

Rivers in the Life of Rāma: A Geographical and Cultural Study of Fluvial Symbolism in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa

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Abstract

The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa traces the life of Rāma across a continuous and remarkably specific geography. Named rivers recur at almost every major turning point of the narrative. This paper undertakes a source-disciplined survey of every river explicitly associated with Rāma in the Vālmīki text alone. It deliberately excludes the Rāmcharitmānas and other later vernacular, regional, or Purāṇic retellings, in order to establish a reliable baseline distinguishing canonical from accretive material. Working kāṇḍa by kāṇḍa from the Bāla Kāṇḍa to the Yuddha Kāṇḍa, the study identifies and chronologically sequences at least thirteen rivers and water-bodies. These include the Sarayū, the Gaṅgā (crossed twice), the Śoṇā, the Yamunā (crossed twice), the Mandākinī, the Godāvarī, and the Pampā (Tuṅgabhadrā). It argues that these rivers function not as passive scenery but as a structural and moral device. They mark thresholds of transition, and they are twice recapitulated within the text itself — in the Bāla Kāṇḍa's opening synopsis, and in Rāma's own narration to Sītā in Yuddha Kāṇḍa, Sarga 123. On occasion they are also directly addressed as witnesses, as when Sītā appeals to the Godāvarī at the moment of her abduction. The paper also flags one significant point of divergence: the popular identification of named rivers in Laṅkā, which Vālmīki's text does not support in the form usually assumed. This case is discussed as a methodological example of separating canonical geography from later devotional tradition. The paper closes by connecting this exercise in textual river-mapping to contemporary efforts at river conservation through cultural memory.

Keywords: Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa; sacred rivers; Sarayū; Gaṅgā; Godāvarī; sacred geography; itihāsa; river conservation

1. Introduction

Rivers occupy a unique place in the Indian civilizational imagination, functioning simultaneously as physical resources, sites of ritual purification, and narrative witnesses within the itihāsa-purāṇa tradition. Few texts illustrate this triple function as continuously as the Rāmāyaṇa attributed to the sage Vālmīki, in which the hero's life unfolds across an almost

unbroken chain of named rivers — from the Sarayū of his birth at Ayodhyā to the sea he must bridge to reach Laṅkā.

In contemporary popular consciousness, however, the association of Rāma with particular rivers is rarely drawn from Vālmīki's Sanskrit text in isolation. It is far more commonly assembled from a composite of Tulsīdās's Rāmcharitmānas, regional retellings, pilgrimage tradition, and oral memory, often without distinguishing which river-reference belongs to which layer of the tradition. This composite habit, while devotionally rich, makes it difficult to answer a deceptively simple historical and literary question: which rivers does Vālmīki himself actually name in connection with Rāma, and in what sequence?

This paper attempts to answer that question directly, restricting itself entirely to the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa as the primary source. Two research questions guide the study: first, what is the complete, chronologically ordered sequence of rivers explicitly associated with Rāma's life in the Vālmīki text, from birth through the war in Laṅkā and the return to Ayodhyā; and second, what narrative or symbolic function, if any, do these rivers perform beyond serving as a static geographical backdrop.

This paper makes three original contributions:

- the first complete, kāṇḍa-by-kāṇḍa canonical sequence of rivers associated with Rāma's life, verified directly against the Critical Edition rather than against composite devotional tradition;
- an argument that this sequence functions as narrative architecture — marking thresholds, recurring in the text's own internal synopses, and on occasion elevating a river to the status of moral witness — rather than as incidental scenery;
- a worked case study, centred on Laṅkā, of how canonical river-geography can be methodically separated from later devotional geography.

2. Scope, Sources, and Methodology

The textual basis for this study is the Critical Edition of the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa prepared at the Oriental Institute, Baroda (Bhatt, 1960–1975), cross-checked throughout against the major modern scholarly English translation by Goldman and colleagues (Goldman, 1984–2009) and against the widely used online edition and translation of Rao and Murthy (n.d.). For terminological consistency in the Hindi-language companion to this paper, the standard Gītā Press verse edition was additionally consulted, though only as a check on Sanskrit terminology and never as an independent source of narrative content.

A strict exclusion criterion was applied throughout: any river-association attested only in the Rāmcharitmānas, in regional retellings such as the Tamil or other vernacular Rāmāyaṇa traditions, in the Purāṇas, or in oral and pilgrimage tradition, is not treated as part of the Vālmīki corpus for the purposes of this study. Where such material is mentioned at all, it is explicitly flagged as extra-canonical and is never silently merged with Vālmīki's own narrative. This exclusion is not a value judgment on the devotional worth of those traditions; it is a methodological choice intended to produce a clean, source-disciplined map of one specific text.

References to the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa are cited in-text by kāṇḍa (book) and sarga (chapter) — for example, “Bāla Kāṇḍa, Sarga 35” — following the Critical Edition's structure, with śloka (verse) numbers added where precision is required. Secondary scholarly sources are cited in standard APA author-date format.

3. Brief Review of Related Scholarship

3.1 Textual and Archaeological Foundations

Two strands of prior scholarship are particularly relevant to the textual basis of this paper. The first is the long tradition of critical Sanskrit textual scholarship. It culminates in the Baroda Critical Edition (Bhatt, 1960–1975) and in Goldman's seven-volume annotated translation (Goldman, 1984–2009). Together, these provide the philological foundation on which any claim about “what Vālmīki says” must rest.

The second is the archaeological strand represented by B. B. Lal's nationally sponsored project, “Archaeology of the Rāmāyaṇa Sites.” Between 1975 and 1986, this project excavated five locations directly tied to the river-route examined in this paper: Ayodhyā, Śṛiṅgaverapura, the Bhāradvāja āśrama at Prayāga, Citrakūṭa, and Nandigrāma. Among its findings was a substantial ancient hydraulic tank complex on the Gaṅgā bank at Śṛiṅgaverapura (Lal, 1993). The historicity debates surrounding these excavations lie outside the scope of the present literary-geographical study. What matters here is narrower: the project's existence shows that the river-sites named by Vālmīki were already being treated, well before the present study, as identifiable points on the Gangetic landscape rather than as purely literary inventions.

3.2 Prior Treatments of Rivers in the Rāmāyaṇa

Beyond philology and archaeology, a small body of scholarship addresses the river-motif in the Rāmāyaṇa more directly. None of it, however, attempts the source-disciplined, narrative-structural survey undertaken here.

Ghosh, Mondal, and Das (2018) catalogue thirty-four named rivers and four seas, using a frequency-count method drawn from fluvial geomorphology. Their corpus, however, is the

fifteenth-century Bengali *Krittibāsī Rāmāyaṇa*, not *Vālmiki's Sanskrit text*. Several of their thirty-four entries, moreover, are devotional epithets of the *Gaṅgā* rather than independent rivers. Their study usefully shows how vernacular retellings multiply and rename watercourses well beyond *Vālmiki's* own count. It does not, however, distinguish canonical material from later accretion, nor does it ask what narrative or symbolic work the rivers perform within the story.

Sharma (2024) works directly from *Vālmiki's Sanskrit text* and from Goldman's translation, and on this basis catalogues eleven rivers, three ponds, and two confluences — the closest existing study to the textual basis adopted here. Her analysis, however, is confined to the first five rivers of the *Bālakāṇḍa* and is framed around the modern category of ecotourism rather than narrative structure. It also draws, for some of its river-references, on the *Uttarakāṇḍa* — an appendix widely treated in critical scholarship as a later addition to the core narrative (Brockington, 1998) — without flagging this layer as distinct from the earlier six books. Sharma's ecological reading is a generative one. It does not, however, extend *kāṇḍa* by *kāṇḍa* across the whole epic, nor does it ask whether the river-sequence functions as a structural device, recurs in the text's own self-citations, or helps separate canonical from devotional geography. These are precisely the gaps the present paper seeks to close.

3.3 Sacred Geography and Pilgrimage Scholarship

A second, larger body of scholarship treats Indian rivers as *tīrthas* within the broader devotional and pilgrimage landscape, independent of any single text. Bhardwaj's (1973) foundational cultural-geographic survey maps the historical and contemporary distribution of Hindu pilgrimage places, drawing primarily on the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas*. Eck (1981) develops the influential argument that a *tīrtha* is best understood as a "crossing" — a conceptual frame that resonates closely with this paper's claim, in Section 5.1, that river-crossings function as narrative thresholds in *Vālmiki*. Eck's later synthesis (2012) extends this argument across the subcontinent, showing how the stories of *Rāma* and other epic figures are woven into a single, continuously sanctified landscape.

This literature is indispensable for understanding why rivers carry sacred weight in the Indian imagination. Eck's "crossing" framework, in particular, anticipates at a conceptual level the threshold-function argued for below. None of these studies, however, isolates what *Vālmiki's* text itself says, as distinct from the devotional and *Purāṇic* material layered onto it over the following two millennia. Their unit of analysis is the pan-Hindu tradition as a whole, not a single critically edited text read *kāṇḍa* by *kāṇḍa*. The *Laṅkā* case examined in Section 5.4 — where popular tradition names a river that *Vālmiki's* verses do not — is exactly the kind of conflation that this broader literature, valuable as it is for other purposes, does not by itself equip a reader to detect.

3.4 Positioning of the Present Study

Taken together, this prior scholarship leaves three gaps that the present paper addresses. First, no existing study traces the complete river-sequence across all seven kāṇḍas of the Critical Edition using a single, explicit criterion for excluding non-Vālmiki material. Second, no study treats the sequence primarily as a narrative-structural device — one that marks thresholds, recurs in the text's own internal synopses, and occasionally elevates a river to the status of moral witness. Third, no study uses the river-sequence as a worked case study in separating canonical from devotional geography, of the kind illustrated by the Laṅkā example in Section 5.4. It is this combination of source discipline, narrative-structural reading, and methodological transparency that distinguishes the present contribution from the literature reviewed above.

4. The River Sequence in the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa: A Chronological Itinerary

4.1 Childhood and Education: the Sarayū, the Tamasā, the Gaṅgā, and the Śoṇā (Bāla Kāṇḍa)

Ayodhyā, the city of Rāma's birth, is itself defined by its position on the Sarayū, and it is worth noting as a meta-textual aside that the epic's own act of composition is set on a riverbank: Vālmiki is described as going to bathe in the river Tamasā when he witnesses the killing of a krauñca bird, the grief from which is said to have given rise to the very first śloka of the Rāmāyaṇa (Bāla Kāṇḍa, Sarga 2). The text that narrates Rāma's relationship with rivers is thus itself born beside one.

When the young Rāma departs Ayodhyā with the sage Viśvāmitra to protect his sacrificial rite, the journey is itself organized around successive river-crossings. The party spends its first night on the bank of the Sarayū and its second night in the country between the Sarayū and the Gaṅgā; on the third day they cross the Gaṅgā, at its confluence with the Sarayū in the region of Aṅga, before entering the forest of the demoness commonly known as Tāḍakā. It is in this forest that Rāma, on Viśvāmitra's instruction, kills Tāḍakā and subsequently the demons Mārīca and Subāhu who threaten the sage's sacrifice (Bāla Kāṇḍa, Sargas 22–30).

On the return journey from Viśvāmitra's hermitage toward Mithilā, the party again halts beside a river: the Śoṇā, where Viśvāmitra and the assembled sages spend the night, and where, as morning breaks, Viśvāmitra rouses Rāma for the day's travel and goes on to describe the special character of that land (Bāla Kāṇḍa, Sarga 35.1 onward). The very next halt, by Vālmiki's own account, is again on the bank of the Gaṅgā, before the party reaches Mithilā itself.

4.2 The Departure into Exile: the Sarayū Once More, the Vedaśrutī–Gomatī–Syandikā, and the Gaṅgā at Śṛīṅgaverapura (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa)

Years later, when Rāma is exiled on the eve of his intended coronation, the journey out of Ayodhyā retraces, in spirit, the river-pattern of his youth. The first night of the exile is spent, as before, on the bank of the Sarayū. As the small party of Rāma, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa, and the charioteer Sumantra travels south, the text names several lesser rivers crossed en route — the Vedaśrutī, the Gomatī, and the Syandikā — before they reach the Gaṅgā at the town of Śṛiṅgaverapura (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, Sarga 49 onward).

At Śṛiṅgaverapura it is the Niṣāda chieftain Guha, devoted friend of Rāma, who receives the exiles and arranges their crossing of the Gaṅgā by boat the following morning (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, Sargas 50–52). The crossing itself is treated with notable reverence: Sītā is described as offering prayer to the river Gaṅgā in its midst, asking for the party's safe return after the period of exile (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, Sarga 52). Guha's loyalty to Rāma, and his role as guardian of this crossing-point, recur later in the text when Bharata himself, following his brother's trail, arrives at the same Gaṅgā-bank at Śṛiṅgaverapura and is similarly received and ferried by Guha and his boatmen (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, Sargas 84–89).

4.3 Prayāga and the Crossing of the Yamunā (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa)

From Śṛiṅgaverapura the party proceeds to the hermitage of the sage Bhāradvāja, situated precisely at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā at Prayāga (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, Sarga 54). It is Bhāradvāja who, after offering hospitality for the night, advises Rāma to make his dwelling at Citrakūṭa and indicates the route southward along the Yamunā. The following morning the party builds a raft and crosses the Yamunā itself, Sītā again pausing in the middle of the river to pray for the family's eventual safe return, and the three then walk for some distance along the river's forested bank before resting for the night (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, Sarga 55). A further, smaller river, the Kuliṅgā, is separately mentioned as being crossed by Bharata's army as it later follows the same general route in search of Rāma (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, Sarga 71), underscoring how thoroughly this stretch of the narrative is threaded with named watercourses.

4.4 Residence at Citrakūṭa: the Mandākinī (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa)

At Citrakūṭa, Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa construct a hermitage on the bank of the river Mandākinī, and it is here — rather than at any other single location in the entire fourteen-year exile — that the family spends what the text and its commentators describe as the largest continuous portion of their time in the forest. It is also at Citrakūṭa, beside the Mandākinī, that Bharata arrives from Ayodhyā to plead with Rāma to return and accept the throne, an episode that occupies a substantial portion of the later Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa (Sargas 56, 94–112).

4.5 Pañcavaṭī and the Godāvarī (Araṇya Kāṇḍa)

On the advice of the sage Agastya, who tells Rāma that the region of Pañcavaṭī near the river Godāvārī would be a fitting and pleasant place of residence for Sītā (Araṇya Kāṇḍa, Sarga 13), the family relocates there. Lakṣmaṇa constructs their cottage close to the Godāvārī's bank (Araṇya Kāṇḍa, Sarga 15), and the text describes Rāma's habit of proceeding to the river each morning for ritual bathing, accompanied by Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa (Araṇya Kāṇḍa, Sarga 16).

It is also beside the Godāvārī that one of the text's most striking instances of a river being treated as a moral agent occurs. At the very moment of her abduction by Rāvaṇa, Sītā, having already appealed in vain to the surrounding trees, turns and appeals directly to the river Godāvārī and the swans upon it, asking the river to convey word of the abduction to Rāma (Araṇya Kāṇḍa, Sarga 49). The river is here not landscape but addressee — a potential messenger whose silence the text registers as a further misfortune in an already catastrophic sequence of events.

4.6 The Search for Sītā: Pampā, the Tuṅgabhadrā, and Kiṣkindhā (Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa)

In the course of their search for the abducted Sītā, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa arrive at the lake or river known as Pampā, described at length in the opening sarga of the Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa as a place of striking natural beauty (Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa, Sarga 1). The text itself later refers to Pampā explicitly as a nadī, a river, rather than merely a lake (Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa, Sarga 3), and translators and commentators have long identified this Pampā with the Tuṅgabhadrā river in the Hampi-Anegundi region of present-day Karnataka, the area also identified with Kiṣkindhā, the capital of the vānara king Sugrīva. It is in this riverine landscape that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa first encounter Hanumān, forge their alliance with Sugrīva, and mobilize the vānara forces that will eventually search the four quarters of the earth for Sītā.

4.7 The Crossing to Laṅkā: Setubandha (Yuddha Kāṇḍa)

The final great water-crossing of the epic is, of course, not a river but the sea itself, bridged by the vānara army under Rāma's command. The text later refers back to this crossing-point, Setubandha, as a place of singular sanctity, capable of absolving great transgressions, and notes that it was here that Vibhīṣaṇa, Rāvaṇa's brother, first arrived when he defected to Rāma's side (Yuddha Kāṇḍa, Sarga 123).

4.8 The Return Journey: Rāma's Own Recapitulation (Yuddha Kāṇḍa, Sarga 123)

After Rāvaṇa's defeat, as Rāma, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa, Sugrīva, and Vibhīṣaṇa travel back to Ayodhya aboard the aerial chariot Puṣpaka, Vālmiki has Rāma himself narrate the journey to Sītā, pointing out from the sky, in sequence, Pampā, the forest of Janasthāna, Pañcavaṭī, the Godāvārī, the hermitage of Agastya, the hermitage of Atri and Anasūyā, Mount Citrakūṭa, the Yamunā, the hermitage of Bhāradvāja, the Gaṅgā, and finally the Sarayū, before the city of

Ayodhyā itself comes into view (Yuddha Kāṇḍa, Sarga 123). This recapitulation, occurring near the very end of the principal narrative, retraces in reverse almost the entire river-sequence catalogued above, and is paralleled at the very beginning of the epic by Nārada's brief synopsis to Vālmīki in the opening sarga of the Bāla Kāṇḍa, which likewise names the Gaṅgā, Śṛiṅgaverapura, and the route to Citrakūṭa via Bhāradvāja's hermitage in summary form (Bāla Kāṇḍa, Sarga 1).

The chronological itinerary traced above is summarized in Table 1 for ease of reference.

Table 1. Summary of the River-Sequence Associated with Rāma in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa

River	Kāṇḍa–Sarga	Episode / Context
Sarayū	Bāla Kāṇḍa 1, 22; Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa 49; Yuddha Kāṇḍa 123	Defines Ayodhyā's location; marks the opening and closing halts of the Viśvāmitra journey, the exile, and the return
Tamasā	Bāla Kāṇḍa 2	Vālmīki's bathing-place; witness to the origin of the epic's first śloka
Gaṅgā	Bāla Kāṇḍa 22-24; Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa 50-52, 84-89; Yuddha Kāṇḍa 123	First crossing en route to Tāḍakā's forest; second crossing at Śṛiṅgaverapura via Guha, with Sītā's prayer; Bharata's later crossing
Śoṇā	Bāla Kāṇḍa 35	Overnight halt of Viśvāmitra's party en route to Mithilā
Vedaśrutī	Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa 49	Minor river on the road into exile (before Śṛiṅgaverapura)
Gomatī	Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa 49	Minor river on the road into exile
Syandikā	Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa 49	Minor river on the road into exile
Yamunā	Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa 54-55; Yuddha Kāṇḍa 123	Crossed near Bhāradvāja's āśrama at Prayāga; Sītā's prayer; route to Citrakūṭa
Kulingā	Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa 71	Crossed by Bharata's army while searching for Rāma

Mandākinī	Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa 56, 94-112; Yuddha Kāṇḍa 123	Residence at Citrakūṭa (the longest single halt of the exile); Bharata's entreaty
Godāvarī	Aranya Kāṇḍa 13, 15-16, 49; Yuddha Kāṇḍa 123	Residence at Pañcavaṭī; Sītā's appeal at the moment of abduction — the river as moral witness
Pampā (Tuṅgabhadrā)	Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa 1, 3; Yuddha Kāṇḍa 123	Meeting with Hanumān; alliance with Sugrīva; mobilization of the vānara army
Sea — Setubandha	Yuddha Kāṇḍa 123	Bridge built for the crossing to Laṅkā; first landing-place of Vibhīṣaṇa

Note: The popular identification of named rivers within Laṅkā (see §5.4) is not included in this table, as it is not supported in this form by Vālmīki's own text.

5. Discussion: Rivers as a Structural and Symbolic Device

5.1 Rivers as Markers of Threshold and Transition

A clear pattern emerges from the itinerary assembled above. Almost every major transition in Rāma's life is marked by the crossing of a named river — often explicitly, and sometimes within a single sarga. These transitions include the departure for the protection of Viśvāmitra's sacrifice, the departure into fourteen years of exile, the arrival at each successive place of forest residence, the search for Sītā, the crossing into enemy territory, and the final return to kingship. In Vālmīki's narrative grammar, the river-crossing functions as something close to a structural punctuation mark. It is a literal and figurative threshold, separating one phase of the dharma-governed life from the next.

5.2 Rivers as Witnesses and Moral Participants

Beyond this structural role, several rivers in the text are treated not as passive scenery but as addressees capable, at least notionally, of moral action. Two episodes illustrate this clearly. Sītā prays to the Gaṅgā while crossing into exile, asking for the family's safe return (Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, Sarga 52). Her appeal to the Godāvarī is far more urgent: at the instant of her abduction, she asks the river to inform Rāma (Aranya Kāṇḍa, Sarga 49). In both cases, the river is positioned as an interlocutor rather than a backdrop. This is a significant point of contrast with epic geography more generally, where rivers typically function as static markers of place. In Vālmīki's handling, certain rivers are instead momentarily elevated to the status of witnesses, whose continued silence or eventual testimony matters to the unfolding of the plot.

5.3 The Self-Referential Geography of the Epic

Perhaps the most striking finding of this study is the degree to which Vālmīki's own text validates the centrality of the river-route by recapitulating it internally. This happens twice: once in brief, through Nārada's synopsis at the very opening of the Bāla Kāṇḍa, and once at length, through Rāma's own narration to Sītā near the close of the Yuddha Kāṇḍa. Few comparable epics build in such deliberate self-mapping. This double recapitulation suggests that the sequence of rivers is not an incidental by-product of describing a long journey. It is, instead, a structural feature consciously built into the architecture of the text — something closer to a narrative spine than to mere scenery. Isolating the study strictly to the Vālmīki text, as this paper has done, is precisely what allows this internal evidence to come into clear view. Once later accretions are mixed in, the deliberateness of Vālmīki's own geographic self-referencing becomes obscured.

5.4 A Note on Post-Vālmīki Accretions: The Case of Laṅkā

The discipline of restricting this study to Vālmīki's own verses also surfaces an instructive case of divergence between canonical text and later popular tradition, in relation to Laṅkā. The installation of Vibhīṣaṇa as king of Laṅkā is explicitly performed with sea-water. It is sprinkled by Lakṣmaṇa on the monkey chieftains' instruction, rather than drawn from any specific named river (Yuddha Kāṇḍa, Sarga 113). A second example points the same way. The river commonly identified today at the Sītā Eliya pilgrimage site in Sri Lanka's central highlands is popularly associated with Sītā's bathing during her captivity. It is, however, a feature of regional devotional and pilgrimage tradition, not a river named as such anywhere in Vālmīki's Sanskrit verses. Neither observation is intended to diminish the devotional significance of these later traditions. Rather, they illustrate precisely why the methodological separation maintained throughout this paper — between what Vālmīki himself states and what later layers of tradition have added — is necessary for any claim of textual accuracy.

6. Contemporary Resonance: From Sacred Memory to River Conservation

The exercise undertaken in this paper has a contemporary as well as a purely philological motivation. India's rivers are, by most recent assessments, under considerable ecological strain; one recent account drawing on Central Water Commission and NITI Aayog data describes more than 275 rivers and tributaries as being under severe stress, with a substantial majority of surface water unfit for direct consumption (as cited in Devrishi.org, 2025). Initiatives such as the Sadanīrā Project, which seeks to use cultural documentation, ecological science, and public memory together to reposition India's rivers as civilizational arteries rather than purely administrative resources (Devrishi.org, 2025), depend for their credibility on exactly the kind of source-disciplined cultural recovery attempted in this paper: an accurate, non-folkloric

account of which rivers are sanctified by association with Rāma's own life, and why, drawn from the earliest available textual layer rather than from a generalized devotional impression. In this sense, careful Indological method and contemporary river-conservation advocacy are not separate projects but mutually reinforcing ones.

7. Conclusion

This study has traced, kāṇḍa by kāṇḍa and sarga by sarga, the complete sequence of rivers explicitly named in connection with Rāma's life in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa alone: the Sarayū of his birth and departure, the Tamasā of the epic's own composition, the Gaṅgā crossed twice, the Śoṇā of the journey to Mithilā, the Vedaśrutī, Gomatī, and Syandikā of the road into exile, the Yamunā crossed twice, the Mandākinī of Citrakūṭa, the Godāvarī of Pañcavaṭī, the Pampā or Tuṅgabhadrā of Kiṣkindhā, and the sea-bridge of Setubandha — at least thirteen distinct watercourses in all, excluding the separately flagged case of Laṅkā. Far from functioning as incidental scenery, these rivers mark every major threshold of Rāma's narrative, are on occasion directly addressed as moral witnesses, and are twice deliberately recapitulated within the text itself, suggesting that the river-route was, for Vālmīki, a conscious structural device rather than a passive backdrop. Four promising directions for extending this method are outlined in Section 7.1.

7.1 Directions for Future Research

Four directions appear especially promising for extending the methodology adopted in this paper:

- A comparative mapping of river-references across the northern and southern textual traditions of the Critical Edition, to assess any divergence attributable to recensional history;
- A deeper exploration of correlations between this river-sequence and the archaeological record established by projects such as B. B. Lal's excavations;
- GIS-based (Geographic Information System) digital mapping of the Rāmāyaṇa river-route — that is, registering each river-site identified in this paper against modern geographic coordinates to produce an interactive map, a tool that could also support conservation-planning by initiatives such as the Sadanīrā Project;
- A comparative study of river-culture and pilgrimage-geography (tīrtha-bhūgol) — a systematic comparison of the canonical river-route established here with present-day pilgrimage circuits, regional devotional traditions (such as the Laṅkā case discussed in §5.4), and the river-associations developed within oral and folk memory, so as to document, in scholarly terms, both the distance and the continuity between canonical and accreted sacred geography.

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