

Vaishnavism as Fine Literature

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Crossing the Godāvarī: thoughts on 'translation' and the Kamparāmāyaṇam

The Irāmāvataram of Kampaṇ is typically framed as a translation of Vālmīki's Sanskrit Rāmāyaṇa; Kampaṇ claims as much himself at the opening of the long poem. I will respectfully question this consensus, and sketch in what is a more complex and hopefully useful account of how this great poem can be understood. The Irāmāvatāram, on this reading, is the result of a complex triangulation, between the long history of Sanskrit kāvya (not just its mythical origin-point), Tamil literature both 'classical' and devotional, and the traditions of reflection on poetic art which had flourished in both languages. Kampaṇ's masterpiece was less a simple work of translation however conceived as it is a sustained meditation on the creation of poetry out of such a complexly entangled literary past. To illustrate this interpretation, I will closely read a passage from the Āraṇiyakāṇṭam, which begins with Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā crossing the Godāvarī river, and so entering South India for the first time.