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THE SPEAKING TREE
NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 14, 2010



REVIEW

SHELF LIFE

Ramayana Revised

Before He Was God: Ramayana
Reconsidered Recreated

By Ram Varma

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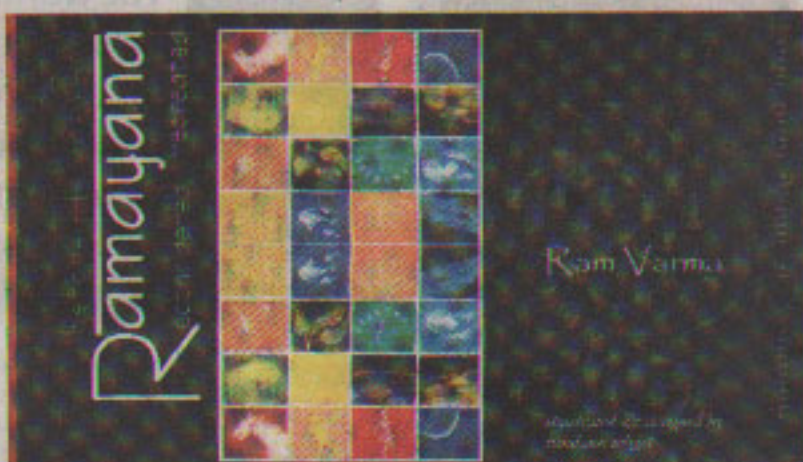
Price: Rs 995

MONA MEHTA

Yes, this long-winding tale can metaphorically be classified as a 'Ramayana', but the story of Rama as rendered by former IAS officer Rama Varma is every bit as riveting as it was when most of us read it for the first time in comic form back in primary school.

Written in the free verse style, *Before He Was God* is Varma's attempt at presenting Rama, the king of Ayodhya, in a historical perspective — shorn of *puranic* myths, mysticism, and unqualified eulogisation by later-day *bhaktas*. The result is a new version of an epic poem that is both contemporary and progressive in parts. The book is spread over 12 chapters, each named after the Hindu lunar calendar. The book begins with *Chaitra*, the month in which Rama was born, and ends in *Phalgun*. Each chapter begins with some fine brushwork by Vandana Sehgal, Varma's youngest daughter, depicting the main theme of the ensuing chapter.

Varma's treatise of Rama is more rational and logical than the works of earlier poets such as *Ramayana* from the *bhakti* poet, Tulsidas, who first made Rama a household name. Varma exorcises the *Ramayana* of supernatural bits, such as the mystery surrounding Sita's birth. He introduces characters too — one example is of the unwed Rohini, Sita's mother, who abandons her newborn in a pot that is discovered next morning by the childless king Janak while ploughing the royal fields.



Through another character, Saudamini, depicted as a victim of Ravana's debauchery, Varma gives us a glimpse of what goes on in Ravana's mind, his power as the ruler of Lanka as well as his helplessness when he is shown as a victim of his own ego.

Rama is also manifested as a matchmaker for Saudamini' at the end of the battle. Varma bases his story of Rama on scriptural evidence found in the Vedic period. The author also recasts Menaka, the celestial *apsara*, as a *rishi-kanyasi*, a sage's daughter; he also grounds the fabled Pushpak Vimana and does away with Kaikeyi's *kopa bhavan* or the room for sulking.

The main landmarks of the epic, though, remain much the same. As a central theme, the tale explores the love of Dasharath for his son Rama, the exile of the prince at the behest of Kaikeyi, and the sublime love between Rama and Sita. It continues to be a story of good triumphing over evil; of the appearance of Hanuman, the killing of Ravana for abducting Sita — and of Lord Rama leading life by a set of rules that were perhaps formulated to suit the need of the hour when society was at a nascent stage. Although there is no *agni pariksha* for Sita when she returns home, Rama still abandons her after he

overhears a story of another man throwing his wife out of his house for spending the night out. But never for a moment does Varma rob Rama of valour, courage and a sense of duty — all the ideals that made him *Maryada Purushottam*.

The hard-bound, thick volume with gilt-edged pages makes for a handsome collector's item, but is too cumbersome for a quick racy read. A paperback edition would have indeed made the book truly unput-downable. ■

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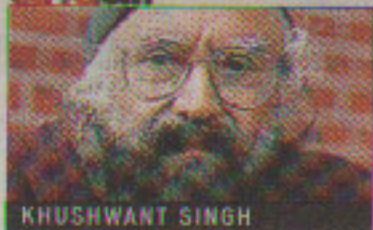
360°

PEOPLE AND JOURNEYS

Advani and the demons of Babri

SQUARE ONE After 1947, we had decided to bury the communal past. And then LK went on his 'rath yatra'

with malice
towards one
and all



KHUSHWANT SINGH

The testimony in court on oath in the name of Sri Rama by Anju Gupta IPS who was then posted in Ayodhya, and in charge of L.K. Advani's personal security, when the Babri Masjid was demolished on December 6, 1992, should clear once for all any doubts about who was involved in the shameful act of vandalism. She still remains to be cross-examined, but it can be assumed that what she has said is the truth. There can now be no doubt that L.K. Advani was the prime mover of the campaign to rouse Hindu communal frenzy across the country and succeeded in doing so by his Rath Yatra from Somnath to Ayodhya.

He made an inflammatory speech from the podium facing the ancient mosque emphasising over and over again that a Ram Mandir would be built at the very spot where the Masjid stood. He watched the destruction and when the last dome went down, celebrated its collapse embracing others on the dais and during celebration a *pedo* was popped in his mouth. In his autobiography he mentions the jubilant crowds greeting him on the way back to Delhi and exulting *sob safraya kar diya* — swept away all of it. With what face can he now say that it was the 'saddest day of his life'?

Muslims (and Hindu and Sikhs together) were attacked and many destroyed from Bangladesh to Pakistan to England. And the communal atmosphere in India poisoned as if forever. Isn't it time we punished those who did it and we resume our quest for communal goodwill.

RAMAYANA RETOLD

My grand-daughter Naina Dayal who recently got a doctorate from the Jawahar Lal Nehru University for her thesis on the *Ramayana* tells me that there are dozens of versions of the epic and we are not sure when exactly they were written. One was by Valmiki. We also do not know who Valmiki was and when he lived; it could be between 3 B.C. to the 4 A.D. However, whatever doubts there may be about its genesis or the authorship, there can be no doubt that it is the only epic in the world which lives in the minds of Hindus wherever they may be. For them Shri Rama is the personification of God (as it is for Sikhs as well). Sita is the Mother Goddess, Lakshmans the example of what a younger brother should be and Hanuman, the power of Pajrang Bali, the devoted caretaker of the divine family. Ravana is the incarnation of the Devil. Aryans, who have questioned these assumptions, have been severely censured. *Aubrey Menon's Ramayana Retold* is to this day banned in India (that is one reason I made it a point to read it).

The latest version of the epic story of miracles is by Ram Varma. A Haryana cadre IAS officer, who rose to become its Chief Secretary. For the last 10 years he has been composing his own version of the epic. *Before He was God: Ramayana*

Reconsidered, Re-created, (Rupa) illustrated by colour paintings by his daughter Vandana Sehgal was launched on Ram Navami and was a near sell-out on the



thing. Sadder than pinching a female colleague in the bottom at least."

RAMAYANA RELOADED

THE AGE-OLD EPIC HAS BEEN GIVEN A BRAND NEW, ALBERT SEXUAL, INTERPRETATION IN THIS NEW BOOK

PROMIITA MUKHERJEE
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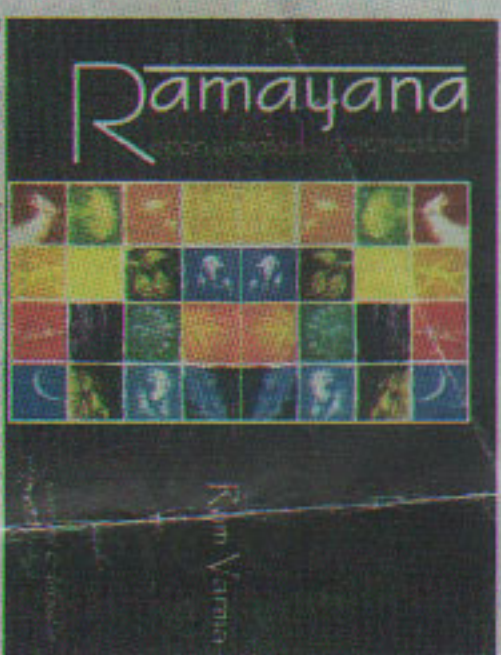
THE Ramayana seems to be the flavour of the season. After Mani Ratnam gave his own interpretation of the tale a celluloid twist, author Ram Verma gave the age-old story — revered in Indian households — a quirky interpretation in his new book.

In *Ramayana: Reconsidered*, re-created, Ram Verma talks of a different Ram. As a child, the author was deeply moved by *Ramcharitmanas* rather than Valmiki's Sanskrit epic, as he says: "To me reading

Valmiki's Ramayana/As it existed today was a pain/There are exaggerations galore!"

It is these exaggerations that Verma has tried to deal with in his version. To him, Ram is not god, rather he is a valiant king, a husband, a son and above all, a human being with emotions. This is the story of Ram before he was given the status of god.

The book is laced with sexual innuendos. He traces this to the original text and explains in the Prologue: "Shocked, bemused and often bedazzled/by their pervasive sexual innuery." He also highlights the plight of women in those days and so



The book cover and (right) an illustration from the book

makes Sita say: "As if I was a trophy, not a woman" when king Janak decides to give her hand to whoever wins her in a *swayambhat*. He goes on to criticise Ram



for making Sita go through *agni pariksha*: "They called Rama *maryada* purushotam./Yet made him perform such deeds/Defend false mores of a wife's chastity."

Written in flowing verse, the book is indeed captivating and gives the reader a chance to interpret the age-old text from a new angle. The illustrations and designs have been done by Vandana Sehgal, the author's daughter and are pretty good. Overall, a good read.

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BOOK REVIEW

De-mystification of the epic

Prema Nandakumar

With parents named Ram Chandra and Ram Pyari "to whom Rama was a Reality", it was natural for Ram Varma to come out with his own version of the ancient tale. He pares off what he considers to be "interpolations" to project his vision of Rama. Not a bad vision really. Rama is the hero, Ravana is the villain. There is no tampering with the basics. The cosmetic changes, however, are interesting.

In tune with Valmiki

Writers before him have tried to fill in the blanks about the domestic life of Rama and Sita. Less than half-a-century ago we had the Telugu poet, Viswanadha Satyanarayana writing about the conjugal felicity of Sita and Rama in his epic, *Sri Ramayana Kalpavrukshamu*. Thus, the details of a married couple in love in

this book are very much in tune with Valmiki's storyline. Of the other changes, mention ought to be made of Kaikeyi using a play within the play (as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) to discover the intentions of Dasaratha in handing over the crown to Rama. Ironically, a hack named Kritinidhi writes the mischievous script for the Dushyanta story.

In Ram Varma's narration, printed in three columns, there is no poetry as such and we even get a hiccup when Dasaratha bursts out: "O God, it's all been mucked up!" It is a relief that Ram Varma has avoided the fire-ordeal and has Rama himself go to the Ashoka Vana and tell Sita of Ravana's death.

"I feel bad

It took us so much time

To reach here, and kill

the foe.

But he's dead and we

meet at last.



RAMAYANA RECONSIDERED

RECREATED: Ram Varma;
Rupa & Co., 7/16, Ansari Road,
Daryaganj, New Delhi-110002.
Rs. 995.

*Nothing is lost, come,
let's go."*

All is well till Rama himself overhears a commoner speaking derisively of Ayodhya's king. The familiar scenario at Valmiki's *asrama* gets new colours with the appearance of Sita's 'real' mother Rohini, the birth of the twins, the return of Sita as Rama's queen, and her peaceful death. "Many a man have come and gone/ There was never a man like Rama."

Ram Varma has tried hard to show Rama as a

mortal like any one of us. We read with engagement but not involvement, as Valmiki is always hovering near us with his last laugh. Ravana, of course, appears even worse, especially when he calls the good Mandodari an 'old hag' who does nothing but nag him. We get a philosophical disquisition on why Kumbhakarna preferred sleep to sex and more such important sizzlers within the framework of 12 chapters that begin with 'Chaitra' and conclude with 'Phalguni.'

Illustrations

None of the novel changes has affected Vandana Sehgal, who has provided the illustrations, in her choice of scenes. The plates include: Janaka finding the baby while tilling the soil; Dasaratha in his court announcing his retirement; Bharat receiving Rama's sandals; Sita in Asokavana looking up at Hanuman —

all the scenes so close etched in our psyche do the centuries. By using li colours and preferring merge the human/vana rakshasa figures with vastness of nature, she gi plenty of elbow room our imagination to und panoramas on its own.

An interesting auth note on the changes is helpful appendage. would rather see Rama an ideal human being a not as an incarnation. Ra na for him is "a king of Dravidian stock", perhaps Gond. As for Mareecha, S panakha and others, th was nothing supernatu about them. He has a "grounded" the Pushp aircraft to realise his jective, "the de-mythifi tion and de-mystificatio the epic." Actually, this g geous publication only p claims the sublimity Valmiki's epic that con ues to sustain our cult even in the 21st century!

HINDUSTAN TIMES, NEW DELHI
SATURDAY, APRIL 24, 2010

READ

ON THE BOOKSHELVES THIS WEEK

Human condition

HIS STORY A Ramayana that takes out the Puranic dross and brings us the story of a man

epicrescue



Ramayana: Before He Was God

Ram Varma
RUPA • RS 995 • PP 326

Ishan Chaudhuri

The favourite passages in this book is the first eight lines that start the 'Bhandrapada' chapter: "Shoorpnakha wasn't her real name/ Her mother once chided her/ For not paring her nails/ Letting them grow big like a 'shoop'/ A receptacle for winnowing grain/ And called her Shoorpnakha; the name stuck, her brothers/ Fondly teased her by that name."

This act of humanising a character from *The Ramayana* — Valmiki's *Ramayana* and the many versions that came after it, in the name of it, and veering away from it — is a profoundly aesthetic function that former bureaucrat Ram Varma serves in his patient and, above all, pleasurable *Ramayana: Before He Was God*. In the acknowledgements and the prologue, Varma tells the reader what he has set



■ **JATAYU TRIES:** An illustration from the book

out to do: clean up the ancient text to present the "fundamental truths" underlying episodes he found difficult to understand. He does that with verve.

Varma puts the narrative in a 'historical' in which the characters are treated as real. Interspersed with watery illustrations of episodes by Vandana Sehgal, Varma takes out the 'anachronisms' — later Vedic interpolations such as the 'Sita's *agni-pariksha*' episode (here, Sita is sent to exile at Valmiki's ashram) — and brings us Ram's story unencumbered by later 'interpretations'. This, then, is a story of a man, before he was morphed into something altogether else.

Ishan Chaudhuri is a Kolkata-based writer

Rama For Real



A Vandana Sehgal painting from the book

RAMA'S avatars have been many. In before-television Kerala, when evenings quietly turned pale purple, children repeated his two-syllabic name easily, innocently by a lit lamp. He was the calendar art of Raja Ravi Varma that got darkened by years of kitchen smoke. He was the made-up Arun Govil in the colour-television euphoria of the late Eighties. He is the man in a green mask looking for a golden fawn amid the cymbal-clanging of Kathakali and the action hero of boisterous Ramlilas. His was also the name inscribed on piles of bricks in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, when a mosque was razed, and that two-syllabic name has not been the easiest to pronounce since.

In *Ramayana: Before He Was God*, a reinterpretation of the epic in verse, the author Ram Varma, who was chief secretary of Haryana, strips Rama of godliness and the epic of the unreal. Here rakshasas are not supernatural demons, Sita is not the daughter of Earth, Ahalya is not turned into a boulder and Ravana is not a 10-headed demon with a flying chariot (he is just an over-sexed Dravidian king with a single head who

makes do with ordinary chariots and barges). What's more, Hanuman does not fly over the ocean to Lanka. He is, instead, a tribal chieftain in a monkey-suit who scampers on the boulders in the causeway, scrambles over cliffs, skips over crevices and swims into the gaps where the path had disap-

peared. Varma turns the most common motifs of the epic on their head in his effort for a realistic Ramayana and an all too human Rama.

Where it succeeds wonderfully is in the description of the rituals, seemingly without sanitising them. When Kaushalya — and later Sita — slays a stallion for the Aswamedha yajna and spends a night with the dead horse, the image is unconventional, almost noirish.

Otherwise, Varma keeps it simple: the love story of a prince and a princess, and the morality tale of a man upholding dharma — without special appearances by deities or demons. This is also Varma writing against the epic's many revisions and interpolations; it is another matter that for his own realistic reading, characters, incidents and entire sequences have been conveniently invented.

— CHARMY HARIKRISHNAN



RAMAYANA: Before He Was God

RAM VARMA
Rupa
Pages: 326, Rs 995



OUTLOOK

books

**BEFORE HE WAS GOD: Ramayana—
Reconsidered, Recreated**
by Ram Varma

Paper | 344 pages | Rs. 195



EPICS like the Ramayana gain in resonance with every recension. Retired bureaucrat Ram Varma has laboured long and hard to produce his Ramayana, conceived like a "Baramasa" tribute. It follows the course of a seasonal appreciation, from Chaitra and Vaishakha through the searing summer and the rains until Phalgun, where Rama sheds his human form in the Sarayu river. This is a feisty personal appreciation rendered in verse, though rhyme and meter tend to be uneven. Yet, Varma's intense engagement with his subject yields moving insights, while humorous and tragical interludes lend immediacy.

Varma's version here discredits and discards Sita's "agni-pariksha". Instead, he has Sita sent into a second exile, then returning to her father Janak's court for shelter, where she discovers her "real" mother Rohini. Her husband then recalls Sita from the forest to fulfil her ceremonial role in the Ashwamedha yagna. This compassionate resurrection exemplifies the very spirit of bhakti, where each devotee is free to image and fashion the object of his worship. The powerful illustrations add to the evocative quality of this book. ■

Namita Gokhale

READ

ON THE BOOKSHELVES THIS WEEK

RAMAYANA RECONSIDERED, RECREATED

HT Correspondent

There have been hundreds of retellings of Ramayana, first composed about 4,000 years ago by Valmiki, who was contemporary of Lord Rama. The story has been lovingly sung and enacted over all these years, reinvented in innumerable versions and languages in India and the countries of south-east Asia and beyond and has shaped the growth of many diverse cultures and civilisations. It is in the heart of the Indian civilisation.

Ram Varma's retelling is entitled "Before He was God, Ramayana Reconsidered, Recreated", is probably unique in both conception and presentation, in as much as it treats the story as a slice of history (and not a fanciful myth, as in popular versions) from an early era of the Indian civilisation when it had spread from Gandhar in north-west to Magadha and Mithila in north-east. His retelling shows how the stupendous feats of courage and valour which in time morphed into monumental myths, like Hanuman 'flying' over the natural link to Lanka in search of Sita, Rama's army crossing the sea after repairing the natural link, Hanuman bringing the life saving herbs from mountains in dead of night etc. were actually performed.

In other words, Ram Varma highlights the historicity of Lord Rama and his times. He believes that the story of Ramayana, like that of Mahabharata, was rooted in fact. In his retelling, he has therefore discarded all improbable, miraculous deeds and events that had been inserted in the Valmiki Ramayana later on, like Hanuman turning into a giant to jump over the ocean or a moth in order to search for Sita in Ravana's palace, or Shoorpanakha morphing into a comely lass to lure Rama and into a demon to devour Sita. Exaggerations like King Dashratha ruling for sixty thousand years or Lord Rama for eleven thousand years have been omitted. Similarly, fanciful accounts like a herd of elephants marching over Kumbhakarna's belly to rouse him for the battle or a battery of hefty men needed to draw the eight-wheel carriage on which the mighty Rudra's bow was lying which was lifted and drawn by Rama and much else in the same genre have been suitably modified. Ram Varma has endeavoured to recapture the greatness of Rama, Sita, Lakshman, Hanuman and others without the props of supernatural power.

His rendering of 'Ramayana' differs from all existing versions, which have varied elements of the phantasmagoric in them. Going behind the myths, discarding the ornamental as well as the dross, fanciful as well as the absurd, Ram Varma unfolds his vision and the characters and events emerge in their true light.

His 'Ramayana' transports the reader to the later Vedic age when the hymns of Rig Veda were on the lips of the rishis in their ashramas. It revives and recreates the historical and civilizational perspective and gives the characters and events a realistic touch.

Ram Varma was particularly anguished by the agni-pariksha episode in the extant Valmiki Ramayana, and when he learnt from research made by eminent scholars that this scene was in fact an interpolation he resolved to rewrite this wounding story, restoring the original version. He uses an eight-syllabic line in deference to the eight-akshara chhanda invented by Valmiki in his Ramayana.

This book is also unique in that it carries about 65 original paintings by Vandana Sehgal, which illumine the text in blank verse.



• One of the 65 original paintings by Vandana Sehgal.

रावणा के न दस सिर थे न पुष्पक विमान : राम वर्मा

नई दिल्ली (एसएनबी)। रावण के न तो दस सिर थे और न ही उसके पास पुष्पक विमान था। इतना ही नहीं भगवान श्रीराम ने भी सीता की अभिनिरीक्षा भी नहीं की थी। कुम्भकर्ण के छह महीने तक लगातार सोने की कमानों भी मिथक है। अलिंगन जाने के लिए हनुमान ने जिस सेतु का निर्माण किया, उसमें कनार सेना तो थी लेकिन वे वारधव में बंदर नहीं थे। वे वानर जनजाति के अर्धवासी थे, जो बंदरों जैसी शक्त बनाकर रहते थे ताकि आसम में एक दूसरे को पहचान सकें। यह तथ्य 'बिफोर ही वाज गॉड रामायण रीकंसीडर्ड रीट्रिब्यूटेड' के लेखक राम वर्मा ने बुधवार को अपनी पुस्तक के लोकार्पण अवसर पर उजागर किया। इस पुस्तक की छांटिया या है कि इसमें लेखक को पूरी बंदना सहजता के बनाए रामायण पर आधारित 65 चित्रों का शामिल किया गया है।



बुधवार को पुस्तक 'बिफोर ही वाज गॉड रामायण रीकंसीडर्ड रीट्रिब्यूटेड' का विमोचन इटिक के अध्यक्ष एसके मिश्रा (मध्य) ने किया। इस मौके पर पुस्तक के लेखक राम वर्मा (बाएं) व उनकी पुत्री वंदना सहजाल (दाएं)। कार्यक्रम के दौरान वंदना सहजाल द्वारा पुस्तक के लिए तैयार व डिजाइन किए गए चित्रों का अवलोकन करते फिल्मकार मुजफ्फर हुसैन।

रुच एंड कंपनी द्वारा अंग्रेजी में प्रकाशित इस पुस्तक का विमोचन करते हुए इटिक के अध्यक्ष एसके मिश्रा ने कहा कि यह पुस्तक अपने आप में अदभुत है। पुस्तक के कई अंश ऐसे हैं, जो पहले समय पठकों को न सिर्फ अपनी ओर खींचते हैं, बल्कि ऐतिहासिक सत्यों को प्रस्तुत करते हुए विषय की गहराई तक बताकर ले जाते हैं। उन्होंने तथ्यपरक और आज के समय से जोड़ते हुए रामायण को नए रूप में पेश करते के लिए लेखक की सराहना की। लेखक राम वर्मा ने कहा कि रामायण

न सिर्फ भारत, बल्कि पश्चिम की प्रसिद्ध और सीती जगती फतहानी है। रामायण पर दुनियाभर में बहुत कुछ लिखा गया है। मैंने अपने शोध के दौरान कोशिश की कि पाठकों को तथ्यपरक जानकारीया उपलब्ध करा सकूँ। क्योंकि दुर्लसी रामायण में कुछ ऐसे तथ्य हैं, जो आज के परिवेश से को-रिलेट नहीं होते

बिफोर ही वाज गॉड रामायण रीकंसीडर्ड रीट्रिब्यूटेड' पुस्तक का विमोचन

हैं। उन्होंने कहा कि मूल वाल्मीकि रामायण को पढ़ने के लिए मैंने बाकायदा संस्कृत सीखी और विषय की गहराई को समझा। इसके बाद मैंने महसूस किया कि इसमें बहुत से ऐसे प्रसंग हैं, जो मूल वाल्मीकि रामायण में मौजूद नहीं हैं। लेकिन आज जो वाल्मीकि रामायण बाजार में मिल रही है, वह मूल वाल्मीकि रामायण से काफी भिन्न है। क्योंकि उसमें समय के अनुसार

परिवर्तों और विद्वानों ने कुछ चौपट्यय व दोषे जोड़ दिए हैं। वर्मा ने कहा कि श्रीराम का समय आज से करीब 3500 वर्ष पूर्व हो सकता है, क्योंकि उस समय चित्रकूट के आसपास सभ्यता के विकास के स्तर मितरी हैं। लेखक ने माना कि उनके रामायण को पढ़ने के बाद विवाद भी हो सकता है, लेकिन उन्होंने कहा कि मेरा काम पठकों तक सही तथ्य को पहुंचाना है। रामायण को चित्रों में दिखाने वाली लेखक की पूरी बंदना सहजाल ने कहा कि मैंने पेटिंग बनाते वक्ता यह नहीं सोचा था कि रामायण पर पेटिंग की एक पूरी बुधदला बन जाएगी। शुरू में मैंने केवल चार पेटिंग की कनायी थी, लेकिन धीरे-धीरे इनकी संख्या बढ़कर 65 तक पहुंच गयी। पेटों से वास्तुविद व पेंटर बंदना सहजाल को पूरी रामायण की पेटिंग के जरिये पेश करने में छह महीने का समय लगा। पुस्तक विमोचन के मौके पर फिल्मकार मुजफ्फर अली, शास्त्रीय नर्तकीगना स्वयं सुंदरी, बरिच पत्रकार रजत शर्मा, अभिज्ञान, वेद प्रकाश वैदिक अरि मीनूद थे।