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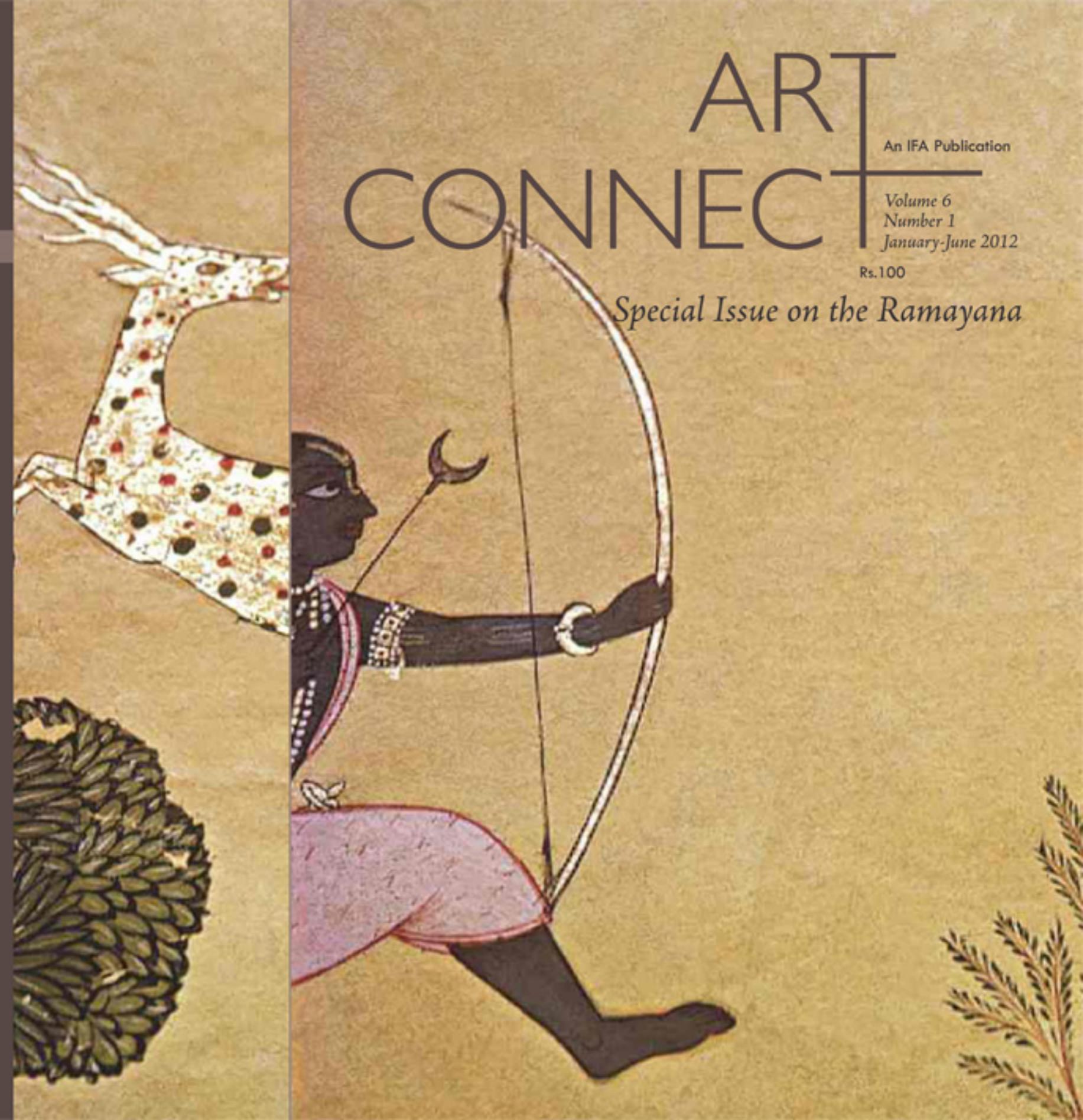
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Editorial

IFA has collaborated with Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts Research to bring you this special issue of *ArtConnect*, which examines, as the poet and scholar A.K. Ramanujan did so magnificently in his critical essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation", the multiple ways in which the *Ramayana* is transmitted and received. The issue is based on edited excerpts of some talks delivered at the Adishakti *Ramayana* Festival 2011 (16 to 23 February) in Puducherry, which was the third and last in an annual series exploring the pluralistic dimensions of the epic. The Festival was largely supported by the Ford Foundation. Southeast Asia was the focus last year, and the dialogue among artists and scholars from India, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia at the Festival underlined what Ramanujan had observed in his essay: "...how these hundreds of tellings of a story in different cultures, languages, and religious traditions relate to each other: what gets translated, transplanted, transposed".

An arresting example of a transplanted myth is the Malaysian *Ramayana*, the *Hikayat Maharaja Wana*. Scholar and translator Eddin Khoo provides the background to its shadow-puppetry version, the *Wayang Kulit Siam* specific to the state of Kelantan, which foregrounds Ravana and is rooted in the oral tradition. Political forces have been hard at work, says Khoo, to codify and 'cleanse' the free-flowing and eccentric *Wayang* as part of their attempts to censor and even deny Malaysia's pre-Islamic past.

Social psychologist Ashis Nandy calls our culture an epic culture, one that is predicated on plurality. As he points out in his essay on epic heroes, we have been, over the centuries, not only writing new versions of our epics but also relocating them in new cultural spaces according to the needs of communities, castes, sects, religions and language groups. Nandy speaks about ways of looking at the past that are beyond and outside history, an approach that counters that of historian Romila Thapar who, with logical precision, analyses the trajectory of the myth through history. By focussing on the Buddhist and Jaina variants of the Rama story, Thapar illustrates how variants of myths often indicate historical and ideological changes through the perspectives they present.

Artist Gulammohammed Sheikh has delved into the countless illustrated manuscripts of the *Ramayana* and he does a close reading of three of them, the oldest being the Mughal *Ramayana* that emperor Akbar commissioned. Author C.S. Lakshmi strikes a different note from the other contributors to this issue as she gives us a deeply personal account of the tellings of the *Ramayana* that she remembers from her childhood. The epic holds different meanings at different stages of one's life, she says.

But the last word hasn't yet been spoken on this enduring epic that defies every man-made boundary and has universally awakened the stupendous power of the human imagination.

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Reading Visuals: Timeless Voyages on the Epic Ocean

Gulammohammed Sheikh

All photographs courtesy the author.

From among the numerous illustrated manuscripts of the Ramayana, Gulammohammed Sheikh chooses to dwell at length on three: the oldest, which was made at the Mughal atelier of Akbar where an eclectic internationalist visual language was born; the folios produced by the Mewar studio in Rajasthan, with their raw energy and local references; and the incomplete Pahadi set from Punjab which, though limited in scope, is staggering in its ambition. While Sheikh examines their narrative strategies, nature of figuration, choice of palette and other aspects, he reminds us that there are countless magical folios, scrolls and murals across the subcontinent that enable the dramatis personae of the Ramayana to get re-born in the eyes, minds and hearts of the people.

Rama sends the Monkey leader Angada to Ravana with an ultimatum from the Siege of Lanka series, Guler, c. 1725, attributed to Pandit Seu, courtesy Howard Hodgkin collection, London.



Myth Retold: Variants of the Story of Rama

Romila Thapar

As any myth does, the Ramayana too has grown through additions and changes, and its trajectory through Indian history is of particular interest to the historian. While carrying out a historical analysis of a myth one does not ask whether the events narrated in it happened or not. The question is: Who invented the myth and why? How has the consciousness of the past been captured and given form through the narrative? Romila Thapar examines the Valmiki Ramayana at various times in Indian history and, through an exploration of the Buddhist and Jaina variants of the Rama story, shows how they establish changes in authorship, language, audience and ideology.

Kumbhakarna battling monkeys and bears, mural in a chhatri, nineteenth century (?) Parashramapura, Shekhawati, Rajasthan. Photograph courtesy Gulammohammed Sheikh.

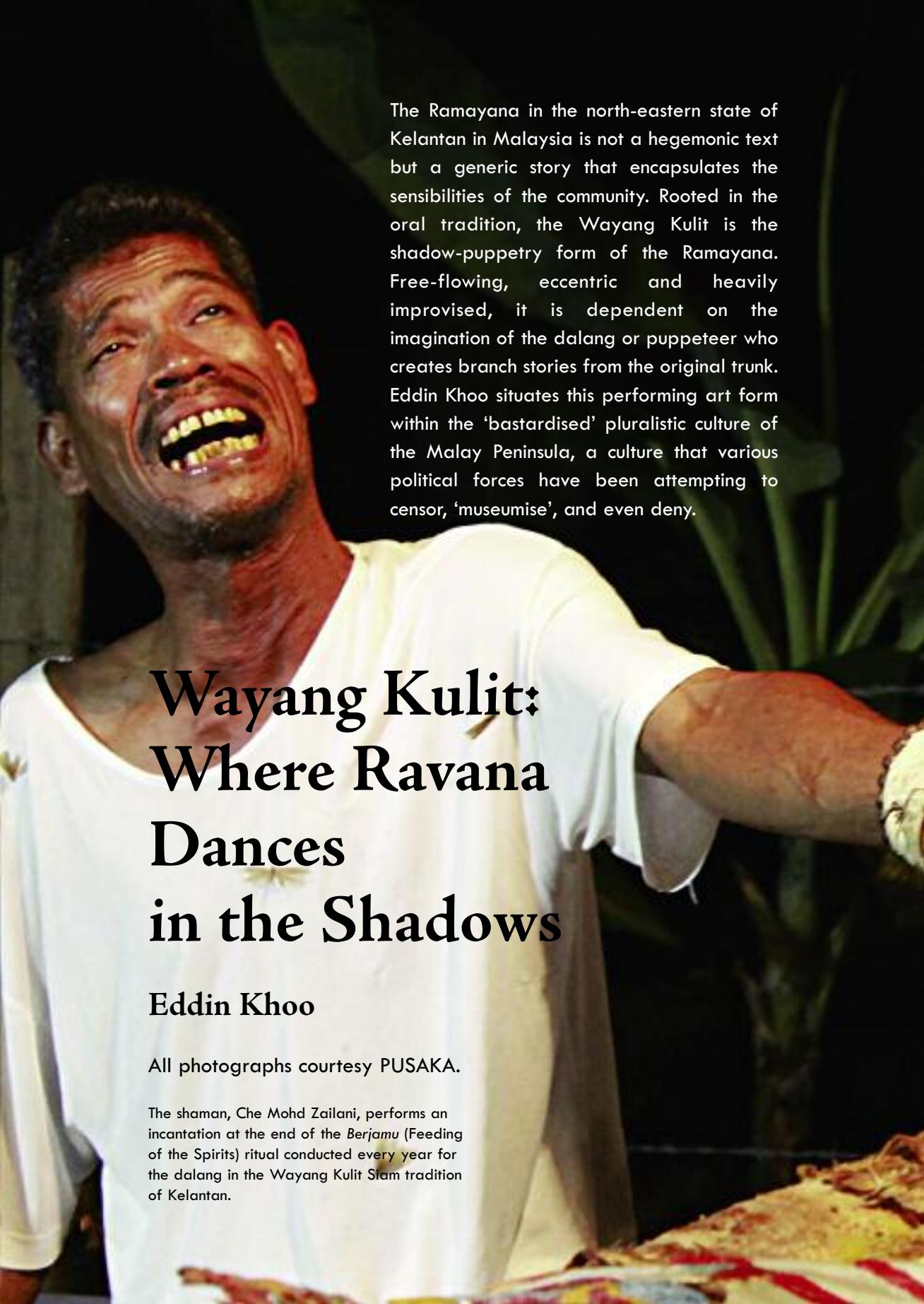
Epic Culture: Many Versions, Many Heroes

Ashis Nandy

When epics are subject to Marxist, Freudian or Structural analyses, when they are examined in the light of history, archaeology and carbon-dating, they are pejoratively called myths. But for large parts of Indian society, as Ashis Nandy points out, the epics provide a means of constructing the past outside history, a past that is as open as the future. In the epic world, heroes and heroines host elements of their anti-selves within them, and these internal inconsistencies give room for myriad variations. In an epic culture, plurality is built in, says Nandy, and the various versions serve as vehicles of culture-specific world-views and thoughts.

Parashurama challenges Rama to stretch Vishnu's bow,
ascribed to Lahu of Chamba, c. 1750-75, courtesy
Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba.
Photograph courtesy Gulammohammed Sheikh.



A photograph of a man laughing heartily, showing his teeth. He is wearing a white t-shirt and has his arm raised. The background is dark with some green foliage.

The Ramayana in the north-eastern state of Kelantan in Malaysia is not a hegemonic text but a generic story that encapsulates the sensibilities of the community. Rooted in the oral tradition, the Wayang Kulit is the shadow-puppetry form of the Ramayana. Free-flowing, eccentric and heavily improvised, it is dependent on the imagination of the dalang or puppeteer who creates branch stories from the original trunk. Eddin Khoo situates this performing art form within the ‘bastardised’ pluralistic culture of the Malay Peninsula, a culture that various political forces have been attempting to censor, ‘museumise’, and even deny.

Wayang Kulit: Where Ravana Dances in the Shadows

Eddin Khoo

All photographs courtesy PUSAKA.

The shaman, Che Mohd Zailani, performs an incantation at the end of the *Berjamu* (Feeding of the Spirits) ritual conducted every year for the dalang in the Wayang Kulit Siam tradition of Kelantan.

Imagining Rama: From Grandma's Tales to Multiple Texts

C.S. Lakshmi

The wonderful thing about a text is that it assumes different meanings at different stages of one's life, says C.S. Lakshmi as she describes her personal encounters with the Ramayana: listening as a child to her mother's story of Rama's birth while getting an oil massage, attending grand public narrations by eminent exponents of the epic, watching popular film versions, and finally approaching the text as a lover of Tamil, as a reader and as an author. Each of her experiences has created its own images, memories and meanings, just as it has allowed for multiple interpretations and retellings. What we can discern from this epic text, says Lakshmi, is that a text, like everything else, can be seen from multiple positions of age, gender, language and perspective.