

Dining Out at Lake Pampa:

The Shabari Episode in Multiple *Ramayanas*

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Tasting one after another, he says, "This one's even sweeter!"

He gazes at them and gushes, "Here, Lakshmana, take one."

The Shabari keeps on handing him *ber* after *ber* after *ber*,

and Raghubir keeps singing out for, "*Ber*, more *ber*!"

- Rasikbihari¹

1. Appetizers

(Valmiki and other literary *Ramayanas*)

Near the end of Valmiki's forest book (*Aranyakanda*), Rama and Lakshmana, wandering in search of Sita, are directed westward by a celestial being whom they have just liberated from a grotesque demonic form. His name, Kabandha or "belly," described him well, for a sage's curse and a god's wrath had reduced him to an enormous stomach equipped only with a mouth and two huge arms with which he grasped and devoured everything within reach. A vestige of this voracious appetite persists even after his arms have been hewn off by the brothers and his body (by his own instruction) immolated in a pit, permitting him to regain his former *gandharva* shape; for in describing the path ahead, he lingers over its gustatory delights. Noting the many varieties of fruit trees that

line the path to Lake Pampa, he urges the brothers, "Climb them or bend them by force to the ground, but you simply must taste their ambrosial fruit before you go." (3.69.4)² He follows up this imagined appetizer with a lakeside main course that will consist of tame and easily-snared water fowl ("plump as balls of butter") and equally succulent fish ("choice, fleshy ones, and not too bony") to be charbroiled on skewers (3.69.8-9).

In fact, Rama and Lakshmana will select nothing from Kabandha's menu. Although they observe the "honey-sweet fruit trees densely clustered on the hillsides," they do not pause to taste them, for they are eager for their prophesied meeting with the monkey-lord Sugriva, who will assist them in recovering Sita (3.70.2). When they reach Pampa, the brothers (who are sometimes aggressively non-veg. in Valmiki's version), pass up its abundant fish and fowl to dine on evidently vegan "forest food" collected by an aged anchorite identified as Shabari, a servant of the long-departed disciples of sage Matanga (3.70.13). The identity of this woman and the precise nature of the foodstuffs she places before the brothers has been a matter of no small interest to *Ramayana* tellers and audiences over the last two millennia, and in the popular Hindi parlance of recent times, at least, the expression "the tribal woman's jujubes" (*bhilni ke ber*) has become a proverbial designation for a humble but loving offering that pleases God, and the verbal signifier of a highly emotional tableau often represented in popular religious art. As with other elements in the epic's "pool of signifiers" (as A. K. Ramanujan termed it; Ramanujan 1991, 46), the components of the Shabari episode have been rearranged to suit a variety of interpretations that nevertheless cluster, both chronologically and thematically, into patterns. Taken together, they suggest the tension, often noted in Hindu bhakti, between more popular and liberal, and more elite and conservative orientations; between the enthusiastic savoring of the sweet and "juicy" essence of collective devotion, and a more sour perspective that finds such egalitarian impulses unappetizing and indigestible.

Valmiki, the often prolix Sanskrit *adi-kavi*, is spare in his description of Shabari, who is the last in a series of saintly anchorites whom Rama encounters in the forest book. Although her name implies that she is a female *Shabara*—belonging to a non-Aryan hill tribe of the Deccan, whose name, together with such terms as *bhila* and *kirata*, became in time a loose designation for "barbarian" or "outsider"³—Valmiki never expands on this association, but simply describes her (in Kabandha's words) as "an ascetic....devoted to dharma" (3.69.19-20), and later, when the princes encounter her, as a "perfected woman" (3.70.6), who offers them a meal she has assembled herself, but which we never see them eat. This is followed by a brief tour of the lakeside hermitage and a prophesy regarding Rama's onward journey, and finally by Shabari's self-immolation to rejoin her erstwhile masters in their immortal world. Valmiki's primary focus, here as elsewhere in the *Aranyakanda*, seems to be on the wonderful spiritual accomplishments of the forest-dwelling ascetics whom Rama has undertaken to protect—blessings that remain visible in the form of unfading garlands, damp barkcloth garments, and glowing fire-altars, years after the sages themselves have left the earth. Shabari appears as a sort of *chaukidar* or custodian of this empty ashram, and her humble status is suggested by Kabandha's description of her as a "servant" of the sages (3.69.19), by her own admiring account of "those I had been serving" (3.70.10), and by the manner in which she greets the brothers.

At the sight of the princes, the perfected woman sprang up with hands cupped in reverence, and then she bowed to clasp the feet of Rama and of wise Lakshmana. (3.70.6)

This is interesting in that Rama's usual practice, on encountering forest sages, has been to prostrate himself and to clasp *their* feet (e.g., Bharadvaja, Atri, Sharabhanga, Agastya), but again, nothing more is said about this reversal, and it may have been obvious to the Sanskrit poet's audience that in light of Shabari's gender and social situation—notwithstanding her spiritual "perfection"—this was the appropriate etiquette. That

Shabari has a special relationship with Rama is implied in the sages' directive to her to await his coming (3.70.11-12), and in a verse omitted from the Baroda edition, she declares that, by seeing him, her asceticism has borne fruit and her life's purpose has been fulfilled. Another verse found in many manuscripts has Rama declare, just before permitting Shabari to immolate herself, "You have given me great hospitality."⁴ (ibid., 1:666, 3.74.31)

The brevity of this passage as well as its peculiar features suggest that it may be alluding to a story upon which the Sanskrit poet chose not to elaborate, but which he assumed would be known to his listeners, or explained to them by a good singer-expounder. There is also the possibility that this story—which evidently has to do with non-Aryan ascetics—has been suppressed in the *Ramayana* as we know it, perhaps in the interest of the brahmanical agenda which would also insert, into the final book of the epic, the sobering tale of King Rama's murder of the shudra Shambuka for practicing asceticism. Shabari's guru, Matanga, is a shadowy if revered figure in Valmiki, but the same name appears in the *Mahabharata* identifying a teacher of low-caste origin (13.29.22ff), and in the *Suttanipata* of Buddhaghosa, Matanga is called an untouchable *candala* who nevertheless "gained the highest fame, and embarked on the path to the gods." (1.7.137ff).⁵

The first major vernacular *Ramayana*, Kamban's ca. twelfth-century Tamil epic *Iramavataram*, is fully as long as Valmiki's version and often expands on its narrative in significant ways (e.g., in the Shurpanakha episode, 3.5), yet its treatment of the meeting with Shabari is shorter still and adds little to the allusive contents of the Sanskrit version. In keeping with the major themes of Kamban's forest book, the emphasis in its brief, final chapter is on *tapasya* and *bhakti*—austerity and heartfelt devotion—and Shabari clearly exemplifies both. Identified as an "empress of difficult tapas" (stanza 3805), she sheds copious tears when addressing Rama (3803) and looks at him "with true love" (3806).

Concerning the meal that she serves the brothers, Kamban merely remarks that "she gave them what they needed" (3803).⁶ The Telugu *Ranganatha ramayana* (ca. fourteenth century) gives a yet more terse account of the episode, stating only that Shabari offers fruits to Rama, which he accepts.⁷

The influential Sanskrit text, *Adhyatma ramayana* ("esoteric *Ramayana*," which most scholars now assign to roughly the fifteenth century) expands slightly on this. A text that is as concerned with ritualistic worship as it is with advaitin metaphysics, it shows Shabari engaged in what is in effect the *puja* of Rama, washing his feet and sprinkling the water over her body, and offering him "*arghya* [a libation] and other ceremonial honors" followed by "the choicest nectar-like fruits that she had collected specially for him" (3.10.7-9)⁸ A significant elaboration on the earlier texts, however, follows the meal: ceremonial worship normally includes a hymn of praise, and Shabari's takes the form of an elaborate declaration of her own unworthiness to offer one.

O Thou immeasurable Being! I am an ignorant and low-born woman. I have not the qualification [*adhikara*] to be the servant of Thy servants at the hundredth remove. What then to speak of my qualification to serve Thee?I am not capable of praising Thee with a hymn. What am I to do? (3.10.17-19)⁹

Rama responds with a long lecture on the irrelevance of social status in relation to bhakti, which he then expounds as consisting of nine basic disciplines (*navadha bhakti*)—association with holy people, hearing of his deeds, repeating his name, etc. (3.10.20-31.) After this digression, the conventional narrative resumes with Rama asking Shabari for onward directions, whereupon she seeks his permission to enter the fire. Her reward is described as *mukti* or liberation, and the author adds (in an apparent nod to his primary audience) "Shabari, though low-born, attained *mukti* by Rama's grace. It is then needless

to say that a man of high birth, if he be devoted to Rama will certainly attain to *mukti*" (3.10.42-43).¹⁰

Tulsidas often shows his great debt to the *Adhyatma ramayana* in the Hindi epic *Ramcaritmanas* (ca. 1574), and his brief presentation of the Shabari episode includes a discourse on ninefold bhakti that closely follows its own. Rama's comments on the irrelevance of social status to devotion are here pointedly juxtaposed, however, with his stern lecture to Kabandha in the preceding stanza on the evil consequences of disrespect to brahmans (3.33.8-34.2). As in Kamban and the *Adhyatma ramayana*, Shabari displays intense emotion, falling tearfully at the brothers' feet before seating them reverently in her hut (3.34.9-10). The meal she then serves them receives a memorable *doha*.

She brought most delicious fruits and tubers to set before Rama,
and the Lord ate them lovingly, praising them again and again. (3.34)

Protesting her unworthiness, Shabari describes herself as "lowborn and densely dull," and impure by virtue of both birth and gender (3.35.2-3). The rest of the episode follows the *Adhyatma* version fairly closely, save that Shabari's ultimate destination is described as "the highest state of the Lord, from which there is no returning" (3.36.ch.2).

Taken together, the rather consistently terse and allusive accounts of Shabari presented in these major literary *Ramayanas* that span roughly two millennia surely serve to whet our appetites to know more about this woman of lowly birth and independent lifestyle, and about her special relationship to Rama. Interestingly enough, these literary epics—to which scholars are apt to turn in search of authoritative renderings of the Rama story—are united in their failure to mention what, in the popular imagination today, is undoubtedly the single most memorable feature of the Shabari episode: Rama's consumption of fruits that were previously tasted by the tribal woman, and that have thus

been rendered *ucchishta* or *jhutha* ("defiled by saliva"), and subject to one of the strongest of all Hindu food taboos.¹¹ To savor this delicate matter, we will have to turn to a different menu.

2. Entrees

(Priyadas, *Kalyan*, Anjaninandan Sharan)

Diet is one of the principal markers of ritual status in Hindu South Asia and the proscribed and polluting food of the lowly and the outsider is often cited, in Sanskrit literature, among their identifying marks; thus *shapaka* or "dog-cooker" is virtually synonymous with *candala* or *mleccha*, and non-Aryan tribal labels such as *bhila* and *shabara* evoke both a barbaric lifestyle and meat-centered diet. Even the vegetarian food of such persons carries connotations of wildness, and in this regard it is interesting to note that the ca. twelfth century *Lilavati* of Bhaskaracharya mentions a kind of wild sweet-potato known as *shabara-kanda* ("Shabara's root") as well as the jujube fruit, which is referred to as *shabarahara*—"the food of Shabaras."¹² Jujube (*Ziziphus jujuba*) is a small, wild plum-like fruit with a greenish or yellowish skin; inside, the pulp can vary from tartly sour to moderately sweet. In modern Hindi it is called *ber*. One seldom finds it in bazaar fruit stalls, however, for it is regarded as a wild and second-rate fruit, and it is mostly sold along the roadsides in rural areas, usually by elderly women or small children who harvest the fruit that has fallen from trees. As is the case with wild cherries or plums, a bag of *ber* is likely to contain at least some sweet and juicy fruits, but also many others that will prove, to any but the hungriest eater, too sour to bother with. All of these qualities—its wildness, its association with poor, rural people and tribals, and its varying quality—help explain the association of *ber* with the Shabari story, and the

widely-held belief that it was this fruit that the old woman served to Rama and Lakshmana.

I have observed that there may have existed a Shabari story that was omitted from some of the best-known literary *Ramayanas*, both Sanskrit and vernacular, and yet was alluded to by them and familiar to their audiences. An elaborate version of such a story, of uncertain age, found its way into north Indian Vaishnava hagiographic literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The terse *Bhaktamal* of Nabhadras (ca. 1624), a highly-condensed "rosary" of some two hundred famous devotees, counts Shabari as eighth among twenty-three *bhaktas* who are termed "beloved of the Lord" (*Hari vallabh*) and who are listed in its ninth stanza. This work appears to have been intended as a kind of mnemonic for Vaishnava storytellers,¹³ and its skeletal outline was fleshed out in ca. 1712 by one Priyadas, who composed an elaborate *tika* or commentary entitled *Bhaktirasbodhini* that adds some 630 stanzas. Seven of these stanzas are devoted to Shabari (31-37), and the story they recount has achieved wide circulation and will be summarized here. An early twentieth-century commentator's introduction tells how the youthful Shabari abandons her own people when they desire to perform her marriage and are preparing to slaughter a large number of animals for the wedding feast. Rebelling against such cruelty, she flees by night to the shores of Lake Pampa where she takes up her abode in the vicinity of Matanga's ashram, subsisting on wild fruits and roots.¹⁴

Shabari longs to serve the sadhus and rishis who dwell in the woods, but keeps away from them, conscious of her low birth. At night she sweeps away thorns and pebbles from the paths they will walk to bathe in the lake, and deposits bundles of firewood outside the doors of their huts. In the morning, the holy men wonder "Who has done this?"

Sage Matanga instructs his pupils to stay awake and apprehend the "thief" [who is "stealing" merit, according to the modern commentator], and they capture the terrified Shabari, who falls at Matanga's feet. Seeing her devotion, Matanga sheds tears of love and feels that he has found a treasure. (32)

He tells his disciples that although she is of low birth, her devotion merits the praise of millions of brahmans, and he instructs her to remain in the ashram and initiates her in the divine name. This angers all the other ascetics, who consider it an affront to their status, but Matanga is unconcerned by their reaction. When he prepares to leave the world, he tells Shabari to remain behind and promises that she will see Lord Rama. (33)

Disconsolate over her separation from her guru, Shabari clings to life in the hope of seeing Rama. One night she is delayed in her sweeping and accidentally touches an ascetic enroute to his morning bath. He angrily berates her for polluting him and she flees to her hut. When the sadhu reaches the lake, he finds that its clear water has turned to blood and is swarming with vermin. Failing to understand the real cause of this awful transformation, he blames it on his contact with the "unlucky woman" (*abhag^*). (34)

Shabari gathers jujube fruits, tastes them, and sets the sweetest ones aside for Rama. Every day, she watches and yearns for his arrival, but when she finally hears that he is coming, she again thinks of her low status and hides in her hut, afraid to face him. Rama comes inquiring of everyone, "Where is Shabari? (35)

"Where is that fortunate woman (*bhagavati*)? My eyes thirst to see her." When he enters the ashram she prostrates before him, but he lifts her up, and seeing him, her sorrow departs and tears stream from her eyes. Bidding him be seated, she serves him fruit and he praises it greatly, declaring that it has relieved his fatigue from the journey. (36)

Meanwhile the rishis are all worrying about the polluted lake, and someone suggests that they ask Rama for a solution. Just then they learn that he has already come, and is seated in Shabari's hut. Their pride is shattered and they fall at his feet. When told about the condition of the lake water, Rama instructs the ascetics to grasp Shabari's feet, and to bring her to the lake; when she touches the water, it becomes pure again. (37)

Priyadas' story shows certain consistencies with the literary *Ramayanas* examined earlier: Shabari is the disciple of sage Matanga, instructed by him to remain in his ashram after his physical death and to entertain Rama when he wanders that way; she falls at Rama's feet, and serves the Raghu prince wild fruits, which he praises lavishly. At the same time, the story makes several significant elaborations on the epic accounts: it explains in detail the nature of the "service" Shabari renders to Matanga and his disciples, and it depicts her not only gathering wild fruits—identified here as *ber* or jujubes—but also *tasting* them before setting them aside for Rama. Further, it makes one radical departure from the versions I have considered, by placing Shabari's abode not in an eerily-deserted ashram still radiant with the presence of departed saints, but in a thriving forest community of flesh-and-blood, but bigoted, ascetics, who fail to recognize Shabari's spiritual attainment because of her lowly birth. This story element, which leads directly to the double transformation of the lake, combines with the motif of the jujubes to make a powerful statement reversing conventional ideas of purity and pollution. Even as Shabari, who is inwardly pure though outwardly polluted, delights the Lord by serving

him wild fruits that she has defiled by touching to her lips, the outwardly pure sadhus, inwardly defiled by their arrogance of birth, pollute their own lake by insulting one of the Lord's humblest *bhaktas* and can only remove the defilement by honoring her and placing her feet in the water.

Although it is uncertain whether this story predates Priyadas' time, it is clear that it has achieved wide circulation since. It appears in elaborate retellings in modern devotional works,¹⁵ and its central event—the serving of the tainted jujubes to an enthusiastic Rama—is a common theme in popular religious art, wherein the gaunt and wrinkled Shabari, clad in a white or ochre sari but without a blouse (an indication of age, tribal status, and/or poverty) feeds the beaming Lord; closer examination of such images reveals small and (literally) tell-tale bites missing from each proffered fruit. When the journal *Kalyan*, published by the Gita Press of Gorakhpur and widely circulated among pious *Sanatan Dharm*^ Hindus throughout north and central India, produced a "special issue on the lives of saints" in 1952 (*Bhakta caritank*, one of its annual book-length thematic supplements), it included a lengthy retelling of Priyadas' story in modern Hindi prose, set within a series of accounts of low-caste and tribal devotees (e.g. Bhakta Kirat, Sudama Mali, Bhim Kumhar, Chandali, etc.). Elaborating on the prejudice of the orthodox rishis of Lake Pampa, it describes how they cease eating or even conversing with Matanga after he has initiated Shabari, but he regards them as "deluded" and remains unconcerned.¹⁶ It also develops the theme of Shabari's long wait for Rama's arrival: her daily preparation of her hut to receive him by applying fresh cowdung to the floor, spreading a carpet of flowers, and, of course, gathering wild fruits. In her intense yearning for Rama's *darshan*, Shabari behaves as if mad (*pagal-si*), and it is in this state that she accidentally brushes against one of the ascetics as he proceeds to the lake, leading to his angry outburst and the transformation of the water. Also emphasized here is Rama's reciprocal eagerness to see Shabari; his repeated asking of everyone, "Where is

my Shabari?" During the climactic meal, much is made of Rama's ecstatic reaction to the fruit; he praises its sweetness again and again, and an inserted *doha* declares that, during the rest of his life, no food that he was served anywhere ever pleased him as much. In the final confrontation with the sages, they condemn themselves for their own spiritual blindness: "Fie upon our wisdom, our celibacy, our learning, our lineage, and our skill in performing sacrifices, because we have turned against Lord Hari!"¹⁷

Modern commentators on the Tulsidas *Ramcaritmanas* often interpret its version of the Shabari episode in the light of such understandings of the old woman as a love-crazed, intimate devotee. Thus, Anjaninandan Sharan, in the great twelve-volume *tika* entitled *Manas-piyush* ("nectar of the *Manas*," 1925-56), interprets the "lovely seat" (*sundar asan*, 3.34.5) she offers Rama to refer to a bed of flower petals, and goes on to describe her daily *sadhana* of gathering and arranging the blossoms, since she never knows exactly when he will be coming. Similarly he notes that although Rama has been served forest fruits in numerous sages' ashrams, he has never been said to praise them before (as he now does, repeatedly, in *doha* 3.34, cited earlier). Indeed, Sharan rightly observes, "Is it not contrary to etiquette (*niyam*) to praise food in India? But in this case, there is love, and where love holds sway, etiquette cannot endure."¹⁸

The matter of the defiled jujubes is treated at length by both Sharan and the commentator in *Kalyan*, with revealingly different results. The Gita Press author was probably a Vaishnava brahman pandit in the employ of the Marwari editors, and in the midst of his paeon to the irrelevance of caste and pollution in matters of bhakti, he inserts a long footnote that argues (a) that Shabari was *not* actually an impure *shabara*, but a high-born ascetic woman who was merely *named* "Shabari"; and (b) that it is untrue that Rama ate *jhutha* fruit served by Shabari; this is impossible because the embodiment of propriety (*maryada purushottam*) would not have done such a thing. References in texts to Shabari "tasting" the fruit, he insists, only imply that she tasted from the various *trees*

to determine which ones yielded the sweetest *ber*, and then gathered fruit exclusively from those.¹⁹ Sharan, however, who was a retired civil servant turned Ayodhya-resident sadhu, offers an interpretation of the episode that reveals characteristic Ramanandi liberality even as it pointedly refutes the above arguments. It is worth relishing in full.

Regarding *jhutha* food, the objection may be raised that the embodiment of propriety would not behave in such a way. This statement is reasonable, but at the same time there's the fact that Shabari didn't regard him as a prince, but as God himself. This is clear from all *Ramayans*, and God is famished for *love*—what does he care about pollution and whatnot? Only a devotee can understand this, no one else. Secondly [with regard to the argument that Shabari only sampled fruit in order to select the trees from which to harvest her offerings], how will you answer this question: the hand with which she ate the *ber* is polluted (*jhutha*), and if she then picks more fruit with that defiled hand, won't those be defiled as well?So, are we to suppose that Shabari carried water with her into the forest to repeatedly wash her hands? Hardly! What will devotees gain from considering such questions? I don't see the point of it at all. Rather, one ought to assert that this path of love is something altogether different. Even today we observe that whereas strict orthodox worshippers place only untasted food before the Lord, loving devotees never offer anything they haven't tasted first, even though according to worldly convention such things would never be considered suitable for divine service. But on the path of love, *adharmā* is also counted as *dharma*.²⁰

The fact that the *jhutha* fruit is not explicitly mentioned in the *Manas* does not trouble Sharan, who explains that Tulsidas sought to uphold the dignity of all teachers and sects

and to avoid giving offence; however, the commentator asserts that when the great Hindi poet uses the adjective *surasa* ("juicy, sweet") to describe the foodstuffs, "he gives an esoteric allusion to the matter of the *jhutha* offering." Further, Sharan quotes a song from Tulsidas' lyric anthology *Gitavali* (3.17) which describes Shabari feeding Rama in the manner of his mother, Kausalya, with the maternal sentiment of *vatsalya*. "In this emotional stance," Sharan notes, "there is absolutely no objection to feeding food that has been tasted."²¹

Like Priyadas' story itself, such debates are a reminder of the ongoing tension within popular Hinduism between a sense of order and propriety (*dharma*, *maryada*) that erects firm barriers against impurity and institutionalizes a status hierarchy based on birth, and a love-saturated devotionism that overcomes all proscriptions and barriers. In the metaphors of bhakti poetics, the onrushing and melting force of devotion, transmitted through lyric poetry in the mother tongue, is often likened to the fresh water of lakes, rivers, and streams and is invariably characterized as "sweet"; in contrast, the injunctions of brahmanical orthodoxy, contained in the corpus of Sanskrit literature, are commonly compared to the ocean—vast and profound, but filled with water that is salty, bitter, and unpalatable: the wellsprings of an ideological enterprise of exclusion, containment, and control that Sheldon Pollock has termed "intellectual violence."²²

3. Dessert

(Ramanand Sagar)

One of the most prominent and ubiquitous *Ramayana* "texts" of recent times was the television serialization "Ramayan," produced and directed by Ramanand Sagar, that aired between 1987 and '89 on India's then single-channel national television network,

Doordarshan. Consisting of a main story in seventy-eight episodes and a sequel entitled "Uttar-Ramayan" ("Epilogue to the Ramayan") in twenty-six more, it kept millions of Indians riveted to television screens for a weekly hour on Sunday mornings over a period spanning more than two years. The creation of a self-styled devotee of the Tulsidas *Ramcaritmanas*, the Hindi-language video epic attempted to promote, to an unprecedented simultaneous audience that eventually swelled to an estimated one hundred million, the theme of "national integration" advocated by Rajiv Gandhi's Congress (I) government. Its meandering and leisurely screenplay—in installments that were sometimes written not far ahead of the shooting schedule—drew on a variety of Sanskrit and regional-language *Ramayanas* (prominently noted in the credits each week) as well as on oral traditions and the director's own inspirations. Its visual vocabulary derived from a century of mass-produced religious art: god-posters, comic books, and the mythological musicals of the Bombay film industry; but it used the small-screen format and slow pace of a TV serial to give viewers an unprecedented sense of intimate visual communion with epic characters. While urban intellectuals bemoaned the serial's garish sets, slow pace, and melodramatic acting, the majority of viewers greedily devoured its hours of close-up *darshan* of a beaming, cherubic Rama and tearful but brave Sita, along with their entourage of family and friends. Exploiting a new medium that permitted minute exploration of motivation and emotion, the serial advanced a number of striking interpretations that humanized traditional villains or advanced "progressive" messages (e.g., for communal harmony or against dowry).²³ Broadly speaking, the director's endeavor was to deftly utilize word and image to smooth over controversial incidents (such as Rama's and Lakshmana's mutilation of the demoness Shurpanakha, or Rama's unchivalrous slaying of the monkey king Vali) and to produce an unobjectionable "Ramayan" that would resonate with the largest possible audience. By all accounts he succeeded.

Rama's encounter with Shabari occupies the better part of Episode 34, which commences with the slaying of Kabandha. Following the redeemed *gandharva's* ascent to heaven, the camera leaves the brothers to cut to Shabari's idyllic ashram—an earthen hut gaily painted with the sort of designs created by many rural women, and approached by a path that meanders through lawns dotted with flowers. The camera then focuses in on a saffron-clad figure whose white, wispy hair, wizened face, and mouth missing several front teeth perfectly evokes the conventional Shabari of the religious calendars (Sagar boasted of his success in casting actors—often unknowns—who would epitomize the audience's mental image of epic figures): an elderly and maternal rustic brimming with *vatsalya*. As she gazes tearfully and expectantly into the distance, a female voice-over sings of Shabari's life of watching and waiting for Rama's arrival: a series of verses with the refrain, "Gazing at the road, Shabari's whole life has passed." With each verse we see the activity being described: Shabari sweeping the path clear ("lest any thorn prick the Lord," warbles the singer), plucking marigolds and spreading them in a gorgeous carpet over the path, and of course, picking *ber*, and (while the singer declares "Tasting sweet fruits, she daily adorns the platter") we see her sampling each tiny pale-green fruit, discarding some and smilingly setting others on a woven basket-plate.

When the *bhajan* ends, Shabari is again seen working on her carpet of marigolds, sighing "My Rama! My Rama!" as she sets down each blossom. Shadows fall over her handiwork, and the camera pulls back to show four bearded holy men with Shaiva forehead markings (the north Indian visual code for brahmanical, "vedic" asceticism) about to step onto her pathway. Shabari entreats them not to crush her flowers, and one of the younger men replies in a huff, addressing her as "Crazy woman" (*pagli*), and mocking her, "How many years have you been at this? Has your Rama come yet?" Shabari replies that he will surely come, her guru Matanga has promised this, and when he does, she doesn't want him to think that, "this *bhilni* doesn't know how to welcome

me." One of the older ascetics then remarks that they shouldn't harass her but should use a different path. We see them doing so, and engaging in the following conversation:

Young ascetic (annoyed): Sometimes it seems to me that the bh[^]l woman has gone mad.

Elder ascetic: Perhaps so, but don't forget that there's little difference between bhakti and madness. From a worldly perspective, a devotee simply appears mad. Shabari is a great ascetic and she has attained mystic powers, but she has no trace of pride in her attainment. This is the mark of a true devotee.

Young ascetic (bowing respectfully): Yes, master.

The camera returns to Shabari and a new set of shadows appear; she begins to scold the would-be trespassers only to behold Rama and Lakshmana, who soon identify themselves; she falls to the ground and washes Rama's feet with her tears.

Leading the brothers down the flower-covered path and seating them on the verandah of her hut, Shabari rushes inside to get her tray of fruit: "I'm just bringing it. For years I've been setting aside the sweetest jujubes for you, Lord. Now please eat... They're very sweet, I tasted each one before I kept it." The camera comes in for a closeup of the tiny fruits, each visibly scarred with toothmarks in the whitish flesh. Rama smiles and begins eating; Lakshmana appears shocked and disgusted and has to be repeatedly urged by Rama to try one.

Rama: Lakshmana, eat. *Vah!* (with great hesitation, Lakshmana selects a *ber* and slowly brings it to his lips, a look of disgust on his face; Rama continues to eat, beaming)

Shabari: They're good, right? They're sweet?

Rama: I have no words adequate to praise them. It's as if, after so many years, my mother Kausalya is feeding me with her own hand. Lakshmana, God himself can't get such sweet fruit in his heavenly world of Vaikuntha!

Lakshmana appears to remain unconvinced throughout, but the visual dialogue of love between the old woman and Rama continues for some time, punctuated by his munching of *ber*.

The rest of the episode more or less follows the literary *Ramayanas*. After describing the way to Sugriva's hideout, Shabari takes the brothers to Matanga's fire altar, above which an unearthly light shines. Here they bow reverently and Shabari entreats Rama, "before I abandon this lowborn body of mine," to bestow on her "the knowledge of bhakti" (*bhakti jnana*). After the disclaimer that he is only repeating what his gurus have taught him (for Sagar's Rama, like Valmiki's, generally denies direct knowledge of his own divinity), he does so. This is accomplished through a silent tableau of Rama raising his hand in blessing over the kneeling Shabari, while a male voice-over sings the famous passage from Tulsidas describing the ninefold devotional path (*navadha bhakti*; *Ramcaritmanas* 3.35.7-36.5). Shabari then takes her leave, disappearing into a flame that hovers in the air while the brothers bow reverently.

Sagar's portrayal is a pastiche of elements from various sources, and lines of dialogue occasionally echo Valmikian *shlokas* or familiar *caupais* from the *Manas*. Moreover, several elements in the episode (Shabari's sweeping the path and decorating it with flowers, her apparently demented behavior, and her charged encounter with the ascetics) indicate the director's familiarity with the Priyadas story or some adaptation thereof—possibly the Gita Press version cited earlier. Having Rama and Lakshmana come upon Shabari hard at work decorating their path, immediately after her encounter with the ascetics, is a clever and original rendering of their first contact (she neither leaps up to meet them, as in Valmiki, nor huddles ashamedly in her hut, as in Priyadas),

calculated for maximum emotional effect: the initial case of mistaken identity yields to intense remorse at having failed to recognize the object of her long vigil, mixed with joy and relief at seeing him at last. The *ber* are present, of course, and two different scenes, each accompanied by verbal confirmation of what is happening, leave no room for doubt about Sagar's position on the matter of the tainted food-offering. Like Priyadas, Anjaninandan Sharan, and numerous poster artists, he confronts viewers with fruit that would be unacceptable to almost any Indian, and underscores his message with closeups of Lakshmana's appalled face (here, as elsewhere, Sagar follows the venerable tradition of allowing Rama's alter-ego to serve as a "straight man" and audience-surrogate, who displays the conventional worldly emotions that Rama's own idealistic actions will pointedly refute).

But on the matter of Shabari's social status, Sagar takes a softer line. There are several references to Shabari, both by herself and others, as a "bhil woman," and in the last scene she speaks of wanting to abandon her body "born in a low community" (*nic kul men utpann*). There is nothing surprising in this, since her very name unambiguously declares her status. But the scene of Shabari's confrontation with the four hermits departs tellingly from the popular Priyadas story of her harassment prior to Rama's arrival. The self-righteous ascetics do not touch Shabari or make any reference to her polluting status; they simply mock her apparent "craziness" in making daily preparation for a visitor who never seems to arrive—and this too is immediately tempered by their recognition of her exemplary devotion. Rather than annoy her, they just take another path, and of course Lake Pampa suffers no pollution. Compared to Priyadas's telling, the sadhus here get off easily, as does nearly everyone guilty of misdeeds that drive the plot—from Kaikeyi and Manthara to Ravana and Kumbhakarna, and indeed to Rama himself—in this maximally non-offensive production. The result, at moments like this, is an unmitigated *sweetness* that some may find cloying.

Especially in the case of Shabari, one may observe that the television director's social and ethical sweet tooth has taken the bite out of her tale as popularized by Priyadas. The honey-like, juicy taste of emotional bhakti remains much in evidence, but what is regrettably missing are other flavors that might enrich the repast, and that the eighteenth-century hagiographer skillfully conveyed: the sourness of arrogant, high-born male ascetics, puffed up with pride over their mechanical rites and carefully-calculated austerities, and the bitterness of social exclusion based on birth-status (vicariously felt by hearers of the story)—of a life spent cowering in the shadows, in terror of polluting other human beings and even God. Perhaps the video-Valmiki realized that the bad taste of such themes might linger long and produce indigestion in the body politic.

¹From a song about Shabari, presumably by a folk poet, quoted (without further identification) in Hanumanprasad Poddar (ed.), *Kalyan: bhakta caritrak* (Gorakhpur, U.P.: Gita Press, 1952), 294.

²Unless otherwise specified, I cite the Baroda critical edition, in Sheldon Pollock's translation, *The Ramayana of Valmiki, Volume III: Aranyakanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

3

On the usage of such labels as *shabara*, *kirata*, *pulinda*, *nishadha*, etc. in ancient Sanskrit texts, see Aloka Parasher, *Mlecchas in Early India* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1991), especially pp. 179-221. In general, Parasher's comprehensive study documents the use of such terms to denote *mlecchajatis*—people born into communities outside the geographical limits and sphere of influence of brahmanical *varna*-based ideology—and (increasingly over time) of *shabara* and *pulinda* as "generic names for barbarous tribes," often associated with the Vindhya region, but sometimes located elsewhere (ibid., p. 187, 191). *êabara* and its variants (e.g., *sabara*, *savara*, *saora*) have been applied in modern times to "tribal" ethnic groups found from Tamil Nadu (see Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 7 vols. Madras: Government Press, 1909; 6:305) to Orissa (see Frederique Apffel Marglin, "Death and Regeneration: Brahmin and Non-Brahmin Narratives." In Diana L. Eck and Francoise Mallison (eds.), *Devotion Divine*, 209-30. Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1991; p. 221); note the comments of one of Marglin's *shabara* interviewees: "In all the *yugas* the *shabar*as are the most devoted to Bhagavan. In the *treta yuga*, the age of Rama, the *shabar*as were good friends with Rama and they helped him cross rivers in their boats...." (Ibid.) Indeed, Guha, the tribal chief who first befriends Rama in the forest and escorts him across the Ganges, is identified as a *shabara* in some texts, especially in *Ramayana* narratives from northeastern India. That he and his followers are "outsiders" of a decidedly base and impure sort is also occasionally emphasized, e.g., in Balaramadasa's (early sixteenth century) Oriya *Jagamohana ramayana*: "The hair on their bodies was frightening to see, the languages they spoke impossible to understand. Some wore their hair in heavy locks. One chewed on chunks of meat scorched in a fire. The bodies of some were smeared with ashes, castor-seed oil oozed down from the hair of the heads of others...." (quoted in W. L. Smith, *Ramayana Traditions in Eastern India*. Stockholm: University of Stockholm, Department of

Indology, 1988; reprint, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1995; pp. 68-69).

4

Gita Press, *Shrimad Valmiki Ramayana* (2 vols.; Gorakhpur, U.P.: Gita Press, 1976), 1:665, 3.74.11 and 1:666, 3.74.31.

5

Cited in Pollock, *op. cit.* (1991), p. 354.

6

George Hart and Hank Heifetz (trans.), *The Forest Book of the Ramayana of Kampan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 298-99.

7

C. R. Sarma, *The Ramayana in Telugu and Tamil* (Madras: Lakshminarayana Granthamala, 1973), p. 93.

8

Swami Tapasyananda (trans.), *Adhyatma ramayana* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1985), p. 166.

9

ibid., p. 167.

10

ibid., pp. 169-70.

¹¹Other examples could be added; thus neither Madhava Kandali's (ca. 1350) Assamese *Ramayana*, nor Krittibasa's fifteenth-century Bengali epic mention the offering of *ucchishta* fruit, and W. L. Smith observes that the episode generally "is not at all well represented in our eastern vernacular Ramayanas" (*op. cit.*, pp. 49-50, 125). Of the two references to the tainted food offering that Smith cites, the earliest is found in Balaramadasa's *Jagamohana ramayana*, in which Shabari serves Rama mangoes, concerning which he remarks, "If they were good, why didn't you mark them with your teeth?" (*ibid.*, p. 125)—which (like other examples cited above) seems to allude to an untold story, even as it makes the Lord himself, rather than his devotee, the instigator of the implied transgression. Not until the late-eighteenth-century *Jagadrama ramayana* in Bengali is the offering of pre-tasted fruit explicitly

mentioned, and it prompts Rama to think, "If I feel disgust and do not eat this fruit, my name as one who is obligated to his devotees will be gone at once. (Therefore) I must eat the leavings of Shabari." (ibid, p. 111). These references support the conclusion that the matter of the *ucchishtha* food is either avoided by the authors of literary *Ramayanas*, or that it developed at a comparatively late date.

12

Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. (Revised ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) p. 1052.

13

George A. Grierson, "Gleanings from the *Bhaktamala*." (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1909: 607-644), p. 608.

14

Sitaramsharan Bhagvanprasad Rupkala (ed.), *Gosvami Nabha-ji ki shri Bhaktmal, shri Priya Das-ji pranita tika-kavitta*. (Reprint ed. Lucknow: Tejkumar Press, 1962), p. 82.

15

E.g., in Hanumanprasad Poddar (ed.), *Kalyan: bhakta caritrnk* (Gorakhpur, U.P.: Gita Press, 1952; discussed below) and in Dayashankar Avasthi, "Devesh," *shabari caritra, khand kavya* (Lucknow: Ramdev Avasthi, 1975).

16

Poddar (ed.), *Kalyan: bhakta caritrnk*, p. 292.

17

Ibid., pp. 293-96.

18

Anjaninandan Sharan, *Manas-piyush*, 12 volumes (1925-56). Volume 8, *Aranya kand*. (Ayodhya: Manas-Piyush Karyalay, 1952), p. 324.

19

Poddar, op. cit., p. 294.

20

Sharan, op. cit., p. 326.

21

Ibid.

22

For the metaphor of the Vedic corpus as oceanic but "salty" see Vasudha Narayanan, *The Vernacular Veda* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1994) pp. 26-27. Pollock's phrase occurs in his article "From Discourse of Ritual to Discourse of Power in Sanskrit Culture" (*Journal of Ritual Studies* 4:2, 1990; 315-45), p. 342 note 49.

23

See Philip Lutgendorf, "Ramayan: the Video," in *The Drama Review* 34:2 (1990) 127-76; esp. pp. 141-57.