

Attestation and Convergence in the Ramayana:

A Cross-Tradition Methodology for Testing What Actually Survives Retelling

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Abstract

Comparative treatments of the Ramayana routinely cite agreement between two or more textual traditions as evidence that a given detail is old, stable, or historically grounded. This paper argues that the inferential step is invalid whenever the agreeing texts are not independent of one another, and proposes a seven-tier attestation framework for testing independence before agreement is counted as corroboration. The framework classifies thirty Ramayana-tradition texts — Sanskrit, Jain, Shakta, Buddhist, Southeast Asian, and Sri Lankan — by their genealogical relationship to the Valmiki lineage, and separately maps four documented cross-tradition diffusion routes to distinguish inherited content from independently arrived-at content. Four case studies illustrate the method in practice: a genuinely independent theological reconstruction in the Jain Paumacariya; a set of place-name identifications independently corroborated outside the Ramayana corpus entirely; a currently circulating geographic identification for Lanka tested directly against a 2024–25 archaeological re-excavation and found unsupported, set against six independent lines of evidence for the traditional identification; and character-level divergence in how three separate traditions resolve Ravana’s death by three different mechanisms for three different theological reasons. The paper concludes that what survives this kind of testing across two thousand years and a dozen religious traditions is not a verifiable historical core, but a stable narrative structure — loss, tested loyalty, and costly pride — that different communities have continuously rebuilt around their own theological and political needs. The full thirty-text analysis, seventeen character and causal-event chapters, and complete source apparatus are published as *The Ramayana: The Paper Trail Behind the World’s Most Retold Epic* (2026), which this paper treats as its primary reference work throughout. The underlying documentation is available in full to researchers who make a credible scholarly inquiry.

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1. Introduction: The Problem With Counting Agreement

The Ramayana does not exist as a single fixed text. It exists as a genealogy of retellings — Sanskrit courtly epic, Jain doctrinal counter-narrative, Shakta theological reconstruction, Buddhist canonical folk-tale, Southeast Asian royal epic, Sri Lankan oral-derived text — composed across roughly two thousand years, in a dozen languages, under a dozen different religious and political systems. This is not a controversial observation. A. K. Ramanujan’s influential 1987 essay, later collected in Paula Richman’s edited volume *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), made the plurality of the tradition the explicit object of scholarly attention, and Richman’s subsequent volume, *Questioning Ramayanas: A South*

Asian Tradition (2001), extended the same project. Three decades on, the plurality itself is well established in the scholarly literature. What is less consistently established is a working method for what a researcher is supposed to do with that plurality once it is acknowledged — specifically, how to decide whether agreement between two or more of these retellings is evidence of anything beyond the fact that one text influenced, translated, or elaborated on another.

This is not a pedantic distinction. It is the distinction between an argument that holds and an argument that does not. If ten regional vernacular retellings of the Ramayana across ten centuries all describe the same detail of Sita's abduction in the same way, and all ten trace back through a documented chain of textual influence to a single Sanskrit original, then the observation "ten traditions agree" describes one act of transmission occurring nine times, not ten independent confirmations. Treating it as ten independent confirmations — a move made constantly in popular treatments of the epic, and not infrequently in semi-scholarly ones — manufactures evidentiary weight that does not exist. The same failure mode recurs whenever a claim about the epic's historicity, geography, or textual history is defended by pointing to how many traditions "agree" on it, without first establishing that the traditions in question are independent witnesses rather than one witness copied repeatedly.

Source-independence criteria of this kind are not new to textual scholarship generally. New Testament source criticism has long distinguished between the Synoptic Gospels' shared material (explained by direct literary dependence, not independent multiple attestation) and material attested across genuinely unconnected source streams. Homeric scholarship distinguishes formulaic inherited epithets, transmitted through the oral-formulaic tradition as a single inherited unit, from independently attested narrative details. What this paper contributes is not the general principle — which is old — but its systematic application to the Ramayana's specific and unusually well-documented tradition-genealogy, in the form of a seven-tier attestation framework and an accompanying diffusion map, tested here against four concrete cases: one theological, one archaeological-corroborative, one archaeological-adjudicative, and one character-level.

2. Related Work and the Gap This Framework Addresses

Ramanujan's essay and Richman's two edited volumes remain the reference point for any serious treatment of Ramayana plurality, and this paper's starting premise — that "the Ramayana" is better understood as a family of texts than as a single work with regional variants — owes its basic framing to that body of scholarship. Where this paper departs from it is in aim. Ramanujan and the contributors to *Many Ramayanas* and *Questioning Ramayanas* are primarily concerned with mapping the diversity itself: what changes, in what direction, for what narrative or cultural reason, across a representative set of tellings. That project does not require, and generally does not attempt, a formal ranking of which agreements across that diversity constitute independent evidence for a claim and which do not. It is a project of description and interpretation, not of evidentiary weighing.

The attestation framework presented here is built for a narrower and more specifically evidentiary purpose: given a corpus of thirty texts spanning the same tradition-family Ramanujan and Richman describe, and given a specific claim under examination — a character's motive, a place's identity, a causal mechanism in the plot — what apparatus is needed to say, honestly, whether the corpus actually corroborates that claim, or merely repeats it? That is a question about method rather than content, and it is the question this paper and its parent volume are built to answer.

3. A Seven-Tier Attestation Framework

Each of the thirty texts in the corpus is assigned to one of seven tiers based on its actual genealogical relationship to the Valmiki Sanskrit lineage — not on its age, its popularity, or the authority a given community grants it, all of which are relevant to other kinds of scholarship but irrelevant to the specific question of evidentiary independence.

Tier A — the Sanskrit Valmiki lineage itself. The Valmiki Ramayana and a small number of Sanskrit texts composed in direct continuity with it, including Kalidasa's Raghuvamsa, Bhatti's Bhattikavya, and Bhavabhuti's Uttararamacharita. This tier is the baseline every other tier is measured against — not because Tier A is more likely to be historically accurate, but because it is the earliest fully surviving version of the narrative and the traceable point of origin for every downstream tradition in the corpus.

Tier A-derived — regional devotional epics built directly on Tier A's foundation. This is the largest tier by text count: Kamban's Tamil Ramavataram, Tulsidas's Ramcharitmanas, Krittibas Ojha's Bengali Krittivasi Ramayan, Balarama Dasa's Odia Jagamohana Ramayana, Madhava Kandali's and Sankaradeva's Assamese Saptakanda Ramayana, Thunchaththu Ezhuthachan's Malayalam Adhyathmaramayanam Kilippattu, Eknath's Marathi Bhavartha Ramayana, Molla's and Ranganatha's Telugu retellings, Narahari's Kannada Torave Ramayana, and several further vernacular texts spanning roughly six centuries and nearly every major literary language of the Indian subcontinent. Agreement between any Tier A-derived text and Tier A is expected by construction — these texts were composed as vernacular elaborations of the Sanskrit original, in many cases explicitly presenting themselves as translations or devotional retellings rather than independent compositions — and such agreement is therefore not diagnostic of anything beyond successful transmission.

Tier B — the Jain tradition. Vimalasuri's Prakrit Paumacariya and Hemachandra's Sanskrit Trishashti Shalaka Purusha Charitra, along with Gunabhadra's Digambara Uttara Purana. This is the strongest independence claim in the corpus: a complete theological reconstruction of the narrative, composed from a cosmological framework — Jain karma theory and the doctrine of the sixty-three Shalaka Purushas — that shares no derivation from Vaishnava theology at all. The Jain texts share character names and a broadly similar sequence of exile, abduction, and rescue with the Sanskrit tradition, but rebuild the underlying logic of the story from the ground up, as detailed in Section 5 below.

Tier C — Shakta and tantric Sanskrit material, principally the Adbhuta Ramayana and material within the Brahma Vaivarta Purana, which restructure the narrative's theology around Sita rather than Rama, up to and including alternate accounts of who actually defeats the story's antagonist.

Tier D — Southeast Asian courts adapting Indian material directly, including Thailand's Ramakien (composed under the royal court of King Rama I, 1785–1809), Cambodia's Reamker (developed across roughly the ninth to sixteenth centuries with no single author), Malaysia's Hikayat Seri Rama (earliest surviving manuscript dated 1633), Myanmar's Yama Zatdaw, and the Philippines' Maharadia Lawana, documented via twentieth-century ethnographic fieldwork among the Maranao people. These texts are diffusion-linked back to Tier A through documented historical routes (Section 4), so close fidelity to the Sanskrit source in this tier is evidence of successful transmission across the routes in question, not independent confirmation of anything.

Tier E — Sri Lankan and Tamil oral tradition, principally the Ravana Katava, a Kandyan-era Sinhala text unusual in the corpus for explicitly naming its own source material within the text itself — Tamil oral teachers, cited directly rather than left as an unstated assumption. A source that discloses its own influence is, on this framework's reasoning, more reliable on that specific point than a source that does not, precisely because it has made the diffusion claim checkable rather than requiring it to be inferred.

Tier F — the Buddhist Pali canonical tradition, represented solely by the Dasaratha Jataka, a communally transmitted canonical text with no single identifiable author and no fixed, datable site of composition — a text whose Rama differs sharply from every other tradition in the corpus, most notably in resolving the exile crisis without any Ravana, Lanka, or war narrative at all.

Two further categories of material sit outside this seven-tier scheme by design rather than oversight. The *Yogavasistha* is tracked separately as a frame text: a philosophical treatise that borrows a young Rama as its literary vehicle without retelling his story, and is therefore excluded from tier comparison entirely rather than forced into a tier it does not structurally belong to. And fifteen further texts in the wider source base — among them the *Adhyatma Ramayana*, the *Ananda Ramayana*, the *Bhusundi Ramayana*, the *Vasudevahindi*, the *Paumacariu*, and the *Cauppanamahapurisacariya* — are excluded from the formal geographic and tier-comparison apparatus because they are anonymous, composite, canonically transmitted, or too vaguely sourced (“probably Karnataka,” “North India”) to support a defensible independence rating. Reporting this exclusion explicitly, rather than silently assigning these texts a tier for the sake of a tidier table, is itself methodologically load-bearing: an evidentiary framework that cannot honestly rate a text should say so, not manufacture a rating.

The operating rule that follows from this structure is straightforward to state and, in practice, easy to violate without a formal check in place: agreement between two texts in the same tier, or between a Tier A-derived text and Tier A itself, is never counted as independent evidence for anything, regardless of how many such texts agree. Only agreement across genealogically unconnected tiers — Tier A against Tier B, for instance, or Tier A against a Tier E text that names its own separate sourcing — counts as convergence in the evidentiary sense this paper is using the term.

4. Diffusion Mapping as a Check on False Independence

Tier classification by itself is not sufficient, because two texts can sit in formally different tiers and still fail to be independent of each other, if one influenced the other through a documented but non-obvious lateral route rather than the generic vertical descent every vernacular text already shares with the Sanskrit original. The corpus therefore includes a second, separate diffusion map, tracking specific evidenced routes of lateral transmission rather than the trivially true fact that every Tier A-derived text ultimately descends from Tier A.

Four such routes are documented, at a deliberately mixed standard of evidence — some confirmed, one explicitly flagged as inference rather than fact, because a diffusion map that only records confirmed routes and silently omits its own uncertainty is not more rigorous than one that records both, it is only more comfortable to read.

Route 1, confirmed: Kamban’s Tamil *Ramavataram* feeds directly into the Malay *Hikayat Seri Rama*, alongside the broader Tamil *Uttara Kanda* tradition. The Malay text is therefore at least two diffusion-hops removed from the Sanskrit source, not an independent line reaching back to Valmiki on its own.

Route 2, inferred rather than confirmed: the *Hikayat Seri Rama*’s relationship to the broader Cham *Akayet* genre is independently confirmed for a related Cham epic, but the specific claim that the Cham *Ramayana* (the *Akayet Pram Dit Pram Lak*) draws on the same Malay *hikayat* tradition was not located as a directly stated claim in any source consulted for the parent volume. It is reported here, as there, as a plausible but unconfirmed inference, not as an established fact — a distinction that matters, because treating an inference as a confirmed route would silently upgrade the evidentiary weight of any agreement found between the two texts.

Route 3, confirmed and dated: the Thai *Ramakien*’s material reaching Myanmar in 1789 is the strongest-evidenced route in the set. A named Royal Commission for Translating Thai Stories, appointed by the Burmese crown prince, produced the *Yama Pya-zat-taw-gyi*, a Burmese-language version of the Thai text, as a documented court translation project with an institutional record behind it — a two-hop diffusion event with a date, not an inference.

Route 4, confirmed by the text's own self-report: the Sri Lankan Ravana Katava's debt to South Indian Tamil oral tradition is not inferred at all. The text states its own source directly: "Tamil teachers of long ago." This framework treats a source's disclosure of its own influence as the cleanest available diffusion evidence, on the reasoning already stated in Section 3 — a text that tells a researcher where it got its material should be trusted on that specific point exactly as much as it is trusted on its other claims, no more and no less.

One further relationship was deliberately excluded from the diffusion map rather than included on weaker grounds: the internal Jain lineage running from the Paumacariya through the Padmapurana (Ravisena's Padmacaritam) and the Apabhramsha Paumacariu to Hemachandra's Trishashti Shalaka Purusha Charitra. This is a genuine textual lineage, but not a geographic one — most of the intermediate texts in that chain have no confirmed place of composition at all, and plotting a diffusion arrow between undated, unplaced texts would claim a level of geographic precision the underlying evidence does not support. That relationship is instead argued at the textual level, within the corpus's Tier B analysis, rather than forced onto a map that cannot honestly represent it.

The practical function of the diffusion map, taken as a whole, is to prevent a specific and easy-to-make error: treating apparent agreement between two traditions in different tiers as two independent witnesses, when one in fact sits downstream of the other through a lateral route not visible from tier classification alone.

5. Case Study One: A Genuinely Independent Theological Reconstruction

The Jain Paumacariya offers the clearest test of what real independence produces when it is actually present in the corpus, because the theological distance between Tier B and Tier A is total rather than incremental. Composed within a cosmological system governed by its own rules about which souls may attain liberation and how, Jain doctrine organizes certain narrative roles around a fixed structure of sixty-three Shalaka Purushas — "illustrious persons" — including a sequence of Baladevas and Vasudevas paired across successive ages. A Baladeva, within this structure, is a great soul on a trajectory toward liberation, and Jain doctrine holds that such a figure cannot take a life directly without disqualifying himself from that trajectory. The Sanskrit tradition's central climactic act — Rama personally killing Ravana — is therefore not merely undesirable within Jain theology; it is structurally impossible for the story to retain if it is to remain coherent within that theology's own rules.

The narrative is rebuilt accordingly, rather than simply softened or omitted. Rama becomes Padma, the eighth Baladeva in the fixed sequence; his brother Lakshmana occupies the paired role of Vasudeva; and it is Lakshmana, not Rama, who kills Ravana — a substitution required by the doctrinal architecture of the Shalaka Purusha system, not a narrative variant selected for dramatic or moral effect. Ravana himself is reframed within the same system as a Prati-Vasudeva, a fixed antagonist-role paired against each age's Vasudeva, which supplies an internal theological reason for his death that owes nothing to the Sanskrit tradition's own reasons for the same event.

This is not a minor divergence layered onto an otherwise shared base text; it is a complete theological reconstruction that happens to retain the same proper names and broadly the same sequence of exile, abduction, and rescue. Because the Paumacariya and its related Jain texts constitute the corpus's strongest available test of whether a shared narrative structure can survive a total change of underlying metaphysics, Tier B carries disproportionate evidentiary weight in this framework relative to its size: where a detail is attested independently in both Tier A and Tier B, that agreement has actually crossed a real independence boundary, in a way that agreement across ten Tier A-derived vernacular retellings never does, however numerous those retellings are. The specific finding, tested at this boundary, is that the underlying narrative structure — loss, tested loyalty, the cost of pride — survives the reconstruction fully intact even though the theology

beneath it has been replaced from the ground up, which is precisely the kind of result an evidentiary framework of this kind exists to surface.

6. Case Study Two: Independent Corroboration of the Narrative's Own Geography

A separate and methodologically distinct test applies to the epic's geography: rather than asking whether traditions of the epic agree with each other, this test asks whether places the epic names can be independently attested in sources that have no connection to the Ramayana at all. Three results from this test illustrate what positive, non-circular corroboration looks like within the framework, set deliberately alongside the negative result in Section 7 so that the method's disposition is not read as uniformly skeptical.

Mithila, the kingdom associated with Sita's birth, is independently corroborated by the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad's own court scene at Videha and by the Vishnu Purana's Ikshvaku-Janaka genealogy — texts with their own transmission histories, unconnected to the Ramayana's narrative claims about the kingdom. Separate Buddhist and Jain traditions corroborate the kingdom's existence again, independently of both the Ramayana and of each other. No single capital-city site within Mithila is confirmed by this evidence, which the framework reports as a regional corroboration rather than a point-location one — a distinction preserved rather than collapsed for the sake of a cleaner-looking result.

Kishkindha, the vanara kingdom associated with Sugriva and Hanuman, has its place-name independently attested in the Mahabharata's own account of a military campaign against “monkey-kings” named Mainda and Dvidida — a narrative with no connection to the Ramayana's own plot, mentioning the same place-name in an unrelated context. This is corroboration of the name as a real place-name in circulation, not confirmation of the specific modern site (Hampi-Anegundi) traditionally identified with it; excavated material at that site is Vijayanagara-era, many centuries later than the period the identification would require, and the framework reports the place-name and the site identification as two separate claims with two different evidentiary statuses rather than treating a hit on one as a hit on both.

Dandakaranya, the forest region of the exile narrative, is independently attested as an ordinary administrative region name across multiple Puranic geography chapters unconnected to the Ramayana's plot, and the Mahabharata separately narrates King Danda's own origin story in connection with the same region. The specific compass-direction boundaries sometimes cited for Dandakaranya in secondary literature are, on inspection, a later scholarly inference rather than a claim stated directly in any primary text — a distinction this framework treats as worth preserving rather than smoothing over, since the region's existence and its precise boundaries are two claims of different evidentiary strength.

Ayodhya itself returns a genuine, if partial, positive result from archaeology independent of the text: Painted Grey Ware pottery dated to roughly 1200–600 BCE and Northern Black Polished Ware dated to roughly 700–200 BCE together establish uncontested Iron Age and Later Vedic occupation at the site. This confirms that Ayodhya existed as an inhabited settlement in the relevant broad era; it does not, and is not treated by this framework as confirming, that the specific events the epic narrates there occurred. A separate 1975–76 pillar-base find at the same site remains under genuine scholarly dispute and is connected to a distinct legal and political controversy this framework takes no position on, a distinction the corpus is careful to keep separate from the archaeological occupation-layer question rather than allowing the two to blur into a single claim.

7. Case Study Three: Adjudicating a Live, Contested Geographic Claim

The clearest illustration of the framework applied to a negative result concerns Lanka. A currently circulating identification, advanced publicly and repeatedly outside the academic literature, places Ravana's Lanka not on the island now known as Sri Lanka, but at Bhagatrav, a Late Harappan-era site on the Narmada estuary in Gujarat. This framework tested that claim directly, using the same standard applied to every other claim in the corpus: check it against the primary text and against independently obtained physical evidence, and report the result plainly regardless of which direction it points.

The primary text does not support a Gujarat placement. The Sundara Kanda states, in Hanuman's own report immediately after completing the crossing, that Lanka sits on the southern shore of the Dakshina Samudra — the "southern ocean" — the very sea he has just crossed (Sundara Kanda 5.65). The same hundred-yojana open-ocean crossing is independently restated five separate times across the Kanda, each instance describing deep water and a crossing by flight, not a short traverse of a river mouth (Sundara Kanda 5.1). The southern search party dispatched earlier, in the Kishkindha Kanda, is already instructed on the assumption that Ravana's location is an island, and is routed through terrain consistent with a march converging on the far south of the peninsula (Kishkindha Kanda 4.41, 4.50). When the full army departs for Lanka, the text repeats the same bearing at the scale of a military campaign rather than a single scout's leap: Rama "moved towards southern direction, along with the army" (Yuddha Kanda 6.4), and the bridge itself is framed, at the point of construction, as the necessary response to an obstacle with no available alternative (Yuddha Kanda 6.15). These are four separate narrative moments, spread across two Kandas composed at different points in the text's long compositional history, independently repeating the same southward bearing and open-water crossing.

Physical and paleoclimatic evidence independently tested against the claim does not support it either. A 2024–25 peer-reviewed re-excavation of Bhagatrav (Kanungo et al., Radiocarbon 67, no. 1, 2025) found no fortification or destruction layer at the site, and its own excavators left the site's port function itself disputed. The chronology required by the claim — a date for Rama placed within the Harappan period specifically so that a Harappan-era site becomes a necessary candidate for Lanka — depends on a reinterpretation of the Vedanga Jyotisha attributing to it a four-age Yuga chronology; checked directly against the primary text of the Vedanga Jyotisha, the work contains only a five-year lunisolar calendar-intercalation cycle, with no Krita-Treta-Dvapara-Kali structure of any kind, and no connection to dynastic or historical chronology. Ecologically, the claim's own cited supporting evidence — that the Narmada estuary's forest reflects a pepper- and coconut-growing ecology — fails independently of the textual and archaeological evidence: black pepper's documented native range is restricted to Kerala's Western Ghats and Sri Lanka, requiring 2,000–4,000 mm of well-distributed annual rainfall, while Bharuch district, the actual location of Bhagatrav, receives approximately 860–890 mm annually, a semi-arid regime roughly a third to a half of what either species requires, with neither species documented as ever having been cultivated there.

Set against this negative result, six lines of evidence independent of one another and of the claim under examination converge on the traditional identification instead: the Sanskrit text's own internal geography as detailed above; a physically surveyed, roughly 48-kilometre chain of limestone shoals between Rameswaram and Mannar Island — Adam's Bridge, Rama Setu, Nala Setu, three names for one structure — passable on foot within recorded history until a cyclone severed it in 1480 CE; two independent foreign witnesses, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims Faxian (399–414 CE) and Xuanzang (629–645 CE), each independently describing an island in the same location by sea, two centuries apart, with no reference to the Ramayana and no stake in this or any later dispute; a documented historical process, traced with primary sources by Justin W. Henry in *Ravana's Kingdom: The Ramayana and Sri Lankan History from Below* (Oxford University Press, 2022), by which the identification became fixed under the Chola dynasty from the ninth century CE onward;

matching wet-zone tropical ecology, with the epic's own account of Lanka classified in published botanical analysis of the text's flora and fauna specifically as evergreen tropical forest, a classification incompatible with Bharuch's documented dry-winter savanna climate; and, notably, the claim's own longest-standing published reference cartography, maintained independently by its own author since at least 2012, which places Lanka on the island south of India rather than at the Narmada.

The claim is retained in the corpus and reported on its own terms, rather than silently omitted, because it is a real and actively circulating position, and a framework that only reports the answer it agrees with is not demonstrating a method at all — it is simply asserting a conclusion. What this case shows methodologically is that testing a claim honestly against primary text and independent evidence sometimes produces a clean negative on that specific claim, and that a clean negative is reported with the same specificity as a confirmation: with the evidence that produced it, laid out so that any reader can independently re-run the same check rather than take the verdict on the framework's own authority.

8. Case Study Four: Character-Level Divergence — Three Traditions, Three Deaths, Three Reasons

Where geographic claims produce a binary confirmed-or-rejected result, character-level claims more often produce genuine, multi-way divergence that the framework is built to characterize rather than resolve into a single answer. Ravana's death is a clear example. Across the corpus, at least three traditions attribute the antagonist's death to three different agents, for three theologically distinct reasons, and the framework treats the pattern in why the death is attributed differently as more diagnostically important than adjudicating which single account is "correct" — a question the corpus does not treat as answerable or, on its own terms, as the right question to be asking.

In the Sanskrit Tier A tradition, Rama kills Ravana directly, consistent with the tradition's central theological claim that Rama is Vishnu incarnate, descended specifically to end Ravana's reign of adharma; the killing is the narrative's theological climax, not an incidental plot event. In the Jain Tier B tradition, as detailed in Section 5, Rama structurally cannot perform this act at all, and Lakshmana kills Ravana instead, as a direct consequence of the Baladeva/Vasudeva doctrinal architecture rather than a narrative substitution chosen independently of theology. In the Shakta Tier C tradition of the Adbhuta Ramayana, the text goes further still, restructuring the confrontation's theological center of gravity away from Rama's martial victory and toward Sita's own power, reframing what the Sanskrit tradition treats as Rama's climactic act.

This is not three traditions disagreeing on a detail while otherwise telling the same story; it is three traditions locating the story's central theological claim in three different places, and resolving the antagonist's death as a direct downstream consequence of wherever that claim is located. Because Tier A, Tier B, and Tier C are genealogically unconnected in the terms established in Section 3 — none is derived from either of the others — the pattern itself, rather than any single version, is what this framework treats as the corpus's actual finding: not agreement on a fact, but independent evidence that the site of theological authority in this narrative has never been fixed, and that every tradition able to relocate it has done so.

9. What Survives the Method

Applying this framework across the full thirty-text corpus does not produce a verified historical core, and the corpus does not report one. Every specific historicity claim tested at this level of scrutiny returns either a clean negative on that particular claim — as in Section 7 — or a genuine, disclosed uncertainty that the framework's own tools cannot resolve further. Neither outcome functions as a verdict on the broader tradition, because the framework was never built to produce

one, and treating a negative result on one claim as evidence against the tradition as a whole would be exactly the same evidentiary error, run in the opposite direction, that this paper opened by describing.

What the method does surface, consistently, across every tier and every documented diffusion route, regardless of which theology, politics, or specific causal mechanism a given tradition attaches to it, is a narrative structure that persists intact through every reconstruction: a father separated from a son he cannot protect; a loyalty tested past any reasonable limit; a sibling choosing a harder, less rewarded form of loyalty over an easier betrayal; a figure whose own overreach creates the exact vulnerability that later destroys him; a character with disproportionately little institutional power who turns out to matter more than his strength alone would predict. Sanskrit courts, Jain monastic orders reconstructing the story's entire metaphysics, Shakta theologians relocating its center of authority, Buddhist canonical compilers stripping it of conflict altogether, and Southeast Asian royal courts rebuilding a national identity after military defeat have all reached for this same underlying structure while rebuilding nearly everything else around it, including, in the Jain case, who performs the story's central act and why.

A structure capable of being rebuilt that consistently, by that many genealogically independent traditions, over that long a period, is not by itself evidence of a single historical event underlying it. It is evidence of something else, and a different kind of finding: a shared narrative scaffold that a wide range of otherwise unconnected communities have continuously reused to hold grief, loyalty, and loss that needed somewhere to go, independent of whichever specific theology happened to be doing the holding.

10. Limitations

Three limitations bear directly on how the findings above should be read. First, the corpus's tier assignments depend on manuscript and translation traditions that are themselves the product of centuries of transmission, copying, and, in several cases, active textual reconstruction by modern critical editions; a tier assignment describes a text's genealogical relationship as best it can currently be reconstructed, not a certainty. Second, the fifteen texts excluded from formal tier and geographic comparison in Section 3 remain part of the corpus's wider source base and are discussed on their own terms in the parent volume; their exclusion from this paper's comparative apparatus is a statement about what can be defensibly compared, not a judgment on their intrinsic value or reliability. Third, the diffusion map in Section 4 records four routes at the standard of evidence currently available; Route 2 is explicitly flagged as an inference rather than a confirmed fact precisely because further primary-source work could confirm or disconfirm it, and the framework's own honesty depends on that distinction being preserved rather than allowed to erode into an unmarked assumption over time.

11. Conclusion

Source independence is not a formality in comparative Ramayana scholarship; it is the variable that determines whether an observed agreement constitutes evidence for a claim at all, or merely documents that a text was copied, translated, or elaborated. The seven-tier attestation framework and diffusion map presented here are offered as a reusable method for that specific problem, tested in this paper against a theological case, two geographic cases with opposite results, and a character-level case of genuine multi-way divergence — each resolved by consulting primary sources and independently obtained evidence rather than by appeal to which tradition is oldest, most widely followed, or most emotionally compelling.

This paper summarizes the method and four of its applications in detail sufficient for independent evaluation and reuse. The complete corpus — thirty texts, seventeen character and causal-event chapters covering Rama, Sita, Ravana, Hanuman, and the supporting cast of Mandodari, Vibhishana,

and Lakshmana, three full geographic map plates, and a source-by-source bibliography built from primary texts and their English translations — is published in full as *The Ramayana: The Paper Trail Behind the World's Most Retold Epic* (Pushpika Indunil Hemakumara, publishing as Anthony Vondoom, 2026), available in paperback (ISBN-13 979-8191928081) and as a Kindle eBook, and is cited throughout this paper as the primary reference work for claims documented at greater length than the present paper's scope allows.

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AI Disclosure

Source organization for this paper was provided by Claude (Anthropic), disclosed transparently per standing author practice. The author takes full responsibility for the content of this paper.