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Bhakti Literature and Folklore

Unfolding the myth of Ravana: a study of Bhakti Literature in a new light

Valmiki's "Ramayana" or Kamban's "Kamba ramayanam" glorified the life of Ram as against Ravana who appeared in both the texts as an unscrupulous ruler who abducted Sita thereby provoking the battle between the good and the evil forces. Interestingly popular versions of Ramayana have always remained fluid in its concept and have travelled into the lived experiences of people of the continent. The legend of Ramayana has been retold three hundred times and contrary to the well-known texts written by Valmiki or Kamban, Ravana has appeared as the main protagonist of the legend of Ramayana in several Bhakti texts. Some of the predominant examples being the Jaina texts or Gond folk lore centering around Ravana.

This study concentrates on the literature that gained momentum from the twentieth century among a section of the Tamil literati who developed a counter narrative in which Ramayana was looked upon as a religious text of the Aryans that consciously denigrated Ravana through a malicious and vile representation of the Adivasis. The new Bhakti literature upheld the story of a new Ravana who was not actually a ten-headed monster(rakshas) but rather a competent intellectual king with a knowledge of scriptures, gods and nature. In spite of the lack of vast literature on this aspect of study, Ravana continues to stir the imagination of a section of the intellectuals for whom he continues to be a symbol of Dravidian supremacy.

Keywords: Ramayana, Ravana cult, Bhakti Literature, Dravidian supremacy.