

LOOKING AT RAVANA: IMAGES OF RAMA'S FOE IN VISUAL ART AND PERFORMANCE

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Looking around India, you will find Ravana in many forms, in many places, for many reasons. Ravana sells carbonated drinks and premium ice cream. He appears in paintings from Kangra, north of Delhi and near the Nepal border in the east. His effigy towers over *Ramlila* grounds in villages and towns of the north; dancers who enact his life draw huge crowds along Kerala's coast in the south. Particular aspects of his story and character emerge from the specific genres in which Ravana appears. In order to understand his diverse meanings, I examine his representations in three genres: single poses in advertisements, multiple scenes in painting, and enactments in drama.

This essay suggests that viewing Ravana's diverse images moves us to expand beyond the classical, the written, and the merely good. My analysis of advertisements argues that, in order to promote consumerism, modern marketers foreground Ravana's unbridled desire. In contrast, I demonstrate how paintings move beyond one-dimensional representation: especially in compositions that depict multiple incidents, artists have the resources to reveal larger patterns within Ravana's behaviour—his need to display his wealth or his ability to suddenly shift his shape, for example. Finally, I show how dramas can reveal the most extensive and nuanced insights into what motivates him. Considering how Ravana appears visually within the *Ramayana* tradition, thus, enriches our understanding of written and visual, as well as textual and theatrical, representations of Ravana.

Advertisements

If the point of advertising in a capitalist economy is to inspire consumption, Ravana serves as the consumer par excellence. When made aware of some new or precious item—whether a celestial chariot or another king's wife—he feels that he *must* get that for himself and expends extraordinary effort to obtain it or her. He takes intense pleasure in battling for, commandeering, and flaunting what he passionately coveted and has eventually acquired. Among aspects of Ravana's character that feature

prominently in advertisements is an excessive desire that far outstrips that of other creatures.

Both text and image work together to convey the advertisement's message. On a large billboard appears the slogan "Ravenous Thirst" above a black-and-white drawing in outline of the king with ten heads, each one sporting a mustache and drinking a bottle of Limca—a lemon and lime flavoured bottled soft drink.¹ (fig. 1) Verbally, the advertisement plays on the similarity between Ravana's name and 'ravenous.' Even for viewers who cannot read, visually the advertisement evokes amusement by depicting Ravana, a monarch from olden times, quaffing a popular, 20th century, carbonated beverage. That a Limca advertisement would feature Ravana makes sense, given the historical moment when it circulated.

In 1977, when it won the national elections, the Janata Party threw the iconic American multi-national corporation, Coca-Cola, out of India. The Janata alliance, an amalgam of political parties that shared little except the goal of ending Indira Gandhi's "emergency" rule, found that its rejection of Coca-Cola gained approval even from its ideologically conflicting political factions. Besides winning support from leftists who viewed Coke as a neo-colonial agent of western imperialism, the decision pleased Indian businesses seeking to enter, or gain a greater market share of, the beverage market. Rejecting Coca-Cola also harkened back to the anti-colonial struggle, when Indians boycotted British imports in favour of goods produced in their own country. Thus, the advertisement for an Indian-made soda stars Ravana, a recognisably Indian (not foreign) figure.

Yet, might Hindu readers view the presence of Ravana as inauspicious or taboo?² On the contrary, advertisements starring Ravana have proved not only acceptable but attention-getting and humorous. As people feel attracted to huge dinosaurs, ten-headed Ravana attracted the attention of viewers. Yet, as



▲ Figure 1
Ravana advertises Limca, a well-known drink

Billboard advertisement
© India Magazine

one does not fear an attack by dinosaurs extinct for millennia, so too with Ravana, who lived and died at the hand of Rama in ancient days. In the advertisement, Ravana appears as a humorous anachronism from a previous age. The heads get viewers to attend to the advertisement; the text conveys that Limca quenches thirst so effectively that it would have satisfied even notoriously insatiable ten-mouthed Ravana.

More than simply a consumer, Ravana consumes prodigiously. In a newspaper advertisement for a new one-litre size of Kwaliti Wall's ice cream from 2000, a huge Ravana dominates the composition. (fig. 2) With bulging muscles, burly arms, and a giant mustache, he looks more like a heavy-weight wrestler than a king, but each head wears a crown. His ten heads grin broadly, as if they could not possibly be happier, now that they have even more ice cream than usual to enjoy. The advertisement conveys that you will never run short on ice cream if you buy the larger Kwaliti size.

Ravana is uniquely well-suited to encourage purchase of luxury goods, since he demands the finest things in life: the most delicious food and the most tasty beverages. Kwaliti, which pioneered the selling of relatively expensive luxury food (long before the economic liberation of India) for urban middle class



▲ Figure 2
Ravana advertises Kwaliti Wall's ice cream

Newspaper advertisement in The Telegraph
© Kwaliti Ice Cream

buyers, targets consumers who seek "the good life." When Kwaliti ice cream was launched, discerning buyers looked for trustworthy name-brand unadulterated food produced with bacteria-free ingredients. Kwaliti's founder, Kanti Parekh, earned his Ph.D. in food science and characterised his ice cream as consistently and reliably high quality.³ Ravana's presence stresses that it is Indian-made ice cream and, as fan of the good life, he also testifies that Kwaliti ice cream is worth every rupee.

Unlike Ravana, Rama seldom appears in advertisements for high-end consumer goods. His mission on earth left him little chance to gratify most sexual and culinary desires since he took a vow to marry only one wife, left the luxury of the palace to uphold his father's honour, and endured the hardship of forest life for fourteen years. Indeed, most pious Hindus view Rama as the exemplar of self-sacrifice and a model of restraint. In contrast, Ravana savoured the most luscious food and drink, so he has the worldly experience to guide buyers seeking top quality ice cream, thirst-quenching soda, and other pleasures.

Painting

Among the many techniques developed by Indian painters, art historians have labelled one of the most resourceful ones



◀ Figure 3
Siege of Lanka

Gouche and gold on paper, late 18th-
19th century
Kangra, Himachal Pradesh
41 x 53 cm
© Asian Civilisations Museum,
Singapore. 2007-01045

"continuous narrative."⁴ In paintings that use it, the artist depicts several moments or incidents *within* the composition of a single work. A painting that uses continuous narrative is analogous to several snapshots taken by a photographer, after they have been assembled and made available for viewing within a single frame. Such compositions can, therefore, provide more complex representations of a character than a work that depicts only a single scene. When Ravana appears in paintings with continuous narrative, the viewer often gains insight into relationships between him and other characters or patterns that underlie his deeds. Looking at two such paintings can deepen understanding of Ravana, the siege of Lanka from Kangra (Panjab Hills) and the abduction of Sita from Mithila (Bihar).

Depicting the siege of Lanka affords artists opportunities to portray the grandeur of Ravana's city in detail. (fig. 3) Traditional paintings from the Panjab Hills (often referred to as "Pahari paintings"), developed their characteristic artistic conventions in small hill kingdoms such as Kangra and Guler as early as circa 1720s. Court painters often glorify kingship in their works of art and, thereby, their king, as one sees in certain Kangra works dating from the 18th and early 19th centuries. On the one hand, a well-educated king was expected to serve as connoisseur and patron of the arts,

his capital graced by the talents of painters, poets, and musicians. With court life as their anchor, a monarch's painter could lavish attention on depictions of kingship. On the other hand, within the *Ramayana* tradition, Ravana appears as the unrivalled monarch of his day, ruling the dazzling city of Lanka, which he won as the spoils of battle. Thus, when King Ravana is vanquished by Rama, he earns undying fame for himself and his lineage. The greater the enemy vanquished, the greater the victor.⁵

The Kangra painting features three moments in the siege of Lanka: the storming of the fort in the centre, Ravana consulting military commanders on one side, and Rama consulting his commanders on the other side. The detailed depiction of Ravana's palace draws attention to the monarch's wealth. The royal precincts encompass multiple chambers, pavilions, turrets, balconies and verandas, topped with a lofty, cool, breezy porch. The painter carefully decorates key architectural elements: columns bear onion-shaped ornament emphasising verticality; geometrical lattice work on the windows graces the lower stories; diamond-shaped designs appear on the roof.

Placement and subject matter emphasise rivalry between the two foes. In the upper left corner (on the palace's top storey), Ravana



◀ Figure 4
Abduction of Sita

White paint on dark grey handmade paper, circa 1970-1990
Artist unknown
Madhubani region, Bihar
55 x 74 cm
© Paula Richman

confers with his commanders about defence of his city. In the upper right corner, atop a hill that provides a good vantage point for viewing the battle, Rama and Lakshmana confer with their commanders. The city of Lanka, which Ravana won in a previous battle from the God of Wealth, is a prize again threatened by war—this time by Rama. The painting's left side displays Ravana's material acquisitions from his martial success but the right side prefigures a new victor. Ravana has lived richly on the spoils from his many victories but he is about to forfeit life and wealth. His ambitions are grand but so is the scale on which he is about to suffer loss.

A painting from the opposite side of north India, Mithila in Bihar, displays another pattern of Ravana: his ability to shift shapes. Mithila artists, the majority of whom were and continue to be women, have long painted ritual designs on mud walls of their homes to create a wedding chamber for newly-married couples.⁶ During the 1966 drought, which impoverished the region, the All India Handicrafts Board sent handmade paper, on which they encouraged Mithila artists to create paintings for sale, establishing an ongoing lineage of Mithila paintings on paper. The painter of Figure 4, whose name is not known, picked two scenes from Sita's

abduction for illustration. According to the *Ramayana* tradition, Sita grew up in King Janaka's palace in Mithila, so a number of artists in the region, including Figure 4's painter, have chosen to portray incidents from her life in their artwork.

Figure 4 displays Sita's abduction as a two-part composition: on one side, Sita brings alms to an ascetic while, on the other side, Ravana abducts her. (fig. 4) The left side depicts (one-headed) Ravana, disguised as a sadhu, awaiting alms.⁷ (fig. 4.1) Nearby Sita, who has just descended the stairs of her cottage, carries a water vessel and a rice ball. Note that her body remains safely within the protective circle that Lakshmana drew before he left to aid Rama. On the other side of the circle stands Ravana, with one foot as close to the line as is possible without touching it. The right side of the painting shows ten-headed Ravana forcing Sita to go with him. (fig. 4.2) There, Ravana's ten heads loom ominously over his captive, while tears fall from Sita's eyes as she attempts to break Ravana's hold on her. Relentlessly, he drags her away.

A large tree separates the two scenes. The tree's left-branching limbs echo the curve of Lakshmana's circle that protects Sita

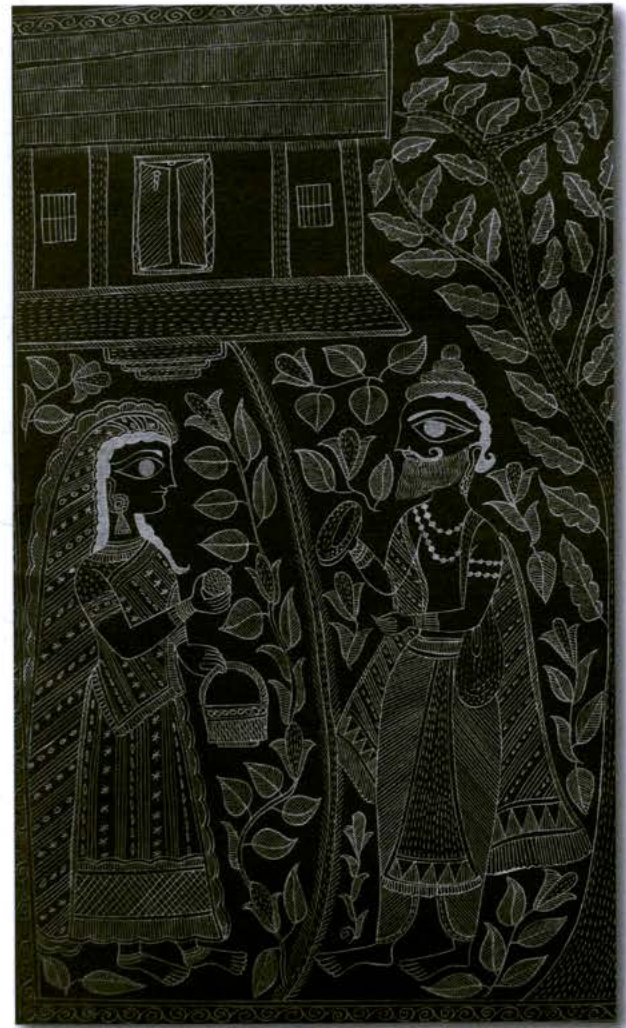
while the tree's right-branching limbs echo the curve of Ravana's many heads arrayed across the right side of the painting. Thus, the directionality of the limbs serves to highlight the power that males exert over Sita. The tree also functions symbolically: what occurs beneath the left-branching limbs suggests the dilemmas of a person left alone in the forest; what occurs beneath the right-branching limbs shows that the forest abounds with danger since it lies beyond the social order of settled life. Finally, the left scene occupies about one third of the painting while right scene covers about two thirds, spatially replicating the physical dominance of Ravana over Sita. The two-scene based composition and its proportions, the left and right branching of the tree, and even the direction of the drapery highlights the ability of Ravana to suddenly shift his physical shape to abduct Sita.

Both paintings generate a feeling of movement and sense of events unfolding. The Kangra painting of Lanka's siege displays markers of Ravana's victorious history in battle by representing the grandeur of his palace. At the same time, the painting foreshadows the imminent loss of all his achievements by representing Rama and his ursine and simian armies storming the battlements. In turn, the Mithila painting explicitly shows the radical transformation of Ravana. First, he arrives as an ascetic, a respected figure to whom a woman of the house gladly gives food. Yet, as soon as Sita steps over Lakshmana's line, Ravana immediately turns into a lecher whose ten heads display the magnitude of his sexual desire. Both paintings resourcefully present, in a single composition, more than one scene and, thereby, reveal multiple aspects of Ravana's behaviour.

Performance

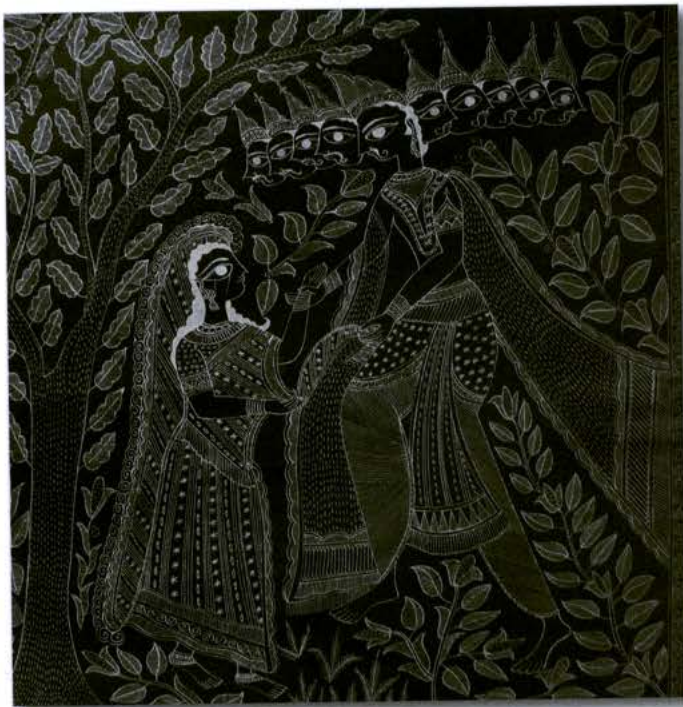
Among the many forms of ritual theatre enacted in north and central India, none has been more widespread nor influential than *Ramlila* (literally, 'Rama's play'), the generic name for a drama that enacts Rama's marriage, exile, war, and rescue of Sita as recounted in the 16th century Hindi text, *Ramacharita Manasa* by Tulsidas. *Ramlila* of various levels of formality and duration occur throughout the region, but the most elaborate *Ramlila* occurs in Ramnagar, across the Ganges from Benaras. This month-long *Ramlila* includes two separate physical representations of Ravana: a human actor and a papier mache effigy.

On the 25th night of this *Ramlila*, Rama defeats Ravana in battle. Figure 5 shows the person playing Ravana with a head-piece of ten



▲ Figure 4.1
Sita bringing food to Ravana disguised as ascetic

Detail from figure 4



▲ Figure 4.2
Ravana dragging Sita away

Detail from figure 4

heads and shoulder-pieces of twenty arms. (fig. 5) After minimum dialogue and great deal of fighting, Rama shoots thirty-one arrows at Ravana. The number is not arbitrary. Rama shoots one arrow for each of Ravana's ten heads and twenty arms but Ravana remains alive. Finally, Rama learns from Ravana's brother, Vibhishana, that Ravana's nectar of immortality rests in his navel. Rama's last arrow, aimed at that spot, finally brings down his mighty foe. *Ramlila* does not emphasise the suffering of dying Ravana; instead, the drama celebrates Rama's valour when he destroys the body of the demon and Rama's compassion when he thereby frees the earth from Ravana's tyrannous rule. After the last arrow hits him, the person playing Ravana removes his mask, walks across to the child playing Rama, touches his feet, and then leaves the *Ramlila* grounds. Yet, this is only the end of one form of Ravana.⁸

The destruction of the gigantic Ravana, towering above the crowd proves much more dramatic.⁹ (fig. 6) The effigy is set aflame and the fire spreads quickly across the highly flammable materials, while fireworks explode in the sky. Soon the fiery shape of the

effigy, which has been brilliantly burning against the dark sky, falls to pieces. (fig. 7) This act of cremation is triumphant, rather than tragic, because it marks the moment when Ravana's inner self, previously imprisoned in an evil body, is freed. After five hot-air balloons are released, they ascend into the sky. Representing the five life breaths of Ravana's self, they symbolise that the bonds that condemn him to endless death and rebirth are now broken, so he can ascend to the celestial world. Thus, after the body dies, the "better part" of Ravana attains moksha, religious liberation.

If *Ramlila* shows the end of Ravana, Kathakali dance-drama reveals the origins of Ravana's ambition. Kathakali is a Malayalam form of drama performed in Kerala that includes martial stances that express power, facial movements to convey moods, hand-gestures to mime poetry, and immersion in music that structures each dance-drama. Actors portray characters according to strict, formal conventions for representation that deeply shape how each figure acts, gestures, dresses, and looks. Kathakali characters are ranked on a hierarchy that ranges from most refined to least refined. Male heroes such as Rama and Krishna occupy the highest rung, called *pacca* (green). Their actions must be virtuous, their gestures dignified, their costumes evocative of great might, and their makeup signalling their great refinement.

Ravana belongs not in this category but one rung down in the hierarchy, the *katti* (knife) category. These male characters act in ways that transgress virtue and gesture wildly due to their lack of self-control. Yet they rank near the top of the hierarchy (just one rung below *pacca*) because they possess some admirable qualities, usually as a result of "a streak of nobility" in their blood.¹⁰ Since both Rama (*pacca*) and Ravana (*katti*) share some noble qualities, both wear the same costume. Ravana's green makeup, however, includes three items that distinguish him from Rama: an upturned red moustache; thick red lines above his eyes and eyebrows; and white balls on his nose and forehead. (fig. 8) All three elements disrupt the green face, signaling less refinement than that of members of the highest rank.

Perhaps surprisingly, some of the most moving Kathakali plays have *prati-nayaka* (anti-heroes) such as Ravana, as their central character, and, therefore present the narrative from their perspective. For example, one may wonder why Ravana immerses himself in a whirlwind of appropriating, accumulating, displaying, and aggrandising. Is he a monster, pure and simple?



◀ Figure 5
Masked Ravana actor in *Ramlila*

September-October, 1976
Ramnagar, Banaras, Uttar Pradesh
© Martin Karcher

▶ Figure 6
**Upper part of effigy of Ravana, surrounded by
Ramlila audience members**

September-October, 1976
Ramnagar, Banaras, Uttar Pradesh
© Martin Karcher



If not, why is he driven to dominate others and transgress virtue? In "*Ravanodbhavam*" (The Origins of Ravana), playwright Kallekkulangara Raghava Pisharody (1725-1793) delves into Ravana's past to dramatise when and how Ravana's desire for power and domination arises.¹¹

One of the most famous sections of the play, lasting an hour and a half, involves Ravana in a *nirvahana* (elaboration) in which the performer gives a history of his life up to the point where the play begins. Ravana's *nirvahana* begins as he remarks on his current wealth and the ensuing happiness it has brought him. As he probes into his past to discover what impelled him to perform rigorous penance (asceticism) that earned him near-invincibility in battle and great wealth, he recalls an event from his infancy.

Once, as tiny child asleep in his mother's lap, he woke to find tears streaming down her face as she watched his half-brother gliding through the sky in a royal aerial chariot that he obtained when he appropriated all their now-dead father's wealth for himself. Sadly, the mother compares the stepson's riches to her own penurious state and that of her own sons. Moved by her sorrow, young Ravana determines he will some day vanquish the half-brother and restore the fortunes of his mother.

When Ravana grows up, he undertakes harsh penance in order to win a boon from the gods. Yet, his fierce asceticism produces no results. Defiantly, he undertakes a far more extreme form of self-mortification, starting to slash off his heads, one after another, but still no god comes to his aid. Just as he is about to cut off his sole



▲ Figure 7
Ravana effigy burning

September–October, 1976
Ramnagar, Banaras, Uttar Pradesh
© Martin Karcher



▲ Figure 8
Ravana as katti in Ramlila performance

Photograph of C. Shanmukhan Playing Ravana, 2009
Kerala Kalamandalam, Kerala
© C. Shanmukhan

remaining head, Brahma suddenly stays Ravana's hand to offer him a boon. Indignant that Brahma has ignored him for so long, Ravana haughtily demands that Brahma return all his heads immediately and that he grant Ravana the boon that no god or demon will be able to kill him. After his heads reappear and Ravana receives the boon, he contemptuously dismisses Brahma. This pivotal scene does not depict Ravana as monstrously evil but instead as tricked out of any inheritance, true to his vow despite the pain it causes, insulted by Brahma, and bravely risking his heads to destroy his mother's sorrow by raising the status of his lineage.

In both dramas, *Ramlila* and Kathakali, Ravana appears as a far more complex figure than in either advertisements or paintings. Because a drama can go beyond representing one or a few moments in a character's life, to provide a narrative arc that can encompass an individual's history and personal motivation as well as circumstances that push characters in particular directions. The overall picture of Ravana a drama provides can go much further in representing him. In *Ramlila*, Ravana's physical body

may suffer, but his inner self attains the highest spiritual state possible so his death is a triumph. The Kathakali play presents Ravana as one whose impoverished childhood impels him to overcome great obstacles to attain success.

Conclusion

All three genres sampled here—advertisements, paintings, and dramas—add to our understanding of Ravana. The advertisements draw primarily on his appetite for pleasure, while paintings broaden the view, revealing the role of extremes in his life and his ability to shift his shape. The two dramas encompass these elements but add more: they contextualise certain deeds performed by Ravana within the narrative arc of his childhood and his death. Thus, the two plays present differing ways of interpreting Ravana's life. This essay provides only a small sampler of the many ways that Ravana has been represented over time in the visual and enacted arts. The more we investigate representations of Ravana, the more we can appreciate the complexity of his character and story.¹²

ENDNOTES

1. A photograph of this advertisement on a billboard (hoarding) appears in Thapar 1990: 43.
2. In today's Tamil Nadu, some prominent social reformers and politicians interpret Ravana as an ancient Dravidian monarch, who ruled the south before Sanskrit-speakers from north India conquered it. As a result, they have a distinctive view of Ravana that differs radically from the one found in *Ramlila*.
3. See Kwaliti Ice Cream.
4. For analysis of "continuous narrative" in the Panjab Hills, see Jain-Neubauer 1990: 67-74; Craven 1990: 2-22.
5. Slaying Ravana would not redound to the glory of Rama and his lineage, were Ravana ruler of an impoverished kingdom or a cowardly oft-defeated warrior.
6. For development of Mithila painting after the introduction of paper, see Jain 1997; Szanton and Bakshi 2007.
7. Ravana manipulates Sita by appealing to her sense of proper dharma. When Sita offers him alms from behind Lakshmana's line, Ravana (disguised as a frail ascetic) insists that he is too weak to move closer.

She feels duty-bound to feed a hungry ascetic and as soon as she steps across the line, he lunges forward and kidnaps her. For an analysis of the motif of a fake sadhu in Indian narrative, see Narayan 1989: 132-159.

8. For this description of the events on the 25th night, I am indebted to Richard Schechner, Linda Hess, and Philip Lutgendorf for conversations and helpful emails. For an extensive account of how spectators respond on this night, see Hess 2006: 125-127.

9. Because the photograph shows members of the audience near the effigy, one can see its large scale.

10. This description of the different categories follows the documentation in Zarrilli 1984: 173-174. The description also contains the four lower male categories as well. See Zarrilli 1984: 178-181 for the makeup used for characters in each category.

11. For the libretto of this ninety-minute scene, called "Tapassattam," see Appukkuttan and Paniker 1993: 188-197.

12. For a collection of photographs and primary texts dealing with Ravana, see Goswami and Baruah: 2009.

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