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What a wonderful (post-apocalyptic) world: representations of India and the West in *Ramayan 3392 AD*

João Pedro Oliveira 

Research Centre for Communication and Culture (CECC), Human Sciences Faculty (FCH) of the Catholic University of Portugal (UCP), Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT

The comics *Ramayan 3392 AD* are the only major futuristic adaptation of the Indian epic *Rāmāyana*. Scholars have stated that the Indian element in the comics has been effaced so that the series could cater for international audiences versed on American pop culture. However, global concepts have often been appropriated by contemporary Indian nationalistic discourses. I analyse *Ramayan 3392 AD* through discourse analysis and the frameworks of Orientalism and re-Orientalism to conclude that, even though globalised, the elements in *Ramayan 3392 AD* create antithetical representations of India and the West.

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Introduction: made in India, born in the USA

The *Rāmāyana*, a tale which has been recreated in different media for centuries (Richman 1991), has been important for the Indian nation and the Hindu religion. The concepts of *nation* and *religion* are often intertwined in nationalistic Indian discourses, which posit that there was a positive pan-Hindu ontological unity throughout the subcontinent from precolonial times until the present (Veer 2019, 46). Accordingly, the epic has been referred to as a repository of images of the ‘Hindu nation’ (Veer 2001, 190), a description which emphasises its religious and political dimensions. In its individual and collective dimensions, the epic polarises identities by distinguishing between ideal insiders and counter-ideal outsiders and is often regarded as a blueprint for the polity (Thapar 2014). Protagonist Rāma and antagonist Rāvaṇa are or become leaders in most retellings. Rāma ends up defeating Rāvaṇa and establishing *Rāmarājya*, Sanskrit for ‘Rāma’s kingdom’, an idealised utopian society which has been used as a model for real polities (Udayakumar 1996).

Ramayan 3392 AD (Dasgupta and Singh 2006–2008) is a series of comics based on the *Rāmāyana* originally published in 2006 in eight instalments. In 2007, eight additional instalments were edited by American artist Ron Marz and published under the title *Ramayan 3392 AD Reloaded*. This is the only major futuristic adaptation of the epic,

CONTACT João Pedro Oliveira  john.olivetree@gmail.com  Faculty of Human Sciences (FCH), Research Centre for Communication and Culture (CECC), Human Sciences Faculty (FCH) of the Catholic University of Portugal (UCP), Lisbon, Portugal

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whose retellings are most often set in the age prior to the establishment of *Rāmarājya*. *Ramayan 3392* is set after *Mahavinaash* (Sanskrit *mahavināśa*, 'Great Destruction'), when most of mankind has been wiped out. Two continents remain: Aryavarta and Nark. Aryavarta is populated by 'various intelligent anthropomorphic races' (1.4)¹ and 'the last remains of the human race' (*Ibid.*), who live in a place called Armagarh. The ruler of Nark is Ravan, an artificial being created as a weapon. Ravan has created artificial beings called Asuras to expand his empire. Disguised as humans, the Asuras infiltrate Armagarh's top ranks. Ram and his brother Lakshman are sent by Dashrath, their father and the ruler of Armagarh, to Janasthan, in the northeast of Aryavarta. When Rama accepts a truce against the Asuras to protect the local women and children, he is exiled to the desert for 14 years. In exile, Rama meets Seeta, the princess of Mithila, who possesses the power to regenerate nature. Rama discovers that he must protect her, given that she is predestined to save humanity.

Scholars who have analysed *Ramayan 3392 AD* (Chatterji 2020; Lent 2015; Simmons 2013; Singh 2020) have stated that the Indian element has been effaced so that the series could cater for an international audience versed in Anglo-Saxon pop culture. Gamache (2019) has analysed Grant's Morrison's *18 Days, the Mahabharata* (2010), an adaptation of the other influential Indian epic, in a similar way. The author has concluded that this series also tried to cater for an international audience by dislocating the story from its sociocultural context, while relying on colonial ethnic stereotypes. Gamache has also argued that the creators have successfully effaced the nationalistic element of the tale. However, one might ask whether the mere act of adapting a nationalistic tale to a global audience may not itself be a nationalistic move related to India's soft power. Soft power refers to the ability to exert political influence through the means of cultural attraction instead of through physical coercion (Nye 1990). Ancient, distinctive Indian cultural values have been used to project such influence. Kugiel (2017) states that Indian soft power can be traced back to the ideal of *ahimsā* (non-violence), the pacifism of 3rd century BCE Buddhist Emperor Aśoka, the universalism of Hinduism and the non-violent independence struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi. These traits could all be thought of as belonging to what is popularly regarded as 'Indian spirituality'. Besides spirituality, Thussu (2013) mentions the lure of Indian cuisine, art, literature, and Bollywood cinema (11).

In the end, it may be difficult to measure the degree of effacement of Indian features in cultural products such as *Ramayan 3392 AD*. Rather than eliminated, they seem to be linguistically and culturally translated so that they become more graspable to audiences versed in global pop culture. Given the importance of the *Rāmāyana* for the creation of discourses on what constitutes Indianness and foreignness, it is possible that the elements in *Ramayan 3392 AD* may contribute to the creation of dichotomic representations of India and the West. To ascertain this possibility, I analyse the 16 instalments of the series through discourse analysis and the frameworks of Orientalism and re-Orientalism. Scholars have written about the subtle influence of Indian iconography in the comics and in contemporary Indian literary works which also rely on visual elements (Simmons 2013; Varughese 2018). However, it has not been pointed out that representations of India and the West in *Ramayan 3392 AD* also exist at the conceptual and narrative levels and that similar strategies have been adopted by recent, avowedly pro-Indian/anti-Western cultural products aimed at Indian audiences. I begin by discussing the origins

and the intellectual implications of Orientalism and re-Orientalism for representations of contemporary India and the West. I then list and analyse these representations as they appear in *Ramayan 3392 AD*. In the final section, I look at the representation of time in the comics and at how they integrate and contrapose ideas of East and West.

The jewel in the crown or in the lotus: India and the West

As defined by Said (2003 [1978]), the term *Orientalism* refers to the way in which modern Western epistemology created the idea of an exotic East to impose Western cultural superiority over it. Representations of India have been double-edged. Hegemonic German Orientalist discourses depicted ancient India as an advanced ancient civilisation which had declined, while British ones focused on India's decline as a way of justifying colonial ambitions (Inden 2001 [1990]). Nationalistic anticolonial and postcolonial discourses have emerged as a response to the latter negative representations, which were to be replaced with positive representations by natives, for whom positive Romantic Orientalist ideas could present readymade solutions.

Said (2003) argued that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the East has been viewed in the postmodern world (26). This phenomenon has been called by several names. I opt for Lau's (2009) concept of *re-Orientalism*. Lau and other scholars have used this concept to describe how cultural English-language works aimed at Western audiences, such as the novels by Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy and the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009), have represented India through negative Orientalist stereotypes of poverty, pollution, and violence (Chakravorty 2014). I argue that one may expand the concept to include positive representations of India for Indians and foreigners and not only negative representations for foreigners, given that there are also nationalistic representations of India which have focused on positive representations which circulate in the public sphere since colonial times. In German Romantic and British imperialist representations, India was regarded as a spiritual civilisation which contrasted with the materialistic West (King 1999). This idea was positively adopted by Hindu reformers of the late colonial period and survives nowadays in Hindu-inspired new religious movements, Western pop culture (Clarke 2006b, 207–233), and contemporary Indian nationalistic discourses. This cultural engagement with an orientalised East may be associated with the concept of soft power. Carving culturally distinctive identities is crucial for nationalistic discourses and their promotion at home and abroad. As Orientalist stereotypes have helped to create such distinctive identities and as they have been turned into positive representations by foreign countercultural discourses and native nationalistic ones, it seems more profitable to adopt and promote such stereotypes than to create new ones from scratch. Gupta (2012), for instance, has written about what he has called the new 'commercial fiction' of India. According to him, contrary to the postcolonial novels of Rushdie or Roy, this kind of fiction has been consumed in India and has displayed a kind of stereotyped *Indianness* that modern Indians appreciate (47). In other words, this new commercial fiction constitutes a kind of re-Orientalist representation for insiders.

One should bear in the mind the two most hegemonic and adversarial kinds of Indian nationalism at play in the India: Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism. Indian secularism refers to a sociopolitical view of the nation which, while influenced by

a Hindu worldview, accommodates other ethnic and/or religious identities (Veer 1994, 23). Hindu nationalism argues that India was originally peopled by Hindus and that this identity should be valued above others. While Indian secularism prevailed immediately after independence, Hindu nationalism, which was launched in the 1920s and grew exponentially in the 1990s after the introduction of neoliberal economic reforms (Jaffrelot 2007), has recently risen to pre-eminence, especially since Modi's election as prime-minister in 2014. Despite their difference in terms of cultural accommodation, both ideologies are similar in the sense that they construct representations of India as responses to Orientalist discourses, while being influenced by them (Chatterjee 1987), and in the sense that they follow a Hindu-centric view of reality. Sen (2005) has stated that the Orientalist representation of India was 'grotesquely primitive', while the Hindu nationalist one has been 'dazzlingly glorious' (140). However, even when not avowedly *Hindutva*, secularist discourses have constructed similar representations. Sen, who wrote almost 10 years before Modi's election, acknowledged that, even though there have been few hardcore supporters of Hindu nationalism, a larger group of proto-*Hindutva* enthusiasts have clustered around them (53). This may mean that the distinction between Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism is not completely dichotomic and that it may be possible to occupy a liminal space between them which is neither secular nor *Hindutva* but is nonetheless nationalistic.

While the content of secular and *Hindutva* discourses often deal with the local, their form is influenced by global forms and discourses, such as: the English language; canonisation of tradition according to Judeo-Christian standards; and the contraposition with the foreign *Other*. This is what happens in *Being Different: A Challenge to Western Universalism*, a book by influential Indo-American activist Malhotra (2015), who has been regarded as a Hindu nationalist (Kurien 2007). While claiming that India is positively different from the West, Malhotra has described this difference in linguistic and conceptual terms which may be understood by Indians with a Westernised education and non-Indians living in the West, who constitute an important part of the Hindu nationalistic electorate (*Ibid.*) and are some of the main promoters of Indian soft power (Thussu 2013, c. 3). Shashi Tharoor, an Indian secularist politician and writer with an avowedly anti-*Hindutva* agenda and also a supporter of a centralised approach to Indian soft power (Kugiel 2017, xi), has created a similar dichotomic representation of India and the West in his works on religion and nationalism: *Why I am a Hindu* (Tharoor 2018) and *The Battle of Belonging: On Nationalism, Patriotism, and What it Means to be Indian* (Tharoor 2020).

The hypothesis that I analyse in the next sections is that *Ramayan 3392 AD* uses a globalised genre, the contemporary futuristic superhero graphic novel, to convey similar nationalistic and celebratory re-Orientalist discourses. *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK), an Indian comic book publisher launched in the 1960s, has produced the most influential comic adaptations of Indian history and mythology, including of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. McLain (2009) has shown how the comics have mixed global and local narrative and visual elements to create positive hegemonic representations of the Indian nation for young, urban, middle-class English-speaking generations. Contemporary Indian nationalistic discourses have emerged as a result of the neoliberal reforms which were introduced in India in the 1990s, which, according to McLain (*Ibid.*), was also the time when ACK started to lose popularity (199). These reforms have

facilitated the importation of global culture into India while not necessarily facilitating the exportation of Indian culture into the global stage. This hierarchic disparity has made Indians rethink Indian soft power and ask themselves how they could reaffirm the legitimacy of their culture at home and abroad. Khanduri (2010) has analysed how, since ACK, Indian comics have obsessed even more over Indian culture, specifically over the balance between globalisation and 'nativisation'. According to Varughese (2014), mythological fiction, a subcategory of commercial fiction which focuses on the mythic Indian Golden Age and imagines the present neoliberal nation-state as its reflection, has been consumed by young Indians who have been grown up consuming global Western culture but wish to connect with Indian philosophy and heritage (354). Varughese, (2018a) has also analysed contemporary Indian comics. According to her, 21st century Indian comics have departed from ACK tales of heroism and valour by invoking a sinister visual nature. This description seems to contradict Gupta's idea that commercial fiction constructs a kind of Indianness which Indians appreciate. *Ramayan 3392 AD*, a post-apocalyptic graphic novel in which evil is seemingly winning the battle against good, invokes such visual inauspiciousness. The antagonists, the places they inhabit and even the post-Apocalyptic cities of the protagonists are represented through bleak, shadowy tones which evoke hopelessness. As the comics are inspired by an ancient utopian narrative which has shaped the worldview of Indians since precolonial times, is its vision that hopeless?

East and West: almost the same, but not quite

I begin this section by describing how some of the major players in the Indian neoliberal comic books industry and in the creation of *Ramayan 3392 AD* have mixed local and global discourses. Sharad Devarajan, who was the first Indian who tried to commercialise American superhero comics into India, had the long-term goal of exporting Indian comic books to America. In 2004, he published *Spider-man: India*, a transposition of the American superhero into an Indian physical and conceptual space (Lent 2015, 281). In the same year, Devarajan joined Gotham Chopra, who was also one of the idealisers of Grant Morrison's *18 Days*, to create Gotham Comics. Gotham Chopra's given name refers to the Sanskrit name Gautama, his birthname, while the orthography refers to Batman's fictional city. In 2006, Gotham comics changed its name to Virgin comics, the label under which *Ramayan 3392 AD* was published, and, in 2008, to Liquid comics, the name it has kept until the present.

Ramayan 3392 AD was created by Deepak Chopra and Shekhar Kapur, written by Shamik Dasgupta and illustrated by Abhishek Singh. Shekhar Kapur is best-known as a film director. He directed *Mr. India* (1987), which is hailed as the first Bollywood superhero film. *Mr. India*, which owes narratively and stylistically to the James Bond series and to the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Venugopal 2015, 129), tells the story of a common Indian man who defeats Mogambo, the non-Indian sounding name (actually, the title of a 1953 Hollywood film by John Ford set in Africa) of a Rāvaṇa-like criminal who plans to conquer India. Kapur also shot *The Four Feathers* (2004), an anticolonial film against the actions of the British Empire in Sudan, and two acclaimed films about the queen Elizabeth (1998, 2007), one of the most important and beloved monarchs in British history. In these films, Elizabeth's representation is less positive than in British

nationalistic takes. According to Latham (2010, 294), Bollywood elements are identifiable in the films' audiovisual aesthetics. Kapur has also worked in other comic books: *Snake Woman* (2006) and *Devi* (2006–2008), both related to gender issues and to Indian religious culture. Shamik Dasgupta's work reflects similar nationalistic issues. His work *The Village* (2018) reflects the current Indian neoliberal atmosphere and is set in a near-future when India is one of the economic and technologically most-advanced countries in the world but is still haunted by undesirable past sociocultural traits, some of which, such as casteism, were the most criticised ones as backward by British colonialists. *Devi Chadhurani* (2015) relates nationalism, gender and globalisation by trying to adapt Bankim Chandra Chatterjee classic 1884 anticolonial novel to a Marvel-like visual universe similar to *Ramayan 3392 AD*. Finally, Abhishek Singh has also written and drawn contemporary-looking comics with themes related to Hindu mythology and spirituality, as the titles *Krishna: A Journey Within* (2012), *Namaha: Stories from the Land of Gods and Goddesses* (2019) and *Purnam: Stories & Wisdom of the Feminine Divine* (2023) show.

It is Deepak Chopra, Gotham's father and one of the most popular Indo-American *New Age* authors, who is the key figure in unravelling the discourses of *Ramayan 3392 AD*. Chopra was born a Hindu and was educated at a Catholic school. He arrived in the United States in 1970 to work as a conventional physician. The stress he accumulated from his work made him become disappointed with Western medicine and the Western lifestyle. In the 1980s, he became interested in Āyurveda and in Transcendental Meditation, a Hindu-based new religious movement (Clarke 2006a, s.v. 'Transcendental Meditation', 634–635). Chopra later broke away from the movement and founded his own institutions of Āyurveda and meditation, in which he has aimed to bridge 'the technological miracles of the West with the wisdom of the East' (Puttick 2005, 159). Such *New Age* ideas often recreate 'ancient' anti-egotistic Asian wisdom traditions according to Western capitalist, egotistic model (Carrette and King 2005). In the process, they are supposed to correct the blunders of contemporary life by harking back to imaginary spacetimes when people had greater spiritual wisdom. Even though spirituality is often opposed to materialism, Chopra, who is a millionaire, has conflated both concepts when stating that spiritual people are prone to achieve worldly success (Aravamudan 2005, 257–258). According to this discourse, internal development is reflected in external poverty/disease or affluence/health. Chopra's literary production is vast and deals with several religions. However, Arjana (2020) has shown that he regards every tradition as a reflection of an amorphous perennial spirituality. Even though Chopra often writes about Jesus, the Buddha, and Rumi, he hardly mentions Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, or Hinduism (*Ibid.*). In conversation with Chatterji (2020), Abhishek Singh has also stated that he wishes to 'explore some of the deep spiritual ideas in Indian mythology through popular media such as graphic novels' (84). Despite this assertion, as I shall now demonstrate, there are no explicit references to religion/spirituality or to India in *Ramayan 3392 AD*.

The only reference to India appears in the introduction of the first instalment, in which it is stated that 'RAMAYAN 3392 AD is a re-imagining of one of the greatest myths ever told – the Indian RAMAYANA' (1.3). The next sentence reads that the original *Rāmāyaṇa* was created over 5.000 years ago. While there is no consensus as to when the epic was created, 5.000 sounds like an impossibly early date, as it would place the epic

in the time of the Indus Valley Civilisation, when there is no evidence for its existence (Goldman and Goldman 2022, 8). This introduction follows a common re-Orientalist stereotype according to which Indian culture is of great quality (one of the greatest myths) and antiquity (5,000 years), a discourse which is often resorted to by Malhotra (2015) and Tharoor (2018).

The rest of the Introduction places the *Rāmāyaṇa* within a global discourse. The epic is said to embody ‘the eternal themes common to all great mythologies’ (1.3), a fact which underscores its universality and shows how the comics are directed towards an international market. Universality is described in Judeo-Christian terms. The themes of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are said to consist of ‘fall from grace’ and ‘redemption’ and the themes of other mythologies are defined as the ‘juxtaposition and inevitable balance between (...) the saint and sinner’ (*Ibid.*). *Grace, redemption, saint, and sinner* are more clearly related to the Judeo-Christian worldview than to the Hindu one or to other mythologies. Next, *Ramayan 3392 AD* is said to be ‘a symbolic representation of (...) mythical symbols that are meant to be understood in the contextual framework of a cross-cultural post-modern, multi-ethnic, global society’ (*Ibid.*). This shows ‘how timeless’ the *Rāmāyaṇa* is (*Ibid.*), despite the fact that the epic is known for having influenced ‘the behavior, the values, and the codes of morality of an entire civilization [India]’ (*Ibid.*). Other snippets referring to Judeo-Christian tradition and to Western pop culture are interspersed throughout the series. One of the clearest references occurs when Lakshman, Rama’s brother, asks Vishvamitra, the old sage who leads Rama and Lakshman to Seeta, whether he can turn ‘water into wine with the nuclear witch’s broom’ (3.9). Turning water into wine is a reference to Jesus’ first miracle at Cana (John 2:1–11), while ‘witch’s broom’ sounds like an image taken from European folklore or from the *Harry Potter* saga.

In his preface to *Ramayan 3392 A.D Reloaded*, American editor Ron Marz continues the de-Indianisation of the tale. He begins by quoting Joseph Campbell (1968), who is known for the concept of the *hero’s journey*, according to which stories about heroes follow a similar structural pattern in unrelated world cultures. Even though Campbell’s work is influential in pop culture, in academia it is often regarded as oversimplistic and oblivious of historical contextualisation. Marz compares Osiris, Prometheus, Buddha, Beowulf, Siegfried and Luke Skywalker (9.1), a cast of ‘heroes’ from different spaces and times. However, his chosen examples are either Western (Prometheus, Beowulf, Siegfried, Luke Skywalker) or well-known in Western pop culture (Osiris, Buddha). Marz admits that his knowledge of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was limited. However, once he read the material, he realised that Rama’s journey was ‘familiar’ and that ‘[h]e’s Beowulf, he’s Luke Skywalker, he’s any of the heroes you’d care to name’ (*Ibid.*). Even though Marz could have chosen any of the examples he has quoted, he has opted for the Anglo-Saxon ones. In the end, even though ‘[t]he trappings may be unfamiliar’ (*Ibid.*) and ‘the names may be strange at first’ (*Ibid.*), the reader would ultimately recognise the story, ‘because it’s part of who we are’ (*Ibid.*). It is unclear to whom ‘we’ may refer. Given the language in which Marz is writing and the normalisation of Indian trappings and names through Anglo-Saxon examples, it probably refers to ‘English-speaking Westerners’. Marz’s discourse fits a post-Enlightenment Orientalist idea according to which the Western experience can be universalised (Masuzawa 2005) and a postcolonial idea according to which non-Western experiences can also be universalised as long as they are translated into Western concepts. As an example, the back cover of several instalments of *Ramayan*

3392 AD reads that the comics are ‘India’s answer to Lord of the Rings’. This tagline constitutes a marketing strategy and has the intention of telling the numerous fans of the *Lord of the Rings* that they may enjoy these comics. The hierarchy of cultural influence and knowledge expected from the audience is evident. While recent Indian answers to Western pop culture have been numerous, one is not liable to find Western cultural phenomena tag-lined as response to Indian ones.

The front cover of the comics quotes a review from Amish Tripathi. Tripathi is a popular English-language Indian author who, according to Varughese (2017), was one of the founders of mythological fiction (461). He first became famous with *The Shiva Trilogy* (2010–2013), which retells the story of the Hindu god Śiva living in an advanced ancient India, and has recently penned a tetralogy of novels based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* (2015–2022) whose covers consist of computerised graphics with bleak, shadowy tones comparable to those of *Ramayan 3392 AD*. Tripathi’s retellings have also followed similar marketing strategies by quoting reviews in which Tripathi is called India’s Tolkien or Paulo Coelho (Tripathi 2015). As Chopra has imagined himself as a ‘native informer’ on Indian/Eastern matters for the Western world, Tripathi has imagined himself as a representative of neoliberal India for local Indians. Tripathi’s collection of non-fiction texts *Immortal India: Young Country, Timeless Civilisation* (2017) claims to be about India’s great ancient civilisation and its renewed neoliberal confidence. However, in this work, the author talks as much about himself and his personal successes as he talks about India (the cover of the book is a photograph of the author and has no clear visual references to India). He also conflates his personal views with traditional Indian values. In short, even though their audiences do not overlap entirely, Chopra and Tripathi have represented themselves as individual embodiments of imagined traditional Indian/Eastern values and have endeavoured to pass their knowledge onto others.

In the end, the frequent use of past and present Western discourses makes it difficult to fathom what traditional Indian values may be. *Ramayan 3392 AD* is similar in content and style to another collection by Virgin comics named *India Authentic*, which was created by Deepak Chopra and which had some volumes illustrated by Abhishek Singh. The term *authentic* is a common catchphrase in the Indian and international market (Arjana 2020). The use of this and similar terms constitutes a soft power strategy whose goal is more to sell rather than to describe, given that consumers are probably more eager to buy ‘authentic’ experiences than ‘inauthentic’ ones. However, given the absence of specific references to India and the focus on contemporary Western tropes of post-apocalyptic fiction disguised as universal mythic patterns, it becomes difficult to realise what is authentically Indian about the comics. In any case, the comics features many representations which Indian nationalistic discourses have appropriated and which, through normalisation, are slowly becoming ‘authentic’. In the following subsections, I explore this contradiction.

Clash of civilisations

In *Ramayan 3392 AD*, there is a striking duality between Aryavarta and Nark. *Āryāvarta*, Sanskrit for ‘the place of the Aryans’, is often used in ancient and contemporary Indian discourses to refer to Northern India. Nark is said to be ‘the

polar opposite in every sense, a dark continent filled with myriad savage races called Asuras' (1.4). *Naraka* is the Sanskrit term for different hells. The unusual orthography of the term *nark* is made to look like the English term *dark*. Armagarh is said to be a 'shining' (9.3) place which reflects 'the splendor of human excellence' (*Ibid.*). As the map in the beginning of the first instalment (1.4), which shows the silhouette of the Indian subcontinent, and the frequent use of Sanskrit terms suggest, in this post-apocalyptic world only (North) India retains its brightness and humanity and the rest of the world is covered in darkness and evil. One could compare this narrative strategy with the BJP's 2004 political slogan and campaign 'India Shining' and with other celebratory neoliberal slogans, such as *India Unbound*, *New India*, and the *Indian Way* (Brosius 2010, 328). The 'India Shining' campaign consisted of colourful posters with smiling Indians from all walks of life and shorts texts with positive inspirational messages (Pinney 2005). This celebratory representation was supposed to depict present India and not a futuristic one. Such discourses circulating in the public sphere strengthen the association between the past Golden Age of most retellings of the epic, contemporary India, and the future Armagarh/Aryavarta of the comics.

The map also capitalises on the pre-Orientalist Indian idea that the south constitutes the direction of death (Sayers 2013, 65). Under the name 'North-South divide', this discourse has often been applied to contemporary Indian geography. Northern India is often described as culturally advanced and the southern part as less so (George 2020). In the map, Aryavarta and Nark are separated by a strait called 'Black Divide' (1.4), a name which emphasises the dualistic contraposition between light (good) and darkness (evil). Finally, the geographical duality also occurs in a centre-periphery axis. Much like the states of contemporary Northeast India (Baruah 2020), places far away from Armagarh, where human beings reside, are described as undesirable borderlands. Rama is said to be banished for 'a life of penance in the outlands' (2.25) or 'wastelands' (3.11). In sum, the comics create ideal representations of a centralised northern India against other geographical entities which do not fit into these categories: central (as opposed to peripheric), north, and India.

Technology, humanity, and race

Ideal and counter-ideal characters of *Ramayan* 3392 AD are obsessed with technological development and its relationship to humanity and race. The humans of Armagarh are said to have been able to survive and prosper against inferior species due to their 'superior technology' (1.4) Shakti Kundali, which synthesises sun power. In Sanskrit, the grammatically feminine term *śakti* means 'power' and is conceptually equated with femininity (Craddock 2005). *Kuṇḍalī* means 'coil' and is more often associated with Indian spiritual traditions than with technology. *Kuṇḍalinī*, a term which is often used in new religious movements (Clarke 2006a, s.v. 'Sahaja Yoga', 544–545; s.v. 'Siddha Yoga Dham', 588–589), refers to the 'coiled serpent' which represents divine female 'energy' and is said to reside within the human body. Most *Hindutva* discourses promote the advances of ancient 'Vedic sciences', which are often characterised as futuristic. In its neo-Romantic vision of a great 'lost civilisation' interrupted by foreign incursion, such discourses point to

real technology which has been forgotten only to be rediscovered in the West centuries/millennia later (Nanda 2003; Subramaniam 2019). While *Ramayan 3392 AD* never mentions the *Vedas*, the fact that this work is set in a futuristic India and that it uses several Hindi/Sanskrit words to refer to advanced technology connects its discourses to *Hindutva* ones.

As in most retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in *Ramayan 3392 AD* good humans fight against bad humanoid species. Contrary to more traditional versions, this difference is not just one between the normal and the supernatural. It is a racial difference marked by technological evolution. Racial evolution, which was strictly related to cultural evolution, was an important theme for most Orientalists, who had a teleological view of human culture and believed that the West was ahead in the scale of progress. Technology is still an important theme for contemporary India and its huge IT industry. Most of the Indians involved in the promotion of Indian soft power at home and abroad, such as Malhotra and most of his collaborators, come from an IT background and often promote a mishmash of science and Indian spirituality. *Ramayan 3392 AD* features the same Orientalist obsession with a hierarchical and teleological view of culture. Kaikeyi, one of Dashrath's wives, states that her people must maintain their '**racial superiority**'² (1.6) and that they cannot 'beg for assistance from half-beast creatures' (*Ibid.*). Janaka, the ruler of Mithila, tells Rama that he ended up 'in a place where all of nature's laws are defied' (5.4) because his 'race was considered **inferior**' (5.5). Race is often conflated with nation and both concepts involve segregation. One *vānara*, the monkey-like creatures who help Rama rescue Seeta, tells Lakshman that he has 'never seen a man so driven in the pursuit of the interests of another nation or race' (14.5). This shows that in *Ramayan 3392 AD* such racial/national solidarity between beings with different technological levels of development is not expected.

Lakshman, Rama's brother, is the character who most often looks down on other groups for their lack of technology. When he discovers that he and Rama should go to Janasthan, he states that '[i]t's a village filled with rustics' (1.15). He later claims that the local inhabitants are 'plebeians' (1.18) due to the fact that they have not 'upgraded the fort's technology' (*Ibid.*) and that they not understand that 'lack of necessity does not mean lack of initiative for progress' (*Ibid.*). He adds that Janasthan is full of 'hordes of half-naked children' (1.19) and that, '[i]f even one of them touches me with their filthy hands, I'll lose it for sure' (1.20). Such descriptions encapsulate Orientalist tropes about India. Half-naked children are a clichéd image of Indian slums (Chakravorty 2014), as evidenced by the popular British film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). *Horde* is a pejorative English term with a Turkish origin. The same term is used in the following instalment when referring to 'a great horde of asuras', who, in Tripathi's (2015) non-fiction and retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, are conflated with the Turkish invaders who took Islam to the Indian subcontinent. The ideas of 'filth' and 'touch' bring to mind the concepts of caste and untouchability, the idea that members of higher castes are polluted if touched by those of lower castes or outcastes. The Asuras are also said to be 'filthy' (3.18), yet another association between half-naked children of Aryavarta and the evil beings of Nark. There is also an association between the Indian concept of caste, animality and the Jewish experience. The 'shudras' (6.7) (*śūdra*), the lowest Hindu caste, are said to be herded like 'animals into ghettos' (*Ibid.*), the areas in which Jews were segregated in medieval Italy and Nazi-controlled Europe. This shows how a system often regarded as

distinctively Indian (Inden, 2001 [1990]: 82–83) has been translated into a Judeo-Christian framework.

Materialism and spirituality

Ramayan 3392 AD makes frequent and ambiguous use of the soft power strategy of emphasising Indian spirituality against Western materialism. Despite this stereotype adopted by Hindu reformers and nowadays reworked for a neoliberal milieu by influential figures like Deepak Chopra and Amish Tripathi, the human heroes of *Ramayan 3392 AD* hardly show spiritual depth. Visually, in both *Ramayan 3392 AD* and in the covers of Tripathi's retellings, male characters are depicted as virile athletes and women are depicted as oversexualised. Men are said to be warriors or even '**super warriors** born and bred to become the finest soldiers' (9.3) in order to protect the 'nation from malign forces aligned against it' (*Ibid.*). Rama is said to be the '**ultimate warrior**' (9.4). Such descriptions conform with those of contemporary American-style superhero comics and also with *Hindutva* discourses on masculinity, which have downgraded the Orientalist descriptions of Hindus as feeble and effeminate (Sinha 1995) and have promoted them as virile warriors with the duty of protecting India from foreign influences (Banerjee 2012). In this case, the visuals of the covers of Tripathi's adaptations of the epic also coincide with *Ramayan 3392 AD*, given that they all depict male and female protagonists and antagonists as highly athletic.

Seeta, 'the key to salvation of this wretched world' (4.27), and her 'enchanted city' (5.3) of Mithila, which is endowed with 'the blessings of nature, fauna, habitable space and clean air to breathe' (*Ibid.*), are the only entities which reflect spirituality and the discourses associated with it in contemporary popular imagination: peace and tranquility; communion with other forms of life; and ecological preoccupations (Nelson 1998). Seeta possesses Maya Vidya (Sanskrit *maya* and *vidyā*, 'knowledge of magic'), which enables her to heal life forms simply by touching them. In one scene, she creates an oasis out of a desert, an action for which the local inhabitants start calling her a goddess (9.23). In another scene, Seeta is said to 'the most powerful being in Aryavarta' and to 'have been kept in **ignorance** of your [Seeta's] true potential', that being the reason why she needs 'proper **guidance**, and the elders will provide that' (12.11). Ideas like finding one's true potential through the guidance of an elderly *guru* are common re-Orientalist tropes related to Indian-based new religious movements (Clarke 2006a, s.v. 'Guru', 247–249; s.v. 'Human Potential Movement', 286–288). Therefore, the comics create implicit associations with the healer Seeta, the guru of contemporary healing Deepak Chopra, and similar *New Age* 'Oriental monks', who in pop devotionism are regarded as closer to divinity than mere mortals and as saviours from the blunders of Western civilisation (Iwamura 2011).

Ravan, the king of Nark, is the most extreme embodiment of dehumanisation and of the evil uses of technology in the comics. He is said to be a 'weapon-turned-being' (5.3) who possesses a technology (*yantra*) which he has developed in order to morph 'flesh into any shaped he desired' (6.22). *Yantra* is one of the many Sanskrit terms which have been modified to fit this futuristic world and translated into English through footnotes. It is translated as 'techno-magic'. Originally, *yantra* means 'tool, instrument'. The term may be familiar to most Western readers, given that it is used in Tantric religious practices

(Clarke 2006a, s.v. 'Tantra', 614–615), in which the term describes diagrams used in meditation (Padoux 2017 [2010]). Elsewhere in the comics, the description of *yantra* is developed in 'scientific' terms. Asuras are said to be able to 'morph into any creature of their size and molecular density' (8.4) and their body to be 'laced with *yantra tech* in the subcutaneous layer' (*Ibid.*). In this case, *yantra tech* is said to be '*sentient microscopic mechanical organisms*' (*Ibid.*) known in the 'olden ages (as) *nano-technology*' (*Ibid.*).

The gods of Armagarh are made out of the same technology. They are discovered to be just 'light induced images, a projection that was known in the old sciences as holograms' (6.10), and to be manipulated by the Asuras (6.22). Religion is turned into a technological tool for espionage and political interference. The Asuras are said to have 'through years (...) infected the very roots of this nation' (6.23). The use of the verb 'infected' describes the Asuras and their manipulated gods as material, given their negative association with infection, germs and disease. More than the humans of Armagarh, the beast-like *vānaras* are the ones who are depicted as being in an advanced stage of 'spiritual' infection by 'materialist' values. The 'venomous *yantra*' released by Ravan has eaten the brain and corrupted the 'pristine soul' (14.13) of Bali, the *vānara* leader, turning him from a democratic vegetarian into a meat-eating tyrant (14.15). The reference to vegetarianism and its positive association with spirituality brings to mind popular representations of Hinduism, even though vegetarianism perhaps entered Indian tradition through Jainism (Alsdorf 2010 [1962]). It is clear that positive 'pristine' spiritual values are associated with Hinduism and that the 'venomous *yantra*', meat consumption and tyranny are regarded as foreign.

Ravan admits that he is unable to experience feelings (9.12), that his mind contains only 'electronic vapor' (16.7), and that his heart is a 'metallic honeycomb which pumps (...) silicon fluids, but (...) cannot synthesize emotions' (*Ibid.*). That is the reason why he pursues Seeta, the only spiritual being who is able to give him a soul (9.12). The Asuras are also said to be 'soulless creatures born and bred to obey the will of their master' (6.20). Such descriptions show how Ravan and his Asuras may be associated with the 'soulless' West and how Ravan's search for Seeta may be associated with the West's search for the spiritual wisdom of India as transmitted by 'native informers' like Deepak Chopra. Materialism is represented as insufficient for human happiness. As Chopra defends and as the fictional Ravan implies, only after one possesses a soul may one obtain happiness from the material world. In this postcolonial reinterpretation, Eastern spirituality is a prerequisite for Western material prosperity and is therefore superior to it.

The negative description of Ravan's inhumanity is ambiguously similar to the positive description attributed to Rama in most versions of the epic. Rama is often depicted as a human being who is unaffected by feeling or emotions and always follows *dharma*, the Indian concept of an impersonal code of social and cosmic rules. *Ramayana* 3392 AD follows a discourse accepted in neoliberal India and in the global world according to which having an independent mind and following individual feelings is regarded as more positive than blindly following collective rules. This discourse is also clear in Tripathi's non-fiction (Tripathi 2017) and fiction (Tripathi 2015), in which Rāma is described as an emotional character who gets angry at senseless social customs and fights actively to cause social change. In the comics, Rama's proneness for feelings is depicted in his romantic involvement with Seeta and emotional involvement with Mithila. Here, it is not *dharma* but his feelings which are 'worth fighting for' (11.13). Rama is contraposed to

soulless Ravan in a passage in which he states that he would ‘give my *soul* to bring back your [Seeta’s] home’ (*Ibid.*), that is, Mithila. This positive personal view contrasts with the negative view related to the inauthentic institutionalised religion ‘poisoned’ by Asuras. Both views reflect contemporary stereotypes of global spirituality (Clarke 2006b, 9).

Rise and fall . . . and rise again: time in India and in Ramayan 3392 AD

Scholarly studies have often made the generalisation that the Indian concept of time is cyclical and the Western or Judeo-Christian one linear (Thapar 2005). In India, time is divided into four ages (*yugas*) which occur in an endless cycle. They begin as ideal, degenerate, collapse, and eventually the cycle begins anew (González-Reimann 2014). According to the Judeo-Christian version, time began during Creation, it progresses linearly and one day it will end. Orientalist discourses often depicted ‘exotic’ Eastern cultures as devoid of history and therefore as unchanging (Inden 2001 [1990]). In *Ramayan 3392 AD*, Janasthan is described with a series of pejorative adjectives which reminds one of Orientalist representations of India. It is said to be ‘uneventful’ (2.3), ‘docile’ (*Ibid.*), ‘sleepy’ (3.3), ‘*obsolete*’ (4.8) and to be characterised by its ‘serenity’ (3.3). In its re-Orientalist reinterpretation, ‘unchanging’ (or, more often, ‘timeless’) may have the more positive meaning of ‘universal’ or ‘applicable to any place and time’, which is how Christianity and Western knowledge were described in colonial times (Masuzawa 2005). The positive epithet ‘timeless’ is commonly applied to India and to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as the title of Tripathi’s (2017) non-fiction book (*Timeless Civilization*) and the introduction of *Ramayan 3392 AD* reveal.

The most influential Orientalist attempt at providing a ‘history’ for India was James Mill’s (2010 [1818–1823]) *The History of British India*. Mill, who never went to India and never learned any Indian language, divided Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and English periods. The first corresponded to a Golden Age, the second to a time of decline and the third to a time of modernisation. As this discourse posited a history of change, modern Indian and Hindu discourses have adapted it to the postcolonial world. One could ask why Virgin Comics decided to adapt the *Rāmāyaṇa* and not any other Indian narrative and why the chosen date was the seemingly random 3392 B.C.E. The *Rāmāyaṇa* tells the story of what many Hindus regard as a Golden Age. According to Smith’s (1999) typology of nationalism, the concept of a Golden Age is crucial in determining what is desirable and undesirable for the future of nations (65–67/262). Given this relationship between past and future, one could think that the date could mirror 3392 B.C.E, but no specific major historical event is known to have occurred then, as there are no (deciphered) Indian writings from that time. However, it is probably not a coincidence that Tripathi’s retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (2015) are set in 3400 B.C.E, a date which almost mirrors that of *Ramayan 3392 AD*. 3400 B.C.E roughly coincides with the beginning of the Indus Valley civilisation, which is regarded by most modern discourses as the foundation of Indian civilisation (Fogelin 2007; Tripathi 2017, 119–122). In the re-Orientalist reinterpretation of Mill’s periodisation, the Golden Age is equated with any age when India was supposedly free from foreign influence, of which the age of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a prime example. The age of decline is equated with foreign influence, which nowadays includes the British along with the Muslims. Finally, the period of

modernisation is conflated with independent India and, more specifically, with neoliberal India. Tripathi's (2017) non-fiction texts provide a good example of this. The author often mentions Rāma and his reign as positive examples of ancient India, the Mughal and British periods as moments when India declined, and the contemporary neoliberal era as a moment of restored greatness. The author also often mentions the concept of reforming 'corruptions' (*Ibid.*, 71) and reviving the ancient approaches that were put into practice 'for centuries' before the arrival of the British (*Ibid.*, 104). This means that the current period of modernisation is regarded as a comeback. And not as an innovation.

Ramayan 3392 AD creates a discourse about time (past greatness, degeneration and reform) similar to that which has been adapted from Mill and transformed by Tripathi and other Indian nationalists. Besides, it belongs to the post-apocalyptic genre, whose formula is based on similar understandings of time. The series acknowledges the relevance of the concept of *Apocalypse* by naming it in the introduction of its first instalment (1.4). When Lakshman states that Armagarh has been '**doomed** to fall' since 'it abandoned its ideals' and Vishvamitra adds that the whole world is doomed to fall, Lakshman replies that '[a]nd so starts the mad prophet of the Apocalypse' (3.19). As concepts, *Apocalypse* (Ancient Greek ἀποκάλυψις, 'revelation') and its 'prophets' have their roots in a Judeo-Christian prophetic discourse. The idea of degeneration, though, fits into the Indian concept of time. When he is exiled, Rama condemns his homeland because he is 'convinced that his homeland no longer defines the ideals it once was founded on' (3.3). Degeneration is not only idealistic (spiritual?) but also material, given that Vishvamitra states that '[t]he **warriors** of yesteryear were a thousand times more formidable than the **boys** with **toys** of today' (3.9). This discourse invokes an Orientalist idea of the childishness and lack of technological progress of primitive people, here in an inverted chronology: in the past, Indians were advanced but they later degenerated. If these quotes are taken together or if one considers how Armagarh is said to be 'rotting from the inside out' (6.18), one may also be reminded of Chopra's discourse that spiritual values influence the material world. In the comics, Panchavati, denounced for its inner decadence and outer affluence, is described as a city that stands at the cusp of degeneration. It is said to be a 'magnificent' city which has become rich because of corruption and where 'smugglers, brigands and thieves of all nations' lead profligate lives (10.12). For the same reasons, it is described as 'decadent' (10.13). Representations of magnificent metropolises marred by political corruption and morally dubious 'foreigners' mirror contemporary populist right-wing discourses common in India and other democratic nations. The *Apocalypse*, though, is not complete. Rama and Seeta bring the promise of 'regeneration', an idea that is also found in the Indian understanding of time. *Ramayan 3392* was discontinued. However, as is expected in the superhero genre and as happens in most retellings of the epic, the creators may have planned that Rama and Seeta would turn the dark dystopia into a shining utopia.

Conclusions

I have shown how the creators of *Ramayan 3392 AD* have resorted to common contemporary soft power strategies by creating positive re-Orientalist representations of India and Hinduism and by contraposing them with negative representations of the West and Christianity, which are also comparable to anti-colonial representations which have

survived into contemporary Western subcultural phenomena. Rather than saying that this process of creation involves effacement, I would say that it involves cultural translation. The stereotyped discourses not only survive but are reinforced and, in the process, Indian epistemology emerges in the national and international arenas as a legitimate competitor to the hegemonic West.

The volume *Visions of the Future in Comics: International Perspectives* (Ursini, Mahmutovic, and Bramlett 2017) analyses the trope of representations of the future in modern comics. In the introduction, the editors state that representations of the future reflect the hopes and anxieties of the present and that, despite culture- and tradition-specific nuances, there exist 'surprising similarities' between representations. Indeed, there are similarities between *Ramayan 3392 A.D* and works by *Marvel* and *DC comics*. While global capitalism does not allow artists to predict the future, it allows them to predict the expectations of living consumers influenced by American pop culture (Crothers 2010). *Ramayan 3392 AD* offers a kind of nationalism which does not work at a culturally protectionist level. The series aims to show that the local is a reflection of the universal and is therefore apt to be exported as a commodity into the global market (Singh 2020). In this sense, it is not surprising that, despite being set 1200 years into the future, the comics depict contemporary Indian and global preoccupations: technology and its relationship to culture and civilisation, urbanisation and the destruction of nature, enmity between different national groups, conflicts in borderlands, corruption, and espionage. While apparently clothed in a sinister narrative and visual atmosphere, the universe of *Ramayan 3392 AD* is far from helpless. The comics aim to present a ray of hope for a better future based on perceived spiritual Indian values above Western material ones and allied with them to produce the most holistic effects. While these ideas are conveyed through an adversarial narrative of a positive *Self* battling against a negative *Other*, a common strategy in *Hindutva* discourses, it must be underscored that, given the absence of explicit references to identity groups and the concealed use of metaphors, it is difficult to associate the comics with either Indian secularism or Hindu nationalism, two ideologies which, to a greater or lesser extent, tend to share a celebratory representation of Indian spirituality and a distrust towards (neo)colonial Western epistemology. In my opinion, the comics fit Sen's liminal definition of 'proto-Hindutva' and, as such, may cater for Indian nationalistic tastes in general.

Simmons (2013), who has analysed the reception of *Ramayan 3392 AD*, has noted that Indians have asked why the series is set in the future and not in the past and in an unrecognisable post-apocalyptic world and not in India, while Westerners have criticised the lack of moral ambiguity and the excess of Indian terms (204). Contrary to what Marz has stated, *Ramayan 3392 AD* did not turn out to be universal, given that the intended audience could not overcome the 'strange trappings'. However, a few years after *Ramayan 3392 AD* and besides Tripathi, several Indian writers have published popular novels based on the same epic and similar to the comics in content and style. Starting with *Asura*, *Tale of the Vanquished*, Neelakantan (2012) has penned sinister retellings full of poverty, pollution and violence. However, in Neelakantan's novels, ancient India is represented as a great civilisation which will be revitalised in the future and his protagonists are represented as neoliberal *self-made men* who try to single-handedly change their destiny instead of blindly following social mores. Pattanaik (2013) has written popular interpretations of mythology in which the West is blamed for interpreting

everything materialistically, while India is praised for interpreting reality psychologically, that is, in universal terms. While the narrative strategies in these retellings are the same as in *Ramayan 3392 AD*, the discourses on positive Indian traits against negative Western ones are more explicit. Furthermore, these adaptations assume as evident the structural principle that India is a temporal and geographical whole in which past, present and future are holistically intertwined. The modern Western notion of *progress*, therefore, becomes discardable, given that it is ever-present: it existed in a past Golden Age, is resurfacing in the present and shall become more evident in the future. As the first cultural object which has tried to describe that future, *Ramayan 3392 AD* is unique.

There is a common re-Orientalist trope used in Indian soft power discourses according to which Western epistemology is founded on a dual Manichaeian distinction between good and evil, while Indian epistemology is more nuanced (Malhotra 2015; Tharoor 2018). This idea has often been applied to the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Tripathi 2017, 44–45). However, *Ramayan 3392 AD* hardly falls into this discourse, given that the comics are full of unambiguous dualisms. It is paradoxical that the avowed preference for spirituality is lost in narrative elements which emphasise virile and aggressive physicality and technological progress. Through such discourses, familiar terms acquire their opposite meaning. The message becomes globalised. In this role, that message may be appropriated by universalistic and nativistic discourses and be used as a way to criticise the materialism of the West and to advocate an Indian/Eastern spiritual materialism which does not differ substantially from the alternative it criticises.

Notes

1. I quote *Ramayan 3392 AD* in the following manner: (instalment.page). (1.4) refers to the fourth page of the first instalment.
2. Terms in bold/italics appears like this in the original.

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ORCID

João Pedro Oliveira  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2833-0418>

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