The numerous, largely understudied, but often extremely interesting medieval commentaries on the major Sanskrit epic and purānic texts constitute a significant genre of pre-modern South Asian secondary scholarship, the study of which raises significant issues of hermeneutics, philology, theology, and translation theory. I am referring here chiefly to the available corpus of Sanskrit language commentaries on the seminal smṛti texts, the Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata and the Bhāgavatapurāṇa.

Secondary texts such as these, unlike such “primary” commentaries as, for example, Patañjali’s Mahābhāṣya or Śaṅkarācārya’s bhāṣyas on the Brahmāsūtras and the Upaniṣads, do not generally form part of the education of the western Indologist and, in fact, are often dismissed by scholars trained in the traditions of European philology as derivative, late, sectarian, biased and, in brief, unworthy of the scholar’s attention. Indeed, when I was a graduate student I often experienced a certain frustration with my teachers’ constant discouragement of my curiosity about the long, intriguing but daunting-looking passages of commentary that were frequently interspersed
between the verses or sections of such seminal primary works as the *Ṛgveda*, the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, the *Raghuvaṁśa* and so forth. that my fellow students and I were required to read in class. The frustration derived from the feeling that we were not getting the opportunity to read with expert guidance what various scholars grounded in the indigenous universe of the Sanskrit knowledge systems, commentators like Sāyaṇa, Mallinātha and so on, had to say about these texts that were so central to their intellectual, religious and aesthetic universe. For surely, I reasoned, they were, if not omniscient and infallible interpreters of these works, at least much closer in time and cultural sensibility to the authors of the primary texts than we were. Might they not then be able to help us better to understand these works in their complex roles in the formation of the Sanskrit based intellectual universe?

Moreover, the discouragement with regard to reading these commentaries derived, it often seemed, from a certain prejudice on the part of my teachers (all of whom were, I hasten to add, excellent and noteworthy scholars), a prejudice deriving, I think, from the mind set of a European or European-style of Indic philology. This is an attitude that decidedly privileged older over younger texts and western over Indian kinds of text-criticism and *explication de texte*. When these two prejudices are combined, one can see that it makes little sense to read the work of someone like, for example, Sāyaṇa. For he wrote not only several millennia after the texts on which he was commenting, but he lacked, so we were told, the critical skills and scholarly distance that formed the supposed bedrock upon which the western philological edifice was founded.

I use the word prejudice advisedly here because the attitude we were encouraged to imbibe from our mentors and models was, not to mince words, infused with a certain type of cultural and even ethnic condescension. This attitude was directed at South Asian scholars past and present and even at the very primary works that western scholarship regarded worthy of study and translation.

Thus, for example, the great *vedic* scholar Julius Eggeling, in his introduction to his monumental translation of the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa*, a task to which he must have devoted years, can speak of the genre to which the text belongs as follows. “For wearisome prolixity of exposition, characterised by dogmatic assertion and flimsy symbolism rather than by serious reasoning, these works are perhaps not equaled anywhere; unless, indeed it be by the speculative vapourings of the Gnostics, than which, in the opinion of the learned translators of Irenaeus, ‘nothing more absurd has probably ever been imagined by rational beings’” (Eggeling 1882, ix).
Similarly, A. B. Keith, a keen student of the Sanskrit poets, when writing (1928, 344-351) of their “achievement” often chose to focus chiefly on the “defects” of their collective œuvre, including its “tricks in poetic form and grotesque experiments…” to the point at which Ingalls (1965, 50) was forced to observe that, “It is obvious from his works that for the most part he [Keith] disliked Sanskrit literature.” Similar statements can be easily adduced from the large corpus of western scholarship on the Sanskrit epics and virtually every other genre of the literature.

It was not until late in my career as a graduate student that I had the opportunity to read Sanskrit texts with traditionally trained Sanskrit scholars in India, scholars who, notwithstanding the fact that they had had generally little if any training in western style philology or critical scholarship, knew the texts far better than any scholars I had previously met. What surprised and intrigued me was the extent to which these scholars would rely, not on the philological aids I had been trained to use, but on the very commentaries I had been taught to hold in a certain contempt and generally to ignore.

When I began to read these commentaries and to take them seriously, I found them to be not only useful because of the help they afford in understanding the texts to which they are keyed, but in many ways fascinating in their own right. For these works give us a unique avenue through which we can gain insight into the ways in which a variety of learned individuals were able to deploy the entire spectrum of the traditional systems of śāstraic knowledge in the service of the elucidation of deeply cherished but often contested texts. In short, I believe that these works, when taken seriously, afford us an unparalleled opportunity to observe the workmanlike application, rather than simply the śāstraic formulation, theorization and defense of pre-modern Sanskrit knowledge systems.

Let me turn now to the specific texts I mean to address and why I want to address them. As indicated above, I am referring especially to the commentaries on the great popular texts that have served, perhaps more than any others, to disseminate the social, political and religious ideology of Brahmanical-Hindu civilization. The ideology to which I refer is the one primarily articulated and defended in the seminal vaidika and śāstraic texts. Articulated in closely guarded technical works, this ideology was disseminated to the broad mass of South and Southeast Asian populations principally through the popular epic and purānic texts mentioned above and the complex set of cultural phenomena they have inspired.

Because of the ways in which these three texts have saturated, as it were, the intellectual, political, social, folkloric, artistic, musical, literary, reli-
gious and philosophical life of southern Asia, they have naturally tended to become the ground for considerable interpretive appropriation and intellectual contestation. This has become manifest in the form of the multiple commentaries to which each of these texts has given rise. The importance of there being multiple commentaries produced by different commentators at different times and in different places should also be stressed here. The divergent readings, views and interpretations as well as the plethora of intertextual appropriations and bitter or mocking disputes serve to warn us that no text can exist apart from its interpretive communities and that a complex mix of affiliation and antipathy is an essential element of a living intellectual tradition. When authors merely rehearse older interpretations and texts, when, to put it another way, anuvāda replaces vivāda, a tradition is, in effect, dead.

Let me emphasize that the commentaries that I am speaking about here are interesting precisely because and not in spite of their secondary status. I am not talking about the sort of commentary that may equal in importance or even outshine the primary text on which it is based; works such as those mentioned above like Patañjali’s Mahābhāṣya or philosophical commentaries such as those of Śaṅkara, Rāmanuja, etc., which have long been read as objects of study in their own right. Rather, these are the nuts and bolts infrastructure of a workmanlike hermeneutic tradition that, while not śāstras themselves, are as close as we can probably get to a dynamic appreciation of the śāstraic intellect in action.

With this as a preamble, I would like to turn now to a few specific examples, focusing particularly on some of the eight or ten Sanskrit commentaries on the Vālmiki Rāmāyana that we in the Rāmāyana translation consortium have been reading in connection with our ongoing translation and annotation of the epic. In so doing I hope to be able to demonstrate something of what I would call the work of the commentators, by which I mean their techniques, their deployment of the resources of the vast complex of systematic knowledge and the larger, shared project in aid of which this deployment is carried out. I also hope to be able to justify to some extent the seemingly fanciful title of this paper.

I chose this title specifically to confront the question of the difference between the ways in which and the purposes for which we as modern western scholars and the Sanskrit intellectuals of pre-modernity read texts such as the Sanskrit epics. For these ways and purposes are in some particulars similar and in others significantly different; and it is this difference that, to some degree, has led to the kind of scholarly condescension and even ridicule for pre-modern Indian intellectual life that I alluded to earlier.
The reader of texts like the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata* must approach them after making a profound, but generally unexamined, choice as to whether to see them on the one hand as some kind of historically informed myth or fairy tale or, on the other, to understand them as inspired records of actual historical events.

Early western scholarship on the epics is often harshly critical of the poems for their apparently chaotic structure and their fanciful or even juvenile representation of absurd events. For what, after all, are we supposed to make of a ‘national epic’ like the *Rāmāyaṇa* filled with monstrous ten-headed demons as huge as mountains and gigantic talking monkeys who can fly across the sea? To the modern scholar such things call for interpretation. Are we dealing with folk tales that have grown out of control? Are the events described allegorical? Are they primitive versions of nature myths in which powerful celestial and meteorological forces are personified? Are these tales the literary analogs of dreams in which the deepest psychic fears and fantasies of a civilization are acted out in shared fantasy? All of these interpretative strategies have been attempted, as have several others.

The Sanskrit commentators on the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* for the most part do not see the work as calling for interpretation in the sense in which I see western-style scholarship reading the work. That is to say they do not generally believe that the poem means something other than what it says, although as I will indicate below even this rule is subject to certain interesting exceptions. For them the events described in the epic are, however fantastic they may seem to us, things that actually happened in real, historical, if very distantly past, time.

In saying this I do not at all mean to suggest that there is some particularly irrational mind set that is characteristic of Indian pre-modernity, any more than, say, a literalist reading of *Genesis* is typical of modern western thought. Indeed, there is ample evidence for a strong streak of rationalism in much early Sanskrit writing exemplified, for example, in the Jain scholars’ critiques of certain Hindu beliefs and in their re-workings of the epics along the lines of what can only be regarded as rationalist interpretation. Thus for Vimalasūri, for example, the author of the Prakrit *Rāmāyaṇa* known as the *Paumacariya*, there are no talking monkeys, only tribal groups that use the monkey as their banner while the ascription of ten heads to Rāvaṇa derives from the fact that he wore a necklace of nine brilliant gems which bore the reflected image of his one head.

This skeptical attitude is perhaps most charmingly represented in a verse from Vidyākara’s eleventh century anthology of courtly Sanskrit poetry
where, in a poem ascribed to Dharmakīrti, the poet laments his lack of
critical acclaim as follows, in Ingalls’ translation (1965, 444-445):

Vālmīki dammed the sea with rocks
put in place by monkeys,
and Vyāsa filled it with arrows shot by Pārtha;
yet neither is suspected of hyperbole.
On the other hand, I weigh both word and sense
and yet the public sneers and scorns my work.
Oh Reputation, I salute thee!¹

Indeed, beyond a certain point even the epic commentators may balk at
too lofty a flight of fancy, characterizing some utterly fantastic episodes
as bālakathāḥ, stories for children. An example of exactly where a pre-
modern scholar can draw the line between fact and fiction can be seen in
the opening sarga of the Sundarakāṇḍa of the poem. Here, in the course
of his epic leap across the ocean, a feat the historicity of which none of the
commentators questions, the monkey hero Hanumān engages in a pecu-
liar contest with the great Serpent Mother Surasā, whom the gods have
induced to take the form of a monstrous all-devouring demoness in order
to test the monkey’s mettle. Each time the giantess opens her gaping jaws
the monkey expands ten yojanas higher until they have reached the stu-
pendous height of one hundred yojanas. Finally Hanumān shrinks in an
instant to a tiny size so he can fly in and out of Surasā’s mouth and thus
satisfy everyone’s honor.²

This episode, although it is set in the middle of one of the culture’s most
deply cherished fantasies, is finally enough to strain the credulity of at least
two of the epic’s commentators.

Govindarāja, an important Śrīvaiṣṇava commentator of the 15th or 16th
century, understands this episode to be an interpolation that fits poorly
with its context. Taking a rationalist stance, he argues that some of the
more extravagant verses are inconsistent and clearly interpolated since it
would surely have been noticeable both to the monkeys (on the northern
shore of the sea) and the inhabitants of Laṅkā (on the southern shore) if

1. śailair bandhayatī sama vānarahṛtair vālmikir ambhonidhiṁ vyāsaḥ pārthaśarais
   tathāpi na tayor atyuktir udbhāvyate | vāgarthau ca tulaḥṛtāv iva tathāpy asman nibandhān
   ayan loko dāśayati prasāritamukhas tubhyāṁ pratiṣṭhe namaḥ || Vidyākara 1957, 297.
2. CE 5.1.130-156. Unless otherwise indicated all references are to this edition.
indeed Hanumān and Surasā had enlarged themselves to the colossal size of one hundred *yojanas*. In this opinion he is seemingly joined by the independent minded 17th century commentator Kataka Mādhava Yogīndra, who finds this passage to be a perfect place for interpolation (*idam atisu-śliṣṭapракṣeptalāh*). He goes on with his characteristic sarcasm to comment: “How fortunate for us that they quit at one hundred *yojanas* and did not go on to tell us that they expanded to a thousand!”.

But aside from occasional passages such as this, which serve to demonstrate that the commentators were not prepared to accept anything uncritically, their basic project seems to have been to subject the story to a kind of close and careful reading grounded both in logic and philology and serving, as part of their purpose, to provide the historical details and interpretive strategies that rescue the epic action from the realm of pure fantasy.

Note too that even in regard to the example just given the instinct of the commentators is not to falsify the words of the poet-seer, which according to a well-established cultural convention can, virtually by definition, never be other than true. Instead they resort to another form of scientific reasoning, that of the textual critic, to show that an utterly incredible passage is not the work of Vālmīki at all.

The commentators pursue their agenda of validation in a number of ways. The simplest and most fundamental of these, perhaps, is their constant effort to provide the epic story of a vanished age of the world with a fairly precise relative chronology. This can be observed on a large scale in the development throughout the earlier books of the poem of a determination of the age the principal characters and a chronology of the years of Rāma’s exile and Sītā’s captivity. In the sixth book, the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, in which the great battle of Laṅkā is lengthily and lovingly recounted, several of the commentators evince great interest in chronicling the war on a day-to-day basis. Although they often disagree as to when a specific event or battle takes place, they will try to track the narrative, observing, for exam-

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3. *madhye kecana ślokāḥ praksiptā asaṅgatāś ca śatayojanāyatate vānarair laṅkāvāsibhiś ca jñātaḥ syād iti virodhāt.* Govindarāja’s comment is on GPP 5.1.149 (= CE 5.1.142).

4. *bhāgyam asmākam. śatayojane samāptāḥ kila sahasrayojanāyatā ity anuktvā.* Kataka on CE 5.1.145.

5. For a discussion of the issue of chronology in the epic, see Pollock (1986, 359-360, note to 2.17.26). See also Goldman, Sutherland Goldman and van Nooten (forthcoming, notes to 6.4.4 passim).
ple, that the slaying of such and such a rākṣasa took place on the evening of a particular fortnight of a particular month, or, alternatively, on such and such day of the war.

The attention and ingenuity devoted to providing rational explanations for narrative details are extraordinary and illuminating. Let me mention a few specific examples to give you some clear sense of what is at issue here.

Anyone even slightly familiar with the Rāma story as represented in literary and visual media throughout southern Asia will be familiar with the episode in which the heroic monkey Hanumān brings to Laṅkā a Himalayan mountain rich in medicinal herbs in order to revive and heal Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and the thousands of monkey troops, who have been laid low by the magical arts and martial skill of the rākṣasa champion Indrajit. Indeed the painted, poster-art and sculptural image of Hanumān carrying the mountain through the sky is one of the most commonly duplicated and widely recognized within Hindu India’s plethora of popular religious icons.

According to Vālmīki the power of the medicinal herbs brought by Hanumān is such that the slain and mortally wounded warriors are revived, restored and healed of their wounds by their mere fragrance as it wafts across the battlefield. This scene is firmly lodged in the minds of scholars and lay audiences of the Rāmāyaṇa alike. Few among modern aficionados of the tale, however, I would guess, have ever paused to wonder how long it took Hanumān to accomplish this amazing feat. In other words, exactly how fast would he have flown? This issue, however, has not escaped the attention of the commentators, several of whom take note of a verse unique to the southern recension of the poem in which it is observed that the bodies of the slain rākṣasas had been cast into the sea “for the sake of honor on the orders of Rāvaṇa”?

The commentators seize on this as the obvious explanation of why the wafting fragrance of the healing herbs does not revive the slain rākṣasas. But what is more interesting is that they also supply a logical military explanation for Rāvaṇa’s order. They claim that he commanded that the rākṣasa dead be hurled into the sea in order to conceal from the monkey troops the number of his casualties so that the latter do not immediately invade the city of Laṅkā in the realization of how small a force must be left to defend it.

6. CE 6.61.67. “No sooner had the two human princes smelled the fragrance of those powerful healing herbs then they were freed on the spot from their arrow wounds. The others, too, the heroic tawny monkeys, stood up as well.” Translation from Goldman, Sutherland Goldman and van Nooten (forthcoming).

7. CE 6.1396*, lines 5-8.
Mention of this episode calls to mind one of the questions that I raised in the title of this essay. How fast does Hanumān actually fly? In order for Hanumān to fetch the mountain of herbs from the Himalayas to Laṅkā, replace it in its proper location once he had accomplished his mission, and then return to the battlefield it appears that he would have had to make two round trip flights between the rākṣasa’s island citadel and what is today western Tibet. We know from the text that the mountain is close to Mt. Kailāsa, and, if we make the assumption, still no doubt a debatable one to be sure, but one that was probably shared by the commentators in question (if not necessarily by Vālmīki) that ancient Laṅkā and modern Sri Lanka are one and the same, then we can estimate four trips of roughly 1250 miles or a little over 2000 kilometers each, a total of approximately 5000 miles or some 8000 kilometers in all. Although the commentators do not, as it happens, specify the distance, assuming perhaps that their audiences would have a general idea of the geography, they do engage in a debate over the time that it took Hanumān to make these trips.

The epic’s account of Hanumān’s mission is bracketed by two verses relevant to the question of timing. In the first of these Hanumān and the rākṣasa Vibhiṣaṇa, Rāvaṇa’s defector brother, virtually the only two of Rāma’s champions left standing in the wake of Indrajit’s massacre, search the battlefield for other survivors. The text says, “Then the two heroes, Hanumān and Vibhiṣaṇa, foremost of the rākṣasas, together roamed the battlefront in the night, torches in hand”.

After the completion of Hanumān’s mission, the monkeys, now restored to life and health, prepare to launch another assault on the citadel of Laṅkā. The second of the two verses I mentioned reads as follows: “Then, when the sun had set and the dread onset of night had come, the leaping monkeys with their torches marched towards Laṅkā”. One will have noted that in both verses the characters must carry torches (ulkā) for the purpose of illumination.

The commentators, needless to say, have noted this as well. They differ, however, as to how much time, if any, has elapsed between the periods of

8. Regardless of where, if anywhere, Vālmīki may have located Laṅkā, it is probable that by the time of the commentators Sri Lanka was understood to be the site of the battle.
9. tāv ubhau yugapad virau hanūmadrākṣasottamau | ulkāhastau tadā rātrau raṇaśirṣe viceratuḥ || CE 6.61.7.
10. tato 'staṅgata āditleye raudre tasmin niśāmukhe | laṅkābhimukhāḥ solkā jagмуs te plavagarṣabhāh || CE 6.62.4.
darkness mentioned in the verses. Katakā and Nāgojī (the latter as so often following the former) understand that Vibhīṣaṇa and Hanumān searched the battlefield in the waning moments of the night while the revived monkeys’ renewed assault on Laṅkā takes place at the onset of the following night. Thus, allowing for the passage of one tropical day, they calculate Hanumān’s four flights (allowing of course for a brief interval during which he searches for the recalcitrant herbs) have taken precisely thirty ghaṭikas of twenty-four minutes each or exactly twelve hours. This, they argue, brings us to the evening of the following day.11 By this reckoning, Hanumān would have sailed along at a speed of some four hundred and sixteen miles or around six hundred and seventy kilometers per hour.

On the other hand, Maheśvaratirtha and Govindarāja, who follow a textual and hermeneutical tradition different from those of Nāgojī and Katakā, believe that the reference to the sun setting is not a specific marker of the time of day, but merely a way of indicating that it is dark. By “the onset of night”, Govindarāja further understands that the first watch (yāma), of the night is intended and that the monkeys’ assault therefore takes place at the end of that period so that it is not twilight, but pitch dark. The idea here is that because of his inconceivable speed, Hanumān accomplishes the fetching and return of the healing herb mountain in a mere instant.12 Thus rather than the twelve hours of day envisaged by Katakā and Nāgojī, Maheśvaratirtha and Govindarāja believe that only about a second has elapsed while Hanumān was in the air. In this case, if my calculations and those of the latter two commentators are correct, the monkey would have had to exceed speeds of at least four and a half million miles or seven million two hundred kilometers per hour.

But for the commentators this is no joke. They are deadly serious about the matter. Maheśvaratirtha even responsibly acknowledges the position of Katakā and Nāgojī as a possible alternative to his own.13

11. pūrvadivasāpararātriśeṣa ulkāhastābhyāṁ hanūmadvibhīṣanābhyāṁ jāmbavadarātriśeṣa
vneśaṇam. tatas tanniyogata uṣasi parvatāharaṇāya gamanam. athāharaṇāṁ punas ca tat
prāpanam punar āgamanam iti triṁśadghaṭikamadhye sarvam. tataḥ punah pradoṣe hanu-
madādīnāṁ laṅkādāhagamanam iti katakādayah. Nāgojibhaṭṭa on GPP 6.75.4 (= CE 6.62.4).

12. niśāmukha iti rātreḥ prathamayāma ucyate. raudra iti višeṇaṁ yāmāntatvena
gādhhakāraṁ ucyate. hanumāṁś ca mahādbhutavegaśālitayā mūhūrtamātrena pras-
thāyasadhiparvatam āniya taṁ punas tatra niksipyāgatavāṁ iti tasya vegātiśayaś ca pra-
tipādito bhavati. Govindarāja on GPP 6.75.4 (= CE 6.62.4).

13. yadvā tato ‘staṁ gata āditye raudre tasmin nīśāmukha iti paradinavrūttāṁ
taṁ. Maheśvaratirtha on VSP 6.75.4.
So how fast do monkeys fly? It is difficult to tell, as there is no clear consensus among the scholarly authorities. But what is clear is that this, like many matters that may seem trivial or even frivolous to us, is matter of scholarly consideration and even controversy, which, for reasons I will return to later on, is of sufficient significance to the scholiasts to amply warrant the mental energy they expend on it. My final example will, I hope, make this clearer still. The question here is how long do demons, or to be truly precise, how long does one particular and highly atypical demon sleep?

Those who have enjoyed the Rāmakathā in any of its innumerable versions will surely recognize the name and character of Kumbhakarna, the largest and most grotesque of the epic's many larger than life characters. For the gargantuan rākṣasa prince, as described by Vālmiki, is surely one of his, and indeed the entire literature's, most extraordinary figures.

In Kumbhakarna we find a warrior so enormous that he towers over the mighty ramparts of the citadel of Laṅkā (CE 6.49. 1-6). His deep, somno- lent breathing is so forceful that it literally blows other powerful rākṣasas out of his cave (CE 6.48. 18-19, 34). The fleshy appetites of this monster are so vast that he breakfasts on piles of deer, buffalo and boar, washing this Brobdignagian repast down with a thousand jars of strong drink (CE 6.48. 26-26, 82). And, when he is finally slain by Rāma, his enormous head smashes the gates of the buildings on Laṅkā's main thoroughfares and knocks down its lofty rampart, while his headless trunk falls into the sea crushing crocodiles, shoals of huge fish, and serpents before entering the earth (CE 6.55.124-5).

Yet of all the extraordinary things the Rāmāyaṇa tells us about Kumbhakarna, by far the most striking and the most widely recognized is the prodigious nature, both in terms of duration and of profundity, of his sleep. The depth of his slumber is, like everything else about this interesting figure, extraordinary. The heroic efforts required of the rākṣasas to wake him—the blaring of trumpets, the beating of drums, the assault with fists, feet and various weapons and the trampling with herds of elephants, etc.—are elaborately and amusingly described at length by Vālmīki (CE 6.48.28-48). However, among all of these extraordinary and grandly hyperbolic descriptions it is the epic's varying accounts of the etiology and duration of Kumbhakarna's sleep that chiefly interest the commentators.

The issues here are largely textual, with different passages of the epic providing seemingly divergent calculations of the duration of Kumbhakarna’s slumber. But the ways in which the commentators strive to reconcile these accounts provide a useful insight into how they approach this complex text.
and why they explain it as they do. It will therefore be necessary to go into a certain amount of detail on this issue in an effort to convey something of the complex interweaving of various systems of knowledge and the continuing debate and dialogic interaction that characterizes the commentarial approach to the poem.

The first mention of Kumbhakarna’s sleep in the critically edited text of the Yuddhakāṇḍa occurs in the forty-eighth sarga of the book. There Rāvaṇa, having been humiliatingly defeated and then dismissed from the battlefield by Rāma, tells his attendants that Kumbhakarna, whom he describes as being overcome by Brahmā’s curse, must be awakened as he is the only warrior seemingly capable of defeating the demon-king’s enemies. He describes Kumbhakarna as sleeping for “six, seven, eight or even nine months at a stretch”.

He goes on to add that, “addicted to this vulgar pleasure (i.e. sleep) his brother lies in a stupor all the time”.

Rāvaṇa’s comments, in which he mentions, but does not describe in any detail, a curse on the part of Brahmā thus appear to indicate that the periods of Kumbhakarna’s sleep are variable. But Rāvaṇa’s indeterminacy seems to be somewhat at odds with the account of the history and terms of the curse as they are related to Rāma by Kumbhakarna’s other brother Vibhīṣaṇa in the very next chapter (sarga 49).

There we learn that when Indra, having been defeated by Kumbhakarna, appeals to Brahmā for help, the latter, fearing that the monster represents a threat of universal destruction, curses him to suffer immediate and perpetual sleep so that he will be, in effect, dead. But at this point, so Vibhīṣaṇa’s version goes, Rāvaṇa intervenes arguing that it is wrong of Brahmā to, in effect, put his own grandson to death. Acknowledging that the word of Brahmā can never prove false and that the curse of somnolence is inevitable for his brother, the rākṣasa lord nevertheless urges the Creator to set some specific time limits on Kumbhakarna’s sleeping and waking. Moved by Rāvaṇa’s appeal, Brahmā modifies his curse, ordaining that the voracious Kumbhakarna shall sleep for periods of precisely six months, waking only

14. For a detailed discussion of the commentators’ elaborate efforts to reconcile the seeming contradictions see Goldman, Sutherland Goldman and van Nooten (forthcoming, note to 6.48.12).
15. CE 6.48.9. brahmaśāpābhihataḥ.
18. CE 6.49.23. tasmāt tvam adya prabhṛti mṛtakalpaḥ śayiṣyasi.
19. CE 6.49.25. kālas tu kriyatām asya śayane jāgare tathā.
for a single day between these periods to indulge his ferocious appetite by consuming all the worlds like a raging fire.20

These two variants on the duration of Kumbhakarṇa’s periods of sleep, however, do not exhaust the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa’s varying formulations of the story. For, in the Uttarakāṇḍa we find yet two more accounts of this seemingly simple matter according to which the rākṣasa’s epic naps are to be reckoned not in months but in years or even millennia.

One of these additional calculations of Kumbhakarṇa’s period of sleep, narrated at Uttarakāṇḍa 10.31-41, is of particular interest. For it is here that we find a perhaps better-known account of how Kumbhakarṇa came to sleep for so long. Here his profound and protracted sleep is not the result of a curse, but of a kind of boon. In this passage, the sage Agastya tells Rāma the following story. The gods, fearing that if Brahmā were to grant Kumbhakarṇa the same kind of boon in compensation for his heroic austerities as his brothers Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa have earned, he would become a still greater terror than before. They beg the god to delude him under the pretext of granting him a boon through which they will actually save the world and lay the monster low.21 Brahmā agrees and summons Sarasvatī, the goddess of speech, instructing her to enter Kumbhakarṇa and speak through him to choose his “boon”. Thus, when Brahmā asks Kumbhakarṇa to select his reward he replies, “O god of gods, what I desire is to sleep for many years”.22 The deluded demon is then left wondering what sort of strange request has come out of his mouth (CE 7.10.41).

The final reference to the duration of Kumbhakarṇa’s sleep in the Rāmāyaṇa occurs three sargas later, as a continuation of Agastya’s tale of the history of the principal rākṣasas. Here, unlike in the Yuddhakāṇḍa version narrated by Vibhīṣaṇa, where Kumbhakarṇa collapses in a stupor the moment Brahmā utters his curse, some time elapses between the deceit perpetrated by Brahmā and Sarasvatī and Kumbhakarṇa’s succumbing to his drowsiness. At Uttarakāṇḍa 13.1-7, the irresistible urge to sleep only gradually comes upon the demon. He informs Rāvaṇa of this and the latter has time to have his artisans construct a grand and ornate sleeping chamber for

20. CE 6.49.26-27. sayītā hy eṣa sānmaśaṁ ekāhaṁ jāgarisyaṁ | ekenāhnaṁ tv asau viṁraṁ caran bhūmiṁ bubhuksitah | vyāttāsyo bhakṣaye lokāṁ samkruddha iva pāvakaḥ.

21. CE 7.10.34. varavājena mohā ‘smai diyatām amitaprabha | lokāhāṁ svasti caiva syād bhaved asya ca saṁmatiḥ || Cf. the Vulgate’s variant saṁmatiḥ, “honor, satisfaction” for the CE’s saṁmatiḥ.

22. CE 7.10.39. svaptum varśāṇy anekāṇi devadeva mamepsitam.
him. Only when the building is complete does Kumbhayakarna succumb to his fatigue and fall into a profound slumber that, in this variant, continues without his waking for “many thousands of years.”

Thus it appears that there are basically two separate and ultimately irreconcilable accounts of how Kumbhayakarna came to sleep for so long, the Yuddhakanda version in which he is cursed as a result of his rapacity and the Uttarakananda version in which he is “rewarded” for his austerities with a fraudulent “boon” that has the same purpose and much the same effect as the curse. Each version has two sub-variants, narrated in close textual proximity to each other, each with a slightly different account of the duration of Kumbhayakarna’s period of dormancy. As a result, it appears that in regard to this fairly minor and seemingly simple point of fact, as it were, the text of the Valmiki Ramayana, as it has come down to us, has four different calculations of the duration of Kumbhayakarna’s slumber.

Whatever we, as literary scholars and textual critics, might make of these discrepancies, perhaps writing them off under the rubric that Valmiki, like Homer sometimes nods, or, like some scholars, attributing the various versions to different historical strata of the epic text, the commentators find these variations to be both significant and troubling. Let me go back for a moment to Ravana’s statement that his brother sleeps “for six, seven, eight, or even nine months at a time” (nava sat sapta caṣṭau ca maśān). The reading of the critical edition, which can also be understood to mean “for nine, six, seven, and eight months”, that is to say for thirty months, appears to be accepted and discussed by only one commentator, Govindarāja.

Govindarāja understands the passage to indicate that on different occasions Kumbhayakarna may sleep for nine months, or seven months, etc. He sees this as in keeping with the demon’s non-specific boon request (at Uttarakananda 10.39) to sleep for many years (varṣāṇya anekāni). He then refers to the other two formulations, suggesting that the curse of sleeping for precisely six months at 6.49.26 either refers by synecdoche (upalakṣaṇa) to the rākṣasa’s other, longer periods of sleep or represents the minimum time during which he must remain asleep (anyūnābhiprayām vā). Finally, he provides a lengthy quotation from the Taittirīyasamhitā (7.5.6.1) where, in the context of the vedic gavamāyana ritual procession, it is stated that the officiants reckon as a month (māsa) a period of six days (sadahaḥ). If, Govindarāja argues, we then add up the number of such “months” indi-

23. CE 7.13.7. bahūny abdasahasrāṇi śayāno nāvabudhyate.
cated in the verse, we get a total of thirty months (i.e., 6+7+8+9=30) of six
days each, or 180 days. This calculation then agrees with the passage at
6.49.26, at which the rākṣasa sleeps for exactly six lunar months reckoned
at 30 days each.

A variety of manuscripts collated for the critical edition as well as
the widely published texts of the southern commentators as well as the
printed texts of the northern recension such as the editions of Lahore and
Gorresio, read instead nava sapta daśaṭau ca māsān, “for, nine, seven, ten,
and eight months”. This reading is mentioned as a variant and commented
upon by Govindarāja as well. Nāgojī attempts to reconcile the three differ-
ent calculations by arguing that the verse does not specify a precise period
of time during which Kumbhakarṇa must sleep, but simply indicates that
that period has no upper limit. He further states that the reference at
6.49.26 indicates only that six months is the minimum period that he must
sleep, but that after any period of sleep, his waking is restricted to a single
day. In other words, Nāgojī argues that “the boon” of Brahmā specifies
only how long Kumbhakarṇa can be awake, not how long he must sleep.
This, he argues, is confirmed by the other two passages mentioned above
where Kumbhakarṇa is said to sleep for “many years” or for “thousands
of years”. The commentator Śivasahāya extends this argument by claim-
ing that although Brahmā’s boon compels Kumbhakarṇa to sleep for at
least six months, there is nothing to prevent him from sleeping naturally
beyond that term”.24

Nāgojī also refers to another line of interpretation, which he attributes
to unnamed others. According to this interpretation, the word aṣṭau is
not to be understood in the sense of the number eight, but as the locative
singular of a noun aṣṭi “to pervade or eat” whose range of meaning he
extends to include the sense of “to leave aside” (tyāge). Rendered thus the
compound daśaṭau has the sense of “leaving aside ten”. If then, as Nāgojī
suggests, we add up the nine and seven months mentioned in the verse, we
get a period of sixteen months, which, with ten months subtracted, leaves
the six months of sleep referred to in 6.49.26. Although Nāgojī does not
specify his sources, this ingenious interpretation is found in a variety of
other commentators, who differ only in their derivation and lexical iden-
tification of aṣṭau. Thus, Govindarāja, who notes this variant, derives the
word from the root ṇaś, in the sense of “eating (aśanam)”, whose meaning

24. Śivasahāya on CE 6.48.12. taduttaram svabhāvikanidrāyā niṣedhābhavāc ca. See
Goldman, Sutherland Goldman and van Nooten (forthcoming, note to 6.48.12).
he extends to “loss or destruction (nāśah).” Similarly Śivasahāya glosses “swallowing (nirgaraṇa) in the sense of “casting out (niḥsāraṇe)” and takes the word in the sense of “eating”. Lokanātha, perhaps deriving the word from the root śas, “throw, toss”, glosses “casting out ten”.25

Interestingly, Śivasahāya, who accepts Nāgoji’s ingenious suggestion that we must cast out ten to achieve the total number of months, balks at his idea that the passage indicates merely a minimum period during which the giant must sleep. In his comments on Uttarakāṇḍa 10.45 (= ce 7.10.39) he quotes Nāgoji but indicates that the latter’s opinion here is doubtful (cintyā) since, according to him, there are two separate “boons” at issue: the one referred to in the Yuddhakāṇḍa and the one in the Uttarakāṇḍa. Śivasahāya adds a new dimension to the problem of the duration here by interpreting the boon Kumbhakarṇa solicits against his will while under the influence of Sarasvatī as specifying a period of slumber of three years.26 He claims that the Uttarakāṇḍa account makes no allusion to any such condition. As far as I have been able to discover, Śivasahāya is the only commentator to address the issue of there being two separate and complementary explanations for Kumbhakarṇa’s sleep quite apart from the question of the different lengths of time during which he is supposed to sleep. Other commentators concern themselves exclusively with reconciling the numbers.27

But what precisely are we to make of the heroic struggles of the Rāmāyaṇa commentators to rationalize the two accounts of the curse/boon of Kumbhakarṇa?28

25. daśaprakṣēpe sati. Quoted in (Gorresio 1856, vol. 9, 377).
26. anekāny ekabhinnāni kapiṇjalādhikaraṇanyāyena trīṇītyartho varṣāni.
27. One must keep in mind that it is a commonplace of the epic texts to provide two or more complementary explanations for a single event or phenomenon. Well-known examples would be the three explanations for Draupadi’s polyandrous marriage and the two causes of Kalmāṣapāda’s becoming a rākṣasa. The only additional light that the epic literature seems to shed on this issue is to be found in the terse narration of Kumbhakarṇa’s curse found in the Rāmopākyāyana of the Mahābhārata. There (MBh 3.259.28) when the rākṣasa is told by Brahmā to select a boon as a reward for his austerities the text simply says: “He chose long sleep, his mind being seized by darkness” (saḥ vavre mahatīṁ nidrāṁ tamasā grastacetanaḥ). On this, the influential 17th century commentator Nilakaṇṭha explains, “The expression ‘by darkness’ means that it was out of delusion that he chose sleep, which he did not desire” (tamasety aniṣṭām api nidrāṁ mohād vṛtvān ity arthaḥ. Nilakaṇṭha ad CS 3.275.28).
28. Perhaps the epic poets had something of the attitude expressed to V. Narayana Rao by brāhmaṇa women in Andhra regarding Rāmāyaṇa variations across versions. “Like
If the authors of the *Uttarakāṇḍa* version, which we will have to assume is at the very least somewhat posterior to that of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, were as cavalier as all epic bards and poets about the consistency of multiple versions of a given story, the same is clearly not the case of the scholiasts who become the custodians and interpreters of the text for the Sanskrit knowing intellectuals of early modern India. As I see it they are in effect part of a large and complex cultural, literary, and theological project to interpret and represent the epic as history. Thus for them differences in the details of a narrative, especially if they involve significant characters and events, are potentially critical problems requiring the investment of considerable ingenuity, learning, and intellectual capital by way of rationalization and remediation.29

Thus a primary concern of the commentators who exert considerable influence on the textual and interpretive history of the poem from around the 12th through the 17th centuries is to validate the work as a basically unitary and internally consistent narrative of real events that, if they took place in the most remote antiquity (the *tretāyuga*), nonetheless played out in real and calculable time and in real geographic locations.30 This is most of the participants in the tradition, these women believe the *Rāmāyaṇa* to be fact and not fiction, and its many different versions are precisely in keeping with this belief. Contrary to the usual opinion, it is fiction that has only one version; a factual event will inevitably have various versions, depending on the attitude, point of view, intent, and social position of the teller” (Narayana Rao 1991, 114).

29. The degree to which the commentators exert themselves to rationalize even seemingly trivial apparent contradictions in the text can be illustrated by the way in which Govindarāja has highlighted a small discrepancy in the chronology of Sītā’s captivity in Laṅkā. He observes that in the *Sundarakāṇḍa* Sītā had mentioned to Hanumān (CE 5.35.8) she had only one month remaining of the year that Rāvaṇa had allowed her before she would either have to submit to him or be eaten. On the other hand Rāvaṇa himself had earlier told Sītā that she had two months remaining before his grim deadline (CE 3.54.22 and 5.20.8). Govindarāja explains the discrepancy by observing that Sītā’s calculation is the accurate one, while Rāvaṇa’s is erroneous as a result of his intoxication brought on by his drinking too much honey-wine (*avaśiṣṭau dvau māsāv ity uktir madhupānāmattatayā avivekakṛtā*)!

30. It should be noted, moreover, that the commentators extend their range of inquiry and remediation far beyond the confines of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*. Thus they are keenly aware of the fact that the many versions of the Rāma story that are found in the *Mahābhārata* and the *purāṇas* often contradict Vālmiki. Interestingly they rarely fall back on the popular explanation that the details of the tale vary as the events are repeated in the different cycles of cosmic time. Instead they propose a kind of hierarchy of historicity among the various types of texts. Thus, for example, Govindarāja can rationalize the failure of Vālmiki’s Rāma to mention the Rāmeśvaraliṅga as he flies over the tip of southern
not to say that they accepted everything in their received manuscripts as belonging to the authentic composition of the First Poet or, in consequence, as correct history. On the contrary, they argue among themselves about many matters both philological and hermeneutic, declaring one passage or another to be either authentic (pāṅkta) or interpolated (prakṣipta) and engaging in interpretive disputation, often of a violent or mocking character, with their predecessors. Although they may thus disagree, even sharply with each other in these matters, the common goal of each is to edit and explain the Rāmāyaṇa as a clear, unitary and internally consistent narrative of an exemplary and theologically significant history.

The commentators’ approach to textual variance and the fantastic in the epics present us with an interesting and useful object of study. It also presents us with a fascinating and valuable corpus of textual exegesis that shows us how deeply imbedded the epics were in the complex cultural and intellectual universe of pre-modern Sanskrit scholarship. Finally it demonstrates the extraordinary intellectual and linguistic resources traditional scholars had at their disposal in pursuit of their hermeneutic project while it shows us with tremendous clarity how deeply important the understanding of what some might think of as extravagantly mythological tales as in fact consistent, genuine and verifiable history was, and to a great extent still is, to Indian audiences.

What is of particular note is that in pursuit of their interpretive and rationalizing project the commentators deploy a vast array of cultural and scientific information that spans the spectrum of the knowledge systems available to the intellectuals of what Sheldon Pollock has called the Sanskrit ecumene. To comment fully on an encyclopedic work like the Rāmāyaṇa a commentator must have access to and be able to creatively cite a dizzying array of works including the Vedas, ritual science, grammar, lexicography, India despite the fact that his establishment of it is mentioned in the purāṇas, arguing that although the purāṇas may deal effectively with such great cosmological events as the creation and destruction of the universe, they are poor sources for the reconstruction of history (as opposed to cosmogony), in which latter area the epics themselves are far more reliable. (purānāṁ sargapratisargadīṣv anyaparam iti netihāsavat pūrāvṛttakathane tātpāryavat). On this see see also Goldman, Sutherland Goldman and van Nooten (forthcoming, notes to 6.111.12). Similarly, Nāgojī accords greater historicity to the Rāmāyaṇa as compared with the Mahābhārata when he observes that the former describes the cremation of Rāvaṇa while the latter represents the demon king as having been vaporized by Rāma’s brahmāstra, leaving nothing to cremate. See Goldman, Sutherland Goldman and van Nooten (forthcoming, note to 6.99.42).
poetics, logic, hermeneutics, theology, architecture, military science, the science of bodily characteristics, cookery, astronomy and astrology, the various branches of natural history, and mythology to mention a few as well as an established if not fully codified tradition of what can only be called philology or text criticism.

The point is that these authors, although some of them like Nāgojī, who was a reputed grammarian, may well have been specialists in one śāstra or another, approach the epic in many ways as general public intellectuals who must have had access to significant collections of manuscripts, libraries if you will, to enable them to carry on their work. For surely they cannot be thought to have memorized all of the texts and sciences to which they refer. Theirs was surely a literate intellectual culture of reference.

Reading these works can then give us important insight into what the intellectual universe of the learned generalist must have been like in the centuries before the advent of European political and scientific power began to change the conditions under which this kind of intellectual culture could thrive. Reading these texts, moreover, enables us to immerse ourselves directly into this world with all of its concerns, its intellectual strategies, its resources and its ongoing debates and discussions about the meanings of the culture’s most foundational documents.

Let me note in closing one important project of the commentators that I have thus far glossed over and briefly allude to some of the interpretive strategies they employ to further it. I am referring to the theological aspect of their work, which is implicit throughout and quite explicit in a number of cases.

I have avoided this area for the most part in this presentation neither because I do not think it significant nor because I do not regard it as worthy of attention. On the contrary, I believe that it is a theological and more particularly a sectarian spirit that most deeply animates these commentaries and that they are eminently worth studying for that reason alone by those who are interested in the history of religion in South Asia in general and in the development of South Indian Vaiṣṇavism in particular.

But this is not the area of inquiry and exegesis that I wanted to bring forward in calling attention to this remarkable corpus of scholarship, which, as I hope I have indicated, subjects the Rāmāyaṇa to a far broader kind of inquiry than the merely religious one and is all the more important and interesting for that reason.

That said, I do not want to create an impression that the Rāmāyaṇa commentators were simply a group of objective, disinterested text critics and cultural historians. On the contrary, they generally come to their task in a
spirit of reverence for Rāma as an *avatāra* of Lord Viṣṇu, a God made flesh, as it were,\(^{31}\) in order to punish evildoers and bring his virtuous devotees to salvation. Indeed it is in connection with the theology of the epic and the differing sectarian orientations of the different sub-schools, so to speak, of the Śrīvaśıśṇava and Mādhva commentators in particular that we see some of the most mocking and bitter disputes among them which can rise or descend depending on how you view it to the level of verbal abuse.\(^ {32}\)

There is also an issue of interpretation here that I alluded to. Several of the commentators, particularly those aligned with the text associated with Rāmānuja (whose gloss is all but non-existent and mostly derivative at that), notably Maheśvaratīrtha and Govindarāja, frequently read the epic on two distinct levels. One of these levels is that of the apparent or manifest content of the text. On this level they comment in the role of the generalist scholar-intellectual outlined above, agreeing with some commentators, disputing others, or proposing their own unique interpretations. Govinda and Maheśvara however are particularly prone to offer themselves implicitly as almost impartial synthesizers of a variety of interpretive possibilities. Thus they frequently offer an ample menu of alternative interpretations. The latter can, when inspired, sometimes come up with ten or more possible ways to read a phrase, while the former has been derided by later rivals as *yadvābhāṭṭa*, “Mr. Or [it could also mean]”.

But in addition they each often contribute, when the theological tenor of a passage seems to them to warrant it, different kinds of “deeper” or even allegorical readings in which they strive to bring out a kind of latent or hidden level of meaning. Maheśvara makes a frequent distinction between the *spaṣṭārtha*, or clear, manifest meaning of a verse and its *vāstavārtha*, or real, inner meaning. In many instances, as for example where the manifest meaning of the text indicates that Rāma or Lakṣmaṇa is defeated, injured, or at a loss, he re-reads the verse to bring out its different, often directly opposite meaning to show that the god on earth is ever victorious and invulnerable. Or, at other places, he will reverse the valence of an emotional speech so as to show, for example, that Rāvaṇa’s threats of Sītā and his declaration of his

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31. Note for example the extensive commentarial debate on whether the *avatāra* really bleeds when wounded or merely appears to do so, like an actor, either to sustain the appearance of mortality or to serve as an exemplar to humans who might not follow the path of *dharma* if they think the heroes are gods. On this see the commentators on GPP 6.45.9 (= CE 6.35.9).

32. Cf. Kataka’s bitter comments such as *ity anartham pralapy naśyatv ayam při*. Satyatīrtha is similarly contemptuous about the views of Nāgoji and Maheśvaratīrtha.
carnal passion for her are really to be interpreted as expressions of bhakti or religious devotion of a passionate devotee for the goddess. In a related but somewhat different way Govinda, too, sometimes reads verses or passages in accordance with what appear to be Vadagalai allegorical interpretations in which the relationships among the epic characters are seen as representing the quest of the individual soul for union with the Lord. Several of the commentators, notably Maheśvara and Satyatīrtha, fully exploit the virtually unique capacity of the Sanskrit language to have a given sequence of syllables yield a variety of different meanings by breaking up words in different ways and by making use of the opportunities provided by sandhi and the rich lexical resources of the language. In a number of instances the commentators either deny the apparent suffering of the heroes or interpret it as part of an exemplary charade in which the avatāra represents physical injury, bleeding, emotional suffering, etc., as would an actor so as to serve as an example of stoicism to mortals or to merely act consistently with the role of the incarnation supposedly unaware of his own divinity.

These phenomena constitute yet another reason for a serious study of these texts as they provide us with numerous fascinating examples of the suppleness of the traditionally trained scholarly mind and the immense flexibility of the Sanskrit language while offering many intriguing intellectual and philological puzzles, struggle with which increases our own ability to understand and appreciate the breadth and subtlety of the śāstraic mentality.

It was not my intention to provide a too detailed discussion of these texts, but I wanted to give a meaningful sense of what they are like and how they not only inform us about the meaning of the epics and about their receptive history but also provide us with a virtually unique window through which we may glimpse the workmanlike application of the full spectrum of śāstraic systems of knowledge to a very practical and culturally critical project. For these reasons and the others touched upon above I commend these important, fascinating, instructive but poorly studied texts to the attention of scholars interested in the role of the Sanskrit epics in the formation of the rich and complex cultural and intellectual heritage of India.
ABBREVIATIONS

CE  The Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa: Critical Edition
CS  Mahābhārata (Chitrashala Press)
GPP Rāmāyan of Vālmiki (Gujarati Printing Press)
KK Šrimadvālmikirāmāyaṇam (Kumbakonam Edition)
MBh Mahābhārata: Critical Edition
Mys Šrimadvālmikirāmāyaṇam (University of Mysore)
VSP Šrimadvālmikirāmāyaṇam (Venkaṭeśvara Steam Press [Mudranālaya])

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