourteenth century on the basis of the Valmiki Ramayana. In the Ramayana written by Madhava Kandali and the Ramayana written by Tulsidas we can notice many folk elements of the particular place where the epic was written.

Initially all epics were current in folk levels and orally transmitted generation after generation. So it had different forms or versions among the folks of different geographical locations. With the passage of time when an epic got a written form it entered into 'great tradition'.

Another theory may be postulated that the legends of an epic were current among the people of a particular geographical location. With the passage of time it was written in a language of that area and later on it influenced people of other cultures also. It took slightly different forms among the folks of different territories to accommodate their cultural distinctions.

### Story of Mahiravana across the Cultures:

The story of Mahiravana and Ahiravana was not found in the original Ramayana written by Valmiki. The story is found described in Ananda Ramayana, Bhavartha Ramayana, Ramalingamrit, etc. In comparison with the Assamese work, Krittivasi Ramayana is though different in the beginning, but it has similarities in the end of the story of Mahiravana. The story of Mayiliravanan or Mahiravan is prevalent in Tamil folk tradition also. But the appeal of the story is now almost universal.

We find this story in Ramayana traditions of different countries of Asia though in different forms. In Seriram of Malaysia we notice abduction of Rama and Lakshmana by Maharayan, Hanuman's entry into *Patalapura* in the water pitch of the princess and rescue of Rama defeating Maharayan. In the Ramakien, the Ramayana version of Thailand, Maiyarab abducts Phra Ram into the nether world with the help of his magic spell. Hanuman goes to *Paatala* and meets his own son Macchanu as the gatekeeper who opens the door to *Patala*. Then with the help of Maiyarab's sister Phirakuan Hanuman was able to kill Maiyarab and rescue Phra Ram. Thus, Phirakuan's son Waiyawik was made the king and Macchanu, the son of Suphanna Maccha and Hanuman was made the prince of Underworld.

### **Story of Mahiravana in Ramayana Tradition of the State:**

In folk imagination we can notice the presence of many fanciful elements. They find in those elements uncritical amazements which bring joy to them. 'Mahiravana Badha', well known in Assamese literature is such a work. The author of this work is either Ananta Kandali or Chandra Bharati. However, the authorship of this work is controversial. The story of Mahiravana is also described in Lankakanda by Adbhuta Acharya.

The story of 'Mahiravana Badha' goes like this. In Assamese poetic work Mahiravana is the son of Ravana. Ravana directed Mahiravana to abduct Rama and Lakshmana. Jambuban knowing it in his astrological calculation sends Hanuman to Lanka. In the guise of a crow Maruti comes to know the conspiracy of Mahiravana and gives this information to the camp of Rama stationed at Subel Mountain. Even though Rama and Lakshmana were surrounded by all the soldiers, they were abducted to the nether world by Mahiravana with the spell of his magical power. Mahiravana's intention was to propitiate goddess Betal Chandi sacrificing brothers duo at the altar. Hanuman in search of Rama meets a Matcharangka bird of three generations old at the seashore. When asked the information of Rama the bird says that at the time of looking for fish in the water she saw a Rakshasa taking two handsome persons to the nether world. When the water bird was asked to take Hanuman to the subterranean world it says:

*We are water birds of stature tiny  
How can we take you with a big body?  
Hearing this Hanuman made a magic spell  
Lowering the big size of his body small.*

Hanuman was dropped in the subterranean world. Thinking the trouble of returning Hanuman made the wings of the bird disabled and in disguise of a Brahman he gets the information from Malini about the whereabouts of Rama and Lakshmana.

Then Hanuman enters the temple of Betal Chandi and entreats her to free the two prisoners. When Betal Chandi refuses, she was killed by Hanuman encircling the goddess with his tail and whirling cyclically. Betal Chandi was mentioned in the poetic work as his aunt or sister of Anjana, mother of Hanuman.

Then Hanuman taking the form of Betal Chandi orders Mahiravana to bring Rama and Lakshmana for sacrifice and begins worship. Mahiravana in deception brings Rama and Lakshmana to the sacrificial alter. In the guise of a fly Hanuman speaks to the ear of Rama to say his inability to understand how to bow down in front of the Devi. So Mahiravana left his sacrificial machete and he was beheaded by Rama at the time when he was showing how to bow down in front of the goddess.

Hearing the death of her husband Mahiravana's pregnant wife came rushing and battles with Hanuman and she was thrashed on the ground by Hanuman and got killed. Hanuman kicks on her big belly and she gives birth to her son Garbhasura. Just after his birth Garbhasura engages in fight with Hanuman. It was very hard to overpower Garbhasura as he enters the stomach and bites the intestines of Hanuman. Then he forces out of him with all his power of breath but the body of the newly born Asura was very slippery. So Hanuman burns Doloni Nagara, it became full of ashes. According to the advice of Rama, Hanuman caught hold of Garbhasura besmearing ashes on his body and thrashed on the ground almost to the extent of death. Rama gives one boon to him for a livelihood of screaming 'where is Lankapur' and scratching earth. Coming out of the town Hanuman frees the wings of the bird whose wings were kept disabled. Though the bird wanted to kill Hanuman dropping him in the sea water on his return journey was not successful. When Hanuman returned to Lanka bringing Rama and Lakshmana the soldiers of Rama's camp were jubilant.

Initially the story was probably not popular. But later on due to the impact of the Kritivasi Ramayana in Bangla the story of Mahiravana became popular among the folks here. Vaishnavism in Assam is an important motivator for enriching the Ramayana tradition in the state. That is why dramas written on the popular episodes of the epic Ramayana which are born out of folk life and appeal the folk mind are still enacted time and again. *Bhaona* in Assam became the vehicle for propagation of Vaishnavite religion propounded by Srimanta Sankardeva. So the story of *Virarasa* like that of Mahiravana appealed the folks and the drama 'Mahiravana Badha' was written and enacted in traditional dramatic form which is still current as well as popular in Assam.

Through the story of Mahiravana heroic acts of Hanuman are extolled. Exploits of Hanuman are shown in this work more interestingly with all possible human imaginations. He is the protagonist here also. There are

lot of popular entertainments in the work. It has not shown excellence in poetic dexterity. There is very less amount of reality; it is surreal and it was the intention of the author to show highly imaginative events. Description of shallow imagination and wonderful circumstances crowded the work. The hero of the *Kavya* (poetic work Mahiravana Badha) was Hanuman; due to his devotion to Rama he can do anything.

Goddess Kali in Krittivasi Ramayana and Betal Chandi in 'Mahiravana Badha' were worshipped in nether world. Betal Chandi is another form of Durga and it was originally a folk deity. There is a Chandika Devalaya at Chhaygaon in southern Kamrup of Assam. Kamakhya Devalaya of pre Christian era is the most ancient *Shakti* shrine of the North East India. It is a fact that the *Shakti* cult is still a strong religious faith in lower Assam.

Probably this story became popular through the Ramayana authored by Krittivasa. In the Ramayana written by Madhava Kandali no story of Mahiravana has found mentioned as it was written on the basis of the Valmiki Ramayana. The story was probably in the oral form even before the Kandali Ramayana was written. When *Shakta* cult became prominent the story was incorporated into the Ramayana written by Krittivasa. Later on this story was accepted in the Ramayana tradition of Assam also. That is why this story is more popular in Lower Assam. It seems to be the direct impact of the Krittivasi Ramayana as the Lower Assam is adjacent to West Bengal. In Lower Assam we find this story in *Holigeet* also.

In Kamarupa Kingdom of ancient time *Shakta* cult was prominent and *Tantrikism* also evolved in this kingdom. Due to the assimilation of *Tantrikism* in Buddhism Bajrayana Buddhism evolved in Trans-Himalayan region. So *Saktaism* and *Tantrikism* were remarkable development in the field of Hinduism during the rule of the Pala-Sena rule in Eastern India. This added a new dimension to Hinduism before the development of Pan-Indian *Bhakti* movement. With the passage of time this religious development influenced the Hinduism as a whole.

Human sacrifice was prevalent for worshipping at the Shakti shrines like Kamakhya and Tamreswari temples. So we find in this story of Mahiravana the act of human sacrifice for propitiation of the Betal Chandi Devi. That was the custom for propitiation of the goddess in the nether world which is imagined as located below the earth (Patala). It seems that the nether world is nothing but the ambience of Tantrik and Shakti faith here itself.

Mahiravana can be compared with Mahisasura. As Mahisasura was killed by Mahisamardini or Durga, so Mahiravana was also killed by Hanuman for their misdeeds. In both the words Mahisasur and Mahiravana the prefix used is Mahi. So it can be presumed that both are analogous.

Near Gauhati or present Guwahati there is a hill named Mayaranga and the first Asura king of the Pragjyotisha kingdom of Assam was Mahiranga. This Mahiranga can be identified with Mahiravana of the Ramayana story. So the story of Mahiravana percolated to the folk level many centuries back. Or the story was prevalent among the folks and it was adopted into the story of Ramayana.

We find variation in the story of Mahiravana in Assamese Ramayana tradition as compared to that of Krittivasi Ramayana. In the Mahiravana story of Assamese Ramayana Kavya Devi Betal Chandi was worshiped by Mahiravana. Here the goddess was shown as a malevolent goddess and she was in defence of Mahiravana. So she was killed by Hanuman before killing Mahiravana. This is in sharp contrast with the Krittivasi Ramayana where goddess Kali helps in rescue of Rama and killing of her own devotee Mahiravana.

We can claim that this story was evolved in the old Kamarupa kingdom. Later on that story was adopted in different cultures because the fanciful events attract the common folk of all cultures. In different cultures the story took slightly different forms to suit their taste specific to their cultures.

### **Concept of Patala:**

We find the existence of three worlds or *trilokas* in Hindu cosmology: *Sarga*, *Martya* and *Patala*. *Sarga* is the world highest in position, *Martya* is the earth and *Patala* is the nether world. *Sarga* is the coveted destination of everyone. On the other hand everybody wants to avoid *Patala*. According to Hindu cosmology the conception of the *trilokas* consisting of nether world (*Patala*), earth (*Martya*) and heaven (*Sarga*) is depicted in the Trivikrama figure of Vishnu who covers the three worlds with his three giant steps. In our general conception *Sarga* is above the earth and *Patala* is below the earth. *Patala* and *Naraka* (hell) are analogous as both are assumed to be beneath the earth.

*Patala* is the base world among the *trilokas*. Ahiravana is the ruler of this world. This world is not easily accessible for human beings of the earth as the heaven is. Sita, wife of Rama goes to *Patala* after their return from Lanka. This act of Sita going to *Patala* seems to be suicidal and an act of protest.

### **Morals of the Story:**

After study and proper observation of the facts we can extract a few morals out of the story. Morals of the story are relevant in the present context also. There is a part of the world which is full of *paapa* (misdeeds). Whoever is engaged in misdeeds is certainly going to perish in the long run. At the end Dharma wins

victory over Adharma or evil howsoever it may be protractedly strong and troublesome. The goddess also cannot help in rescue of her devotee who follows the sinful path. The devotee (Hanuman) of Rama can achieve anything which may seem impossible for a mortal human.

## **II. Conclusion:**

The story of Mahiravana is like an addendum of the original Ramayana though later on it became an integral part of the epic. This has given us ample scope for popular entertainment in different literary and performing art forms of different cultures. The story with pool of folk elements has perhaps crossed the boundary of local perspective to a discourse of universality. Mahiravana is nothing but one dark aspect of a human being. He may be identified with the egoistic and sinful acts of Ravana. As long as we cannot get rid of these evils called Mahiravana we will not be able to free our atman or soul from the clutches of Ravana.

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