Myths, Similes and Memory Traces: Images of Abduction in the Ramayana Universe

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Abstract

In this essay, the Ramayana is conceptualised not merely as a text but as a narrative universe constituted by the multiplicity of its telling. Each telling is unique and involves combining fragments or narrative elements in particular ways. This universe occupies not merely a geographical but also a kind of virtual topological space made up of the relation between narrative elements. The argument is exemplified at two levels, first through an abstraction of one theme—abduction—from the text of the Valmiki Ramayana, which is then mined for significant poetic elements. Second, the article takes up the Ramayani *gathas* (ballads) of the Pardhan Gonds of Madhya Pradesh and describes some stories also based on the theme of abduction. A comparison of the fragments from the two types of texts reveals comparable elements such that poetic elements, like similes and metaphors, used to describe Sita's abduction and Rama's grief undergo structural transformation and are expanded into metonymic configurations, that is, plot elements in the Pardhan Gond *gathas*. Thus, the Valmiki Ramayana and the Gondi Ramayani seem to have a metonymic connection with each other. The second part of the article then shows how transformations occur within the narrative universe of the Gondi Ramayani itself as the storyable themes move from the aural medium to that of painting, as contemporary Pardhan

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Gond artists use themes and poetic imagery inspired by the *gathas* for their compositions.

Keywords

Gond artists, Gondi Ramayana, folk epic

There is a considerable body of scholarship on regional forms of the Ramayana and Mahabharata and their relationship with the surrounding literary worlds made up of the classical Sanskrit epics and their commentaries.[1] Thus, scholars like Alf Hiltebeitel (2011), A. K. Ramanujan (1991) and Paula Richman (1991) have shown how the process of vernacularisation involves not just translation and re-inscription of a literary tradition but also radical forms of dislocation and re-emplotment to make up new compositions. Thus, the epics are not merely discrete texts but rather meta-universes that provide 'pools of signifiers' for regional versions, as Ramanujan (1991) so aptly says. The classical texts are made present in their regional variants through a process of recall— of fragments of plot or figurative detail which capture the sentiments expressed by the epics. No Indian, as Ramanujan says, ever remembers the first time that s/he heard the Ramayana or Mahabharata or is even able to remember all their subplots. Given the 'many-storied' nature of their plots, this would be a virtual impossibility. Instead, there is an imaginative connection to the narrative universe that is always already there.

But what if a particular culture decides that it will acknowledge this epic universe but turn away from it at the same time? What if its storytellers say that they are well aware of the stories that make up the epic universe in the Sanskritic literary tradition but insist that their epics are entirely different? Further complications arise when the chief protagonists in these epics have the same names as their literary counterparts. Thus, Pardhan Gond bards of central India who sing the Gondi Ramayani insist that their epic stories belong to a tradition that they call *naveda*—not in the Vedas.[2] The 'Vedas' is used as a generic term to refer to the literary and textual tradition of which the classical Valmiki Ramayana as *kavya* is very much a part. *Naveda*, its opposite,

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[2] The existence of the Hindus as a cognate community is acknowledged in the Gond origin myth that states that both are descended from the offspring of Mahaprabhu (Shiva) and Parvati who choose different lifestyles for themselves (Mehta 1984).

refers to the oral tradition, one that has no source in an authoritative narrator but is transmitted through the common currency of everyday speech, as *kimvadanti* or speech fragments in the mouths of people. The idea that mythic lore is *kimvadanti* seems to suggest a fundamental truth about the nature of myths—that they are not reducible to explicit tales found in texts but are omnipresent in society, disaggregated into components that are circulated not merely through ritual performance but also through speech genres, such as jokes, riddles and proverbs. Most people's knowledge of their myths is thus fragmentary and allusive, embodied as memory traces in language, and it is only the professional bard who has knowledge of the actual corpus of mythical tales (Bhagwat 1972; Severi 2012). But as Walter Benjamin (1968) tells us, bards are also journeymen, gathering experiences from elsewhere and using these as elements in new story versions. Myths, like other traditional stories, exhibit a plurality that might seem inexplicable to literary scholars used to working with singular texts—the creative expressions of individual authors. Myths live in a narrative universe that is in a continuous churn, shaped by creative encounters with other myths, bards, performance events and listeners each with their own singular and novel experiences. In such a tradition, continuity exists not so much in the organisation of the different narrative elements into plots but in the narrative elements themselves (Brandel and Bagaria forthcoming). In this article, I take the Ramayana as constituting a narrative universe consisting of different kinds of aesthetic traditions and performance modes in which not just common fragments of plot but also poetic elements are distributed. To exemplify this idea, I juxtapose portions of Valmiki's text, as it has come down to us over the centuries, with episodes from the Gondi Ramayani. Does it make sense to compare texts that at first sight seem to be so radically different? As I have mentioned, apart from the names that the main protagonists share, neither the characters nor the plot has any traits in common. Yet, when I read the Valmiki Ramayana (in translation), it struck me that the poetic imagery that Valmiki uses, especially in the scenes like Sita's abduction and Rama's frantic search for his beloved wife, was strangely familiar to that in the Gondi Ramayani. I am an anthropologist with an interest in folklore, not a classicist, and I am not familiar with India's literary, traditions. Yet, there was a shock of recognition as it was the Gondi myths that I was reading that seemed to resonate with these images, acting as a kind of echo chamber, sometimes amplifying and sometimes distorting them in wondrous and exciting ways.

The significance of formulaic poetic expressions in bardic compositions that are primarily oral was first demonstrated by Milman Parry and

Albert Lord, who were able to show how oral epic narratives were built up by using formulaic expressions to connect series of metrical lines that expressed repetitive themes (Lord 1971). They argued that composition actually takes place in the course of the narration, as the bard uses the formulas that he has memorised through repeated use to stitch together different themes. Other scholars, like J. M. Foley (1992), insist that formulaic expressions also serve a larger and less utilitarian purpose, since they function as metonyms linking particular narrative performances to an immanent tradition subjectively perceived by the audience. Foley shifts the focus of analysis from composition to reception, asking us to think of the story as a work in the process of being heard, in which words carry an affective charge so that they call forth other contexts in which they have occurred. Thus, for Foley, repetitive utterances and themes act as indexicals pointing to larger, unspoken contexts that frame the specific event of narrative performance. With Foley's argument that oral epics are to be analysed in terms of the ways in which they are subjectively apprehended by the audience, I come to the second part of my article. I describe how a bardic tradition is interpreted by a group of city-dwelling Pardhan Gond painters. Change in the social contexts in which events of narration traditionally took place due to urbanisation and school education has resulted in the steady decline in the number of actual bards in the Pardhan Gond community.[3] However, this has not led to the devaluation of their mythic lore. Instead, a new generation of Pardhan Gond artists are turning to their traditional lore for painterly themes. At first sight, this may suggest that the artists think of themselves as illustrators of the stories that they heard as children. However, unlike some of the other traditional forms of painting in India, they do not consider painting to be a graphic mode of storytelling.

I examine some of these paintings, treating them as creative responses to a particular way of listening to oral narratives, using Foley's argument that the rhythmic power of formulaic words used by bards in their performances call out to the imagination of the listeners. However, since the oral compositions of the Pardhan Gond bards are part of a larger and immanent metanarrative universe, I first select a theme and some stock images that seem to recur across narratives and explore the 'unspoken worlds of signification' that transform them into affective images with the power to persist through time (Foley 1992, 276).

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[3] The tradition has not completely died out, as Roderic Knight (2001) attests, and there is still an audience for such bardic performances in rural districts, like Mandla in Madhya Pradesh.

What then is the relationship between the painterly images and the epic compositions from which they seek inspiration? To address this question, we must first examine the poetic images that emerge in the oral narrations of the bards, paying close attention to the narrative contexts in which they first emerge and the manner in which they may be projected in other contexts. Such projections involve an intuitive understanding and participation in this mythic universe, as well as a sensitivity to the cognitive potential of the images themselves, such that paintings seem to be transmutations of themes that frequently recur in the myths. But first, a brief account of the Pardhan Gond community.

The Pardhan Gond bards

The Pardhan Gonds are an offshoot of the great Gond tribe that is spread across much of central India. According to a Gond origin myth, the first Pardhan was the youngest of seven Gond brothers who chose to carve out a separate path for himself as a bard. The bards are considered to be the memorialists of the Gonds, keeping their myths and legends alive through their ballads (Hivale 1946). These stories are in the form of ballads or *gathas*, sung to the accompaniment of the *bana*, a stringed instrument that is supposed to have been a gift from the god Bara Deo to the ancestor of the Pardhan Gonds. These *gathas* once formed part of the narrative repertoire of the Pardhan bards whose patrons were Gonds. The Pardhan Gond bards had an important role in keeping the historical memory of the Gonds alive by disseminating myths and legendary accounts of their kings and heroes. However, once the system of patronage dried up as the various Gond kingdoms became absorbed into larger state formations, ceremonial settings in which such narratives were performed also began to disappear.

The great Gond tribe is supposed to have spread across central India between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, and the first Gond kingdom was established here in the late fourteenth century. There were three Gond kingdoms between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries under the nominal suzerainty of the Mughal emperors. There were alliances between the Gond rajas and Rajput kings as well, and one of the most famous Gond rulers, Rani Durgawati, who died fighting against the Mughal emperor Akbar, was a princess of Chandela Rajput descent, widow of a Gond raja, Dalpat Shah. The three Gond kingdoms finally succumbed to repeated invasions by Marathas in the eighteenth century (Knight 2001).

The Pardhan Gonds at one time probably served as genealogists at the royal courts of Gond kings. They have a similar clan structure as and common clan names with the Gonds. They are still considered to be the musicians and bards of the tribe and may have been their priests and diviners as well. The *mangteri* (patron–client) relationship between Gond and Pardhan clans of the same name is probably a trace of an earlier, more symbiotic relationship between the two communities. The *mangteri* is a tour that Pardhan Gond bards make every 3 years to the households of their Gond or patrons—to sing and entertain their households and receive gifts in exchange. The relationship between a Gond *thakur* or patron and his Pardhan *dasondi* (the word derives from the root *dana*) is a ritual relationship and has to involve members of clans with the same name (Hivale 1946). The *dasondis* sang long narrative poems based either on legendary accounts of Gond kings, called *Gondvani*, or myths from the epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, called the *Ramayani* and *Pandavani*, respectively. Very little has actually been written about the Gondi epics. Verrier Elwin and Shamrao Hivale translated a fragment of a story about Lakshmana's adventures into English, which has been discussed by scholars who work on central Indian myths, such as Durga Bhagwat (1972) and M. K. Mishra (1993). Sheikh Gulab, a schoolteacher who lived in Chindwara district of Madhya Pradesh, was the first person to compile a set of ballads based on stories from the Gondi epics in writing (Gulab 1964). Sheikh Gulab's works are not easily accessible even in Madhya Pradesh, but a few of the artists do own copies of his Ramayani compilation and have used it as an additional source for their paintings. I shall also be relying on Sheikh Gulab's text for my analysis, which I have tried to supplement with information from Pardhan Gond artists in Madhya Pradesh.

The Gond Style of Painting and the Bardic Tradition

The 'Gond' style, as the art of the Pardhan Gond painters is called, is a new tradition that developed under the auspices of modern art institutions. J. Swaminathan, an eminent Indian artist, was invited to help set up Bharat Bhavan, a centre for art and culture in Bhopal, the capital of Madhya Pradesh, and was in charge of building its contemporary art collection. Deeply influenced by 'primitivism', especially in its more recent incarnations through the work of contemporary aboriginal artists from Australia and New Zealand, he felt it necessary to include folk and tribal artworks in the Bharat Bhavan collection of contemporary art

(Chatterji 2012). Figurative art is rare in the Gondi tradition, and Gond deities are generally represented in aniconic form or through natural symbols, such as ant hills, stones and trees. The first generation of Gond painters were able to tap into the contemporary artistic interest in primitivism by painting images of their deities as semi-anthropomorphic figures covered with interlocking lines and arabesques inspired by the decorations on the walls of their village huts. The presence of mythological beings, like *naga* (serpent) deities, and popular gods, such as Mahaprabhu (Shiva), Parvati and Ganesha, that are commonly known to Indians but depicted in a distinctive 'Gondi' style, stirred interest among urban art lovers as well. The first generation of Gond painters who worked with Swaminathan and his team of artists at Bharat Bhavan used mythology to source ideas for their paintings but chose not to depict the actual tales. That was left to a later generation of artists who have sought inspiration from their oral epics, depicting stock figures and popular themes from narratives that they heard as children.

While reading Sheikh Gulab's transcription of the aural Ramayani, I was struck by the presence of certain familiar themes, such as the *agni pariksha* (trial by fire) and *haran* (abduction) in contexts associated not with the figures of Sita and Ravana but with Lakshmana and other anthropomorphic creatures, such as Bhauramal Joddha—the warrior bee—and the *kurri baaj*—the hawk woman. I then started to read the Valmiki Ramayana for a comparative perspective and made an even more startling discovery. Similes and metaphors that are used to describe the scene of Sita's abduction in the Valmiki Ramayana are displaced and re-emplotted to become metonymic configurations in the Gondi Ramayani.

Sita's abduction is one of the key moments in the Ramayana, as it draws together the different segments of the plot. In the Valmiki Ramayana, Ravana's abduction of Sita is given dramatic force through the use of figures of speech that refer to thunder, lightning and storm clouds. In the Ramayani stories, the verbal imagery expressed through the similes used in the Valmiki Ramayana are elaborated into episodic sequences and used to explore the theme of abduction involving protagonists that are multiforms of Sita. The popularity of the Ramayani among Pardhan Gond painters has led to a further transmutation of the abduction theme in the last decade or so.

For the purposes of my argument, I focus specifically on the theme of abduction and try to show how it emerges repeatedly in texts that are radically different and far apart in time and place. Among the texts that are considered, one set belongs to the oral narrative repertoire of the Pardhan Gond community of Madhya Pradesh, while the other is the

Valmiki Ramayana, which is considered to be an exemplary text from the archaic past—dated to a period roughly between the second century BCE and the second century CE (Richman 1992). Keeping in mind that myths do not exist outside the specific instances of their expression, we shall explore this theme across a series of representations in texts and paintings, paying special attention to the fact that each representation must conform to the conventions of the genre in which it occurs.

Poetic Images in the Two Ramayanas

The frame story of the Ramayana describes the founding moment of the epic narrative in Valmiki's grief at the sight of the death of the male *krauncha* bird[4] at the very moment of its coupling with its mate. Valmiki curses the hunter who has caused this terrible transgression, and through the very intensity of his grief (*shoka*), his utterance is transformed into a new poetic medium—the *shloka* that is used to render the story of Rama. Valmiki teaches his poem to two young bards, Kusha and Lava, the sons of Rama, who were born during Sita's forest exile. Inspired by the lament of the female *krauncha* bird as she mourns for her mate, Julia Leslie (1998) says that this is an echo of Sita's own grief, and the frame story itself an allegory of her abduction by Ravana which begins her tragic separation from Rama. As befits its tragic theme, the dominant emotional tone of the poem is the *karuna rasa* (taste), or the sentiment of compassion. Unlike the classical Sanskrit literature of later times, the style of the Ramayana is relatively simple, the figures of speech used being largely similes. The use of the poetic techniques such as parallelism and chiasmus[5] seems to indicate their origin in the oral tradition, according to the scholars like J. L. Brockington (1977).

In contrast to the mood of compassion (*karuna*) that pervades the Valmiki Ramayana, the Ramayani of the Pardhan Gonds is largely in the comic mode (*hasya rasa*). The bard alternates between songs and narrative passages accompanying his recitation with music for a fiddle-like instrument called a *bana*. The music is lively, ranging from

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[4] According to Julia Leslie (1998), the *krauncha* is likely to have been the majestic sarus crane.

[5] Parallelism involves the use of repeating words and grammatical forms to give pattern and rhythm to a literary passage. Chiasmus is a form of inverted parallelism in which words or concepts are repeated in reverse order. The scholars like Sheldon Pollock (2006), however, insist that as India's first *kavya*, the Ramayana, has to be thought of as a primarily literary text.

medium- to fast-tempo, and the bells that are suspended from the bow accentuate the strokes on the fiddle strings. Specific tunes are played to indicate the entrance of a particular character. Not only do major characters have their signature tunes, but emotional moods and specific activities, like the hero galloping across the battlefield and so on, also have their special tunes. According to older Pardhan Gonds who were more familiar with such bardic performances, the audience can usually predict the direction that the story is going to take by following the arrangement of tunes by the bard (Knight 2001). With this brief account of the narrative styles in the two Ramayanas, let us now turn to a more detailed discussion of some of the poetic images that are commonly found associated with themes of abduction in our texts.

The Ramayana of Valmiki

Consider the following verses from the Aranya Kanda (The Book of the Forest):

Sarga 50,9. When Vaidehi [Sita] was assaulted, a blinding darkness enveloped the world, the whole world from end to end, all things that move and do not move.[6]

Sarga 50,13. All adorned in ornaments of burnished gold and dressed in garments of yellow silk, the princess looked like a streak of lightning flashing from a storm cloud.

Sarga 50,16. Her golden silks, billowing out way up in the sky, resembled a cloud stained copper by the rosy rays of the midday sun.

Sarga 50,17. As she was held fast in Ravana's embrace way up in the sky, her pure radiant face, without Rama, began to fade like a lotus ripped from its stalk.

Sarga 50,21. Maithili (Sita) was golden skinned, the *rakshasa* deep blue black, and folded within his arms she looked like the star that glitters within a sapphire.

Sarga 50,22. Fair as a lotus, golden hued, with ornaments of burnished gold, the daughter of Janaka in Ravana's embrace looked like a streak of lightening caught within a storm cloud.

Sarga 50,23. The sound of Vaidehi's ornaments made the overlord of the *rakshasas* still more like a rain cloud, pure black and now sounding as well.

[6] The following verses have been taken from Sheldon Pollock's translation of the Aranyakanda (Pollock 2006).

'The streak of lightning in a storm cloud' is an image that persists in the literary imagination and lends itself to variable and seemingly contrary interpretations. Thus, in the commentary called Bhushana on the verses quoted above which Pollock refers to, it is said that Sita will remain in Ravana's grasp only so long as lightning remains in the grasp of the rain cloud. Ravana's power will crumble with the passage of time. The image of the copper cloud in verse 16 refers to the red-tinted clouds that appear at the end of the cosmic age, symbolic of Ravana's destruction (Pollock 2006, 325). In classical Sanskrit literature, however, the poetic image of lightning in a cloud is also used to suggest that Shri, the goddess of fortune and the embodiment of royal splendour, is associated with the refulgence of kings, who are likened to rain clouds glowing with the light flashing from the lightning bolts (Bronner et al. 2014). Shri, the companion of the sovereign king, is also notoriously fickle, and the metaphor of lightning used to symbolise her nature also expresses the impermanence of royal power. The rain cloud image suggests, therefore, not just the threat of impending doom in the scene of Sita's abduction but also the luminous splendour of Ravana's majestic presence—a point that is reinforced in the following book, the Kishkinda kanda, as we shall now see.[7]

> Sarga 27, 11. The sky, lashed by lightning as if by golden whips, makes thundering sounds as if in pain.

> Sarga 27, 12. Flickering against dark clouds, the lightning looks to me like poor Vaidehi trembling in Ravana's grasp.

These verses are uttered by Rama addressing his brother Lakshmana after they have wondered into Kishkinda, the monkey kingdom of Valin and Sugriva, in their search for Sita. These verses take the form of a chiasmus, presenting a reverse image in which lightning is now thought to resemble Sita—a meta-textual reference to Sita as an incarnation of the goddess Shri. In fact, the *sarga* as a whole functions as a kind of chiasmus—an inversion of the frame story about the female sarus crane lamenting the loss of her mate (Leslie 1998).

As a figure of speech, lightning in the Ramayana is not only associated with Sita in the scene of the abduction but also used to describe Ravana

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[7] The following quotations are from the Kishkindakanda 2007, translated by Rosalind Lefeber. Lightning as a metaphor for Shri is made quite explicit in the following verse:

  Sarga 16, 15. Ravana's exquisite women, their eyes still blurred from sleep and drink, accompanied their mighty lord, as streaks of lightning do a thundercloud.

in his royal court at Lanka. Thus, in the Sundara Kanda, Hanumana's first surreptitious glimpse of Ravana in his palace at Lanka is described as follows:

> Sarga 8, 5–9. On that glittering bed, the great monkey saw the mighty lord of the *rakshasas* sleeping. With his red eyes, great arms, garments shot with gold, and his precious dazzling earrings, he resembled a great storm cloud. His body smeared with fragrant red sandal paste, he truly resembled a cloud laced with streaks of lightning and reddened in the sky at twilight….

Lightning as an image connoting sensuality and the *shringara rasa* is commonly found in the poetic vocabulary of the *adivasi* groups in Madhya Pradesh, but it also has a mythic association, as we shall see.[8]

Another image that occurs repeatedly in the Ramayana is that of the lotus, sometimes accompanied by the bee—a polyvalent image that was used to signify, among other things, the discerning critic, the lover and even the dark eyes of the beloved in later Sanskrit literature (Bronner et al. 2014). In the Sundara Kanda of the Valmiki Ramayana, we see again the use of contrapuntal images using the lotus—its presence or absence—to highlight the contrast between the sensual luxury of Ravana's palace populated with exquisitely beautiful women and Sita's ascetic appearance in the Ashoka *vatika* (garden), guarded by fierce *rakshasis*. I quote again from the *sarga* that describes Hanumana's secret visit to the palace, where he marvels at the beauty of Ravana's many lovers. While these scenes cannot strictly be included in the theme of abduction, the contexts in which they appear are directly related to it.

> Sarga 7, 33. Maruti gazed upon the faces – fragrant as lotuses – of those beautiful women, their eyes closed and their teeth concealed. (The Ramayana of Valmiki: Sundara kanda, Vol. 5 2007)
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> Sarga 7, 34. Their faces resembled lotuses that had awakened with the wondering of the dark and once more closed their petals at night.

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[8] Elwin and Hivale (1935, 199) give this song as an example of the kinds of songs sung during the post-nuptial procession that accompanies the married couple to the bride's home after the wedding:

> How often I've warned the young cowherd
> Not to go to the Gond village
> For Gond girls flicker like lightning
> They stop the boys on the way
> Now they have stolen your stick And other cows have eaten your fodder.

Sarga 7, 35–36. The great and majestic monkey reflected that their faces shared the qualities of water-born lotuses, and he aptly thought, 'Surely intoxicated bees must repeatedly seek out these lotuslike faces as if they were blooming lotuses sprung from the water'.

Conversely, Sita in the Ashoka *vatika* is described as a pool without lotus flowers or as a lotus stem shorn of its flower.

Sarga 13, 20. She was clad in a single, fine yellow garment, now much worn. Covered with dirt and lacking ornaments, she resembled a pond without lotuses.

Sarga 15, 25. Her body was covered with dirt, yet she was adorned with her own physical beauty, and so – like a tender lotus stalk covered with mud she both lacked beauty and possessed it.

Now consider this verse from the Kishkinda kanda which describes the dying Valin:

Sarga 27, 4. Like a blazing fire because of his anger, Valin looked like a pool radiant with red lotuses, his terrifying fangs white as lotus fibres.

The use of the lotus image is particularly striking in this verse, because it is counter-intuitive. The poet extends the simile, using it to convey a *rasa* (sentiment) that is seemingly far removed from the erotic. According to the classical theory of aesthetics in India, no *rasa* is presented unrelieved by the presence of other *rasas* that may complement it or provide a contrast. Here, it is the *shringara rasa* or erotic sentiment that seems to enhance the flavour of the dominant *vira rasa*, or the heroic sentiment (Goldman and Goldman 2007). Let us now turn to our other text—the Ramayani of the Pardhan Gonds.

The Ramayani: Lakshama's Truth Test

As the section heading suggests, the stories included in the Ramayana of the Pardhan Gonds have very little in common with Valmiki's text. Instead of a single overarching plot that binds all the different parts of the epic narrative as in the Valmiki Ramayana, there are instead discrete stories grouped together thematically concerning the adventures of Rama's younger brother, Lakshmana. Sita figures prominently as Lakshmana's sister-in-law and an instigator of many of his quests, but Rama is a distant figure who appears rather infrequently in the stories. The theme of abduction appears in several of the stories, but in none of

them is Sita the victim. Lakshmana figures as the victim in one story, and in an echo of Sita's trial by fire after the war in which her abductor, Ravana, is vanquished, he too is tested in the same way. All the female figures that appear in the abduction stories are magical beings with the ability to change their form at will. However, the repeated appearance of rain clouds, lightning and lotus flowers seems to indicate a hidden connection.

Lakshmana and Bijal Dai

As mentioned earlier, the Ramayani consists primarily of Lakshmana's adventures as he goes in pursuit of a series of beautiful and often magical maidens at the behest of his sister-in-law, Sita. A man's relationship with the wife of his elder brother is an intimate one often coloured by a transgressive flirtatiousness. Lakshmana is depicted as a bachelor—a heroic ascetic—fully in control of his senses, described repeatedly as 'one who never disturbs a twig in the path where he walks; never looks at the face of another's woman; never walks under a barren tree; never loses his way in the field of ripe *til*; and never looks into a blind well' (Gulab 1964, 9).[9] His continued bachelor status is a subject of great concern to his brother and sister-in-law, who are always on the lookout for prospective brides for Lakshmana. One such maiden is Raja Vasuk's (Vasuki Naga) daughter Bijal Dai, the lightning maiden. Raja Vasuk, the serpent lord, is the ruler of Patala Loka. He is reluctant to send his only child to a faraway kingdom but feels reluctant to refuse the marriage proposal given by a king as powerful as Rama. Instead, stalling for time, he insists that Lakshmana offer *lamsena* service (bridegroom service) for 12 years before the marriage can be solemnised. Rama agrees and Lakshmana patiently serves his father-in-law, overcoming all the obstacles that the latter puts in his way.[10] After the marriage ceremony is

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[9] All the images suggest a disciplining of the senses—a person who does not allow himself to be diverted from his chosen path, even if only to break a twig from passing a tree or peer into a well out of sheer curiosity. References to fields of *til* and barren trees have to do with fertility and marriage. Sweets made from *til* seeds are distributed at weddings in central India.

[10] All the obstacles have to do with stalling the marriage ceremony. First, he asks him to plant a field full of oil seeds for the lamps that are to be lit at the wedding and then asks him to sort them out—a task that he is unable to perform. Bijal Dai's companions suggest that he take the help of the 9 lakh birds that follow him wherever he goes, and they are able to accomplish the task in no time. Next, Vasuk asks him to cut down a wood full of iron-hard trees to build the wedding canopy and fire altar. This time, Lakshmana is helped by his prospective sister-in-law and her brother's wife, who teach him the correct technique for

complete, Lakshmana is ready to set out with his bride. She is locked into a bamboo tube, and Lakshmana is warned not to open it till they reach his kingdom. Still suspicious of his father-in-law's intentions, Lakshmana opens the bamboo tube midway through the journey, and Bijal Dai flies out. Transformed into a streak of lightning, she flits between the clouds in an attempt to hide from her bridegroom. Lakshmana is furious, and from that day onwards he becomes the sworn enemy of the rain clouds. One can hear the sound of Lakshmana's arrows as they strike at the clouds even today.

The motifs of rain clouds, lightning and thwarted bridegroom are all present here as they are in Valmiki's story. The rain-cloud analogy used for Ravana, the abductor, in the latter becomes the enemy in this story, and the bride is literally transformed into a streak of lightning. In symmetry with the transformations that have occurred in the motifs of the clouds and lightning, we see a transmutation of the abduction theme as well. Marriage is perceived as a form of abduction by Bijal Dai, and she manages to escape it using her own magical powers. More importantly, similes that suggest likeness or similarity between different kinds of entities, thus enabling their comparison in the Valmiki Ramayana to each other, are transformed into metonymic associations in the Ramayani. Roman Jakobson, in his seminal work on figures of speech, says that metaphor associates entities on the basis of their similarity or contrast with each other, while metonymy involves the association of entities on the basis of spatial and temporal relationships. The selection or substitution of words that are equivalent to each other are common in everyday speech as are combinations of words denoting different kinds of entities to make up phrases but in the poetic use of metaphor selection becomes contiguity by the projection of equivalence from the plane of selection to that of combination and in metonymy contiguity provides a field to select from (Dubnick 1980, 407; Jakobson 1971). The following story takes up the figure of the lotus and subjects it to a similar transmutation.

Lakshmana and Tiriya Phul (flower maiden)

Sita, anxious about her brother-in-law's bachelor status, decides to visit him in his secluded palace—Dunda Mahal. To draw his attention to her

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cutting the wood. Thwarted in his attempts to stall the wedding, Vasuk finally insists that the bridegroom's party be capable of appreciating the full force of his hospitality. Lakshmana invites the two divinities Shukra and Shani to come to his wedding, and they finish the great banquet laid out for them in no time at all and then ask for more. Vasuk is humbled and the wedding goes through.

concern, she throws him a challenge and says, 'O listen my brother-in-law the vow bearer, my brother-in-law the wind bearer—I do not know if which of these virtues are truly yours and which are falsely ascribed to you'. Lakshmana responds to her provocation by reiterating that his actions speak for his virtue. He says:

> Never look at the face of another's woman; never lose my way in a field of ripe *til*; never gaze into a blind (dry) well; never break a twig from a tree along the path I walk; never walk in the shadow of a barren tree—these are the vows I have taken. So how do you still doubt my virtue?

In response, Sita throws him a challenge:

> Raja Indra has a daughter, Durbal Kanya (Delicate Maiden) by name—soft of speech, with the gait of a pigeon, the face of Mohini (the seductress)[11] and the lustre of the sun and the moon combined. If you remain unmoved at the sight of this beauty I will accept that you are a truth bearer indeed.

Lakshmana sets off for Indraloka immediately, traversing many enchanted and dangerous lands. He finally reaches the outskirts of Raja Indra's kingdom and is helped by some sadhus (ascetics) in locating the whereabouts of Durbal Kanya. They direct him to a lake, Bhaan *taalaab*, where Durbal Kanya and her sisters come to bathe at midnight in their winged chariots. They also warn him not to fall asleep and offer tips on how to stay awake. He takes their advice and rubs sand in his eyes but is unable to bear the pain, and when he washes his eyes, he falls asleep. The same thing happens the next night, even though he rubs chilli powder on his eyes, following the sages' advice. On the third successive night, in the face of Lakshmana's persistence, they advise him to scatter puffed corn (*lai*) around the shore of the lake.

Lakshmana follows the advice that the sadhus give him and scatters puffed corn on the shore of the lake and then sits waiting for the sight that he has come from so far to see. Meanwhile, in Indraloka, Durbal Kanya and her sisters climb into their winged chariots (*udan khatola*) at the stroke of midnight and fly down to Bhaan Lake. As they start walking towards the lake, Lakshmana sees that Bahimata, the goddess who dwells near water, precedes them and puts to sleep all creatures that are standing in their path. But then, she gets distracted as she sees the

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[11] The great god Vishnu takes the form of the beautiful Mohini to seduce the anti-gods and trick them out of their share of the nectar of immortality (*amrit*) that had emerged from their joint churning of the primordial ocean at the beginning of time.

puffed corn scattered on the ground and, squatting down on her haunches, she starts to sort out and gather the grains, forgetting about the task at hand. Thinking that the whole world is asleep, the maidens take off their clothes and enter the water. But as soon as the water reaches the crowns of their heads, flowers suddenly bloom where their heads had been. The flowers circle the lake seven times and then turn back into their human form. The maidens climb out of the lake, reaching for their garments, when they are suddenly confronted by a handsome youth.

Attracted by his beauty, all seven maidens are ready to marry him, but he wants only Durbal Kanya. She agrees to go with him, but Lakshmana still has one last doubt that needs to be put to rest. He asks Durbal Kanya about the power that was able to bring about the miraculous transformation in their appearance and protect their chastity when they were naked and seemed most vulnerable to the eyes of the outside world. Durbal Kanya tells him that it was the power of her *sat* (virtue) that made possible the transformation that he had just witnessed. Wanting to make sure that he has not been deluded, Lakshmana insists that she transform herself into Tiriya Phul (flower maiden) once more before his eyes. She pleads with him, warning of dire consequences if that should happen, but Lakshmana is adamant. She goes into the lake and, as before, as soon as the water reaches the crown of her head, she becomes a beautiful flower. At that very moment, before Lakshmana's eyes, a honeybee appears and, attracted by the promise of delicious nectar, flies off with the beautiful bloom. Lakshmana tries to give chase, shooting arrows into the sky, but the honeybee is too quick for him. Finally, after a long and unsuccessful search for Tiriya Phul, Lakshmana has to return empty-handed to the friendly *sadhus* who tell him that the abductor was no ordinary honey bee but Bhaura Mal Joddha, one of Raja Indra's spies and a mighty warrior.[12] He has hidden Sita in a bamboo thicket in the Kajali *vana* (forest),[13] guarded by warrior bees with poisonous stings. Lakshmana rushes off to rescue Tiriya Phul. When he reaches Kajali *vana*, he sees massive, drum-shaped hives suspended from tall bamboo shoots. A swarm of bees attack him, and he is so badly stung that he has to pray to Dharati Mata (Mother Earth) to save him. She hides him inside her, safe from the bees.

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[12] According to the folklorist Durga Bhagwat (1972), bees are thought to be the god Indra's eyes in Gond mythology.

[13] This is probably the same magical Kadali Vana or the forest of banana trees that is mentioned in the Ramayana. Like the motif of *til* seeds mentioned in the introduction to this story, the bamboo plant is also associated with marriage rituals in many parts of India and is depicted alongside other auspicious symbols in the nuptial chamber (*kohbhar ghar*) during marriage rituals in Mithila, Bihar.

Meanwhile, back in Ayodhya, Sita is worried by Lakshmana's long absence. She sees in a dream that he is in trouble and goes to her husband, Rama. Rama calls upon the Pandavas for help in locating his younger brother. Sahadeva, the youngest of the Pandava brothers, was also a great astrologer. He divines that Lakshmana has been captured by the army of Bhaura Mal Joddha. All the gods gather behind Rama as he mounts his rescue mission. Bhima, the mighty warrior, is the first to tackle the bees, but he is stung so badly that he has to jump into the ocean to save himself. Then, Hanumana is sent. Hanumana bundles all the bees up in a net and, using his strong and supple tail to secure the bundle, he dashes them to the ground. Lakshmana is freed and Tiriya Phul rescued. She turns back into her true self and goes with Sita to live in the latter's palace, Jhijri Mahal.[14]

Just as we saw in the previous story, here too metaphoric imagery from the literary world of the epics seems to have been displaced and re-embedded in a novel metonymic configuration, leading to a radical transformation of the narrative landscape. A detail in a prior text acquires other connotations associated with feminine imagery, to be transformed into a different story altogether. However, unlike in the previous case, the lotus image does not actually figure in the scene of abduction but appears later in scenes depicting Sita's imprisonment in Ravana's kingdom. But if we go beyond the Valmiki Ramayana and explore the epic universe, we find a striking parallel in the old Javanese Ramayana. This is what Ravana says when he sees Sita for the first time:

> As I look closely at your beauty to me it is like that of a flower which has already lost its honey to a honey bee and its pollen has fallen. There are still traces of its beauty apparent. You are like that. That is why I can see that you have a husband (Javanese Ramayana 5, 74, in Royo 2003, 45–46).[15]

Flowers are intimately associated with female sexuality in the literary world of the Ramayana (Royo 2003). But why Tiriya Phul—the name given to Durbal Kanya in her flower form? 'Tiriya', when associated with women, means 'secretive' or 'wily' (McGregor 1993, 453).[16] In Hindi literature too, *tiriya charitra* is the term used to refer to female characters

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[14] Rama, Sita and Lakshmana all reside in separate palaces—Rama in Ajudhya Mahal, Sita in Jhijri Mahal and Lakshmana in Dunda Mahal, where he lives in seclusion as befitting an ascetic, protected poisonous snakes, scorpions, bees, ants and other fierce creatures that prevent anyone from disturbing his solitude.

[15] Translated by Soewito Santoso.

[16] McGregor (1993) says that the word is derived from 'stri' or woman and 'tiriya charitra' refers to a woman's wiles or trickery (ibid.: 453).

in the Ramayana who are secretive or capable of duplicity, like Kaikeyi or Ahilya, and this image resonates with the poetic sensibility of Pardhan Gond bards, who describe the fickle and changeable nature of the feminine personality in graphic and often humorous detail (Hivale 1946). What do these figures of *tiriya charitra* tell us about the flower maidens of our story? I asked Kalabai, a Pradhan Gond artist, what the word *tiriya* really meant as a designation for Durbal Kanya. Was it used in the same way as it was when referring to the characters like Kaikeyi? The artist Kala Bai insisted that Durbal Kanya was a *tiriya charitra*. Like Kaikeyi, she even carries her *kope* with her when she comes down to bathe. The *kope ghar* is the notorious seclusion chamber where Kaikeyi retires to sulk on the eve of her stepson Rama's coronation—a form of emotional blackmail that moves her husband, King Dasharatha, to make an impulsive promise that leads to Rama's banishment from the kingdom.

There seem to be several strands in this story which resonate with the figure of Sita in the Ramayana. The erotic images of the lotus and the nectar-sucking bee are images associated with the scene of abduction in the larger Ramayana tradition, as we have seen. Seclusion too is a theme that is developed as a direct consequence of Sita's abduction. The abduction is the crucial event that brings about the transformation in the conjugal relations between Rama and Sita and the plot as such. However passionately he may love his wife, this event marks the moment when his trust in her is irrevocably lost. This is movingly expressed in the Yuddha kanda, when at the end of the war Rama forces Sita to appear before his troops—an act that she, a royal princess used to the seclusion of the women's quarters, finds extremely distasteful. The public demonstration of Sita's chastity through the fire ordeal or *satya kriya* (act of truth), Rama's lurking distrust that will finally lead to their revocable separation, is echoed in the Tiriya Phul story as well. Here, it is Lakshmana who demands a public demonstration of Durbal Kanya's virtue, that is, proof of her powers in the daytime when the world is awake, an act that leads to her abduction by the bee warrior. The substitution of the awesome figure of Ravana by a bee and Lakshmana's escape beneath the earth locates this scene of abduction squarely within the comic mode. Lakshmana's rescue by Hanuman and his compliance with the wishes of his sister-in-law are strands that echo the classical Ramayana story as well, but Durbal Kanya's depiction as a *tiriya charitra* is unclear. It seems to go against the abducted-maiden paradigm where it is assumed that the maiden is innocent and chaste. To understand the relationship between the two Ramayana genres, there is one further story that we have to consider.

Lakshmana and Indra Kamini

Lakshmana lived secluded in Dunda Mahal, guarded by the 12 phases of the sun and moon, 13 *danavas* from Dalvapura, bears and tigers, swarms of flies and bees, ants, wasps and scorpions that buzzed around his palace, preventing intruders from entering as he lay on his serpent bed—Shesha Naga became the bed post,[17] Dhamna Naga braided its coils like strands of silk to form the mattress, Ajgar Naga was the pillow, and scorpions anchored the floor, fastened like nails to the floor. Ants lay thick on the floor, covering it like a carpet. Lakshmana meditated in their midst. Eons passed as Lakshmana meditated. But he was lonely and thought that music would make a fitting companion. A beautiful *kindra* was made for him, but then he hung it up on a wall, thinking that he would rest awhile and then play. Twelve years passed, and every six months he would turn in his sleep.[18] The *kindra* was restless—it appeared in Lakshmana's dreams and complained, 'You took me from the forest, separated me from my companions and have now left me alone hanging from a nail without playing me even once'. 'You keep on sleeping I am going back to my friends in the forest', it said.[19] Lakshmana woke with a start and saw the *kindra* hanging on the nail just as he had left it. He swept the floor, spread a deer skin, brought out 18 musical instruments and called 900 doves (*phadki pareva*).[20] They came dancing, adorned with bells on their wings and cymbals held tightly in their beaks, ankle bells tied to their feet and peacock feathers in their ears. Lakshmana started to play, the doves danced along, and strains of music echoed through the palace. All 18 doors and 52 windows of the palace were shut—even the air could not come in or go out—but the music pushed passed the central beam supporting the roof and flew up to Indraloka, from a small crack near the finial. The gods and goddesses, sages and ascetics were all enraptured by the music. Indra's daughter Indra Kamini

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[17] In the Ramayana, Lakshmana is an *avatara* of Sesha Naga on whom Vishnu resides in the cosmic ocean.

[18] Lakshmana's 12-year sleep is an inversion of other folk traditions where he is supposed to have stayed awake for 12 years to guard his brother and sister-in-law.

[19] For Gondi listeners, the anguish of the *kindra* would be magnified, because it is said that the tree that is chosen to make the instrument is supposed to stand away from other trees. It has no children, and so the sound of its grief enhances the plaintive music of the instrument.

[20] Lakshmana has acquired some of the traits of Lingo, the legendary ancestor of the Gonds who brought music to the world by inventing 18 musical instruments that are played by Lakshmana's dove companions in this story.

heard the music.[21] She thought, 'If the music is so enchanting what must the musician be like?' She left her palace, walked to the ends of her father's kingdom and, taking the form of a hawk (*kurri baaj*), flew up into the sky, following the strains of the music. After flying a great distance, she reached a field planted with chickpeas and was trapped in the net that the farmer had draped over the field to protect his crop from marauding birds. She turned back into her womanly form, and it was in this form that the farmer found her. He was startled to see a beautiful young woman caught in the net. Indra Kamini said, 'I have travelled far to find you, release me and let us marry'. The farmer took her home, fed her and, when he fell asleep, transformed herself into the *kurri baaj* once again and flew to Dunda Mahal. She saw that the 18 doors and 52 windows were tightly shut. She flew all around the palace. 'From where can I enter?' she mused, and transforming herself into a bee, she managed to find her way in through a crack near the finial on the roof through which the music had previously escaped. She saw Lakshmana deep in his 12-year sleep. Indra Kamini gazed at him. She thought, 'Who is this, whose body shines like lightening? If I could have him as a husband how lucky I would be'. She tried to waken him, pinched his cheek, yelled in his ear and shook him, but to no avail. In frustration, she tore off her garments and pulled off her ornaments, leaving them strewn all over the room. Jhijri Mahal was where Sita lived. Sita thought, 'I have not seen my brother-in-law for a long time'. She decided to visit him, but when she reached Dunda Mahal, she was confronted with a scene that shocked her to the core. Lakshmana lay sleeping, and in the room, scattered on the floor and on the bed beside him, were the clothes of a woman and her ornaments—earrings, bangles and necklaces. She thought, 'My brother-in-law—the truth bearer, the wind bearer, the lightening bearer—did his virtue [*sat*] waver? Have the village girls come here and pleasured him while he slept?' Sita rushed to Badan Mahal, to her husband, Rama. Lord Rama was holding court in Ajudhya Nagari. Gods and goddesses, rajas and maharajas and subjects were all in attendance. Rama asked Sita why she had come, and she said, 'While giving justice to all you have forgotten your own brother. It is time to get him married. He has grown up and is of age'. Rama set out for Dunda Mahal with an entourage consisting of Sita, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, gods, goddesses, kings and emperors and their armies—Ajudhya Nagar was emptied out. They arrived at Lakshmana's palace to see him lying asleep, with a woman's clothes and ornaments scattered all over the room. In anger,

[21] In one of the Gond origin myths, Indra Kamini is an *apsara* who teaches the first human pair the art of sexual intercourse.

Rama shouted out to Lakshmana, who woke with a start. Unaware of what had happened in the room, he stood silently before his elder brother. It was Narada who suggested the fire ordeal to put Lakshmana to the test. An iron palace was built, which Lakshmana entered with his *kindra*, with the 900 doves carrying the 18 musical instruments, and then it was set on fire. The iron started to melt, and the heat from the fire could be felt at a distance of 12 leagues, but inside the chamber where Lakshmana played his *Kindra*, it was cool. The 900 doves danced while he played. From the intensity of the fire, it seemed that nothing would survive—everything inside would be reduced to ashes. Rama, Sita, all the gods and goddesses, the Pandavas and the Kauravas were beside themselves with grief. Vasuk Raja scolded Rama, saying, 'Why are you weeping now. For a small mistake you burnt your brother to death'. Hearing Vasuk's words, Rama started crying. Bhima offered to get water from the sea. He brought 14 large pots of water. Lakshmana heard what was going on outside and thought that if Bhima put out the fire, his ordeal would count for nothing. He pushed the door of the iron palace and it fell open with a loud crash. The people saw in amazement that Lakshmana was untouched. Lakshmana ran out and embraced his brother. Bhima threw the water he was carrying to quench the fire on the ground, where it became a mighty river.

The abduction and the fire ordeal have been displaced and disaggregated in these stories, transferred from Sita to Lakshmana, occurring as discrete and independent events in two separate stories. In a variant of the first Indra Kamini story mentioned by Elwin and Hivale (1935), Indra Kamini deliberately squeezes the broken bangles so that they will fit only Sita's narrow wrists and then flies off to Indraloka in the form of a lightning bolt (see also Mishra 1993, Naik 1993). Lakshmana is accused of having a liaison with his sister-in-law, but it is he and not Sita who undergoes the fire ordeal. Lakshmana then goes into voluntary exile, insulted by the slur cast upon his reputation. Sita tries to stop him by taking on different forms that pose a challenge to his reputation for asceticism, but he is unyielding. She finally curses him not to see a human face for 12 years. In other variants, Bijal Dai takes Indra Kamini's place and is supposed to be Ravana's daughter, born from his blood.

Bijal Dai and Indra Kamini are clearly multiforms of Sita. The reference to Ravana's daughter makes this explicit, as in some Ramayana variants Sita is said to be Ravana's unacknowledged daughter. The open expression of female sexuality in these stories is in contrast to the suppression of the erotic dimension in Valmiki's Ramayana (Goldman 2007). Chastity, one of Sita's chief virtues, is transferred to Lakshmana in these stories, as are the particular episodes in the narrative where it is featured—that is, the abduction, the fire ordeal and the disappearance

into the earth. However, while Sita's chastity is an essential aspect of her character because of her birth on sacrificial ground, Lakshmana's chastity makes him a slightly comic figure, as it is constantly being challenged by Sita and other aggressive women.[22] This too is in marked contrast to the Lakshmana of the Valmiki Ramayana who suppresses his own sexuality, leaving his wife behind in Ayodhya to follow his brother into exile. The combination of the heroic and comic moods which is common in folk variants of the Ramayana story is also present in the figure of Lakshmana.[23] He is vanquished by a honey bee and married to a woman who flees from him. This could well be a conscious act of parody that may be paradigmatic of the way the high literary traditions are addressed by this bardic community.

The Posthumous Life of Images

The Valmiki Ramayana is considered to be the first *kavya* in the classical literary tradition of India. However, its re-inscription and transmutation through numerous regional narrative traditions mean that for most Indians, there is an imaginative connection to a larger pan-Indian Ramayana universe. Illuminated manuscripts of the Ramayana have also been found in the royal courts of the Gond rulers, and peripatetic Brahmins may have travelled to these courts along with Rajputs and other caste Hindus through the centuries, taking their stories and literary works with them (Mishra 2007). The distinction between the literary and oral narrative traditions made by the Pardhan Gond bards speaks of an awareness and acknowledgment of the former while also emphasising its difference from the latter.

   Scholars from as far back as Max Müller have said that mythology is not reducible to the telling of tales but is first and foremost a style of language that is heavily dependent on poetic imagery. Even if we do not agree with Müller's naturalistic interpretation of mythology, his idea that myths persist as memory traces in our everyday language is important. Metaphorical usages, such as 'the sun rises' and 'the sun sets' in English, are examples of the way in which the mythic imagination still persists in

[22] Sita was born from the earth at the place where her foster father Janaka was performing a sacrifice. She reminds Rama of this after the battle in which Ravana is vanquished and before she asks Lakshmana to build her a pyre, as she does not wish to live with a taint on her character. She emerges unscathed from the fire (Valmiki Ramayana, Yuddha Kanda 104.15).

[23] In Bengal, it is usually Ravana who is treated in this way (Chatterji 1985).

our everyday language. While they are often used to anthropomorphise natural phenomena, Müller suggests that such use also points to an intuitive apprehension of some ineffable quality that seems to animate such phenomena, creating images that are emotionally charged. Myths whose sources lie in these metaphoric figurations embedded in language are produced through a form of cultural amnesia—a forgetting of the past—of the poetic formulations that inspired them. It was the task of comparative mythologists, Müller said, to recover the past of such images through the etymological analysis of the names of the divinities that figure in the myths (Müller 1968). Max Müller thought of them as mnemonic traces of a more poetic age when priests used verbal images to express feelings of wonder and awe evoked by the natural phenomena around them. However, it was the art historian Aby Warburg who stated that evocative images have a 'posthumous life' (*nachleben*), such that it is necessary to study them in all their historical and cultural complexity (Didi-Huberman 2002).

We may no longer agree with Max Müller's form of mythological analysis, but the idea that the texts like the Ramayana are palimpsests made up of the detritus of ancient texts that range as far back as the Vedas with references to atmospheric gods, Indra, who brings beneficial rain to earth, and bees that serve as the spies for the divine rulers of the universe is certainly appealing.[24] Counter-intuitive images, like that of the rain cloud, conjoin images from the human and natural registers of existence or images that synthesise both positive and negative qualities, like lightning being used to signify both Ravana and Sita or the lotus flower referring simultaneously to a woman's delicate beauty and to her duplicity. Multiple and contradictory significations give such images an affective charge that allows them to persist over time and emerge repeatedly in diverse contexts over long stretches of time.

Verbal Images and Their Pictorial Transmutations

Let us now turn our attention to the relationship between narratives and their pictorial representation. Bards tend to reinforce significant moments in the narratives that they are reciting by changing the pace and rhythm of the narration, as well as through the formulaic use of musical phrases. Thus, the musical mimicking of the sound of horses' hooves may signal the beginning of a battle scene. In the transcripts of the stories summarised

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[24] Sukumar Sen (1976) has used the framework of nature mythology to deconstruct the Ramayana metanarrative.

above, we see sound used in a similar way—to mark moments of transition between different phases of the plot. These could be natural sounds or musical refrains. Consider the following passages from the Indra Kamini story:

> Thus was *satloki* Lakshmana[25]
>
> Guarded by the twelve phases of the sun and the moon
>
> Thirteen demons (*danavas*) from Dalvapur
>
> Tigers and lions protected the gateway
>
> Twelve rows of bees, thirteen rows of flies
>
> Fourteen rows of ants, fifteen rows scorpions
>
> And sixteen rows of wasps who buzzed around him
>
> This was how Lakshmana's solitude was guarded, Oh master!
>
> (verse from Lakshmana and Indra Kamini – 1)

Lakshmana is sleeping—a 12-year-long sleep.[26] He turns to one side and then to the other once every 6 months. Only his snores disturb the silence. But his *kindra* is restless. 'Will nothing awaken Lakshmana', it thinks. 'It were better if I had been in the house of a Brahman, at least I would have been played every day. Or even better if I was still with my companions in the forest' (Prose passage Lakshmana andIndra Kamini – 1).

> Dunda Mahal has seven roofs and seventy gateways
>
> Fifty windows in the room
>
> Serpents form the bedpost and serpents form the mattress
>
> On which Lakshmana lies sleeping, Lakshmana the mendicant
>
> A cobra at his head and another at his feet.
>
> (Verse Lakshmana and Indra Kamini – 2)

Now, look at Indra Kamini as she clings to the wall in the form of a fly. How will she awaken the sleeping Lakshmana as she sits next to the restless *kindra*, the *kindra* that is the desire of Lakshmana's heart

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[25] All passages from the Gondi Ramayani have been translated by me.

[26] According to some folk variants, Lakshmana prayed to Yoganidra, the goddess of sleep, to leave him for the 12 years of exile. The 12-year-long sleep mentioned here is the only indication that these stories are set in a period after the return.

(*man mohan*), which lies forgotten while Lakshmana sleeps his 12-year-long sleep? Now, Indra Kamini flies down to rest on the sleeping Lakshmana, buzzing angrily while he snores oblivious to her presence (Prose passage from Lakshmana and Indra Kamini -2).

The tension between the buzzing in the first passage that suggests Lakshmana's complete isolation, sealed off from the sense impressions from the world outside and the *kindra's* restlessness, the buzzing that creates the impression of a swirling perimeter around Dunda Mahal, and the music swirling inside the palace when Lakshmana finally does awaken and starts to play on the *kindra*, looking for a way to escape from the sealed chamber, and Indra Kamini's angry buzzing clashing with Lakshmana's loud snores all coalesce to create complex images that are portrayed visually by Pardhan Gond artists. The contrapuntal arrangement of sounds in the narrative and the polysemic image of the buzzing bee, which suggests both Lakshmana's impregnable isolation and Indra Kamini's sexual frustration and is associated with the amorous buzz of the bee lover[27] in the Tiriya Phul story, allow the stories to be read alongside each other, to be considered as part of a transformational set.

Venkataraman Singh Shyam, an artist who is particularly sensitive to acoustic symbols of this sort, has created a set of paintings that juxtapose fragments from all three stories to create composite images of flower maidens and bird women—chimeral beings that echo the contrapuntal arrangements of acoustical images. In the story that Venkataraman Shyam told me as he showed me his Tiriya Phul series, Durbal Kanya and her sisters are Indra's *apsaras* who come down to earth to bathe on full-moon nights. They are also stars forming the constellation (*nakshastra*) called the 'Seven Sisters', taking the forms of different kinds of winged creatures as they descend—first as fairies and then as vultures (*gidd*) (see Figure 1). They then become flowers as they touch down upon the waters of Bhaan Lake (Figure 2). Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6 depict Tiriya Phul's transformation, her capture and Lakshmana's battle with the bee warriors painted by different artists. However, just as in Figure 1, where there is a conflation of the images of Durbal Kanya and Indra Kamini in her disguise as a predatory bird, so too in Figures 6 and 7 the abduction scenes from the Bijal Dai and Tiriya Phul story are combined. This is made explicit in Figure 6, where scenes from the two stories are juxtaposed—the eye in the cloud-covered sky on the upper left side, a substitute for the bees on the upper right side of the painting. Bees are supposed to be Indra's eyes in Gond mythology, as they are

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[27] The buzzing of bees is used as a metaphor for the sound of Kama's (Cupid) bow in Indian classical literature.
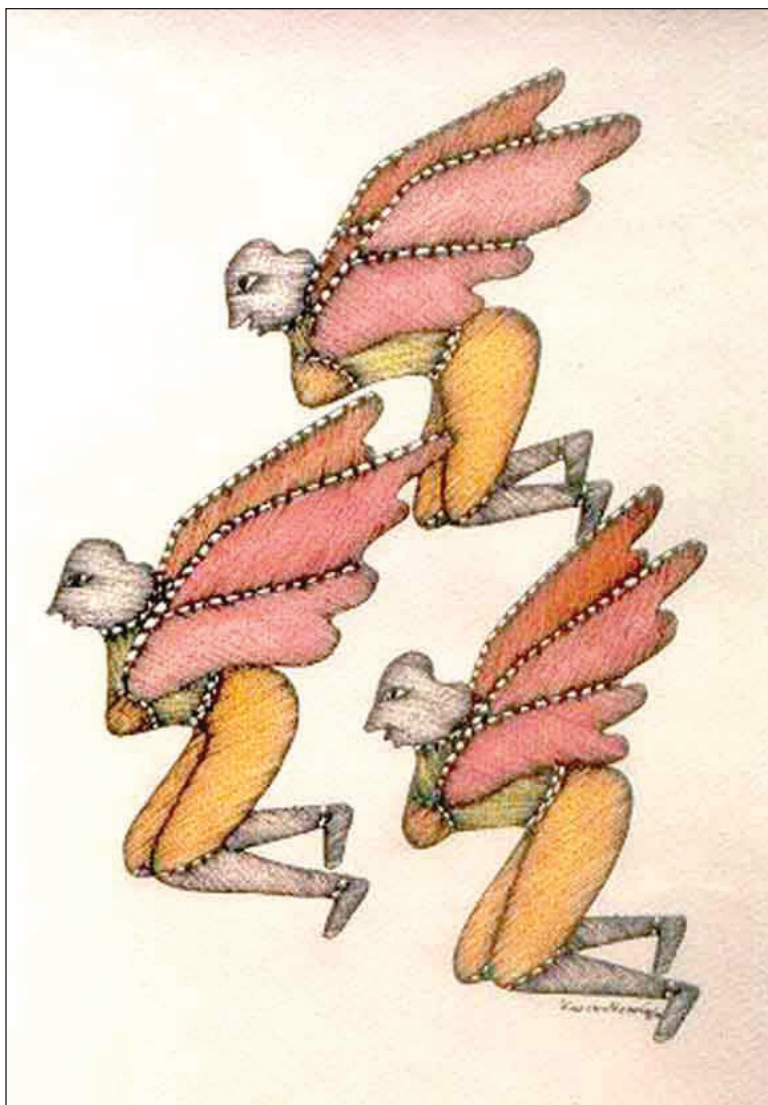
Figure 1. Durbal Kanya and Her Sisters by Venkat Shyam

Figure 2. Tiriya Phul by Venkat Shyam

Figure 3. Tiriya Phul and Bhauramal Joddha by Venkat Shyam

Figure 4. Tiriya Phul by Mangru Uikey

Figure 5. Durbal Kanya and Her Sisters by Suresh Dhurve

Figure 6. Lakshmana and Bhauramal Joddha by Venkat Shyam

the spies for the atmospheric god Varuna in the Vedas (Bhagwat 1972). Drawing connections between acoustical images from the oral narrative, events and visual images, Shyam attempts to translate relations rather than objects or events from the myths, drawing out latent similarities between characters from the different stories and creating a class of female figures that can be designated as *tiriya charitra* (duplicitous woman)—who serves as a counterpoint to Lakshmana's asceticism. This is most clearly seen in Figure 7, where, unlike in the other paintings that depict the women in disguise, she is not shown at all. Instead, a giant bow dominates the top half of the painting, with symmetrical rows of arrows flying towards the clouds—a synecdoche for Lakshmana, the bow-bearer, accompanied by his favourite doves. The clouds cover Bijal Dai, hiding her from Lakshmana and from us.

Lakshmana is the divine archer, the thunderer, whose arrows pierce the rain clouds, the musician whose heart-rending music draws the fire bird (*kurri baaj*) from heaven. In the Vedas, Agni (fire) is often depicted as the lightning bird (MacDonell 1897). But lightning is also the divinity Apam Napat, who is mentioned in the Rig Veda as being the child of the heavenly waters, who suckles the lowing cows of the clouds. The lowing of the cloud cows is the thunder that we hear during storms. It is the voice of the atmosphere, the paradigmatic form of speech that comes down to earth as rain (Dange 1996). But it is Indra whom the Rig Veda typically describes as the lord of the atmosphere and master of the thunderbolt (*vajra*). In the Bijal Dai story, thunder is the sound of Lakshmana's anger at the rain clouds for having concealed his bride, the daughter of Vasuk, the serpent king. Thunder imagery does not appear directly in the scene of Sita's abduction except in the name 'Ravana', which means the screamer, the one who causes the world to wail.[28]

In myths, abstract qualities are often presented metaphorically, which gives an 'as if' quality to the world, making it the playful creation (*lila*) of the gods. Mythic motifs are not only contained in fabulous stories but also exist as dispersed fragments, surfacing in unexpected ways in new contexts (Cantlie 2003). As Levi-Strauss (2014) says, this power of mythical thinking to escape the boundaries of myths themselves produces unconscious and uncontrollable images that disturb conventional

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[28] Shiva is supposed to have given Ravana his name after the latter tried to lift the Kailash Mountain on which the god resides. Shiva pressed the mountain down with his toe, causing Ravana to let out a scream that went on for many thousands of years. The name is also a way of distinguishing Ravana, a malevolent character, from his benign half-brother Vaishravana or Kubera, the god of wealth. 'Vaishravana' means distinct speech (Uttara Kanda 1894).

Figure 7. Lakshmana Fighting the Rain Clouds by Venkat Shyam

storylines. If we consider that the paintings of the Pardhan Gond artists are a product of this mythological way of thinking where one thought is layered on another, then it becomes easier to make sense of the motifs that appear in their paintings (Goswami 2014). Restricting ourselves to depictions of the abduction theme we have discussed, Suresh Dhurve in his interpretation of this moment shows the goddess in the form of the setting sun that signals the time of rest and sleep—a metonymic displacement from the goddess to the effects of her actions (Figure 5).

Mangru Uikey, who has chosen to portray another moment of the same scene, shows Tiriya Phul as a chimera—part-human, part-snake. A flower slowly emerges from her head, and the ripples on the lake look like serpentine coils that are writhing in the water as the honeybee drags her away while Lakshmana looks on, helpless (Figure 4). The presence of such figures in the pictorial imagination suggests a dual connection with a narrative universe that is composed of myths from all the different *adivasi* groups in the region, as well as a larger literary world. There are variants of the Tiriya Phul theme among the Baiga of Chattisgarh which frame it not as a Ramayana *gatha* but as an aetiological tale about the birth of the lotus flower (Prasad 2018).

Leonard Nathan (2007) suggests that the 'unremitting accumulation of similes' in such classical texts as the Valmiki Ramayana tends to draw the listener's attention away from 'the objects in the story to the things with which they are compared' (ibid.: 100). The density of the figuration and the use of hyperbole produce verbal images that are counter-intuitive, removed from our ordinary experience, and this is the reason that they generate a kind of affective force that allows them to persist as disconnected fragments over long stretches of time and reappear in a variety of different contexts. In Indian aesthetic theory, the term for these latent memory traces is *vasana*. It aids in the activity of interpretation and appreciation of artistic events by awakening latent impressions derived from past experience—even past lives—that stimulates *rasa,* aesthetic appreciation and emersion in a wondrous world far removed from that of everyday experience (Dange 2002; Gnoli 1985).

In our contemporary time, it is Gilles Deleuze, the philosopher, who seems to articulate this idea in his use of 'recognition' as a model of thought. Recognition involves the identification of sameness, a focalisation and 'harmonious exercise' of all the senses on an object— 'the same object may be seen, touched remembered, imagined or conceived…' (quoted from *Difference and Repetition* p. 167 in Hasty 2010, 6). The object so identified as potentially the same allows the power of recognition to work backwards, as well as forward in time, and 'to grant the object perceived as identical a givenness that temporally and logically precedes comparison' (ibid.). The identity that guarantees recognition therefore is more than that of the actual materiality of the object at any given moment of time. It is virtual, with an identity that transcends duration and has the potential to shape novel experiences. The past and future become reflexive—they are no longer conceived merely in terms of retention (of the past) or expectation (of the future). Instead, sameness—the identification of particularity through the passage of time—is also the recognition of multiplicity and variability.

In anthropology, it was Levi-Strauss who suggested that it was in the mythic fragment, arrested by the analyst in transit as it were, culled through the plurality of narrative variability, that the particularity of an idea was to be sought. It was in music that he sought the framework for his magisterial work *The Mythologies*. Like musical refrain, mythic motifs detach themselves from particular stories to travel across the narrative universe, participating in new landscapes and enriching the internal relations between narrative elements across time and media.

We began this article with a plea that we shift our focus from oral narratives as texts to be analysed to the words that occur repeatedly in the performance of the stories—not only the meanings that they carry but also their physiognomy—the shape of the sounds as they register on the ear. In Indian aesthetics, the *rasika* (taster) performs a creative act in listening to or receiving a work of art as a connoisseur. Can we think of these young Gond artists as *rasikas* who in their creative reception are the true inheritors of their traditional lore? But whose lore are we talking about here: only the lore of the Pardhan Gonds or the Ramayana lore as such—across all the performative traditions in which it is expressed? The very idea of passage that is central to an understanding of the musical refrain in Levi-Strauss is also an aspect of the mythic fragment embodied sometimes in a topical theme like abduction, as we saw, but also in poetical elements and figures of speech (see also Deleuze 2004). They traverse a space that is topological, constituted by the relations of transformation between them. It is perhaps to those who have the intuitive ability to recognise these elements and make it their own that the Ramayana truly belongs.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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