



## **An Overview of the Commentaries on the Rāmāyana: A Brief Study**

**Dr. Shiladitya Satpathi\***

### *Abstract*

Ancient Sanskrit literature is distinguished by a rich tradition of commentarial works, which are essential for a deeper understanding of its texts. This study provides a comprehensive overview of the commentaries on the *Rāmāyana*, one of ancient India's seminal epics. The *Rāmāyana* has inspired a multitude of commentaries, each reflecting the intellectual, doctrinal, and sectarian contexts of its author. Written over centuries, these commentaries offer valuable insights into the text's intricate layers of meaning and historical interpretations. The tradition of commentary in Sanskrit literature extends from Vedic texts to classical poetry, with notable contributions from scholars such as Sāyaṇācārya and Mallinātha. Commentaries on the *Rāmāyana*, spanning from the medieval period to modern times, highlight diverse perspectives and interpretative traditions. This study examines several key commentaries on the *Rāmāyana*, including the '*Rāmāyanaṇabhūṣaṇa*' by Govindarāja, the '*Tilakaṭīkā*' by Rāmavarmā, the '*Śīromāṇi*' by Śivasahāya, and others. Each commentary offers unique insights into the epic, addressing both philosophical and grammatical aspects. For instance, Govindarāja's '*Rāmāyanaṇabhūṣaṇa*' is renowned for its comprehensive analysis, while Ahobal's '*Tanīśloki*' is noted for its clarity. The '*Dharmākutaṃ*' by 'Trayambakmakhi' and the '*Manoharā*' by LokanāthaChakraborty contribute significantly to the understanding of the text's religious and philosophical dimensions. By exploring these commentaries, the study illuminates how scholars have engaged with the *Ramayana* over time, revealing the depth of its interpretative traditions and its impact on Sanskrit literature. This analysis not only enhances our understanding of the *Ramayana* but also underscores the enduring relevance of commentarial scholarship in preserving and elucidating ancient texts.

**Keywords:** Rāmāyana, Sanskrit commentaries, Govindarāja, Tilakaṭīkā, Śīromāṇi, Ahobal, interpretative traditions, ancient texts.

### **Introduction**

Ancient Sanskrit literature is renowned not only for its primary texts but also for the rich tradition of commentarial works that have developed around these texts over centuries. These commentaries, known as *ṭīkā*, *bhāṣya*, *bibṛiti*, and *tippanī*, among others, play a crucial role in elucidating the complex and layered meanings of the original works. They are indispensable tools for scholars and readers seeking a deeper understanding of the texts. The *Rāmāyana*, one of the seminal epics of ancient India, has inspired a vast array of commentaries. These commentaries are not merely academic exercises but are reflections of the intellectual, doctrinal, and sectarian contexts in which they were written. They offer insights into how various commentators have interpreted the text, shedding light on different layers of meaning and providing explanations that are often not immediately apparent from the primary text alone. While the primary texts of Sanskrit literature are held in high esteem and continue to captivate modern scholars, the commentaries are equally valuable. They offer a window into the interpretative traditions and scholarly practices of the past. Each commentator, drawing upon their deep knowledge of the texts and their

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\* Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, Chakdaha College, Nadia, West Bengal, Email: shiladitya2414@gmail.com



doctrinal affiliations, provides unique perspectives that contribute to a richer understanding of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is important to recognize that the interpretations provided in these commentaries are deeply rooted in the intellectual and spiritual traditions of their time. They are not merely personal opinions but are shaped by the commentators' connections with their doctrinal backgrounds. Thus, these works are more than just explanatory notes; they are integral to understanding the sacred texts themselves.

In exploring the commentaries on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, we uncover not just the meanings of words and verses, but also the historical and cultural contexts that influenced their interpretations. This study serves as a guide to appreciating the depth and diversity of commentary literature, highlighting its significance in the broader landscape of ancient Sanskrit scholarship.

### Background:

The tradition of commentarial literature in ancient Sanskrit scholarship is a testament to the depth and complexity of interpretative practices that have evolved over millennia. This tradition is pivotal for understanding and appreciating the subtleties of ancient texts, including the revered epic *Rāmāyaṇa*. The commentaries on the *Rāmāyaṇa* are part of a broader tradition that includes significant commentarial works on other classical Sanskrit texts.

In the Vedic context, celebrated commentators such as Sāyaṇācārya, Veṅkaṭamādhava, and Skandasvāmin have crafted influential commentaries on the Vedas. These works often offer multiple interpretations of Vedic mantras and words, reflecting various aspects of Vedic thought—be it sacrificial, spiritual, or aligned with the *Nairukta* tradition. Despite occasional discord with modern interpretations, these commentaries are essential for understanding the meanings of obscure or difficult Vedic terms. The commentary tradition has roots in the etymological explanations provided by scholars like Yāska in his *Nirukta*, which serves as a crucial resource for interpreting Vedic words through their etymology. Similarly, in the realm of Sanskrit poetry and poetics, the importance of commentaries is equally profound. For instance, the *Meghadūta* by Kālidāsa, a seminal work in Sanskrit literature, has been extensively analyzed by commentators such as Dakṣiṇāvartinātha, Bharata Mallika, and Mallinātha. These commentaries provide insights into various facets of Kālidāsa's poetic genius, elucidating the poem through different schools of thought, including the aesthetic and suggestive theories of Alaṃkāraśāstra. Mallinātha's *Samjīvanī* commentary, for example, offers a rich analysis of the poem's emotive and suggestive elements, showcasing the commentator's deep engagement with the text.

The role of commentators extends beyond mere explanation; they also function as interpreters who navigate the intricate layers of meaning embedded in the texts. Their work helps in understanding the text's grammatical correctness, stylistic elements, and thematic significance. In dramatic poetry, commentators evaluate plays through the lens of *Nāṭyaśāstra* and consider variations in textual readings, thus contributing to a nuanced appreciation of the drama. The extensive commentary literature on prominent texts like the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, Mammaṭācārya's *Kāvya prakāśa*, and Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* underscores the integral



role of these works in the scholarly tradition. Some commentaries, such as VācaspatiMiśra's on the Indian ṣaḍdarśanas or Abhinavagupta's *Lochana* on Ānandavardhana's *Dhvanyāloka*, have achieved a status nearly equal to that of the original texts. They are indispensable for a comprehensive understanding of the original works.

### Commentaries on the Rāmāyaṇa:

It is generally believed that around 30 commentaries were written on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the epic composed by the sage Vālmīki. Many of these commentaries have been lost over time, some are mentioned only in historical references, and a few remain unpublished. However, approximately 15 Sanskrit commentaries are currently available and in circulation. Most of these were composed during the medieval period in India, roughly between the 12th and 18th centuries CE. Several of these commentaries were published in the 19th and 20th centuries in cities such as Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. This article provides a brief introduction to some of these notable commentaries, highlighting their significance and contributions to the understanding of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

#### 1. Rāmāyaṇabhūṣaṇa:

Among the various commentaries on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the commentary titled *Rāmāyaṇabhūṣaṇa*<sup>1</sup> is particularly well-known. This commentary was authored by Govindarāja, a scholar from the Kauśika lineage of Kāñchī. A Vaiṣṇava of the ŚrīSampradāya and a disciple of ĀcāryaŚaṭhagopadeśika, Govindarājais believed to have composed this work in the mid-16th century CE. The renowned scholar M. Krishnamachariar, in his '*History of Classical Sanskrit Literature*' (3rd edition, 1974, Delhi), refers to the *Rāmāyaṇabhūṣaṇa* as "the most well-known commentary," describing it as "...learned, discursive, and authoritative, comprehending all that a reader may desire for a proper appreciation of the poem."

According to scholars, Govindarāja's commentary effectively meets the needs of readers from multiple perspectives. Notably, the commentary provides distinct names for the seven sections (Kāṇḍas) of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. These names are Maṇimañjīrā, Pītāmbara, Ratnamekhala, Muktaḥāra, Śṛṅgāratilaka, Maṇimukuta, and Ratnakirīṭa. The *Rāmāyaṇabhūṣaṇa* has been published multiple times, including editions from Madras and Delhi. For instance, the version first printed by the Gujarati Printing Press in Mumbai (1920) and later reprinted by Parimal Publications in Delhi (1991) demonstrates that Govindarāja's work was well-regarded by scholars. The dedication in the commentary reads —

"Śrīrāmāyaṇabhūṣaṇehatramukuṭībhūtāmparāmuttare  
granthevyākṛtimātanōtividduṣāmpṛīḥpunarvardhatām."

This reflects Govindarāja's intention to make a significant contribution to the appreciation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* through his scholarly work.

#### 2. Sarvārthasāra

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1 PanditHrishikeshShastri (Ed.), BI, 188691; PanchananTarkaratna (Ed.), *Mūla O Baṅgānuvāda*, Kālikātā, 1361; Yāñgeśvara's *Baṅgānuvāda*, 1292



Another notable commentary on the *Rāmāyaṇa* is *Sarvārthasāra*, written by VenkatKrishnādhari. Krishnādhari was a disciple of ĀcāryaŚaṭhagopa and is believed to have composed this work around the 15th century CE. The commentary is renowned for its concise yet insightful explanations of key verses in Vālmīki's epic, offering a clear understanding of the underlying philosophical and moral teachings of the text. *Sarvārthasāra* plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between the traditional interpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the evolving philosophical discourses of the time.

VenkatKrishnadhari, being a part of the ŚrīVaiṣṇava tradition, emphasized the devotional aspects of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, particularly focusing on the depiction of Lord Rāma as the ideal ruler and incarnation of Viṣṇu. His work is also noted for its linguistic precision and attention to the finer nuances of Sanskrit grammar, making it a valuable resource for scholars and readers alike.

### 3. Tilaka:

Another renowned commentary on Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is the *Tilakaṭīkā*<sup>2</sup>. At the end of each section (Kāṇḍa), the commentator writes, "Itiśrīrāmābhīrāmeśrīrāmīyerāmāyaṇatilakevālmīkīyādikāvyaṭṭarakāṇḍaekādaśottarāśatatamaḥsargaḥ". This description indicates that the commentator's name was Rāma. In the reprinted edition published by Parimal Publications in Delhi, which includes three commentaries, it is clearly stated as "Rāma-praṇīta-RāmāyaṇaTilaka" (Tilaka commentary composed by Rāma).

Many believe that the author of this commentary was Rāmavarma, the king of ŚrīṅgerīPuri. However, since the renowned grammarian NāgeśaBhaṭṭa, also known as NāgojiBhaṭṭa, was the chief scholar under Rāmavarma, there is speculation that Nāgeśa might have written the commentary. Regardless, this commentary was composed in the latter half of the 18th century CE and has been praised by scholars for its authoritative and scholarly nature.

### 4. Śīromāṇi:

Among the various commentaries on Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Śīromāṇi* is particularly well-known. In the reprinted edition from Delhi, which includes three commentaries, the *Śīromāṇi* is one of them. The commentator's name appears as Śīvasahāya in the text—"Śīvasahāya-praṇītaRāmāyaṇa-śīromāṇi". However, at the end of the Uttarakāṇḍa, the final section of the commentary includes the phrase "Vaṃśīdharaḥśrīyutaḥ". This has led some to believe that the *Śīromāṇi* commentary was composed by both Śīvasahāya and Vaṃśīdhara.

### 5. Rāmāyaṇa-tattvadīpikā

The commentary known as *Rāmāyaṇa-tattvadīpikā*<sup>3</sup> was authored by Yogi MaheśvaraTīrtha and is also known as *Maheśvaratīrthīyatattvadīpikā*. It is sometimes simply referred to as *Tīrthīya*. According to prevalent views, MaheśvaraTīrtha was a disciple of the renowned ascetic NarāyaṇaTīrtha of Kāśī. Given the time frame of NarāyaṇaTīrtha, the commentary is accepted to have been written in the 17th century

<sup>2</sup> Published by Gujarat Printing Press

<sup>3</sup> Published by Sri Venkateswar Steam Press, Mumbai



CE, predating Govindarāja's commentary. This commentary has been published multiple times from Madras, Mumbai, and elsewhere.

## 6. Rāmānujīyam

The Rāmānujīyam or Śrīrāmānujīyam commentary was authored by Rāmānuja. However, it is believed that this Rāmānuja is not the same as the commentator of the Śrībhāṣya. Scholars date the composition of this commentary to the 14th century CE.

## 7. Manoharā

LokanāthaChakraborty wrote a commentary called *Manoharā* on the Bengali version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, published in 1951 from Kolkata. Though Lokanātha wrote this commentary on the Bengali text, he was also well-known among readers of other versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. A resident of Jessore district in East Bengal, LokanāthaChakraborty composed the *Manoharā* commentary on the Gauḍīya version. The commentator was familiar with other versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and made efforts to rectify disputed verses through textual criticism.

## 8. Dharmākṛtaṃ

Another notable commentary on the *Rāmāyaṇa* is *Dharmākṛtaṃ* by Trambakamakhī. M. Krishnamachariar praised this commentary, stating that "Dharmākṛtaṃ is a splendid critique on the *Rāmāyaṇa*." The commentator Trambakmakhī, the son of Gāṅgādhara, a minister in the court of King Ekoji of Thanjavur, attempted to interpret the significance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* according to Vedic and mythological traditions. The commentary was written in the 17th century CE.

## 9. Taniślokī

The Taniślokī commentary was authored by Ahobal. Another commentary by Ahobal, named Bālmīki-hṛdayam, has also been identified. He likely composed the Taniślokī in the 16th century CE. Some scholars believe that both Ahobals might be the same person.

## 10. Rāmāyaṇa-dīpikā

Among other commentaries on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, VidyānāthaDikṣita's *Rāmāyaṇa-dīpikā* (circa 15th century CE) holds a significant place. Vidyānātha was also the author of *Smṛtimuktāphala*, a work on dharma and ethics.

## 11. Rāmāyaṇakatak

Mādhavayogī's *Kataka* commentary (circa 18th century CE) is particularly noteworthy. Mādhavayogī possessed exceptional scholarship in Vedānta and other śāstras. His explanations of the complex verses of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are especially engaging. In his commentary, he meticulously indicates the number of verses for each canto separately.

## 12. Bṛhat and Laghu-vivarāṇa





ĪśvaraDikṣita's *Bṛhat-vivaraṇa* and *Laghu-vivaraṇa* (circa 16th century CE) are significant contributions to Sanskrit literature. These works demonstrate his deep insight and analytical approach to the texts he commented on.

Several brief commentaries and selected verse commentaries on the *Rāmāyaṇa* have also been written, such as *Chaturarthī*, *Rāmāyaṇa-sāra-candrikā*, *Rāmāyaṇa-viśama-padārtha-vyākhyāna*, and *Rāmāyaṇa-tātparya-dīpikā*. These works discuss the *Rāmāyaṇa* from various perspectives. For instance, *Chaturarthī* provides four different interpretations of several important verses from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The author's name is unknown. The *Rāmāyaṇa-tātparya-dīpikā* focuses on the philosophical and religious significance of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Similarly, the *Rāmāyaṇa-tattvadarpaṇa* and the *Rāmāyaṇa-viśama-padārtha-avyākhyāna* commentaries aim to explain the more complex verses of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Modern scholar M. Krishnamachariar described the latter as "A running gloss on difficult portions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*."

Following a brief discussion on the significant commentaries on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is possible to mention several other works related to the *Rāmāyaṇa* that explore its underlying themes. For example, works such as *Rāmāyaṇa-tātparyanirṇaya*, *Rāmāyaṇa-tattva-darśana*, and *Mantra-Rāmāyaṇa* delve into various aspects of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Among these, the *Mantra-Rāmāyaṇa* was written by the renowned commentator of the *Mahābhārata*, Nīlakaṇṭha. In this work, Nīlakaṇṭha attempts to align the underlying principles of the *Rāmāyaṇa* with Vedic thoughts by citing Vedic mantras. This text brings to mind Trambakmakhi's commentary called *Dharmākṛta*. Given that Nīlakaṇṭha's time is considered to be the latter half of the 17th century and the early 18th century, the composition of this work is roughly estimated to be in the early 18th century.

## Conclusion:

The rich tradition of commentaries on the *Rāmāyaṇa* illustrates the profound intellectual engagement with this ancient epic across centuries. These commentaries, crafted by erudite scholars, offer more than just explanations of the verses; they delve into the poetic, philosophical, and religious dimensions of the text, providing a comprehensive understanding that extends beyond Valmiki's original work. Each commentator, while adhering to the structural elements of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, brings unique insights that reflect their own doctrinal and philosophical perspectives. For instance, Govindarāja's *Rāmāyaṇa-bhūṣaṇa* commentary exemplifies the integration of classical ornamentation theories from works such as Mammata's *Kāvya-prakāśa* and Daṇḍi's *Kāvya-darśa*, alongside Pāṇinian grammar, highlighting the commentator's vast knowledge and skill in intertextual analysis.

This tradition of commentary writing is a testament to the prominence of 'commentary literature' within Sanskrit scholarship, with the *Rāmāyaṇa* standing as a central pillar in this literary genre. Many of the available commentaries on this epic were written during the medieval period, spanning the 11th to 18th centuries CE, reflecting the scholarly rigor of that era. Although some commentaries have been lost or remain unpublished, the extant works are of significant value, contributing greatly to the preservation and interpretation of the epic. Commentaries such as Govindarāja's *Rāmāyaṇa-bhūṣaṇa* and Nīlakaṇṭha's *Bhāratabhāvadeepikā*



demonstrate not only the depth of Sanskrit scholarship but also the enduring appeal of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* as subjects of study.

The commentators' ability to weave together textual analysis, poetic evaluation, and grammatical precision elevates these works beyond mere academic exercises. They provide a window into the religious, cultural, and intellectual contexts of their time, allowing modern readers to engage with the *Rāmāyaṇa* through multiple layers of interpretation. Each commentary offers a fresh lens through which the epic can be understood, making it accessible to new generations of scholars and devotees alike.

In conclusion, the commentaries on the *Rāmāyaṇa* are invaluable resources that deepen our appreciation of the epic's literary, philosophical, and cultural significance. They offer an enduring contribution to the field of Sanskrit literature and continue to guide scholars in exploring the multifaceted richness of one of India's most celebrated epics. Through these works, the *Rāmāyaṇa* remains a living text, constantly reinterpreted and reimagined in light of evolving scholarly and cultural discourses.

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