Myth, Memory, and Identity: Ramkatha in the Tribal Cultures of Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh

Dr. Kuldeep Mathur
Associate Professor
R R Mehta College of Science and C L Parikh College of Commerce, Palanpur, Gujarat,
India

Abstract

This paper examines the rich tradition of Ramkatha (the story of Rama) as it has been appropriated, transformed, and lived by tribal communities in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. Moving beyond the pan-Indian Sanskritic tradition represented by Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Tulsidas's *Ramcaritmanas*, the paper explores how Adivasi communities have made the epic their own through oral narratives that reflect their social structures, ethical values, and historical experiences. Through detailed analysis of the Kunkana Ramayana of the Dangs region, the Ramnami tradition of Chhattisgarh, and contemporary political engagements with tribal Ramkatha, the paper argues that these narratives constitute distinct literary traditions in their own right—"living" and "contemporary" literature rather than mere variants of a dominant text. The paper considers three interrelated dimensions: the narrative transformations that distinguish tribal Ramkathas from their Sanskritic counterparts, particularly in their treatment of gender and marginalised characters; the role of these narratives in constructing and preserving tribal identity; and the contemporary political context in which tribal Ramkatha has become a site of contestation over religious identity and cultural autonomy. The paper concludes by reflecting on what these traditions reveal about the nature of epic narratives in India and their capacity to accommodate diverse worldviews.

Keywords: Ramkatha, tribal literature, oral tradition, Kunkana, Ramnami Samaj, cultural identity, Adivasi studies

1. Introduction

The Ramayana is perhaps India's most versatile narrative tradition. For over two millennia, the story of Rama has been told and retold in countless languages, genres, and contexts across the subcontinent and beyond. As A.K. Ramanujan famously observed in his essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas," the Ramayana is not a single text but a "pool of signifiers" from which different tellers draw to create works that reflect their own cultural and historical locations . This insight—that there exist "countless Ramayanas" rather than a single authoritative version—has profoundly shaped scholarly understanding of the epic tradition.

Yet scholarly attention has tended to focus on literary Ramayanas in classical and modern Indian languages, or on performance traditions in mainstream religious contexts. The Ramkatha traditions of India's tribal (Adivasi) communities have received considerably less attention, despite their richness and distinctiveness. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how tribal communities in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh have made the Rama story their own—transforming it in ways that reflect their social structures, ethical sensibilities, and historical experiences.

The paper focuses on three states—Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh—that are home to significant tribal populations and to distinctive Ramkatha traditions. In Gujarat's Dangs district, the Kunkana community preserves an oral Ramayana that differs strikingly from Valmiki's version, particularly in its treatment of Sita and its localization of the epic's geography within the Dangs territory . In the Chhattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh, the Ramnami Samaj—a sect of Dalit Ram devotees—has developed its own relationship with the Rama story, treating Tulsidas's *Ramcaritmanas* as a living text to be interpreted, expanded, and sometimes selectively modified in accordance with the community's values . Across all three states, tribal communities including Bhils, Gonds, and Kols maintain oral traditions that connect them to characters and events from the Ramayana .

This paper advances three interconnected arguments. First, tribal Ramkathas are not derivative or secondary versions of a "great tradition" but constitute distinct literary traditions with their own integrity, aesthetics, and worldview. Second, these narratives function as vehicles for collective memory and identity, enabling tribal communities to locate themselves within—and sometimes against—the broader narratives of Indian civilization. Third, tribal Ramkatha has become a site of contemporary political contestation, as different actors seek to claim tribal communities for Hindu identity or to assert tribal cultural autonomy.

The paper draws on available ethnographic and textual sources, including fieldwork reports, academic studies, and journalistic accounts. It acknowledges the limitations of relying on written sources for oral traditions and the need for further fieldwork to document these living narratives.

2. Theoretical Framework: Many Ramayanas, Many Worlds

2.1 The "Countless Ramayanas" Paradigm

The study of Ramayana traditions was transformed by the publication of Paula Richman's edited volume *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* in 1991 . Building on A.K. Ramanujan's influential essay, the volume demonstrated that the Ramayana is not a fixed text but a narrative tradition characterised by variation, contestation, and creative adaptation. Different tellings select different episodes, emphasise different characters, and advance different values. Some celebrate Rama's divinity, others question his actions. Some centre on Rama himself, others give voice to Sita, Ravana, or marginal figures.

This paradigm has been enormously productive, enabling scholars to attend to the diversity of Ramayana traditions without privileging any single version as authoritative. Yet as Richman herself has noted, the "many Ramayanas" framework has limitations. It can obscure power relations between different tellings, implying a kind of pluralist equality that does not reflect the actual hierarchies of textual authority in Indian society. Moreover, it has tended to focus on literary Ramayanas in classical and modern Indian languages, with less attention to oral traditions and to the Ramayanas of marginalised communities.

2.2 "Little Traditions" and "Great Traditions"

The anthropological distinction between "great traditions" and "little traditions," associated with Robert Redfield and Milton Singer, offers one framework for understanding tribal Ramkatha. On this view, the Sanskritic Ramayana of Valmiki represents a "great tradition"—

a literate, pan-Indian tradition associated with elite social groups and institutionalized religion. Tribal Ramkathas, by contrast, represent "little traditions"—local, oral, and associated with non-elite communities.

G.N. Devy, the cultural activist and scholar who has done much to document tribal literature, notes that scholars of Indian literature "may like to describe the Kunkana Ram epic and similar epics elsewhere, such as the Bhartari epic in Chattisgarh and the Madeshwara epic in Karnataka, as 'little traditions'" . Yet Devy immediately complicates this classification, observing that these traditions "have still not ossified into 'traditions.' These enchanting poetic creations are even now 'contemporary' literature for them. They are the real literature, in this side of India" .

Devy's observation is crucial. To classify tribal Ramkathas as "little traditions" risks missing their vitality and their centrality to the communities that sustain them. For the Kunkanas of Gujarat, the Ramayana is not an ancient text from a distant past but a living narrative that speaks directly to their present experience. The story is "seen by the community as part of their immediate ethos" . This quality of living contemporaneity distinguishes tribal Ramkathas from the Sanskritic traditions that have, for many modern readers, become artifacts of a classical past.

2.3 Acculturation and Resistance

The relationship between tribal Ramkathas and the pan-Indian Ramayana tradition is complex, involving both acculturation and resistance. Aruna Ravikant Joshi's fieldwork on the Dangi Ramakatha examines how the Kunkana community has "adopted" the pan-Indian epic, but in such a way that it becomes "a narration of their own social history" . This is not passive reception but active appropriation—the epic is transformed to serve the community's own purposes and to express its own understanding of the world.

At the same time, tribal Ramkathas can function as forms of cultural resistance. By telling the Rama story in their own way, in their own language, and from their own perspective, tribal communities assert their cultural autonomy against the homogenizing pressures of Sanskritisation and Hindu nationalism. The very existence of distinct tribal versions of the Ramayana challenges the claim that there is a single, authoritative Rama story to which all must adhere.

3. The Kunkana Ramayana of Gujarat

3.1 The Kunkana Community and Its Location

The Kunkana Adivasi community lives on the border between Maharashtra and Gujarat, primarily in the Dangs district of Gujarat . The Dangs is a hilly, forested region that has long been home to various tribal communities, including the Kunkanas and Bhils. The region's geography—remote and relatively inaccessible—has helped preserve distinct cultural traditions, including the oral Ramayana.

G.N. Devy first encountered the Kunkana Ramayana at Saputara, "a really tiny hilltop stretch of houses" in the Dangs, where he met Dahyabhai Vadhu, "an extremely gifted culture-enthusiast and a bank employee" who led a group of Kunkana singers and musicians . Vadhu told Devy that "the Kunkana language has an entire Ramkatha, substantially different from the

Valmiki Ramayana" . When the singers presented an episode, Devy realised that "it was indeed different. The story was amazingly humane and far more sensitive to the women's perspective" .

3.2 Narrative Transformations: The Birth of Sita

The Kunkana Ramayana departs from Valmiki's version in numerous ways, but its treatment of Sita's origins is perhaps the most striking. In the Kunkana telling, Sita is depicted as Ravana's daughter, though her progenitor is Shiva . The narrative unfolds as follows:

Ravana, born without arms or legs in a family of robbers, decides to undertake penance at Kailash to please Shiva. After twelve months of penance, Shiva notices the formless child, and Ravana expresses his desire to become a complete human. Shiva must attend to his "worldly duties" but allows Ravana to stay in the Kailash palace, forbidding him from entering a certain room where, Shiva warns, "a black bee" may sting him to death.

Unable to tolerate the delay, Ravana disobeys Shiva and enters the forbidden room, which contains a pool of nectar. He falls into the pool and begins drowning; nine sips of nectar enter his belly, and nine new heads sprout on his body, making him a ten-headed monster. When Shiva returns, Ravana complains, and Shiva promises him the kingdom of Lanka to repair the damage.

As Ravana leaves Kailash, he sees Parvati and immediately returns to plead with Shiva to give him Parvati as his wife, reasoning that no girl would willingly marry a ten-headed being. Shiva, "true to his generous nature," allows Parvati to go with Ravana . This creates panic among the gods, and Krishna is assigned to rescue Parvati.

Krishna, disguised as a villager, meets Ravana on the path and tells him that Shiva has cheated him—the woman he has is merely a maid, while the real Parvati remains at Kailash. Ravana returns to confront Shiva, while Krishna creates Mohini, a woman more charming than Parvati. When Ravana re-enters Kailash, he finds Shiva with Mohini and takes her away, believing her to be Parvati.

The gods' worries are not yet resolved, however, because Ravana's consumption of nectar has made him immortal. Krishna therefore tricks Ravana again, telling him that just as Shiva gave him an ordinary woman instead of Parvati, he gave him only the kingdom of Lanka rather than the kingdom of Death. Ravana returns to Shiva and demands Death—this time in writing.

The Kunkana poem narrates the episode:

"'O Elder one, you have once again made a fool of me. You are a great god, you have given me the throne of Lanka and its neighbouring regions and all the seven oceans. Do you wish me to be content with just that? I wish to possess the throne of Death.' Quite exhausted by Ravana's pestering, Siva writes (the Kunkana Adivasis believe Siva writes all his boons): 'The king of Ayodhya will have a queen named Kaikeyi. She will give birth to Rama. At that moment Ravana will get pricked by a thorn, and the pain of the thorn-prick would shoot all the way up to his head. Ravana will then be seized by malarial fever. Eventually, Rama will kill Ravana.'"

Having lost both the real Parvati and his immortality, Ravana begins his journey to Lanka with the woman he believes to be Parvati. She is already pregnant from her time with Shiva, but while bathing in a river she is terrified by Ravana's roaring voice and drops the foetus. The

foetus floats downstream and lands where a gardener named Jambumali resides. Sita is born, and her fame spreads. Later, King Janaka takes Sita to his palace.

3.3 A Different Sita

The Kunkana narrative continues to develop Sita's character in ways that distinguish it from Valmiki's version. During a visit to Janaka's palace, Dasharatha rests there, and Sita takes up his mighty bow, turning it into "a toy-horse for her to play with" . Dasharatha is stunned by her power: "Janaka, Dasharatha, and the entire kingdom of Janaka stare dumbstruck at the divine strength of Sita. Only a great and mighty warrior could possibly have lifted such a huge bow and a two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow. Sita was just a child" . Dasharatha leaves the bow behind for Sita to play with.

This Sita is no passive heroine but a figure of extraordinary strength and agency. The Kunkana tradition's emphasis on Sita's power reflects, perhaps, the relatively greater status of women in many tribal communities compared to mainstream Hindu society. As Vikram Acchalia, an expert on tribal culture, notes, "Among tribals, most of the rituals are performed by women only" . The Kunkana Sita embodies this alternative gender order.

3.4 Localization and Living Tradition

The Kunkana Ramayana is not merely a narrative but a lived relationship to place. The Kunkanas believe that "the Rama story indeed took place within the confines of the Dangs territory. The place names in the narrative tally with geographical locations within the district" . This localization of the epic—placing its events in the community's own landscape—is a powerful strategy of appropriation. The Ramayana is not something that happened elsewhere, in a distant and mythical Ayodhya; it happened here, in the hills and forests the Kunkanas inhabit.

The narrative is performed during the months following the long monsoon by bards who engage in agricultural work during the rains . These performers "do not follow the text inscribed in their memory and learnt through oral tradition handed down by their ancestors" . The community as a whole has "a full familiarity with the storyline and the songs interspersed over the narrative" . The narrative style works to "bring the listeners and the narrative closer" , ensuring that the story remains a living presence rather than a fixed text.

4. The Ramnami Samaj of Madhya Pradesh

4.1 Origins and Development

The Ramnami Samaj of Chhattisgarh (now part of Madhya Pradesh at the time of the source) offers a different model of tribal engagement with the Rama story. Unlike the Kunkana Ramayana, which preserves an independent oral tradition, the Ramnami Samaj centres on a specific text—Tulsidas's *Ramcaritmanas*—but approaches it in ways that transform its meaning and significance.

The Ramnami Samaj is "a sect of harijan (Untouchable) Ram bhaktas" formed in the 1890s . Its founder was Parasuram, "an illiterate Chhattisgarhi Camar (member of an Untouchable leather-worker caste)" . Parasuram's father had been "an avid Manas devotee who would listen to recitations of the text whenever possible and commit verses to memory" . Parasuram followed his example, memorizing verses from childhood.

According to the sect's oral hagiography, when Parasuram was in his mid-twenties he contracted leprosy but was miraculously cured by a Ramanandi ascetic. The ascetic exhorted Parasuram to "devote himself entirely to the Manas, viewing the text as his chosen deity, and to ceaselessly practice ramnam, repetition of the name of Ram" . As word of the miracle spread, villagers came to hear Parasuram recite from the Manas and speak of the greatness of ramnam. "Parasuram's popularity grew, and in less than a year the Ramnami Samaj was born" .

4.2 The Manas as Living Text

The Ramnamis' relationship with the *Ramcaritmanas* evolved over time. In the early years, the text functioned on three levels: as a material object (the physical text was revered as a deity, positioned in the center of the group during worship); as sound (its verses were viewed as mantras possessing transformative power); and as meaning (it was cherished as the primary source of the Rama story, though "actual recitation of the narrative has never been stressed") . Initially, the Ramnamis focused primarily on the first two levels, paying less attention to meaning—possibly because "nearly all of the members of the sect were illiterate" . The Manas enjoyed what the source terms "quasi-sruti status"—it was "revered primarily as a recited text containing potent mantras that did not need to be understood in order to be spiritually efficacious" .

Over time, however, members began to memorize verses and integrate them into their ramnam chanting. Occasionally they learned the meaning of the verses they had memorized. The desire to memorize led to "an increase both in literacy and in understanding of the chanted portions of the text" .

4.3 Selective Appropriation and Resistance

As understanding of the memorized verses increased, the Ramnamis encountered a dilemma. They discovered that the Manas "contains many verses that support orthodox Hindu beliefs regarding Brahmin social and religious superiority and the inferior status of low castes and women" . The text they revered as scripture "turned out to contain certain teachings that were diametrically opposed to their own beliefs and apparently supportive of the existing social and religious hierarchy that had placed them at its bottom" .

This discovery prompted a significant response. Younger Ramnamis learned to read so they could understand the verses being chanted. This served two purposes: "it would allow them to sift through the existing collection of verses and eliminate those that were contrary to the sect's developing belief system," and it would help establish "selection criteria to be employed in the building of a corpus of verses to be chanted, which would in turn help give definition to the sect's philosophy and values" .

As the focus shifted from sound to meaning, "the status of the Manas began to shift from sruti to smrti" . No longer viewed as "a bounded, inviolable scripture, the text came to be seen as open-ended, capable of being interpreted, elaborated, and when necessary modified" . The Ramnamis began "both to reinterpret and to expand on the text, emphasizing verses that were in accordance with their values while ignoring others that violated their belief system" . The Manas thus became "the basis for the sect's own tellings of the Ramayan, which draw not only on the Manas but on a variety of additional texts" .

The Ramnami example demonstrates that engagement with a canonical text need not entail submission to its authority. By treating the Manas as smrti rather than sruti—as a text open to interpretation and selective appropriation—the Ramnamis made it their own. They transformed a text that, in its "original" form, supported the hierarchical social order into a resource for asserting their own dignity and religious identity.

5. Tribal Ramkatha and the Politics of Identity

5.1 Contemporary Contestations

In recent years, tribal Ramkatha has become entangled in contemporary political debates about religious identity and cultural autonomy. In March 2021, the culture department of Madhya Pradesh announced it would hold Ram Leelas in 89 tribal blocks across the state to inform tribals about "the influence of Lord Ram in their lives" . The stated purpose was to counter the demand, then gaining momentum among some tribal groups, for a distinct religious code (Sarna code) separate from Hinduism.

Ashok Mishra, the project coordinator, explained the rationale: "When there is a debate going on whether tribals were Hindus or not, the cultural department of MP has decided to organize three Ram Leelas to establish the fact that tribals were followers of Lord Ram" . The Ram Leelas would tell tribals about Shabri, "a tribal woman," and Nishad Raj, "a tribal ruler," who were "ardent followers of Lord Ram" . The scriptwriter, Yogesh Tripathi, claimed there were "a lot of documents to suggest that Lord Ram spent most of his 14 years in exile with tribals and learnt a lot from them" .

The state's approach explicitly sought to use tribal connections to the Ramayana to assert that tribals are Hindus. As Madhya Pradesh's minister of culture and tourism, Usha Thakur, put it: "A section of people are trying to prove that tribals have no religion, but we know that these 'vanvasis' (forest dwellers) are Hindus" .

5.2 Tribal Responses and Resistance

Tribal rights activists strongly contested this appropriation of their traditions. Naresh Biswas, a Dindori-based activist, called the decision an attempt to "enforce" Hinduism on tribals: "It is surprising that the state government has taken over the RSS programme to 'enforce' Hinduism on tribals. It is a dangerous move and will change the traditions of tribals" .

Vikram Acchalia, an expert on tribal culture, offered a more detailed critique. He argued that "Tribal communities existed before the advent of religions. Like Hindus converted into Islam after Mughals came to India, some tribal also adopted Hinduism but it doesn't mean that the tribal is a Hindu" . He emphasized the distinctiveness of tribal religious practice: "the tribal tradition and festivals are based on nature and not on any idol worship. We celebrate Diwali to honour our cattle, which help us in ploughing" . He also noted differences in ritual practice: "Tribals offer non-vegetarian food and liquor to god and goddess, but in the Sanatan Dharm, non-vegetarian food and liquor are consumed by demons only" .

The Sarna code demand reflects this assertion of distinct identity. Tribal bodies in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha have demanded inclusion of a separate Sarna code in the Census to formally register tribal population as non-Hindus . The Jharkhand assembly passed a resolution

on this matter in December 2020, and Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren, the only tribal CM in the country, declared: "Tribals were not Hindus in the past, nor are they Hindu now" .

5.3 The Politics of Narrative

The contemporary contestation over tribal Ramkatha reveals the high stakes involved in claims about narrative ownership. For the state government, tribal connections to the Ramayana—whether through characters like Shabri and Nishad Raj or through distinct tribal versions of the epic—serve as evidence that tribals are, and always have been, Hindus. The narrative is used to incorporate tribals within a homogenizing Hindu identity.

For tribal activists, by contrast, tribal Ramkatha is evidence of distinctiveness rather than incorporation. The very fact that tribals have their own versions of the Ramayana—versions that differ significantly from mainstream tellings—demonstrates that tribal culture has its own integrity and cannot simply be subsumed within Hinduism. Moreover, the existence of distinct tribal religious practices, focused on nature rather than idol worship, suggests a worldview fundamentally different from that of mainstream Hinduism.

This contestation echoes the dynamic observed in the Ramnami Samaj. There too, a marginalised community engaged with the Rama story on its own terms, selectively appropriating elements that served its purposes while resisting or ignoring those that did not. The Ramnamis did not simply accept the Manas as authoritative; they transformed it, making it speak to their own values and experience. Contemporary tribal communities, in their resistance to Hindu nationalist appropriation, are engaged in a similar process of selective engagement—asserting their connection to the Rama story while refusing the identity that others would impose on the basis of that connection.

6. Comparative Reflections

6.1 Distinctive Features of Tribal Ramkatha

Several distinctive features emerge from this survey of tribal Ramkatha traditions. First, these traditions are characterized by what might be termed "narrative hospitality"—a willingness to transform the story in accordance with local values and sensibilities. The Kunkana Ramayana does not hesitate to give Sita a different origin, to emphasize her strength, or to locate the epic's events within the Dangs landscape. The Ramnami Samaj does not hesitate to select from the Manas those verses that accord with its values while ignoring those that do not.

Second, tribal Ramkathas tend to be more attentive to marginalised characters and perspectives. The Kunkana tradition's focus on Sita—and its depiction of her as a figure of extraordinary power—reflects this attentiveness. The Ramnami tradition's focus on the Name (ramnam) as accessible to all, regardless of caste, similarly reflects a concern with the marginalised.

Third, tribal Ramkathas are characterized by what Devy terms "living contemporaneity." They are not preserved as ancient texts but performed as living narratives, intimately connected to the community's sense of itself and its place in the world. The Kunkana belief that the Ramayana took place in the Dangs is not a scholarly hypothesis about historical geography but a lived conviction that makes the story present and immediate.

6.2 The Question of Origins

The relationship between tribal Ramkathas and the Sanskritic Ramayana tradition raises complex questions about origins and influence. Do tribal versions derive from the Sanskritic tradition, transformed through oral transmission and local adaptation? Or do they represent independent narrative traditions that have intersected with the pan-Indian epic at various points?

The question is likely unanswerable in any definitive sense—and perhaps beside the point. What matters is not the historical origin of these narratives but their present reality as living traditions that shape and express tribal identity. As the Kunkana example demonstrates, these traditions have their own integrity and their own authority for the communities that sustain them. They are not残缺 or derivative versions of something else; they are the Ramayana for those communities.

6.3 Ramkatha and Tribal Identity

Throughout this paper, we have seen how engagement with the Rama story serves to construct and express tribal identity. For the Kunkanas, their Ramayana distinguishes them from neighbouring communities and connects them to their landscape. For the Ramnamis, their distinctive relationship with the Manas marks their difference from—and resistance to—caste Hindu society. For contemporary tribal activists, the assertion of distinct tribal versions of the Ramayana serves to resist incorporation into a homogenizing Hindu identity.

This is not to suggest that tribal Ramkatha is primarily or exclusively about identity politics. It is first and foremost about story—about the pleasure of narrative, the wisdom of tradition, the comfort of familiar characters and events. But story and identity are never fully separable. The stories a community tells, and the way it tells them, are constitutive of who that community understands itself to be.

7. Conclusion

This paper has explored the rich and varied traditions of Ramkatha among tribal communities in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. From the Kunkana Ramayana of the Dangs, with its strikingly different account of Sita's origins and its localization of the epic within the community's own landscape, to the Ramnami Samaj of Chhattisgarh, with its selective appropriation of Tulsidas's Manas, these traditions demonstrate the remarkable adaptability and vitality of the Rama story.

Several conclusions emerge from this exploration. First, tribal Ramkathas are not secondary or derivative but constitute distinct literary traditions with their own integrity and authority. They deserve to be studied and appreciated on their own terms, not merely as variants of a Sanskritic original. Second, these traditions function as vehicles for collective memory and identity, enabling tribal communities to locate themselves within—and sometimes against—the broader narratives of Indian civilization. Third, tribal Ramkatha has become a site of contemporary political contestation, as different actors seek to claim tribal communities for competing identity projects.

The future of these traditions is uncertain. Economic change, migration, and the spread of mass media all pose challenges to oral traditions. The politicization of tribal identity and the

pressures of Hindu nationalism create additional pressures. Yet the resilience these traditions have shown over centuries—their capacity to adapt and transform while maintaining continuity—suggests that they will find ways to survive. The Kunkanas still gather after the monsoon to hear their Ramayana. The Ramnamis still chant the Name. The story continues.

As G.N. Devy reminds us, these are not "traditions" in the sense of something past and fixed. They are "even now 'contemporary' literature" . The Ramayana lives in the Dangs as it lives nowhere else—not as ancient text but as present reality, not as distant myth but as immediate experience. In this, perhaps, tribal Ramkatha reveals something essential about the Ramayana tradition as a whole: its capacity to be always new, always contemporary, always responsive to the needs and values of those who tell it.

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