SOME LEXICAL PROBLEMS IN THE
VĀLMĪKI RĀMĀYAṆA

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For all the apparent simplicity of its style, the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa bristles with passages where we simply must confess that we cannot understand exactly what is meant. Virtually every page of the text can in some way reproach us for the vagueness of our comprehension of its verbal detail. Modern students of the poem, rather more so than their counterpart in the medieval tradition of Rāmāyaṇa exegesis, seem all too often prone to allow these obscurities to remain such. But however minor each individual uncertainty may be, the ambiguity will of course be cumulative, and as a consequence our comprehension and appreciation of the Indian epic tends to a greater imprecision than scholarship in comparable Indo-European epic traditions has tolerated. To a large extent this is a result of the critical deficiency in our scholarly tools. We have no complete grammar of the epic dialect, no adequate dictionary (let alone specialized lexica, as of particles), and worst of all no concordances. Until all the evidence is fully and sensitively assembled, the philological study of the epic will not progress much beyond the work of the 12th century pioneers, and a tentative and provisional character will unavoidably still attach to it.

Under such a proviso, I wish to examine here, as a modest contribution in honour of Dr. Sakseina, a few minor lexical problems of the Rāmāyaṇa. These include both items which, correctly explained by the medieval scholiastic tradition, have been ignored by modern scholarship, as well as a few, which, I believe, have been imperfectly understood both in the Indian tradition and the West. My objects of study here are principally questions of nuance, slight in their isolated impact, but cumulatively significant. The arguments
to be summoned can sometimes, and by necessity, rest on nothing more secure than likelihood.¹

SATYAPARĀKRAMA— Stock epithets constitute one major area of ambiguity, and the primary cause of this is precisely the fact that they are so often used formulaically: It is the frequent absence of context-sensitivity, or apparent absence, that makes it difficult for us to distinguish their exact semantic content.

SATYAPARĀKRAMA—Presents us with an example of this kind of vagueness in our comprehension, and the most recent translator of the Mahābhārata demonstrates the problems one faces in gauging the right shade of meaning: “mighty in truth” (I.70.24); “gallant in his truth” (III.61.46); “whose powers is his truth” (V.36.23); “whose valor is the truth” (V.134.21).²

As the above translations show, it is the martial sense of parākrama (“to strike out”, etc., to battle; cf. yudhāya... parākrama); hence, “to be brave, bold” that is foremost in the translator’s mind, and understandably so, since it is the one we most frequently encounter in the epics. What I take to be the more general significance, “to strive for”, “to make a zealous effort towards”, seems rarely to be found in the epics. It is, however, the primary one in the Pāli canon and the Āsokan Inscriptions. The latter offer an even more particularistic example in Rock Edict VI (Shahbazgarhi), line 16 (Hultzsch):

yang ca kṣiṣa parākramāmi hiti bhūtanām anugamāṃ vratayā... kṣiṣā ca mā tu nāpyo parākramānāṃ sarvalokaḥkāye dvāra tu bhūtaḥ imāṃ suktaḥ agnena parākramuṃ

“...And any effort that I am making is so that I may discharge the debt I owe to living creatures... Likewise, that my sons

LEXICAL PROBLEMS IN THE VĀLMIKI RĀMĀYANA

and grand sons may strive for the welfare of all the world. But this indeed is a difficult thing to accomplish without intense effort”.³

The evidence of the Rāmāyana tends to suggest that in certain contexts and compounds it is this signification which is in fact operative.

Although it is not frequent that the substantive is used independently in this more neutral sense, instances can be found. After learning of his father’s “order” to go into banishment, Rāma takes leave of his mother, begging her permission to be allowed to depart for the forest. We read,

prārdayen naravṛṣṭaḥ sa na labham
parākramāj jīvaṁ eva dāndakāsya

The Śrīramani commentary, seeking to preserve something of the usual sense, explains, “[He wanted to go] in order to attack [āśrama—] the enemies [jūra]... of the sages”. The more cogent explanation, and the only one fully authorized by the narrative itself—Rāma after all has been pleading with Kaṇsāyā for much of the chapter—is that suggested by the Āsokan parallel:

“The bull among men errantly entered his mother—he wanted only to go to the Dāndakas...”

After having answered the Lokāyata arguments expressed by the minister Jābbī, Rāma sets forth his own understanding of what constitutes proper conduct, summarizing in this way:

atyayena dharmena ca parākramam ca
bhātamekaṃ prāparipādhanāṃ ca
prājñāvīdanaṃ prāmānayo ca
pṛthivānam abhi śrīśiṣyāya nastaḥ

The commentators, those at least who are willing to address the problem (Mahākārattrtha and Govindaśrāja are not), find themselves at something of

1. Much of this material is drawn from my annotated translation of the Aṣṭāyūṣayā (forthcoming). All references to the Rāmāyana are to the critical edition, Baroda, 1960-75.
3. Ibid. V.129.17.
4. Cf. for example Dhammapada 383, śivāsa nityam parākrama, and the common collocation śivāsa, nākāna, parākrama (as, e.g., in Sūryaṇīrīgī, V.66, 104f.).
LEXICAL PROBLEMS IN THE VÂLMIKI RÂMASÂYA

No doubt analogous to saṭyaprâkrama- in saṭyaprâkrama- and related to it dharmaśravanâ (which is paralleled by dharmaśravanâ in saṭyaprâkrama-). The juxtaposition of the compounds clearly indicates that we are to see a complementarity: "who know and strive (to follow) the ways of righteousness." Here then would be a bipartite formulation, "knowing and doing" (in contrast to what has been cited above), one which we are to encounter again below.

KRTÂJNA— PW knows no signification for the compound other than the standard classical one, "grateful," "thankful," and in the main this is indeed the sense it bears in the Râmâyana. But there are instances where we cannot admit this sense without dulling or obscuring altogether the meaning of a verse, and where consequently we must be prepared to discover some other nuance.

Stâ is waiting for Râma to return after his coronation:

1. epikrâtya sâ mā likē prâjâ kârtâcchana |
2. (ebhi jā rajâdhrâstraṁ rajâpuraṁ prâthiṣṭâpate)‖

Tilaka strives to find an application for the common signification:"grateful." She worships the gods in gratitude for their beneficence in granting (Râma) the kingship." Besides the fact that Râma has not yet received the kingship, I do not know that gratitude to the gods ever finds ritual expression in the Râmâyana. Ritual is employed only either to avert evil or to secure good fortune. It is for likelier that the compound stands in apposition to the gerundial clause:

"She performed the rites for the gods in deep delight, knowing the proper things to do (and was waiting for the prince, aware of the kingly attributes to expect)."

1. ibid., II.100.7.
2. ibid., II.101.4.
3. ibid., II.100.7.
4. Ibid., II.101.4.
5. Ibid., II.101.4.
This is in fact how Śrīmad-bhāgavata understands, and the probability of such an interpretation is strengthened by the following passage, in which Rāma addresses Kaikēyī:

ḥīṣaṇa garuṇa pīṭā ḫeṣṭhitinaṇa ṛṇaṇa ca
hṛṣīṣīyam avādūkṣaḥ kānti na hṛṣīṣīyam aham priyam.

Even more noticeably than in the previous case, “gratitude”, “thankfulness” has no semantic propriety in the verse, for it has nothing at all to do with the authority Dārārāta exercises over Rāma. What does count, again, is Dārārāta’s truthfulness and righteousmness, and the never questioned assumption that whatever he might ask is the correct thing to do:

“If enjoined by my benefactor, guru, father, a man who knows what is right to do and who is my king, what would I hesitate to do in order to please him?”

Widening the semantic range of the compound also aids us in explaining an otherwise peculiar juxtaposition in the list of Rāma’s virtues at the beginning of the Ayodhyāprakṣṇa:

The copulative particles (e. g. . . . ca) demand a close relationship between the two terms, which no other translation allows us to establish but the following:

“[Rāma was] learned in the sciences and skilled in practice, too”.

I would additionally suggest that here again (as in dharmaṣṭram dharmeṣṭram above), but more explicitly, the text is drawing the distinction between “theory” and “practice” that was to become so significant a topic in Indian thinking of classical period (normally under the opposition kāśmir-prayoga).

1. Mahākāśyapa and Gīvindādīraja similarly, “knowing the appropriate rituals”, though they understand prospectively (the rituals that he was going to do when Rāma returned). Note also the reading dharmāḥ in two U MSS.

2. Rājāraja, 11.1.22.

3. Note once again the NR’s variant, dharmāṣṭra (356). The commentators here seek too much specificity: Katsa, Tīkṣaṇa, “conjoint of Kaikēyī’s deed, i.e., how she had saved him”; Tīkṣaṇa and Gīvindādīraja, “conjoint of his own deed, i.e., his having granted the boon”.

4. H.1.20.

5. See also H.11.14-17, 31.19 for further examples. I now notice that Bhābhīkāla’s aberrant dictionary does record “knowing what is right”, citing MBh. XII.104.8 vulg. (in the critical edition replaced by ṭīṣṭopad).
Tilaka explains, "Desiring to do a kindness", that is, to his father"—the sort of comment that obscures more than it clarifies. More probably, "Rāghava had them straightway fetch [the charioteer], for he was anxious for the news".

After the death of Dāśaratha, envoys are despatched to the land of the Kekayas, in order to bring back the new king-to-be, Bharata:

bhārantā prījātih kalaracanātitham
bhuyantā ca mamāya parigrāhātitham

bhārya here refers to Bharata (as pāda l indicates), whom the envoys like the people of Ayodhya already consider to be their king. The commentators mistakenly understand dāśarathayā, and this error along with the uncertainty about prījā, leads them astray: Tirtha and Govinda, "It is a 'kindness to their master' [i.e., Dāśaratha] insofar as his reaching the other world depends on Bharata's being quickly brought and his performing the funeral rites". The passages already adduced permit us, I think, to explain instead,

"To bring their master the news (i.e., the message that he is to return at once), to ensure the safety to their master's House and his succession in the dynasty, the messengers wasted no time but hurried on . . ."

PARALOKA— A verse cited above, in which Rāma describes his father, continues as follows:

paralokahbhāyaḥ bhotā nīhrāyaḥ stu pita mama //
(tasyāt hi bhavet asmin harinām apratimamānte)
(saṁśaya na mamaśya tuṣya tuṣṇa tuṣṭe ca ca mām) //

Here lies one of those crucial details that must colour much of our understanding of the psychological motivations underlying the action of the Rāmaśāstra. What precisely conditions Dāśaratha's behaviour? Is it the "fear of the other world", solicitude about his fate after death, or is it rather "fear of people", of what they would say were he to break his promise to

LEXICAL PROBLEMS IN THE VAYMIKI RĀMAṆĀ

Kaikeyī? A similar problem confronts us in the case of Rāma. Soon after leaving Ayodhya he says to Lakṣmīmaṇa,

aḍharmahkaśabāt ca paralokahā ca dhanaḥ //
tena lakṣmīmaṇe nāyakam stūrṇam abhijñeyam //

Though not absolutely conclusive the evidence weighs in favour of the second interpretation, a sense unrecorded in the lexicon.

Both Śiṅgaraṇa and Satyastrī agree in giving the compound paraloka-the sense of "other people", "public opinion". More important is the Northern Recension's interpretative reading in 47.26, lokāvāra, "public talk" (for paraloka). When the sense "other world" is required in Rāmaśāstra the uncompound form is preferred, or far more frequently replaced by param abhaṅga, svarga, trīdaṁ, etc. I can locate only one instance in the critical edition where paraloka indubitably bears the meaning "other world" (note that it is picked up in vs. 8 by the uncompound form), though there is a second case I will examine below.

The context to my mind clearly urges the second analysis. The charge of dishonesty, "swaṁ na", requires some reference to public censure, while the king's emotional response, munaṁpaṭa, would hardly seem to be one commensurate with exchathological terror. In 20.5.6, moreover, Lakṣmīmaṇa is doubtless answering Rāma's argument here when he says,

asīhānāmamṣaṃ paśca jīto vai nāmānikaḥ //
<aharmeṣvaraṃ paśca jīto vai nāmānikaḥ> //

"This is no place for panic—this has given rise to such imprecision—from worry about the people's respect" if there should happen to be a lapse from righteousness . . ."

It is perfectly obvious in Dāśaratha's interview with Kaikeyī what kind of fears are preying on his mind:

1. 11.47.26.
2. Rāmaśāstra, II.19.7.
3. ibid., II.47.26.
4. II.61.
5. Cf. ibid., II.59.8.
6. Cf. ibid., II.306.16; similarly prāṇa, ibid., II.37.8, etc.
7. ibid., III.59.6.
8. ibid., II.19.7.
10. Divide aśītaviṣṭaḥ, with Govinda's second interpretation and the NR gloss, lokāvāra.
The arguments to be brought against this interpretation are not particularly cogent. The principal one is the opinion of the other commentators: “what causes fear in the world to come, i.e., falsehood” (Tirtha, Tihaka); “fear relating to the loss of the world to come” (Govinda, Karaka). The propensity to see eucharistic reference here may be thought to find support in passages where the metaphysical implications of conduct are openly voiced. But it is quite an easy matter to assemble witnesses against all such examples, passages that reflect a deep concern about one’s duties and one’s fame in this world. I, therefore, feel compelled to render the two passages as follows:

“Let (my father) be freed from the fear he has, of what other people might say. (For if this were not called off, he too would suffer mental torment, to hear his truthfulness impugned, and his torment would torment me).”

“I fear the danger unrighteousness poses, blameless Lakṣmana, and I fear what other people might say. That is why I do not have myself consecrated this very day.”

The testimony of one further passage must still be considered, for it is significant thought not, I feel, unequivocal.

After Rāma’s departure Sūmainā attempts to comfort Kaṇasana, citing first Rāma’s expounding in the face of his misfortune, and then Lakṣmana’s devotion to him:

1. Ibid., II.11.6.
4. Ibid., II.18.29, 101.7-9.10. If further evidence is required of how strong the power of public opinion was felt to be, one needs only point to the events in Tattvāloka (VI.103 ff.), where Rāma allows the ordeal of Śīvā because he fears the reproach of people (VI.106 ff.), and to Uṣṭhadiṣṭa (VII.62 ff.), where Rāma driven Śīvā from the kingdom because of what the people are saying.
5. Ibid., II.19.7-8.
6. Ibid., II.47.26.
7. Ibid., II.54.5.

LEXICAL PROBLEMS IN THE VĀLMIKI KĀMAYĀNA

laksanastu cāpi nāmaṣṭu padam pariṣcaraṇaṃ /
ārādhyayati dharmāḥ/ śa parādah/k jñānādhyayāḥ "\n
Besides the fact already noted that the compound form parādah- rarely occurs in the poem in the sense “other world”, the use here of a- the verbal root rād- is particularly problematic. The form of the verb always appears to construe with a personal object in the Rādhaśayana, and in fact I am unable to locate a single example in Sanskrit literature of its being employed with an impersonal object, as it would be here if we understood parādah- in its usual sense (PW s.v. can adduce only one citation, the present verse). The very important group of D MSS, D457, clearly found the usage impossible, offering instead,

ārādhyayaḥ dharmena kārutātham abhirat-padda // (1302)*

“(Lakṣmana) will be dwelling [in the forest] winning the regard of Kākuṭātha by his righteousness”.

All the rest of the Northern Recension similarly felt the need to recast the line:

vassativataḥ padeḥ tālam arjuna dharmanirjitaḥ \n
The variant is interesting on two counts. It demonstrates both the tradition’s discomfort with the use of arjuna with an impersonal object, and the difficulty it found with the compound form parādah- in its metaphysical signification. Finally, let us observe how frequently elsewhere in the book reference is made to the esteem Lakṣmana has won in the eyes of the people for his selfless sacrifice:

One would, therefore, be inclined to render II.54.6 as follows:

“Lakṣmana, too, by serving Rāma in the forest, by his self-restraint and sense of duty, is winning the regard of other men.”

On this verse, however, the commentators are unanimous in their explanation: “is gaining the higher world”. And they find strong support in an Aṣokā inscription:

hidalagam ca paralagam ca uśtuṣṭvati²

“That they might gain both this world and the world to come”.

1. Ibid., 54.6.
2. Cf. Ibid., II.4.40, 23.32, 33.4; II.10.56, etc.
3. Here I think it far likelier that we have not, as usual, an interpretation of the original uṣṭavatā, as D457 offer, but a revision.
4. Rādhaśayana, II.35.27, 42.7, 80.1 etc.
5. Separate Rock Edict II (Jugadā), line 7.
The Atokan parallel may be just enough to tip the scale in the case of the following verse:

"Lakshamana, too, (by serving Rama in the forest, by his self-restraint and sense of duty), is gaining the higher world."

It appears to me, however, that it is insufficient to impugn the arguments adduced for the other two passages, and that we must instead posit a bivalence in the term for the Rāmāyana.

ŚAṬRUA— Lakshamana urges Rama to resist his unjust banishment, and asserts that he himself is able to defeat anyone who might stand in the way. Moreover,

na cetham kāmaye' stvarham yah yās chatur mato mana //
ainā . . .
pragāhiṇa vai śatram vijñanām tāna kalpasya //

"enemy", "opponent", "foe", the standard significations of the word, are not applicable here. The sense "conqueror", or better, "match" is what is required:

". . . nor am I very eager that anyone be thought my match. With my sword . . . held ready I count one my match, be he Indra himself, God of the thunderbolt."

"Match" is the sense I think we must give the word also in such passages as Śrīpatra Dīnāman 1.6.3.8, the famous māyāpurana of indrasann (Tvasta wants a son to conquer Indra, who has enemies enough already), and for the name Ajñāśāstra, which should signify "whose match has not been born".

VASIN— In a verse already cited Daśaratha goes off to tell Kaikeyi the news of Rama’s coronation:

priyādānā priyam abhājanān simhāntāḥpāpam varṣa

The commentators Katakā and Tiłaka remark on the epithet, "self-controlled", in all things except what concerns his wife", while Govinda explains,

1. Rāmāyaṇa, II.34.6.
2. Are we to explain this as reflecting a period of ethical transvaluation, where a shift is taking place from a "heretic" concern for communal approbation to a more personal pre-occupation with heavenly rewards?
3. Rāmāyaṇa, II.32.26–27.
4. yah is reduced from yah [or, yah] kaśic, as often (cf. Ācta, Sanskrit Syntax [Leyden, 1909], p. 326).
5. Rāmāyaṇa, II.10.1.

LEXICAL PROBLEMS IN THE VĀLMIKI RĀMĀYANA

"everything is under his own control", that is, he is independent and would tell Kaikeyi himself. Neither explanation allows us to grasp the true implication; "of one’s own accord" (here, "willingly", even, "gladly"), a rare sense attested it seems only in Taittirīya Samhitā, does permit us to catch the important suggestion, that the king believes Kaikeyi will be as pleased as he is himself to learn of Rama’s consecration (as in fact she would have been but for the "poisonous counsel" of Mantharā). Again, later in the book Rāma says to Bharata, who is pleading with him to return,

sa sauchato bhava mā toṣṣa pātaṁ ēva tāṁ purīṁ /
tathā pitaṁ ajñatāṁ si vaśīṇā . . . //

"Compose yourself and do not grieve. Go back and take up your residence in the town, as father of his own accord directed you to do."

Here, as Govinda’s previous gloss helps us to perceive, Rāma’s crucial purpose is to re-affirm in Bharata’s eyes the validity of their father’s command by emphasizing the fact that the king, in the final analysis at least, is absolutely autonomous.

KĀNCI— After slaying Jātañjā, Rāvaṇa takes hold of Śiśu and flies up into the sky. The golden Śiśu shines like lightning within the arms of Rāvaṇa, blue-black as a storm-cloud (va. 13, 22), or like the moon peeping out through a dark cloud (va. 18). Then comes the following simile:

vaṃ manauṛṇā nāmaṁ mādhavam kṛṣṇaśāndhānaṁ /
vasuḥ śāṅkunā kātiśi śām manjīnā śatāṁ //

kātiśi, to my knowledge, is nowhere found in any sense but "belt, girdle", which here makes obvious difficulties. Several commentators, Tiłaka and Śirimangi for example, without any manuscript support alter the lection of pāḍu d, reading gajam for maṣṭam, "[like a golden girth] around a [dark] elephant". But the upādā also is asked, for Śiśu is not embracing Rāvaṇa, she is being held within his embrace, as the other similes serve to indicate. Those commentators who read with the critical edition are driven to rather desperate explanations, as Govinda: "‘like a girdle (maitaka, or, ‘band’) on [in conjunction with?] a sapphire’. Every one knows it is silver that is used to heighten the beauty of a sapphire. Gold by contrast dulls it, and thus the
verb actually expresses the opposite, '(she was as little beautiful, i.e.,) she was not beautiful (in Rāvana's embrace)'. The word kāśi-, I have little doubt, is here being used in an unattested sense, "lustrous streak", which is also suggested by the Dāl variant lekhā, and the Dhātupātha gloss of kāci, kāci, "dīptibandhanayoh". I would, therefore, render as follows:

"Maithili was golden-skinned, the rākṣasa was deep blueblack, and in his arms she looked just like the star that glitters within a sapphire."

It is interesting to note that a principal source of star-sapphires is Ceylon itself: "Ceylon has for ages been famous for sapphires.... Some of the slightly cloudy Ceylon sapphires, usually of greyish-blue colour, display when cut with a convex face a chatoyant luminosity, sometimes forming a luminous star of six rays, whence they are called 'star-supphires.'"  