

Decoding the Impact of the *Srirama Panchali* on Baranagar Temples Facades: The Driving Force behind Terracotta Artisans' Narrativization of Ramayana Events

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Abstract

Valmiki Ramayana is one of the most popular, universally read, and widely circulated literary works. The poets of different languages in India ornamented Valmiki's Sanskrit Ramayana with the vibrancy of their own indigenous languages and cultures. A significant number of such versions trace their roots to Bengal. The epic was first translated into the Bengali language by the great poet Krittibas Ojha. Its influences and popularity have been such as to justify it being called the Bible of the people of Bengal. Its intense undiminished popularity among the populace has also left an indelible impression on the artisans of Bengal and their creations in different eras. The study primarily aims to investigate the *Ramayana* narratives that have been found on the facades of the temples of Baranagar in Murshidabad, West Bengal, India. The intention is to trace the impact of Krittibas's *Srirama Panchali* on the portrayals of the Ramayana episodes. The formal method of Art History has been employed to provide an in-depth description of the formal elements that have been incorporated by the artisans. Besides, a detailed critical inspection of the concerned portrayals has been complemented with literary references to get a lucid understanding of the intended issues.

Keywords: Valmiki's Ramayana, Krittibas's *Srirama Panchali*, narrative art, terracotta temple's facade, Baranagar, Murshidabad

Introduction

Ramayana is the unique creation of the sage Valmiki in the Sanskrit language (5th century B.C to 1st century B.C) (Ghosh, 2017). It is one of the most popular, universally read, and widely circulated literary works. It is a story whose awareness is palpable in every household of the country. It strikes a chord with the intelligentsia as well as the illiterate. The professionals, as well as the householders, relate the examples of the epic with their day-to-day happenings (Verma, 2015). The epic churns in the readers the deeply moving emotions of joy, love, sorrow, sacrifice, and languishment, which are closely associated with the life of human beings. This rich repository of Indian cultural heritage remains a source of unceasing inspiration for many later writers to compose Sanskrit dramas and poetry. Besides intensely inspiring the literary thoughts of India, the epic has been equally influencing the artistic creations since eons (Pollock, 1993; Ghosh, 2006;

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Bawa, 2018, & Ghosh, 2017). During the Gupta period, *Ramayana* became a focus of cultural production and dissemination, be it in the literary, oral, or sculptural traditions. It became a popular vehicle of conveying ideas and emotions in literary traditions, inspiring many later writers to compose Sanskrit dramas and poetry, and visuals (Bawa, 2018). Given its timelessness and popularity, its undiminished influence could be noted in the diverse kinds of art forms in India, which include manuscript paintings, miniature paintings, sculptures, modern paintings, songs, films, television serials, and so on (Ghosh, 2017).

The poets of different languages in India ornamented Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramayana* in their language and culture. Though the origin of those compositions was no doubt Sanskrit the poets incorporated in the compositions their own culture and language (Chattopadhyay, 2017). A substantial number of such versions could also be found in Bengal and their impact seems to be more salient than that of Valmiki's creation among the populace and has found a permanent place in Bengali homes (Ghosh, 1948, & Sen, 1940). The epic was first translated into the vernacular by *mahakabi* (the great poet) Krittibas Ojha (1381-1461). His creation *Srirama Panchali* (a form of narrative folk songs) and popularly known as *Krittibasi Ramayana* was completed towards the end of the fifteenth century (Banerji, 2004; O'Malley, 1917; Sen, 1940, & Ghosh, 1948). The poet contemporized his work to suit the sensibilities of his generation. This great literary work in the Bengali language was the foundation on which Bengali literature is built (Dutt, 1877, & Mitra, 1908). Following Krittibas, Bengali versions of the *Ramayana* under different titles also came up, such as *Sri Rama Panchali* by the 18th-century poet Ramananda Jyoti, *Buddhabharata* by Ramananda Ghosh and *Advuta Ramayana*, the joint venture of Jagat Rama Rai and Ramprasad. Moreover, different episodes of the epic were isolated to create separate poetical works. Of these, *Lakshmana Shakti Shela* (Lakshmana and his weapons) by Shivaratna, *Sitar Banabas* (exile of Sita) by Utsabananda, *Tarakavadh* (Killing of Taraka) by an unknown writer, *Padmalochana Badh* (Killing of Padmalochana) by Jaydeva Das, etc. are the prominent ones (Haque, 2014). But, the best and most popular version remains the *Srirama Panchali*. It is worth mentioning here that sage Valmiki had written for the elites and pundits but Krittibas wrote for the Bengalese only (Das, 1926, & Ghosh, 1960). His creation was not intended for those well versed in Sanskrit, as they would have preferred in any case to read the original, but it was intended for the common people who had scanty education or no education at all or those who had no access to the original due to their unfamiliarity with Sanskrit (Banerjee, 1960; Ghosh, 1948, & Ghosh, 1960).

According to the existing literature, only a handful of learned men knew the language of the original Sanskrit. Thus, it was not possible for them to read the Sanskrit scriptures (Annadasankar & Ray, 1942; Haque, 2014; Mazumder, 1927; Paranjpye, 1931; Prasad, 2001, & Taboji, 2011). The people were content with the translation of Krittibas, what was offered to their ears through their own familiar dialect (Annadasankar & Ray, 1942). It is a well-known fact that the best in man can come out through one's mother-tongue (Dasgupta, 1980). The poet immortalized the Bengali version of the *Ramayana* in such a manner that the people of Bengal, of all ages to come, would be able to find solace in grief, tranquillity in anxiety, and restraint in enjoyment (Banerjee, 1960). It has all the engaging qualities of first-rate folk literature (Ghosh, 1948). He has used a language that is sweet and mellow; too simple to understand, written in a most simple and most musical style, and which is so near to the Bengalis and very much rooted in the soil (Das, 1926, & Ghosh, 1960). He made it a perfect match of the time by pouring his

imagination with local colour (Chattopadhyay, 2017; Haque, 2014, & Ray, Hai & Ray, 1966). Banerjee presumed that due to the humid weather, riverine tracts, and flat surface of eastern India Krittibas's characters have become soft, sweet, and kind-hearted (Banerjee, 1960). He fixed his eyes on the tender beauty of Bengali's nature (Das, 1926; Ghosh, 1960). These episodes inspire the heart of the masses (Nadkarni, 1921). Bengali Hindus are therefore indebted to Krittibas for making this knowledge available to them through his translation (Ahmed, 2012). His *Ramayana* has found a way into every Hindu home and is daily read by millions (Das, 1926). 'The village *Mudi* (confectioner) reads his Ramayana when waiting for his customers, and the village Kulu (oil-manufacturer) chants the story of Rama and Sita as his bullock turns his primitive oil-mill with a slow creaking sound' (Dutt, 1895, p. 56 & Garrett, 1910, p. 37). Very few books have become such an essential part of the life of a people as has the *Ramayana* of Krittibas Ojha. Its influences and popularity have been such as would justify it is being called the Bible of the people of Bengal. It is rare to come across a man or woman who does not know some of its verses by heart (Ghosh, 1948).

The *Kathaks* (Professional story-tellers) or the *Gayens* (Singer), or the *patuas* (scroll painters) had played a significant role to make the *Panchali* songs to be more popular. They often used to recite or sing Krittibas's poetical work with a demonstration before their audiences (Chattopadhyay, 2017; Ghosh, 1960, & Mahapatra, 1960). As a consequence, the epic tales were carried from mouth to mouth to the masses (Annadasankar & Ray, 1942, & Ghosh, 1960). An etching which was made by the eighteenth-century European painter Balthazar provides an eyewitness visual experience in this regard (Solvyns, 1799, p. 233, & Zulekha, 2014, p. 256) (see Figure 1).

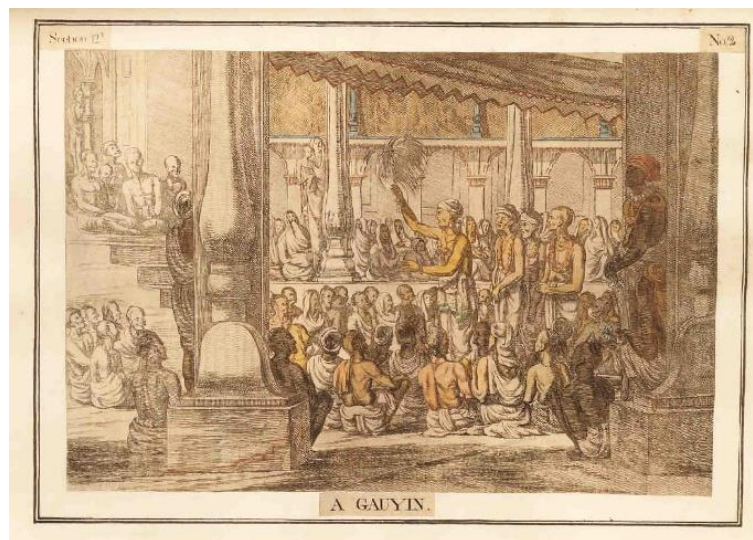


Figure 1: Coloured etching of Solvyns, showing a Ramayana/ Mahabharater Shava, with the gayen in the middle with a fly-wisk (Source: Solvyns, 1799, p. 233).

Its intense undiminished popularity among the populace has also left a strong impression on the artisans of Bengal and their creations of different eras. One can find its indelible impact in songs, folk dances, paintings, *Patachitras*, sculptures, poetry, folk dramas, and so on (Chattopadhyay, 2017). This also becomes apparent in the manifestations of the artisans'

architectural imaginations in the form of intricately carved designs and richly depicted narrative portrayals. The study primarily aims to investigate the *Ramayana* narratives that have been found on the facades of the Char-Bangla Temple cluster and the Jor-Bangla Temple of Baranagar in Murshidabad, West Bengal, India (see Figures 2A-D and 3). The intention is to trace the impact of the *SriramaPanchali* on the portrayals of the Ramayana episodes. The temples of Baranagar are some of the best examples to work on such kind of issue. Various eminent authors in the field of archaeology elucidate the same (Biswas, 2014; Biswas & Haque, 1995; Dey, 2019; Dikshit, 1926; Ganguly & Goswami, 1959; Nath et al., 2017; Pal, 2017; Silliman, 2017, & Tarafdar, 2017). The primary materials for the study comprise the depictions related to the epic Ramayana carved on the front facades of the Baranagar temple cluster. The secondary sources were collected through different libraries and digital platforms which mostly comprise books, journals, theses, and conference proceedings. The formal method of art history has been applied to provide a detailed account of the formal elements that have been incorporated by the terracotta artisans. Besides, the investigation of the narratives on the carved plaques has been complemented with literary references to get a clear understanding of the concerned issues.



Figure 2A: Char-Bangla Temple (north), Baranagar, Built in 1755 A.D. (Photographer: Author).



Figure 2B: Char-Bangla Temple (west), Baranagar, Built in 1755 A.D. (Photographer: Author).



Figure 2C: Char-Bangla Temple (east), Baranagar, Built in 1755 A.D. (Photographer: Author).



Figure 2D: Char-Bangla Temple (south), Baranagar, Built in 1755 A.D. (Photographer: Author).



Figure 3: Jor-Bangla Temple, Baranagar, Built in 1753 A.D. (Photographer: Author).

Tracing the Analogy between the Narration of the Srirama Panchali and the Narrative Style Implemented by the Artisans to Portray the Ramayana Events

Entwining Contemporary Elements with the Mythical Narratives

According to various authors, the *Srirama Panchali* is not just a rewording of the original Indian epic but contains picturesque descriptions of Bengali social life and its values in the middle ages. The dimensions have been added to the characters conducive to the mind of the people for whom the *Panchali* was composed (Das, 1926, & Ghosh, 1960). It is certain that Krittibas's characters are not a replica of his illustrious predecessor, Valmiki, nor an unintelligent copy of the same (Garrett, 1910, & Ghosh, 1948). In doing so, the folk poet subordinated their supreme divinity to earthly human characteristics within the framework of daily life, of course, all the while maintaining a high dignity to the superhuman and divine qualities of the god. One can find a picture of Bengali society with its customs, ceremonies, and moral values that give a thinly veiled picture of the contemporary scene (Annadasankar & Ray, 1942; Ghosh, 1960, & Haque, 2014). These certainly brought his work nearer to the hearts of Bengalis and the artisans of Bengal. The terracotta artisans in particular quite skilfully interwove the contemporary elements with the mythical narratives (Mangaonkar, 2012, & Michell, 1983). Several portrayals on the temples' facades elucidate the same. For instance, while portraying the royal court of Ayodhya, King Dasharatha, and his spouses are shown in an ordinary household setting. Dasharatha is portrayed as a middle-aged potbelly man, wearing a common ordinary attire. Apart from his pivotal role as King, he is also seen as an ideal husband. His wives are carved as attending their husband, standing with uplifted hands in the manner of ovation in front of Dasharatha. They have been conceptualized within the sphere of earthly realities as if each of the characters is very intimate and tied in the family bond of the people living amidst the drudgeries of daily life (see Figure 4). In another portrayal, the wives of Dasharatha were carved in seating posture while holding their child on their lap, which is also attributable to a common household sentiment (see Figure 5). Their particular manner of wearing saree as worn by simple village housewives, their postures and gestural expressions, and the pattern on their dress all indicate that the artists derived their inspiration from keen observations of the daily lives of the people around (Datta, 1975).



Figure 4: Ayodhya King Dasharatha and his wives, Jor-Bangla temple, Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).

The implications of the local sentiment are also quite apparent in the manifestation of the marriage scene of Rama and his brothers (see Figure 6). Whereas, here too a close affinity with the narratives of the *Srirama Panchali* is easily traced. Krittibas mentioned all the details of the rituals that are usually performed during a typically Bengali marriage-ceremony (Ghosh, 1960). The same may be found in Bengal even today during marriage ceremonies. The portrayal shows a welcoming ceremony of newly married brides to their in-law's house with their husbands where the young girls have been married to adult males. Farquhar (1993) in his book 'A Primer of Hinduism' mentioned that 'A girl should be given in marriage before puberty' (p. 165). It is in accordance with the law of Child-Marriage in the earliest Hindu Law-book i.e. *Gautama, Dharmasutra*, xviii 2I. (Farquhar, 1993). The practice of young girls being married off to grownup males was quite predominant in Bengal till the end of the 19th century (Chakrabarti 2016).



Figure 5: The wives of Dasharatha with their sons, Char-Bangla temple(north), Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).



Figure 6. The marriage scene of Rama and his brothers, Jor-Bangla temple, Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).

Feelings of Ardent Love and Devotion in the Narrativization of the Ramayana Events

Krittibas was deeply moved by the theme of *bhakti* and that is evident in the narration of the several episodes of the *Srirama Panchali* (Ghosh, 1960). The poet lived in the Vaishnava era and no wonder that the devotional elements have been introduced in his creation probably under the Vaishnava influence (Das, 1926, & Ghosh, 1960). The characterization of Lakshmana is one of the perfect examples in this regard. The poet has aimed to present Lakshmana as an ideal character. Hence there is no trace of his arrogance and disrespect to his elder brother. Lakshmana's devotion to his elder brother is always prominent (Banerji, 2004). Even, his attitude to Sita is much more restrained and respectful than what was found in the Sanskrit Ramayana. In Valmiki Ramayana,

the character of Rama has been presented as the epitome of all supreme virtues. But Lakshmana is shown to be diametrically opposite to his brother. He is rude and shockingly outspoken. Rama has constantly tried to pacify and restrain his arrogant and intolerant dear young brother (Ghosh, 1960). It seems, in Krittibas's Ramayana, Lakshmana is manifested as if the precedent of an ideal younger brother who is always respectful to his elders. The portrayals of Lakshmana with certain behavioural patterns on the temples' facades could be seen from the lens of Krittibas and his creation too. Based on the Portrayals it could be assumed that Lakshmana is projected as a devoted follower of his elder brother Rama and his wife Sita. His various gestural expression towards his elders including standing with folded hands (see Figure 7A) or holding an umbrella (see Figure 7B) or standing outside the house as if guarding it to dealing with uncertain happenings in the forest show his inherent love and respect to his elders (see Figure 7C).



Figure 7A: Sita and Lakshmana, Char-Bangla temple (west), Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).



Figure 7B: Coronation of Rama, Char-Bangla temple (west), Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).



Figure 7C: Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana, Char-Bangla temple (north), Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).

In the portrayals of Queen Sita, the impact of the literary descriptions is also clearly noticeable. According to the Bengali version, she has been manifested as an ordinary woman with a self-abnegation attitude for the sake of her husband (Banerji, 2004). In several portrayals on the temples' facades, she has been depicted as a shy lady with a covered head, dressed in a style typical to Bengali culture. Sometimes, she is seen as holding her saree over her head (see Figure 7B). A significant character of women in rural Bengal is to be submissive to their husbands and being a good helpmate to them. The manifestation of Sita with a similar approach could be noted frequently in the portrayals. In a depiction, a man and a woman probably Rama and Sita are shown engaging in a thoughtful conversation by sitting underneath an unusual room-like structure. From the gestural position and the direction of the faces of both the figures, it appears that the woman is trying to concentrate on the words which are being delivered by the man. Her subservient and passive nature in accordance with prescribed behaviour for a perfect wife illustrates the same (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Rama and Sita, Jor-Bangla temple, Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).



Figure 9A: Ravana's last prayer, Char-Bangla temple (north), Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).



Figure 9B. Detail of a panel where Ravana begging the pardon of Rama with folded hands, Jor-Bangla temple, Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).

The characterization of the Rakshasa king Ravana by Krittibas is another significant example in this regard. Krittibas added one notable peculiarity to the character and that is convert devotion to Rama (Banerjee, 1960, & Ganguly, 1960). According to the narration of the *Srirama Panchali*, Ravana disclosed his identity to Rama just before his death. His last words to Rama are as follows: 'You are the Lord of destitute like myself. You are the rescuer and redeemer of fallen ones. Kindly place your feet on my head so that I may die peacefully and regain your grace after the termination of this heinous life' (Banerjee, 1960, p. 157). A deep inspiration drawn from the above lines of Krittibas is noted in the portrayals above the centre arch of the Char-Bangla temple (north) and the wall panel of the Jor-Bangla temple (see Figures. 9A-B). The portrayal of the Jor-Bangla temple depicts eighteen Rama images with stretched arms holding the bow and aiming at Ravana. He (Ravana) is shown in ten heads with folded hands. Compositionally different but almost the same kind of representation has been observed in the Char-Bangla temple (north). Both the portrayals exhibit a similar kind of unusual characteristic of Ravana where his heart is awash with the flow of Bhakti, transforming the *rakshasa* king into Vaishnava *bhakta*, who, when coming face to face with

Rama, eulogized him instead of fighting. This narration is also popularly known as Ravana's last prayer before the war (Nath et al., 2017).



Figure 10A: Hanuman kneeling down before Lord Rama, Jor-Bangla temple, Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).



Figure 10B: Sugreeva and his armies, Char-Bangla temple (east), Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).

Besides, a deep sense of devotion or *bhakti* is perceived in the portrayals of Hanumana, and Sugreeva, the king of the monkeys who are frequently seen as kneeling down or bowing before Lord Rama, Lakshmana, and the queen Sita. The plaque on the corner element of the Jor-Bangla temple most probably depicts a monkey joining Rama's army (see Figure 10A). Rama is shown as a benevolent figure reassuring the monkey who is bowing at his feet. The monkey could be recognized as either Hanuman, Rama's principal devotee, or just one of the soldier monkeys. In another depiction, three monkeys are shown standing with folded hands. The central figure who wore a crown on the head could be speculated as Sugreeva, the king of the monkeys with whom Rama made friendship for assistance while searching for Sita (see Figure 10B). The next plaque is associated with the *Sundara Kanda*. The plaque probably portrays Hanumana who managed to cross the ocean to find Sita and give her the message from Rama along with Rama's ring. In turn, Sita is seen as blessing him by touching his head (see Figure 10C). The feeling of *bhakti* could be experienced in the gestural representation of some other figures too. A depiction on the left-side panel above the arch of the Char-Bangla temple (west) shows the panoramic scene of the *Ramayana*-battle (see Figure 11), where Rama and Ravana are engaged in fierce combat, monkey-soldiers and some of the people accompanying are found standing with folded hands like devotees and not warriors. They seem to be imbued with the *bhakti-rasa*.



Figure 10C: Hanuman's meeting with Sita at the Ashoka Kanana (a forest) at Lanka, Jor-Bangla temple, Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).



Figure 11: The Battle Scene, Char-Bangla temple (west), Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).

Interpolation or Induction of New Imageries or Ideas

Apart from the persistence of the main outlines of the original story of Valmiki, Krittibas interpolated various stories and sub-stories which are not found in the Sanskrit original. The stories are his own (Garrett, 1910; Ghosh, 1948, & Ghosh, 1960). The story of Jatayu (a mythical creature which is the devoted bird of Rama) is one of the perfect examples of interpolation by Krittibas which is not found in the original Ramayana (Ghosh, 1960). According to the original story, when Ravana abducted Sita and carried her off in the flying chariot, Jatayu, a great devotee of Rama, engaged in an aerial battle with Ravana to rescue her. Unsuccessful, he fell to earth, mortally wounded. It was from Jatayu that Lord Rama got to know about his wife. But, in the Bengali version of this incident, Jatayu made an effort to swallow up the chariot to kill Ravana but is impelled to barf it out once he realizes that queen Sita is on board. Jatayu is described as a great fighter rather than as a loser (Sinha, & Panda, 2012). The accurate replication of the literary

expositions is also noted on the temples' façades of Baranagar. The portrayals show, the ten-headed demon Ravana and Sita, wife of Rama, in a chariot held in the beak of the bird Jatayu, king of the vultures. He is trying to prevent the abduction of Sita by Ravana, with its wide-open beaks (Haque, 2014) (see Figures 12 A-B).



Figure 12A: Jatayu trying to stop the chariot, Char-Bangla temple (north), Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).



Figure 12B: Jatayu trying to stop the abduction of Sita by Ravana, Jor-Bangla temple, Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).

Krittibas narrated elaborately many of the incidents which were not told by Valmiki and other authors (Garrett, 1910, & Ghosh, 1948). His genius prompted him to introduce innovations instead of producing a carbon copy of the Sanskrit epic where he unhesitatingly introduced new episodes to his interpretations (Mangaonkar, 2012, & Michell, 1983). The Sixth Book of the Ramayana i.e. *Yuddha Kanda* (*Book of War*) mainly talks about the war between Lord Rama and the Rakshasa king Ravana. It is the crowning event of the epic; and in portraying this warfare Krittibas has inserted some new incidents (Dutt, 1895). The most important addition, made by

him, is the introduction of the autumnal Durga puja, known as *Akal-Bodhan*, stated to have been performed by Rama seeking the grace of the goddess Durga for success in his encounter with the powerful demon king who abducted Sita, the consort of Rama (Banerji, 2004). The episode starts with Ravana's worship of Goddess Durga before the final battle. Being pleased with Ravana, the Goddess came and sat on his chariot. Then Rama had to worship Devi Durga according to Lord Brahma's advice. But Maa Durga played a trick. Rama collected a hundred and eight blue lotuses with the help of Hanuman to offer her, but one of them was hidden by her. The lotus-eyed Lord Rama then decided to offer his one eye instead of the missing lotus. Maa Durga became pleased and left Ravana's chariot. The manifestation of the aforementioned event with a similar narrative approach is also found on the façade of the temple of Baranagar (see Figure 13). It is worth mentioning here that since then, worshipping Devi Durga with a hundred and eight lotuses is still followed by Bengali people in their greatest religious festival, Durga puja.



Figure 13: Rama worshipping Devi Durga just before the onset of the Lanka war (Akala-Bodhan), Jor-Bangla temple, Baranagar, (Photographer: Author).

Discussion and Conclusion

It appears that both, the *Srirama Panchali* and the portrayals on the temples' facades often have been drawn on the visual landscape that surrounded the poet and the terracotta artisans respectively in their daily lives. Their retelling of the narratives of the epic which have been presented in front of their audiences and viewers by the poet Krittibas and the artisans respectively vividly incorporated multifarious aspects of daily life and deftly brought forth all elements of emotions and sensualities. It could be assumed that the iconographic compositions on the temples' facades were simply visualizations of Bengali versions of the epic. Besides, certain changes in the iconographic representation undoubtedly show the impact of Krittibas's creation too. The artisans equally accomplished intermixing the local colours and custom of celebration with the mythological events. Thus, in the portrayals, the characters of the epic become identified with the people of the rural surrounding, not as distant Gods but as characters who are very familiar to them. The characters give the impression of being real, sympathetic, loveable, and pulsating with life like those of the *Srirama Panchali*. The portrayals do not provide the ambiance

of the ancient India of Valmiki, but the Bengal of their own day. The characters retain their original names of Rama, Sita, or Lakshmana but in reality, they are representations of Bengali men and women. They retain their original roles of kings, queens, and warriors, but they represent popular and rustic ideals, not the aristocratic ideals of the heroic poem. The lofty and austere virtues of courts and camps have been replaced by soft and sentimental domestic virtues. Finally, it could be said that the narrative panels of the Ramayana episodes noted on the facades of the Baranagar temple cluster are mostly reminiscent of the visual representations of the text of the *Srirama Panchali*.

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