



Thadaka Reimagined: Vayalar Ramavarma's Dravidian Queen and the Politics of Epic Revision

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Article Info

Received: 03 Aug 2026,

Received in revised form: 29 Aug 2026,

Accepted: 02 Sep 2026,

Available online: 07 Sep 2026

Keywords— *Thadaka, Ramayana, Rama-Kadha, cultural identity, marginalized voices*

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Abstract

This paper reads Vayalar Ramavarma's poem "Thadaka enna Dravida Rajakumari" as an act of epic revision that unsettles canonical Ramayana ethics by restoring voice, agency, and cultural specificity to a figure traditionally demonized. Situating the poem within scholarship on Ramayana plurality—from Sanskrit, Buddhist, and Jain variants to regional and tribal tellings in Wayanad and Kerala—the study traces how epic meanings are historically produced by power, ritual authority, and cultural displacement. Close reading reveals Vayalar's double intervention: a feminist reclamation that rehumanizes Thadaka as a woman whose desire and subjectivity are obliterated by ritualized violence; and a postcolonial/ethno-cultural critique that recasts her as a Dravidian princess whose erasure indexes Aryanizing narrative processes. The poem's landscape imagery, devotional registers, and rhetorical strategies are analyzed to show how local memory, temple performance (notably Tholpavakoothu), and place-based Ramayanas supply the cultural resources for this counter-narrative. By interrogating Rama's moral authority and the interpretive violence that precedes physical killing, the essay argues that Vayalar's revision destabilizes monolithic heroic frameworks and offers an ethical alternative centered on recognition, plurality, and the politics of memory. The paper concludes that "Thadaka enna Dravida Rajakumari" exemplifies how literary reimaginings can recover marginalized voices, challenge hegemonic traditions, and renew contemporary debates on gender, caste, and cultural identity.

Introduction

The Ramayana is not a single, unchanging epic but a living tradition that has evolved across centuries, regions, languages, and communities. Its history is marked by

variation rather than uniformity, and this diversity is precisely what makes it one of the most enduring narratives of Indian civilization. Sukumar Sen, in his important Bengali work *Ramkathar Prak Itihas* (1977), approached

the Ramakatha not as a believer but as a historian. He distinguished historical inquiry from religious faith, arguing that history depends on evidence and logic, while religion rests on faith. Yet he also recognized that both history and religion possess their own truth, even if they do not always agree. His method is significant because it opens the Ramayana to critical study as a cultural and historical phenomenon rather than a fixed sacred text.

Sen's work begins with the *Rig Veda* and traces the Ram-Katha through Buddhist Jataka and Jain traditions. These versions already reveal how fluid the epic was in early Indian imagination. In some Jataka stories, Rama and Sita are described as uterine siblings, and in one narrative the abduction of Sita by Ravana does not occur at all. Jain retellings shift the center of the story further: Rama's mother becomes Aparajita, Lakshmana kills Ravana, and Lakshmana, not Rama, becomes the principal heroic figure. In both Buddhist and Jain traditions, the epic characters are even depicted as vegetarians, showing how deeply the story changed as it moved across religious worlds.

Later scholarship sharpened this understanding of the Ramayana's plurality. Bhupendranath Datta saw the epic as "a brahmanical version of the class struggle between the Kshatriyas and the Brahmins," while Rajsekhar Basu's Bengali translation exposed uncomfortable details often hidden in devotional retellings: Rama and Lakshmana hunted animals for meat, Rama killed Sambuk, and Bali was slain from behind while in battle. As K.S. Singh observed, "Rama did not object to Sugriva keeping Bali's wife Tara," even though Rama condemned Bali for taking Sugriva's wife. Such contradictions show that the epic's moral universe is far more complex than its idealized modern image.

Anthropologists and historians have further demonstrated that tribal, folk, and women's Ramayana's preserve alternate moral worlds. As Romila Thapar writes, "The Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history," for its many versions articulate the "social aspirations and ideological concerns" of different communities. T.B. Naik, Molly Kaushal, N.N. Vyas, and Nabanita Dev Sen all reveal how

the epic is continually reimagined by forest communities, women, and regional cultures. In these versions, Rama may appear human rather than divine, Ravana noble rather than demonic, and Sita central rather than secondary.

Wayanad's Ramayana traditions show how a great epic becomes local, lived, and socially meaningful when it is carried into the memory of specific communities. As Azees Tharuvana observes,

not a single Adivasi community in Wayanad has an objectively written history; stories told in their oral literature, beliefs and myths are counted as their history. These myths and folklores, it is believed, have their roots in the tribal community's need to reconstruct identity and overcome an existential crisis which comes from living on the margins of civilisation for long. Most tribal communities in Wayanad possess a rich treasure of oral literature. For centuries, they have been transmitting their literary tradition from one generation to the next through various mediums like folk songs, folk tales and legends (Tharuvana)

These oral traditions are preserved through songs, tales, and legends passed down for generations. This is especially significant in Wayanad, where the presence of tribes, caste migrants, and diverse devotional practices has produced Ramayana versions that differ sharply from the canonical one.

The *Adiya Ramayana* localizes the epic in a familiar Wayanad landscape. Rama and Lakshmana appear as warrior brothers who search for Sita in the forests of Pulpally and Thirunelli, while Ravana takes Sita to Lanka in a bullock cart rather than across the sea. In this version, Lanka lies beyond a river, Sita is not yet married when she is taken, and Hanuman discovers her only after seeing an Adiya woman washing her clothes. The story then turns even more local: Sita gives birth to twins near

Ashramkolly; the boys cultivate crops such as rice, yam, beans, coffee, and pepper, and the conflict begins when Rama's horse destroys their fields. Instead of war, the story ends through mediation by local deities such as Valliyoorkavu Bhagavathy, Pulpally Bhagavathy, and Kottiyoor Perumal, showing a community-based ethic of reconciliation. The *Chetti Ramayana* also reshapes the epic around Wayanad's geography and social world. Here, Lakshmana abandons Sita in the forest; she is cared for by Valmiki, and her grief forms the lake called Sitakulam at Ponkuzhy. Lava and Kusa are tied to local forest life, forest deities guide the action, and Sita ultimately returns to Mother Earth at Jadayattakavu. As in the Adiya version, the local setting is not incidental; it gives the community ownership over the narrative and turns the Ramayana into a story that reflects Wayanad's own ecology, deities, and social relations. Taken together, these versions show that the Ramayana in Wayanad is not a distant Sanskrit inheritance but a living, plural tradition shaped by local memory, migration, and community imagination. They make the epic familiar, ethical, and shared, while also affirming the agency of communities often left out of the canonical telling.

One of Kerala's most enduring folk art traditions, *Tholpavakoothu*, presents the Ramayana in a distinct and localized form. Rather than reproducing Valmiki's Sanskrit epic in a fixed or literal manner, it re-creates the story through performance, song, shadow, and oral commentary, turning the Ramayana into a living cultural experience shaped by Kerala's temple traditions and agrarian imagination.

In this tradition, the influence of the *Kamba Ramayanam* is especially important. Its devotional tone, emotional intensity, and humanized character portrayals help make Rama more relatable and Sita more resilient, qualities that resonate strongly with Kerala's audiences. The performance is not limited to elite literary culture; through trilingual narration in Tamil, Sanskrit, and Malayalam, the *pulavars* make the epic accessible to temple-goers of varied social and educational backgrounds. Their improvisations, idiomatic expressions, and oral storytelling practices democratize the epic and keep it culturally alive.

The visual dimension of *Tholpavakoothu* is equally significant. Its puppets, numbering around seventy-one characters, represent gods, demons, kings, sages, and other epic figures, translating the Ramayana's vast cosmological world into shadow and form. The craftsmanship of these figures reflects Kerala's syncretic aesthetic, where Dravidian and Aryan elements coexist with local artistic idioms. In this sense, the performance does more than narrate an epic; it embeds the epic within Kerala's own cultural landscape.

At the same time, *Tholpavakoothu* also negotiates and subtly unsettles Brahminical dominance. Although the Ramayana is often associated with orthodox religious authority, Kerala's temple arts developed in a social world shaped by fluid caste relations, matrilineal customs, and strong Dravidian influences. Within this context, *Tholpavakoothu* becomes not just an act of devotion but also a site of cultural mediation, where the Ramayana is reinterpreted through local sensibilities rather than imposed as a rigid canonical text.

Kerala has many place-names associated with Rama and Sita, such as Ramapuram, Ramakkalmedu, Seethathodu, Seethakuzhi, Seethamudi Mala, and Gurunadhan Mannu, which show how the epic has been embedded in local memory and landscape. Equally important are sites like Sabari Ashram and Sabari Peedom on the route to Sabarimala, where the story of Sabari's devotion to Rama has become part of a widely revered pilgrimage tradition. The legend of Jatayu at Cadayamangalam in Kollam further strengthens this connection: Jatayu is remembered as the vulture-figure who tried to rescue Sita from Ravana, fell wounded on Jatayupara, and waited to inform Rama of the abduction. These sacred sites suggest that the Ramayana in Kerala is not only a textual tradition but also a lived and remembered geography.

Malayalam literature and performance traditions also demonstrate the Ramayana's enduring importance. The *Kannassa Ramayanam* of the Niranam poets helped revive bhakti-oriented literary culture in the fourteenth century, while Ezhuthachan's *Adhyathma Ramayanam* became a foundational devotional

text in Malayalam households. It is still recited widely during *Karkitakam*, reinforcing its place in religious practice and domestic life. In addition, *Ramanattam*, the temple dance-drama created under Kottarakkara Thampuran, dramatized the Ramayana in eight plays and later influenced Kathakali.

Reclaiming Tadaka: From Yaksha Princess to 'Demoness' in Aryan Narrative

Vayalar Ramavarma's "Thadaka enna Dravida Rajakumari" is one of the most powerful reinterpretations of the Ramayana in Malayalam literature. Instead of repeating the traditional moral framing of Thadaka as a demoness, the poem reimagines her as a Dravidian princess whose body, desire, and identity are marked by cultural and political erasure. In doing so, Vayalar does not merely retell a familiar episode. He challenges the authority of an epic tradition that has long been read through Aryan-centered and patriarchal assumptions.

A counter-reading of the epic

The poem begins by placing Thadaka in a vivid natural and cultural landscape:

"Vindhyashailatthinte thaazhvarayil
nishagandhikal mottidum phaalguna
sandhyayil
parvati poojakku poonulluvaan vanna
dravida raajakumari njan thaadaka" (1-4)

These opening lines are crucial because Thadaka introduces herself not as a monster, but as a royal woman from a specific land and tradition. Tadaka introduces herself in the phrase "Dravida raajakumari" immediately overturns the usual epic image of her as a rakshasi. The poem therefore works as a counter-reading of the Ramayana, asking the reader to see through the labels imposed by the dominant narrative.

The traditional Ramayana presents Thadaka as a threat to sacrificial order and therefore as a figure to be eliminated. Vayalar's poem rejects that inherited logic. It suggests that the so-called "truth" of the epic is not neutral, but shaped by power, ritual authority, and cultural dominance. By restoring Thadaka's voice, the poem creates a space for the silenced side of the story.

Aryan invention and power

One of the poem's strongest features is its critique of what may be called the Aryan invention of cultural order. The poem does not simply describe an ancient conflict; it dramatizes the process by which a social system rewrites history, names enemies, and controls memory. The lines:

"Aaryagothathalavanmaar
anucharanmaarumaay
Dakshina Bharathabhoomiyil
sanghangal
sanghangalaayi vannu samskaara
samhitha aake
thiruthikkurichanaal" (15-19)

suggest a cultural invasion in which southern land, customs, and memory are rewritten by an external power. The poem frames this not as a peaceful civilizational exchange, but as an act of domination. The result is that the Dravidian world is cast as secondary, while the Aryan version becomes authoritative. Tadaka speaks with longing and irony to Rama, asking whether the Arya lineage will yield to the golden throne of the Suryavansha. The lines dramatize her emotional response and also carry a strong symbolic tension between desire, power, and dynasty.

"Mutthukilungum swaravumaayi
chodichu
mugdanuraga vivashayaayi thadaka.
Aryavamshatthinnadiyara veykkumo
suryavamshatthinte svarṇasimhāsanam"
(39-42)

This is why Thadaka's identity matters so much. She is not simply an individual woman in a mythological episode. She is a symbol of the Dravidian order that has been pushed to the margins. Her demonization in the Ramayana becomes, in Vayalar's hands, a sign of how dominant cultures create their others. The poem therefore exposes the politics hidden inside epic storytelling.

Thadaka as a Woman

The poem is also deeply feminist. It presents Thadaka as a woman who sees Rama, feels attraction, and moves toward him with longing.

This is a radical departure from the conventional reading, where her body is reduced to a threat and her femininity disappears beneath the label of demonhood. The poem says:

“Stree hridayathinulmaadam unarthuma
mohana
gopaanga bhang
nukarnnaval,kannadakkathe,
kannedukkathorabhoma
romaanchamaayi ninnal” (10-13)

These lines emphasize her emotional and sensual response. Thadaka is not depicted as violent in her desire; she is portrayed as someone moved by beauty. That is precisely what makes the later violence against her so disturbing. The poem suggests that her humanity is ignored because the epic order does not allow a woman like her to be seen as a full subject.

This is especially important in the scene where Rama is asked to kill her. The command comes not from moral reflection but from authority:

“Villu kulakkoo, sharam thodukkoo,
Raama, kolloo
nishachari thaadakayaanaval” (48)

The tragedy here is not only that Thadaka is killed, but that her womanhood is never considered. The poem turns that absence into its moral center.

“Adyamayi Ramante manmadhastram
maala chartthiya
rajakumaritan hrittadam
mattoraatrathal thakarnnu poy
stabdhanay putri viyogavyathayil
vindhyachalam” (49-50)

These lines say that Thadaka, the princess, was first affected by Rama's charm. But soon her heart was broken by another blow, and she was left in deep sorrow. The poet also compares her pain to a mother named Vindhyachala who has lost her daughter. This makes the scene emotional and sad, and it shows Thadaka as a tragic figure, not just an enemy.

CONCLUSION

The poem's celebration of Dravidian identity gives it its distinctive force. The Vindhya landscape, the southern earth, the royal imagery, and the invocation of Parvati worship all

work together to create a cultural world that belongs to Thadaka before the arrival of Aryan epic authority. This world is not presented as primitive or wild. It is presented as ancient, dignified, and spiritually grounded. The poem implies that Dravidian culture has its own forms of beauty, memory, devotion, and sovereignty. By contrast, the Aryan version of history appears as a system of replacement. The destruction of Dravidian crowns, the rewriting of cultural codes, and the slaying of the queen all become part of one symbolic pattern. In that sense, the poem is both literary and historical in its imagination. The place of Thadaka near the Western Ghats is especially significant. The landscape is not merely scenery. It becomes part of her identity. The Vindhya region and the forested southern terrain connect her to a geographic and civilizational memory that the poem wants to recover. She belongs to that land, and the land itself seems to witness her humiliation.

Vayalar's poem does not simply attack Rama as a character. Rather, it questions the moral framework that turns his act into a heroic necessity. The poem shows that Rama kills Thadaka without truly recognizing her as a woman or as a being capable of feeling. That is the ethical wound at the center of the poem. The violence is not only physical; it is interpretive. She is first defined as a demon, and only then destroyed. The poem's emotional structure makes this clear. Thadaka approaches with desire and vulnerability, while the ritual and royal authority surrounding Rama demand her elimination. This produces a tragic irony: the same tradition that celebrates Rama's righteousness also depends on the erasure of a woman's humanity. Vayalar forces the reader to confront that contradiction directly. In this sense, the poem is not anti-Rama in a simplistic way. It is anti-unquestioned-Rama. It refuses to accept the epic hero's moral authority without examining the cost paid by those turned into enemies.

The importance of “Thadaka enna Dravida Rajakumari” lies in its ability to reopen a closed epic story. It reminds readers that myths are not fixed truths. They are narratives shaped

by power, and they can be reread from the perspective of those whom history has silenced. The poem also has continuing relevance because it speaks to current debates about caste, gender, and cultural identity. It shows how women can be turned into symbols of danger when they fall outside accepted norms. It shows how southern identities can be subordinated to a dominant civilizational story. And it shows how literature can recover dignity for figures who have long been misread. In the end, Vayalar's poem is a brilliant act of revision. It reclaims Thadaka as a Dravidian queen, exposes the violence hidden inside heroic narrative, and asks the reader to see the Ramayana from the side of the defeated. That is why the poem remains powerful: it is not just a retelling, but a critique of how epics create meaning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I acknowledge the use of Perplexity tool and Grammarly to help with editing this manuscript. I used the tool to refine the wording, improve formal tone, and correct language.

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