

Excerpts from
KAMBA RAMAYANA

A STUDY
V.V.S. AIYAR

With Best Compliments from:
ILAKKIA CHINTHANAI

9, Ganapathy Nagar, Madras-18

as a homage to V.V.S. AIYAR
on the occasion of his Centenary

With grateful acknowledgment to:
M/s Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay

A handwritten signature in blue ink is located in the upper right corner of the page. Below the signature, the date '9481' is written vertically in blue ink.

IN MEDIAS RES.¹

The reader will have noticed that the Ramayana follows in its natural order the life of the hero from his birth and childhood up to the close of the action which forms its theme. On the other hand the epics of Europe, as is well known, follow their prototype and example, that *Iliad*, and start the story as near the end as possible, filling in the earlier events by slight allusions as well as by episodic narrative. These epics have an undeniable advantage over the Indian *Maha Kavyas* in that their dramatic opening arrests the imagination even at the very commencement of the poem, while the Indian epics have to gather some momentum before they are able to carry with them the attention of the modern reader. But our great epic poets have proved that one may tell a story in chronological order and yet write a poem that generations will not willingly let die.

It is Aristotle that first formulated the rule that the story of the epic should not be told in chronological order. He says in the 23rd chapter of his *Poetics* as follows:

"Concerning the poetry which is narrative and imitative in metre, it is evident that it ought to have dramatic fables in the same manner as tragedy and should be conversant with one whole and perfect action which has a beginning, middle, and end* in order that, like one whole animal it may produce its appropriate pleasure, and that it may not be after the fashion of histories in which it is not necessary to treat of one action, but of one time. . . . Hence in this respect also Homer will appear to be divine when compared with other poets, because he did not attempt to sing of the whole Trojan War though it had a beginning and an end. For if he had, it would have been very large, and not sufficiently conspicuous, or if it had been of a moderate size, it would have been intricate through the variety of incidents. But now, having selected one part of the war, he has made use of many episodes such as the catalogue of ships and other such ones with which he has embellished his poem."

Horace has followed Aristotle closely, and he too has given his sanction to this canon. For after praising Homer's manner of beginning the *Odyssey* he says in his *Art of Poetry*,

"To sing of the return of Diomed, the poet does not ascend up to the death of Meleager; in singing of the Trojan War he does not begin

¹ Into the Midst of Things.

with the two eggs of Leda. On the other hand, he hastens with the reader into the very midst of the action¹ taking for granted that he is fully acquainted with the story."

The authority of these masters—to which we should add also the example of Virgil—has overshadowed all later literary criticism, and we find almost all European poets and critics make a fetish of this rule and bow down before it. Milton followed it consciously and deliberately as we see that he uses the very words of Horace in his argument to the First Book of *Paradise Lost*: 'which action passed over, the poem hastens into the midst of things' etc. Boileau writes in his *L'art Poétique* in this wise: "Away with those halting rhymers whose phlegmatic spirit would make them preserve the order didactic even in their *elan*! Poor annalists, who while singing the exploits of a hero follow the order of events! They dare not leave one incident out of sight. Apollo was never liberal with his fire to such as these!"

Dacier, Boileau's contemporary, was so much obsessed with this rule that he wrote a very elaborate commentary to the following effect on three lines of Horace:²

"Horace reveals here one of the greatest secrets of the art of poetry. A historian always follows the order of events. But the order which poets follow in the treatment of their subject is entirely different. For in the drama, as in the epic, the great masters place the opening of the scene as near to the catastrophe as possible, and take hold of the action always near the end. Their art enables them to bring back before our eyes all that had gone before. Homer, Sophocles and Euripedes have never departed from this rule, and it is an admirable one. For in postponing the catastrophe which we are awaiting every instant, and in interposing between it and us a series of probable and natural incidents, they awaken our curiosity and excite in us one after another all the passions—a thing which a methodical arrangement can never do. In order to be convinced of the truth of this, one has only to read Apollonius of Rhodes who has written a poem on the Argonauts. Longinus admits that there is not a single fault in this work; but it is mortally weary reading. One could give several reasons as to why this should be so, but the principal reason is its chronological sequence. It is methodic throughout, and that is the worst error into which an author could have fallen; for there are none more cold than those poets,

1 *In medias res, non secus ac notas, auditorem rapit.*

2 *Ordinis hoc virtus erit et venus, aut ego fallor,
Ut jam nunc dicat, jam nunc debentia dici,
Pleraque differat, et proesens in tempus omittat.*

These lines may be translated thus: 'In the matter of the order of a poem, merit and gracefulness consist, if I am not mistaken, in saying at the commencement those things that ought to be said in the beginning, and in postponing several things to the end, abstaining from treating them in the beginning of the poem.'

'Who singing of a hero the exploits grand
 Poor annalists, pursue the events' course.'

"Vida has treated at length this question of arrangement in the Second Book of his *Poetics*, where he says finely that the reader, carried by the art of the poet to the very end of an action, and filled with a vain hope, commences the reading of the poem with the greatest alacrity believing that he is very near the conclusion of the story, just as a man who sees his port imagines that he is about to enter into it; but he is much farther from it than he imagines—he is fated to retrace his course and fly over many a sea. He then adds that a wise poet will never begin, to take an example, the Trojan War at the judgment of Paris and place every incident in its natural order as if he were writing annals or a journal and not a poem."

We have quoted these extracts at some length purposely as we want the reader to realise how deep and widespread is this superstition in the West with regard to the order of narrative in the graver poems. But, as we have said before, our epic poets have shown that the rule in question is not as absolute as western critics seem to imagine. For our poets have followed the chronological order in their great poems, and yet have succeeded in producing epics that are as fresh today as when they first issued from their lips. Valmiki sang our first national epic. He has called it variously as *the Life of Rama*, *the Destruction of Ravana* or *the Grand Story of Sita*, and in fact the whole life story of Rama and Sita up to the overthrow of Ravana is described in its natural order in the epic proper. And yet the interest of the story never flags for a moment in the whole course of the poem which is very nearly three times as long as Homer's *Iliad*; on the contrary the interest grows steadily until the very end is reached. The same will be found to be the case with the *Mahabharata* if we remove the didactic portions like the *Shanti* and the *Amushashana Parvas*, which seem to have been added by our sires to the main story in order to give it an encyclopædic character. Our own poet Kamban has not departed from the chronological order in the treatment of his poem, and yet the whole story in his hands rises into a crescendo of interest from the commencement till the very close of the action.

As a matter of fact, it is not the 'hastening into the midst of things', or 'the taking hold of the action near the end' that has given Homer the first place among the poets of the west¹. But rather it is his superb knowledge of the human heart with all its joys and sorrows, and his love of Nature in all her aspects, joined

¹ It is out of our province to discuss here the unitarian authorship or otherwise of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. The question is far from being settled as yet. But we may take it that there was a poet in Asia Minor who called himself Homer and who

to a rich imagination and a noble earnestness of purpose, all guided by the indefinable but supreme quality of poetic tact that knows how to make all the parts adhere together into a single organic whole—it is these we say, that have made him the greatest of western poets and the *Iliad* the greatest of western epics. The liquid flow of his story and his majestic style are but the natural results of these grand qualities. But not satisfied with giving Homer the first place among the poets of the West, or even, if they pleased, to satisfy their chauvinistic pride, the first place among the poets of the World, European critics have made him into a sort of tyrant of the Republic of Letters, raising every single trait and trick of his grand poems into an immutable law which every other poet disobeys at the cost of his reputation.

The rule in question, however, is so artificial that none can give any substantial reason as to why it should be so. We have seen above how Vida supported it. But we wonder if any reader has ever deluded himself on reading the opening lines of the *Æneid* that *Æneas* was at the end of his labours and was going immediately to plant the seed of the Roman Empire on Italian soil.¹ Nor do we believe that the opening lines of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* create the delusion that the end of the narrative is not far off. Such a delusion might conceivably be induced in the minds of scholars who are deciphering an unknown poem in a forgotten language; but how can we suppose that the reader of any well-known epic will believe that his business as reader and the poet's business as narrator is going to end at the very threshold of the poem? Great poets are able, of course, by their supreme art to throw us off our guard at the critical moments of the story and make us hope and almost expect that a great misfortune that threatens the hero may pass over, and may not materialise. But the delusion that Vida and Dacier require to support the *dicta* of Aristotle and Horace is something entirely different, and we do not believe that any reader of the great western epics has ever experienced such a feeling.

The real advantage of opening the story near the end of the catastrophe consists in this that the interest of the reader is captured at once at the very commencement of the poem. But this method has a compensating disadvantage in that the poet is obliged to cry

had a great deal to do with the Homeric poems. We shall in this study merely accept the tradition, and always speak of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as the works of Homer. There is the same difficulty with regard to the authorship of the original Samskrit *Ramayana*. Here also we shall only accept the tradition and generally speak of it as the production of Valmiki and Valmiki alone.

¹ The reader will have noticed how this view conflicts with that of Horace when he says, '*in medias res, non secus ac notas, auditorem rapit*'—the poet hastens the reader into the very midst of the action, taking for granted that he is fully acquainted with the story.

halt to the action before he has proceeded very far, and to narrate the earlier portions of the story which are bound to be much less interesting than the main action. Even the greatest poets have to beat time with flat verses till they judge that the epic has drawn itself out to a length sufficient to allow the taking up of the main thread of the story. On the other hand, the chronological order followed by eastern poets, if it makes the beginning of the poem plain and unadorned, has this great advantage that the interest of the story gathers force in an ever progressive degree to the very end of the poem.

Thus Kamban's *Ramayana* is divided into six books. The First Book describes the birth and education of Rama and his marriage with Sita on whose beauty and spotless chastity turns the catastrophe of the epic. In this book we have many episodes, most of which may well have been suppressed. In the Second Book, we have the plot of Manthara and Kaikeyi to thwart Rama's coronation, and as a consequence to bring about Rama's exile to the forests. The Third Book, which is called the *Jungle Book*, brings Ravana upon the scene, who carries away Sita from Rama's cottage home in the forest. This forms the seed of the action proper of the poem. The Fourth Book is episodic in appearance, but in reality it introduces to us the Vanara hosts who are to play such a large part in the war. The character of Vali is superbly drawn, and we are made to feel that we can never have enough of this hero's majestic words. The next book, distinguished as the Book of Beauty gives us the sublime picture of Sita standing firm in her chastity in the midst of temptations and threats. This increases tenfold our moral indignation against Ravana and prepares us for the war in the last book which is called the Book of Battles, and in which is described with great power the fall of Ravana's generals and finally of Ravana himself.

It will be seen from the above that Kamban is able to make the story rise steadily in interest from beginning to end. Compare this with *Paradise Lost*, written by one of the greatest poets of any age or country but who felt himself bound by the example of the *Iliad* and the rule of Aristotle which we have quoted above. In this poem the four books from the fifth to the eighth deal with the war of the angels in heaven and the creation of the world and man; while the eleventh book and the greater part of the twelfth deal with the vision of the future shown by Archangel Michael to Adam. But these books, though they are beautiful in themselves, and are artfully soldered on to what goes before and after, still create the impression that the action is interrupted merely for the

sake of the episodes.¹ If even Milton has found it a difficult matter to make his episodes organic and integral parts of his epic, it is no wonder that lesser poets who have submitted themselves to this canon of Aristotle have been unable to keep their episodes from bulging out of the general *cadre* of their story.

Thus we see that the rule of opening the epic *in medias res* has at least as much disadvantage as it has advantage, while the chronological method, if it does not ensure an arresting beginning to the poem, has at least the advantage of keeping it from turning sloppy in the middle.

From treating the story chronologically flows another result, namely that the poet is able to make the main story occupy a longer period of time than if he followed Aristotle's rule. This may not be considered an advantage by western critics. But there seems to be a greater fullness of life and greater stateliness in an epic which deals poetically and with art with the birth and youth and manhood of his hero and his achievements.

But after all these are secondary matters. If we prefer the chronological treatment of the oriental epics for their steadily increasing interest and for their greater stateliness, we are not blind to the grand poetical qualities of the epics as understood by Homer and Milton. We can appreciate the art that takes up the action near the catastrophe and is able to weave into the story the details that give it greater volume and fullness. We claim only that the *in medias res* theory should not be raised into an absolute rule, disobedience to which *ipso facto* throws the epic into the second rank.

I think we may conveniently consider here the length of our epic. Kamban's *Ramayana* contains 10,569 stanzas of four lines each. Being about thrice the length of the *Iliad*, it may be thought to be over-long for an epic. But Valmiki's *Ramayana* in the southern recension, contains 21,018 *shlokas*, the vast majority of which consist of two lines each.² The *Mahabharata* goes up to 100,000 *shlokas*. And Chand Bhat's *Prithivi Raj Rasa* is said to be at least as long as the *Mahabharata*.

There is of course no fixed rule as to how long an epic should be. Dandi, a Samskrit critic, only says that it should be *asamkshipta*, that is, not short. It is of course allowed by western as well as eastern critics to be so long as to be incapable of being read

¹ It is indeed a question if the tendency on the part of later poets to introduce the earlier portions of the story episodically as if narrated by one character to another, is not due to Aristotle's dictum, based on the example of Homer, that the author of an epic should seldom speak himself, but should throw as much of this work as he can into the mouths of those who are his principal actors.

² We exclude from the calculation the Seventh Book which is of the nature of the cyclic poems of Greece.

through at a single sitting. And if it cannot be finished at one sitting it does not matter how long it is, provided that it is *rasa-bhava-nirantara* i.e. satisfies our sense of the grand and the beautiful by appealing to the higher emotions in an artistic manner.

We have heard of a Japanese novel, of which even the 200th volume or so which has been recently¹ published has not brought the end of the story in view. This story makes, we need not say, an extreme demand upon the patience of the reader, but even here we do not know if the book finds any detractors in Japan on account of its length. However, while we are not prepared to go as far as the author of our Japanese novel, we can allow the epic poet to choose for himself how long he will make his poem. If popularity with the mass of the people, as well as with the learned, is a test of the justness of a poet's choice as to length, we find that Indian epics, long as they are, have been listened to from beginning to end without flagging enthusiasm as they are read and explained by Pandits during evenings continuously for many months at a stretch. And as Kamban's *Ramayana* holds the reader's interest sustained up to the very end, we cannot condemn it as excessively long, but on the contrary we should be thankful to the poet for providing us with such abundance of rich and delicate food for our imagination and our spirit.

1 About 1920.

THE ARCHITECTONICS

The build and the structure of the *Ramayana* of Kamban are superb. The poem satisfies the soul with its *ampleur*, the proportion of its parts, and the art with which the parts are combined into an organic whole. It is true that the story follows the order of events chronologically. But there are a hundred ways in which a story can be narrated even in the chronological order, and it is in the choice that the poet makes from among these that we see whether he is the supreme artist or an ordinary writer. And Kamban has shown his genius for the architectonics of poetry both where he follows Valmiki as well as where he departs from his order.

The question of the build of the epic is not treated in detail in any of the treatises of rhetoric in Samskrit that have come to light up to now. There must have existed books which examined this question deeply, for we cannot imagine that a people who have laid down elaborate rules for the construction of the drama could have neglected such an obvious subject of critical study as the detailed anatomy of the epic poem. These are either lost to us or are waiting to be discovered in the *Bhandaras*¹ of our temples and of our States. The rhetorical works that have been printed up to now discuss generally only questions of style, figures of speech, and the emotions as subjects of poetical treatment. *The Mahakavya Lakshanas*, so called, are not much more than lists of what subjects should be necessarily treated or described in an epic.

In the *Kavyadarsha*, however, Dandin, after describing ten figures of speech finishes with three *shlokas* on what he calls *Bhavika*. He says,

"*Bhavika* is said to be the essential quality of the *Prabandha* or poem; for *bhava* is the idea of the poet as to how he should arrange the poem and set forth its parts. The mutual harmony of the parts both in the subject matter as well as in the canto divisions; the leaving out of useless incidents and the placing of everything in its proper place; the individuality and character in the treatment even of the sublime which comes of a vigorous diction and well-ordered words—all this is the result of *bhava*, i.e., the inner poetical sense. And the right employment of the *bhava* gives rise to the quality called *Bhavika*."

1 archives.

THE ARCHITECTONICS

In the above lines is contained, though in mere skeleton, the whole theory as to how the epic, as any other kind of long poem, should be constructed. It is interesting to compare these lines with the words of Aristotle in reference to the same matter, that the epic should be a unity like one whole animal. The animal has different organs, no doubt, but all its organs adhere together perfectly to make up that one animal. The author of the *Mahabharata* too, we may note in passing, compares his work to a majestic tree with branches and stem, and fruits and flowers, but which in its entirety is a single whole. The epic, therefore, should be a unity, with parts of course, but parts which go to make up and show off that unity.

Now the one action of the *Ramayana*, as Valmiki proposes in the beginning of the poem, is the destruction of Ravana, and every incident of the story contributes to this end. This idea is never absent from the mind of Kamban. When Tadaka, who comes to spoil the sacrifice of Vishvamitra, falls by the arrow of Rama, she looks, according to him, 'like Ravana's standard of victory felled down to the ground as a foreboding of his future fate'. When Kaikeyi yields to the evil advice of Manthara, it is

Because the promise must be fulfilled now
That Vishnu to the gods had made, because
The gods did work their *maya*, and the saints
Had earned the fruit of virtuous deeds, and cup
Of Rakshas sins was full,—her heart was hardened.
For if the world to-day the ambrosial strains
Of Rama's praise doth drink, doth not it owe
The joy to Kaikeyi's cruelty?¹

And when Ravana lies dead on the field, Mandodari lamenting his death says, among other things,

The fairy charms of Sita, her chastity
Divine, the passion of my Ravana,
Shurpanakha's disgrace, and banishment
Of Rama by command of the King of kings,
All these and more, what are they but the fruit
Of Indra's great austerities?²

Here we see the poet referring all these different incidents as leading but to one only end, namely, the destruction of Ravana, for it is only after Ravana was destroyed that Indra could get back his heavenly kingdom.

Let us now examine the plot of the *Ramayana* in some detail.

In the beginning of the First Book, the destruction of Ravana is proposed, and Vishnu Himself promises to come into the world as the son of Dasharatha and destroy the Rakshasa. The interest of the reader is from that moment fixed upon Rama, the *avatar* of the Supreme God, and all his doings. The First Book is taken up with the exploits of Rama's youth and his marriage with Sita who is the incarnation of Lakshmi. The killing of Tadaka, the episode of Ahalya, the love of Rama for Sita and of Sita for Rama, Rama's bending and breaking of the mighty bow of Shiva, Parashu Rama's pride and its punishment, all these form a number of varied incidents interesting in themselves and at the same time calculated to make the reader expect high things of Rama. The march of this book is rather slow owing to the various episodes that are cast in the form of stories told by Vishvamitra to Rama and by Shatananda to Janaka. The journey of Dasharatha to Mithila which Valmiki describes in but one or two *shlokas* is elaborately described by Kamban in four *Patalas*¹ which take up about 300 stanzas. This is a great deal too much. But these *patalas* occur in the First Book before the epic has gathered its proper momentum. Moreover, many of the stanzas in these cantos are of great idyllic beauty.

In the Second Book, Rama's character is magnificently developed in his attitude towards Kaikeyi, Kausalya, and Lakshmana. The story too marches rapidly. The conversations between the several persons here are pitched in a high key, and the nerves of the reader become highly strung even at the thousandth reading. Between every one of these meetings, the pitch is lowered a little for the reader to take breath before he is confronted with the next scene of high-strung emotion. The art with which the climax is prepared in the meeting with Sita can never be sufficiently admired. The struggle of Dasharatha between his love of Rama and love of Truth, his anger against Kaikeyi, his despair at the charioteer's return without Rama, the whole contrast between Rama's expected coronation and his banishment, Bharata's renunciation, Guha's attachment to Rama, his suspicion of and indignation against Bharata and his subsequent recognition of his sublime nature, the rivalry in the heroism of renunciation between Bharata and Rama—all these make the Second Book a superb piece of work.

In the Third Book, the first thirteen years of Rama's life in the forests are passed over very rapidly though not without the poet reminding us of the purpose of Rama's *avatar*. In the fourteenth year, Shurpanakha's passion for Rama unchains the series of incidents that end with the death of Ravana. The fight in which

¹ Chapters.

Rama annihilates the fourteen thousand Rakshasas who come to avenge Shurpanakha gives us a foretaste of the magnificent battle-pieces with which Kamban fills his Book of Battles. Ravana's passion for Sita is described in a very extravagant way. Our idea of probability requires that Ravana should have seen Sita at least once before his soul could be fired with a desire to possess her at whatever cost. Tulsi Das has felt this and so he introduces Ravana as one of the suitors to her hand at the *Swayamvara* at her father's court. The extravagance of Kamban's description of Ravana's passion however, faulty as it is, has a meaning, for only such a passion can explain Ravana's persistence in keeping her in spite of the worst defeats and disasters. Rama's going after the golden deer and Sita's fatal obstinacy in sending Lakshmana after Rama are narrated with great skill. Ravana now meets Sita alone in the cottage. The poet expends all his art in the colloquy between the disguised Ravana and Sita, and the bursting of the false form and the revealing of Ravana in his true shape are made to take place exactly at the right moment. The battle of the Vulture-King provides a heroic and touching episode to this book and Ravana carries off Sita without further hindrance. Kamban shows his sense of the fit in not describing at this stage, as Valmiki does, another interview between Sita and Ravana, in Lanka. It is only in the next book that he describes the first meeting of Sita and Ravana after her captivity, and he merely suggests their previous interviews by one sentence put in the mouth of Ravana:

'The days are passing one by one away,
And this is all the kindness thou hast shown
To me!¹

Lakshmana's adventure with Ajomukhi is but a repetition of Rama's with Shurpanakha and is therefore superfluous, but Kamban employs it to reveal to us the deep love that Rama has towards Lakshmana. Kabandha closes, as Viradha began, the adventures of Rama and Lakshmana with the Rakshasas in the Forest Book. These three incidents have the same kind of fairy-tale ring about them as the adventures of Ulysses with the Cyclops and Circe have in the *Odyssey*.

The Fourth Book introduces to us new characters in the Vanaras of Kishkindha. The poet exhibits to us the intensity of Rama's desire to avenge his wrongs when he makes him determine the death of Vali the moment he hears from Hanuman that Vali had deprived Sugriva of his wife. The single combat of Vali and

Sugriva, Vali's fall, his reproaches against Rama and final acceptance of the justice of his punishment, all these form one of the finest episodes in the poem. The Fourth Book ends with the sending of the Vanara host in all directions in search of Sita.

In the Fifth Book Hanuman, the favourite servant of Rama, discovers Sita. Ravana's interview with Sita, Sita's despair, Hanuman's delivery of Rama's message, his desire to leave a mark in Lanka worthy of his might, his subsequent capture, his release, his setting of Lanka on fire, and his return to Rama crowd this book with a multitude of shifting scenes each flowing from its predecessor as a natural and inevitable consequence.

The *Yuddha Kanda* or the Book of Battles is at least as long as the *Iliad*. The scene opens in Lanka charred by the conflagration started by Hanuman. The Council of the Rakshasas is less interesting than the debate in the Second Book of *Paradise Lost*, but the episode of Hiranya is magnificent. Vibhishana recites to Ravana the story of the great Asura who was destroyed for his pride, and advises Ravana to avoid a similar fate by sending Sita back to Rama. Ravana, of course, refuses to listen to this advice and war begins. Every battle is a masterpiece, and there is hardly a repetition in the descriptions of such a multitude of battles. The reader will see in subsequent pages that the battle-pieces of Kamban cannot at all suffer by a comparison with Homer's best battles. But battles are not all the contents of the *Yuddha Kanda*. In this book scenes of the deepest pathos alternate with scenes of grand-souled heroism; despair and hope, and hope and despair weave their light and shade about the heroes and heroines, the terrible and the sublime play about us in all their grandeur. The story gathers fresh force and animation at every step till the death of Ravana. The poet, however, does not stop here but desires to enhance the glory of Sita and bring out into greater prominence the virtue of Bharata. And so, we have the ordeal of Sita which raises our feelings to a pitch which almost bursts our hearts. Bharata's sensitive heart is next presented to us in his sublime determination to expiate his imagined share in his mother's sin by falling into a fire that he has kindled. And the poem ends sweetly with the coronation of Rama and the happy announcement that all the worlds were contented and in peace.

Now the plot in almost all its details is Valmiki's. But if Kamban takes the situations from Valmiki, he has treated them absolutely in his own way. In the manner of developing the situations, in the gradation by which the climax of each situation is brought about, in the *justesse* which knows how to bring out all its capabilities out of each situation, we feel the touch of the master-

artist. In the manner also in which the incidents have been joined together to form the whole, no ordinary skill has been displayed. Every limb of Kamban's story is of course familiar to the student of Valmiki. But on going through the whole poem of Kamban, one is constrained to exclaim, 'here is a building which is built on the same plan no doubt, and with the same materials, but which possesses a striking individuality of its own'.¹

¹ Further remarks on Kamban's skill in the Architectonics of poetry will be found in the succeeding chapters where the characters are examined and studied in greater detail. See especially chapter XI where the episode of Vali is examined closely with special reference to *Architectonics*.

THE SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS

Every epic has got a supernatural element in it which interlaces itself with the human element in the story, and the action of both these elements in themselves as well as in their interaction form together the warp and the woof of the whole story. Thus we have in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the *Æneid*, Zeus and Juno, Minerva and Mars, Neptune and Apollo who interfere directly or indirectly with the actions of the several human heroes, Æolus who could unlock the winds and lash the sea into a tempest; and similar beings endowed with more than human power and strength, and with ability to move from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven with ease. In *Paradise Lost* Milton introduces Satan and Beelzebub, Raphæl and Abdiel, the Messiah and even God Himself as the chief actors in the story along with Adam and Eve. In his *Les Martyrs* Chateaubriand brings into play Satan and other fallen angels, the Spirit of Jealousy, the Spirit of Vengeance, the good angels and God as some of the protagonists of his story. In a similar manner, all other epic poets have in some way or other made use of the supernatural element in order to give more than ordinary importance to the action which they celebrate in their epics. The taking in of the aid of the supernatural in Epic Poetry has become such a universal habit that even Pope thought his *Rape of the Lock* not dignified enough without the play of this machinery, and so he introduced in his revised edition elves and fairies which certainly add to the interest of the original poem.

In our *Ramayana* also, the supernatural element plays a very important part in the action of the story. But it is, as is natural, of a character different to that of the western epics. It is always difficult to adjust the focus of one's mental vision to the conditions of a world different from that to which it has been previously adjusted; and it is this difficulty that is to a large extent responsible for most of the criticism that those whose taste is formed on a study of the western epics alone are used to make against eastern epics. We should draw the attention of such critics to the words of Mr. Mark Pattison which he uses in connection with *Paradise Lost*, but which are capable of being applied with equal truth to all epic poetry and even broadly speaking to every fine art. He says,

"The world of the *Paradise Lost* is an ideal, conventional world,

THE SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS

quite as much as the world of the *Arabian Nights* or the world of chivalrous romance or that of the pastoral novel. Not only dramatic but all poetry is founded upon illusion. We must, though it be for the moment, suppose it true. We must be transported out of the actual world into that world in which the given sense is laid. It is chiefly the business of the poet to effect this transportation, but the reader (or hearer) must aid. If the reader's imagination is not active enough to assist the poet, he must at least not resist him. When we are once inside the poet's heaven, our critical faculty may justly require that what takes place there is quite consistent with itself, with the laws of the fantastic world. But we may not begin by objecting that it is impossible that such a world should exist. If in any age the power of imagination is enfeebled, the reader becomes more unable to make the effort and he ceases to co-operate with the poet. Much of the criticism of the *Paradise Lost* which we meet with resolves itself to the conditions that the poet demands, a determination to insist that his heaven peopled with deities, dominations, principalities and powers shall have the same material laws which govern our planetary system. It is not, as we often hear it said, that the critical faculty is unduly developed in the nineteenth century. It is that the imaginative faculty fails us; and when that is the case, criticism is powerless—it has no fundamental assumption upon which its judgments can proceed."

A sympathetic understanding of the nature and conditions of the conventional world postulated by the poet is therefore indispensable to the critic if his criticism should be rational and fruitful. Such an understanding is equally necessary for the simple lover of poetry who desires only æsthetic enjoyment. So, we propose in this chapter to give an account, necessarily brief, of the nature of the supernatural beings that take part in the story and of the miraculous machines of destruction used by them as well as by the human heroes in their battles.

There are mainly two classes of beings which partake of the character of the supernatural in the *Ramayana*. They are the Rakshasas and the Vanaras. We shall take the Rakshasas first. They are beings of enormous power and size, and should be, strictly speaking, labelled as preternatural beings. Ravana has ten heads. Trishiras has three heads. Some other Rakshasas and Rakshasis have heads of horses, wolves, jackals, lions, etc. By performing great and severe *tapas* (austerities) these Rakshasas have acquired enormous physical strength and many magical powers. They can bend the bow with such force that their arrows can break to pieces the rocks hurled against them by their enemies. They can assume whatever shape they please at their will. They can fly through the air with or without aerial chariots. They hold other worlds than this terrestrial world in subjection under themselves. They can create automatons looking like human beings or Rakshasas.

In short they possess all the powers and qualities that are attributed to the gods in the Greek mythology. As a class, the Rakshasas hate virtue and doers of virtue and love a life of vice and luxury. Destruction and humiliation of men and gods are their chief delight.

Besides the ordinary powers and strength of the Rakshasas, Ravana possesses some very extraordinary powers. He is able to lift with his hands the great Mount Kailas with Shiva Himself enthroned upon it. He fights and conquers the *Ashta-dik-gajas*—the eight immense mammoths—elephants which are supposed to bear aloft the universe from its eight sides and corners. The God of Death and Varuna¹ have to acknowledge defeat at his hands. The Sun and the Moon, and Fire and Wind obey his every wish. The very seasons obey him, and come and go at the slightest expression of his will. In short his austerities have earned for him from Shiva and the other gods power and strength only short of omnipotence.

Gods as such do not take an active part in the story. They have been conquered by their enemies, the Rakshasas. Their world, the *Svarga*, is in the hands of Ravana. Their wives and daughters are working as maids to the Rakshasa 'women' in Lanka. They themselves are doing menial service to their Rakshasa masters. Their king Indra is a wanderer away from his kingdom and throne. Even the Supreme Three² have been defeated by Ravana and live under a self-denying ordinance, resolving not to interfere with his doings till the strength of his austerities has begun to wane.

But at the command of Vishnu—one of the Supreme Three—who is the one designed in this age to destroy the evil and unrighteous Rakshasas and Asuras, the gods are born as *Vanaras* or giant monkeys on earth. But while they are born on earth, they keep also their own divine bodies in *Svarga*, or wherever they are for the moment. The Vanaras are therefore spoken of both as the sons of the respective gods as well as their incarnations. The Vanaras, at least their leaders, have the same preternatural strength and courage as the Rakshasas. They can also assume at will whatever shape they please. They can leap over immense distances of space. Hanuman, the greatest of the Vanaras, can fly across the sea from the mainland to Lanka and fly back. Again he flies to the hill of drugs situated far north of the Himalayas and returns with the hill in his hand in the course of a single night. He can grow as high as the heavens and pervade the world with his body. Angada and Sugriva are almost equal to him in strength but do not possess his pervasive power. The strength of the Vanaras is such that they can tear trees and

1 Rain-God.

2 Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

THE SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS

rocks by the roots and hurl them against their foes. The reader will not be far wrong if he imagines the Vanaras as possessing almost all the strength and powers of the gods of the Greek epics. Only, unlike the latter, they compose the entire army of one of the combatants in the war.

Garuda and Sampati and Jatayus must be classed separately among the supernatural and preternatural beings of the *Ramayana*. Garuda is the great golden eagle, the *Vahan* or carrier of Vishnu. He is the enemy of all serpents and he appears on the battle-field to free Lakshmana and the Vanaras from the serpent noose of Indrajit. At his mere approach all the serpents of the noose either die or slink away. Jatayus and Sampati are vultures—the sons of Aruna, the charioteer of the Sun, and they are the Icarus and Dædalus of Indian story. They had tried to fly up to the very Sun and had fallen down scorched by his fierce rays. Jatayus, the younger, was protected from being burnt by Sampati who shaded him from the sun and had his own wings burned off. At the period of our story, Sampati lives on the Mahendra hill at the southernmost point of the mainland, till the choral repetition of Rama's name makes his wings miraculously to grow. Jatayus is the friend of Dasharatha and so Rama has a tender filial affection for the noble Vulture-King. Jatayus, as the reader will remember, attempts to prevent Ravana from carrying off Sita, but after a terrible struggle falls mortally wounded by Ravana.

These are about all the preternatural beings that take part in the action of the epic. Although Rama and his brothers are divine incarnations, Kamban, like Valmiki, treats their actions as those of mere human heroes, only endowed with some extraordinary powers. For instance, Kamban does not gift Rama with the pervasive power or enormous size and strength of Hanuman, though everywhere he reminds us that he is the Supreme One who is immanent in everything and who transcends even the Three Persons of the Trinity. In fact, Rama and his brothers are human in their actions and their physical condition, though they are divine in their ultimate nature.

But if Rama and Lakshmana are merely men in their actions, they possess the power to command the gods to do their bidding even as Ravana and the Rakshasa leaders have. We speak of their power to convert their arrows by means of *mantras* or spells into weapons possessing the power of *Agni* and *Vayu*,¹ Shiva and Vishnu and Brahma, and other deities. Arrows thus impregnated by spells are called *Astras*. It is these *astras* that deserve to be called machinery, a term which western critics are used to apply to the

¹ Fire and Wind.

supernatural beings etc., that influence the action in the *Iliad* and other epics.

The *astra* should be imagined by the reader to be an arrow which the spell, pronounced by the bowman at the time of aiming it, converts into a weapon possessing preternatural power, generally the power of a god. Thus the *Agneya-astra* must be supposed to be an arrow which the spell of the archer impregnates with the *Shakti* or force of *Agni*, the God of Fire. Such an arrow must be imagined to fly against the enemy carrying living fire in its bosom and burning down everything before it. Similarly the *Varuna-astra* would be the weapon possessing the force of *Varuna*, the God of the Ocean, and hence would be aimed against the *Agneya-astra* whose fire it would extinguish. The *Maheshvara-astra* would be an arrow filled with the force of God *Shiva* or *Maheshvara*, the *Narayana-astra* would be an arrow filled with the force of God *Narayana* or *Vishnu*, and the *Brahmastra* would be a dart filled with the force of *Brahma*, and so on. The *Naga-pasha* or the serpent-nose must be imagined to be an arrow or a succession of arrows which the appropriate spells convert into deadly serpents which bind themselves round the bodies of the enemies and strangle them. Kamban speaks also of the *Maya-astra* which creates any illusion that the sender pleases before the eyes of the opponent. In rare cases, incantations are supposed to be pronounced upon other weapons than arrows, and then these weapons,—sometimes even a blade of grass serves as a weapon to the expert in the science of *astras*—become the appropriate *astras*.

The reader will observe that when an *astra* is aimed against an archer, his obvious defence according to this convention would be to send against it an *astra* of superior power which would conquer or neutralise it. Thus arrows would wrestle against arrows in mid-air, each armed with the force given to it by the respective archers.

Out of all these *astras*, the *Brahmastra* is supposed to be the most powerful, though in one or two places Kamban speaks of the *Narayana-astra* and *Maheshvara-astra* as equally or even more powerful weapons. These *astras* are to be supposed to rush through the air with fatal force, giving birth, both on their way as well as when they strike the enemy, to innumerable destructive machines and even beings such as cobras, demons, etc. The torpedoes and shrapnels, and flame-throwers and poison-gas shells and similar destructive weapons so abundantly used in the late war are the analogues of the *astras* of the *Ramayana*. And who knows if the first ideas of some of the terrific weapons of modern times were not put into the heads of their European inventors by the description of the several *astras* mentioned in the *Ramayana*!

THE SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS

Rama and Lakshmana on the one side and the great leaders of the Rakshasas on the other are described by the poet as great experts in the science of *astras*. Rama's arrows have another peculiarity in that they come back to his quiver after doing the destruction for which they were sent.

Although the gods do not take part in the action of the story except through the *astras*, they make their appearance sometimes in their own persons in the course of the action. Thus, when Bharata persists in inviting Rama to come back to Ayodhya, the Devas who are standing around unseen by the assembled people pronounce a command, which is heard as a disembodied voice, that he should himself go back and rule the kingdom for fourteen years. Again Rama and Lakshmana see Indra approach Shrabhanga in order to offer him residence in his own heaven. Matali, the charioteer of Indra, is ordered by the gods to drive Rama in the heavenly *vimana* or air chariot of Indra during the final battle with Ravana. And finally the gods and the deceased Dasharatha come down on earth at the time when Sita falls into the fire and advise Rama to take her back to himself.

We believe we have now placed before the reader all that is necessary for a proper understanding of the conventional world in which the action of the *Ramayana* unfolds itself. Now we shall take up the study of the more important characters of our story and see how Kamban treats them in his epic.