

Jagat Singh's Ramayana.

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The Ramayana: Love and Valour in India's Great Epic was on display at the British Library, London between May 16 and September 14, 2008. This was a unique opportunity to view almost in its entirety, the manuscript known as "Jagat Singh's Ramayana", a splendid and elaborate illustration of the epic, from Mewar, which formed the central focus of the exhibition. The exhibition also showcased a variety of other media through which the story of Rama is told, from stone sculptures that decorate the walls of temples through shadow-puppets to the Doordarshan televised version of the epic. The immense popularity of the epic down the ages and its continued relevance in the modern world was clearly evinced through these eclectic snapshots. One of the first things to grab visitors' attention in the exhibition space was a larger-than-life Ravana, made up of newspapers etc. and brightly painted to resemble the effigies of Ravana that are burnt in north India on Dassehra. This immediately told the viewer not to expect a purely academic exposition of the epic, but rather a celebration of its myriad forms, with the spotlight on the wonderful illustrated Mewar Ramayana. The exhibition was accompanied by performances of the epic in song, dance, and theatre, and also animation; hence viewers encountered "many Ramayanas". The manuscript itself was displayed in a way that would facilitate an understanding of the story of the epic, the space being demarcated into sections related to episodes in the manuscript with a clear indication of the route the visitor should follow, and labels for each painting that described the events taking place therein.

The Mewar Ramayana was produced between 1649 and 1653 at the court of Jagat Singh. It is grand in scale and dramatic in conception, with over 400 paintings distributed over the seven books of the epic. The seven books were probably divided among different master painters and their studios: scholars have identified two of the master painters as Sahibdin and Manohar, and a third as having a Deccan-influenced style. There is a clearly discernible stylistic difference between the seven books with Books 2 and 6 in the style of Sahibdin and his studio, Books 1, 3, and 7 in the style of Manohar and his studio, and the remaining two books in the anonymous Deccan-influenced style. ([n1](#))

The illustration depicting the assault on Lanka (figure 1) is in the hand of Sahibdin and is one of the most dynamic and exciting paintings of the manuscript. At the centre of the page is Ravana with his multiple heads and arms, sitting in his golden palace as a dramatic battle unfolds all around him. He is depicted a second time on the roof of the palace, watching the city walls being breached in all directions by Rama's vanara sena. It is a common device in many miniatures to depict the main character more than once on a page -- this can indicate two separate episodes, the passage of time or even different locations. In this painting, it would appear that Ravana receives news of the battle while seated inside the palace and then goes to the roof to survey the scene. According to Professor J.P. Losty, Sahibdin makes use of the "medieval idea of a conceptual view" which "typically took a plan view of a circular city with just its gateways shown in elevation". ([n2](#)) Hence we have a clear picture of what is going on within the palace walls, outside them, as well as at the gates. Within the city walls, the action radiates outwards from Ravana's central pavilion: his army seated on elephants and chariots, and on foot, draw their bows and arrows and charge in the direction of the attacking monkeys. The latter converge on the city walls from without, armed with boulders and branches with Rama and Lakshmana

inconspicuous in their midst at the bottom left of the painting. The clash occurs at the city walls where opposing forces collide in dynamic conflict. The tension of the battle is palpable in the way Sahibdin has set up the page.

In the battle scenes, Sahibdin always depicts Ravana's palace on the right and Rama's camp on the left of the page.([n3](#)) This is done to maintain a narrative consistency and assist the viewer in reading the illustration which can get confusing with protagonists depicted twice, thrice, and even four times. Sometimes the different episodes on a page are divided into compartments and often they follow a linear sequence, but once in a while the viewer might just have to rely on his or her knowledge of the text to understand how the story unfolds in the painting. For example, in the illustration depicting Bharata's visit to Rama and the latter's hearing the news of their father's death, from Book 2 (figure 2), Rama is depicted seven times and at first glance it is difficult to determine how the narrative proceeds. According to Professor Vidya Dehejia, the first scene in the narrative sequence on this page is off-centre to the upper left where Bharata and Shatrughna pay obeisance to Rama who is seated with Sita and Lakshmana, by kneeling in front of him. The narrative travels left to the group sitting together in front of Rama's hut and then moves anticlockwise with the group walking along the river to perform their father's last rites and then dejectedly climbing up the hill, until finally at the centre of the page where Rama sits in front of the hut again with his head bowed in sorrow.([n4](#))

In this painting the artist's facility in organizing the space is evident. Though the protagonist is depicted seven times, the page does not seem crowded with figures. The setting throughout is the forest and riverbank where Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita lived, and here the groups of figures are distributed with trees and vegetation becoming informal divisions on the page. There is a sense of balance between the many human figures and their natural habitat and neither seems to overwhelm the other. In contrast, the painting depicting Hanumana jumping into the mouth of Surasa gives prominence to the two protagonists, their figures dominating the page with land and water depicted summarily in the background. Hanumana is depicted leaping at the monster, then entering its mouth, and next emerging out of its ear in a stream of blood. Another painting where the protagonist covers the entire page is the waking of Kumbhakarna. Sahibdin devoted 17 paintings to the awakening of Kumbhakarna and his going into battle, a favourite part of the Ramayana story.([n5](#)) This painting is monoscenic and depicts Kumbhakarna still sleeping, with Ravana's army crawling all over him trying to wake him up with music, weapons, animals, etc. Kumbhakarna was a giant and while we can gauge this by comparing him to the elephants beside him, the fact that he occupies the entire page serves to emphasize his huge stature. In another page where he is awake and consuming enormous quantities of food, his seated figure occupies the entire height of the page. While miniatures often make use of the device of hierarchical size where the most important figures are larger than others, here, the artist makes it apparent that Kumbhakarna is indeed a giant.

A favourite painting from this manuscript depicts Hanumana's journey to the Himalaya in search of the special herb that will save Lakshmana who was lethally wounded by Indrajit (figure 3). Hanumana is depicted thrice, the first in the chronological sequence being on the left where he appears to be flying through the sky, scanning the mountainous terrain for the herb. The story moves to the right of the page where Hanumana is unable to recognize the appropriate herb and scours the mountain before deciding to take back the entire mountain, which is what he is shown

doing at the top centre of the page. A charming detail is Hanumana's tail which is securely wrapped around the mountain, holding it in place while he soars through the air. Of special interest here is Sahibdin's depiction of the mountainous terrain with its many-coloured peaks, varied vegetation, and mountain streams that rush to meet the water body at the bottom of the page. Once again, the artist evinces his great talent in depicting nature.

But apart from artistic merit, the Mewar Ramayana has special significance as a work of subtle political propaganda. This manuscript was the grandest commission of Jagat Singh's reign and required an expansion of his studio. As Professor Losty suggests, the reason for its lavishness rests in the fact that the Solar Rajputs were principally represented by the Sisodiya ruling clan of Mewar and included Rama among their ancestors. Hence in one sense the Ramayana was a genealogical history of the clan with the great hero Rama at its head, his battle standard displaying the sun in splendour -- the motif of the Sisodiyas. (n6) The manuscript served as a reminder of the greatness of the clan and the bravery and valour of its heroes who were bound by and adhered to the same sense of (Rajput) duty as Rama. Professor Losty also conjectures that the artist depicts the figure of Ravana in a way suggestive of the Mughal emperor, thereby demonizing the latter. This is done by making Ravana appear in a jharokha balcony giving court in a manner similar to paintings of Jahangir and Shah Jahan. (n7) Another means through which this is achieved is by placing Ravana within red tent hangings in the painting where he prepares for his final encounter with Rama. These red tent hangings were the prerogative of Mughal emperors in India, even though the Mewar rulers had captured some and also used them. (n8) The Yuddhakanda can therefore be read as a battle between Mewar and their great enemies, the Mughals, where the heroic Rajputs emerge victorious. This would however remain a dream confined to the imaginative pages of a manuscript, because as the pages of history tell us, it was the Mughals who emerged victorious.

Footnotes

(n1) J.P. Losty, *The Ramayana: Love and Valour in India's Great Epic, The Mewar Ramayana Manuscripts*, London: British Library, 2008, p. 11.

(n2) Losty, *Love and Valour*, p. 16.

(n3) Losty, "Sahib Dins Book of Battles: Rana Jagat Singh's Yuddhakanda", in Vidya Dehejia (ed.), *The Legend of Rama: Artistic Visions*, Bombay: Marg, 1994, pp. 101-16, see p. 103.

(n4) Vidya Dehejia, "The Treatment of Narrative in Jagat Singh's 'Ramayana': A Preliminary Study", *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 56, No. 3/4, 1996, pp. 303-24, see p. 306.

(n5) Losty, *Love and Valour*, p. 17.

(n6) Losty, "Sahib Dins Book of Battles", p. 102.

(n7) *Ibid.*

(n8) *Ibid.*, p. 114.

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