

The Krittivasi Ramayan: Re-imagining the Valmiki Ramayana as Sri Ram Panchali in Medieval Bengal

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Abstract

The Ramayana is one of the most popular, universally read, and widely circulated literary works by the great sage Valmiki. Through the expansive reach of his imagination and the natural vigor of his language, Valmiki elevated *the Ramayana* to the status of an epic. Valmiki's poetic strength is vast, his imagination grand, and his perspective universal. The poets of different languages in India adorned Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramayana* with the vibrancy of their own indigenous languages and cultures. A significant number of such versions trace their roots to Bengal. The epic was first translated into the Bengali language by the great poet Krittibas Ojha in the fifteenth century CE. Its influences and popularity have been such as to justify it being called the Bible of the people of Bengal. *The Krittivasi Ramayan* was instrumental in spreading Rama worship throughout Bengal. By making the story of Ramachandra accessible in the mother tongue, by translating the epic into accessible Middle Bengali, Krittibas Ojha moved away from the rigid rituals of Sanskrit orthodoxy. This shift mirrored the broader Bhakti movement, which prioritized heartfelt, personal devotion over complex traditional ceremonies. The poet immortalized the Bengali version of *the Ramayana* in such a manner that the people of Bengal, of all ages to come, would be able to find solace in grief, tranquility in anxiety, and restraint in enjoyment. This paper intends to delve into how Krittibas bridged the gap between ancient scripture and the common person, leaving a legacy for which Bengali society remains deeply indebted.

Keyword: Krittibas, Ramayana, Re-imagining, Translation, Bengal, Culture

Introduction

Scholars generally place the core composition of *the Valmiki Ramayana* around 500 BCE, with the broader writing process likely spanning the 7th to 4th centuries BCE. Originally composed in Sanskrit by Sage Valmiki, the epic was preserved through oral tradition for generations before it was finally committed to writing. *The Ramayana* tells the journey of Rama, prince from Ayodhya in the kingdom of Kosala. Krittibas Ojha (c. 1381–1461) was a pioneering medieval poet and translator. He achieved historical significance as the first person to translate the Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramayana* into the Bangla language. Born into a scholarly Bengali Kulina Brahmin family in Phulia village of present-day Nadia

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district, West Bengal, he composed *Sri Ram Panchali*. His intellectual foundation was built by his father, Banamali Ojha, and his grandfather, Murari Ojha, both of whom were esteemed scripture scholars. At approximately age 11 or 12, Krittibas traveled to Nabadwip, a premier hub of scholarship in medieval Bengal, to pursue higher education. While Nabadwip is the most recognized location for his studies, some historical records suggest North Bengal as an alternative site for his academic training. His ambitions later led him to the royal court of Gauda, where he sought to become a court pundit. This accolade occurred during the turbulent early 15th century, amid the reigns of figures like Raja Ganesha (c. 1414–1415) or Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah (c. 1418–1433). Regardless of the monarch's identity, the King was deeply moved by the verses Krittibas recited. He honored the poet with lavish gifts and personally commissioned him to compose a Bengali version of *the Ramayana*. Krittibas's deep education in Sanskrit classics, including *the Ramayana*, equipped him to bridge the classical text with everyday Bengali expression. Krittibas adapted Valmiki's original Sanskrit epic using the payar metre, consisting of 14-syllable lines arranged in rhyming couplets. Like its model, Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the work is divided into seven books, in this case *Adikando*, *Ajodhyakando*, *Aranya Kando*, *Kishkindha Kando*, *Sundor Kando*, *Lankhakando*, and *Uttorkando*. His work was more than a translation; it was a cultural reimagining that resonated deeply with the local population. *Krittivasi Ramayan* received its first printed edition from the Serampore Mission Press in 1802-1803, spanning five volumes and marking an early milestone in Bengali printing history. A second edition, edited by Jaygopal Tarkalankar, followed from the same press in 1830-1834 across two volumes, refining the text for wider dissemination.

The Krittivasi Ramayan: Re-imagining the Valmiki's Ramayana in Bengal kaleidoscope

While numerous other writers attempted to compose the Ramayana in Bangla, none achieved the enduring fame or popularity of Krittibas. His work became the spiritual and cultural cornerstone for the Hindu community in Bengal. By making the story of Ramachandra accessible in the mother tongue, Krittibas bridged the gap between ancient scripture and the common person, leaving a legacy for which Bengali society remains deeply indebted. Valmiki is the 'Adi Kavi' - the First Poet. His poetic strength is vast, his imagination grand, and his perspective universal. His work is characterized by a majestic flow, deep spiritual grandeur, and a movement that spans the three worlds. On the other hand, Krittibas, due to a more narrow imagination and limited experience, kept his Ramayana within the bounds of a Panchali - a folk narrative style. *The Krittivasi Ramayan* has around 5000 Bengali verses, while *the Valmiki Ramayana* has around 24000 Sanskrit verses. While Valmiki's epic imagination roams through oceans, mountains, and the infinite sky, the imagination of Krittibas never transcends the boundaries of a rural courtyard or a village pond. Elements like the ocean, mountains, forests, and wild animals appear repeatedly in Valmiki's *Aranya Kanda*, *Kishkindha Kanda*, or *Sundara Kanda*. However, since these vast landscapes were outside the experience of the Bengali audience, Krittibas could not describe them with the same natural intensity, nor did the audience feel a deep curiosity for them. Valmiki viewed the world with a spontaneous poetic power. He composed shloka (verse) after shloka describing the beauty of the Dandaka forest, the arrival of the rains, and the grace of autumn on Mount Malyavan. He balanced this with a masterful portrayal of human nature,

ancient customs, joys, and the unparalleled wealth of Ayodhya and Lanka. One cannot expect such vastness or descriptive skill from Krittibas. In his version, the Chitrakoot hills descend to look like the flat rice fields of Bengal; the roaring ocean turns into the canals and marshes of the Bengali countryside; and the epic war between Rama and Ravana feels like a feud between two local landlords. Actually, the creation of epic beauty was not Krittibas's goal. He wove the web of Rama's story through the narrow window of 'Bengali-ness'. While Valmiki presents a picture of a grand, Vedic, Pan-Indian society, Krittibas offers a social portrait of Bengali traditions and rituals. He carefully preserved the moral and religious values of the Bengali people, as seen in his depiction of the Ahalya episode or Lakshmana's character. In *Valmiki's Ramayana*, we see that the poet was a contemporary of Rama. He likely composed the epic shortly after the major events - the exile, the abduction of Sita, and the rescue. However, in *the Krittivasi Ramayan*, we find the belief that Valmiki wrote the story sixty thousand years before Rama's birth:

“Ramjanmo purbe shati sahasra batsar,

Anagato puran rachilo munibar.” (Sil, p. 34)

(Sixty thousand years before the birth of Rama, the great sage composed the future Purana.)

The proverb '*The Ramayana* was created before Rama was born' supports this view, though it is based on folklore without historical evidence.

The difference in perspective is most evident in the characterization of Rama. In Valmiki, Rama is 'Narachandrama' (the Moon among men) - the greatest of men, but not a God. Despite his virtues, he is not beyond human weakness. If he were the Supreme Narayana himself, why would he be fooled by Maricha's illusion? After the agony of rescuing Sita, he succumbs to a psychological shift and tells her that seeing her is 'as painful as a lamp to one suffering from eye disease.' He must be judged for the stealthy killing of Vali, the abandonment of Sita, and the killing of Shambuka. These flaws prove he is, ultimately, a human. In contrast, the Rama of Krittibas is a devotee-loving Avatar of Vishnu. Even though Krittibas follows Valmiki's plot, he paints Rama as a merciful savior of the fallen. In Krittibas's version, characters like Tarani Sen, Birbahu, and even Ravana enter battle voluntarily just to die at Rama's hands and achieve salvation. Krittibas sought to establish the divinity of Rama by glorifying the power of his name.

Two primary *Rasas* (sentiments) dominate *the Krittivasi Ramayana* - Bhakti (Devotion) and Hasya (Humor). The element of Bhakti likely entered through the influence of Vaishnavism over time. To entertain his audience, Krittibas occasionally used exaggerated elements or light-hearted, sometimes coarse, Bengali wit. Where Valmiki succeeds in creating the 'Heroic' and 'Furious' sentiments through the grandeur of Sanskrit, Krittibas often fails due to a lack of direct experience with war and the limitations of the *Payar* rhythm. His battle scenes lack the epic weight. Similarly, while Krittibas makes the readers weep with Rama's sorrows, he cannot recreate the profound, silent inner burning of grief found in Valmiki. Valmiki's metaphors are drawn from the ocean, mountains, and sky. Krittibas draws his metaphors from daily village life - comparing things to 'the stalk of a banana tree' or a 'potter's wheel'. Ultimately, Krittibas could not maintain the epic dignity or

the vast narrative flow of the Aryan (Sanskrit) *Ramayana*. He compressed the original story and his characters lack epic proportions. However, by flawlessly adapting the story to the Bengali mindset and national life, he turned *the Ramayana* into a 'Poem of Bengali Life'. This is the true glory of *the Krittibasi Ramayana*.

There are several notable differences between the story of *the Ramayana* as described by Valmiki and that of Krittibas. However, this does not mean Krittibas was unfamiliar with Valmiki's version or that he composed it solely based on hearing it from wandering singers. There is no doubt that Krittibas had read *Valmiki's Ramayana*; in many places, he expresses deep respect for his predecessor:

“*Ramayan korilo Balmiki mohakabi,*

Panchali korilo Krittibas anubhabi.” (Shil, p. 38)

(The wise Krittibas, having bowed to Valmiki, Composed the Ramayana in the common tongue at an auspicious moment.)

Ancient genealogical records and the poet's own signatures (bhanitas) refer to him as a 'Pandit' (scholar), confirming his mastery over the Sanskrit language. When Krittibas sat down to compose his *Ramayana*, he took the essence of the story from Valmiki but mixed it with events from various Puranas and other *Ramayana* versions, alongside his own imagination. He presented the ancient tale in a way that suited the Bengali temperament. Consequently, he omitted several segments found in Valmiki, such as- The birth of Kartikeya, The conflict between Vashistha and Vishwamitra, The legend of Vishwamitra, The sacrifice of King Ambarisha, Rama's recitation of the Sun Hymn etc.

Krittibas often chose stories from the Puranas rather than Valmiki. Krittibas didn't just translate; he re-imagined. In *Adi Kanda*, Unlike Valmiki, who begins with Narada's instructions, Krittibas follows the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, describing Vishnu's voluntary decision to incarnate in four parts. He also includes the popular folk legend of Ratnakara the Robber transforming into Valmiki through the grace of Brahma. He borrowed the story of King Harishchandra from the *Devi Bhagavata* and *Markandeya Purana*. The details of Bhagiratha's birth were taken from the *Yoga Vashistha* and *Padma Purana*. The story of the Sage Rishyasringa was adapted from the *Kashi Khanda* of the *Skanda Purana*. In the *Lanka Kanda*, Krittibas introduces the *Akal Bodhon* - untimely awakening of Goddess Durga by Rama, a story found in the *Kalika Purana* but not in Valmiki. This established the tradition of Durga Puja in Bengal. He depicted the rakshasas (demons) not just as monsters, but as secret devotees of Rama. This reflects the dominance of Vaishnavism in Bengal during that era. Valmiki's Rama is Maryada Purushottama (an ideal man) who is often stoic and detached. Krittibas's Rama is very 'Bengali' - he weeps openly, shows human vulnerability, and interacts with his devotees like a close relative.

Krittibas added several elements that are entirely his own or drawn from local folklore. Legends of Saudasa, Dilip and Raghu, the birth of Ganesha in *Adi Kanda*, The 'Lakshman Rekha' - the protective line drawn by Lakshman in *Aranya Kanda* are innovation popularized by Krittibas. In *Lanka Kanda*, The stories of Tarani Sen, Birbahu, and the killing

of Mahiravana and Ahiravana are unique to his version. He even depicts Rama giving lessons in politics to a dying Ravana. Krittibas brought the grand, sky-reaching imagination of the ancient sage down to the courtyards and rural landscapes of Bengal. He replaced complex philosophical debates with human emotion. He turned the epic into a medium of moral education for the common people by altering Vedic rituals with Bengali customs.

While the great poet Valmiki depicted flawless artistic representations of noble life ideals within his characters, one cannot expect that same level of 'national' characterization from the medieval poet Krittibas. Standing within the social fabric of Bengal, Krittibas molded these characters to be suitable for the common masses. Consequently, while they may lack the 'Aryan' heroic majesty and diversity found in Valmiki's work, they reflect the authentic life ideals of the Bengali people. This is the true achievement of *Krittivasi Ramayan* characters therein have also shifted away from their epic archetypes to take on distinct forms.

In *the Valmiki's Ramayana*, characters like Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, Sugriva, Angada, Hanumana, Ravana, Vibhishana, Indrajit, and Kumbhakarna, as well as Kaikeyi, Manthara, Sita, Tara, and Mandodari, are each marked by their individual distinctiveness. They do not play monotonous roles. Valmiki takes his characters through the highs and lows of life, ranging from simple to complex mentalities. The helplessness of the truth-bound Dasaratha, the petty selfishness of Kaikeyi, the extraordinary endurance of Rama and Sita, the robust masculinity of Lakshmana, and the self-sacrificing glory of Bharata make these characters vibrant. In Krittibas's portrayal, neither epic grandeur nor superhuman ferocity is particularly prominent. During Krittibas's era, the country was under foreign rule. Even if a Hindu king occupied the throne of Gaur for a few years, he had to compromise with his environment. The state was dominated by Muslims, most lands were under the control of Amirs (commanders of army), and the Hindu religion was cornered by the oppression of Pirs (Muslim saints) and Sultans (Muslim rulers). In such a social state, one cannot expect the vastness and character elevation of a classic epic. Out of affection for Rama, the Krittivasi Dasaratha attempts to deceive Sage Vishwamitra by initially offering Bharata and Shatrughna instead of Rama and Lakshmana. Does this deceit not stain the character of the heroically powerful Dasaratha? Moreover, as Rama and Lakshmana depart with the sage, the King's descent into public weeping appears strikingly inconsistent with the stoicism expected of a monarch. In the hands of Krittibas, the mighty Dasaratha turns into a weak, henpecked, and diminished figure. Vishwamitra's character is rendered light and almost comical when he shows excessive fear upon seeing the demoness Tadaka - a distortion unimaginable to Valmiki. Valmiki's Rama is 'Narachandrama' - a moon among men, adorned with the best qualities of humanity. Valmiki intended to make a God into a man in his poetic rhythm. His Rama is firm in dharma, brave yet forgiving, and remains steady in both prosperity and adversity. Although Valmiki's Rama performs some questionable acts such as the killing of Vali, the abandonment of Sita, the killing of Shambuka, these are often debated as later interpolations (*Uttara Kanda*). However, the killing of Vali is Valmiki's own conception, an act that is difficult to justify logically. After the war in Lanka, Valmiki's Rama speaks heartbreaking words to Sita, expressing doubt about her character and telling her she is free to go to Lakshmana, Bharata, or even Vibhishana. This suggests he was suffering from a mental breakdown at the time. Yet, when Sita finally disappears into the earth, his stoicism shatters,

and he becomes ‘maddened for Maithili’, finding no peace. This grief makes him human, not an avatar. In contrast, Krittibas’s Rama is a direct avatar of Vishnu. He is merciful, the savior of the fallen, and the soul of his devotees. The touch of his feet brings Ahalya back to life. Demons like Tarani Sen, Birbahu, and even Ravana feel blessed to die at his hands. He is the ideal son, brother, husband, and king. Even though he subjects Sita to the fire ordeal, in the eyes of the Bengali devotee, he remains the ideal husband. However, Krittibas's Rama is more prone to tears than warrior-like brilliance, emphasizing the *Karuna* (pathos) and *Bhakti* (devotion) rasas. Valmiki’s Sita is a spirited Kshatriya woman. When Rama hesitates to take her to the forest, she sharply rebukes him, questioning if her father married her to a woman in a man’s form. In Krittibas, this sharpness is lost; she becomes a soft-spoken, tearful Bengali housewife who simply laments her fate. During her abduction, instead of Valmiki’s defiant Sita, Krittibas shows a helpless woman crying for her ‘ocean of virtues’, Rama. Valmiki depicts Hanuman as a supreme scholar and Vedic expert. Krittibas emphasizes his ‘monkey-like’ nature (e.g., Hanuman urinating to desecrate Indrajit's sacrifice). While Valmiki maintains Hanuman’s dignity even amidst his natural restlessness, Krittibas leans into folk humor. The powerful, arrogant Ravana of the epic becomes a devotee of Rama in his final moments in Krittibas’s version, praying to the ‘eternal Brahman’ as he dies. This transition lacks the consistency of the original but fits the medieval Bengali focus on *Bhakti*. Krittibas could not escape the shadow of his time. His Rama is the ideal son of a Bengali household, and his Sita is the gentle daughter-in-law. By grounding these epic figures in the life and emotions of medieval Bengal, Krittibas ensured his *Ramayana* became the national epic of the Bengali people.

Whenever Krittibas finds an opportunity to describe a wedding, he looks to the tastes and preferences of the Bengali people. He infuses the narrative with the minute details of Bengali marriage rituals with great skill and enthusiasm. For instance - He provides a detailed description of Dasaratha’s wedding, which is absent in Valmiki’s version. He includes specific Bengali customs like Basibiye (the morning rituals after the wedding), Kalratri (the night after the marriage day and before Bou-bhaat, the reception from the groom’s side), and Adhibas (traditional Bengali marriage ritual). In describing the births of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, and Shatrughna, he follows every ritual of a Bengali Hindu household: Panchu-uti (on the 5th day), Shasthi Puja (on the 6th day), Ashtakalai (on the 8th day), and the Annaprashan (first rice-eating ceremony) in the 6th month. The wedding of Rama and Sita features the *Stri-achar* (women's rituals), the exchange of dowries, the jokes in the bridal chamber, and the *Bodhu-boron* (welcoming of the bride).

The food mentioned is unmistakably Bengali. When Bharata visits the hunter-king Guhaka, he is welcomed with curd, milk, coconut, betel nut, bananas, mangoes, and jackfruit, along with Rui and Chital fish. In Bharadwaj’s hermitage, the soldiers are treated to Moong dal cakes (pitha) and coconut sweets. The list of sweets is a ‘who's who’ of Bengali delicacies - Motichoor, Monda, Rasakora Saruchakli, Gur-pitha, Chittoi-puli, Tal-bora, Chhana-bora, Khaja, Gaja, and Payesh. In the *Uttara Kanda*, when Sita cooks for Lakshmana, the menu is a classic Bengali feast:

“*Prothomete sak diya bhojon aarambho,*

Tahar pore sup aadi dilen sanando.
Bhaja jhol aadi kori panchas byanjon,
Krome krome sabakar kailo bitaron.
Shese ambolanto hole byanjone samapto,
Dadhi pore paromanya pisthokadi jato.” (Shil, p. 642)

(First, the meal begins with greens. After that, soup and other items are served with joy. Fried items and broths - fifty different curries are distributed one by one. The meal ends with a sour dish, followed by curd and various sweet cakes).

These are the dishes of a common Bengali kitchen, lacking the royal opulence of Ayodhya or Mithila. Even Sita, the queen, behaves like a modest Bengali daughter-in-law; when the sages' wives ask about Rama, she bows her head in shyness and points to him through gestures, perfectly capturing the image of a traditional Bengali bride. The birds mentioned in the story of the vulture and the owl are the common birds of Bengal - crows, cuckoos, cranes, kites, vultures, pigeons, parrots, kingfishers, and woodpeckers. Krittibas also includes the characteristic "Devar-Boudi" (brother-in-law and sister-in-law) humor of Bengali families. When Lakshmana comes to take Sita to the forest (for her exile), Sita, unaware of the tragedy, playfully teases him. Krittibas re-defined the characters of the Aryan epic to suit Bengali sensibilities. In Valmiki, Ahalya consciously accepts Indra's advances. To preserve the ideal of the *Sati* (the chaste woman), Krittibas shifts the blame entirely onto Indra's deception. While Valmiki's Rama and Lakshmana naturally consumed meat and wine as per the customs of their time, Krittibas's heroes live a *Sattvic* (pure) life, eating only fruits and roots.

Conclusion

As the critic Buddhadeb Bose noted, while Valmiki though a forest dweller spoke as a representative of the capital and a sophisticated citizen, Krittibas remained a provincial Bengali poet. Krittibas did not just translate Valmiki; he transformed *the Ramayana* into a Bengali poem. The natural and mental atmosphere of the book is entirely Bengali. Through the bonds of brotherhood between Rama and Lakshmana, the devotion of Hanuman, and the chastity of Sita, the epic left the palaces of Ayodhya and Lanka to become a household treasure in every Bengali home. The legacy of *the Krittivasi Ramayan* profoundly shaped Bengali literature and society across several centuries. It influenced oral recitations, terracotta temple art in regions like Baranagar (e.g., Jor-Bangla Temple, c. 1753–1755), and broader socio-cultural practices such as *Ramayana Gaan* performances. The epic of Krittibas has had a profound impact on the literature of Bengal and the surrounding regions. Tulsidas, the 16th c. Hindi *Ramayana* translator, was deeply moved by the theme of Bhakti in his *Ramcharitmanas*, just as Krittibas was. In the 16th century, the Assamese poets Madhav Kandali and Shankardev jointly rendered *the Ramayana* into old Assamese, somewhat akin to Bangla. In the 17th century Adbhut Acharya (Nityananda) composed the version known after him as *Adbhutacharya Ramayana*. Though this version became quite popular in north Bengal, it did not surpass that of *the Krittivasi Ramayan*. The epic's unique narrative style

and *bhakti* (devotional) ethos served as a foundation for 19th and 20th century literary giants. Figures like Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Rabindranath Tagore drew inspiration from Krittibas's work, weaving his themes into their own compositions. This cross-generational influence enriched Bengali poetry with modern values of humanism and rebellion, blending traditional roots with contemporary thought. Socially, *the Krittivasi Ramayan* acted as a tool for empowerment. By using simple, idiomatic Middle Bengali, Krittibas broke the 'Sanskrit barrier', making the sacred text accessible to those traditionally excluded from formal learning such as Women and Lower Caste people. The work embodied the core principles of the Bhakti movement, which prioritized inclusive spiritual participation over orthodox rituals. By moving the story of Rama out of exclusive Brahmin circles and into the homes of common people, Krittibas helped integrate the epic into the fabric of everyday life. It was characterized by Dinesh Chandra Sen in 1911 as 'by far the most popular book in Bengal' and 'the Bible of the people of the Gangetic Valley' (p. 170). This democratizing force played a significant role in uplifting marginalized groups and fostering a more egalitarian culture in medieval Bengal.

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