

Abstract
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‘The Rescue of Sītā’: a grandmother’s tale in context

In 1895 and 1896 the London-based journal *Folk-Lore* published a series of tales collected in Central India by Susette M. Taylor. These tales had been told to Miss Taylor at Sehore (Bhopal) by her *ayah*, a Hindu woman named Gaṅgā, over seventy years of age, who had long been resident in that area and had learnt the tales from her grandmother. ‘The Rescue of Sītā’ is a brief prose retelling of the Rāma story, prefaced by ‘Servan’, a detailed, extended version of the story of the ascetic boy accidentally shot by Daśaratha, localised near Bhopal (*Folk-Lore* 7 (1896): 84-86).

The paper will discuss this tale as an example of the narrative developments undergone by Vālmīki’s *ādikāvya* in later Sanskrit and vernacular adaptations, exploring the factors influencing these changes to the tradition, in particular the sex, age and status of teller and audience. As a tale told to a young child, the content must be subtly modified; as a woman’s tale, the whole emphasis is shifted. The handling makes it clear that the prime interests of the teller are agricultural rather than militaristic or religious.

In particular, the figures of the unfortunate ascetic boy, Daśaratha, Kaikeyī and Hanumān are all presented in a different light from their epic prototypes. Vālmīki’s unnamed boy has been given a history commensurate with his growing status as the hero of an independent tale; steps are taken to lessen the guilt attached to Daśaratha and Kaikeyī; and the hero of this telling is Hanumān, rather than Rāma.

The paper aims to explore how far these changes are conditioned by the specific requirements of the Bhopal tale, and how far they reflect developments found more generally in a wide range of other Sanskrit and vernacular adaptations of the Rāma story.