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Variants of the Kuśalavopākhyāna

W.L. Smith

The *Kuśalavopākhyāna*, the account of Rāma's battle with his two sons, is an old and widespread epic theme found in Hindu and Jaina epic literature, Sanskrit drama, *purāṇas*, and vernacular versions of both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Rāma's sons Lava and Kuśa are not mentioned in the oldest layers of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, but first appear in the *uttarakāṇḍa* which was added to the epic some time in the centuries before Gupta rule.¹ There (7.84-86)² we are told that when the populace of Ayodhyā began voicing doubts about the chastity of Rāma's queen Sītā, who had been the prisoner of the demon Rāvaṇa for so many months, Rāma ordered his brother Lakṣmaṇa to take her to the forest and abandon her there. Sītā found refuge in the ashram of the sage Vālmīki where she bore and raised Rāma's twin sons, Kuśa and Lava. When they grew up, Vālmīki taught the boys to recite the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which he had recently completed. When the twins sung the epic in Ayodhyā at the conclusion of Rāma's horse sacrifice, Rāma recognized the boys and they were reunited. This tale is like the entire *uttarakāṇḍa* an obvious addendum, inspired by the word *kuśīlava*, itinerant epic bard.

¹ J.L. Brockington, *Righteous Rāma. The Evolution of the Epic*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984, p. 314.

² Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa, text as constituted in its critical edition*, gen. ed. Ramkrishna T. Vyas Oriental Institute, Vadodara, 1992.

Jaina Rāmāyaṇas

Soon after this first appearance of the theme in Vālmīki, the tale turns up again, in a much different guise in the *Kuśālavopākhyāna* of the *Pauma cariyam*, the earliest Jaina version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* composed by Vimalasūri in Mahārāṣṭrī Prakrit around 473.¹ Here² Rāma's sons are named Lavaṇa and Aṅkuśa (Aṅkusa), and are found and raised by king Vajrajaṅgha (Vajjajaṅgha) who finds the abandoned Sītā (Sīyā) while hunting elephants in the forest. The twins grow up in the city of Pauṇḍarikapurī where the Jaina ascetic Siddhārtha (Siddhattha) teaches them the arts of weaponry. When Vajrajaṅgha requests the hand of the daughter of king Pṛthu (Rāyā Pihū) for Aṅkuśa, Pṛthu insults the messenger and thereby provokes a war which the two boys clamor to take part in; Vajrajaṅgha and Sītā try to dissuade them, but eventually relent. The war is a short one: Pṛthu's army flees, he apologizes and gives Aṅkuśa his daughter Kanakamālā. The boys discover that they have acquired a taste for warfare and set off on a *digvijaya*, defeating numerous kings, a long list of whom is provided by Vimalasūri. When Aṅkuśa and Lavaṇa return triumphant to Pauṇḍarikapurī they are visited by the celestial busybody Nārada who tells them that their glory almost matches that of Rāma (Pauma; i.e. Padma, the Jaina name of Rāma) and Lakṣmaṇa (Lakkaṇa) who rule in the city of Saketa (Ayodhyā). Unwilling to tolerate any rivals for glory, the boys resolve to attack Saketa immediately. In the ensuing battle Rāma and Lakmaṇa find to their amazement that in spite of their hitherto infallible weapons, they are unable to defeat the two young lads. The fighting comes to an end when Siddhārtha and Nārada inform Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa of the true identity of their juvenile opponents causing them to throw down their weapons; once Rāma recovers from the shock, he embraces his sons,

¹ This is the date in Oskar von Hinüber, *Das Ältere Mittelindisch im Überblick*, Der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien, 1986, p. 46.

² Vimalasūri, *Paumacariyam*, vol. II, ed. H. Jacobi, with Hindi trans. by S.M. Vora, reprint, Prakrit Text Society, Ahmedabad, 1968, *parvans* 97-100.

happy in the realization that Sītā is alive, and apologizes for his treatment of her. The family is then united. In the Sanskrit *Padma carita*,¹ a 7th century work, the poet Raviseṇa tells the same story as Vimalasūri but at greater length. There are a few minor differences, most notably that in Raviseṇa Hanumān, here a *vidyādhara*, joins Kuśa and Lava in their fight against Rāma when he hears the story how he treated their mother (102.169). Raviseṇa also notes that later, disgusted with life and afraid of rebirth, the twins denounce the world, take initiation from the recluse Amṛtasvara, and become Jaina monks (115.59ff.). In Raviseṇa Lava is sometimes referred to as Anaṅgalavaṇa. Though scholars have often pointed out that Vimalasūri's work is "obviously based on" Vālmīki,² the Kuśa Lava episode obviously cannot be, since it is not found there. It is also obvious that it cannot be a Jaina innovation, since it turns up later in somewhat different form in the work of Hindu poets.

Rāma's Naramedha

It was only several centuries after the appearance of Raviseṇa's *Padma carita* that the first "Hindu" versions of the *Kuśālavopakhyaṇa* were committed to writing. These appear in a number of variants, one of which centers around a human sacrifice, *naramedha*, attempted by Rāma, a tale which found its way into the *Kathā sarit sāgara* of Somadeva (11th³ century). There we are told that Sītā was found in the forest by hermits whose doubts about her chastity were dispelled when Mother Earth carried her over the waters of the lake at Tītibhasara *tīrtha*. Sītā gave birth to a single son whom Vālmīki named Lava. One

¹ *Padma purāṇam*, ed. with a Hindi translation by Pannālāl Jain, Bhārātīya Jñānapīṭha Prakāśan, 2nd ed., New Delhi, 1978, 102.

² Umakant P. Shah, *Rāmāyaṇa in the Jaina Tradition*, in K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, ed. *Asian Variations in the Ramayana*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1983, p. 66.

³ Somadeva, *Kathā sarit sāgara*, ed. by Jagadīś Lāl Śāstrī, Motilāl Banarsidass, Dilli, 1970, 9.1.70ff.

day when Sītā went off to bathe in the Ganga with her son, Vālmīki, not seeing the child, concluded that he has been carried off by a wild beast and so created an exact duplicate from *kuśa* grass (*kuśaiḥ kṛtvā*). When Sītā returned with Lava, the sage realized his mistake, explained what had happened and introduced Kuśa. He then instructed the boys in celestial weaponry (*divyāstra*). Some time later the boys killed and ate a deer at the hermitage and, even worse, played with the sage's Śiva-*liṅga* as if it were a toy. Angry, Vālmīki demanded that they worship the *liṅga* with lotuses and mandāra flowers as a penance. Though still a boy (*bālo'pi*) Lava went to the garden on Kailāsa, killed its *yakṣa* guards and stole the required flowers. While on his way back to the hermitage, he grew tired and sat beneath a tree to rest where he was seen by Lakṣmaṇa. Noting the auspicious marks on the boy's body, Lakṣmaṇa decided that he would be an ideal victim for the human sacrifice (*naramedha*) Rāma was planning, and so challenged Lava to combat, stupefied him with a magic weapon and carried him off to Ayodhyā. Meanwhile Vālmīki informed Kuśa of what had befallen his brother, armed him and sent him to the rescue. Kuśa besieged the sacrificial enclosure (*yajñabhūmi*) in Ayodhyā, defeated Lakṣmaṇa, then duelled with Rāma who found himself unable to defeat the boy. All was resolved when Kuśa announced that he and Lava were the sons of Rāma, and Rāma introduced himself.

Another version of this variant is found in the fourteenth century(?) *Ānanda rāmāyaṇa*,¹ an encyclopedic bhakti work whose unknown author tried to assemble in it all available *Rāmāyaṇa* lore.² According to this retelling, at the instigation of Kaikeyī, his mother's co-wife, Rāma ordered Lakṣmaṇa to take Sītā to the forest and do away with her and bring back one of her arms complete with ornaments as proof that he had done the deed. His action, of course, is *līlā*, acted out for the sake of his devotees.

¹ *Ānanda rāmāyaṇa*, with commentary of Rāmtej Pāṇḍeya, Chaukambha Sanskrit Pratishtan, Delhi, 1986, *janmakhanda* 3-7.

² This device allows the poet to have his cake and eat it too; see W.L. Smith, *The Rāmāyaṇa in Eastern India: Assam, Bengal, Orissa*, reprint, New Delhi, [1988] 1994, p. 108 ff.

Lakṣmaṇa returns with a severed arm fashioned by the artisan-god Viśvakarman and displays it to Rāma and the citizens of Ayodhyā, thus satisfying the requirements of the *līlā*. Once this has been done, he and Rāma fly to Vālmīki's hermitage in their aerial car, *puṣpaka*, to pay a visit to Sītā. As in Somadeva, Sītā gives birth to a single son, here Kuśa. Returning to Ayodhyā, Rāma begins the first of one hundred horse-sacrifices which are supervised by Śatrughna who hovers over the horse in *puṣpaka*. One day while on her way to bathe, Sītā sees a female monkey (*vānarī*) tenderly caring for its five infants. Feeling a pang of guilt, Sītā returns to the hermitage to fetch her son; a short time later Vālmīki returns and, not seeing the child he is supposed to be keeping an eye on and afraid of Sītā's curse, he creates a duplicate, in this case from cuttings (*lava*), hence the child is given the name Lava. When the children are five years old, Sītā begins performing a 10-day rite (*vrata*) for which lotuses from in a pond in Ayodhyā are required. Lava goes to steal the flowers and for the first seven days he is unchallenged because at that hour the guards happen to be eating lunch. On the eighth day he is spotted by the guards who ask his identity. Lava introduces himself as the servant of Vālmīki and when the guards attack him, his arrows send them flying back to Ayodhyā. The next day Rāma despatches a thousand guards to protect his lotuses but Lava stuns them with his magic weapons and tells them he wants to meet Rāma. Rāma, imagining that Vālmīki is behind the theft because he had not been invited to the horse sacrifice, does so, and the sage turns up at the sacrificial shed (*yajñavaṭa*) the next day in the company of Sītā and the twins. Sītā cannot be recognized, however, as she travels in a covered palanquin. There the two boys recite the *Rāmāyaṇa* just as in Vālmīki's *uttarakāṇḍa*. As in Vālmīki, the audience notes their physical similarity to Rāma but remain unaware of their true identity. The performance over, the five-year old Lava goes off to play, finds the sacrificial horse, seizes it and defeats the army sent by Śatrughna to recover it. Rāma then sends off a second army, this one including the monkey warriors Hanumān and Sugrīva to Śatrughna's relief. Lava, realizing that these are the friends of his

father and uncle and not wanting to kill them, fires a magical missile causing the entire army to fall unconscious. He then takes the captured Sugriva and Hanumān home to his mother and displays his trophies. A third army, this one led by Lakṣmaṇa, then takes the field, and after a fierce struggle, Lakṣmaṇa succeeds in “binding” Lava with his *brahmā* weapon. Lava, in fact, only allows himself be taken captive out of respect for the weapon and is bundled off to Ayodhyā. Once there Rāma orders him to be executed, but is told that the boy is invulnerable to weapons. Lava is then asked how he can be killed and, remembering that Vālmīki has told him that if water is poured on his body, it will swell in size, he obligingly replies that water alone can kill him. The citizenry of Ayodhyā is then ordered to fetch water by the wagon-, camel- and elephant-load and pour it over him and as this is done his body steadily grows larger. Lakṣmaṇa suspects that Lava is gulling them, but the boy explains that his life decreases as his bulk increases so the drenching continues.¹ Meanwhile Kuśa is walking along the riverbank where he sees crowds of Ayodhyans fetching water from the Ganga. When he asks them what the water is for, they answer “for killing Lava” (*lavaṃ hantum*). Kuśa arms himself and goes to the rescue, first defeating Lakṣmaṇa and then facing Rāma. When Rāma finds himself unable to defeat the boy, he sends a messenger to ask Vālmīki who the two lads are, and is informed that they are the sons of Rāma. Vālmīki then summons the boys back to the ashram and tells Rāma to come to the assembly at the conclusion of the horse sacrifice the next day. This he does and there the family is reunited. In the *vivāhakāṇḍa* the poet tells the many marriages of Kuśa and Lava and notes the numerous grandchildren produced for Rāma.²

¹ This comic episode is an inversion of one from Vālmīki where Hanumān is captured by Rāvaṇa whom he tells he is invulnerable to everything but fire. Rāvaṇa consequently orders that ghee-soaked cloth be wrapped around Hanumān’s tail and put on fire. As the cloth is wound around his tail, the tail grows longer and longer. When it is finally set alight, Hanumān breaks free and burns down Laṅkā. *Rāmāyaṇa*, 5.49-52.

² 9.13ff.

The *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa* is an encyclopedic work which gathers material from a large number of different traditions. In this complex variant the anonymous poet harmonizes (if that is the word) the story of the flower-stealing and Rāma’s human sacrifice with the account of the recitation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by the twins as related in Vālmīki’s *uttarakāṇḍa* and adds for good measure the story that came to dominate in later versions of the theme, that of the fight between father and sons during Rāma’s horse sacrifice.

The Rāmāśvamedha

The earliest version of this variant is found in the fourth act of the *Uttararāmacarita* of Bhavabhūti¹ (8th century). Here Janaka, Sītā’s father is visiting Vālmīki’s hermitage in the company of Kauśalyā, Rāma’s mother, when he notices a hermit boy who resembles Rāma. This is Lava who has just learned the *Rāmāyaṇa* which has been composed, but not published² and tells Janaka that the epic has progressed as far as the exile of Sītā. He then notices the sacrificial horse, an animal he has never seen before, which wanders by under the watchful eye of Candraketu, a son of Lakṣmaṇa; Rāma’s horse sacrifice is underway and he is its guardian. Lava takes the horse and refuses to release it and a battle with Candraketu’s huge army results. Rāma then arrives and is impressed by the appearance of Lava and his elder brother Kuśa. After they recite the *Rāmāyaṇa*, they are introduced to their father who takes them home to Ayodhyā.

Some scholars have suggested that Bhavabhūti betrays familiarity with the *rāmāśvamedha* of the *Padma purāṇa* in his play.³

¹ Ed. by P.V. Kane & Joshi, Motilal Banarsidass, 4th revised edition, Delhi, 1962.

² *praṇīto na prakāśitaḥ* (4.22)

³ Ludo Rocher, *The Purāṇas, A History of Indian Literature*, vol. II fasc.3, Otto Harrasowitz, Wiesbaden 1986, footnote 329.

This is, however, unlikely since the story in the *purāṇa*¹ has a different cast of characters and takes a different course. There is also the very great problem of dating the text of the *purāṇa* or of any episode in it, but it does not seem to be older than Bhavabhūti. In the *Padma purāṇa* the horse is guarded by Rāma's younger brother Śatrughna rather than Candraketu, and it is Kuśa rather than Lava who finds the horse, ties it to a banana tree and refuses to return it. When Śatrughna's troopers attempt to untie the horse, he amputates their hands with his arrows, and, after wreaking great slaughter, is wounded by Śatrughna and "faints".² Lava, who had been away, returns to avenge his fallen brother, killing Śatrughna's general, Kālajit, disabling Puṣkara (Bharata's son), and capturing Jambavān and Hanumān before Śatrughna's arrows fell him in his turn. Kuśa, having recovered, reenters the lists and fells Śatrughna. When the two lads display their captives and their loot to Sītā, she explains both the identity of their victims and that of their father, the fighting ceases and she is temporarily reunited with his husband. The *rāmāśvamedha* of the *Padma purāṇa* contains sixty-eight *adhyāyas* only twelve of which, *adhyāyas* 54-66, are concerned with the *Kuśalavopākhyānā* which is its climatic episode. The first 54 *adhyāyas* recount other confrontations, most notably those with four kings, Subāhu, Satyavān, Vīramaṇi and Suratha, all of whom are devotees of Rāma and only seize the horse in order to get *darshan* of their Lord. Because of these bhakti elements the *rāmāśvamedha* came to be considered a devotional work, though the Kuśa Lava story remained unaffected by the devotional spirit of the rest of the tale.

The popularity of the *rāmāśvamedha* section of the *Padma purāṇa* was reflected by its inclusion into the *Jaimini bhārata*

¹ The version referred to here is the Ānandāśrama edition of 1894: *pātālakhanda* 54-68. It is translated by N.A. Deshpande in *The Padma-Purāṇa, Part V, Ancient Indian tradition and Mythology Series*, Delhi 1990.

² One of the conceits of this literature is that warriors are repeatedly wounded by arrows and other missiles and swoon (an often used word is *mūrcchita*) to later recover without apparent ill-effects.

which claims to be the 14th *parvan*, the *aśvamedha* *parvan*, of the otherwise lost *Mahābhārata* of the sage Jaimini, and hence is also known as the *Jaimini aśvamedha*. The *Jaimini bhārata*¹ clearly borrowed the *Kuśalavopākhyāna* from the *rāmāśvamedha* of the *Padma purāṇa* (both works, one notes, are exactly 68 *adhyāyas* in length). In the *Bhārata* it is a digression and the longest individual episode (*adhyāyas* 25-36); when Arjuna faces his own son Babhruvāhana in battle, he asks whether any other father had found himself in such a situation and in response is told the story of Rāma's confrontation with his own sons. The account of Kuśa and Lava's battle found in the *Jaimini bhārata* follows that in the *purāṇa* but is longer, as further martial episodes are added: here Rāma despatches a second army led by Lakṣmaṇa and leads a third himself, one which includes Aṅgada, Sugrīva, Hanumān and other heroes. All these mighty warriors are ignominiously defeated and Rāma realizes too late that he has been fighting his own sons. Here, too, Lava and Kuśa pile their unconscious captives in a chariot along with jewelry looted from their victims and take everything home to show to mother with the same results as in the *purāṇa*.

Vernacular versions

Most of the versions of the *Kuśalavopākhyāna* follow the version of the story as told in the *Padma purāṇa* or the *Jaimini bhārata*; the latter, with its extended battle sequences, seems to be more commonly relied upon. The story was also absorbed by popular tradition where it underwent further modification and often considerable parochialization; such versions usually remain, nevertheless, recognizable. Most divergent are those versions from outside India. The *Kuśalavopākhyāna* circulated both independently, and as an episode of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, of the *Jaimini bhārata* and of the *Mahābhārata* as well. Independent versions include several Sanskrit works entitled

¹ The edition used here is Gītā Press, Gorakhpur samvat 2052.

Kuśalavopākhyāna which remain in manuscript.¹ The oldest of the NIA vernacular versions is the Assamese *Lava-kuśar yuddha*² by the poet Haribar Bipra who is said to have flourished during the reign of Durlabhanārāyaṇ, ruler of Kāmatā towards the end of the 13th century.³ One notes that in this and many other vernacular versions, the names of the two boys are in “reverse” order: Lava-Kuśa. Another Assamese poet Gaṅgadhara, whose date is not established, treated the subject in his *Sītāra banabās*.⁴ In Oriya it can be found in the *Jaimini bhārata* of Indramāṇi Sāhu.⁵ Elsewhere it is included in the final *kāṇḍas* of vernacular renditions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, such as the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇas* of Kṛtibāsa,⁶ the “Bombay” edition of the *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsīdās, where it is found in a separate, apocryphal book entitled *Lavakuśakāṇḍa*,⁷ and in the Nepali *Rāmāyaṇa* of Bhānubhakta (1814-1889), the national poet of

¹ J. Duncan M. Derrett, Greece and India again: the Jaiminī-Aśvamedha, the Alexander-romance and the Gospels, *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 22, 1970, note 21.

² Assam Sāhitya Sabhā, Guwahati 1959. According to Haribara’s “translation” the Sun God gives Lava a golden bow and arrows with golden feathers and he uses this weapon to defeat Rāma’s armies; p. 70.

³ Birinchi Kumar Barua, *History of Assamese Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1964 p. 10. Many scholars prefer a later date.

⁴ Gaṅgadhara, *Sītār banabāsa*, Dattabharuvā eṇḍi Kompāni, Nalbārī Assam, 1975.

⁵ Indramāṇi Sāhu, *Brhat jaiminī bhārata [pratham o dbitīya bhāga ekatra]*, Dharmagranth Śtār, Kaṭak n.d. pp. 233-262.

⁶ Kṛtibāsa, *Rāmāyaṇa uttarkāṇḍa*, ed. Hīrendranāth Datta, B.S. 1307, Calcutta. Here the narration of the *Lava kuśer yuddha* is interrupted by other episodes. In addition there are independently circulating works entitled *Lava kuśer yuddha* attributed to Kṛtibāsa (as is a great deal of other Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa* lore); see Basantaraṅjan Rāy & Tārāprasanna Bhaṭṭācārya, *Bāṅgālā prācīn puthir bibaraṇ*, Baṅgīyā SāhityaPariṣat, Calcutta, B. S. 1367, nos. 126-132. A *Lava Kuśer yuddha* by Utsāvananda is also found; Haraprasād Shāstrī, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Vernacular Manuscripts of the Collections of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, rev. & ed. by Jogendra Nath Gupta, vol. IX, nos. 13 & 14.

⁷ Bhārgava Bokḍipo, *Vārāṇasī*, 1964, pp. 1071-1163.

Nepal.¹ The Nepali version, too, was added to Bhānubhakta’s rendering in later printed editions as a separate section with the title *rāmāśvamedhakāṇḍa*.² The last is a relatively faithful rendering of the episode as told in the *Padma purāṇa*. There is in addition a still unpublished prose version of the *rāmāśvamedhakāṇḍa* in Nepali.³ A very lengthy version of the Kuśa Lava tale appears in another late compilation, the Kashmiri *Rāmāyaṇa* of Divākara Prakāśa Bhaṭṭa from the end of the 18th century, a work which is divided into two parts, *śrī-rāmāvatāracaritam* and *lavakuśacaritam*.⁴ Here, as in Somadeva, Kuśa is created from a wisp of *kuśa* grass. Kuśa eventually becomes king of Kuśavatī and Lava king of Lavapura (Lahore). Another Assamese version is found in the rendering of the *Jaimini bhārata* which serves as the 14th *parvaṇ* of the Assamese *Mahābhārata*; this is a collective work composed by three 18th century poets, Gaṅgadās, Bhavanidās and Subuddhi Rāy.⁵ There are a great number of versions of the tale in other vernacular versions of the *Jaimini bhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*; Kāmil Bulke notes that the Kuśa Lava story appears in the Marathi *Bhāvārtha Rāmāyaṇa* (which is based on the *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa*) and that there are versions in Tibetan, Thai and Malay.⁶ The last three are very divergent and based on oral material.⁷

¹ Ṭhākurprasād eṇḍi sans, *Vārāṇasī*, n.d. pp. 297-521.

² Kamala Sankrityayan, “Rāmāyaṇa in Nepal”, in V. Raghavan ed., *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1980, p. 372.

³ *Ibid.* p. 349.

⁴ George A. Grierson ed., *The Kāśmīrī Rāmāyaṇa of Divākara Prakāśa Bhaṭṭa*, Bibliotheca Indica, work no. 253, issue no. 1509, Calcutta, 1930. The Lava Kuśa story is summarised on pp. xii-1.

⁵ *Aṣṭādāś parba asamīyā mahābhārata*, ed. Harinārāyaṇ Dattabharuvā, reprint Guvāhāṭi, 1993.

⁶ Kāmil Bulke, *Rām-Kathā (utpatti aur vikās)*, Hindī Pariṣad Prakāśan, Prayāg, 1962, pp. 711-713.

⁷ A summary of the Malay versions can be found in Alexander Ziesenis, *Die Rāma-Sage bei den Malaien, ihre Herkunft und Gestaltung*, Alt- und Neu-Indische Studien 1, Hamburg 1928, p. 60ff.

Character

Though it found a place in many devotional works, the *Kuśa-lavopākhyāna* is older than bhakti and usually remained unaffected by it; this association, nevertheless, seems to have lent it a certain devotional allure. Kuśa and Lava are, after all, the sons of Rāma. The primary reason for popularity of the tale, however, was its literary potential. First, it provides great scope for the exposition of the pathetic sentiment in its account of Sītā's sufferings in which it follows Vālmīki, often with the addition of details borrowed from various other sources, most commonly those which provide motives for Rāma's decision.¹ Rāma's banishing of his innocent wife because of the slanders (*lokāpavāda*) of the citizens of Ayodhyā seems to cast a shadow on his character and it is interesting that in many of the works reviewed here, Rāma's action is criticized. In Raviseṇa's Jaina *Rāmāyaṇa* Aṅkuśa tells Nārada that "Rāma's abandoning of Sītā in the terrible forest was not worthy of his lineage".² According to the *Kathā sarit sāgara*, "all the hermits (who found Sītā in the forest) adored that very chaste woman and wanted to curse Rāma because of their anger at his abandoning her"³ and they only refrain from doing so when Sītā stops them. In the *Ānanda rāmāyaṇa* Lava taunts the guards in Ayodhyā by impugning Rāma's manliness (*pauruṣam*) "whose glory left him the day he abandoned Sītā."⁴ When he later faces them in battle, he points out, "I am not like Sītā, one to allow himself to suffer [at the hands of Rāma], know, you scoundrels, that I am like a rain cloud about to extinguish the flames of Sītā's grief".⁵ Again in the *Kathā sarit sāgara* a tearful Rāma introduces himself to

Kuśa as the sinner who had abandoned his mother¹ as he also does in the *Uttararāmacarita*.² In the apocryphal *Rāmcarit-mānas* version, the defeat of Rāma and his brothers at the hands of two children is seen by Bharata as divine retribution for the exile.³

The latter, and longer, part of the tale, sometimes called, quite appropriately, the *Kuśa lava yuddha* belongs to the genre of "battle literature" which is given so much attention in medieval times. What gives the *Kuśa lava yuddha* an air of novelty and an extra dimension is the identity and the fate of the protagonists. Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata, Śatrughna, Hānumān, Sugrīva, Vibhīṣaṇa and other invincible heroes of the Rāma epic are here defeated (and sometimes even killed) by mere children and not only children, but children who have grown up in the pacific precincts of a hermitage, dress in unmilitary bark garments and subsist on an innocuous diet of roots and fruit. Yet despite this they prove to be ferocious warriors who slaughter entire armies of adults with ease. The irony of the situation is obvious. In the Jaina *Rāmāyaṇas* the pugnacity of the twins is encouraged while they are still in the womb as their pregnant mother studies her face in the reflection of a sword blade rather than in a bejeweled mirror and prefers the twang of a bowstring to the sound of the *vīṇā*,⁴ and when Kuśa and Lava are born, puts necklaces of tiger claws around their necks.⁵ They learn the use of miraculous weapons from Vālmīki in the same way that Rāma and his brother learned it from another rishi, Viśvāmitra. In a Malay story the two boys are playing with a ball which rolls beneath a house inhabited by a man-eating demon couple. When the boys go to fetch the ball, the demons attack them; the lads kill them without

¹ *saiṣo 'haṃ pāpo rāma iti bruvan*; 9.1.110.

² *pāpe ... mayi* etc. 6.42.

³ *bharata jori karakai kaheu bacana amita bilakhāya | sīyatyāgaphala dīna bidhi || op. cit. p. 1114*. "Joining his hands together, very despondent Bharata said, 'this has been ordained by fate (or Brahmā) as a result of the abandonment of Sītā'."

⁴ Vimalasūri 97.5; Raviseṇa 100.14.

⁵ Vimalasūri 95.5.

¹ For these see Bulke, *op. cit.*, pp. 692-703.

² *na kulaśobhanam | kṛtaṃ rāmeṇa vaidehī muñcatā bhīṣaṇe vane || 102.41*.

³ *tām te mahāsādhvīm praṇemu munayo 'khilāḥ | rāghavaṃ śaptum aicchaṃśa tat parityāga-manyunā || op. cit. 9.1.83*.

⁴ *rāghaveṇa hi yadā sītā vane tyaktā jayaśrīśca gatā tadā | JKh. 6.48*.

⁵ *na sītāvat sulabho 'haṃ pīḍanārthamihādya hi | sītākleśānalaharaṃ māṃ meghaṃ vettha bho khalāḥ || Jkh. 7.61*.

effort and then go back to their ball game.¹ Kuśa and Lava are thorough *kṣatriyas*, proud to the point of arrogance (or insolence), easily angered and quick to violence. In Vimalasūri hostilities are set off when Nārada points out that their glory (*sirī*) is equaled by that of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa;² as soon as they hear this they are exceedingly enraged (*paramaruṭṭa*) and immediately march off to battle. In Raviseṇa they announce that they will tolerate no one with a reputation comparable to theirs.³ Their pride also leads to hostilities in the later versions of the tale where they are provoked by reading of the proclamation on the forehead of the sacrificial horse (*bhālapātra*; in vernacular versions *jayapātra*). Here, too, they will tolerate no one superior to themselves.

Lava, armed with a bow, was enraged
and he spoke to the hermit children with a voice quivering with
anger:
“Look quickly at the impudence of this *kṣatriya*,
the prince who wrote of his own prowess on the *bhālapatra*.
Who is this Rāma and who this Śatrughṇa? (Mere) insects of little
might.
Are they, born in *kṣatriya* families, and not we excellent ones?”⁴

When Lava finds the horse in Bhavabhūti’s play and voices his defiance of Rāma’s claims to universal sovereignty, the boys from the ashram warn him that warriors will not be tolerate such insolent (*dr̥pta*) words from a child.⁵ In the *Rāmcaritmānas* Rāma orders Lakṣmaṇa to go and “curb the arrogance (*bariyāt*)

¹ Zieseniss, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

² *jā rāmalakṣaṇasirī sā tubbhaṃ havau savisesā* 199.4.

³ *Op. cit.* 102.45.

⁴ [...] *kupito lavaḥ śastradhanurdharaḥ |
uvāca muniputrāms tāt roṣagadgadabhaṣitaḥ | |
paśyata kṣipram etasya dhṛṣṭatvaṃ kṣatriyasya |
lilekha yō bhālapatre svapratāpabalaṃ nṛpāḥ | |
ko’sau rāmaḥ kaḥ śatrughṇaḥ kīrtāḥ svalpabalāśritāḥ |
kṣatriyānām kule jātā ete na vayanuttamāḥ | |*

Padma P. PātālKh. 54.18-20.

⁵ *śīṣor api dr̥ptāṃ vācaṃ na sahante* (4.28).

of the hermit boy (Lava)”.¹ This does little good: “You scoundrel (*śaṭh*)!”, says Lava in reply, “summon the others who are helping you, [for] what’s the good in killing you alone?”² Still, he is a child so the soldiers guarding the horse assume that Lava is a “silly boy” (*murkho... bālakaḥ*),³ a nuisance to be shooed away. Kuśa and Lava are also, apparently, the children of hermits, so killing them would not be proper (*ucita*).⁴ In the Assamese *Jaimini bhārata*, unaware that their last hour is nigh, the soldiers guarding the horse address Lava in patronizing tones,

The soldiers said, “listen you stupid child,
how can you, an infant, desire to die?
How reckless it was of you to take the king’s horse!
You’re at a flighty age, not knowing right from wrong.
You’re a hermit’s boy, living on roots and fruit.[...]
Don’t you know that taking the horse means death?” [...]
Run way before some warrior comes along!
The hermit’s son then smiled and said,
“Let he who is strong unsheath his sword and take the horse.”⁵

Their great self-confidence, a quality not unknown in the young, never wavers. In Kṛtibāsa, Rāma, his patience growing thin, says in exasperation, “Because you’re the sons of *munis* I’ll suffer your impudence, if it were anyone else I would kill them”.⁶ When asked their identities by Rāma, they tell him to mind his own business⁷, and tell him that they only suffer his arrogance

¹ *jāu [...] muni bālaka bādhyo bariyāt* | p. 1111.

² *nija sahāya śaṭha āna bulāt | kevala tohi hate na bhalāt* | | p. 1112.

³ *Jaimini bhārata* 29.5.

⁴ *Rāmcaritmānas*, p. 1111.

⁵ *senāgaṇe bole śuna abodha chavala | śiśu huiyā maribāra cāve yamakāla
| | dharilā rājāra ghorā kimāna sāhas | doṣa guṇa nubujas cañcala bayasa
| | phala mūla khāvā tumi munira kumāra | [...] najāniyā ghorā dharā
maribāra kaje | | [...] prāṇa laiṇā palāt yāvā yāve bīra nāse | hāsiyā bulila
tebe munira tanaṇa | yāra bala āche āsi kārhi neuka haya | | Aṣṭādās
parba asamīyā mahābhārata*, p. 2274.

⁶ *munira bālaka bali ahaṅkāra sahi | āra keha hena kaile tāra prāṇa lahi*
| | p. 242.

⁷ *kisera lāgiā mora cāha paricaṇa | mora paricaṇe he tomāra kibā kājā | |*
ibid.

(*ahaṅkāra*) because he is an old man (*buṛā*), the term they choose to address him and his brothers with. To Lakṣmaṇa they are equally cheeky when he demands the return of the sacrificial stallion:

“Even though you’re a *kṣatriya*, you go around stealing horses.
You’re a thief and you’re talking about *dharma*” [said Lava].
The hero Kuśa then said, “Brother, don’t give up the horse to him.
This old geezer is surely an expert horse thief.”¹

Despite all this they remain children at heart. In Kṛtibāsa the two wage war all day but return at night to their mother who gives them dinner then lulls them to sleep in her arms; the next day they wake up at the crack of dawn to put on their bark garments and return to the battlefield.² When finally victorious, they take their captives home to show them to mother, much in the style of boys proudly displaying a frog or odd insect they have found:

Lava and Kuśa say, “We have something to tell you mommy.
We slew Rāma’s four brothers (sic) in battle
and we have a fun thing to show you –
we have bound the monkey Hanumān and brought him here.”³

The vernacular renderings conclude in different ways. In one variant, as in the *Padma purāṇa* and *Jaimini bhārata*, Sītā informs the two boys of the identity of their father and Vālmīki tells Rāma to take back his wife if he thinks she is innocent.⁴ In another, Kuśa and Lava kill their father Rāma and their uncles. Then, according to Gaṅgādhara,

¹ *ghoṛā curi kari bula haṇa kṣetri jāti | cora haṇa beṛāsi dharmnera kaha kaihā || [...] kuśa bīra bole dādā nā chāra ghoṛā | ādi ghoṛā cora beṭā baṭe ei buṛā ||* Kṛtibāsa, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

² *Op. cit.* p. 228.

³ *lava kuśe bole kathā śuniyok āi | samarata mārilom rāmara cāri bhāi || āru eka raṅga āi dekhāibo tomāka | bāndhi āniyāchoṃ hanumanta bāndharaka ||* Haribara *op. cit.* p. 106. This echoes *Jaimini bhārata* 35.65.

⁴ *manyase yadi sītāṃ ca nirdoṣāṃ netuṃ arhasi |* *Jaimini bh.* 35.79.

Sītā ran to the place where the battle took place,
held the feet of her husband and wept.
“Lord, your own sons have slain you [she said],
what a terrible sorrow fate has ordained for us.
Build a funeral pyre”, said Sītā,
“I will abandon my life alongside my husband.”
Hands on their heads, Lava and Kuśa were weeping.
The two boys embraced their mother’s feet and said,
“You didn’t tell us before that our father was Rāma.
How could we have known if you didn’t say his name?
It’s your fault that the both of us are sunken in sin.
By killing our father we have died as well,
there is no release from this great sin.
We will light the fire and burn ourselves to ashes in the flames.”¹

Vālmīki, who has been away on a visit, turns up just as Sītā and her two sons are ascending the funeral pyre; he stops them and revives the dead with the water of immortality (*mṛtajivī jala*) and the family reunited and the sin of patricide averted. The same denouement is found in the Oriya version of the story.²

No apocryphal Rāmāyaṇa episode has enjoyed the popularity of this tale and its appeal is not difficult to understand: based on an ancient motif, hallowed by its place in the Rāma cycle, heavy with irony and sometimes lightened with humor, it provides a free field for the play of the *karuṇa* and *vīra rasas*, providing diversion in the guise of edification.

¹ *lavariyā gailā sītā jaita bhailā raṇa | rāmara caraṇa dhari karilā krandaṇa || taba putra hui prabhu tomāka badhila | kinō nidāruṇa śoka bidhātāi dila || sītā bole agnikunḍa kariyo nirmāṇa | svāmīra lagata mai tyajaho parāṇa || śire hāta lava kuśa kariche krandaṇa | māṭṭr caraṇa dhari bolay dūjana || nubililā pūrbe tumi pitā haṇ rāma | kimate jānibo tumi nakahile nāme || taba doṣe dūjana pāpata majilo | pūr badha kari āmi samūli marilo || ei mahā pāpe āi nāhike nistāra | agni jvālī puri mari haibo āṅgāra ||* Gaṅgādhara, *Sītār banabāsa*, p. 76.

² Indramaṇi Sāhu, *Brhat jaiminī bhārata*, pp. 140-142.

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CATEGORISATION AND INTERPRETATION

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Philology, Göteborg University

A volume dedicated to the memory of
Gösta Liebert

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