

Ramkatha Tradition in North East India: An Unexplored Avenue

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Abstract: Exploration of Ramkatha or the legend of Rama in the last two millennia or beyond in different parts of Asia has given rise to massive traditions of literature and art. The epic story has been retold in countless ways across time and space adapting to the values, ethos and ambience of diverse cultures, which resulted in emergence of numerous traditions of literature and visual and performing arts. In the process of adaptation and assimilation of the legend to diverse cultures, many of these renditions, while retaining the basic story and spirit of Valmiki Ramayana, the fountain head of all Rama traditions, have considerably departed from it to assume completely new forms, dimensions and appearances. Significantly, while Ramkatha traditions closely following the Valmiki Ramayana representing the Hindu spiritual and philosophical views occupy the prime place in the field of Ramkatha Studies, the traditions reflecting other religious and cultural views and values enjoy a peripheral status. Study of these traditions is essential for comprehending the Rama tradition in its entirety. Moreover, in the Indian context, where the Rama legend plays a profound role in the life and thought of the entire nation, a study and promotion of the versions outside the Valmiki Ramayana tradition is essential for upholding the spirit of unity in diversity in Indian culture. The proposed paper will make a probe into the Ramkatha based literature and art traditions of the North East India in order to examine the characteristic ways of adapting the legend to the socio-cultural views and ethos of the region reflecting its distinctive identity.)

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I. INTRODUCTION:

The Rama legend has played a profound role in the life, thought and culture of the Indian nation. Since the first elaborate rendition of the legend in the Valmiki Ramayana, the epic legend has been retold in countless ways in literature and other areas of visual and performing arts adapting to the values and ethos of diverse cultures. In the process many of these renditions have assumed diverse forms and appearances. Yet they are all connected to one another by their adherence to the basic theme and eternal values embedded in the story. The diverse manifestations of the Rama legend in India reflect the quintessential spirit of unity in diversity in the multicultural, multi-lingual Indian society. An elaborate study of the diverse manifestations of the Rama legend is essential for both comprehending Ramkatha tradition in India in its entirety and for having a glimpse of the numerous facets of Indian life and culture. Unfortunately many areas of Ramkatha tradition, particularly the oral traditions of small ethnic communities of India, have remained a largely neglected area of study and research.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The objectives of the study are to-

- (i) Make a survey of diverse manifestations of Ramkatha Tradition in different regions of the North East India.
- (ii) Analyze the distinctive characteristics of the Ramkatha based literary and art traditions of the region and their socio-cultural implications.

III. METHODOLOGY:

The study adopts explorative and analytical methods.

Ramkatha tradition in North East India

The North East India comprises seven states, viz Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. The region is often regarded as one cultural entity, somewhat different from the 'mainland India' for some definite characteristics like predominance of mongoloid races and languages of Tibeto-Burman and Thai- Chinese origin. The Northeast exhibits a unique composite culture resulting from the confluence of Aryan, Austric, Mongoloid and Negrito races. This composite society emerged through the dual processes of assimilation and absorption of the tribal communities into Hindu fold and absorption of the tribal values and practices by the Sanskritized non-tribal communities. In the making of the multicultural society of

the region, the legend of Rama played a significant role as a unifying link. Almost all the states have Ramkatha based literary and artistic traditions in varying degrees. The exploration of the Rama theme in the region itself is reflective of the culture building process of the region. The exploration of the Ramkatha material exhibits the dual process of assertion of the values, ethos and customs of the native soil and subscription to pan Indian values and ideals. Moreover, for the region's geographical location at the major immigration routes from south east Asia, the South east Asian versions of the Rama story also entered the narratives of the Northeast. Thus, manifestations of the legend in this region assume a unique character corresponding to the distinctive cultural values and ethos of the region and its contact with different cultures. The study of Ramkatha in the region from historical and socio-cultural perspectives throws significant light on the specific expressions of the Rama story in the region, their major characteristics and the socio-cultural implications.

Below is a discussion of Ramkatha traditions in the individual states of the Northeast.

Ramkatha tradition in Assam:

The Rama story was known to the people of Assam from an early date. Two seventh century copperplate inscriptions¹ of King Bhaskaravarmana(seventh century) mentioning Rama, Dasharatha and Janaka; sculptural depiction of the Rama story in a relief at Deoparbat(10th- 11th century); elaborate reference to diverse episodes of the Rama story in Kalika Purana (10th- 11th century) etc. bespeak an early presence of the Rama story on Assamese soil. Assam has the proud distinction of possessing the first rendition of the Valmiki Ramayana in any Indian language of Aryan origin which was composed by Madhava Kandali in the fourteenth century. From the sixteenth century onwards Assam saw a surge of Ramkatha based creations in diverse fields of literature and the arts. Thus, Assam possesses a very rich and huge Ramkatha tradition comprising numerous works of both oral and written literature and traditions of visual and performing arts. Below is a discussion of the diverse areas of Ramkatha tradition in Assam.

Literature:

Assam possesses a massive stock of Ramkatha based literature. A huge body of Ramkatha literature comprising a good number of Ramkatha texts rendering the entire Rama story or the Kandas(cantos) and countless poetry, drama, songs and lyrics based on the themes, characters and episodes of the Rama story has been produced in the region. Apart from the written literature which is mostly composed in Assamese, the region has a massive corpus of Ramkatha based oral literature in Assamese and the ethnic languages of the region.

Written literature:

Assamese:

Below is a list of the representative works of Ramkatha literature in Assamese:

Ramkatha Texts :

Madhava Kandali Ramayana : a faithful rendition of the five Kandas (from Ayodhyakanda to Yuddhakanda) of Valmiki Ramaya. In the Sixteenth century Saint poets Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva added the Uttarakanda and Adikanda respectively to complete the Kandali Ramayana.

Ananta Kandali Ramayana : Composed in the sixteenth century, it was a Vaishnava adaptation of Madhava kandali Ramayana.

Durgabar Kayastha's Geeti Ramayana: Composed in the Vaisnavite era by Durgabara Kayastha, this was a musical rendition of Kandali Ramayana comprising sixty songs set to twenty three ragas and descriptive verses.

Srirama Kirtana: A composition of narrative verses composed in the seventeenth century by Ananta Dasa. Though the poet introduces his poem as based on the Ramayana Chandrika of Kalap Chandra, he too seems to have been adherence to the Madhava Kandali Ramayana.

Katha Ramayana of Raghunath Mahanta : composed in the eighteenth century, this is the first prose rendition of the Ramayana in any language of Indo-Aryan origin.²

Kavya: Harihar Bipra's "Lava- Kushar Yuddha" (14th century), Ananta Kandali's "Mahiraban Badh(16th century) ", Ramasaraswati's "Lakshmanar Shaktishel" (17th century), Raghunath Mahanta's " Shatrunjay Kavya" and " Adbhut Ramayana" (18th century) Bhavadev Bipra's " Nagaksha Yuddha" , Dhnanjaya's " Ganak Charitra"(18th century) Gangaram Das's "Seetar Banabas" (18th or 19th century) , Dwij Panchanan's " Patalikanda Ramayana"(18th or 19th century) , Bholanath Das's " Seetaharan Kavya" (19th century) , Durgaprasad Devasarma Phukan's " Laban Doityabadh aru Laba- Kushar Janma Upakhyan (20th century) etc.

Nataka: Sankaradeva's " Ramvijay Nat" (16th century) , Madhavadeva's " Rambhavana Natak" (16th century) Lakshmidewa's " Raban Badh Natak", Purnakanta's "Lankadahan", Biswambhardeva's " Seetaharan Balibadh" Bhadradeva's " Seetaharan" (18th or 19th century), Atul Chandra Hazarika's " Seeta" and " Ramchandra"(20th century) etc.

Themes and materials of the Rama story have been extensively explored in modern Assamese literature in diverse genres, particularly in poetry and drama with new sensibility, orientation and interpretations.

Ramkatha texts in other ethnic languages:

(a) Chabin Alun:

Composed in the Karbi language, this text initially belonged to oral tradition. At present, three written versions of the oral epic are found, viz, "Sabin Alun" compiled by Premakanta Mahanta (1976), "Sabin Alun" edited by Samsingh Hanse (1986) and "Sabin Alun and other Popular Legends of the Karbis" edited by Phukan Chandra Phanso (2002). Having all the qualities of an oral epic, this Ramkatha text is totally set in the Karbi soil deeply adapted to the Karbi customs, traditions, beliefs and ways of life. Though the broad framework of the Karbi Ramayana is same as that of the Valmiki Ramayana, it exhibits many significant deviations from the Valmiki Ramayana. The Chabin Alun shows some affinity with the Ramkatha themes prevalent in South east Asia.³

(b) Likchaw Lamang:

Composed in the Khamti language, this rendition is deeply influenced by Jataka tales and Buddhist philosophy. Rama is deeply identified with the Buddha. This version has close similarity with the Ramkatha tradition of Southeast Asia.

(c) Ramayane Kharang:

This text originally belonged to oral traditions of the Tiwas of Assam. It is a very simple and abridged rendition of the Rama story containing all the major episodes of Valmiki Ramayana. The text has been written down by Rupsingh Deuri in 1993 in Assamese script.

Ramkatha in oral literature and folklore:

Assam has about thirty two linguistic communities and almost every community possesses, in varying degrees, Ramkatha based oral traditions. Among these, the most extensive stock of oral traditions is found in the Assamese language. Ramkatha is found manifest in areas like devotional songs, ritual songs, marriage songs, festival songs, lullabies, incantation, proverbs, folk tales and folk beliefs in Assamese. Among other linguistic communities, the Karbis and Tiwas deserve special mention. Both the communities possess their own oral epics or ballads of the Rama story. Moreover Ramkatha prevails in diverse areas of their culture like folk songs, folk beliefs and customs and rituals. In case of other linguistic communities Ramkatha mainly finds place in songs (mostly marriage songs), folk beliefs and myths. A few communities have Ramkatha based performing art traditions as well. Thus the Rama story finds expression in folk literature and culture belonging to different communities of Assam.

Ramkatha based performing arts traditions:

The region possesses a good number of Ramkatha based performing art traditions of song, dance, theatre and puppetry. These traditions belonging to folk, classical and semi classical genres have definite structures with regard to tunes and patterns of songs and music and styles and conventions of dance and acting. It is a matter of grave concern that many of these forms are dying and decaying due to various socio-economic reasons. Some of the major Ramkatha based traditions are mentioned below.

Dhulia Bhaona- a popular folk art form comprising song, dance, instrumental music and acting chiefly based on the Ramkatha tradition. This form consists of a troupe of about twenty to twenty five members including instrumentalists like drummers, cymbalists and pipers and several actor performers.

Khulia Bhaona- once widely popular in undivided Darrang and Kamrup districts of Assam, this folk dramatic art form uses the Ramkatha theme and the Mahabharata theme. Comprising a troupe of several khulias (players of the cylindrical drum), cymbalists and a lead actor and several other actors, this form makes use of masks.

Kusan Gan - traditional art form comprising recitation and dramatic representation entirely based on the Ramkatha theme. This form is mostly current in North Goalpara of Assam.

Bhari Gan- Traditional Ramkatha based art form comprising song and drama using wooden masks. This form is basically confined to the Pati Rabhas.

Ramayan Gowa Oja-pali or Durgabariya Oja Pali - This is a form of Oja pali, a semi classical dramatic art form of Assam. This form is confined exclusively to the Ramkatha theme using the Giti Ramayana of Durgabara.

Ankiya Bhaona- Dramatic art form belonging to Sattriya tradition basically centering around the Krishna cult makes use of the Rama theme as well

Putala Nach- a tradition of string puppetry chiefly using the Ramkatha theme

Ramkatha in Visual Arts

(i) **Painting:** use of the Ramkatha themes in different schools of painting (eg., Sattriya school, Darrang School)

(ii) **Sculpture:** Ramkatha based sculpture in temples, sattras , namghar etc.

Masks: masks of Ramkatha characters used in Khulia Bhaona, Bhari Gan, Ankiya Bhaona etc.

Assam, thus, possesses a huge Ramkatha tradition emerging from the multitudinous and multifarious explorations of the Rama story.

Manipur:

Manipur has a vibrant Ramkatha tradition manifest in literature, art and folklore.

Literature:

A complete Manipuri rendition of the Ramayana with all the seven cantos was composed by Pandit Angom Gopi or Kshema Sing Moiramba under the patronage of the eighteenth century Manipuri King Garibniwaz(1709-1748). Based on the Krittivasi Ramayana, with a sprinkling of the Valmiki Ramayana, this rendition exhibits deep regional complexion and flavour of the cultural soil of Manipur.

A complete Manipuri translation of the Valmiki Ramayana by L. Ibungo Yaima Singh, a Manipuri recreation of the seventh canto of The Valmiki Ramayana by poet A. Minaketan Singh and of the Krittivasi Ramayana by N. Ibobi have been reported to exist in Manipur.

Raghu Vamsha of Kalidasa has two Manipuri versions rendered by Pandit Kalachand Shastri and Pandit Brajbihari Sharma. Original and translated plays on various episodes of Ramakatha have been presented on modern stage.

Performing Art:

Ramkatha in Ariba pala: A form of Kirtana singing with distinctive ragas and raginis having some affinity with Assamese Oja-pali begun in the royal court of King Garibniwaz still exists in some parts of Manipur.

Ramkatha through Katthaks: Waari Leeba(Storytelling tradition) , a declining art tradition comprising singing and gesticulating (while sitting erect) utilizing various episodes from Krittivasi, Valmiki, Yoga Vasistha, Adhyama and other Ramayanas belonging to the Meiteis of Manipur and Tripura.

Ramkatha in Pena Sangeet: Manipuri folk minstrels singing the epic story of Khamba-Thoibi also take up the story of the Ramayana. Accompanied to the folk stringed instrument called Pena, this performance is regarded as an act of prayer and worship.

Ramkatha in Khongjom Parva: A folk performance comprising narration and singing with the dholak commemorating the battle of Khongjom (the last war of Manipur's independence in 1891) utilize Ramayana episodes.

Ramkatha in Lairik-Thiba –Haiba: A kathak tradition in Manipuri presented in various modes and moods , uses with other religious texts, the Krittivasi Ramayana. This form of singing slokas are presented mostly in payar chanda in a particular raga or ragini (as different from Kirtana style)

Ramkatha in Manipuri Jatra Tradition: This is a nearly extinct Manipuri Ramleela tradition dealing mostly with the early portion of the Ramayana using acrobatics and humour.

Arunachal Pradesh:

Literature:

The 'Lik Chaw Lamang', the Khamti Ramayana deeply reflecting the ethos, customs, religious beliefs of the Khamti community is prevalent among the Khamtis inhabiting in the Lohit region of Arunachal Pradesh .

A folktale popular among the Mismis inhabiting in the Dibang and Kamlangar valleys , Chiyang and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh has deep affinity with the Rama Story.⁴ The tale tells about a king whose daughter is abducted by an eight headed demon. She was rescued by the king but she was kidnapped by another demon king from across the sea. The King made an alliance with the king of monkeys , kills the demon king and rescues his daughter. Thus the story incorporates all the major episodes of the story of Rama.

Meghalaya:

Literature:

Ramkatha is prevalent among all the major communities of Meghalaya, viz. Khasi, Jaintiya and Garo. In 1900, Jeebon Roy, founder of Seng- Khasi , a socio-religious organization brought out the Ramayan in Khasi in the form of a booklet. L. H. Pole adapted the Ramayana into Khasi. Existence of another Khasi translation of the Ramayan accomplished by Sylvanus Lamare has been reported.

Ramayana is fairly well-known among the Garos as well. It is told as a folk tale. A Garo translation of the Ramayana in short story form is included in a volume called ' Itihasni Kattarang'(Stories from History).

A Garo translation of the Ramayana by Redin Momin (died 1959) was published posthumously in 1992. This has been reported as the only attempt at translation of the full text of the Ramayana in Garo.

Rama story is widely popular among the Jaintias who had accepted Hinduism long ago.

Meghalaya does not possess elaborate traditions of Ramkatha based literature and art. But the story of Rama is popular among the masses. Acceptance and popularity of the story among the masses is also indicated by the prevalence of Ramakatha based folk belief and practices.

Folk belief :

The people of the Ri-War region believe that the oranges of the area are very sweet because Rama had brought oranges from Lanka and dropped in those areas. Among the Jaintias, if twin boys are born, they are given the names of Ram and Lakhon (Lakshman).

Mizoram:

In Mizoram, Ramkatha basically finds place in folk tradition, especially in folk tales, folk beliefs and proverbs. Many of the episodes of the Ramayana are found in Mizo folk tale. The story of Rama finds expression in an elaborate folk tale called "Khena and Rama – te Unau Thu" (the Story of Lakshmana and Rama).⁵ In its limited range the story depicts the main episodes of the Rama story. Apart from Ram and Sita the Mizo version of the Ramkatha has a number of characters such as Khena, Hawlawman, Luphirabon, Lusariha who may be identified as Lakshmana, Hanuman, Mahiravan and Ravana respectively. The Mizo Ramkatha incorporates some episodes which are not found in the Valmiki Ramayana. For example, this text narrates that on being badly beaten up by his brother for having sex with his brother's wife, Hawlawman (Hanuman) cries immensely shedding tears like heavy rains and is comforted by Rama. Sita creates a statue of Lusariha (Ravana) at Rama's insistence. The statue comes to life causing Rama's suspicion about Sita's chastity which leads to Sita's exile. These episodes found only among the ramkatha versions in Southeast Asia hints toward non-Valmiki versions as the source of the Mizo Ramkatha.⁶

Ramkatha plays an important role in Mizo folk belief and proverbs as well. Rama and Khena are accepted as gods. In an invocation to rice used in various rituals related to marriage, death, birth etc the two characters are mentioned in the following manner:

While the earthworm took earth for shaping the world,

While mother nature modeled the world.

You were created by Khena and Rama

To predict the truth and

To sing the truth...⁷

Ramkatha is thus basically present in oral tradition of Mizoram.

Tripura:

Ramayana exerts tremendous influence on the life and culture of the people of Tripura. The region shows acquaintance with the Ramkatha from ancient times.

Literature:

The Rajaratnakara, an important historical chronicle of Tripura composed in the fifteenth century mentions Puru Sen, an early king of Tripura as a contemporary of King Dasharatha of Ayodhya who went to Ayodhya to attend the sacrifice performed by King Dasharatha.⁸ Whatever the truth about the facts may be, it certainly indicates the acquaintance of the people with the Rama story.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, Shivendra Dwija under the patronage of King Ramaganga Manikya of Tripura composed a version of Adhyatma Ramayana in Sanskrit. Under the aegis of the king, an ardent devotee of Sri Rama, the text was published and preached among the subjects.⁹

As a Ramkatha text the Bengali rendition of the Ramayana by Krittivas is immensely popular with the people from the interior hills to the plains. The epic has been a great source of inspiration and has given rise to countless works of literature including poems, plays, songs and paintings and dramatic traditions based on the story of Rama.

Performing Art:

"Rama Panchali" a simple unsophisticated form of folk poetry based on the Rama story is performed in different occasions, particularly during Shradh ceremonies in the villages of Tripura.¹⁰

"Ramayana Pala Kirtan" a Ramkatha based performing art tradition comprising song, dance and drama is prevalent in Tripura. It is sung at night during winter. Presented by talented bards it requires a few nights to complete the story.¹¹

There is a rich tradition of folk dance and drama based on the Rama story among the tea garden communalities like the Santhals, Mundas, Tantis, Nunisa and Gauds which is performed during Holi.¹² Another important folk performance tradition of Tripura making use of Ramkatha themes are the dance dramas called Kathamos which are staged by professional troupes during Charak puja. This particular form is characterized by rich music, beautiful foot works and elaborate limb movements, use of masks and specific costumes. Episodes of the Ramayana that are usually selected for performance are the marriage of Rama-Sita, their exile, Sita's abduction by Ravana, the war between Rama and Ravana, Sita's exile, birth of Luv- Kush and the like.¹³

Oral Tradition:

The Rama legend has profound influence on the folklore of Tripura. The episodes, themes and characters of Ramkatha find important place in folktales, proverbs, riddles and folk beliefs and folk art. Deep influence of the Rama story in the life and culture of the people of Tripura is evident from the association of names of people, place, hills, flora and fauna etc. with different characters from the Ramayana.

Influence of the Rama story is evident in a few folk games of Tripura. For example, "in the southern part of Tripura, a game consists of a short song and physical demonstration. It depicts the martial music and martial preparation of Rama and Lakshmana on the eve of the war (with Ravana). The sympathy goes with Rama and Lakshmana".¹⁴ Thus Ramkatha is widely prevalent in literary, performance and oral traditions of Tripura.

IV. OVERALL ANALYSIS:

The foregoing accounts bespeak deep-rooted and all-pervasive presence and impact of the Rama legend in the Northeast. Abundance of Ramkatha based oral traditions of the region is a pointer towards the popularity of the legend among the masses of the region. It is significant to note that while in many parts of India the religious and spiritual dimensions of the Ramkatha legend find foremost place in the collective consciousness of the people, in Northeast India, Ramkatha is basically a cultural engagement emphasizing the ethical and ideological implications of the story. The first rendition of the Ramayana text of the region, viz. the Madhava Kandali Ramayana clearly mentions the story as a secular and earthly one.¹⁵ The prevalence of Ramkatha based performing art traditions and institutions and exploration of the Rama theme in secular creative literature and secular domains of folklore of the region certainly point towards the cultural orientation of the Rama story in the region. Many of the tribes of the region are Animists or followers of other traditional religious faith. Thus, while in many of these cultures Rama is not regarded as a god or deity, his character as an epitome of ultimate human virtues and the values and ideals embedded in his story exerts tremendous appeal to the collective consciousness of the people. However, the devotional aspect of the Rama story is not totally absent in the region. During the neo Vaishnavite movement of Assam, the religious and spiritual aspect of the Rama story came to be fervently explored. However, as incarnations of Visnu, Rama and Krishna were identified as one and thus no Rama-cult was established. Apart from the followers of Ramabhakti marga in Manipur there is no remarkable Rambhakti sect in the North east. Shrines like two Raghunath temples in Bongaigaon area of Assam are rare examples of Rama worship in the region. In the folk minds of the region the diverse aspects of Rama the ideal human appeals a lot. Another important aspect of the exploration the Rama legend is the reflection of socio-cultural ethos of the region. The characters and episodes of the story, while retaining the essential qualities in the original assume new appearances moulded according to the values, ethos and ambience of the region. Thus, Rama becomes an ideal youth of the region, the meek and submissive Sita becomes a bold and vocal maiden and king Janaka becomes an ideal farmer in some of the versions of Rama story in the region.

The deep rooted and all-pervasive presence of the Rama story in the region explodes the myth of Northeast's essential difference from the "mainland India". By adapting the story of pan-Indian recognition to the cultural ethos of the region the Ramkatha tradition of the Northeast at once subscribes to the pan-Indian values and asserts its distinctive cultural identity reflecting the spirit of multiculturalism in India.

V. CONCLUSION:

Ramkatha in Northeast India is a largely unexplored area of study. Ramkatha is prevalent in diverse forms and ways in the region. Most of these are totally unknown to people outside the region and even within the region. Ramkatha mostly resides in oral tradition and traditional performing art forms. Many of these are either in decadent state or on the verge of extinction. Many of them have been lost forever without being written down or documented. In some regions Ramkatha based traditions gradually lost prominence or relevance after spread and consolidation of Christianity. These were further put into oblivion by the weakening ties of the mainland culture resulting from various socio-political factors causing estrangement between the two. Urbanization and globalization have also adversely affected. Still these traditions emerging the indigenous soils

are precious gems of this region. And a reminder and indicator of the essential oneness of India. Study and exploration of the Ramkatha based traditions of the region may contribute greatly towards national integration.

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- [5] The story is included in “ Mizo Leh Vaik Thon Thu”(Mizo and non-Mizo Tales) edited by J. Shakespeare, and printed in Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong in 1897
- [6] Sangkima, Impact of Ramayana upon the Mizo, Ramayana in the North-East India, p 45
- [7] Ibid, p. 43
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- [10] Ibid, p 97
- [11] Tripuri Ramayana, Ramayana in the North-East India, Jagadish Gan Choudhury, p.68
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- [13] Ibid,pp 64-65
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