

UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE RETELLINGS OF THE *RĀMĀYĀṆA* AND THE IDEAS OF INDIA: CULTURE AND SOCIETY (2010-2020)

Tese apresentada à Universidade Católica Portuguesa para obtenção do grau de Doutor em *Culture Studies*

Por

João Pedro Marques Morgado Ferreira de Oliveira

Faculdade de Ciências Humanas (FCH)

Setembro de 2023

UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE RETELLINGS OF THE *RĀMĀYĀṆA* AND THE IDEAS OF INDIA: CULTURE AND SOCIETY (2010-2020)

Tese apresentada à Universidade Católica Portuguesa para obtenção do grau de Doutor em *Culture Studies*

Por

João Pedro Marques Morgado Ferreira de Oliveira

Faculdade de Ciências Humanas (FCH)

Sob orientação de
Prof.ª Dr.ª Maria Luísa Homem Leal de Faria Geraldes Barba
Prof. Dr. António Eduardo Hawthorne Barrento

Setembro de 2023

Resumo

O *Rāmāyaṇa* é uma das tradições narrativas mais importantes para a civilização indiana. Esta história tem sido recriada através de *media* diferentes e através do diverso espectro social indiano ao longo de séculos. No século XXI, especialmente a partir da segunda década, várias adaptações literárias em língua inglesa surgiram no mercado indiano. Os autores mais bem-sucedidos têm-se distinguido por abordagens únicas à epopeia: Anand Neelakantan costuma adaptar discursos coloniais, anticoloniais, regionais e pós-coloniais para inverter os papeis tradicionais dos protagonistas e antagonistas principais; Devdutt Pattanaik recria a mitologia indiana como um sistema de valência psicológica oposta às abordagens ocidental e nacionalista hindu, que o autor considera serem materialistas; Amish Tripathi recria a epopeia como uma narrativa nacionalista para um público globalizado habituado ao popular género transnacional de fantasia épica; Kavita Kané conta a história da epopeia do ponto de vista das personagens femininas menos importantes; e Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni faz o mesmo em relação a personagens femininas principais.

Apesar destas diferenças, as adaptações mais bem-sucedidas têm seguido duas linhas discursivas importantes: os autores masculinos têm usado a epopeia para criar representações positivas da civilização indiana e religião hindu, geralmente por oposição explícita ou implícita a civilizações e religiões estrangeiras. As autoras femininas, por sua vez, têm usado a epopeia para criar representações e modelos positivos da mulher indiana. A nível estrutural, tanto os autores masculinos como femininos têm usado a epopeia como uma memória colectiva que encerra em si as virtudes positivas e que contém a resposta para os problemas sociais da modernidade. Através da adopção de valores que se tornaram relevantes na Índia desde o período anticolonial e especialmente após a implementação de reformas neoliberais de 1991, o que inclui uma maior abertura global associada um medo de se perderem as raízes nativas e o desejo de se descolonizarem as mesmas, estes autores têm-se tornado porta-vozes importantes da Índia, do hinduísmo e do feminismo indiano contemporâneos entre os leitores indianos de classe-média e falantes de língua inglesa.

Nesta dissertação, sirvo-me de análise crítica do discurso multimodal baseada em dados qualitativos e aliada às áreas do Orientalismo, do re-Orientalismo, do pós-colonialismo e da decolonialidade de modo a perceber: 1. como é que os três autores masculinos têm cimentado os processos de construção da nação e da religião na Índia

do século XXI através da criação de uma visão do mundo socio-histórica centrada na Índia enquanto civilização e no hinduísmo enquanto religião, ambas na qualidade de civilização e religião simultaneamente tradicionais e modernas, e muitas vezes contrapostas com visões do mundo consideradas não-indianas e não-hindus; 2. as duas autoras femininas têm adoptado uma abordagem semelhante para criar uma nova representação feminina vista como simultaneamente tradicional e moderna. Os protagonistas da epopeia têm sido recriados como personagens ideais que encerram em si características globais positivas como igualdade de escolha, igualdade de oportunidade e justiça social, características que nas adaptações são reinterpretadas como características pré-coloniais. Com excepção de personagens femininas, grupos subalternos têm sido muitas vezes descritos com características negativas associadas a modos de ser e de se estar no mundo não-indianos e não-hindus.

Palavras-chave: *Rāmāyaṇa,* ficção mitológica, orientalismo, nacionalismo, hinduísmo, feminismo.

Abstract

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is one of the most important narrative traditions for the Indian civilisation. This story has been recreated through different media and across the broad social spectrum of India for centuries. In the 21st century, especially from the second decade onwards, several adaptations of the epic in English have appeared in the Indian literary market. The most successful authors have adopted unique approaches to the epic: Anand Neelakantan often adapts colonial, anticolonial, regional, and postcolonial discourses to invert the traditional roles of the main protagonists and antagonists; Devdutt Pattanaik recreates Indian mythology as a system with psychological value opposed to the Western and Hindu nationalist approaches, which the author regards as materialistic; Amish Tripathi recreates the epic as a nationalist narrative for a globalised audience used to the popular transnational epic fantasy genre; Kavita Kané tells the story of the epic from the perspective of less important female characters; and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni does the same, but from the perspective of the main female characters.

Despite these differences, the most successful adaptations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have followed two important discursive lines: male authors have tended to use the epic to create positive representations of the Indian civilisation and Hindu religion, often by explicitly or implicitly opposing them with foreign civilisations and religions, while female authors have tended to use the epic to create positive representations and models of Indian women. Structurally, both male and female authors have used the epic as a collective memory that encapsulates past virtues, which are regarded as containing the answer to current social problems. By adopting values that have become relevant in India since the anticolonial period and especially after the implementation of neoliberal reforms in 1991, which include greater global openness coupled with a fear of losing one's native roots and the desire to decolonise contemporary Indian culture, these authors have become important spokespersons for contemporary India among middle-class, English-speaking Indian readers.

In this dissertation, I use Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis based on qualitative data combined with the fields of Orientalism, re-Orientalism, postcolonialism and decoloniality to understand: 1. how the male authors have created a socio-historical worldview centred on Indian civilisation and Hindu religion, with both being simultaneously regarded as traditional and modern; 2. how the female

authors have adopted a similar approach to create a new representation of Indian femininity, which is also regarded as traditional and modern. Although the authors promote a discourse according to which they have based their approaches on Indian perspectives, often explicitly contradicting Western discourses and creating socially holistic adaptations, they are actually authors who come from a privileged and Westernised social class. The protagonists of the epic have been recreated as ideal characters that embody positive global characteristics such as equality of choice, equality of opportunity, and social justice, here often reinterpreted as pre-colonial characteristics. With the exception of female characters, subaltern groups are often described with negative characteristics associated with non-Indian and non-Hindu ways of being and living in the world.

Keywords: *Rāmāyaṇa*, mythological fiction, Orientalism, Indian nationalism, Hinduism, feminism

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, professor Maria Luísa Homem Leal de Faria Geraldes Barba and professor António Eduardo Hawthorne Barrento. Their invaluable comments and corrections to the following four hundred pages have been useful and productive. Professor Isabel Capeloa Gil, the dean of Universidade Católica Portuguesa, and professor Jorge dos Santos Alves, the jury of my project defence, have also been deeply engaged with my project. Professors Alexandra Lopes, Ana Margarida Abrantes, Nélson Ribeiro and Tânia Ganito have commented essays related to this dissertation. I would also like to express my appreciation towards the many anonymous reviewers of peer-reviewed journals who have commented on papers based on my ongoing thesis, should they ever come across this version. I hope that they may consider that my corrections follow their advice. Finally, I am grateful to the jury committee, which has given me very useful and relevant guidelines for me to revise my thesis prior to its defence.

My parents and the rest of my family have supported me in every possible way. Special mention has to be made of Zhou Shenglan. She read and commented on most versions of this dissertation.

Professor Jayanti Dutta, who was my teacher of Russian and is now my friend, could have written this thesis with more competence, given that she knows the *Rāmāyaṇa* much better than I do and for a much longer time than I have. Professor Shiv Kumar Singh was my first Hindi teacher. He helped me understand and have an appreciation for Indian culture. Crystal D'Souza introduced me to the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the first place and has proofread my thesis.

To all the friends who explored India with me. Although we are not as close as we once were, I have always carried and will always carry them in my heart: Gabija Vosyliūtė, Milena Todorova and Yevgeniya Ternoushko. Also, to my Ph.D. colleagues who were gently forced to comment on my progress: Alfredo Brant, Amadea Kovič, Brian Jay de Lima Ambulo, Eduardo Prado Cardoso, Gloria Adu-Kankam, Hugo Simões, Miriam Thaler and Zohar Yanko.

I would also like to express my gratitude towards Lia Khachikyan and Mariam Harutyunyan, my Eastern Armenian teacher, Seniye Vural, my Turkish teacher, Fabio Testy Loren, my Indonesian teacher, Yuko Kase, my Japanese teacher, Sabri Zekri, my Persian language partner, and Mind Pondsinee, my Thai language partner. Throughout

these five years, they have made me go beyond Portugal, where I was physically, and India, where I was intellectually.

Table of Contents

Index of Tables	**13**
Index of Figures	**15**
Transcription of Sanskrit and Hindi terms	**19**
Introduction	**21**
1. The *Rāmāyaṇa* Then and Now: From Powerful Narrative to Narrative of Power	**51**
2. Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism: "Ideas of India" and Hinduism	**115**
3. Blessed in Mind and Muscle: Gender and Sexuality in the Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*	**197**
4. Caught in Indra's Net: Other Divisions in the Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*	**273**
5. Rise and Fall of the *Rāmarājya*… and Rise Again: The Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Time	**335**
6. Everything In Its Right Place: The Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Space	**377**
Conclusion	**427**
References	**447**
Filmography	**483**
Appendix I: Summary of the *Rāmāyaṇa*	**485**
Appendix II: List of Characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*	**491**
Appendix III: Glossary of Indic Terms	**499**

Index of Tables

Table 1 - Enlightenment cultural dichotomies (adapted from King, 1999: 13) **201**

Table 2 - *Business Sutra* vocabulary (adapted from Pattanaik, 2013b: 425-432) **356**

Table 3 - Dichotomies between India and the West as per the discourses of the contemporary English-language male retellers **433**

Table 4 - Dichotomies inside India according to the contemporary English-language retellings **437**

Index of Figures

Figure 1 - Edwin Lord Weeks' *Old Blue Tiled Mosque Outside of Delhi India* (c. 1885) **40**

Figure 2 - Poster for the *Incredıble!ndıa* campaign **40**

Figure 3 - "Pollution turns white marble Taj Mahal yellow and green" *India Today* **41**

Figure 4 - Cover of C. Rajagopalachari's *Ramayana* (1968) **76**

Figure 5 - Cover of *Valmiki's Ramayana: The Great Indian Epic (2009)* **78**

Figure 6 - Cover of *Rama: Retold from the Ramayana* (1970) **78**

Figure 7 - Cover of *Ramayan 3392 A.D.*, Vol. 1 (2006) **79**

Figure 8 - Cover of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013) *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* **88**

Figure 9 - Cover of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013b) *Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management* **89**

Figure 10 - Cover of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2014) *Shikhandi and Other Stories They Don't Tell You* **90**

Figure 11 - Cover of Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* **94**

Figure 12 - Cover of Amish Tripathi's (2017b) *Immortal India: Young Country, Timeless Civilisation* **96**

Figure 13 - Cover of Anand Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* **98**

Figure 14 - Cover of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's (2019) *The Forest of Enchantments* **101**

Figure 15 - Cover of Kavita Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess* **106**

Figure 16 - Poster of Sudipto Sen's (2023) *The Kerala Story* **126**

Figure 17 - Seeds and Branches (Pattanaik, 2013b: 50) **166**

Figure 18 - The universality of Hinduism (Pattanaik, 2013b: 47) **172**

Figure 19 - Modern Western and Traditional Indian Epistemologies (Pattanaik, 2013b: 15) **175**

Figure 20 - Comparison between the Bible and the Homeric Epics (Pattanaik, 2013b: 27) **178**

Figure 21 - Comparison between the Homeric Epics and the Indian ones (Pattanaik, 2013b: 27) **178**
Figure 22 - The Hero and the Villain (Pattanaik, 2013b: 30) **181**
Figure 23 - India, the West and China (Pattanaik, 2013b: 67) **192**
Figure 24 - The universality of the Hindu epics (Pattanaik, 2013b: 47) **194**
Figure 25 - Raja Ravi Varma's *Vanvasi Ram* (Debroy, 2021: 95) **215**
Figure 26 - Karan Acharya's *Angry Hanuman* (Pande, 2018) **216**
Figure 27 - Cover of Amish Tripathi's (2019) *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* **219**
Figure 28 - Cover of Amish Tripathi's (2022) *War of Lanka* **220**
Figure 29 - Cover of Raghav Khanna's (2021) *Sita's Kitchen* **233**
Figure 30 - Poster for Mehboob Khan's (1957) *Mother India* **234**
Figure 31 - Cover of Amish Tripathi's (2017a) *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* **250**
Figure 32 - Śūrpaṇakhā by Devdutt Pattanaik **253**
Figure 33 - Varṇa and Jāti (Pattanaik, 2013b: 63) **285**
Figure 34 - Fluid mindsets expand with wisdom (Pattanaik, 2013b: 62) **288**
Figure 35 - Rāma kills Śambūka (Neelakantan, 2012: 483) **290**
Figure 36 - Rāma accepts Śabarī's berries (Pattanaik, 2013b: 343) **292**
Figure 37 - Cover of Anand Neelakantan's (2018) *Vanara: The legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara* **323**
Figure 38 - Tripathi's (2022) portrayal of Rāma. **336**
Figure 39 - Cover of Possehl's (2002) book depicting the Harappan Priest-king **336**
Figure 40 - Poster of Nitesh Rai's (2023) *Ramrajya* **345**
Figure 41 - Detail of cover of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013b) *Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management* **355**
Figure 42 - Sītā's choice: obey or decide? (Pattanaik, 2013b: 111) **358**
Figure 43 - Cover of Tripathi's (2020) *Legend of Suheldev: King Who Saved India* **368**
Figure 44 - Narendra Modi as Shivaji Bhonsale I **369**
Figure 45 - Rāma's name in the Indus Valley script according to Tripathi (2015) **370**
Figure 46 - The fictional Nāga stone **372**
Figure 47 - The real Paśupati seal **372**

Figure 48 - Bhārata Mātā Mandir (Temple of Mother India), Varanasi **378**
Figure 49 - *Mother's Call* (Brosius, 2005: 181) **379**
Figure 50 - Narendra Modi as "Mother India" **380**
Figure 51 – Anand Neelakantan's (2012: 6) Map of India **381**
Figure 52 –Tripathi's map in *Ram Chandra Series* **383**
Figure 53 – Devdutt Pattanaik's conceptual map of India **385**
Figure 54 - Map of India with emphasised states containing sites mentioned by Pattanaik emphasised in red **389**
Figure 55 - Screenshot of Rohit Shetty's (2013) *Chennai Express* **398**
Figure 56 - Cover of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013) *The Girl Who Chose: A new way of narrating the Ramayana* **422**
Figure 57 – "India to hang 2012 New Delhi gang rape convicts on January 22" *Aljazeera* **427**
Figure 58 - Cover of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2018) *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison* **433**
Figure 59 - Chapter heading of Anand Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* **444**
Figure 60 - Chapter heading of Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* **444**
Figure 61 - Chapter heading of Chitra Banerjee's Divakaruni (2019) *The Forest of Enchantments* **444**
Figure 62 - Chapter heading of Kavita Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess* **444**

Transcription of Sanskrit and Hindi Terms

This dissertation follows the IAST (*International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration*) convention for the transliteration of Sanskrit/Hindi terms originally written in *devanāgarī* script. This convention was created during a 1894 congress of Orientalists and is still followed by the great majority of the academic community. In Sanskrit/Hindi, there is perfect correspondence between writing and pronunciation.

I have taken the following tables from Antonia M. Ruppel's (2017: 11) *The Cambridge Introduction to Sanskrit.*

VOWELS

अ a as in *but*	आ ā as in *father*	इ i as in *bee*, but shorter	ई ī long vowel as in *bee*	उ u as in *put*	ऊ ū as in *fool*
ऋ ṛ short vocalic *r*, as in *father* (US pronunciation)	ॠ ṝ like *r*, but longer	ऌ ḷ short vocalic *l*, as in *table*	(ॡ ḹ*) like *l*, but longer		
ए e long vowel, similar to the first e in *where*	ऐ ai as in *my*	ओ o long vowel, as in *more*	औ au as in l**ou**d		

CONSONANTS

kinds of stops:	unvoiced unaspirated	unvoiced aspirated	voiced unaspirated	voiced aspirated	nasal
velar stops	क ka unaspirated k, as in *ski*	ख kha aspirated k, as in *cut*	ग ga hard g, as in *golf*	घ gha aspirated g, as in *egg**h**ead*	ङ ṅa 'velar' n, as in *si**n**g*
palatal stops	च ca unaspirated palatal, as in ***c**harm*	छ cha aspirated c, as in *ran**ch** house*	ज ja *as in jam*	झ jha aspirated *j* (rare); as in *sponge **h**older*	ञ ña like *-n-* before consonants, *-ny-* before vowels
retroflex stops	ट ṭa retroflex *t*: see note above	ठ ṭha retroflex aspirated *t*	ड ḍa retroflex *d*	ढ ḍha retroflex aspirated *d*	ण ṇa retroflex *n*
dental stops	त ta unaspirated *t*, as in *still*	थ tha aspirated *t*, as in *hot-**h**eaded; **not like** English -th-*	द da as in ***d**ance*	ध dha aspirated *d*, as in *mad-**h**ouse*	न na as in ***n**ame*
labial stops	प pa unaspirated *p*, as in *sports*	फ pha aspirated *p*, as in *upheaval*	ब ba as in *but*	भ bha aspirated *b*, as in *club**h**ouse*	म ma as in ***m**other*
semi-vowels	य ya as in *yes*	र ra as in *run*	ल la as in *leave*	व va as in *water*	
sibilants and *h*	श śa palatal *s*: as in ***sh**ip*	ष ṣa retroflex *s*: further back in the mouth than *ś*: as in *wa**sh***	स sa dental s as in *sing*	ह ha as in ***h**ouse*	

Three *devanāgarī* diacritics are:

◌̇[1]	ṃ	Nasalised consonants are homorganic to the next consonant, which means that they should be pronounced in the same part of the mouth.
◌̃	~	Nasalised vowel, as the *-n* in French *grand*.
◌ः	ḥ	Voiceless glottal fricative, similar to the *-ch* in German *Bach* or Scottish *Loch.*

1 The dotted circle stands for the letter with which the diacritic is associated.

Note: Sanskrit is a highly inflected language. Sanskrit and Hindi form the plural differently from English. As being faithful to grammar would be confusing to readers who are not versed in these Indian languages, I transcribe Sanskrit/Hindi terms in the vocative case and form the plural by adding an *-s*. This is the way modern English-speakers in India pronounce such terms when incorporating them into English speech. The nominative singular *rākṣasaḥ* and nominative plural *rākṣasāḥ* therefore appear as *rākṣasa* (vocative singular) and *rākṣasas* (vocative singular plus English plural suffix *-s*).

Novelists and some scholars do not use the IAST system but transcribe terms using only English letters and symbols (e.g., *rakshas* instead of *rākṣasa*).

Introduction

The object and its context

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is one of the most important narrative traditions in several parts of Asia, even though it is not as well-known in the non-Asian English-speaking world as other Asian tales. Due to the profusion of editions for children, it is probably the *Arabian Nights* that comes to the mind of most Western readers when thinking of representations of Asia in ancient Asian literature. Nevertheless, the *Arabian Nights* has to a great extent been a creation of European authors, compilers and translators and the book has never achieved in the Middle East the literary position it has held in Europe (Irwin, 2010 [2004]). Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) once remarked that great literature ultimately becomes children's literature (quoted in Irwin, 2010 [2004]: 290). This idea would apply to the *Arabian Nights*, which, in its bowdlerised versions without the most violent and sexually suggestive parts, has travelled the world over, including back to Asia. Borges' description would also apply to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but not when one thinks of Western languages, in which children's versions of the tale have been scarce and relatively unknown. In India, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been one of the few narratives that has existed in many versions for children, not only as literature but also as comics, animated series, films, folk performances, oral stories told by adults, and other media.

What constitutes great narrative varies from culture to culture and this phenomenon reveals the gap that sometimes exists between different cultural centres. While the West has created the contemporary transglobal literary canon based mainly on Western works, it has relegated everything that falls outside of it to be regarded as "world literature(s)", a term which, while seemingly inclusive in its use of the term *world*, creates a clear division between Western and non-Western literature(s) and defines who has the power to determine which is which. In many local contexts, however, one finds alternative canons which may be more socially relevant than the Western one. In India, throughout the Indian diaspora and in many countries in Southeast Asia, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been part of the canon for centuries. The immensity of new English-language literary adaptations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* which have appeared on the Indian market during the second decade of the 21st century and the several online and printed articles which have commented on this tendency provide evidence to this claim.

The timeframe of these new adaptations is relevant. The second decade of the 21st century roughly corresponds to the first generation after important pan-Indian economic,

political and sociocultural events, such as the introduction of neoliberal policies in 1991 and the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* (Sanskrit for "the place of the birth of Rāma") movement, a controversial political and sociocultural episode directly related to the *Rāmāyaṇa* which culminated with the demolition of a mosque in 1992. I will analyse this movement in greater detail in the first chapter. Both events seem related to the cultural attempt, one which is also easily identifiable in contemporary Indian discourses in English, to decolonialise and de-Westernise Indian culture and restore what is regarded as the native, precolonial culture. In 2012, Jyoti Singh Pandey (1990-2012), a female college student, was gang-raped on a bus in New Delhi while she was on her way to the cinema. She later died in the hospital. One of the rapists was a minor and did not undergo a trial like the other rapists. While this was neither the first nor the single case of rape in India,[1] Pandey's death originated several mass protests. Despite being a common girl, she was turned into a symbol of both Indian womanhood and the Indian nation. Her case raised discussions about traditional Indian culture and gender roles. I analyse her case and its representation in a retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the third chapter. In 2014, the BJP (*Bhāratīya Janatā Pārṭī*, Hindi for "Indian People's Party"), the major right-wing Indian party, won the general elections with a clear majority under the leadership of Narendra Modi (1950-). The position of both Modi and the party was reinforced in the 2019 election. In 2019, the contentious Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, which then lived under different laws from the rest of the country, was reintegrated into the nation. I analyse the question of geography, with a focus on borderland regions like Jammu and Kashmir, in the sixth chapter. In the same year, the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* case, was decided in favour of the Hindus. I analyse the significance of this event in the first chapter. Finally, in 2020, just like every other country in the world, India had to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, a phenomenon that I refer to in the conclusion in relation to the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

In this dissertation, I study the major Indian retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* that were written in English and that were published within this timeframe. The earliest is Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, published in 2012. This was the first

[1] Most Indian newspapers have sections devoted to this topic: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/rape/news (accessed on 29/6/2022); https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/rape-cases-in-india/news (accessed on 29/6/2022); https://indianexpress.com/about/rape-cases/ (accessed on 29/6/2022); https://www.hindustantimes.com/topic/rape (accessed on 29/6/2022); https://www.thehindu.com/topic/The_fight_against_rape/ (accessed on 29/6/2022); https://www.firstpost.com/tag/rape-cases-in-india (accessed on 29/6/2022).

retelling of the epic after several years with no major English-language adaptations. The most recent retelling is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, which was published in 2019. Given these significant events, it is possible that the rising number of adaptations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have been a response to the recent economic, political and sociocultural changes I have outlined.

One finds an unfathomable number of literary *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings in online bookstores and social networks. These range from less popular ones with no online ratings or reviews to others which have become nationwide best-sellers. Many of the successful popular contemporary retellings at a pan-Indian and diasporic level have been written in English and have come from a limited cast of authors, some of whom have become well-known spokespersons of Indian and Hindu culture and of Indian feminism among English-speaking middle-class Indians and Hindus. The most successful have been Anand Neelakantan (1973-), Devdutt Pattanaik (1970-), Amish Tripathi (1974-), Kavita Kané (1966-), and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-).[2] Through their mythological retellings, they have tried to reshape the views of young English-speaking middle-class Indians on Indian mythology and its relevance in the contemporary globalised world.

These retellings have encouraged discussions in the Indian media. In *online* newspaper articles, journalists Kavita Shanmugam (2013) and Swati Daftuar (2015) and Sanskritist Arshia Sattar (2017) have commented on the sheer popularity surge of mythological retellings in the past few years. Akansha Singh (2019) has taken a positive view towards these new retellings when remarking that many have alerted readers to the mistreatment of women in Indian society and have appealed for social change. Biraj M. Rathi (2017) has stated that they have focused on the human strengths and weaknesses of divine characters. However, she has been less positive when stating that most retellings are not revolutionary in sociocultural terms but

> does raise issues of its relation with the larger ideology of Hindutva that dominates Indian politics. It may seem that the reinterpretation of myths are closely related to the revival of Hindu nationalism and identity; considering that almost all of popular culture's mythological source is Hindu.

[2] It must be added that there are many other contemporary English-language retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and that, for scholarly reasons, I had to limit myself to these five ones. The most preeminent reteller which I had to leave out is probably Samhita Arni, who wrote *Sita's Ramayana* (2011) and *The Missing Queen* (2013).

In an analysis of literary trends in late 20th century Indian fiction, author R. K. Gupta (1994) remarks that, despite several innovations, historical, legendary and mythological themes have remained popular.[3] Gupta adds that such fiction cultivated a pessimistic outlook (306). The recent retellings of the Indian epics, however, seem to constitute a new phenomenon. Suman Gupta (2012), a professor of Literature and History, writes about what he has called the new "commercial fiction" of India. According to him, contrary to the post-colonial novels by internationally renowned authors such as Salman Rushdie (1947-) and Arundhati Roy (1961-), who have in fact been more successful in the West than in India and have tended to cultivate a pessimistic outlook, this kind of commercial fiction has been consumed in India, given that it has displayed a kind of *Indianness* that modern Indians appreciate (47).

Not much has been said in academia regarding the recent phenomenon of epic retellings and nothing comprehensive has been said about the contemporary corpus of *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings. *Modern Mythologies: The Epic Imagination in Contemporary Indian Literature*, Indologist Sucheta Kanjilal's (2017) doctoral dissertation, is the only work on the contemporary retellings of the epics. The author has focused on 20th-century retellings of the *Mahābhārata* in English, Hindi and Bengali. She has included TV series in her corpus. She has also straddled into some 21st century adaptations. According to Kanjilal, many of the writers of the epic adaptations have been upper-middle-class Hindu children who came of age watching televised and comic book versions (154), which I introduce in the first chapter. Kanjilal's main argument, which seems to agree with Biraj M. Rathi's, is that conservative adaptations of the epics have been more likely to achieve popularity (194) and that contemporary adaptations have been more socially conservative than the epics themselves (24), that is, the canonical Sanskrit versions, which I also introduce in the first chapter.

E. Dawson Varughese (2014, 2017) is one of the few scholars who has written about a subcategory of new commercial fiction, one she often calls "post-millennial mythology(-inspired) fiction" or "*Bharati*[4] Fantasy". I call it mythological fiction, which seems to be the most common term used to refer to it in the Indian *media*. According to Varughese (2014), this kind of fiction constitutes a new literary trend. Its tales are set in ancient mythic India and draw on the narrative aspects and protagonists of the Indian epics. Such fiction has been fiercely consumed by young Indians who

[3] See a more detailed typology of themes and characters in the Indian novel in English in Singh (1989: 209-213).
[4] *Bhārata* is the Hindi name for India and *bhāratīya,* "Indian", the adjective derived from the same name.

wish to connect with Indian philosophy and heritage (354). In the opinion of the author, the canonical versions of the epics were amoral for modern standards. The postcolonial Indian novel, however, is rooted in the liberal middle-class conscience and founded upon liberal humanist verities. According to Varughese (*Ibid.*), liberal humanist verities tend to defend that multiculturalism is good, while colonialism and fundamentalism are bad (352). Elsewhere, Varughese (2017) has stated that, for readers with a better knowledge of the epic traditions, such novels might be regarded as "fantasy", mainly when they depart from traditional versions and challenge ideas of received cultural and religious histories (463). Nevertheless, given that such novels focus on India and provide Indian cultural ideas through specific locations, cultural beliefs and practices, it proves difficult to consider them as mere "fantasy" (471). Such "fantasy" novels merely fictionalise stereotypical ideas about India which already exist in the public sphere. In my view, this fictionalisation has a complex relationship with "reality", given that it is both influenced by reality and influences it through the consolidation of the same stereotypes. Neither Varughese nor other scholars have studied what the representation of contemporary Indianness in mythological fiction might be and how it might be harmonised or contrasted with the conservative values which Kanjilal has referred to. In both views, there seems to be a complex relationship between local/native and global/foreign values which cannot be reduced to sheer acceptance or refusal.

Although there are many contemporary English-language retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and a few short online articles and scholarly papers which have commented on them, there is no comprehensive study which attempts to situate, describe and interpret the works with greater commercial success and cultural impact. Given the recent economic, political and sociocultural changes and the relevance that the *Rāmāyaṇa* has had in Indian imagination in making sense of sociocultural continuity and change, such a study would be relevant to understand the political and sociocultural dynamics of contemporary India. These issues began to shape my interpretation of the retellings, so the topic seemed worth looking into. The representation of contemporary Indian society in terms of mainly nation, religion, and gender, but also caste, class and mythological species through the traditional plot of the epic seemed to attempt to connect the global present with the local past.

Research questions

This dissertation tries to answer the following questions:

1) What is the representation of India, Hinduism and Indian femininity that has emerged in the English-language literary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* published in the second decade of the 21st century?

2) How have the traditional characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* been recreated in the retellings and how do they represent modern Indian society when it comes to gender, caste, class and species?

3) Who are the *Others* against which the retellers are writing their recreations and how are they represented in contrast to ideas of the *Self*?

4) How have the new retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (2010-2020) tried to strike a balance between the empowerment of subaltern groups while including them into larger identity groups, such as the Indian nation, the Hindu religion or an overarching concept of Indian femininity?

Methodology

To answer these questions, I chose to focus on one novel by each of the most commercially successful retellers. These are, in order of publication date: Anand Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013) *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*, Kavita Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's (2019) *The Forest of Enchantments*. The main criterion for the choice of the novels of the *corpus* was popularity based on the number of online reviews in popular online stores such as *Amazon* or *Flipkart* and literary social networks such as *Goodreads*. The only exception would be Kavita Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess* instead of her (as of 2024) better-known *Sita's Sister*, published in 2014. The reason why I have considered this exception is that, while the main character of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's (2019) *The Forest of Enchantments* is the main female protagonist of the epic, Kané's *Lanka's Princess* focuses on the main female antagonist. As Anand Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* and Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* focus on the main male protagonist and antagonist, the choice of Kané's *Lanka's Princess* provides interesting material for comparison with the case of the male characters and contrast with the female protagonist in Divakaruni's novel. Whenever relevant, I have not shied away from referring to other literary or non-literary products by the same or by other authors and both prior and posterior to the timeframe under discussion, particularly when such retellings raise important issues related to my research questions.

An example which I will often discuss in both textual and visual terms is Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013b) *Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management*, which contains relevant nonfiction material related to "ideas of India" and Hinduism.

I resort to Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (Machin and Mayr, 2023) based on qualitative data to analyse them. This methodology takes a top-down approach when it comes to power, ideology and control. Critical discourse analysis consists in the analysis of the way linguistic data, such as lexicon and grammar, may be used as a semiotic resource to explicitly or implicitly encode ideology and persuasive ideas. The main goal of such ideas is not so much to describe the world but to create it by making readers or listeners conform with the ideology of the writer or speaker. Ideology tends to involve positive or negative views about things, people, processes and places as conveyed through symbols such as written language, sound or images. In the cases I analyse, as I shall show, ideology involves positive views of physical, psychological and attitudinal clues related with the identity group with which the creator of the discourse identifies and negative views with the clues related to any other identity group which the creator of the discourse regards as contrasting with his/her own. One can begin by conducting discourse analysis on the term *ideology* itself, given that this is often regarded as a pejorative term with the meaning "a biased view of the world". In this sense, the target of the discourse, in opposition to its creator, is the one who is usually regarded as following an ideology, while the creator of the discourse usually represents himself as having an unbiased view of the facts. This is not the way in which I use the term. Given that human beings are subjects who have to interpret the world and act in it, all human beings have to make choices about what to think and how to act, which means that everybody has an ideology. Therefore, I use the term to mean "a way of thinking about the world and of acting in it" and do not attach any affective value to it. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1991), "ideologies serve particular interests which they tend to present as universal interests, shared by the group as a whole" (167). This means that a specific author or speaker, who regards himself/herself as belong to a group, will try to influence others and make their ideology conform with his/her own.

The term *multimodal* in Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis refers to the fact that the persuasive semiotic strategies used in language can be mirrored in other *media*. They can, for example, be used iconographically in pictures, including visual media which mix text and image, such as tables or diagrams, which I also analyse.

(Multimodal) Critical Discourse Analysis has most commonly been used to analyse media such as news in printed paper or on the television, as well as texts in recent digital platforms, such as social media. While, in my view, literature can also be a mediatic way through which convey ideology in implicit and explicit textual and iconographic ways, given that literature may easily be used as a means to represent social reality in more abstract or symbolic terms which may be difficult to decode, Critical Discourse Analysis has been less commonly used to analyse it. However, as I will show in the following chapters, the contemporary English-language retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have tended to use similar linguistic and, in the cases in which they have used images or audiovisual media, iconographic strategies in their nonfiction and fiction texts, which shows that they have used their nonfiction and fiction in similar discursive ways.

Given the preponderance of literature in my thesis, I also try to adopt some principles of comparative literature. I follow some of the methodological principles of the manifesto for a New Comparative Literature devised by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (1998), a professor of Comparative Literature. Some of the most relevant of de Zepetnek's points for my thesis are: 1) in the study of literature and culture as a whole, the "how" is more important than the "what", which means that there is a preponderant focus on the method through which I approach my object of analysis; 2) Comparative Literature must be multicultural, multilingual, and multidisciplinary; 3) literature should be studied in relation to other forms of artistic expression and in relation to other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences; 4) Comparative Literature focuses on English, not as an Eurocentric language, but as a global language of communication, scholarship, technology, business, industry, and other fields; 5) literature must be understood within the larger context of culture; 6) the researcher should adopt a theoretical, methodological, ideological and political approach of inclusion; and 7) the researcher should focus on the simultaneous forces of globalisation and localisation (16-18). Reflecting some of these principles, Satendra R. Singh (1989), a professor of English Studies, has stated that each Indian novel or writer can only be understood within the widest context of the Indian socio-cultural, economic, political and literary process (205) and that "an Indian writer is three-quarters inside his culture and one-quarter outside it, and that the Indian part is partly within his linguistic-cum-geographical milieu and partly outside it in the Pan-Indian tradition" (206). Finally, he has stated that urbanisation and modernity are affecting the nation in the sense that it is giving new meanings to "situations, characters, metaphors, symbols and themes to the

Indian novel" (208). While Singh was writing in 1989, before the introduction of neoliberal policies and the political rise of Hindu nationalism, which will be key concepts along my thesis, I would say that his ideas still apply and just have to be reformulated within these new economic, political and sociocultural developments.

Given the increasing ability of technology to create realistic sensorial reproductions of the world perceived by human senses, I consider that the possible intersection between nonfiction discourses, which are supposed to represent reality, with fictional literary ones, which are supposed to represent potentiality, and the way these approaches may be rooted or not in Indian tradition or in global discourses is one of the most relevant subjects I explore. Given that all authors adopt an existing narrative and mythological tropes and rework them to varying degrees in order to modernise them, with Pattanaik mostly selecting and grafting episodes from different sources and Tripathi reinventing significant parts of the plot, I am interested in finding out not so much "what" they have chosen to represent but "how" they have chosen to represent it and what such choices mean in discursive terms. As a result, by mixing Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and the principles of Comparative Literature I summarised, I plan to analyse the language and visual strategies used by the authors of the novels of the corpus and ask myself: what/who have the authors said/depicted in both in-group and out-group terms? How have they said/depicted it? What is the ideology that they wish to convey to their readers? What do those discourses mean in the larger historical, political and social context in which they have been written? This will often involve minute linguistic, narrative and iconographic analyses, which means that I will also ask: what do specific words, expressions, grammatical constructions or visual elements mean in the local and/or globalised context they are used? What kind of human actors are such choices supposed to represent? What are the affective meanings associated with them? What kind of generalisations about the (social) world can be extracted from such choices? What is the ontological relationship between fictional events and characters and nonfictional ones? I specifically analyse what these authors have stated about the topics under scrutiny in the chosen novels and nonfiction texts, which are mainly India, Hinduism, and gender, but also caste, class, species, time and space. My approach is synchronic, that is, I am mainly interested on how these retellings dialogue with mythological fiction as a literary genre, with other literary and non-literary contemporary cultural products and, finally, on how they interact with nonfiction discourses and everyday events. I also engage with other literary and non-literary works

by the same authors, contemporary Indian (pop) culture, and historical discourses which are still relevant for contemporary Indian collective memory, which includes Indian mythology and philosophy, colonial scholarship, and anticolonial, postcolonial and decolonial discourses.

Summary of the chapters

The first chapter, "The *Rāmāyaṇa* Then and Now: From Powerful Narrative to Narrative of Power", traces the history of the most relevant retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in a modern pan-Indian or scholarly context. This chapter also introduces the contemporary retellers and their works and tries to explain what separates and unites them in discursive and narrative terms. I articulate past and contemporary retellings with the scholarship on the *Rāmāyaṇa* and issues pertaining to contemporary Indian studies, such as the tension between inclusive and pluralistic views of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Indian culture against contrasting exclusive and homogeneous views. My approach is chronological and thematic. The main goal of this chapter is to reveal that, despite their different narrative approaches to the epic, the contemporary retellings have followed two main discursive lines. The works penned by the male authors (Neelakantan, Pattanaik and Tripathi) have mostly been concerned with the positive reevaluation of Indian civilisation and the Hindu religion, usually against either explicit or implicit contrast with foreign cultural elements. For that reason, I regard their fiction and nonfiction as representations of clashes of civilisations. The works penned by the female authors (Kané and Divakaruni), for their part, have been more concerned with the positive reevaluation of the female condition in Indian mythology, history and contemporary times against opposing patriarchal representations. For that reason, I regard their fiction as representations of battles of sexes. The works by both the male and female authors have been similar in their adoption of a middle-class ethics simultaneously turned inwards to native Indian culture and outwards to global English-speaking modernity.

The second chapter, "Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism: Ideas of India and Hinduism", explores the ideas of Indianness and Hinduism as they have been wrought since anticolonial and postcolonial times by the two most relevant political ideologies at play in the current Indian political world: Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism. I focus particularly on the discourses of four of the most influential 21st century English-language cultural critics of Indian civilisation and/or Hinduism (Amartya Sen,

Gurcharan Das, Shashi Tharoor, and Rajiv Malhotra) in order to show that, while these ideologies have resulted in different levels of inclusivity and tolerance towards difference, when it comes to the representational level of *Self* and *Other*, they are ontologically complex and not merely the two poles of a dichotomy. I also aim to show that, according to some discourses, both Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism can be regarded as contrasting with stereotyped representations of the West and/or of Abrahamic religions. I then analyse how the male retellers of *Rāmāyaṇa* have represented their "ideas of India" and Hinduism in similar terms in their nonfiction discourses.[5]

The third chapter, "Blessed in Mind and Muscle: Gender and Sexuality in the Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*", analyses how the retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* construct gender paradigms and anti-paradigms for men and women, as well as for the relationship between members of the same and different genders. I focus on four characters, who have been regarded as representatives of ideals and counter-ideals in the most widespread pan-Indian versions of the epic: Rāma, the ideal man; Rāvaṇa, the counter-ideal man; Sītā, the ideal woman; and Śūrpaṇakhā, the counter-ideal woman. Each is the main character in at least one of the novels of the *corpus*. My main argument is that the contemporary English-language retellers have both endorsed an individualistic view of men and women on par with contemporary neoliberal values and a traditional view of gender roles based on social duties.

The fourth chapter, "Caught in Indra's net: Other Divisions in the Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*", analyses the representation of social divisions other than gender: caste, class, and species. I ascertain whether these categories are differentiated from one another, given that they seem to point to social, economic, and biological ideas, or whether there is some relationship between them. The main idea of this chapter is that the retellers collapse these categories into a wider distinction between humanity and animality. While these are mythological tropes, the fact that the retellings by the male authors adopt a nationalistic stance to varying degrees makes desirable traits be associated with Indians and/or Hindus and undesirable traits be associated with competing foreigners. I conclude that, even though there are

[5] The first two chapters do not require prior knowledge of the plot/characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The next chapters, though, do require such knowledge. Readers unfamiliar with the tradition can refer to appendixes I (summary of the plot of the *Rāmāyaṇa*) and II (characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*). Non-English terms, including relevant anthroponyms and placenames, are explained in appendix III (glossary).

attempts at an appraisal of subaltern castes, classes and species, there are implicit representations of hegemonic groups as more ideal and of subaltern ones as less so.

The fifth and sixth chapters, "Rise and Fall of the *Rāmarājya*… and Rise Again: The Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Time" and "Everything In Its Right Place: The Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Space" deal with how the retellings construct notions of time and space and how these notions are related to the "idea of India". I consider to what extent retellers have tried to mix representations of past and present by bringing elements of pre-colonial Indian culture closer to the present and by tracing contemporary concepts to the native past. As for space, I consider how the retellings use mythic tropes to create different ideas of the Indian city and forest, while, in the case of the male retellers, creating an "idea of India" as a stable and unified geographical entity. I also consider how the social divisions analysed in the two previous chapters might be defined according to temporal and spatial parameters. Even though the history of India, like the history of any country, encompasses long periods and wide regions, I show how there has been a narrative effort to create a stereotyped view according to which what has happened millennia ago mirrors the present and contrasts with the recent collective memory of the colonial past. I also show that what happens in one point of the country is regarded as mirroring what happens in other distant points.

Concepts and definitions

In these six chapters, I depart from the hypothesis that the *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings have constituted a *corpus* of stereotyped representations of memories of the Indian and Hindu identities and of memories Indian femininity. These ideas have dialogued with mythological narratives, globalisation, as well as colonial, anticolonial, postcolonial and decolonial perceptions of both. The retellers have promoted a discourse which regards their positive representation of proto-modern individual and civilisational ideals with those of the contemporary global world. As I never straddle from the ideas and concepts in this paragraph, I will spend the remainder of this introduction trying to define how I will use and approach them.

My theoretical framework relies on the notion that discourses constitute knowledge systems created and imposed on the basis of power. According to this notion traceable to philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984), there can be no objective descriptions of reality. Every knowledge system is shaped by webs of power that identify what is

classified as normal or abnormal within a cultural phenomenon (Foucault, 1977 [1975]: 27). This means that there is no such thing as objective truth but that instituted powers construct what is regarded as true in a given space and time. Foucault has studied the creation of discourses on madness, medicine, surveillance, punishment, and sexuality. In this dissertation, I am concerned with the construction of a nation (India), a religion (Hinduism), and, when it comes to the female authors, with femininity. I am also concerned with how these discourses have influenced sociocultural dynamics in contemporary India. I regard the concept of reality as representative and processual and not as essential. This means that I will not say what India, Hinduism or Indian femininity are but rather what the authors under discussion say these entities have been, how they are now and what they wish them to become in the future.

The notion of cultural hegemony, which was developed by Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), is comparable with the Foucauldian notion of power and with how it shapes discourses. The concept of hegemony as it appears in Gramsci's (1977 [1948-1951]) *Prison Notebooks* (*Quaderni del carcere*) is complex and comprises different layers of meaning. The one that concerns me states that the supremacy of a social group over another may manifest itself in two ways: through coercion/violence and through consent. In the latter, the ideology of the hegemonic group is transmitted to subaltern groups through the ensemble of educational, religious, political, and other kinds of associations. Through such discourses, hegemonic and subaltern groups are imagined as forming a greater ontological group contrasted with what I will term the *Other*. Linguist Teun A. van Dijk (2004) has identified three ways in which the *Other* can be represented negatively: 1) difference: the *Other* is not like us; 2) the *Other* behaves in a way that "we" feel is amoral; and 3) *threat*, the *Other* is dangerous (352-353). I should remark that both *subaltern* and *Other* are relative intra-discourse terms. What is *subaltern* or *Other* in one discourse may not be so in other(s).

The Foucauldian and Gramscian ideas of power and hegemony have been reflected in different academic subjects which have played an important part in the analysis of Asian culture(s): Orientalism, re-Orientalism, post-colonialism, and decoloniality. Orientalism refers to the way in which Western science and arts have created the idea of the exotic East in order to impose its cultural superiority over it. This concept was first introduced by Edward Said (2003 [1978]). Following Foucault, Said stated that Orientalism constitutes a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between East and West (2) whereby the relationship

between both is one of power and domination (5). In the colonial period, Western intellectuals created an imaginary representation of the East in order to exert their power over it and in order to define the superiority of their own culture. In *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, a study of the evolution of the concept of "world religions" in Western colonial discourses, historian of religions Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) has shown how during imperialist times Western knowledge and Christianity were represented as the only ones with universal applicability, while non-Western knowledge systems and non-Christian religions were represented as having only limited, local applicability. Following Foucault's notion of discourse and Gramsci's notion of hegemony, this is an assertion which cannot be made objectively but can only be made in subjective cultural contexts. When the modern subject of Orientalism appeared after the independence movements of former non-European colonies, it became the major theory to analyse the relationship between the knowledge systems of the colonisers and the colonised. Due to these developments, past Orientalist approaches have gained a pejorative connotation and have been relegated in the academia to a subaltern Western-centric status, including, in many cases, in Western academia.

Since Said, who has focused on the Middle East, several works have dealt with the issue of Orientalist representations of India in different Western cultures, such as Great Britain (Dissanayake, 1986; Trautmann, 1997; Chatterjee, 1998; Franklin, 2006; Dodson, 2017), Germany (Pollock, 1993a; Figueira, 2002; Arvindson, 2006; Myers, 2013; Cross, 2013) and America (Versuis, 1993; Altman, 2017; Arora and Kaur, 2017). There have also been important cross-cultural works (Inden, 2001 [1990]; King, 1999). These works, which are not primary sources, analyse and categorise the construction of previous discourses in these cultural hubs. In general terms, it can be said that India was described through negative attributes related to spirituality, chaos, tradition, superstition, lack of progress and of freedom, while the West was characterised through the opposite positive traits, that is, rationality, order, modernity, science, progress and freedom. Again, it must be said that these traits are not intrinsically negative or positive but only acquire such values in specific cultural contexts. Even though sometimes contradictory, stereotypical Orientalist ideas can also be summarised by national

tradition.[6] German Orientalists tended to search the foundations of Western civilisation and an alternative model to the Judeo-Christian[7] worldview in ancient India. India was represented as a great past civilisation which had declined. British authors justified British colonial intervention in India by defining it as backwards. American representations contrasted stereotypical ideas of the spirituality of India with equally stereotypical ideas of Western materialism. As I shall demonstrate, to a greater or lesser extent, these approaches are still common in the discourses of contemporary retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, mainly the male ones, although, when compared with Orientalist representations, their assessment of these stereotypes tends to be different.

Although Said's ideas have been popular and have originated similar works, they have not been without their critics. In *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies*, Arabist Robert Irwin (2006) has produced a more balanced history of Orientalism. Irwin has blamed Said for being guilty of what he criticised. While Said criticised the "West" and Western hegemonic approaches, he was biased towards the Arab world and against the Judeo-Christian one, which meant that Said was also a kind of Orientalist, only in reverse. In other words, ancient Orientalists and their modern critics may tend to resort to the same discursive strategy. Both imagine a monolithic good and innocent civilisation (their own) and contrast them with another monolithic evil and guilty one (the *Other*). Many past scholars and artists had an unjustifiable stance towards Asian civilisations. Nevertheless, there were also scholars and artists who aimed at detached views of their object of study. Likewise, then and now, there have been native scholars and artists who have unjustifiably directed their criticism towards a general notion of "the West" or of "Judeo-Christianity" while trying to exacerbate their local knowledge systems. I analyse both arguments in order to highlight their epistemological similarities.

Orientalism is concerned with matters of identity. Sociologist Stuart Hall (1932-2014) was one of the main modern theorists who defined this concept. According to Hall (1988), the self is an illusion which requires the creation of communities of

[6] Biblical hermeneutist R. S. Sugirtharajah has discussed some relevant exceptions to the most stereotyped and hegemonic colonial discourses about India. SUGIRTHARAJAH, R. S. (2013). *The Bible and Asia: From the Pre-Christian Era to the Postcolonial Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, c. 2.

[7] As Masuzawa (2005) remarks, while it is now a common term, Judeo-Christian would have been an oxymoron throughout most of Western history (301). This shows how religions and their representations are not static but how they and their representations change through time. I often use this term for conventional reasons and due to the fact that it is less cumbersome to read and write "Judeo-Christian" than "Judaism and Christianity", just as it is less cumbersome to read and write "Abrahamic religions" than "Judaism, Christianity, and Islam". Furthermore, as I show in the second chapter, some Indian writers also resort to this adjective sometimes.

identification, such as nation, ethnicity, family or sexuality (45). Elsewhere, Hall (1997a) stated that as important as the definition of one identity is, the definition of different identities is even more so, as in this way symbolic boundaries may be instituted (236-237). Nevertheless, as Hall (1996) stated, identities are never unified nor singular but increasingly fragmented, fractured and multiply constructed across different and often antagonistic discourses (6). This means that identities are as illusory as they are real, given that individuals never collapse entirely into a collectivity but retain unique features which make him/her an individual. Hall's ideas seem to overlap with *social identity theory*, which was posited by the Polish social psychologist Henri Tajfel. Summarising this theory, sociologist Richard Jenkins (2014 [1996]) has made a distinction between personal and social identities, the latter consisting of the emotional internalisation of stereotypes about a community and the exaggeration of in-group similarities and out-group differences (114-115). This is a discursive tendency with which I will be concerned with throughout most of my thesis.

Hall (1997) was also one of the foremost authorities on the study of representation. This constitutes a way of organising, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts and of establishing complex relations between them, given that the one who represents imposes one's meaning on the world, that is, one's ideology, through the medium of language (15-17). What this means is that identities never exist in a vacuum. As discourses, they arise through conflicts of power and have to be constantly defined and negotiated by insiders who belong to the represented identity groups and by outsiders. Again, when considering Foucault's definition of *discourse*, as knowledge can never be objective, whatever may be said about reality does not constitute reality itself but is a mere representation of reality. As representations relate to power and hegemony, the authority to create and disseminate representations usually lies among influential individuals who belong to powerful groups within society.

As representations of identities always rely on simplified and either positive or pejorative descriptions of *Self* and *Other*, they tend to constitute stereotypes. The term *stereotype* was first described by American journalist Walter Lippman (2004 [1922]). Lippman stated that stereotypes are ordered and general pictures of the world to which we are comfortably adapted (52).[8] It seems clear that, depending on the epistemological approach one adopts, individuals may be regarded as changing in time, as possessing

[8] For a study on stereotypes on art and literature about India, see CHAKRAVORTY, Mrinalini (2014). *In Stereotype: South Asia in the Global Literary Imaginary*, New York: Columbia University Press.

some intrinsic individual continuity which distinguishes them from other individuals, or as belonging to collectivities, which may range from small identity groups to large ones, such as nation, religion, gender, among others. I do not think that, other than relying on self-identification, trying to prove or disprove that certain human beings fit into ontological boxes is fruitful. In this regard, and this will be important for my second chapter, if a given author states that (s)he is a Hindu, I will take it as a fact. However, if (s)he states that another author who also says (s)he is a Hindus is not a "real" Hindu, I will not try to prove or disprove him.

According to philosopher Terry Eagleton (1993), the Gramscian notion of hegemony as a cultural phenomenon involves the establishment of the moral, political and intellectual leadership of one group in social life by conflating the worldview of that group with those of others (116). The knowledge and worldview that the ensemble of educational, religious, political, and other kinds of associations spread tends to be constructed by the most powerful groups. Hall (1997b) related the concepts of stereotype and power when stating that stereotypes constitute a device for the establishment of social and symbolic order whereby different identities might be divided and categorised according to concepts of normalcy and deviancy, with the most powerful groups usually determining these terms across the social spectrum and the least powerful ones accepting or resisting them (258). Sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1983 [1978]) commented that, when subalterns may be represented, they may also be manipulated (20-22). Therefore, sometimes the definition of what constitutes one identity may be imposed from without. One could intuitively think that stereotypes could originate from a lack of knowledge about the *Other* and that increased understanding, such as the one brought about by globalisation, would correct such misrepresentations. However, the encounter with the global world may lead to instances of provincialism, given that locals may fear that the hegemonic power of a foreign culture may threaten local identity (Deshpande, 2003: 171). Hegemonic foreign cultures may be seen as representing a kind of neo-imperialism that works through consent and the economic allure of cultural products rather than through violence.

The issue of the consolidation of ancient stereotypes in the modern globalised world leads to the issue of re-Orientalism. Said (2003) argued that one aspect of the postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient has been viewed (26). Jane Naomi Iwamura (2011), a professor of Religious Studies, and Sophie Rose Arjana (2020), a professor of Islamic Studies, have showed

how Orientalist stereotypes of Asian religions, including of Hinduism, have continued to exist in Western pop culture since the late 20th century until nowadays. Orientalist discourse has also infiltrated Eastern traditions. In *The Origins of Religious Violence: An Asian Perspective*, Nicholas F. Gier (2014), a professor of Religious Studies, blames the British imperial strategy of divide-and-rule, Western theories of religious and racial superiority, and the way they were adapted by locals in a kind of "reverse Orientalism" (xxiv). The idea that ancient Indian civilisation was highly advanced, for instance, may present ready-made ideas that can be put to work in favour of nativistic political agendas and, indeed, Hindu nationalistic discourses have made widespread use of positive Orientalist stereotypes (Banaji, 2018).

Contrary to Orientalism, this phenomenon has not yet become an established academic subject and, as a result, has been called by different names. Anthropologist James G. Carrier (1992) calls it *ethno-orientalism*; historian Arif Dirlik (1996) *self-orientalism*; and anthropologists Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (1993) *internal orientalism* or *postcolonial predicament.* Gier seems to follow Tony Mitchell (2004), a professor of Cultural Studies, who calls this phenomenon *reverse orientalism*. I use the concept of *re-Orientalism*, which was coined by human geographer Lisa Lau and used by her, Om Prakash Dwivedi and Ana Cristina Mendes, both professors of English Studies (Lau, 2009; Lau and Mendes, 2011; Lau and Dwivedi, 2014; Mendes and Lau, 2014).

The concept of re-Orientalism as theorised by these authors refers to how contemporary writers and artists have used Orientalist stereotypes in their fiction and nonfiction works. I use this term because I also focus on literature. Lau, Dwivedi and Mendes use this notion to describe Indian literature in English to be consumed abroad, such as the popular and critically acclaimed novels by Rushdie and Roy, as well as films, such as *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009). Such authors and films, which have been popular among Western audiences and less so among Indian ones, make use of Orientalist stereotypes in order to captivate their mostly Western audiences. Such stereotypes are mostly negative, given that they focus on poverty, pollution, and violence, that is, stereotypes through which the people of what is simplistically called the first-world tend to imagine the equally simplistic third-world. Studies of authors such as political scientist Partha Chatterjee (1987; 1993), postcolonial theorist Robert J. C. Young (2001), and historian of religions Richard E. King (1999) reveal that the concept of re-Orientalism may be applied to the cultural discourses consumed inside

India since (anti)colonial times until our days, including when analysing constructions of the Indian nation and Hindu religion. Indian authors have endeavoured to reinvent several tropes which have been used to refer to them in the past. The main difference between the international and intranational strands of re-Orientalism lie in the fact that, while stereotypes for Western audiences tend to rely on negative stereotypes, "ideas of India" transmitted through contemporary English-language mythological fiction are for the most part optimistic. Here, it seems prudent to remark that, while there are clear ontological correlations between Orientalist and re-Orientalist stereotypes, other than when the authors themselves acknowledge so, it is likely difficult to prove that there exists causal influence between them, which means that analysts should be careful when analysing such similarities.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 reveal different but interrelated stereotyped representations of India as viewed through different discursive lenses. While attempts at deriving essential ideas about India from these images are doomed to failure, attempts at deriving the ideas and feelings (that is, the representations) that the authors of these images wished to convey seem more plausible. Figure 1 is an Orientalist artwork titled Old *Blue Tiled Mosque Outside of Delhi India*, believed to have been painted around 1885 by the American Orientalist artist Edwin Lord Weeks (1849-1903). This picture presents a single small mosque in an empty and dreamlike landscape. The human figures within the picture aid in the construction of the exoticism of this landscape. They dress lavish clothes, mount or pull camels, and a naked ascetic man talks to them. This style of painting is usually interpreted as belonging to the Orientalist genre and is regarded as creating representations of the "East" as an exotic *Other*. Figure 2 is one of several posters made by the Government of India since 2002 for a campaign titled *Incredıble!ndıa*, which aims at promoting Indian tourism. The visual similarities between this poster and the Orientalist painting by Weeks are evident. The Taj Mahal in the background and the empty and fuzzy landscape are comparable to the blue-tiled mosque. Similarly, the foreground reveals lavishly and colourfully clothed men riding camels. One could argue that this kind of touristic ads are re-Orientalist in the sense that they try to construct representations of touristic destinations as exotic *Others* to lure mostly Western tourists. One could compare these "exotic" depictions of India with Figure 3, which features in an article titled "Pollution turns white marble Taj Mahal yellow and green" published in the online newspaper *India Today*. The blue-tiled mosque and the white Taj Mahal have been swapped by a bleaker Taj Mahal engulfed

by suburban smog and the lavishly dressed Indians riding camels have given place to piles of colourless rubbish. The Taj Mahal also features in *Slumdog Millionaire* and, even though it is depicted in an aesthetically pleasing sepia tone, the suburban smog, and surrounding pollution are also present.

As anyone who has visited the Taj Mahal knows, one is liable to find a composite version of these idealised and de-idealised representations. The camels and lavishly dressed men are there in order to give a paid ride to visiting tourists. The smog and rubbish discarded by Indians in the Yamunā river are also present but can be emphasised or hidden according to the viewer's intention, that is, his ideology: does (s)he want a beautiful photo in order to lure tourists or to show it to relatives and friends at home or does (s)he want to call people's attention to local pollution?

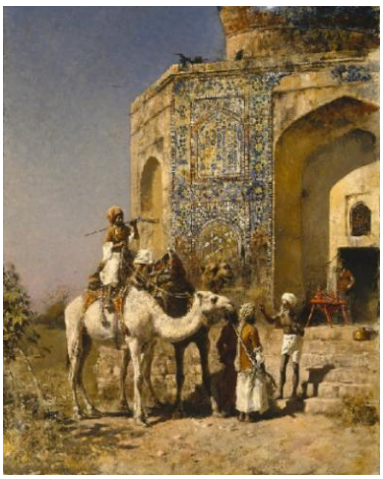


Figure 1 - Edwin Lord Weeks' *Old Blue Tiled Mosque Outside of Delhi India* (c. 1885)[9]



Figure 2 - Poster for the *Incredible!ndia* Campaign[10]

[9] https://www.edwinlordweeks.org/Blue-Tiled-Mosque-At-Delhi-India.html (accessed on 27/5/2022).
[10] https://www.india-briefing.com/news/incredible-india-campaign-launched-chinese-8549.html/ (accessed on 27/5/2022).



Figure 3 - "Pollution turns white marble Taj Mahal yellow and green" *India Today*[11]

The field of postcolonial studies emerged as a response to colonial Orientalism and modern Orientalism as theorised by Said may be said to be a subfield within postcolonial studies. This intellectual framework departs from the premise that Western intellectuals have created essentialist theories about mankind while referring to only a small fraction of it: the West (Chakrabarty, 1992: 3). Postcolonial scholars have tried to counter the stereotyped representation of their identity made by Westerners and to promote "native" representations (Young, 2001: 354-355). For that reason, postcolonial theory has enabled non-Western critics based in the West to present their cultural inheritance as a valuable field of knowledge (Gandhi, 1998: ix), even though such knowledge was already canonical in their native lands. It has been said that the initial representation of India in the West and inside India was produced in a power dynamic involving three parties: 1) the Orientalist scholar, 2) the native informant and 3) the subalterns among the colonised who were unable to represent themselves and were reliant upon native informants for representation (O'Hanlon, 1988: 217). In the view of critical theorist Homi Bhabha (1994), the colonial subject was characterised by ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity. These features point to the fact that the colonial subject shared features from both colonising and colonised cultures. Bhabha posits that the colonial subject emerged from the desire of the colonist to find a subject of

[11] https://www.indiatoday.in/fyi/story/pollution-turns-white-marble-taj-mahal-yellow-and-green-1239010-2018-05-22 (accessed on 27/5/2022).

difference, the native informant, that is "almost the same, but not quite" (86). As a result, the colonial experience allowed the emergence of a "third space", a new identity that shared the features of both coloniser and colonised but was neither. This is the main idea behind Partha Chatterjee's (1987) *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, in which the author states that Indian nationalism produced a discourse that challenged the colonial claim to political domination, while accepting the premises of "modernity" on which colonial domination has been based (30).

The apparent postcolonial paradox is that postcolonial scholars often come from Westernised elite groups of their respective societies and are often regarded as representative of selected Westernised segments of the population. In other words, while the Western scholar is removed from the equation, the "informed native", in opposition to other "uninformed" groups within society, apparently remains. In the present situation, Bhabha's terms could be swapped with "post-coloniser" and postcolonial cultures. The knowledge that postcolonialism may entail more physical freedom than intellectual freedom from the coloniser and that postcolonial thinkers continue to reproduce Western-based epistemological systems led to the appearance of the concept of *decoloniality*, which was devised by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (1928-2018). This concept entails the attempt to decentralise the hegemony of power from the North-Atlantic Western world. Ideally, *decoloniality* does not mean the rejection of Western epistemology, which has dominated academia, but simply its hierarchical realignment as a knowledge system on par with others. This would leave room to criticise Western models of thinking and to accept non-Western ones (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). The concept of decoloniality seems to be particularly relevant for the Indian context, given that India is an ancient civilisation with ample textual and archaeological documentation and that that it was colonised by the culture which most hegemonically determined the linguistic and epistemological traits of contemporary globalisation. This likely means that post-independent India has had more difficulties in breaking free from the colonial shadow than modern nation-states with less ample textual and archaeological documentation and/or which were colonised by other Western cultures less relevant in shaping globalisation.

In my view, described as such, the process of *decoloniality* would provide historical justice to ex-colonial societies and would be akin to real globalisation instead of mere Westernisation of the global world. However, in many modern discourses based on identity, *decoloniality* and similar discourses often mean purging the culture

from external accretions and trying to make it return to its pristine roots. In other words, new cultural hierarchies get created. Such nativistic discourses, which seem to be a consequence of globalisation and are also on the rise on ex-colonising nations, seem to stem from a particularly modern tendency to regard cultural phenomena as historical and spatial essences with clearly defined beginnings and borders between them and other cultural phenomena. In short, they arise from generalisations and stereotypes. Except for Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who has lived in America for decades, the retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have not resided most of their lives abroad. In any case, they follow the same postcolonial trend of trying to value what they regard as traditional Indian concepts, in the case of the male authors against Western ones in the case of female authors against patriarchal ones, despite the fact that they have been schooled into the epistemological system of India's ex-coloniser and have almost invariably or invariably written and published in its language. These retellers are different from Indians of the past who did not have first-hand knowledge of English culture, either through the means of colonial education or through contemporary media. They are also different from contemporary British, who, for the most part, do not have first-hand knowledge of India and, even in the case of those who have, do not tend to derive such knowledge from the perspective of identity groups associated with India and based there.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996) gives the name *ideoscapes* to the phenomenon of representations that are related to the ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of subaltern groups. Such *ideoscapes* comprise elements of the Enlightenment worldview and include: freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation and the master term "democracy" (36). In a later work, Appadurai (2013) adds that, since the birth of the United Nations, minorities of every kind (women, children, immigrants, refugees, political prisoners, and other weak citizens) have had the ability to exert pressure on the state to respect their human rights (63). This situation becomes conducive to the rise of identity-based activism (156). In terms of representation, it may be politically convenient to represent oneself as belonging to a subaltern group rather than to a hegemonic one. As for the specific case of India, historian Romila Thapar (2014) mentions three main groups which have been kept at the margins of history and whose activism has been growing in the previous decades: 1) women; 2) lower castes and outcastes and 3) tribal societies, consisting mainly of forest-dwellers (264). Arjun Appadurai, anthropologist Frank J. Korom and folklorist

Margaret A. Mills (1991) remark that, in South Asia, the culture industries have sought to commodify and domesticate local voices and local voices have tried to incorporate the commodified forms they have been forced to consume (23). Other than the fact that Kavita Kané and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are women, the retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* do not belong to Indian subaltern groups which are traditionally regarded as subaltern: such as the low castes or outcastes, low classes or tribal societies. In any case, they are often concerned with their representation. In this way, perhaps, subaltern groups may be represented as less subaltern and become integrated into a larger identity, be it the national, the religious or gendered one. I do not mean to say that the retellers do so in a premeditated way. They may do so because they feel the need to define themselves and such disparaged groups as Indian and/or Hindu, which would be understood in the contemporary world of nation-states and competing world religions, or as women. Similarly, they may do so because they feel the need to contrast themselves with the individuals of other nation-states, religions and those who follow patriarchal values.

Individuals and groups may employ several discursive strategies to construct and deconstruct identity groups. Through the creation of fictional or fictionalised characters, the events they participate in and their connection to a given identity, narrative seems to be a relevant strategy. As the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been regarded as a living memory of Indians as a nation, notions related to Memory Studies should play an important part in the analysis of contemporary India. The concept of "collective memory" was pioneered by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1968 [1950]). Halbwachs postulated that this kind of memory is not individual or internal but is shared by specific groups, which Halbwachs called *cadres sociaux*, "social cadres", delimited in space and time. Collective memory comes from without and is a discourse based on power which aims at the cementation of social identity based on a shared representation, in this case a memory of a past event.

According to Barbie Zelizer (1995), a professor of Communication, *collective memory* and *history* are not synonyms. Collective memory is ever-changing, unpredictable, partial, usable, material, and simultaneously peculiar and universal. Its main goal is to remake the residue of past decades (or, in this thesis, centuries and even millennia) into material with contemporary resonance, so that much of how people act in the present comes to be regarded in accordance with constructions and memories of past experiences (216). The events studied by history may have no direct relationship to the present. As a result, the main difference between history and

memory lies in the distance they postulate between the past and the present. This distance is "closer" and more relevant in collective memory (Hutton, 2016: 2). Memory also tends to focus on similarity and continuity, while history perceives difference and discontinuity (Assmann, 2011: 28). For this reason, the notion of collective memory may encourage simplistic and essentialised explanations of the past (Thapar, 2014: 58-72) or, in other words, stereotypes which conflate identities of the past with those of the present.

The concept of *collective memory* often straddles into Nationalism Studies, given that, since the creation of the modern nation-state, the identity that "official" versions of a *collective memory* aim to create are often that of the nation. Here, it is relevant to introduce the concepts of patriotism and nationalism. Philosopher Simon Keller (2012) defines patriotism and nationalism as the expression of love towards a nation with positive and negative social outcomes, respectively. A patriot wants his nation to prosper, while a nationalist wants it to dominate other nations (xiii). I regard this explanation as simplistic, given that, in most practical cases, other than self-identification, it seems difficult to distinguish between these ideas. Philosopher Jun-Hyeok Kwak (2015), for example, states that in the East Asian context these terms are indistinguishable. One could ask whether this would also apply to South Asia and, in the second chapter, I plan to demonstrate how the threshold between these concepts is often blurry, at least in the way Keller defines them. Another comment I need to make is that, when I use the term nationalism, I do not mean constant propaganda about the greatness of one's nation and the destruction of its enemies. The idea of "banal nationalism" concocted by social psychologist Michael Billig (1995) is helpful. In Billig's view, nationalism does not refer only to phenomena related to extreme right ideologies manifested through flag-waving. It is a pervading mood which may manifests itself in "unwaved flags", that is, in subtler and sometimes camouflaged cultural representations. In this case, the use of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis sounds particularly effective in trying to decode such subtle, camouflaged cultural representations.

Associating nationalism and collective memory, Orientalist and Semitist Ernest Renan (1990 [1882]) claimed that nationalism exists on the principle that nations possess glorious memories of the past and a present desire to relive such memories. According to Renan, this desire is more important than common cultural singularities between the members of a nation, such as language, geography, race or religion (19).

Such memory of the past "nation" is continually narrated in histories, the media and popular culture, mainly when the nation becomes threatened by external forces (Bhabha, 1990: 1). In postcolonial societies like India, this "external force" is often physically absent but psychologically present through globalised education and culture. Again, representations of the nation are not created by the nation as a whole. Zelizer (1995) states that narrated memories of the nation are often shaped by the elites, sometimes appropriating the ideas of the common people, and that the voice of those who try to interpret the nation's past in a different way is often silenced.

Political Scientist Benedict Anderson (1983) described the nation as an "imagined community" whereby, through the means of print capitalism, a group of people who have never and will never meet are imagined to share a common identity. Anderson believed that the fictional concept of the nation arises from literature. Literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993) speaks of literature as the best aid to ideological transformation, as she claims that the successful reader is the one who learns to identify with the value system disseminated by literature (136). Even though the literary market is still important nowadays, it now constitutes one of several multimodal approaches. One may ask whether other media, such as the internet and television, do not play a more important role in imagining nations and whether any mainstream writer could really be successful nowadays merely by publishing books. Hall (2019) stated that the mass media have been responsible for the basis through which groups and classes have constructed a representation of other groups and classes and a representation of a social totality in which the different social fragments can be grasped as a coherent "whole" (327). Some of the retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are active on the internet and television, two effective platforms which they have used in order to advertise themselves and their books. As of 2024, Kavita Kané is the only reteller with no official website. The others have one official page[12] in which they present their biography and work, hyperlinks to their social media (*Facebook, Instagram, Twitter*), blogs/vlogs, and several audio-visual materials (TV show appearances, TED talks,

[12] https://www.authoramish.com/ (accessed on 27/5/2022); https://www.anandneelakantan.com/ (accessed on 2/5/2022); http://www.chitradivakaruni.com/ (accessed on 27/5/2022); https://devdutt.com/ (accessed on 27/5/2022);

podcasts, etc…). Kavita Kané has a *Facebook* author page,[13] as well as *Instagram*[14] and *Twitter*[15] accounts, all of which are updated frequently.

Another landmark in nationalism studies was *The Invention of Tradition* by Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm and Africanist Terence Ranger (1983). Hobsbawm (1983) posited that traditions which appear or claim to be old are often recent in origin and sometimes invented. In this way, they inculcate values and norms of behaviour by repetition. This automatically implies continuity with the past. In Hobsbawm view, these invented traditions may establish and consolidate social cohesion or the membership of groups, as well as inculcate beliefs, value systems, and conventions of behaviour. In *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, professor of Philosophy James R. Lewis and historian of religion Olav Hammer (2007) adopt Hobsbawm's and Ranger's definition and apply it to religion. According to them, the most common cases of invented sacred traditions are those in which crucial events are projected centuries or millennia into the past in order to create a common national worldview and therefore strengthen cohesion within the group (5). The idea acknowledged in this work is that nationalistic concepts are often similar to religious ones. This conclusion is crucial for the second chapter of my thesis, in which I analyse how "ideas of India" as a nation have often been conflated with ideas of Hinduism in similar ways. As relevant determiners of identity, geographically and historically sprawling phenomena such as nations and religions tend to be simplified and essentialised. Masuzawa (2005) writes how Europe and Christendom became historically conflated with each other as a "well-bounded totality" (322). However, Christianity started as one of several local subaltern religious groups in the Roman empire and its success was likely the product of historical processes and not the identification of essential ontological qualities that Europe and Christianity share. As the historian Richard Foltz (2010) remarks:

> Religions are not monolithic, fixed institutions existing each in their own realm of dominance, although we often speak of 'Christendom,' 'the Islamic World,' and so on. In reality, religions are like organisms: they are born into this world at a point in time, they grow, develop, undergo diverse influences, and adapt to their environment (9).

[13] https://www.facebook.com/authorkavitakane (accessed on 27/5/2022).
[14] https://www.instagram.com/kavitakane/ (accessed on 27/5/2022).
[15] https://twitter.com/kavitakane (accessed on 27/5/2022).

Following Foucault's definition of discourse, I would say that this statement applies to every religion, nation, and cultural phenomenon. I regard all as continuous processes and projects rather than as pure essences that get corrupted and have to be reformed, a kind of discourse which is sometimes applied to Hinduism and that the reader will often find in this thesis. There is no such thing as "one" Hinduism or "one" Christianity but only people and practices which are represented or represent themselves as being Hindu or Christian at any given place and time.

The use of concepts such as nation and religion also lead me to discuss language and translation. As my discussion has shown, the modern English concepts of *nation* and *religion* have a modern Western intellectual history. This does not mean that there were no institutions in both the pre-modern West and precolonial non-Western cultures which could be partially compared to how we understand these terms nowadays. Again, self-identification sounds more relevant than identification by others. Religion, in particular, has been a particularly elusive concept to define and nothing seems to unite the "world religions" which Masuzawa (2005) has analysed. The term may have a positive meaning and be regarded as a desirable label or it may be connoted with institutionalisation and be avoided in favour of more neutral or positive terms such as "philosophy", "way of life", or "science" (Clarke, 2006a: 9), as I shall demonstrate in the second chapter. I usually feel unsatisfied with the concept of *religion*, which to me sounds like an empty signifier, and am always at a loss as to how to refer to phenomena which are usually referred to as *religion* in a clear and meaningful way. Again, much as with cultural phenomena, I do not regard language and the concepts they point to as the monopoly of specific identities and historical times. This means that I am not so interested in finding out the Ur-meaning of a specific idea and its use as the only legitimate one, while regarding recent in-group uses as modern fabrications or out-group uses as cultural misappropriations, reactions which, in my view, are common to many hegemonic discourses, including some academic ones. In this thesis, this should apply both to terms and concepts which were said to exist in the West and not in India and vice-versa.

A final relevant question is: how is the *Rāmāyaṇa* related to nation and religion? In *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, historical sociologist Anthony D. Smith (1999) devised a comprehensive typology of nationalism. The author defined national communities as populations distinguished by: 1) an identifying name or emblem; 2) a myth of common ancestry; 3) shared historical memories and traditions; 4) one or more

elements of a common culture; 5) a link with a historic territory or "homeland" and 6) a measure of solidarity, at least among the elites. In his discursive diversity, the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition could fit any of these descriptions.[16] This dissertation attempts to provide information on the role that the *Rāmāyaṇa* has played in the representation of the Indian and Hindu identities in India during the second decade of the 21st century. It also attempts to show how other voices less concerned with nation and religion and more concerned with other kinds of identity, such as femininity, have also carved a distinct niche in the mythological fiction genre. Nation, religion and the place of different sub-identities into these overarching ones have been pressing matters in contemporary India, as the growing literature on nationalism in India reveals. In 2020, as I write these lines, several scholarly books have explored the subject of nationalism in India through different prisms. This reveals how this study is relevant and timely:

1) Political scientists Bidyut Chakrabarty and Bhuwan Kumar Jha (2020) have traced the history of Hindu nationalism through the life and works of its most important theoreticians;

2) The study by political scientist Paula Wallace (2020) gathers scholarly articles related to the 2019 general election in India, which has cemented the power of Hindu nationalism in the country;

3) Ex-diplomat, politician and fiction and nonfiction writer Shashi Tharoor (2020), who will be an important character in my second chapter, has written a defence of civic nationalism against Hindu nationalism as a political solution for contemporary India;

4) Anustup Basu (2020), a professor of English, Media and Cinema Studies, has studied the development of right-wing Hinduism as a kind of "political monotheism". I deal with these first four points in the second chapter;

5) Prem Kumar Vijayan (2020), a professor of English Literature, has studied how Hindu nationalism has used gendered discourses in order to spread its hegemony. I analyse the same phenomenon in relation to the contemporary English-language retellings in the third chapter;

[16] As any typology requires so, Smith used examples from all over the world. Sometimes, he mentioned the case of India and once he mentioned the role of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Indian nationalism.

6) Civil rights activist Anand Teltumbde (2020), who was arrested in 2020 for devising a plot to assassinate Modi,[17] has collected papers on the complex relationship between Hindu nationalism and the lower castes. I analyse the same phenomenon in relation to the contemporary English-language retellings in the fourth chapter;

7) Anthropologist Arkotong Longkumer (2020) has written a study which has shed light on the influence of Hindu nationalism in the remote regions of Northeast India. This study is comparable to my treatment of India as a geographical entity with well-defined borders in the sixth chapter.

[17] SAMPATH, G. (2020). "Who is Anand Teltumbde and why was he arrested recently?" *The Hindu*, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/who-is-anand-teltumbde-and-why-was-he-arrested-recently/article26292219.ece (accessed on 27/10/2021).

Chapter 1

The *Rāmāyaṇa* Then and Now: From Powerful Narrative to Narrative of Power

In this chapter, I explain the relevance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition in India and highlight the adaptations which have had broad scope in the subcontinent and which may still have relevance at a pan-national level and/or are still commonly discussed in academia. I also refer to the main topics of discussion they have raised. I use recent secondary literature to show that popular instantiations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition have been used as a powerhouse for two opposite purposes, mainly in recent times: to cement the worldview of the most powerful groups within society and as a means of resistance used by subaltern groups against that same worldview, with the former version having broader cultural influence. I end by introducing the major adaptations made in the second decade of the 21st century, including those which will constitute the corpus of my thesis, and by introducing the role of English-language and of neoliberalism in India.

The narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has had great importance for Indian culture. First of all, referring to Indian (and any national culture) culture in the singular is a generalisation and I sometimes use it for conventional reasons, given that modernity has often divided human cultures along national lines and academia has often followed suit. The modern nation-state of India has many federal states and constitutionally recognised languages, [18] besides other languages which are not constitutionally recognised, as well as different ethnic groups, which have no constitutional status. In national cases like India and similar countries with great size and sociocultural diversity at various levels (linguistic, religious, ethnic, among others), it feels necessary that such diversity is taken into consideration when analysing cultural matters (Jain, 1989: 84). The *Rāmāyaṇa* has been referred to as a repository of images of the "Hindu nation" (van der Veer, 2001: 190), a description which emphasises its religious (Hindu) and political (nation) dimensions. Descriptions often underscore this importance through generalisations. As an example, Arvind Rajagopal (2001), a professor of Media Studies, states that to know the *Rāmāyaṇa* is to know India itself (87).

Throughout history, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and other Indian narratives have been categorised into different genres. Together with the other epic, the *Mahābhārata,* this

[18] See Patil (2013: 299) for the official numbers, which I did not mention, given that they keep changing.

epic has been regarded to belong to the category of *itihāsa*. This Sanskrit word is usually translated as "thus it happened" and involves the concepts of *myth*, *history* and possibly *philosophy* and *morality* (Ghosh, 2007). *Mythology* and *history* are supposed to be easily distinguishable and even dichotomic modern epistemological terms. In the Western world, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is usually regarded as part of Indian mythology. However, as the term *mythology* has been used pejoratively to describe unlikely narratives associated with non-Abrahamic religions, it feels understandable that this disparity may sound offensive to devotees of living non-Abrahamic religions.

The concept of *history* has also been defined modernly by Western academia. As historian of South Asia Audrey Truschke (2021) remarks, the idea that colonial nations did not have a historical tradition is an Orientalist stereotype which has survived into postcolonial times. The author argues that the same could be said about the West, which also lacked a modern historical tradition before the meaning and methods of the discipline were fixed in modern times (7). One could also argue that there have been previous Western attempts at protohistory. However, if one is to accept such cultural continuity for the Western case, why should similar arguments for the continuity of previously colonised cultures be regarded as fabrications? With this discursive hierarchical disparity in mind, Truschke states that, if we broaden the scope of "history" to include narratives which refer to historical events, then not only pre-modern Europe but also colonial nations had historical traditions. However, this does not mean that such pre-modern histories or even modern ones can have absolute claims to factuality. Indeed, as modern history is regarded as scientific and science has such epistemological authority in contemporary society, some Indian discourses have aimed to find evidence to legitimise the factuality of *itihāsa* (Thapar, 2014: 116-126) and the ancient Sanskrit term *itihāsa* and modern English term *history* get confused in the modern Hindi term *itihāsa*, which is indeed used to refer to the academic subject of history. Finally, besides thinking of mythology and history as dichotomies, one could think of a middle ground definition which deliberately mixes fact and fiction and makes it difficult to distinguish between them, much like happens in the contemporary genre of historical literature, which are supposed to be fiction, as well as historical revisionism, which is supposed to be nonfiction. By straddling the ontological break between mythology and history, contemporary Indian mythological fiction often aims to become one of these.

Another important literary distinction is the one between *śruti* and *smṛti*, Sanskrit for "that which is heard" and "that which is remembered", respectively. The first refers

to religious texts which "have been heard". These are not ascribed to any specific author, place or time and are seen as eternal and uncreated. The latter genre, to which the *Rāmāyaṇa* is said to belong, while also regarded as sacred, refers to religious texts authored by human beings. This difference in genesis makes the former texts fixed and inviolable and the latter fluid and malleable. I find it relevant that the concepts of *itihāsa* and *smṛti* reminds one of the modern scholarly concept of the modern concept of *collective memory* and, as a result, may be regarded or even consciously used as Indian and/or Hindu discourses on cultural remembrance.

Western scholars often try to establish analogies between the *Rāmāyaṇa* and other textual traditions, most often the Bible and the Homeric epics (Richman, 2008: xv). Such analogies, like all analogies, may be problematic and, in the case of descriptions of Asia, tend to consider Asian phenomena to be defective analogues of Western ones. The *Rāmāyaṇa*, unlike the Bible and the Homeric epics, was not a fixed textual tradition until recently (Goldman, 1986: 97-99/106; Richman, 2008: xv). I should underscore that it was neither fixed nor merely textual but also existed in a plethora of different non-textual media and that, even though it now has a critical Ur-edition, it continues to exist as a diverse, flexible narrative tradition. Besides the canonical Sanskrit version, there exist several other Sanskrit ones. There are also regional versions written in local vernaculars, with some modern Indian states having more than one regional version. In the view of Sanskritist Robert P. Goldman (1986), one of the translators of the canonical textual version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* into English, the epic retains a strong oral and folk component which has not been engulfed by the hegemony of print-capitalism. To modern media and oral versions told by relatives, one may add theatre plays, sculpture, painting, folk music, tapestry, among other arts and crafts. For this reason, it is often said that no one ever "reads" the *Rāmāyaṇa* for the first time (Ramanujan, 2004 [1987]: 158). In Indian culture, the story is ever-present and the first approach that most Indians have to the text is not even literary. Essayist and novelist Pankaj Mishra (2006), for instance, states that, like millions of other children, he first heard the story of Rāma from his parents and that it would be impossible to remember a time when he did not know it (viii).

Besides existing as a stand-alone Hindu narrative in different media, the *Rāmāyaṇa* exists as a subplot in the canonical Sanskrit version of the *Mahābhārata*, in which it is

called *Rāmopākhyāna,* Sanskrit for "the short tale of *Rāma".*[19] The *Rāmāyaṇa* is also a relevant tradition for other religions and nation-states. There is one Buddhist version, the *Dasaratha Jātaka,* and many Jain versions of the story.[20] According to his biographer ʾAbū'l Faḍl (1551-1602), the Mughal ruler Akbar (1542-1602) commissioned translations of the Hindu epics into Persian, the court language, as a medium for promoting better understanding between Hindus and Muslims (quoted in Miller, 1991: 786-787). The tale also exists and is relevant in India's neighbouring regions, particularly in Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, where the story is performed in several theatrical styles, the plot has been influenced by local versions of Islam.[21] In short, it seems that whatever may be said about the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition is necessarily some kind of generalisation and, here, I do not intend to aim to be encyclopedic but to focus on the versions of the tale and on the topics which will be relevant for my later analysis. I use the expression *Rāmāyaṇa tradition* when referring to the narrative as a recognisable structural whole and not to any specific version.

1.1 The *Rāmāyaṇa* as a *charter myth*

Almost every scholarly and non-scholarly text about the *Rāmāyaṇa* begins with a description of the epic as what has been called a *charter myth.* Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1948 [1926]), who invented this concept, considered myth to be a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom (79). Nowadays, Malinowski's use of words such as "primitive", "faith" and even "myth" feel dated. Even though the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a tale with ancient origins, it is also a contemporary story. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is also not only related to "faith" but plays wider social roles which going beyond religion, whichever way one defines the term. Despite these

[19] SCHARF, Peter (2003). *Rāmopākhyāna - The Story of Rāma in the Mahābhārata: A Sanskrit Independent-Study Reader*, London: Routledge.

[20] REYNOLDS, Frank E. (1991). "Ramayana, Rama Jataka, and Ramakien: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Buddhist Traditions" in RICHMAN, Paula (ed.). *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press; KULKARNI, V. M. (1980). "Jain Ramayanas and Their Source" in RAGHAVAN, V. (eds.). *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy; CLINES, Gregory M. (2022). *Jain Rāmāyaṇa Narratives: Moral Vision and Literary Innovation,* London: Routledge.

[21] RAGHAVAN, V. (ed.) (1980). *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy; KAM, Garrett (2000). *Ramayana in the Arts of Asia*, Singapore: Select Publishing; VATSYAYAN, Kapila (2004). "The Ramayana Theme in the Visual Arts of South and Southeast Asia" in BOSE, Mandakranta (ed.). *The Rāmāyaṇa Revisited*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; SARAN, Malini, and KHANNA, Vinod C. (2004). *The Ramayana in Indonesia*, Delhi: Ravi Dayala Publisher; ACRI, Andrea, CREESE, Helen, and GRIFFITHS, Arlo (eds.) (2011). *From Laṅkā Eastwards: The Rāmāyaṇa in the Literature and Visual Arts of Indonesia*, Leiden: KITLV Press; XIANLIN, Ji (2012). "The Ramayana in China" *China Report*, Vol. 48, pp. 187-198; BOSE, Anita (2020). *Ramayana: Footprints in South-East Asian Culture and Heritage,* Calcutta: BEE Books; FUKUOKA, Madoka (2022). *Ramayana Theater in Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Jenny Stanford Publishing.

shortcomings, Malinowski's definition of myth as a structural model which can work as a blueprint for lived reality is useful.

In the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, this function has been represented through the actions of the characters, who, depending on the version and on the audience, have often been regarded as ideals to be emulated or counter-ideals to be avoided. Rāma and Sītā, in particular, have been role models for male and female behaviour in the most popular versions of the tradition, while the siblings Rāvaṇa and Śūrpaṇakhā have been models for what men and women should not be. Given the great diversity of the tradition, however, this does not mean that there are no exceptions and I should refer to them later. In any case, in specific sociocultural contexts, Indians may impart moralising prescriptions to children and note that they should behave like Rāma and never like Rāvaṇa (Goldman and Goldman, 2004: 87). Anthropologist Irawati Karve (1969) stated that the whole *Rāmāyaṇa* is filled with idealised characters, such as the ideal brother, the ideal servant, ideal subjects, and even ideal villains (108).[22] This kind of monovalent characterisation is sometimes considered to be the main cause of the success of the epic (Goldman, 1986: 4), given that the tale is said to provide unambiguous answers to ethical questions. Again, in this chapter I shall show that the diverse tradition reveals that, while such answers may be unambiguous in some versions and sociocultural contexts, they may be ambiguous in others. In any case, while revealing the importance of this epic tradition for individual cultivation, such descriptions reveal the importance that any version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the tradition as a whole may have in shaping a community of like-minded individuals.

In relation to individual duty, I should also mention the concept of *dharma*. This is a relevant and complex Sanskrit concept which changed through time and space and which, as I shall show in the second chapter, is often mentioned by the contemporary English-language retellers of the epic and Indian public intellectuals who discuss the unique traits of Indian and Hindu civilisations. It has often been translated as "moral conduct" or, in the modern Hindi sense, as "religion". This concept is usually stratified, given that this kind of moral conduct has been considered to differ according to one's birth. Given the fact that the most popular versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* may provide moral and ontological justifications for the legitimation of the existing hierarchical systems

[22] Given the historical and cultural complexity of the subject, my approach here is necessarily short and just what is necessary to understand this section and the discussions of the term which shall appear later. For in-depth discussions, see the chapter on this topic in Halbfass (1990 [1988]: 310-348); Brockington (2004); the appendix in Das (2009); and Hiltebeitel (2011a).

within society (Pandit, 1995: 105), the *Rāmāyaṇa* is often said to be a treatise on *dharma* (Lutgendorf, 1991: 343). The antonym of this concept is *adharma*, which could be translated as "immoral conduct".

As the main protagonists of the epic may be regarded as a perfectly functional family and the main antagonists as a dysfunctional one, scholars also stress the importance of the epic at the collective or social level, mainly in a family context,. Anthropologist Peter van der Veer (2001) calls the *Rāmāyaṇa* the most influential discourse on the family in Hindu North India (89). This tendency is clearer when considering the generational transmission of culture, given that the maxims, characters and tales of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are said to provide the ideal medium for the acculturation of children (Goldman, 2004: 21) into the family and society at large. Such use is clear in the words of reteller Devdutt Pattanaik, who states in an online article that Indians say that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is to be kept inside the house, given that it promotes union in the family, while the *Mahābhārata*, which portrays family conflict, is to be kept outside.[23]

The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition has also been considered to be a *charter* for society as a whole, including for political entities. This is the function to which contemporary scholars have paid the most attention. The hero and the villain of the tale, Rāma and Rāvaṇa, are or become kings throughout the plot. As a political tool, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been used and appropriated in order to define and polarise identities, that is, to define who is inside and outside a given community. According to historian Romila Thapar (2014), the fact that the *Rāmāyaṇa* constitutes a short and compact story in which good and evil are demarcated was used for political purposes since early times. In her view, initially, the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s main political use was as an aid in the gradual conversion of relatively egalitarian societies organised by clans into the hierarchical society of caste and kings, given that the tale presents and endorses a stratified society with the king at the top (192-203).

In modern times, the epic has been used not only to legitimise the role of the king or the leader but also to legitimise the nation-state of India. Modern Indian politicians from Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) to Modi[24] have often used the *Rāmāyaṇa* to

[23] https://devdutt.com/articles/mahabharata-inside-the-house/ (accessed on 9/3/2022).

[24] GHOSAL, Aniruddha, SHERIFF, Kaunain, and KAUSHIKA Pragya (2014). "Under 'Ram Avatar Modi', BJP Calls for Ram Rajya in Delhi" *Indian Express*, https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/under-ram-avatar-modi-bjp-calls-for-ram-rajya-in-delhi/ (accessed on 20/05/2021); RUPANI, Vijay (2020). "Gandhi envisioned Ram Rajya, Modi fulfilling it: Gujarat CM Vijay Rupani" *Business Standard*, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/gandhi-envisioned-ram-rajya-modi-fulfilling-it-gujarat-cm-vijay-rupani-120100200493_1.html (accessed on 5/04/2021).

explain their political initiatives (Lutgendorf, 1991: 379). Nevertheless, the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition can be appropriated for different political purposes. While Gandhi interpreted the *Rāmāyaṇa* in an inclusive way to try to unite the Indian population under the same banner, Hindu nationalists have used it in an exclusive way, given that the struggle between Rāma and Rāvaṇa can be used as a framework to understand and legitimise the struggle between Hindus and Muslims (van der Veer, 2001: 158) or, as I will argue throughout this thesis, between Hindus and other religions in general, Indians and non-Indians and even feminists and male chauvinists.[25]

1.2 The great and little traditions

Essentialist studies about India have stated that Indian culture is composed of two overarching traditions: 1) an urban and elitist *great tradition* contraposed by 2) a rural and folk *little tradition(s)*. While simplistic, this dichotomy is helpful when analysing discourses on India, Hinduism and the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. Anthropologist Robert Redfield (1956: 41-42) was the first one to establish this division, even though he did not apply it to the Indian case. During the 1950s and 1960s, this concept was used by other anthropologists who studied India and who made a distinction between the *great tradition* of classical Hindu texts and the *little tradition(s)* of rural India. Some stated that both traditions were different and others advocated that they formed a greater unity (Gosling, 2001: 9). As usual, my aim is not to prove the veracity or falsity of such claims, considering that this would be possible, given that in my view this all depend on the criteria one chooses to fit phenomena into the same or different boxes. I just aim to see how such discourses developed and were accepted or rejected.

Folklorist Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan (2004) stated that one should distinguish between not two but three sets of independent oppositions in Indian culture: classical versus folk, written versus spoken, and free versus fluid (539). He also identified three different strands of the little tradition(s): 1) folk traditions, which rework and domesticate the classical tradition; 2) *bhakti*, "devotion", which subverts that classical tradition; and 3) *tantra,* a later form of Hinduism (and Buddhism), which inverts it (26-27). The little traditions are represented as more oral and fluid than the

[25] The appropriation of the myth for political purposes is also noticeable at the institutional level. One of the first parties to emerge after the establishment of independent India was called *Rāma Rājya Pariṣad* (1948-1971), "party of Rāma's kingdom" (van der Veer, 2001: 383-384), which took its name from the concept of *Rāmarājya*, "Rāma's reign" or "Rāma's kingdom". The concept refers to the ideal kingdom that Rāma established on earth, a concept I analyse in the fifth chapter.

great one, which tends to be written and fixed. This kind of dichotomies and essentialising discourses have survived into the 21st century. Author Gurcharan Das (2000), who often writes about social issues in contemporary India, states that there exist two distinct and easily separable cultures in India: a rural one dominated by traditional Hindu beliefs and a modern urbanite elite culture, which is widespread through the nation (155).

The relationship between these traditions, considering that such a division exists and represents the Indian social reality as a whole, has been a matter of debate. With respect to the matter of syncretism, one can posit two hypotheses: either 1) the two traditions are hierarchically balanced and equally represented or 2) there is a difference of power between them. Novelist Arundhati Roy (2002), one of the most popular Indian English-language writers in the West, hints at the latter hypothesis. In her view, as economic and cultural differences grow in India, so do both traditions. This, Roy has stated, is the real horror of India: the powerful and the powerless grow further apart and never share anything, neither language nor country (36). Reflecting this view, modern research on the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition and India tends to focus either on the elites or the oppressed (Dwyer, 2006: 58). As a result, classification and interpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is sometimes regarded as consisting of binary extremes: the elitist and the subaltern, with rare considerations of hypothetical liminal spaces between them.

It feels understandable that, instead of focusing on disunity, nationalistic takes on this issue should try to criticise this stance as attempts at divide and rule perpetrated by foreign academics or native accomplices and that they should invert this discourse and posit some kind of ontological continuity and similarity between different groups within the nation. Both views are likely simplistic and try to collapse many people living in different times and places into just one or two cultural categories. Drastic dichotomies may be useful for interpretative purposes and may indicate trends, but they also run the risk of positing tendencies with no historical, geographical or sociological points of contact. The opposite trend, one which considers a fundamental similarity in a diverse country with the highest population number in the world, also seems implausible. Whatever the relationship between different cultures within India may be (urbanite and rural, literature and illiterate, rich and poor, etc…), though, this is likely not a relationship of extremes.

One of the most common suppositions regarding the relationship between the two traditions is that the *little* one is appropriated by the *great* one in a hegemonic manner.

Sociologist Mysore N. Srinivas (2001 [1956]) called this process *Sanskritisation*. Sanskrit refers to the scholarly, sacred language of Hinduism (as well as Jainism and Buddhism), which has a rich literary heritage documented since the *Vedas* (Filliozat, 2000 [1992]) and greatly declined during the time of Muslim rule, even though its scholarly and religious use did not stop then (Truschke, 2021). *Sanskritisation* does not entail only linguistic but also sociocultural change to the social structures encoded into Sanskrit works. Most of the best-known pan-Indian versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* presents readers with a good narrative example of this idea, given that the epic tells the story of a royal upper-caste man (Rāma) who evokes respect from the submissive subaltern groups he encounters and fear from non-submissive ones. Indeed, one assumption underlying many of the studies on the *Rāmāyaṇa* is that the tale reinforces the *ethos* of the priestly elites through the definition and reinforcement of hierarchies established during encounters between major characters (Goldman, 2004: 40) and making little room for discourses which go against them (*Ibid.:* 20). In this regard, the evolution of the epic tradition is considered to be defined by its gradual *Brahmanisation* (Brockington, 1984), a term which probably better describes the social consequences of *Sanskritisation*. This is the reason why Velcheru N. Rao (1991), a Professor of Indian literature, states that, despite the appeal of the epic in India, its popularity tends to increase with the status of caste (130). I shall analyse contrasting views to these ones in due time.

In her study of Hinduism, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, Sanskritist Wendy Doniger (2009) states that oppressed groups (women and lower castes) also contributed to mainstream Hinduism (1). In her view, priestly attitudes towards oral folk traditions have ranged from ignorance to condemnation. Nevertheless, most Brahmins have appropriated folk traditions into their texts, sometimes in sanitised forms, given that they were no longer able to ignore the fact that they were part of widespread religious movements (370-405). In the case of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, this idea of the entanglement of different traditions becomes clear when one considers the fact that Rāma is exiled among the common people before he can ascend the throne. Through this process, he learns how the non-privileged lives (522). According to Doniger, even though the term *little* carries a pejorative geographical connotation, the little traditions would constitute most of Hinduism. The author suggests that the terms should be reversed: the pan-Indian tradition should be called *little*, given that it constitutes a system which belongs to the limited elite groups of India, while the village cultures

should constitute the *great* tradition, given that they are the most geographically widespread (382). Doniger also adds that, following modern democratic and socialist values, the privileges that the state has given to the lower castes in recent decades, such as the Mandal Commission[26] reservations of 1980, have stood Sanskritisation on its head. This has led to what Doniger has called *Dalitification* (633), which has been one of the main causes of middle and upper class complaints. This inversion also seems related to contemporary views on populism, according to which the authorities have to find legitimacy for their hegemonical power in an identification with the "majority" instead of just with the most powerful minority (Bell, 1992).

1.3 Classification and interpretation

Several scholars have tried to classify the many different versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in ways which remind one of the dichotomy between the great and little traditions. Indologist Paula Richman (2008), who has mostly conducted research on the *little tradition* versions of the epic, classifies them into: 1) Sanskrit versions, 2) regional language devotional tales, and 3) folk versions (8).[27] In the author's view, authoritative versions, which refer to versions that have been influential beyond the time and place in which they have been produced and may be both Sanskrit or regional versions, tend to endorse normative ideologies of ranked social hierarchy (9). Richman identifies three versions with authoritative status: Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* in Sanskrit, the regional 12th century *Kamparāmāyaṇa*[28] (Kampar's *Rāmāyaṇa*) in Tamil and the 17th century *Rāmcaritmānas*, written by Tulsīdās in Awadhi, which is a vernacular of Sanskrit older than modern Hindi and nowadays regarded as one of its dialects. The main goal of the latter two is to praise Rāma as a compassionate deity (10). For that reason, they are regarded as more devotional in tone than Vālmīki's text. It seems that the concepts Sanskrit/regional/folk and authoritative/non-authoritative do not overlap entirely, given

[26] Commission established in 1979 and headed by Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal (1918-1982) with the purpose of identifying the backward classes and castes of India and allot them places in education and public jobs. Its constitution led to protest by both the Congress and the BJP. AGRAWAL, S. P., and AGGARWAL J. C. (1991). *Educational and Social Uplift of Backward Classes: At What Cost and How? Mandal Commission and After*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company; JENKINS, Laura Dudley (2003). *Identity and Identification In India: Defining the Disadvantaged*, London: Routledge.

[27] Indologist Philip Lutgendorf (2007b: 33) categorises the versions of *Mahābhārata* in a similar way. According to him, they can be more "elite/literary/classical" or more "popular/oral/folk" in nature, even though they often overlap and cross-pollinate.

[28] SUNDARAM, P. S. (trans.) (2002). *The Kamba Ramayana*, London: Penguin Books.

that, as Richman (2008) adds, the Sanskrit versions may not always reiterate the power ideologies of the authoritative versions (9).

Richman gives the name "counter-*Rāmāyaṇas*" (1991b: 15) or "oppositional readings" (2008: 16) to versions which subvert or even invert the common discourses of the authoritative versions. However, how can one be in opposition with something that is often characterised as monovalent? Even though the epic is sometimes described so, the diversity of the tradition tends to defy simple dichotomic explanations. In the view of Sanskritist Mandakranta Bose (2016b), the main paradox of the tradition lies in the fact that it tells the story of a righteous man who engages in many wrongs (161). Oppositional readings tend to question such ideals and posit alternative worldviews in which the heroes of the tale neither represent ultimate good nor the villains represent ultimate evil.[29] Similarly, Mishra (2006) states that the appeal of the *Rāmāyaṇa* among ordinary people has distinguished it from most of the Indian literary tradition, which has been forbiddingly elitist (vii). This assertion seems to contradict the view that the status of the *Rāmāyaṇa* rises with that of caste. In my view, the solution to this conundrum may be as follows: different versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are prized by different Indian groups. Some are more elitist, while others are more anti-elitist. The divergence in the classification of given versions of the epic lies mainly in the approach any single author may take and not on the tradition itself. Popular versions created by members of privileged groups may perhaps tend to maintain the *status quo*, while circumscribed versions created by underprivileged groups may perhaps tend to question it.

Similar views arise when one shifts one's attention from classification towards interpretation. One can identify the conflict between a *great* tradition and a *little* one in the modern scholarship on the *Rāmāyaṇa.* Indologist Philip Lutgendorf (2004a), who often writes about both premodern and modern retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa,* identifies two main tendencies of analysis of the epic during the second half of the 20th century. The first one includes the analysis of classical texts, mainly the canonical textual version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the preparation of critical editions. Apart from this fixed classical tradition, there is a second broader view of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as an inclusive and multivocal tradition subject to constant reinterpretation (149). This approach, which

[29] Sanskritist Alf Hiltebeitel (2011b: 42-43), an authority on the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata,* draws a comparison between folk versions and what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls counter-narratives in colonial and postcolonial discourse. In the view Hiltebeitel, such versions disturb ideological maneuvers through which "imagined communities" are given essentialist identities (149).

refers to the many versions in different media made through time and space, includes what would be regarded as the *little traditions*. I would call these approaches "literary" and "anthropological", respectively. Literary approaches tend to focus on canonised texts, even when nobody but specialists may have read them, while anthropological approaches tend to focus on living traditions, even when they may not have been written down. Rajagopal (2001) suggests four different approaches to the study of the epic. He calls the first three textual, historicist, and culturalist approaches. Each focuses respectively on the narrative features, the historical context of composition and the cultural context in which a given version has been produced (86). To these, Rajagopal adds a fourth contemporary approach, one which has examined the constituent parts of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition and its subcultural uses (*Ibid.*). This latter view can be conflated with Lutgendorf's anthropological view.

1.4 Vālmīki: The man and the myth

Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* in Sanskrit is regarded as the canonical textual version of the *Rāmāyaṇa.* According to Goldman and Goldman (1996), Sanskritists regard Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* as unshakable in its claim to the title of *Ādikāvya,* the "first and foremost of poems" and the inspiration and model for others (35). Vālmīki's poem consists of around 24.000 verses divided into seven parts called *kāṇḍas*, with most scholars considering the first and last *kāṇḍas*, which tell about the childhood of Rāma (*Bālakāṇḍa)* and what happened after Sītā was rescued from Laṅkā (*Uttarakāṇḍa*), to be later accretions. Though the orality of the epic is usually said to be beyond doubt, the fact that this version is shorter when compared to the other Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata*, and more coherent, makes it more likely to be the work of a single author (van der Veer, 2001: 125). The purported author, Vālmīki, appears as a character in the tale. The discussion about Vālmīki's identity as a real and single author seems to say less about Vālmīki himself and the *Rāmāyaṇa* than it says about contemporary commentators, so I will not deal with the question of the author's historicity.

In terms of dating, it is sometimes said that no other work of literature has generated as much scholarly disagreement as Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* (Goldman, 1986: 14), whose dates of creation range a period of about one thousand years, from 500 B.C.E to 500 C.E (Thapar, 1989: 4). Rather than trying to date Vālmīki's version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in absolute terms, most scholars have preferred to date it relatively to other versions. However, the absolute dating of the epic is an important matter not only for scholars

but for many modern Indians, who regard the canonical version of the epic as a sacred text. Archaeological excavations, which were mostly conducted by the Indian archaeologist B. B. Lal (1921-2022), have been made on sites identified with the stories of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* and have revealed that the former was younger than the latter, while, according to tradition, it should have been the opposite (van der Veer, 2001: 128). Remarking that such excavations have often been conducted in order to prove the textual tradition and not the other way around, van der Veer (*Ibid.*) has quoted an Indian archaeologist as stating that he would "strive and strive with success to make Archaeology and Tradition about Rama and Krishna meet on the same plane of time" (145).

Many websites and *e-zines* feature articles discussing astronomical evidence to date the events of the story (Kurien, 2007: 170). I must warn the reader that the following are works for Hindu audiences and are not accepted as independent, unbiased works in academia. In *The Scientific Dating of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Vedas*, which is full of astrological and astronomical jargon, P. V. Vartak (1999)[30] tries to date the *Rāmāyaṇa* through astronomical clues in the text and concludes that the events of the tale must have occurred in 7400 BCE In *The Historic Rama: Indian Civilization at the End of Pleistocene*, Nilesh Nilkanth Oak (2014)[31] also analyses astronomical evidence to falsify Vartak and similar writers. He states explicitly that his research is the best one to date and concludes that the *Rāmāyaṇa* occurred in the 13rd millennium BCE. Finally, in *Historical Rama*, D. K. Hari and D. K. Hema Hari (2010)[32] resort not only to astronomy but also to geology, archaeology, ancient travel literature, government journals, Indian and British historical documents, recent scientific research, and local folk knowledge to conclude that the *Rāmāyaṇa* happened in 5100 BCE. Even though each book is full of conclusive evidence, the dates vary by millennia.

Like every premodern text which had to be copied by hand, Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* soon began to differ regionally. This resulted in its broad division into northern and southern recensions (Brockington, 2016a: 3). A critical edition of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*

[30] Vartak's personal website states that the author is an ex-surgeon who currently works as a writer, spiritualist, philosopher and lecturer. https://sites.google.com/site/booksofdrpvvartak/biography (accessed on 23/9/2021).
[31] According to his blog, Nilesh Nilkanth Oak studied Chemical Engineering and is interested in astronomy, archaeology, geology, genetics, quantum mechanics, economics, ancient narratives and philosophy. https://nileshoak.wordpress.com/about/ (accessed on 28/5/2024).
[32] D. K. Hari and D. K. Hema Hari are a couple. D. K. Hari studied commerce and business administration and worked in the industrial sector in India and overseas. https://bharathgyan.com/d-k-hari/ (accessed on 28/5/2024). D. K. Hema Hari studied physics and computer engineering and has worked in consulting, mentoring and business development. https://bharathgyan.com/d-k-hema-hari/ (accessed on 28/5/2024).

into seven volumes was made by the Oriental Institute of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda fairly recently, between 1960 and 1975. This edition is fully translated into English. It was annotated and published by the Princeton University Press between 1986 and 2017, with Robert P. Goldman working as its general editor (Goldman, 1986; Pollock, 1986, 1991; Lefeber, 1994; Goldman and Goldman, 1996, 2017; Goldman, Goldman and Nooten, 2009). This Sanskrit edition has helped to turn the Baroda critical edition into the "official" *Rāmāyaṇa* in the mind of classicists. According to van der Veer (2001), the goal of the Baroda edition was to represent Hinduism as modern and as on par with other "world religions" with similar canonised scriptures. This means that the appearance of this edition can only be understood in the framework of India's encounter with modernity and globalisation. In van der Veer's words, canonisation was achieved through the nationalisation of the past by means of printing and editing, through the reversion to an *Ur*-text that privileged a classical tradition and through the marginalisation of everything that came afterward, even though Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is written in an ancient classical language which can be read only by a select educated few. That which was marginalised was not only the Mughal and British periods and what was written in Persian and English during those times but also everything that was produced in Sanskrit or local Indian languages during the same period (119-122/158).

1.5 The classical approach

Scholars who have adopted the classical approach have tried to rationalise the fantasy elements in the plot and extract historical knowledge from them. Among them are those who have tried to associate non-human species with hypothetical subaltern groups and placenames with existing geographical spaces (Goldman, 1986). Thapar (2014) states that the attempt to historicise Indian mythologies and to find specific places associated with them is a relatively new phenomenon and that in premodern times locations of mythological events were vague (116-126), which means that the attempt to historicise and locate *itihāsa* in physical reality can likely also be understood only within the context of modernity and globalisation. Most modern studies on Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* have endeavoured to ascertain to what extent the plot has been influenced by reality. As often happens with religious texts, the distinction between myth and reality is a bone of contention between scholars and devout believers (Kurien, 2007: 170). In the view of sociologist Prema Kurien (*Ibid.*), it is possible that some

characters and events of the epic refer to specific people and occurrences, even though the stories were embellished (*Ibid.*: 25). Jawaharlal Nehru (1985 [1946]), the first prime-minister of independent India, stated that he never considered the epic tales to be factually true and criticised their supernatural elements, while considering them to be "imaginatively true" (100). In sum, depending on one's discursive stance, Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* may be represented as factual, as fictional, as somewhere in between or as a story beyond ideas of factuality and fictionality. Even though the historical analysis of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and of every narrative tradition is a legitimate endeavour, sometimes the representation of history and its use as a powerful discursive tool is more important than historical considerations themselves.

The first Western scholars who wrote about the *Rāmāyaṇa* were some of the most famous Orientalists,[33] such as William Jones (1746-1794) or Sir Monier Monier-Williams (1819-1899). Nowadays, such scholars are criticised for their biased Christian views towards Indian culture. Their approach can be regarded as historicist, though they were more concerned with Christian history, religious conversion, and excuses for European domination. One sees in such interpretative discourses the different power statuses of different epistemological systems. Orientalists dismissed Eastern narratives as myths or as deformed versions of Christian history, which, despite similar fantastic elements, was regarded as factual. Just like contemporary archaeologists such as B. B. Lal searched for evidence of Indian mythology, modern Western archaeologists also worked in the field of what came to be known as *Biblical archaeology* and is nowadays more neutrally called *Near Eastern archaeology*.

William Jones (1807), who is famous for having identified that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin belong to the same Indo-European linguistic family, tried to date the *Rāmāyaṇa* according to the Christian reckoning of the age of the universe devised by archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656), who, through his study of the Bible, posited that the universe began on October 23rd, 4004 BCE. Jones established 2028 BCE as the beginning of the reign of Rāma, whom he equated with the biblical Ra'mah of Genesis (10:7) and Ezekiel (27:22) (48). This means that absolute dating of the *Rāmāyaṇa* appeared long before the contemporary era and is not necessarily only a Hindu

[33] One should bear in mind that these authors are "Orientalists" in the Saidian sense only in hindsight, given that they have lived long before Said created his definition. For the Orientalists who have lived before Said, "Orientalism" only meant "the study of Eastern cultures" and, to their minds, their Eurocentric Judeo-Christian encyclopaedic interpretations of Eastern cultures were objective.

nationalistic enterprise. Monier-Williams (1863), whose Sanskrit dictionary[34] is still the one of the most authoritative one in scholarly circles, wrote that the epics are closely connected to the faith of millions who acknowledge British sway and that it is the only window to a "people without a history" (iii-iv). That is to say, even though the Orientalists considered Indians to be incapable of producing history, they proposed to dig into their traditions, demythologise them and find the hidden history within them, as Jones had tried to do.

One should also consider how such Orientalist interpretations mirror some modern native views. Reading Monier-Williams' comment, it comes out as obvious that Vālmīki's *Rāmāyana* was treated by Orientalist literature as a national epic (Hiltebeitel, 1998: 406). Later, anticolonial Indian thinkers also adopted the epic as a common ideology under which the fragmentary Hindu population could be united (Bakker, 1991: 96), given that the most popular versions of the tradition tend to speak about a Golden Age, to cover a large and malleable landscape and to refer to many social groups under the aegis of a charismatic leader. This kind of discourse is evident in several studies and retellings of the epic by Indian authors. Social reformer Pandurang Shastri Athavale (1976), for instance, stated that Rāma sacrifices personal happiness for "national interests" (162). Whatever one believes the dating of Rāma or Vālmīki to be, it makes little sense to talk about contemporary *nations* when referring to their time period. One could state that it would not make sense to use any English term, including the perhaps more conventional *kingdom*, to refer to the precolonial past. Again, terms and the concepts they point to are flexible and not the monopoly of specific times, places and peoples. However, as I shall demonstrate, the constant repetition of terms with a modern flavour such as *nation* often has a nationalistic intention which goes beyond mere translation or adaptation to modern audiences.

Postcolonial scholars have tended to focus on interpretations of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* as a *charter myth* for specific events of Indian history, mainly the conflict between Hindus and Muslims as it has been portrayed by Hindu nationalistic discourses. In his paper "Rāmāyana and Political Imagination in India", Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock (1993b), one of the translators of the critical edition of the epic into English and, as a result, a classicist who has mostly referred to the canonical version of the epic,

[34] MONIER-WILLIAMS, Monier (1899). *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged Cognate Indo-European Languages*, London: Oxford University Press. Available online at https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/2020/web/ (accessed on 6/04/2021).

analyses the tale as an instrument through which a divine political order, represented by Rāma, is conceptualised, narrated and historically grounded. Conversely, the author adds, the fully demonised *Other*, represented by Rāvaṇa, is also categorised, counterposed, and condemned (264), given that the outsiders of the plot are represented as sexually and politically deviant (282-283). Drawing from archaeological and written historical sources, Pollock explains how this dichotomy gained a strong political dimension in Western and Central India, mainly from the 11th to the 14th centuries. This development allegedly occurred as a response to the political presence of Turks and the foundation of the first Sultanate in India during a period when Hindus renewed their emphasis on religious ideas and their relationship with political life.[35] Thapar (1996), for her part, writes that the demonisation of the enemy, irrespective of who it may be, was a constant factor with reference to many pre-Islamic enemies going back to the earliest times (14).[36] In any case, it is important to remark, as Truschke (2021) does, that during most of Indo-Muslim rule, writers in Sanskrit who used epic tropes from Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* to describe their times did not necessarily envision themselves as Hindus and their enemies as Muslims in the modern sense but rather as kingly ideals and counter-ideals based on local social hierarchies. This means that attempts to link the political emergence of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* with the rise of the Hindu-Muslim conflict may stem from the desire to relate past and present and, as a result, to explain the latter.

1.6 The modern approach

Rather than trying to figure out what the *Ur*-text of the epic was, scholar who adopt the modern approach tend to focus on the epic's past and present diversity. Several scholars have written about the *Rāmāyana* as a diverse narrative tradition. Richman has edited *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (1991a), *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* (2001), *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology* (2008) and, together with Rustom Bharucha, *Performing the Ramayana Tradition: Enactments, Interpretations and Arguments*

[35] According to Doniger (2009), it was during the Vijayānagara empire (1336-1646) that Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* became politically relevant, with the cult of Rāma becoming significant at the imperial level and individual kings identifying themselves with the hero of the tale and their enemies with the villains (445-472).

[36] Historian of religion Diana Dimitrova (2014) calls the *Rāmāyaṇa* one of the great narratives of otherness and othering (8). Historian Ajay K. Rao (2015) disagrees with the arguments of Pollock and agrees with Thapar, stating that the early theology on the *Rāmāyaṇa* in South India pre-dated the establishment of Hindu and Muslim identities as forms of collective identification (123).

(2022). Bose (2004) has edited *The Rāmāyaṇa Revisited* and, together with Brockington and Brockington (2016), *The Other Rāmāyana Women: regional rejection and response*.

The founding scholarly text about the epic as a diverse tradition is Ramanujan's (2004 [1987]) "Three Hundred Rāmāyanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation". The author paid attention to the fact that many of the characters and actions of the plot change radically between different versions. Influenced by structuralism, Ramanujan defined the *Rāmāyana* as an endemic "pool of signifiers (like a gene pool, signifiers that include plots, characters, names, geography, incidents, and relationships)" (158). In his view, the epic does not derive from a single work, but, in structuralist parlance, from a kind of abstract reservoir, which makes it both *sujet* and *récit*. These terms would refer respectively to the *Rāmāyana* tradition as an abstract structure and to specific, concrete versions. Ramanujan concluded that the story may be the same in two versions, while the discourses may be vastly different (134). Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of structuralism, posited that natural languages work in this way and, therefore, that this is an organic process. Nevertheless, stories likely do not work in the same way as language. The main question is not what the *Rāmāyana* is as an essential part of social reality but the uses it has represented in social reality.[37] As I stated previously, there have been attempts to establish the authority of Vālmīki's version to the detriment of others, which have been considered to hurt Hindu sentiment. In this regard, Ramanujan's influential essay has been turned into a representative of those *other Rāmāyanas*. In one of the most famous instances of attempts to legitimate Vālmīki's version and delegitimise all other versions of the epic, on the 25th of February 2008, there were protests near Delhi University due to the inclusion of Ramanujan's essay in the syllabus for the Ancient Hindu Culture B.A. in Delhi University (Dharwadker, 2012).[38]

The tension between the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a single tradition and a multiple one is still visible in academia and politics. Indian mathematician and Sanskritist M. R.

[37] Thapar (2014) also argues that, contrary to the Homeric epics, the *Rāmāyana* does not belong to any particular moment in history but has its own history related to a given version and its interpretation (217). Despite such diversity, though, there is always an underlying unity, given that the *Rāmāyana* rests upon a strong plot and well-established character profiles (Bose, 2016b: 157). It seems that, irrespective of the existing diversity, a version of the *Rāmāyana* is always identified as such and not as the version of another story or as an entirely new story.

[38] https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/abvp-activists-run-riot-in-du-over-ramayana-essay/story-Ko76BTwjblJLZXonTDUfTK.html (accessed on 30/5/2022); https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/ramanujan-essay-dropped-to-save-pm-another-headache/articleshow/10965372.cms (accessed on 30/5/2022).

Parameswaran (2014), who belongs to the latter group, privileges the non-diverse view of the epic. He argues that, after Vālmīki composed the epic, the text got "corrupted" and several versions arose in various parts of India. Such version, the author states, wrongly depicted Rāvaṇa as a learned and refined scholar and Rāma as going against *dharma* (1). Parameswaran states that even a child with an elementary course in Sanskrit would be shocked by the Sanskrit translations by American Sanskritist Wendy Doniger, who has been heavily criticised by Hindu nationalists, and by the large number of mistakes in her writings. He also criticises Paula Richman and Sheldon Pollock, renowned scholars who have mostly written on the epic from the modern and classical perspectives, respectively. The only Western scholar and translator whom Parameswaran endorses is Robert P. Goldman, a scholar who has translated and conducted research on Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, Parameswaran also accuses him of making some mistakes (x), which, given the antiquity of Sanskrit, the length of the *Rāmāyana* and the fact that there can never be perfect linguistic and cultural translation between languages, let alone between languages widely separated in space and time, would sounds more like a compliment than like a critique.[39]

Similarly, Indian historian and political scientist Meenakshi Jain (2017) often criticises "leftist historians", mostly Indian historian Romila Thapar, and their defense of the multiple versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. According to Jain, Vālmiki's narrative is "widely acknowledged" as the earliest surviving "account of Rāma's life" (80). She adds that the religious significance of the character evolved on the basis of his depiction in this work (*Ibid.*). In my view, what is most relevant about Parameswaran and Jain's views on Vālmīki's *Rāmāyana* is how similar they sound to the Orientalist trope about a great original civilisation which later got "corrupted". In both discourses, Vālmiki's *Rāmāyana* stands as a symbol of the premodern Indian past, the corruption that followed Vālmiki's efforts and the present attempts to revitalise the past by getting rid of the corruptions and by reinstating the foundation. As I will show in the fifth chapter, this a kind of grand narrative which, to a greater or less extent, also features in the contemporary English-language retellings of the *Rāmāyana,* mainly the ones with a more nationalistic bent. During the process of Parameswaran and Jain's discourses,

[39] In the introduction to the last volume of their translation of the critical edition, Goldman and Goldman (2017) also mentions the e-mails sent to them by Parameswaran, whom the authors call "a serious and learned scholar of the epic" (72).

what other individual and collective Indian voices think about Rāma and the *Rāmāyana* is made irrelevant and regarded as misguided.

Finally, what is most remarkable is that, even though the contents of these two kinds of discourse differ drastically, the medium of their ideas is similar: contemporary academic papers/books. Works by Romila Thapar, an Indian scholar renowned in the Western and Indian secular academia, and by Meenakshi Jain, an Indian scholar respected in Hindu nationalistic circles, have presented convincing and properly quoted evidence from archaeological and historical sources in order to prove contradictory points. Scholars and non-scholars usually identify with one side and accuse the other of cherry-picking arguments and evidence according to political leanings. In the end, what is most relevant tme o is not ascertaining which discourse is true or false but how such arguments reflect Foucault's notion of how "scientific" realities are constructed on the basis of power and resistance and how the contemporary scientific method, despite being regarded as a paradigm of objectivity, may be used as subjectively as any other epistemological system.

1.7 Retellings of the *Rāmāyana*

By *retelling*, I mean any version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* which is not a translation (or re-enactment, if one considers non-literary versions) of a previous version but in which an author(s) has made changes to some of the major events, characters, mood, dialogues, or perspectives of the plot of previous retellings. A comprehensive summary of all retellings would be impractical and impossible, which means that whatever may be said about the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition always has to be selective. What follows is a summary of the versions and topics which may be relevant for my later analyses. In the process, many retellings which have been relevant in some time and/or place, such as most regional versions, had to be left out.

Lutgendorf (2004a) proposes three kinds of transformation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: 1) expansion and contraction, whereby well-known but problematic episodes are explained or removed; 2) counter-narrative, that is, a challenge or reversal of the values of previous retellings; and 3) organic or characterological expansion, whereby popular events are developed (151-152). The modification of narrative elements entails the modification of ideological positions. Occasionally, older points of view are rejected, given that it is considered that what was said before was not the whole truth and that it needs to be set right (Bose, 2016b: 155). This, as I shall show, is a common technique

in the contemporary English-language retellings I will analyse and which I explain in light of the economic, political and sociocultural transformations of contemporary India, which have made contemporary Indians reevaluate their previous narratives and reinterpret them in accordance with those transformations.[40]

1.8 Tulsīdās' Rāmcaritmānas

The *Rāmcaritmānas*[41] (*Sacred Lake of the Acts of Rāma*) is a poem composed by Tulsīdās, whose birth and death dates are disputed, but who was active during the 16th century. Contrary to Vālmīki's version, which is written in Sanskrit, the *Rāmcaritmānas* is written in Awadhi, a vernacular language derived from Sanskrit (Saksena, 1971). Despite the fact that this is a non-Sanskrit text, it has been said that this work has been elevated to the status of *śruti* (Lamb, 1991: 236), even though *Rāmāyaṇa* is supposed to be *smṛti* in the first place. Most scholars mention how, contrary to what happens in Vālmīki's version, in this retelling Rāma is depicted as a full-fledged divinity. [42] In Lutgendorf's (1991) analysis, the most important development of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition was the reinterpretation of the story in light of the devotional (*bhakti*) movement, which is regarded as a *little tradition* which was later incorporated into the *great tradition* and is now part and parcel of modern Hinduism (Hawley, 2015). Thapar's (1989) view seems to be that Rāma's divinisation was a top-down effort. In her opinion, the transformation of the epic from a secular tale into a religious one was related to its appropriation by the priestly caste (6). Later, the

[40] I must add that this strategy is not exclusive to the Rāmāyaṇa tradition or to Hinduism but follows a traditional pattern of change in interpretation across time common to other literary and religious traditions, which are never static. In the case of the Abrahamic religions, one may think how new revelations were made by new prophets or how newly-found esoteric texts corrected the mistakes of the past and presented themselves as the perfected form of past traditions or as the hidden knowledge which was not fit for the simple minds of the past. In more recent times, one may think of secular reinterpretations of Judeo-Christian narratives. The Indian concept of *smṛti* seems to invite such recreations, given that, contrary to the *Vedas*, *Torah* or *Quran*, which are regarded by devotees to be divinely inspired, in *smṛti* the human element is acknowledged and may be updated.

[41] The most complete English-language study of Tulsīdās' *Rāmcaritmānas* in English is Lutgendorf's (1991) *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas*. The author has also translated the *Rāmcaritmānas* into English. LUTGENDORF, Philip (trans.) (2016-2023). *The Epic of Ram*, 7 Vols., Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

[42] In Pollock's (1991) view, Vālmīki's Rāma is neither a man nor a god but incorporates and transcends both (41). All the same, Pollock regards Rāma's divinity as a central feature of Vālmīki's poem from the beginning (52). In Brockington's (2004) view, though, in the first stage of the redaction of the epic, there was little concern for religious matters and the concept of *dharma* was related only to the *status quo* of the warrior caste, while on a second stage the concept was more related to the religious dimension of ethical behaviour (669). Elsewhere, Brockington (2016b) claims that religious development followed two opposite directions: in mainstream versions Rāma came to be venerated as an avatar (*avatāra*) or as a god himself, while in non-mainstream versions he remained a human role model, as was the case in the Jain and Buddhist traditions (149). Doniger (2009) states that, contrary to Rāma, his consort Sītā was originally a goddess, but that in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* she is depicted as a mortal woman. Afterwards, she became a goddess once again and has maintained this status in modern Hinduism (229).

Rāmānandīn sect, [43] an important *bhakti* sect devoted to Rāma and of which Tulsīdās was a member, derived its interpretation from such an appropriation (19). In fact, Tulsīdās' text is said to lament the decay of caste hierarchy and the rise of low-caste men to positions of influence (Mishra, 2006: xi). In other words, even though the *bhakti* movement began as an egalitarian movement in the *little tradition(s)*, in the *Rāmcaritmānas*, a text which ultimately became part of the *great tradition*, such egalitarianism was criticised. In this sense, the *Rāmcaritmānas* can be considered to be as much as an appropriation of the *bhakti* movement as a reaction to it and, as such, it is a work whose uses may defy such common dualistic classifications such as *great tradition/little tradition*, hegemonic/subaltern, elitist/folk, among others.

Pointing to the religious dimension of this work and to the Orientalist desire to find parallelisms with Western traditions, John M. Macfie (1930), one of the early translators of Tulsīdās' retelling, called the *Rāmcaritmānas* the "Bible*"* of Northern India. Macfie claimed it to be the best and most trustworthy guide to the popular living faith of the Hindu people (xxxviii). Therefore, while Vālmīki's text is the one which is often put under philological scrutiny, the *Rāmcaritmānas* is the one which has had the most important religious dimension in the everyday life of India (van der Veer, 2001: 126). It must be added that, despite being more well-known as a publicly recited text rather than a privately read one, the *Rāmcaritmānas* is also important for the history of the modern press in India. The Gita Press (Mukul, 2015), a publishing house founded in 1923, has been closely related to the diffusion of this work. As the largest publisher of cheap editions of Hindu religious texts, including the epics, its main goal has been to unify the Hindu community under a single discourse (Chakrabarty and Jha, 2020: 245-246). Along with the *Bhagavad Gītā* and possibly the 10th book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, one of the most revered texts in Krishnaism, the *Rāmcaritmānas* is now the Hindu text which is most commonly recited in public in India (Lutgendorf, 1991). If Vālmīki's version has been regarded as the key version of the epic in some circles, why has the *Rāmcaritmānas* gained so much prominence in others? I would say that, when emphasising tradition, the argument of antiquity is crucial. However, when trying to

[43] BURGHART, Richard (1978). "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect" *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 121-139; BURGHART, Richard (1983). "Wandering Ascetics of the Rāmānandī Sect" *History of Religions*, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 361-380; VAN DER VEER, Peter (1989). "The Power of Detachment: Disciplines of Body and Mind in the Ramanandi Order" *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 458-470; LAMB, Ramdas (2002). *Rapt in the name: the Ramnamis, Ramnam, and untouchable religion in Central India*, New York: State University of New York Press.

privilege sacredness, Tulsīdās' version is probably more relevant, given that in it there is less ambiguity about Rāma's sacred role.

1.9 Modern retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Since the last stages of the (anti)colonial period and the beginning of the postcolonial period, among other possible uses, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has gained a national and local dimension in the sense that is has been used as a nationalistic tool to unify the Indian population and as a resistance tool by subaltern groups to distinguish themselves from the overarching national identity. Some of the former have entered the modern pan-Indian imagination as the *official*/*national* versions in popular Indian imagination. While *popular Indian imagination* is a vague notion, I use it often because the contemporary English-language retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* also do so. I take it to mean what the majority of English-speaking middle-class Indians who are not specialised on Indology tends to stereotypically think about the *Rāmāyaṇa* and, in more general terms, about Indian and Hindu cultures. Print-capitalism and the modern media have also allowed oppositional readings of the epic tradition to become widespread.

As always, defying simple dichotomies, some retellings have been both nationalistic and oppositional. The first important modern retelling of this kind was Michael Madhusudan Dutt's (1824-1873) 1861 Bengali poem *Meghnad Badh Kavya* (*The Slaying of Meghanāda*),[44] in which the roles of heroes and villains are inverted. It is in this narrative sense that it is oppositional. This poem tells the story of Meghanād/Indrajit, Rāvaṇa's son. Dutt wrote that his sympathy was with the villains, given that he despised Rāma and his "rabble". The idea of Rāvana, whom he considered to be a great fellow, elevated and kindled his imagination (quoted on Seely, 1991: 137). For the sociologist and clinical psychologist Ashis Nandy (1983), Dutt was the one who most dramatically sought to redefine popular mythology to fit the changing values under colonialism. He admired Rāvaṇa for his modern commitments to secular, possessive this-worldliness and his consumer's lust for life and despised Rāma for his premodern effeminacy and ineffective pseudo-ascetism (20). It is in this sense that Dutt's retelling is nationalistic, given that, to his mind, Rāvaṇa was a better representative of the modern values which the Indian nation would need to succeed.

[44] Seely (1991); DATTA, Michael Madhusudan (auth.), and SEELY, Clinton B. (trans.) (2004). *The Slaying of Meghanad: A Ramayana from Colonial Bengal*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Another relevant nationalistic and much less oppositional version is Chakravarti Rajagopalachari's (1878-1972) *Ramayana* (1968). Rajagopalachari first wrote it his version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in his native language Tamil (1957) and later translated it into English. Nowadays, the English version is much better-known and more widely read than the original one (Ramanujan, 2007: 420). Besides writing influential English renditions of the Indian epics, Rajagopalachari had a successful career as a politician. He served as Governor of West Bengal (1947-8), India's head of state (1948-50), Home Minister in Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet (1950-51), and Chief Minister of Madras (modern Chennai) (1937-39 and 1952-54). He was the major critic of B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), a *Dalit* politician who was famous for being the first Minister of Law and Justice of independent India (1947-51), for drafting the Constitution of India, and for converting to Buddhism late in his life due to his belief that Buddhism could act as a *Dalit* resistance discourse against Hinduism (Fitzgerald, 1999). Rajagopalachari was a devout Hindu who thought that Hinduism united the nation. Ambedkar, however, felt that Hinduism legitimised caste hierarchy. Rajagopalachari described Ambedkar's moves for separate electorates for untouchables as an anti-national tactic that undermined the unified efforts of the Indian National Congress to gain independence from Britain (quoted in Viswanathan, 1998: 219).

In Rajagopalachari's (1968) words, adapting the epics was the best service he rendered to "his people" (7). According to him, the epics embodied India's "national" character in all its aspects (8). In the author's view, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was not a fictional charter. It encapsulated an Indian essence that was beyond India's encounter with modernity. According to Richman (1995), Rajagopalachari regarded himself as a fatherly figure who was passing the correct version of the epic onto the responsible citizens of a new-born nation (635). In this role, he provided clear guidelines for proper interpretation and treated the readers as children in need of edification (649). While Dutt wished to break away from the past and create a new future, Rajagopalachari wanted to interpret the present as a connecting point between a continuous past and future.

In her paper *Epic and State: Contesting Interpretations of the Ramayana*, Richman (1995) contrasts Rajagopalachari's rendition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* with *The Ramayana: A True Reading* or *Characters from the Ramayana* (*Iramayanappattirankal*), a retelling written in 1930 by E. V. Ramasamy (1879-1973), better-known as Periyar, the Tamil

term for "elder, sage, scholar", itself derived from *periya*, "big".[45] This was both an oppositional and an anti-nationalistic retelling. Ramasamy was an Indian social activist who is nowadays regarded as the main figure of the Dravidian movement, which, during the anticolonial and postcolonial period, tried to break away from the idea of a single and homogeneous Indian community centred in Indo-European North India and in the use of Hindi as the national language (Hardgrave, 2022 [1965]). According to Richman (1995), Ramasamy did not see the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a unifying nationalistic epic. He saw it as a divisive text that justified the oppression of non-priestly castes by Brahmins, whom Ramasamy considered to be the Aryan descendants of Rāma at work in New Delhi to keep the Dravidian subjugated (649).[46] Ramasamy defended Rāvaṇa as a Dravidian hero (van der Veer, 1994: 175). Richman (1995: 649) also considers that, contrary to Rajagopalachari, Ramasamy employed a rhetoric of empowerment and encouraged his readers to think for themselves (Richman, 1995: 649).

1.10 Graphic novel retellings

In contemporary societies and, most visibly, in pop culture, visuality tends to be at least as relevant as textuality. Even though common wisdom states that one should never judge a book by its cover, that is precisely what book covers are used for in the contemporary literary market.

[45] PERIYAR, E. V. R. (2005) [1930]. "True Ramayana" in VEERAMANI, K. (ed.). *Collected Works of Periyar E.V.R*, Chennai: The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution. See also RICHMAN, Paula (1991c). "E. V. Ramasamy's Reading of the Ramayana" in RICHMAN, Paula (ed.). *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

[46] I will introduce and analyse the controversy related to Aryans and Dravidians in the fourth chapter.

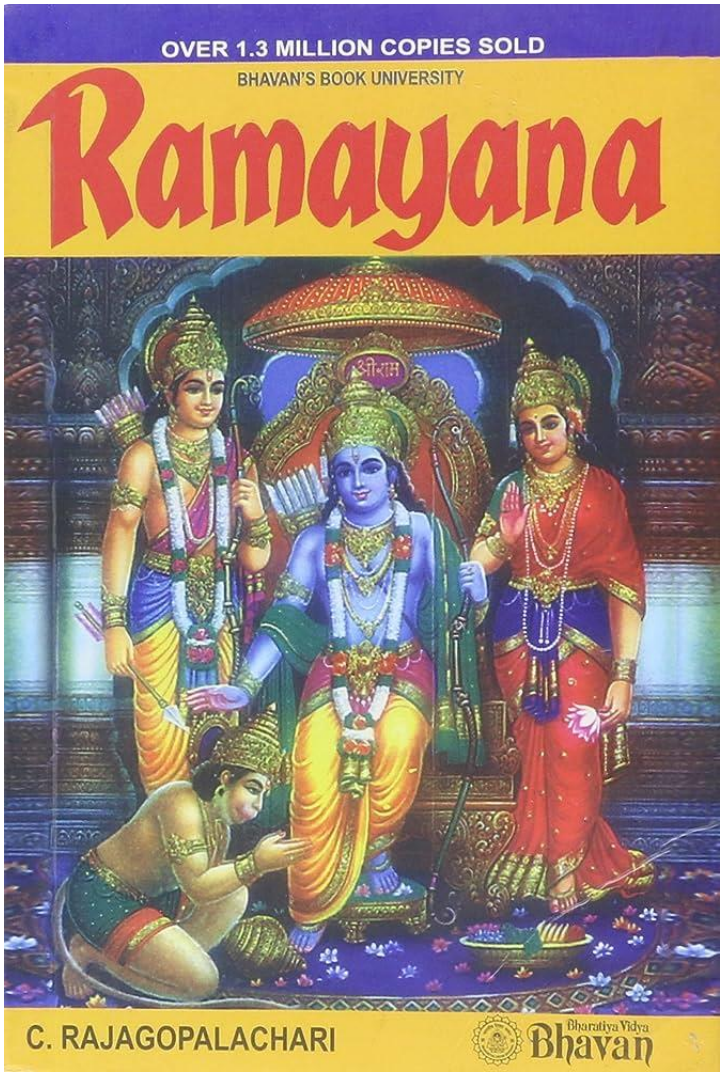


Figure 4 - Cover of C. Rajagopalachari's *Ramayana* (1968)

The cover of the most widespread edition of Rajagopalachari's version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Figure 4) is witness to the relevance of visuality. This cover shows a common and ever-present scene in Hindu imagination: Rāma sitting in his throne surrounded by his wife Sītā, his brother Lakṣmaṇa and his devoted friend Hanumān. In both content and style, this is a popular subject of Hindu calendar art (Pinney, 2004), one of the most common kinds of popular art in public and private spaces in India.

It is no wonder that some of the most popular versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the 20th century have relied on visuality. *Amar Chitra Katha*,[47] Hindi for "Immortal Picture Tales", is a publishing house of comics founded by Anant Pai (1929-2011) in 1969. In 1967, Pai watched a quiz show in which five students of the elite Westernised St. Stephen's College in New Delhi could answer questions related to Greek mythology (Kasbekar, 2006: 94) but did not know who Rāma's mother was (Sreenivas, 2010: 14-15). Pai became worried that children knew more about the foundational culture of the ex-colonisers than about their native culture. He decided to launch the comics in order to substitute the absent 'grandmother', the one who used to impart the knowledge of traditional Hindu culture to younger generations in nuclear families (56). Pai is also

[47] Karline McLain's (2009). *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings and Other Heroe* and Deepa Sreenivas' (2010) *Sculpting a Middle Class: History, Masculinity and the Amar Chitra Katha in India* are the most in-depth English-languages studies on the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics. The publisher's official website is https://www.amarchitrakatha.com/ (accessed on 18/11/2021).

known by the nickname "Uncle Pai". The term "uncle" shows Pai's representation as an intimate person who is older than the speaker and is imbued with respectable authority.

The set of comics that *Amar Chitra Katha* has published since 1969 remains the leading Indian series of this kind in India and among the diaspora. Harleen Singh (2015), a professor of South Asian Literature, writes that, for most of the English-speaking middle-class children of India between the 1970s and the early 1990s, history was a three-tiered construct: it was a subject of study at school; an amalgamation of familial, religious, and mythological stories; and what appeared in *Amar Chitra Katha* (143). The strong relationship that these books maintain with representations of Indian history is evidenced by the taglines with which they have been advertised, which include "the only comics welcomed in schools", "the route to your roots", and "the glorious heritage of India" (Sreenivas, 2010*:* 159). Perhaps the reason why this series is considered to be an ideal representation of Indian history is that it provides heroic ideals (gods who appeared human and humans who attained divine status) to which children can look up (Singh, 2019: 15). As gods and humans are assimilated, historical figures with human frailties became flawless deities and deities become as human as their devotees.

Deepa Sreenivas (2010), a professor of Gender Studies, mentions her personal experience with the comics. She states that they taught her the "facts" (inverted commas in the original) about India, which include the "idea of India" that she took for granted as everybody's idea of the country and which has remained with her, as well as the historical figures who should be considered honourable and despicable. Conversely, the author states that she has forgotten the material from history books (2). In her view, the comics emerged as a nationalistic discourse counter to the Subaltern Studies Group,[48] given that they tried to re-install normative politics (19) when the "clamour" of subaltern protests threatened to fragment the nation (92). Even now (2023), when one searches *Google* for "Amar Chitra Katha", the official website is introduced with the tagline "Facts about Mythology, Historical, Literature". The idea that the publishing

[48] Influential group of Indian scholars (Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty being the three most influential ones) which arose in the 1980s and tried to analyse Indian colonial and post-colonial history from the point of view of subaltern groups. GUHA, Ranajit (ed.) (1997). *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press; PRAKASH, Gyan (1994). "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism" *The American History Review*, Vol. 99, No. 5, pp. 1475-1490; SIVARAMAKRISHNAN, S. (1995). "Situating the Subaltern: History and Anthropology in the Subaltern Studies Project" *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 395-429; LAL, Vinay (2001). "Subaltern Studies and its Critics: Debates Over Indian History" *History and Theory*, Vol. 40, 135-148.

house is "factual" about these three relevant areas of Indian (and of any national) culture shows that it aims to achieve a representation akin to Rajagopalachari's self-representation: the publishing house, which is imbued with authority, aims to teach those with no authority through narratives that are not supposed to be a platform for relativism but are supposed to be the final word on the subject.

Amar Chitra Katha has produced several comics related to the *Rāmāyaṇa*: *Rama* (1970), *Valmiki's Ramayana* (1978, 2017), *Tulsidas' Ramayana* (2007), among others including only short episodes. In comics about historical matters, historical figures are also exposed to the plot and characters of the epics (Sreenivas, 2010: 168). In the words of Karline McLain (2009), a professor of Religious Studies, on the cover of two of these *Rāmāyaṇa* adaptations, Rāma is depicted, as a muscular, bare-chested god-king, while Sītā is a beautiful, fair-skinned woman (Figures 5 and 6). I would add that, besides the fact that the characters look calm, composed and idealised, the landscape looks idyllic, even though both covers depict the moment when the couple is exiled to the forest, an episode which may be and has indeed been regarded as disgraceful.

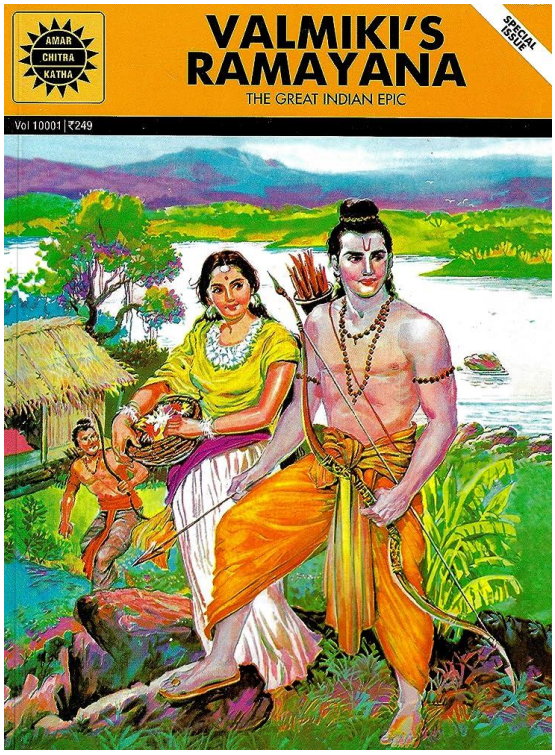


Figure 5 - Cover of *Valmiki's Ramayana: The Great Indian Epic* (2009)

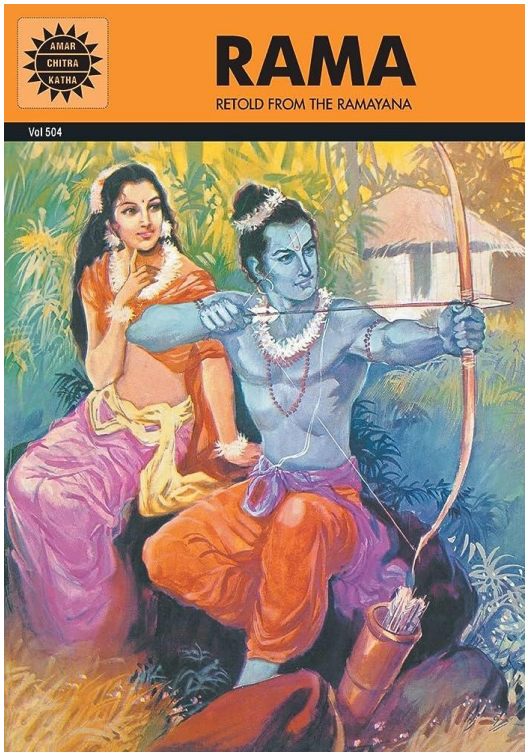


Figure 6 - Cover of *Rama*: *Retold from the Ramayana* (1970)

Varsha Singh (2019), a professor of Literature, writes that the comics published by other publishing houses after the launching of *Amar Chitra Katha* were refurbished versions of these famous comics and constituted radical departures neither in storyline nor ideology, which, given the popularity of the series and the fact that this was a pioneering effort, seems to make sense. They were following the pioneering recipe for success. Singh contrasts these comics with contemporary adaptations in which Indian content is further Americanised.

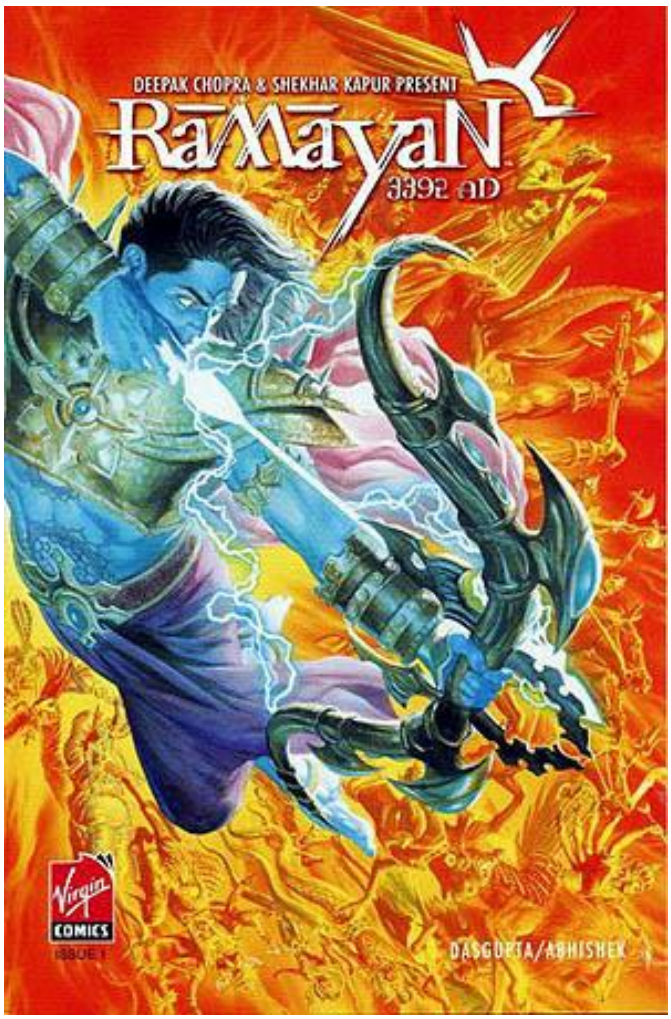


Figure 7 - Cover of *Rāmāyan 3392 aD*, Vol. 1 (2006)

According to Singh, the intention has been to globalise Indian culture and speak to a new global capitalism in which the exaggerated sexuality of male and female characters and the industrial look of urbane cities of publishers such as Marvels or DC Comics have become beguiling global forms. The most relevant contemporary graphic novel retelling of the epic has been *Rāmāyan 3392 aD*. As the title implies, this is a futuristic version. Visually and narratively, these comics are inspired by contemporary superhero graphic novels (Figure 7) and depart from Indian pictorial traditions.[49]

[49] Varughese (2018) also analyses contemporary Indian comics in several of her papers and books. According to her, Indian graphic novels of the 21st century have been different from *Amar Chitra Katha* in the sense that they do not depict Indianness in a favourable way but invoke visual inauspiciousness and, therefore, depart from traditional tales of heroism and valour. This argument seems to be different from Singh's. In my view, one finds both kinds of discourses: positive and negative. There are comics, such as *Rāmāyan 3392 aD,* which follows *Amar Chitra Katha'*s celebratory views on India, albeit in a different pictorial shape, but there are also bleaker ones which are comparable in tone to the novels written by postcolonial writers famous in the West.

The publication of *Amar Chitra Katha* may be regarded as a milestone in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition in several ways. As it targeted children, its role in education has been paramount. The series tried to create a generation of readers who were simultaneously more anglicised than their predecessors and more conscious about their native heritage. As the series appeared in a cartoon format, they also reveal the transition from a literary construction of the nation into one that is visual and more relatable to the age of television and now, as the comics are still being published, to that of computers and the internet. Finally, this series may also be regarded as important because it appeared and was popular when most contemporary English-language retellers were born or were still children or teenagers.

1.11 Rāma on screen

The so-called "mythological genre" has been a popular audiovisual genre in Indian since the early days of cinema and television. However, given its association with religion and the fact that India is supposed to be a secular state, its depiction in public venues has been limited. In the late 1980s, when the Indian government relaxed its restrictions on the depiction of religion, the mythological genre gained great momentum in the form of religious soap operas (Dwyer, 2006: 52). More than any other retelling, the TV series of the *Rāmāyaṇa*[50] (1987-1988) directed by Indian director Ramanand Sagar (1917-2005) has been a major influence on contemporary Indian society and academia. The series claimed to be an adaptation of Vālmīki and Tulsīdās' versions of the story. However, given that Rāma is depicted and regarded by other characters as a manifested god, the series seems to be more similar to Tulsīdās' version.[51]

At the popular level, the main point of interest of the series is how it blurred the borders between fiction and reality, not only in a discursive sense but in a very physical one. In the words of historian Jonah Blank (1992), when the millions of Indians who watched the series thought of what Rāma meant, they were guided neither by close readings of the authoritative texts, by pious homilies heard in temples, nor by doctoral theses. They were led by the image of the living televised Rāma (155-156). Several descriptions point to the ritualistic dimension of the series and to its popularity. Viewers

[50] Arvind Rajagopal's (2001) *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* is the most comprehensive study of the series and its political context and impact.

[51] https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20191022-the-tv-show-that-transformed-hinduism (accessed on 12/6/2022). The last screenshot of the series features in the article mimics the well-known devotional image of Hindu calendar art depicted in Rajagopalachari's book cover (Figure 4).

performed religious functions as they were watching it (Kanjilal, 2017: 98). There are also descriptions of empty cities, closed shops, idle public transports and events which were advertised as "[t]o be held after Ramayan" (Rajagopal, 2001: 84).[52] Cultural anthropologist Purnima Mankekar (1999) writes that the viewers she has worked with engaged with the *Ramayan* with the same reverence they would have accorded a religious ritual, given that seeing Rāma on television was for them a form of *darśana* (200), "seeing (the deity)",[53] a key concept in contemporary Hinduism.

In the political realm, the *Rāmāyaṇa* series is said to have created a centralised, authoritative and hegemonic version of the epic that became instrumental in fuelling Hindu nationalism (Kanjilal, 2017: 11), given that it contributed to the establishment of the Delhi-centred, Hindi language middle class medium across the country's diverse population (Hasan, 1996: 107; Rajagopal, 2001: 83).[54] The TV retelling was appropriated by Hindu nationalist leaders, especially L. K. Advani (1927-), nowadays mainly famous for his *Rāma Ratha Yātrā*,[55] "the pilgrimage of Rāma's chariot", a political pilgrimage promoted by Hindu nationalists (Hasan, 1996: 102; Davis, 1996). Advani dressed up and equipped himself with apparatuses which were meant to imitate the characters of the TV series and travelled through several key religious sites in North India in a van adorned like an ancient epic chariot (Rajagopal, 2001). In short, besides allowing a deity to become flesh and bone, modern television allowed a living politician to liken himself to a deity.

Just as Sagar's *Rāmāyaṇa* has been deemed as the most important media event in independent India, the related *Rāmjanmabhūmi* movement has been deemed the most relevant sociopolitical and religious event. It has been referred to in virtually every scholarly work about modern India (Nandy, Trivedy, Mayaram and Yagnik, 1995;

[52] One may watch recordings of the religious dimension of the series at the popular level at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtKUyBcib_4 (accessed on 29/5/2024).

[53] Varughese often writes about visuality and the way this religious concept of *darśana* is used in contemporary Indian pop culture, such as in book covers and contemporary comics. VARUGHESE, Dawson (2018). "Seeing Shiva, Seeing Ram: Visual representations of deities in the genre of mythology-inspired fiction, an analysis of the book covers of Amish Tripathi's novels" *South Asian Popular Culture*, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2018.1510632 (accessed on 1/11/2020).

[54] This series does not stand alone in this nationalistic purpose. Similar relevant series with a mixture of mythological and historical themes which were aired at around the same time included: Shyam Benegal's (1988) *Bharat Ek Khoj*, an adaptation of Nehru's (1985) *The Discovery of India*, which also features passages of episodes from the epics; B. R. Chopra's (1988-1990) *Mahabharat*, a televised adaptation of the other Indian epic; and Chandraprakash Dwivedi's (1991-1992) *Chanakya* (4th century BCE-3rd century BCE), about the historical author of the *Arthaśāstra*, an ancient Indian treatise on politics.

[55] JAFFRELOT, Christophe (2009). "The Hindu nationalist reinterpretation of pilgrimage in India: the limits of Yatra politics" *Nation and Nationalism*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp 1-19.

Brosius, 2005).[56] This movement tried to associate Rāma's mythic birthplace with an existing site. According to the epic tradition, Rāma is born in Ayodhyā, which in Sanskrit would mean "invulnerable, indestructible, invincible". Ayodhya is also the name of a modern city in Uttar Pradesh.[57] It is possible that the name of the modern city was inspired by the epic and not the other way around. According to many devotees, Rāma was born in modern Ayodhya, specifically in a spot where there was a mosque called Babri, reportedly built by Babur (1483-1530), who was the founder and first emperor of the Mughal Empire (1526-1540 and 1555-1857). The *Rāmjanmabhūmi* movement was a political movement which aimed at tearing down the mosque and substituting it with a Hindu temple which was to be built, as the Hindi political slogans of the time said, "on that very same spot".[58] The *Rāmāyaṇa* series has been linked to the 1992 demolition of the mosque, with the series main cast aiding in the propaganda surrounding the event and Deepika Chikhalia (1965-), the actress who played Sītā, becoming a BJP member of parliament (Pinney, 2004: 11).

The evidence for *Rāmjanmabhūmi* has been defended in the public arena by partisan historians and archaeologists with academic credentials (Chatterjee, 2002: 18). Jain (2017) states that no evidence whatsoever has been presented of continued Muslim occupation of the mosque, while the uninterrupted presence of Hindu devotees has been attested by several sources (144). This view on *Rāmjanmabhūmi* is mainly endorsed by Hindu nationalists of Indian origin. There are also some Western authors who endorse this view and who are mentioned and admired by Indian authors. An influential example would be Flemish scholar Koenraad Elst (1959-), who wrote three books defending the Hindu claim to the site: *Ayodhya and After: Issues Before Indian Society* (1991), *Ayodhya: The Case Against the Temple* (2002), and *Forever Ayodhya* (2023).

There are also Indian scholars with differing views. In a paper signed by several Indian scholars (Gopal, Thapar, Chandra, Bhattacharya, Jaiswal, Mukhia, Panikkar, Champakalakshmi, Saberwal, Chattopadhyaya, Verma, Meenakshi, Alam, Singh, Mukherjee, Palat, Mukherjee, Ratnagar, Bhattacharya, Trivedi, Sharma, Chakravarti, Josh, Gurukkal and Ray, 1990), the authors try to prove four points. They list archaeological and textual evidence 1) to show that modern Ayodhya cannot be

[56] For a documentary film with footage of the event and interviews with common citizens and some of the major figures involved in the controversy, see PATWARDHAN, Anand (Director) (1992). *Ram ke Naam* [Film], Film South Asia.

[57] I use Ayodhya when referring to the modern city and Ayodhyā when referring to the mythic one.

[58] In Hindi, *Maṃdira vahīṁ banāeṁge*, "we shall build the temple on that very same spot".

identified with the mythic Ayodhyā, 2) that the worship of Rāma in the city is not as ancient as supporters of Hindu nationalists claim, 3) that the mosque was built over the birthplace of Rāma by Babur and 4) that there was no serious enmity between Hindus and Muslims in the deep past. Western scholars often provide similar arguments (Bakker, 1991).

The *Rāmjanmabhūmi* seems to have turned into a political issue only after India's urban middle class attained a certain size and India's modernisation reached a certain stage (Nandy, 2003: 67). The series, which are regarded as having constituted a top-down hegemonic discourse, found a receptive audience among peasant castes and the masses of young uneducated and semi-educated people in cities, small towns, and villages in northern and western India (Hansen, 2009: 177). The same is said to have happened on the Muslim side, given that few Indian Muslims knew of the existence of the Babri Masjid in 1980, while few were unaware of it after the series had been broadcasted (Thakur, 1993: 655). Anand Patwardhan (1992), an independent Indian filmmaker known for his documentaries about Hindu nationalism and subaltern resistance discourses in contemporary India, has made a documentary film titled *Raam ke Nam* (*In the name of Rāma*), which documents the events surrounding the demolition of the mosque and tries to make it clear that the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* was a top-down movement deliberately spread by the modern media.

After a three decade-long judicial battle which opposed Hindu and Muslim pretences, the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* case was solved in favour of the Hindus in November of 2019 (Chakrabarty and Jha, 2020: 257).[59] After the verdict, prime-minister Narendra Modi dressed up as an ancient Hindu sage-king and laid the first silver brick of the temple (Tharoor, 2020).[60] In the same year, *Ram ki Janmabhoomi*, a Bollywood film which fictionalises the controversy, came out. In this film, the Muslims are represented as the ruthless and illegitimate attackers who wish to destroy Hinduism and the Hindus as the peaceful and legitimate defenders who wish to build a temple and peacefully include their Muslim brothers in the process. In short, even though fictional, this film

[59] "Ayodhya verdict: Indian top court gives disputed site to Hindus" *Aljazeera*, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/babri-mosque-case-indian-top-court-disputed-site-hindus-191109052713446.html (accessed on 27/1/2020); "Ayodhya verdict: India top court rejects review pleas by Muslims" *Aljazeera*, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/ayodhya-verdict-india-top-court-rejects-review-pleas-muslims-191212122610718.html (accessed on 27/1/2020).

[60] https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-modi-uses-silver-brick-to-lay-the-foundation-stone-of-ram-mandir/story-SdjaznicaNTMBh4WSxk8OK.html (accessed on 31/5/2022).

emphasises the "nonfiction" judicial sentence. The temple was inaugurated by Modi in 2024.[61]

In any case, the *Rāmāyaṇa* series also revealed that there exist alternative worldviews. Vālmīki, the purported author of the canonical Sanskrit version of the epic, was supposed to be of humble origins. For that reason, he became the patron saint for some modern lower castes who call themselves Bālmīks (Goldman and Goldman, 2017: 100), which is derived from the author's name. Members of this caste work mainly as sanitation workers. In 1988, they went on strike because the *Rāmāyaṇa* series finished at the moment when Sītā is rescued from Laṅkā, as in Tulsīdās' *Rāmcaritmānas*, and omitted the last *kāṇḍa* of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. As this *kāṇḍa* deals with the story when Rāma exiles Sītā to the forest, it is often regarded as less acceptable by modern middle classes with liberal worldviews. However, the Bālmīks demanded that it also be aired.[62] *Luv Kush* (the name of Rāma's sons), the sequel to the series, was aired from 1988 until 1989. It was also directed by Ramanand Sagar. Even though the aesthetics and the actors are the same, *Luv Kush* was less popular and influential than its predecessor.

Sagar's series can be contrasted with the animated film *Sita Sings the Blues*, which was directed by American director Nina Paley (2008). This retelling alternates between the story of the author's break-up with her husband and shadow puppet characters from the Indian subcontinent telling her version of the epic. Most notably, the film includes an oversexualized Sītā who sings blues songs throughout the film. Focusing on the last part of the story, the one which Sagar wanted to omit and which Tulsīdās did omit, the film was advertised with the tagline "The Greatest Break-Up Story Ever Told". In its use of American music, this version departs from and contrasts with Ramanand Sagar's series.

Paley has been criticised by conservative Hindu groups (Kanjilal, 2017: 164). Hindu activist Rajiv Malhotra (2016b), who will be a key player in the second chapter of this thesis, accuses Paley of claiming to base her film on Vālmīki's version, when in his opinion it is based on Western readings of the epic. As the modern approach tends to show, the power of the epic lies on its fluidity. The film is considered to have opened up the story's themes to new audiences and transnational responses (Lodhia, 2015: 407)

---

[61] "India's Modi opens controversial Hindu temple in Ayodhya" *Aljazeera*, https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2024/1/22/indias-modi-opens-controversial-hindu-temple-in-ayodhya (26/4/2024).

[62] Lutgendorf (2007a) calls this strategy a classic display of the "weapons of the weak" and an example of the assertiveness of the lower orders that often drives many in the middle-classes to embrace Hindu nationalism (371).

and, indeed, Paley's film was based on already existing but lesser-known native, feminist and anti-upper caste interpretations of the epic (Poduval, 2016: 33-34). This seems to mean that, from a conservative Hindu nationalistic perspective, whatever is regarded as following this ideology is regarded as native and whatever is regarded as going against it is regarded as foreign, regardless of whether supposedly "native" ideas have been influenced by globalisation or whether "foreign" ones have actual roots in local heritage.

1.12 21st century English-language retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

According to Kanjilal (2017), after the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* events and the television series, the *Rāmāyaṇa* became a controversial source of new retellings and the *Mahābhārata* became a more likely source (162). In any case, recent collective memories tend to be silenced just as quickly as old ones are readopted and, as Kanjilal acknowledges, there has been a spark of interest in retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, mainly those which retell the story from the perspective of subaltern characters (163). Especially since the second decade of the 21st century, many new retellings have appeared. Contrary to scholarly works on contemporary India, these retellings tend to be silent about the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* movement and its aftermath.

With the advent of the 21st century, a new English-language version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* appeared. Ashok Banker's (2013) eight volume *Ramayana Series* was published between 2003 and 2012 and collected in an *e-book* version in 2013. Varughese (2017) regards Banker as one of the founders of contemporary mythological fiction. Lutgendorf's research on Banker's books and Banker's preface to the virtual edition of the series show how this genre of literature appears in a contemporary neoliberal context which is simultaneously influenced by nationalistic and globalised discourses. Lutgendorf (2007a) states that Banker's books are influenced by Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and by the *Star Wars* franchise. He also states that they are suggestive of a science-fiction computer game (123). These descriptions point to their global appeal. Elsewhere, Lutgendorf (2004b) adds that Banker aims to bring ancient history into conformity with a dualistic worldview that confronts good against evil. Lutgendorf claims that this discursive strategy is linked to the heritage of Western epic and scripture, to nationalism and to globalised American-style capitalism (211). Contrary to what happened in 20th century adaptions, gods are not only nationalised but globalised, two

processes which are not necessarily antithetical, given that nationalism is only needed if there are other nations with which to compare and compete in the global stage.

In the preface to the *e-book* version, Banker (2013), who was educated in Christian and Jewish schools,[63] states that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is beyond religion, nationality, race, colour, or creed, given that it belongs to Hindu, Christian, Muslim, or whatever faith one exposes, a description which also sounds global in its range. Contrary to Lutgendorf's words and probably in reaction to them, given the fact that the virtual edition of the series was published after Lutgendorf's paper, Banker adds that he has felt compelled to show the nuances of word, action and choice rather than a black-and-white depiction of good versus evil. As I shall show in the next chapter, discussions about the extremely dualistic worldview of good versus evil is one of the most common ones when discussing Indian representations of differences between Western and Indian cultures. This means that Banker apparently tries to distance himself from global Westernised discourses and to position himself within a native Indian framework. Banker also states that he attempted to do what, according to him, has never been done before: creating a complete *Rāmāyaṇa* that incorporates the various and often contradictory aspects of the various Indian retelling of the past. He emphasises this last point when admitting that he was not interested in the foreign versions of the tale, despite his statement that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is beyond nationality. Again, this statement discursively positions the author in a nativistic discourse. He seems to be interested in the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a tradition that is beyond nationality only insomuch as it is an originally Indian tradition which spread beyond the confines of the nation. In sum, what Banker seems to have endeavoured was a kind of canonisation of the diverse Indian tradition and not of the diverse tradition as a whole, despite the fact that the national was projected onto the universal.

I now introduce the five most popular English-language retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the 21st century. These authors occupy different market niches by resorting to unique narrative techniques, which I will keep on analysing through my thesis. Despite such differences, the male authors are comparable in their discourses in the sense that they seem mainly concerned in defining what is authentically Indian, with contrasting it with what is not, and with trying to put the Indian approach into practice. The female authors, for their part, are more concerned with exploring the topic of femininity, feminism and

[63] https://www.lightspeedmagazine.com/nonfiction/author-spotlight-ashok-banker/ (accessed on 12/6/2024).

patriarchy, which they regard as feminism's antithesis. Given the discursive similarities among the contemporary English-language male retellers and female retellers of the epic, I will often refer to them as *male retellers* and *female retellers* for short. Despite the narrative and discursive differences between male and female authors, all approach the epic as a collective memory which connects the characters of the epic with living Indians and as story with potentially modern values which can offer positive solutions for contemporary challenges. When wishing to mention the five retellers as a whole, I will simply refer to them as *contemporary retellers*. After introducing the authors, I end this chapter with two sections about the English language in India and about recent economic changes in India. These will also be relevant topics for my thesis. I will deal with politics, the third major sociocultural issue for understanding these authors and their works, in the next chapter.

1.12.1 Devdutt Pattanaik (1970-): the psychological way

Devdutt Pattanaik, who started his career as a physician, has been the most prolific and discursively diverse of the new English-language retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and of Indian mythology. The author's family is originally from Odisha, but the author grew up in Mumbai. He has stated that he speaks Odia and Marathi, both Indo-European languages, fluently.[64] However, he has only published books in English and has hosted a TV series in Hindi. While he has been publishing books and has been active online and in other audiovisual media since the late 1990s, his most influential works, including the great bulk of the ones I will discuss, were published after 2010. Pattanaik's ongoing bibliography is extensive and ranges from mythological colouring books for children to long books for adults. For this reason, trying to make a comprehensive overview of his works would be almost as fruitless as making a comprehensive overview of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. As the majority of Pattanaik's books are organised by topic and sometimes include similar passages from other of his works with interrelated topics, I sort them out into three main categories.

[64] https://devdutt.com/a-classical-language/ (accessed on 8/6/2023).

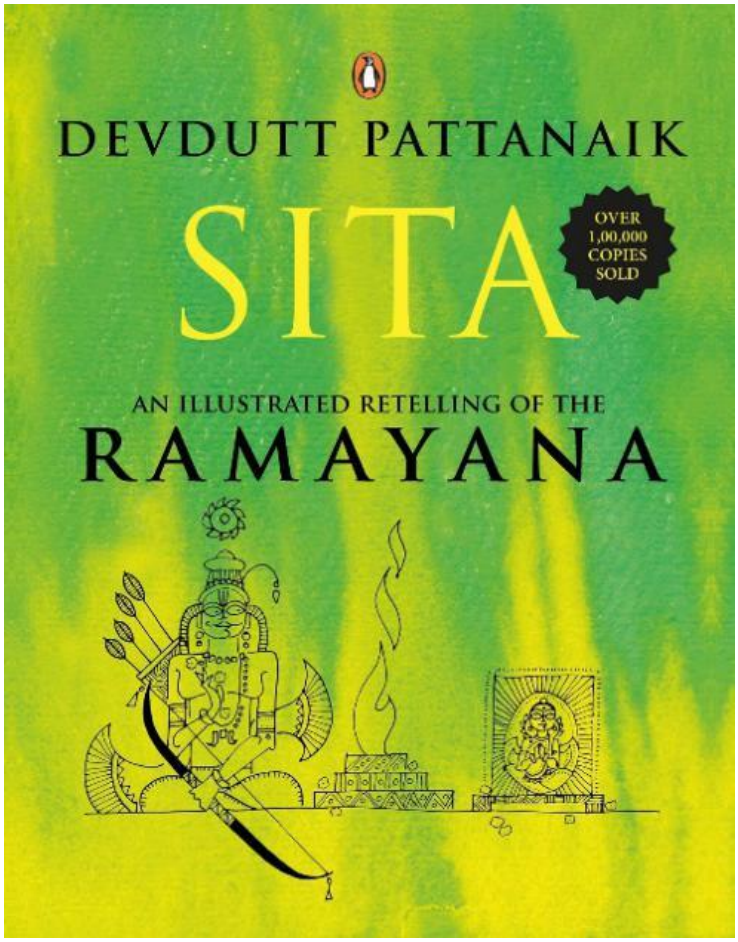


Figure 8 - Cover of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013a) *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*

1) Condensed versions of mythological stories, usually organised by text or character: *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013a) (Figure 8) is a retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* which focuses on the tradition as a whole, like similar books on the *Mahābhārata* (*Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, 2010) and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*Shyam: An Illustrated Retelling of the Bhagavata*, 2018).

These texts are comprised of short and concise narrative chapters which mix classical and popular tales followed by topical explanations by Pattanaik. Such explanations are often derived from scholarly sources, discourses which are popular in the Indian public sphere, Indian folklore, and sometimes seem to consist of Pattanaik's own opinion. In an initial section titled "A Few Ramayana Beacons across History", the author notes down several important versions of the tradition in chronological order. These include Sanskrit, Prakrit (Jain), and Pali (Buddhist) versions, several regional ones, the *Amar Chitra Katha comics*, some films, and the Ramanand Sagar's TV series. The list ends with Banker's books (xviii). However, contrary to Banker, Pattanaik includes several stories from non-Indian sources, such as Thailand and Indonesia, which means that his approach may be regarded as more holistic. In the following section of Pattanaik's *Sita*, which is titled "A Few *Ramayana* Anchors across Geography", he notes down several other Indian artistic elements associated with the tradition, as well as foreign texts.

In *Ramayana versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison* (2018), Pattanaik tries to explain the main differences and similarities between the epic traditions. His Hindi *Netflix* series *Devlok with Devdutt Pattanaik* (2015), in which he discusses several tales, characters, and topics from Indian mythology with TV hostess Rasika Dugal (1985-), falls under the same category. In the episode devoted to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Pattanaik mentions the influence of the epic outside of India.[65]

2) Appropriation of Indian mythological stories for the contemporary world, mainly for business purposes.

The best-known example is *Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management* (2013b) (Figure 9), which was published in the same year as *Sita* and whose style and themes are repeated and sometimes copied in later shorter works.[66] This book was published after the transmission of an English-language TV program with the same title, *Business Sutra* (2010), another talk-show in which Pattanaik tells and interprets mythological stories in conversation with a TV host.[67]

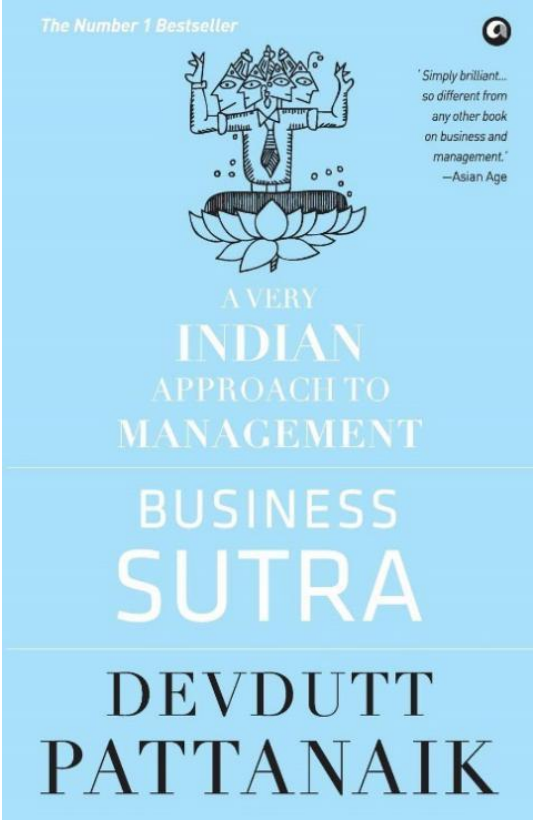


Figure 9 - Cover of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013b) *Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management*

[65] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhetFnmiwos (accessed on 19/11/2021).

[66] Examples include *The Success Sutra: An Indian Approach to Wealth* (2015), *The Talent Sutra: An Indian Approach to Learning* (2016), and *The Leadership Sutra: An Indian Approach to Power* (2016), as well as another collection with similar themes: *How to Take Decisions* (2016), *How to Maximize Your Potential* (2016), *How to Know Ourselves* (2016), *How can we be Kings even Without Kingdoms* (2016), *How to Cope with Change* (2016), *Putting People First* (2016), *How to Succeed at Business* (2016), *How to Feel Empowered* (2016) and *What makes an Organization succeed?* (2016).

[67] In an excerpt from the series available on *Youtube*, Pattanaik explains "Work place Dharma (…) through characters of Ramayana and Mahabharata". See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmBjRaoJSbc (accessed on 1/6/2022).

Business Sutra is divided into three major sections: "Introduction: Connecting Belief to Business", "From Goal to Gaze: Decoding Western, Chinese and Indian Beliefs" and "Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management". The first part tries to prove how religion and business are interrelated and provides the rationale to interpret premodern tales in a modern corporative context. The second one compares and contrasts the Western, Chinese, and Indian approaches to belief and business. The last one analyses the Indian approach with reference to Indian mythology. Every subsection in this part includes: 1) a mythic story, many of which are from the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition; 2) a diagram or cartoon sketched by Pattanaik; 3) the author's interpretation of the story in a business context and 4) a made-up story in a contemporary business context in which the mythic story is re-enacted.

3) Collections of *queer* tales from mythology. Here, Pattanaik looks particularly innovative, given that he is the pioneering and, so far, the only popular English-language mythological reteller who approaches queer subjects in Indian mythology.[68]

Again, the examples are numerous. The most well-known one is *Shikhandi* [69] *and Other Stories They Don't Tell You* (2014) (Figure 10), which begins with an introduction about queerness in Indian mythology and then retells several stories about mythological characters who change their gender, cross-dress or maintain homosexual relationships. Even though most of the stories are drawn from the *Mahābhārata,* the last one is a folklore story drawn from the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

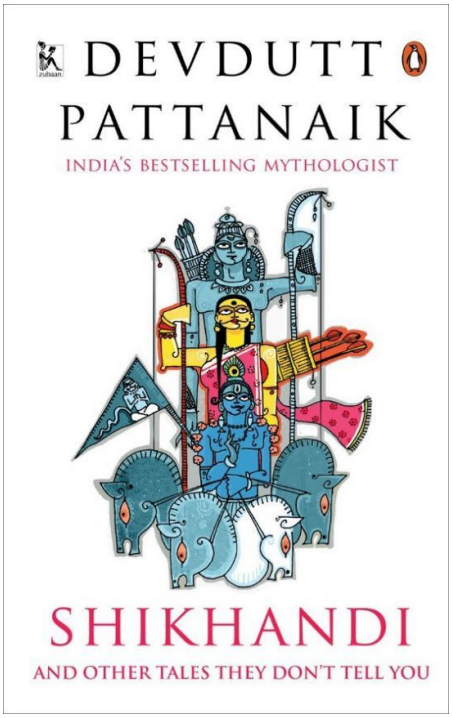


Figure 10 - Cover of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2014) *Shikhandi and Other Stories They Don't Tell You*

[68] https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/profiles/devdutt-pattanaik (accessed on 29/5/2024).

[69] Character from the *Mahābhārata* who is born as a girl and later becomes a man. The character and the story are often regarded as the most relevant narrative representatives of queerness from ancient India (Goldman, 1993; Vanita and Kidwai, 2000).

The Pregnant King (2008) is also a queer story inspired by events mainly told in the *Mahābhārata*, even though the author draws some narrative elements from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In this case, most of the events, dialogues and some of the characters are of Pattanaik's invention. In this sense, this is an exception in the author's catalogue, given that this work is classified as a novel and not as a nonfiction work. Some editions, such as the one published by Penguin India in 2014, have the subtitle "a novel" on its cover, while the back cover calls it "Devdutt Pattanaik's first work of fiction".

One could conclude that Pattanaik presents Indian mythology as a holistic universal system (category 1) which crosses national and social boundaries and is adapted to contemporary professional (category 2) and personal (category 3) lives. Pattanaik's methodology tends to be essentialising, given that, even though he often mentions the diversity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, he often refers to a single *(very) Indian* approach. Similarly, it tends to be highly schematic, given that the author often provides comparisons and contrasts and that he often incorporates tables/diagrams full of parallelisms in his works (Figures 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 33, 36). *Ramayana versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison* (2018) is a good example of both tendencies. In this case, Pattanaik takes two sprawling narrative traditions which have varied through time and space and compares and contrasts their plots, characters and narrative strategies in a way that seems that, despite their diversity, these traditions were consciously created to mirror each other perfectly. I would conclude that the author tries to recreate a canon of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, not a centralised Ur-canon like the critical edition of Vālmīki's version I described above, but a diverse decentralised canon in which there is no hierarchically superior version, despite the fact that there is still an overarching unity.

Pattanaik has followed an interesting discursive path which I interpret in light of what Jeremy Carrette, a professor of Philosophy and Religion, and historian of religions Richard King (2005) call "the psychologization of religion" (64) in their book *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, which is a critique of how neoliberalism have adopted religious discourses to serve capitalistic and, more specifically, corporate interests. While Carrette and King focus on the American literary market, the growth of similar English-language recycled works based on Indian mythology, most commonly the *Bhagavad Gītā*,[70] shows that this process is also relevant in India. In

[70] Examples would be Debashis Chatterjee's *Timeless Leadership: 18 Leadership Sutras from the Bhagavad Gita* (2012), Chaitanya Charan's *10 Leadership Sutras from Bhagavad Gita* (2014), Pujan Roka's *Bhagavad Gita on*

Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology, Pattanaik (2006) contraposes the Western notion of *myth*, which is opposed to truth, to the Indian notion of *miṭhyā*, which the author regards as being part of a larger truth. While there is little doubt that this understanding of religious narratives has existed in Hinduism and other religious systems, this linguistic understanding of the term *miṭhyā* seems to be a linguistic invention by the author, given that the several Sanskrit dictionaries in *Wisdomlib* translate the term as "falsely, deceitfully, wrongly, incorrectly", a translation which sounds closer to the meaning of the English term *myth* than to Pattanaik's definition.[71] In *Myth = Mithya*, Pattanaik has used the term "spiritual" 17 times and never mentions psychology when describing the truth dimension of mythology. This situation is inverted in *Business Sutra*, in which Pattanaik (2013b) states that the greatest value of the *Rāmāyaṇa* comes from representing the epic in psychological terms (12). Later, he playfully remarks that "the word 'spiritual' is not part of *Business Sutra*" (437). *Sita* follows the same trend. The epic is never defined as "spiritual", but, in the last sentence of the book, it is said that it "can be seen in psychological terms with each character representing a different aspect of our personality" (Pattanaik, 2013a: 314). In sum, while it is remarked that one often hears in contemporary societies that one is "spiritual but not religious" (Han and Nasir, 2016: 84), Pattanaik goes further and implicitly states that his approach (and, as an extension, the Indian approach) is psychological but not spiritual.

While the author stereotypically tends to identify his approach as the traditional Indian one, it sounds similar to the distinction that Aristotle (2013 [4th century BCE]) established between "history" and "poetry" in his *Poetics*, with the difference that Pattanaik has used the term "story" instead of "poetry" (*ποίησις*). According to Aristotle, the concept of "history" is about actuality, while that of "story/poetry" is about potentiality. Furthermore, Pattanaik's approach is comparable to the essentialist Jungian approaches which are popular in new religious movements (Clarke, 2006b, s.v. "Jung, Carl": 320-321). Indeed, Pattanaik often quotes Jungian mythologist Joseph Campbell (1940-1987). Campbell (1968) was a mythologist who became popular in America due to his studies of world mythologies, which the author decontextualised

Effective Leadership (2017), A. S. Narayanan and Hariharan Iyer's *Leadership Gita: The Six Tenets Of Great Leaders* (2020), Pranay's *GITA: Spirituality For Leadership & Success* (2020) and Vikram Khaitan's *Life Transformation With The BHAGAVAD GITA: Learn Leadership Wisdom, Personal Development, Self Awakening And Attain Spiritual Realization* (2023).

[71] https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/mithya#sanskrit (accessed on 2/6/2024).

from their historical context and used to prove that hero stories tend to follow a similar psychological pattern in unrelated world cultures: heroes depart from their world, undergo adventures and return psychologically wiser. This narrative of self-improvement catered for the tastes of individualistic and liberal American minds. As I assume that cultures are syncretic continua and that finding the "pure" roots of cultural facts are less useful than analysing their ideological uses in specific times and places, I am not going to try to understand which discourses influenced Pattanaik. Much like Jung and Campbell were influenced by their understanding of Asian traditions and of Western discourses to create their versions of psychology of mythology, I would say that Pattanaik is influenced by Indian discourses and Western ones in inseparable ways. However, I shall have more to say about what Pattanaik's "psychological" approach entails in ideological terms in the next chapter and show that, far from strictly commercial, the author's intentions are also cultural.

1.12.2 Amish Tripathi (1974-): the liberal way

Amish Tripathi is a banker by training. He worked in the industry before he became a full-time author. Tripathi was born in Mumbai and grew up in Odisha. According to him, his mother tongue is Hindi.[72] Tripathi first became famous due to *The Shiva Trilogy* (2010-2013), which, as the name implies, tells the story of Śiva. According to Varughese (2017), together with Banker, Tripathi is one of the founders of mythological fiction (461).

The covers and first pages of Tripathi's books often include quotations from flattering reviews by several Indian personalities. According to Modi, Tripathi's writings have generated immense curiosity about India's past culture (Tripathi, 2015). Praise from popular Bollywood actors and directors, spiritual leaders, journalists and politicians follow. *Business Standard* calls Tripathi "India's Tolkien" and *Business World* "the Paulo Coelho of the East" (*Ibid.*). Like J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), Tripathi adapts and updates ancient mythological tales and, like Paulo Coelho (1947-), he tries to adapt ancient spiritual wisdom to modern contexts. It sounds strange that an author who is said to generated immense curiosity about India's past culture is compared with popular foreign authors with no relationship to India, despite Coelho's "Oriental" escapades. In any case, I would say that Tripathi's representation is

[72] https://www.thequint.com/campaigns/bol/hindi-is-my-dil-ki-bhasha-says-writer-amish-tripathi (accessed on 8/6/2024).

comparable to Banker's claims to both nationalism and globalisation. Tripathi's books are usually advertised by special events sponsored by TV personalities and by book trailers uploaded during the time of publishing, activities which position the author and his works within a well-orchestrated capitalist and consumerist milieu.[73]

After his initial trilogy, Tripathi published a tetralogy based on the *Rāmāyaṇa: Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015), *Sita*: *Warrior of Mithila* (2017a), *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* (2019) and *War of Lanka* (2022). The first three novels look at the biographies of Rāma, Sītā and Rāvaṇa. They often repeat the same events from the perspectives of these three characters. The fourth novel tells the story starting from the moment when the lives of these characters become intertwined.

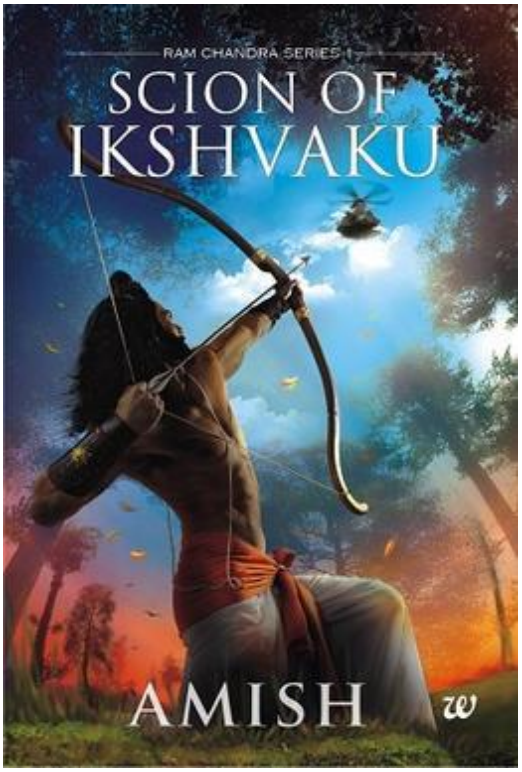


Figure 11 - Cover of Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*

The cover of Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* reveals the author's engagement with modernity. It shows a low-angle CGI of Rāma pointing an arrow at what seems to be a contemporary or even futuristic flying device. Contrary to the more conventionally looking cover of Rajagopalachari's retelling (Figure 4), this cover presents innovations in form and content. In any case, one still notices engagement with tradition, given that anybody who knows the plot of the *Rāmāyaṇa* would recognise this scene.[74]

Since the *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings, Tripathi published *The Legend of Suheldev: The King Who Saved India* (2020b), a novel about a pseudohistorical Indian monarch who

[73] For the trailers of the author's retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4xhu9MeIzw (accessed on 9/1/2023); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll04LDMEdBQ (accessed on 9/1/2023); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEBUze38-U0& (accessed on 9/1/2023); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZJKWXQroYU (accessed on 9/1/2023).

[74] One should note the continuity between this tetralogy and Tripathi's previous trilogy. The book covers of *The Shiva Trilogy's* novels and those of the *Ram Chandra Series* seem to depict the same character, even though Rāma is supposed to be a reincarnation of the God Viṣṇu and not of Śiva. https://www.authoramish.com/ (accessed on 15/9/2022).

defeated the Muslim Ghaznavid[75] general Ghāzī Miyān (1014-1034 CE) (Narayan, 2009: 86). Contrary to the *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings, which take place in the mythological past, this novel takes place at a later historical time, during the invasions of India by Muslims.

Tripathi also writes nonfiction books. The most relevant ones for the purposes of this thesis are: *Immortal India: Young Country, Timeless Civilisation – Articles and Speeches by Amish* (2017b) and *Dharma: Decoding the Epics for a Meaningful Life* (2020), which he co-wrote with his sister Bhavna Roy. The former is a collection of short essays, speeches and interviews published in several Indian newspapers or magazines. It is divided into the following major chapters: "Religion and Mythology", "Social Issues", "History" and "Musings", titles which reveals the author's engagement with relevant Indian political and sociocultural topics. Throughout the book, Tripathi has described himself as a devout Śiva worshipper, a peace-loving religious liberal, a strong supporter of women's rights, and as a stark critic of the caste system and every theory against the unity of India as a nation. As this nonfiction book mirrors the discourses on *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015) and as Tripathi has expressed his opinions through the epic characters, I shall refer to it often.

[75] Persian dynasty which ruled from 975-1187 in Persia, Transoxiana and northern India.

While the title of *Immortal India* states that this book is about India, Tripathi writes a lot about himself and conflates his views with those of what he regards as the traditional Indian approach. The cover (Figure 12) does not depict anything specifically Indian. It depicts the young and confident author. This seems to be a marketing strategy. By the time this book was published, Tripathi was well-known. It also reveals how Tripathi has represented himself as a spokesperson of Indian tradition.

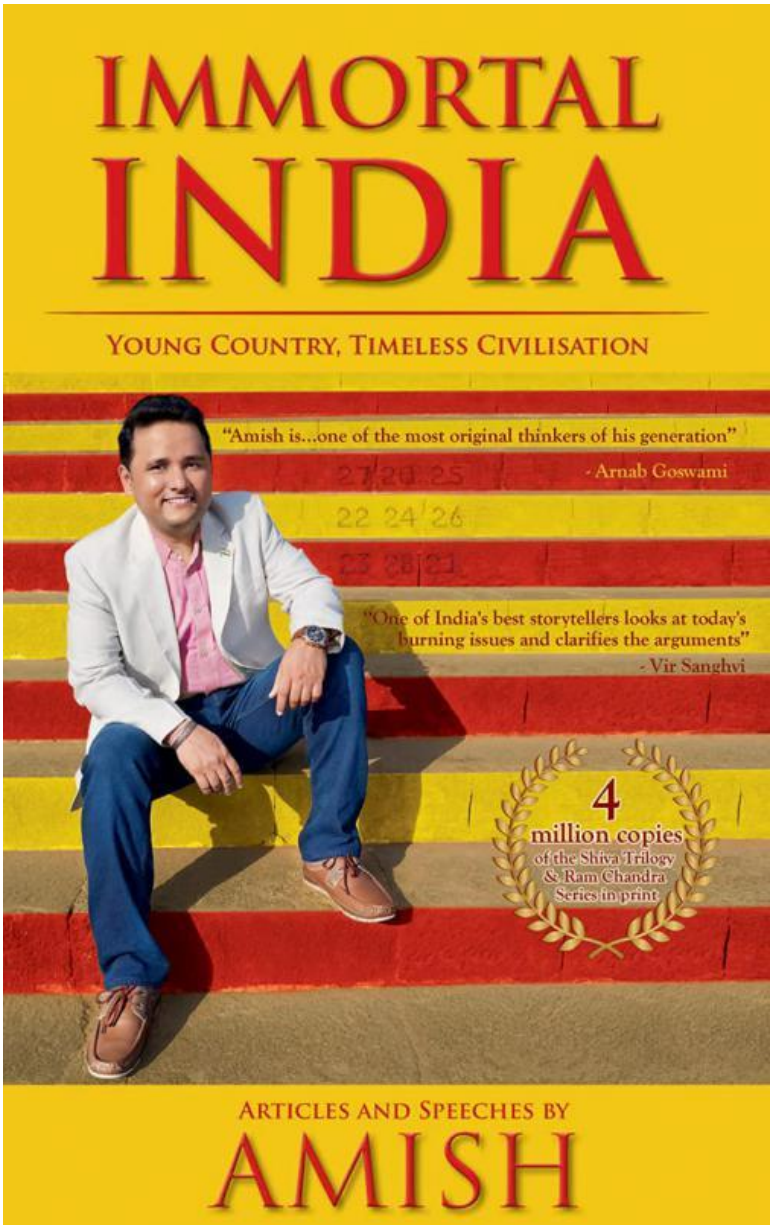


Figure 12 - Cover of Amish Tripathi's (2017b) *Immortal India: Young Country, Timeless Civilisation*

As hinted in Tripathi's self-representation in both textual and visual terms, if the keyword to understand Pattanaik's representation of a monolithic Indian approach is "psychological", the one to understand Tripathi's one would be "liberal". The author uses it 52 times in *Immortal India*, including in the titles of two texts, and 3 times in *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*, the main nonfiction and fiction texts by Tripathi which I will analyse.

Tripathi and Roy's (2020) *Dharma: Decoding the Epics for a Meaningful Life* is said to be modelled like an *Upaniṣad*, a dialogue in which several characters discuss different points of view on a certain subject. This assertion is meant to reveal that this

book adopts a native Indian discourse. It also relates the present to the past, given that the very notion of *Upaniṣad* takes the reader to India's Vedic age, even though this specific work is unlike any ancient *Upaniṣad* in content. Again, even though the book's subtitle includes "decoding the epics", the characters discuss mostly Tripathi's novels, another evidence of how the author and the marketing structure working for him represents him as a spokesperson of Indian tradition. At one point, one character states that he is going to discuss Tripathi's *Rāmāyaṇa* and not Vālmīki's. While the fact that the author tries to diversify the discourse and decentralise Vālmīki constitutes a common approach, his discourse is very different from Pattanaik's, who never mentions a "Pattanaik's *Rāmāyaṇa*". Given that Tripathi has not yet written a retelling of the *Mahābhārata,* only his discussions of this epic have been derived from sources other than his retellings.[76] Similarly, while the *Upaniṣads* are known for deemphasising the individual ego as an illusion and emphasising the universal soul (Hirst, 2018), Tripathi's focus on himself as a contemporary media star representative and modern symbol of Indian tradition seems to reflect more contemporary neoliberal ideals than ancient Indian philosophy.

In 2022, the TV channel Discovery Plus launched a documentary series called *Legends of the Ramayana with Amish*.[77] In it, Tripathi travels to several locations in India and Sri Lanka in order to identify specific places with the plot of the epic or, as the official description of the series reads, to map "myth with geology, customs and belief". In a teaser uploaded on *Youtube*, Tripathi introduces the series in a similar way. He states he aims to explore "the connection between mythology and geology" and "the relationship between astrophysics and philosophy".[78] In his literary and audiovisual works, Tripathi seems to mix traditionally accepted Indian discourses with global ones. Depending on one's perspective, his syncretic approach to history and mythology may be regarded as a decolonial approach to fuse these ideas into the native concept of *itihāsa*. However, as I will show in the following chapters, it may also be associated with the kind of historical revisionism and fringe science with which Hindu

[76] Tripathi has projected an adaptation of the *Mahābhārata* as his next major project. https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/amish-tripathi-to-write-a-mahabharata-series-after-concluding-the-rama-chandra-one/story-d7jzSxNpD7IomuDJhGPvqJ.html (accessed on 26/9/2021).

[77] KULSHRESHTHA, Sujata, and TEWARI, Abhimanyu (Directors) (2022). *Legends of the Ramayana with Amish* [Series], Discovery Plus.

[78] https://www.primevideo.com/detail/0KGPKHW3M4DG3S4X0X2CSL2YIS/ref=dvm_src_ret_in_xx_s (accessed on 19/7/2022). See a trailer at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGwofKQorEs (accessed on 19/7/2022) and the teaser at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vb9dwelw4JE (accessed on 19/7/2022).

nationalistic discourses and similar international right-wing ideologies are sometimes associated.

1.12.3 Anand Neelakantan (1973-): the contrarian way

Anand Neelakantan is a Keralite and native speaker of Malayalam. He began his career as an engineer. *Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished* (2012), his first novel, began the trend he has followed up until now, that of turning the traditional heroes of the epics into villains and vice-versa. In this novel, Neelakantan turns Rāma into a barbaric conqueror from North India who disrupts Rāvaṇa's advanced civilisation in the south. As the author states, he feels more drawn to the anti-hero of the epic, Rāvaṇa, and to his species, the *Asura* of the title (*Ibid.*: 4).

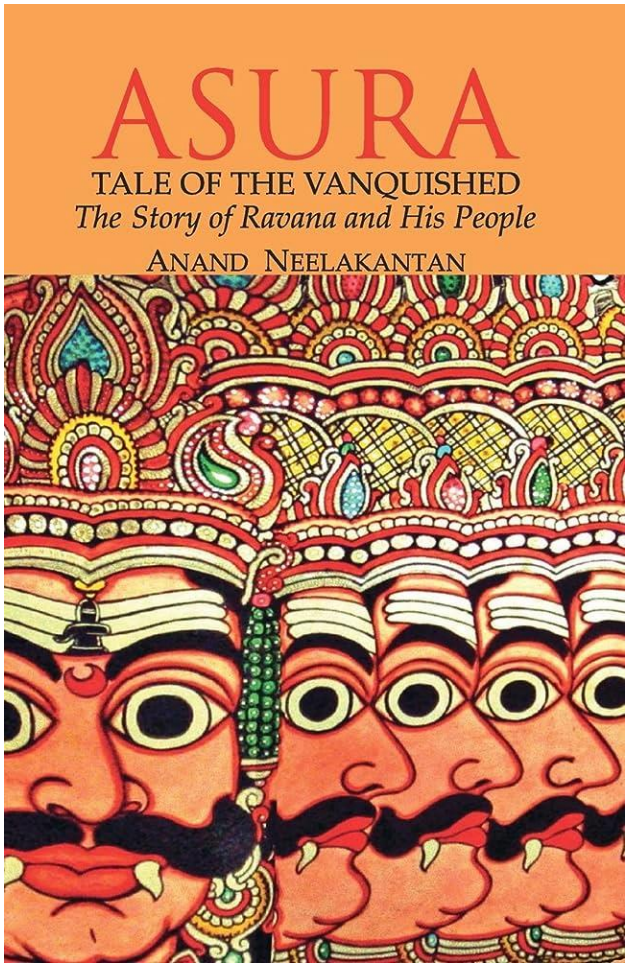


Figure 13 - Cover of Anand Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*

Figure 13 shows the cover of Neelakantan's (2012) novel, which has a seemingly more traditional look than Tripathi's (2015) cover (Figure 11). It shows a *Tholu bommalata* puppet, a shadow theatre tradition from Andhra Pradesh.[79] This is a reference to South Indian culture in opposition to the northern one or to the more globalised iconography of the cover of Tripathi's novel.

[79] https://sarmaya.in/objects/indigenous-tribal-art/ravan/ (accessed on 1/6/2022).

Neelakantan focuses on the vanquished, weak, poor, destitute, downtrodden, terms which the author, his narrators and characters often use. Rāvaṇa narrates approximately half of the chapters of *Asura*. The other half is narrated by Bhadra, a term which means "good, happy, prosperous, auspicious, kind, friendly, pleasant, skilful" in Sanskrit, among a few other positive meanings which, as I shall demonstrate in the fourth chapter, do not really describe the character the name is associated with. He is a common outcaste of Neelakantan's invention. Bhadra is said to have been oppressed and mistreated all his life by upper caste characters. As Neelakantan deals with such subaltern groups and with issues of violence and social injustice, the atmosphere of his novels has been bleak. His style is comparable to the one Varughese (2018) has referred to in relation to contemporary Indian graphic novels.

Similar oppositional interpretations also characterise Neelakantan's later retellings of the *Mahābhārata* (2013, 2015, 2023) and in *Vanara: The Legend of Bali, Sugreeva and Tara* (2018), another retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa.* In 2019, the author published his first novel in Malayalam, *Peṇ Rāmāyaṇaṁ*, "the female *Rāmāyaṇa*". Neelakantan is unique among the contemporary retellers I analyse in the sense that he is the only one who has published in his native language. In 2021, the author published *Valmiki's Women: Five Tales From the Ramayana,* a collection of short stories which he had published previously as independent stories and whose topic is comparable to his Malayalam work. Each story focuses on one woman from the epic: Sītā, Śāntā, Mantharā, Tāraka and Śūrpaṇakhā. In the same year, Neelakantan also published the collection of podcasts *Many Ramayanas, Many Lessons*, in which the author has endeavoured to condense Indian and Southeast Asian versions of the epic, with a clear focus on versions from South India. Each of the 29 episodes tells several versions of the same scene followed by the moral lessons which can be derived from them. Following the success of his first novel, Neelakantan (2024) has recently published his first nonfiction work: *The Asura Way: The Contrarian Path to Success*, a self-help book which, while announcing right away the author's oppositional discursive and narrative strategy, is much like Pattanaik and Tripathi's nonfiction in the sense that it has the ultimate goal of providing what is regarded as a traditionally Indian way to achieve one's personal and professional goals. Given my introduction, even though the author never uses the term "contrarian" in his novel *Asura*, I feel it is as good a word to describe his view of the Indian approach as "psychological" and "liberal" are good to describe Pattanaik and Tripathi's approach.

Neelakantan (2013) differs from Patanaik in the sense that he tends to adopt a historicist interpretation. In a nonfiction passage, he describes himself as a "rebel" for trying to find logical explanations (433-438), that is, for telling supernatural events in a rational fashion. The author states that he attempts to achieve this by removing the fantasy layers and by finding out what they could have meant originally (2018). Such *rebelliousness* may sound novel for readers who grew up accustomed only to the monolithic *Amar Chitra Katha* comics and the *Ramayan* TV series. However, the author's approach seems to owe narratively and discursively to such opposite (contrarian?) readings such as Dutt and Ramasamy's retellings in Bengali and Tamil. I will analyse these and other influences in greater detail in the fourth chapter.

Neelakantan's novels also contain quotes from positive reviews by celebrities of the film industry. Emphasising some of the points introduced in the previous paragraphs, Neelakantan's reviewers, whose reviews are quoted in the novel, state that the author turns the greatest heroes and villains from the Hindu epics into mere mortals (Neelakantan, 2013) and that he creates the narrative of the *Others*, the defeated, insulted and trampled upon who fight without expecting divine intervention (*Ibid.*). Other reviewers state that, by making the reader question everything one has learned since childhood (*Ibid.*), Neelakantan's works have turned into what *Amar Chitra Katha* had been when people from Neelakantan's generation were little (quoted in Neelakantan, 2018). Through his textual and visual approaches, Neelakantan presents himself as a South Indian writer who creates alternative versions to the best-known major retellings among English-speaking Indians. However, even though the pessimistic mood of his writings is different from the optimistic views adopted by Pattanaik and Tripathi, his approach can only be regarded as new and rebellious among the English-language milieu.

1.12.4 Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-): the way of the goddess

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in Calcutta, India and later went to the United States to pursue her M.A. and Ph.D in English Studies. She states that her English skills are better than her Bengali ones.[80] Divakaruni now lives and works as a professor of creative writing in Houston. Divakaruni has published several fiction works in poetry and prose. Most have dealt with the experience of Indian women, particularly in

[80] https://www.goodreads.com/questions/1057348-will-you-pl-write-in-bengali-too (accessed on 8/6/2024).

diasporic contexts. *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), her first mythological work, is a retelling of the *Mahābhārata* as told from the point of view of Draupadi, the most important female character in most retellings of this epic.[81] In 2019, Divakaruni published *The Forest of Enchantments*, a retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* told in the first-person by Sītā. In this novel, Sītā is treated like a living goddess by the characters of the novel and by Divakaruni, as in the author's note she writes that Sītā is the incarnation of the goddess Lakṣmī, who is Viṣṇu's consort and the Goddess of wealth, but also a human being with feelings (ix). Therefore, this novel tries to simultaneously deify and humanise Sītā.

Divakaruni divinises Sītā as an exemplary woman. This idea is visible in the cover of the novel (Figure 14), which shows a lonely Sītā, supposedly after Rāma expels her to the forest. This event becomes symbolic of the plight of Indian women. If in contemporary discourses devotion to Rāma is often characterised by nationalistic tendencies, in Divakaruni's universe, devotionalism is related to feminism. For that reason, I would place her work within New Age feminism, in which the role of the Goddess blends many religious traditions and functions as a subaltern discourse against hegemonic patriarchal discourses.[82]

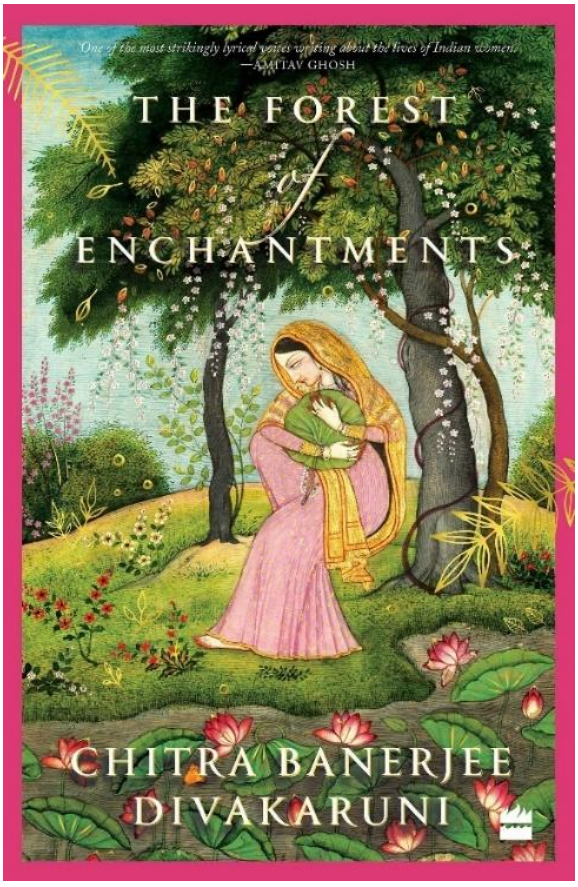


Figure 14 - Cover of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's (2019) *The Forest of Enchantments*

In the author's note to *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni (2008) asserts her intention of retelling the epics due to her unsatisfaction when it comes to their portrayal of women (xiv). Accordingly, in the note to *The Forest of Enchantments*, she adds that

[81] Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is the most recent novel of the corpus of Kanjilal's (2017) dissertation.
[82] CROWLEY, Karlyn (2011). *Feminism's New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

there is a disconnect between the truth of Sītā, which is that of a strong and active character, and the way Indian popular culture has thought of her as a meek and passive character (2019: viii). Ten years before Divakaruni, Malashri Lal, a professor of English Studies, and author Namita Gokhale (2009) had already analysed the complex depiction of Sītā in their anthology *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*, which gathers diverse ancient and recent texts and, for the most part, represent Sītā as strong and active. In order to correct previous views, Divakaruni claims to have read many versions of the story, including Vālmīki's and Kampar's versions, as well as the 15th century Bengali *Kṛttivāsī Rāmāyaṇ*, the best-known regional version from Divakaruni's native Bengal. She also claims to have listened to folk songs sung by women.

In Divakaruni's view, Sītā possesses the courage that has been reflected for centuries in the lives of women, including in contemporary Indian women (ix), and the strength to become the role model for women all over the world (x). Much like happens in Banker and Pattanaik's description, one notices a universalising tendency, not of the nation, but of the female condition. Divakaruni concludes that her wish is that her novel brings a new meaning to the old blessing "[m]ay you be like Sita" (*Ibid.*). In sum, Divakaruni's main goal is to create new meanings out of old ones by accepting and rejecting the past through the removal of less desirable attributes and the emphasis on desirable ones with a renewed sense of modernity.

Divakaruni is the only diasporic author studied in this dissertation, so I should introduce this topic. Sociologist Judith T. Shuval (2000) defines the term *diaspora* as a social construct founded on identity, emotion and narrative. Such a social construct is possible when the sense of connection to a homeland is strong enough to resist forgetting, assimilating or distancing (43). While the concept of *migration* only refers to the physical movement from one state to another, *diaspora* has a deeper psychological understanding, given that it simultaneously refers to physical distancing and psychological proximity paired with continuous social engagement with one's native culture. Diasporic authors often feel nostalgic towards their native culture, which means that deterritorialisation may create new markets for the recreation of the homeland which may cater to both international and to nativistic interests. Given the strong physical separation between the individual and the nation, the artistically recreated homeland in diasporic contexts often exists only as a representation in the mind of deterritorialised individuals (Appadurai, 1996: 49). Such representations may also be coloured by the new nation, which often serves as a point of comparison or

contrast. This means that diaspora cements the contrast between what is native and what is foreign, in this case from the point of view of someone who is also writing for foreigners as a *native informant* of his/her native culture. The 'othering' of India by Indian diaspora artists is said to have created a magical, mysterious, colourful and unreal space (Nabar, 2014: 25). In Lau's (2005) view, female diasporic writers have been the main creators and keepers of the global literary image of South Asian culture (239). The author likely thinks so because there is a wide market for African, Middle Eastern and South Indian women who retell their experiences with patriarchy. At the same time, though, such writers often try to dissociate themselves from their native customs (Lau, 2009: 578-580).

In accordance with Lau's description, Lavina Dhingra Shankar (2009), a professor of Indian Diaspora Studies, states that Divakaruni is regarded in literary circles as a representative of an imagined authentic ethnicity, while representing a (re-)Orientalist vision of India. The titles of Divakaruni's fiction works are indicative of this trend. Besides the mythological retellings, titles that point to the "exotic" and feminine world of the East include: *Arranged Marriage: Stories* (1995), *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *The Vine of Desires* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *Oleander Girl* (2013), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016) and *The Last Queen* (2021). In Divakaruni's works, India is often depicted as a repressive and exotic place which contrasts with America, which is depicted as a nation where women might escape the shackles of family, tradition, and superstition, and create their own destinies (30-35). In the end, in Shankar's view, such simplistic representations annihilate the complexities of both nations (46). Even though these ideas have been emphasised in most studies about Divakaruni's work, it is a trend that has continued throughout her career. Divakaruni is probably acquainted with the commercial demand regarding India in American fiction (Figueira, 2004: 57). One of the major topics of the chick-lit genre related to the South Asia is that of the tension between love marriages and arranged ones. These are usually associated with the host and home country, respectively. The former is often depicted as superior (Kanjilal, 2017: 132). Following this idea, Divakaruni (2019) states that her *Rāmāyaṇa* retelling is a meditation on the "nature of love" (ix). In most major retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa,* the marriage of Rāma and Sītā is neither an arranged marriage between the elders of two families nor a contemporary love marriage in which the main players get to know each other intimately until the moment they decide to marry. It is an idealised and predestined love. However, through her wording and narrative strategies, Divakaruni

turns it into a contemporary marriage in which fate plays little role and rational decision-making comes to the fore.[83]

The introduction to the volume *Critical Perspectives on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni Feminism and Diaspora* (Singh and Field, 2022), which focuses less on representations of America and India and more on how Divakaruni's tries to modernise representations of Indian femininity, is more positive of the author's work. This volume has the added benefit of letting the author speak for herself, a key approach in postcolonial studies. It includes one text written by Divakaruni herself and two interviews conducted with her. In her essay "Between Scylla and Charybdis: What Should a Writer Write About, and How?", Divakaruni (2022) resorts to classical mythology when stating that she has felt as if caught between Scylla and Charybdis, given that she writes the truth about South Asian relationships and the subaltern condition of Indian women, while being criticised by scholars who state that she exotifies and, therefore, falsifies her native culture. While Divakaruni tends to be more concerned with narratives of diaspora than with mythological fiction, her two mythological works are popular in India and often integrate lists of mythological fiction,[84] that being the reason why I include *The Forest of Enchantments* in my *corpus* of analysis. Divakaruni's more international, scholarly and feminist audience, at least when compared with the audiences of all other contemporary retellers, is evidenced by the praise section in the back cover of *The Forest of Enchantments*, which includes quotes by American Indologist Philip Lutgendorf and respected Indian female authors and scholars, such as Sanskritist Arshia Sattar, fiction and nonfiction author Namita Gokhale, and Telugu feminist author Volga (Divakaruni, 2019).

[83] See also DASGUPTA, Sanjukta (2007). "Locating 'Home' in a Liminal Space: Longing and Belonging in the Fiction of 'Bengali' American Women Writers" in LAL, Malashri, and KUMAR, Sukrita Paul (eds.). *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature*, New Delhi: Longman; ZUPANČIČ, Metka (2016). "New Feminine Myths as Builders of New Transcultural Horizons" in BHADURI, Saugata, and MUKHERJEE, Indrani (eds.). *Transcultural Negotiations of Gender: Studies in (Be)longing*, New Delhi: Springer; GUPTA, Deepti, and BRAR, Sumeet (2017). "Women in Diaspora, Stranded on the No-Man's Land: A Study of Selected Works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni" in GARG, Shweta Rao, and GUPTA, Deepti (ed.). *The English Paradigm in India: Essays in Language, Literature and Culture*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

[84] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/top-trending-products/books/top-7-indian-mythology-books-you-must-read/articleshow/101009999.cms?from=mdr (accessed on 29/5/2024); https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/photo-stories/indian-mythological-fiction-books-one-must-read/photostory/61117299.cms (accessed on 29/5/2024); https://medium.com/@gomatisekhar/12-must-read-books-based-on-the-indian-mythology-382cf1002782 (accessed on 29/5/2024); https://www.bookgeeks.in/fiction/mythology/ (accessed on 29/5/2024).

1.12.5 Kavita Kané (1966-): the way of forgotten women

Like Divakaruni, Kavita Kané, a former journalist born in Mumbai, has been retelling the *Rāmāyaṇa* through the eyes of female characters. Kané is the only contemporary reteller who has written neither nonfiction books, prefaces nor author's notes in which she explains why she writes about the epics, which makes her intentions harder to fathom. In any case, the biography section of her latest books states that she is considered a "revolutionary force" in Indian writing due to the fact that she has brought feminism where it is most needed: the field of mythology (Kané, 2019; 2021). As a result, it is possible to compare her with Divakaruni in her feminist efforts and to contrast her with the three male authors of my *corpus*. The main difference between Kané and Divakaruni is that the former is not a diasporic author and writes neither novels contrasting foreign nations and India nor the opportunities that diaspora may provide for women. In fact, Kané is unique among the five retellers whose works I analyse in the sense that, in the second decade of the 21st century, she only published novels based on subplots of the epics. She first came to public attention and is still best-known for her first novel, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013), an adaptation of a minor subplot and character of the *Mahābhārata* who is not even mentioned in most contemporary retellings. Kané's retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* include *Sita's Sister* (2014), which tells the story of Ūrmilā; *Lanka's Princess* (2016), about Śūrpaṇakhā, Rāvaṇa's sister and the most notorious female character of the epic; *Ahalya's Awakening* (2019), about Ahalya, a subaltern female character whom Rāma meets during the forest exile; and *Tara's Truce* (2023), about Tārā, a female character who belongs to a mythological species and who is married to two husbands. In *Saraswati's Gift* (2021), her first novel which is not directly based on the epics, Kané deals with the goddess of knowledge and consort of the god Brahmā.

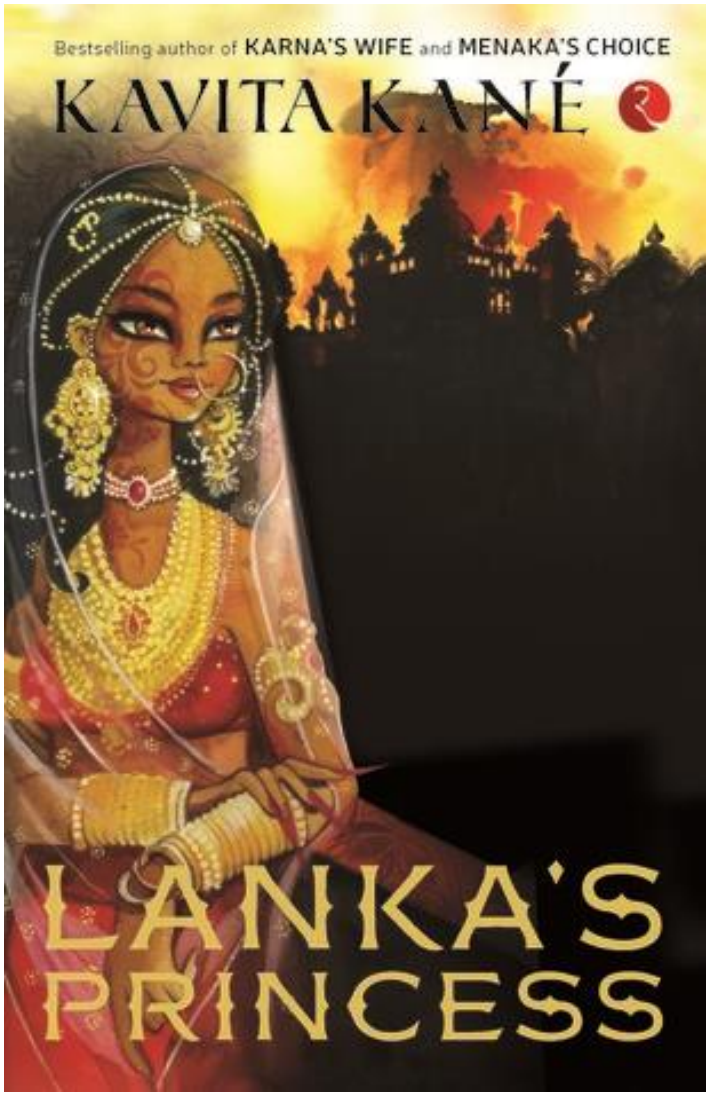


Figure 15 - Cover of Kavita Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess*

In this dissertation, I analyse *Lanka's Princess* (2016), given that it provides interesting material for contrast with Divakaruni's *Palace of Enchantments* (2019). As the visual depiction of Śūrpaṇakhā in the cover of this novel predicts (Figure 15), Kané's character is not the demonic, monster-like woman of some of the best-known 20th century *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings. Here, she looks like a simple, naïve girl. Through their light smiles, Śūrpaṇakhā and all the women depicted in the covers of Kané's books reveal confidence and optimism.

Perhaps the reason why Divakaruni has only written retellings about major female characters so far and Kané about minor ones lies in the fact that, besides residing in different countries, their audiences do not overlap entirely. While Kané writes for Indian readers familiar with the epics, Divakaruni also writes for American or diasporic audiences less conversant with the intricate subplots and several minor characters. This is evidenced by a review from *The Houston Chronicle* which has been printed on the cover of an edition of Divakaruni's *Mahābhārata* retelling *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). The review states that the novel "provides a radiant entrée into an ancient mythology virtually unknown to the Western World", an exotic description which depicts India as a temporarily and geographically distant place when compared to the West and describes the novel as an introduction to a tradition and not as a development of it.

1.13 The English language in India

The diversity of languages in the major retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* I have mentioned and the power relationship between them seems relevant. Vālmīki's telling is in Sanskrit, the old classical language of North India. While there are other versions in Sanskrit, this is the most influential one. Tulsīdās' devotional text is in Awadhi and Sagar's TV series use Hindi, both vernaculars derived from Sanskrit, with Hindi designated as the official language as per the Indian Constitution (article 210).[85] Ramasamy's critique is in Tamil, which in recent history has been the main Dravidian language of protest against northern Hindi hegemony, given Tamil's ancient literary tradition as classical language. Dutt's version is in Bengali, another Indo-European language which, due to the proximity with the British power in Kolkata during the initial phase of the British presence in India, was important in the movement of cultural revival often called *Bengal Renaissance* (Dasgupta, 2007). Finally, Rajagopalachari's summary and the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics books use English, the language of the previous coloniser of India. This summary conforms with the idea that, despite the variety of local vernaculars, some languages have acquired specific pan-regional sociolinguistic functions, with Hindi as the official language mainly accepted by northern speakers of this or other Indo-European languages, English as the modern and neutral mediating language, and Sanskrit as the classical language of ancient North India (Shaban, 2018: xxiv-xxv).

The retellings I analyse are written in a variety of English interspersed with Hindi and/or Sanskrit terms.[86] Some authors (Neelakantan, 2012; Pattanaik, 2013b; Tripathi in *Shiva Trilogy*) include glossaries in their novels, which shows that they expect unfamiliarity with Sanskrit/Hindi terms from at least some of their readers, while no author seems to have expected unfamiliarity with English terms. The retellers sometimes write comments on language use. Neelakantan (2018) states that Sanskrit and classical Tamil are dying languages and that their translations tend to be horrendous. The author adds that he chose to write in English in order to make the story available to the masses. Tripathi (2017b) writes that he speaks Hindi with his family and thinks in a mix of Hindi and English, a phenomenon which has constrained his English

[85] https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/ (accessed on 4/6/2024).
[86] For the linguistic traits of Indian English, see MOONEY, Annabelle and EVASN, Betsy (2019) [1999]. *Language, Society and Power*: *An Introduction*, London: Routledge, p. 242.

language abilities (163). Contrary to Neelakantan, Tripathi represents himself as someone with roots in North India. By alluding to his difficulties when communicating in English, though, he emphasises his non-elite status, which, as I will show in the next section, is a common self-representation strategy for this author. Despite the historical relationship between English and colonialism, English was the language in which nation-building in India proceeded according to secular and developmental lines (Srivastava, 2008: 7), which means that it was the language through which the nationwide idea of "India" became available to subnational speakers of other languages (Singh, 2019: 18). Nevertheless, such "subnational" speakers were neither "subaltern" or "the masses" as Tripathi and Neelakantan imply but constituted a privileged minority.

Even though the British promoted English-language education as a means of creating a class of faithful upper-caste Indians to administer their colonial subjects, an issue I also analyse in the next section, by the 1820s Indians had not only mastered the coloniser's language but started to adopt it as their chosen medium of expression against colonialism. According to Anand Balwant Patil (2013), a creative writer and Professor of English Studies and Comparative Literature, the process of Anglicisation entailed the joint venture of Sanskritisation/Brahmanisation and Westernisation/modernisation (300). As a result, English turned into a language of modernisation and, as such, of subversion rather than submission. In that role, English has had an important role in imagining India as a (modern) nation. This means that, from its inception, there has been a close relationship between Indian literature in English and Indian nationalism, as well as with Hinduism (Naik, 2009). The English-language literature which developed from the 1820s to the present has been called by different epithets: Anglo-Indian literature, Indo-Anglian literature, Indo-English literature, Indian English literature, Indian Writing in English. Literary critic Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (2003) states that its most striking feature is the fact that "there have been no schools, literary movements, or even regional groups within it. Its history is scattered, discontinuous, and transnational" (25-26). The fact that Indian literature in English has been created by a "narrow, well-entrenched, metropolitan-based ruling elite" (20), the author has remarked, is the reason why it has been regarded with some animosity in some social circles.

As stated above, the Indian constitution of 1950 gave Hindi the status of de facto official language and gave English the same temporary status in official contexts for a period of fifteen years, that is, until 1965. However, by the 1960s, Hindi had ceased to

be the unifying anticolonial language and had become a regional language like others, while English retained its status as a regionally neutral language and as a language of sociocultural dynamism. While the initial encroachment of English was regarded with suspicion in North India and welcomed in South India, since then English also came to be accepted in the north. Van der Veer (1994) states that, at the time of his writing, a broad national elite continued to read the news in English, watch English television and send their children to English schools (182). In the author's view, English is not regarded as entailing the "colonisation of the mind", given that it is not regarded as a foreign language anymore but as a marker of class distinction (183). Even though the percentage of English speakers has been changing, especially after the introduction of neoliberal policies in 1991, they are still one indicator of socioeconomic differences in India. In any case, English is clearly a valuable linguistic and cultural asset with economic advantages and influence in the business sector (Zare and Iyer 2009: xvii) and it is said that proficiency in this language is a requirement for a good job, at least in North India (Connerney, 2009: 59).

I should note that recently there has been a re-valorisation of the Sanskritic heritage through the medium of English (Basu, 2016: ix) and contemporary mythological fiction is in some ways indicative of this trend. In Kanjilal's (2017) view, it was already irrelevant whether the epic retellers of the 20th century could read the canonical Sanskrit texts or not, given that television adaptations or books in English were considered sufficient to claim knowledge about past Indian traditions (166). Pattanaik, for instance, is often criticised for not knowing Sanskrit.[87] However, this is a relevant question neither for the author, who never alludes to his linguistic skills, nor for his readers, who tend to be more concerned with modern and relatable interpretations of their heritage than with scholarly endeavours to restore a Ur-text or Hindu nationalistic endeavours to place Sanskrit above other languages. In the end, as English is still a language used by a small and powerful minority in India, it can be said that the fact that the contemporary retellers under discussion chose English to write their retellings means that their goal is to make that small and powerful minority their main audience. However, to varying degrees, their works have been translated to regional languages, which means that they can also reach larger audiences.

[87] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtkMFLuOa3M (accessed on 31/3/2021). See also https://durgadash.com/2020/04/22/what-happens-when-you-dont-understand-sanskrit/ (accessed on 2/6/2022). In this article, the former soldier and current *yogi* Durga Prasad Dash asks "what happens when you don't understand Sanskrit" and concludes that one becomes a "fake mythologist" like Pattanaik.

1.14 The middle class and neoliberalism in India

In a much-quoted passage, Thomas Babington Macaulay (1965 [1835]), the British politician who became infamous for his role on the introduction of British education in India, stated that the British colonialists had to do their best to form a class that could work as interpreters between them and the millions they governed, "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (178). The British claimed that, given that these middle classes were Westernised and cut off from their Indian culture, they represented only themselves and not India as a whole (Torri, 2010: 47). This means that this was supposed to be a class of imitators and not of originators of ideas and values (Mishra, 1961: 11). However, the truth is that this class fashioned a specific culture and identity (Jaffrelot and van der Veer, 2008: 15). As sociologist Satish Deshpande (2003) asserts, in any society, the middle class is often projected as the best qualified group to represent the whole of society, given that it nominally tends to be a centrist group prone to the avoidance of extremes (130). However, as the same author remarks, the English-speaking Indian middle class has increasingly been imagining itself not merely as the representatives but as the nation itself (150).

Initially, the middle class was mostly constituted by upper-caste men.[88] However, as the only condition to join this class was to pass an exam, the one which allowed Indians to join the colonisers' administration, people could ideally come from all ranks of life (Das, 2000: 10). In practice, though, access to social opportunities was limited, given that upper-caste men were the ones who had the time and resources to pass that exam. However, this theoretical openness has recently been materialised by new education opportunities and the spread of the mass media (Shridaran, 2004: 421). This is the reason why scholars have devised the idea of a "new middle class" (see Mathur, 2010). Sociologist Steve Derné (2005) points out that economic (and, as a result, cultural) globalisation in India began in earnest in 1991, when the government broke with previous industrial policies and encouraged business, the private sector and international trade (35). Here, I would like to say a few words about neoliberalism, given that its *ethos* may influence sociocultural and even narrative ideals, something

[88] Women and the lower castes constituted objects of reform and revivalist discourses (Sarkar, 1997: 172). Even though women and the lower castes did not share the hegemonic power associated with the middle class, upper caste men often created discourses according to which women were represented as important national symbols.

which will be clear in the following chapters. Neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy which emerged in the 1970s. According to this philosophy, everything can be commodified, marketised and decentralised, which means that national governments should play no role in interfering with economics (Abramovitz, 2012). Given the deemphasis on the welfare state, according to neoliberalism individuals are ultimately responsible for their success, wealth and happiness (Binkley, 2011), which means that their degree of failure or success is evaluated in terms of whether they are talented and/or diligent enough and not on wider sociopolitical forces. In sum, the neoliberal reforms allowed the separation between the traditional middle class, which came from privileged families during colonial times, and the new one, which has had its origins in humbler families. As the neoliberal reforms have allowed India to compete with other modern countries (Fernandes, 2006: xv/xxvii), it could be said that, much like the traditional middle class, the new one has had more in common with global consumers than with ordinary Indians. Finally, neoliberal India may be defined as a post-industrial society which relies mainly on information technologies. In this sense, mimicking Anderson's (1983) notion of an "imagined community", political economist Andrew Wyatt (2007) refers to contemporary India as an "imaged economy" where steel, once a totemic product in the national imaginary, has been displaced by software (468).

Cultural differences between the old and new middle classes constitute a common topic of discussion among scholars, Indian public intellectuals and, as I shall show in the next chapter, some contemporary retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Das (2000) describes the old middle class as tolerant, secular, ambiguous, and based on education and merit. Conversely, he has described the new one as based on money, drive, and an ability to get things done (319). It is not that the contemporary retellers and their worldviews unambiguously fit into these two categories. However, they have been writing their fiction and nonfiction in response to such socioeconomic changes and to the ideological worldviews such changes have been associated with. As usual, other than self-identification, I am not willing to attach these labels. Tripathi (2017b) implicitly represents himself as new middle class. In the same passage I quoted in the previous subsection in relation to the English language, the author states that he would not be a suitable author for the English-language publishing industry because he does not come from the upper class, which has connections to the elite slab of Indian society (163). In other words, besides representing himself as non-elite when it comes to language use, Tripathi represents himself as non-elite when it comes to class. Actually, Tripathi

comes from a Brahmin family, but this is something the author never stresses in his writings. The author is also clear about the group to which he thinks he belongs when describing himself as "by nature a rebellious person, slightly anti-elitist" (42). Tripathi also often refers to Indian "youngsters" or to the Indian "youth". He writes that, while youngsters are criticised, they are reviving significant aspects of Indian culture (124), given that they are eager to learn from the West without feeling embarrassed by their native values (149). In his view, contemporary youngsters are "more Indian" than their parents (124), who have been out of touch with Indian culture (144). In sum, it seems that, besides identifying native Indian culture with himself, Tripathi also identifies both himself and native Indian culture with Indian millennials, that is, Indians who were born and raised after the introduction of neoliberalism. At the same time, he associated the old middle class with total Westernisation.

In cultural terms, this idea that precolonial India is being gradually revived since the introduction of neoliberal reforms through the hands of the new middle class finds expression in recent works related to Indian mythology which sometimes follow a monolithic view of *Rāmāyaṇa* and of Indian mythology in general, one which could be compared to the scholarly discourses by Parameswaran and Jain I analysed earlier. As I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, not all writers have followed this mentality and some have tried to present a diverse and pluralistic view of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and of Indian mythology. In any case, many mythological authors, whom I will not analyse in depth in this thesis, represent themselves as correcting some kind or precolonial truth which was lost during colonial times and during the Westernised period of post-independence. According to its introduction in *Amazon India*, the book *The Real Side: an authoritative look at the most controversial episodes of Ramayana & Mahabharata* by Govinda Das (2017), vows to "revisit the treasure that Valmiki & Vyasadeva gave by astutely analysing and broadcasting the futility of new-age opinions and speculations that have regrettably eclipsed the true essence of their legacy".[89] Similarly, the biographical note of author Amy Ganatra, who is introduced as "Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIMA). A management professional, she is also a devout yoga practitioner, a certified yoga instructor, and a student of Sanskrit and Indian knowledge systems", states that her book *Ramayana Unravelled* is not a retelling or imagination "but an attempt to go back to the original itihasa and present the story, learnings and nuances

[89] https://www.amazon.com/Real-Side-authoratative-controversial-Mahabharata-ebook/dp/B071DQ2J97 (accessed on 2/6/2024).

for what they are".[90] Similar recent works on the other epic tradition, the *Mahābhārata*, claim to debunk erroneous, distorted myths created by foreign scholars and by the Westernised Indian middle class of the post-independence period, and to restore the truth from the original sources.[91]

While it is a common discursive strategy to blame the old middle class for having entirely Westernised themselves, this does not mean that the new one should reject globalisation entirely. Tripathi and Roy (2020) have claimed that they have learned to straddle between two worlds, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) in school and the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* at home (xvii). In Tripathi's view, these two worlds represent India and traditional *Bhārata*. The former is derived from the Sanskrit word *Sindhu*, "river", and is the name the Persians gave to the subcontinent when they first got there, while the latter is the Hindi name for India. India is also the name by which the modern country-state is best-known throughout the contemporary world. Tripathi adds that the concept of *Bhārata* keeps Indians rooted to their tradition. Conversely, he describes India as a land playing "catch up" with the world, with modernity and Western-style liberalism (xv-xvii). These two concepts battle each other in the contemporary wrestling ring of the mass media and the lure of globalisation often makes spectators fear that *Bhārata* may lose. That is the reason why, in the most recent round, a new middle class with a neoliberal mentality has been trying to help *Bhārata* resurrect its antiquity, moral authority, and complexity and make a comeback against the newcomer India. In sum, it seems that what constitutes India is important for both English-speaking old and new middle classes. For that reason, I will now analyse the contemporary discourses on India as a civilisation.

[90] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Ami-Ganatra/author/B098PR56F6 (accessed on 2/6/2024).

[91] https://www.amazon.in/stores/Vivek-Dutta-Mishra/author/B085VVV97P (accessed on 2/6/2024); https://www.amazon.in/I-Duryodhana-Pradeep-Govind/dp/9352766199/ (accessed on 2/6/2024); https://www.amazon.in/Accursed-God-Lost-Epic-Book-ebook/dp/B082RGH4JD/ (accessed on 2/6/2024); https://www.amazon.in/Draupadi-Demystified-Mahabharat-Mahendra-Arya/dp/B0BPMZHF3P/ (accessed on 2/6/2024).

Chapter 2

Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism: "Ideas of India" and Hinduism

This chapter explores the ideas of Indianness and, in most cases, of Hinduism as discussed by well-known public intellectuals and the male retellers of the corpus of this thesis, given that the female ones have not written about these issues in their mythological fiction nor in nonfiction works related to mythology. The intellectuals I discuss include: Amartya Sen (1933-),[92] Gurcharan Das (1943-),[93] Shashi Tharoor (1956-)[94], and Rajiv Malhotra (1950-).[95] I begin by providing the rationale for comparing these authors, given that, despite different ideological leanings, most depart from an Indian or Hindu-centric worldview, with the added nuance that, in the discourses of some of them, it is sometimes difficult to be sure where India as a civilisation or nation ends and Hinduism as a religion begins. Nation and religion are said to rely on discursive and essentialist views of their respective realms as organic wholes and as individual entities whose various aspects or dimensions are inextricably related (Kinnvall, 2006: 758). Even though modern nationalisms are supposed to be secular, they can and have also frame religion (van der Veer, 2019) and, in the Indian case, the tension between these two ideas has been particularly relevant, given that, as I shall discuss, the Indian understanding of secularism may differ from the Western one. In order to compare and contrast the concepts of Indianness and Hinduism, I begin by defining the religious concept and then the nationalistic one.

[92] Economist and Nobel laureate who mostly writes about economic inequality and development in India.

[93] Das has a Ph.D degree in Philosophy from Harvard University. He worked most of his life in the business sector, but retired and became a full-time writer of fiction and nonfiction. He mostly writes about modern Indian society.

[94] Former UN diplomat and currently a MP in the lower house of the Indian parliament. Tharoor is a successful fiction and nonfiction writer. *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), his first fiction book, is a satirical retelling of the *Mahābhārata* in which the events and main figures of the Indian independence movement are compared to those of the epic. THAROOR, Shashi (1989). *The Great Indian Novel*, New Delhi: Penguin Books. The novel is part of the corpus of Kanjilal's (2017) Ph.D dissertation about 20th Century *Mahābhārata* retellings. Since the beginning of the 21st century, along with the rise of Hindu nationalism, Tharoor has mostly been writing works in support of Indian secularism.

[95] Independent Indian-American scholar and founder of the *Infinity Foundation*, an institute which aims to revise and amend the misrepresentation of Hinduism in Western scholarly and popular circles. Kurien's (2007) work on Hinduism in America deals with Malhotra's influence on contemporary Indo-American discourses. According to Kurien, even though Malhotra is not an academic, he is regarded as an influential spokesman of Hinduism among the Indian diaspora in the United States. Malhotra is said to mostly use his background in business to make Hinduism more similar to neoliberal ideas and to other world religions, which Malhotra often represents as being run like businesses (193).

2.1 The idea(s) of Hinduism(s)

The major sociocultural bone of contention in relation to the concept of Hinduism has been ascertaining whether this is an artificial construct concocted by British colonisers or whether it existed previous to Western scholarship's intrusion into India. I must first define my position and state that, in my view, both assertions could be right. It is clear that, before Westerners arrived there, there existed in India religious phenomena which could nowadays be partially equated with modern Hinduism. However, as the modern concept of *religion* was created by Western scholars with Western Christianity as the main reference point (Masuzawa 2005), non-Christian religious phenomena were likely only understood in modern Christian-like terms after the colonial encounter. In my view, and this is where I differ from more prescriptive views, this does not create any kind of hierarchy. While appeal to tradition is a common discursive strategy which has been used by Western academia and nationalistic discourses, the way in which tradition and/or innovation are valued or devalued are themselves cultural phenomena which vary through time and space. As I have defined religion and culture as changing phenomena and not solely as essences, I do not attach any kind of value to antiquity or modernity, even though, as I shall demonstrate shortly, many authors tend to do so. In sum, my approach is descriptive and I consider modern phenomena as equally legitimate and culturally relevant to ancient ones.

Most contemporary scholars agree with the former hypothesis, that is, that Hinduism is a modern construct.[96] Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962), one of the most renowned professors of Comparative Religions of the 20th century, regarded Hinduism as a simplified and overarching name the West gave to a variegated series of religious facts (130). Later scholars have tended to agree that there is no single teaching in Hinduism that can be shown to be valid for all Hindus (Sweetman, 2001: 218).[97] Doniger (2009) calls the Hindus a "rainbow people" moved by different texts and readings of the same text produced by different social groups (25). Hinduism is said to have discouraged the formation of a collective religious identity (Ludden, 1996: 5-6) bound, like the Abrahamic religions, by a single holy book and a limited set of dogmas,

[96] SUGIRTHARAJAH, Sharada (2003). *Imagining Hinduism: A Postcolonial Perspective*, London: Motilal Banarsidass; PENNINGTON, Brian K. (2005). *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Oddie (2006); BLOCH, Esther, KEPPENS, Marianne, and HEGDE, Rajaram (eds.) (2010). *Rethinking Religion in India: The colonial construction of Hinduism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Van der Veer (2014) shows how similar developments occurred in Chinese religious traditions and provides comparisons between the Indian and Chinese cases.

[97] The concept of *dharma* may be regarded as a factor which unifies Hindu discourses (Halbfass, 1990 [1988]: 243).

a single or at least a major deity, a central authority in the figure of an individual or of an institution, common nationwide rituals, etc. While these arguments are not false, one could ask whether such variety does not occur in all major religions, including the Abrahamic ones. Defining Hinduism as diverse and heterogeneous makes it sound as if other world religions have the opposite features. However, despite centuries-long attempts at unifying and canonising doctrine by central religious authorities, no major religion is practiced in the same way in different spatial, temporal, and sociocultural contexts.

Some scholars consider that Hinduism also emerged as a political construct. Gier (2014) writes that, until the British introduced the concept of "pure religions" and religious identification, Indians did not always emphasise or live by such differences (xvii-xviii). This means that the cultural criteria for what was relevant or not were different from the modern Western one. This is a problem which remains, given that most Westerners who do not study culture or religion seemingly still expect non-Abrahamic religions to be structurally similar to centralised, exclusivist and faith-based like Christian practices. Warren Hastings (1732-1818), the first governor-general of India, was the first who demanded the creation of a unified Hindu community to be bound by one set of laws (Kurien, 2007: 31). According to colonial policy, Indians were made to define themselves religiously for the first time. This compelled Indians of all castes and sects to reflect upon what united them and what made them different from other religious groups (Bakker, 1991: 95).

Finally, it is often remarked that modern Hinduism was devised by Orientalist scholars in dialogue with Brahmins (King, 1999: 89-90; Keppens and Bloch, 2010: 5). The British and Brahminical framework, which existed before the coming of the colonisers, were elite traditions carried by scholars and connecting political power to knowledge (van der Veer, 2014: 120-121). It may be argued that, since the independence movement, there has been a shift from an Orientalist discourse to a re-Orientalist one and that Indians have begun claiming that a religion with the features put forth by Orientalists existed in precolonial India (Keppens and Bloch, 2010: 5). Similarly, it may be argued that Hindus have tried to show their tradition in a positive light by interpreting it as a canonised and homogenised religion like Judaism and Christianity (*Ibid.:* 8), given that, due to the Abrahamic hegemony in determining the terms of what religion is supposed to, non-Abrahamic religions may be regarded as lacking something and, for that matter, practitioners themselves may think so. Given

that modernity has been an ideal for most non-Western nations, it feels comprehensible that postcolonial discourses often try to adapt local knowledge systems to modern ones. However, most Indians still practice ancestral traditions and not the pan-Indian religion (*Ibid.:* 14).

The idea of Hinduism as a colonial invention is opposed by Malhotra's (2016a) *Indra's Net: Defending Hinduism's Philosophical Unity.* The author states that, despite the appearance of diversities, tensions, and complexities, an underlying core of shared values and attitudes were subject to systematisations by precolonial Hindu thinkers. Indologist Andrew J. Nicholson (2010) is one the few Western scholars who supported the idea that Orientalist scholars were influenced by Indian philosophers from the 12th to the 16th century (2), that is, prior to the British Raj. Again, I am more interested in the political relevance of such comments, given that the definition of the antiquity of Hinduism is often regarded as relevant in its comparison with other religious phenomena, than in their veracity or falsity, which, in my view, depends exclusively on how one defines the criteria at play.

While some authors try to recreate Hinduism as a unified system inspired by Judaism and Christianity and around which all Indian religious facts converge, others tend to ignore the concept of religion and rank Hinduism differently, calling it by names such as a "way of life" (Kurien, 2007: 197). This is a widespread phenomenon in counter-cultural and decolonial contemporary forms of religiosity, which often regard the concept of "religion" as a negative phenomenon characterised by old-fashioned ideas of dogmatism, ritualism, collectivism, among other ideas often associated with organised Judaism and Christianity (Clarke, 2006a). Hindu discourses (as well as those of other religions, including contemporary variants of Christianity) do not try to legitimise themselves through comparison but rather through positive contrast with institutionalised religion. Das (2009), for instance, makes use of a quasi-New Age discourse when stating that

> Hinduism is not a 'religion' in the usual sense. It is a civilization based on a simple metaphysical insight about the unity of the individual and the universe and has self-development as its objective. It employs innovative mental experiments of yoga that evolved in the first half of millennium BC, and does not have the notion of a 'chosen people', of a jealous God; it does not proselytize, does not hunt heretics. It could not be more different from the great Semitic religions - Christianity, Judaism

> and Islam. Hence, I felt I could interrogate its texts in order to learn to live a secular life in a better way (xxxvi).

Again, depending on one's perspective, other world religions could also be and have been regarded as "civilisations" with similar features, including variants of the Abrahamic religions. Tripathi (2017b) also writes that Hinduism does not fit the description of an organised religion because it is decentralised (109). I would argue that there are contemporary centres of Hinduism which have been supported by the modern mass media and that, to varying degrees, every major centralised world religion has decentralised offshoots ranging from major to minor sects which try to resist the hegemonic centre. In the end, both extreme views on Hinduism and of any cultural fact may be hazardous. Regarding Hinduism as a colonial invention robs past and present Indians of agency. The argument sometimes makes it sound as if precolonial Indians had no sense of the religion/civilisation/way of life they followed before the coming of the British. Similarly, stating that the religious phenomena which existed in the Indian subcontinent before the arrival of the British did not suffer British influence (or, conversely, that British culture did not suffer Indian cultural influence) would also be extreme from a cultural perspective, given that cultures tend to be syncretic.

2.2 The idea(s) of India

The debate about the naturalness or artificiality of the concept of Hinduism is mirrored by similar discussions about India as a nation. I should make right away the same argument I have made in the previous section: while the modern concept of the nation-state was devised in the West (Smith, 1986), this does not mean that postcolonial non-Western nation-states did not have forms of political organisation which could be partially compared to the modern definition of a nation-state, even though my goal here is not to try to define exactly what such comparisons could be but what discourses have been created about such comparisons. Most scholarly and non-scholarly works acknowledge the ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity of the modern nation-state of India. This idea shows how India may be regarded as "an imagined community" as every other nation. The titles of Ronald B. Inden's (2001 [1990]) *Imagining India*, Salman Rushdie's (1992) collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Geoffrey A. Oddie's (2006) *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism 1793-1900,* Sudipta Kaviraj's (2010) *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* and Diana Dimitrova and

Thomas de Bruijn's (2017) *Imagining Indianness: Cultural Identity and Literature* are examples of the importance of the concept "imagination" for the conceptualisation of both modern India as a political, cultural and religious unity.

The most common concept related to Indian nationalism is that India is not an "imagined community" but rather an "idea". Author Jonah Blank (1992) has described India as a "hodgepodge of hundreds of cultures, languages, and peoples held together only by an idea" (218). Descriptions by nationalistic Indian discourses tend to be similar to this one, even though they often lead the conclusion of this "hodgepodge", which is a term which can be interpreted derisively, towards a more positive *denouement.* The expression "idea of India" has been widespread in writings of both an academic and a non-academic nature pertaining to Indian nationalism and identity.[98] Tharoor (2018), who often uses this expression in his writings, states that the expression is as old as antiquity itself, although it was probably popularised by Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). In a 1921 letter sent to Charles Freer Andrews (1871-1940), a British missionary in India, Tagore wrote:

> I feel that the true India is an idea and not a mere geographical fact (...) The idea of India is against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one's own people from others, and which inevitably leads to ceaseless conflicts. Therefore my one prayer is: let India stand for the cooperation of all peoples of the world (quoted in Bhattacharya, 1997: 61).

Here, one sees some of the traits of the "idea of India" I will analyse later in this chapter. Despite its diversity, India is said to be unified, given that it is said to be a pacific and tolerant nation which naturally includes and harmonises difference. Even though pacifism and tolerance seem to be unique traits, they are universalised, given that it is said that India shall "stand for the cooperation of all peoples of the world".

In another study, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (2017), who has written extensively on Tagore, pushes the referent of the expression "idea of India" further back in time. The author claims that the "idea of India" as a syncretic civilisation that accommodates plurality and diversity was already present in the 1903 essay *Bharatavarṣer itihāsa*, Bengali for "The History of India". In this work, Tagore stated that the aim of India:

[98] It has also been used by the Indian government. In 2021, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations has launched a poster and painting competition titled "My idea of India" to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Independent India. https://www.iccr.gov.in/Iccr4Art/index.php (accessed on 29/9/2021).

> has always been to establish unity amidst differences, to bring to a convergence different paths, and to internalize within her[99] soul the unity of the severalty, that is to say to comprehend the inner union between externally perceptible differences without eliminating the uniqueness of each element (quoted in Bhattacharya, 2017: 24).

In Tagore's view, the process of the "idea of India" involved joining the nation's social groups and the whole of mankind in order to avoid conflict and ensure stability. This process would create a cohesive group without demeaning the identity of smaller groups. In theoretical terms, this conflation of national and universal values has been associated with the ideal of Indian secularism, which I will describe in a short while. The idea of some kind of ontological unity is also relevant, given that later I will analyse how the male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* broach this subject.

In the view of historian Ramachandra Guha (2011), the publication of the book *The Idea of India* by Sunil Khilnani's (1997), a professor of Indian politics and history, made Indians realise what the "idea of India" represented. According to Guha (2011), Khilnani's work presented a nationalism that was different from others. Specifically, while traditional nationalisms gravitate around a common identity, the nationalism of Tagore, Gandhi or the Indian Constitution called for the diversity of identities. According to Khilnani (1997), the "idea of India" proposed by Nehru sought to coordinate the values of democracy, religious tolerance, economic development and cultural pluralism (3). In order to achieve this, Nehru relied on a compelling story of the Indian past told as a tale of cultural mixing and fusion with a tendency towards unification (116) but committed to the protection of cultural and religious difference rather than to the imposition of uniform "Indianness" (167).

Guha (2011) mentions the ongoing fear that this artificial construct of a greater India may be dismantled into its constituent parts. Rushdie (1992) also claims that the paradox of the "idea of India" is that its component parts, the states which coalesced into the union, were ancient historical entities, with cultures and independent existences going back centuries, whereas the nation is only a few decades old (41). This means that unity between the nation and its smaller political units is an ongoing project. This is the reason why discussions around the "idea of India" as both an ancient civilisation and recent

[99] India is envisioned as a feminine entity. Grammatically, this makes sense in neither English nor Bengali, which have no grammatical gender. In Hindi, *Bhārat* is a masculine noun. The translator has probably been influenced by the common representation of the Indian nation as a feminine figure (see the third and sixth chapters).

nation continues to be relevant, as the title of Tripathi's (2017b) *Immortal India: Young Country, Timeless Civilization* reveals.

Discourses on India as a culturally-unified nation tend to be similar to those of Hinduism as a culturally-unified religion. As there may be arguments for the creation of a pan-Hinduism influenced by a Western holistic view, there may be arguments for the creation of a pan-Indian nation-state based on the Western-based concept of nationalism (Eck, 2013 [2011]: 47), but with at least a claim to difference, according to which variety is as much as prized as similarity. The ontological similarities in descriptions of the constructs of "religion" and "state" seem to facilitate the creation of discourses in which both are imagined as forming a greater unity.

It is clear that there exist many conflicting ideas of any modern nation-state, including of India, a country with more than one billion people and, as of 2024, the most populous country in the world. However, since the beginning of discussions about the "idea of India", two ideas have been more hegemonic than others. One regards India as a modern secular and tolerant culture with no hierarchic sociocultural preferences, while the other regards it as an intrinsically Hindu culture in which diversity thrives because Hinduism allows and promotes it. Both concepts have competed in the cultural and political arenas since (anti)colonial times, with the former being more expressive in the years after post-independence and the latter having become more expressive in the past few years and decades. While these ideas seem to differ on their approach to religion, both draw on Indian religious discourses (van der Veer, 2019: 46). Politically, one may coalesce these ideas with the discourses of the current main political parties of India, the Indian National Congress (Congress) and the *Bhāratīya Janatā Pārṭī* (BJP), respectively. The former tends to be universalistic and to strive to include the multicultural and multi-ethnic population of India along the lines of Tagore's "idea of India", while the latter tends to have a narrower view of Hindu identity and of cultural supremacy along the lines of similar recent international right-wing movements which prize other ethnoreligious identities (Jaffrelot, 2007: 3-4).[100] Legal historian Sylvie Guichard (2010)

[100] The discourse about competing ideas of India also plays a role in the political arena. In an interview to *The Hindu* during the 2014 election rally, Rahul Gandhi (1970-), the then vice-president of the Congress, said: "[w]e are now faced with a contest between two competing ideas of India. The Congress' idea of India is about inclusion, decentralisation, empowering people, and building partnerships for economic growth. The Opposition's idea seeks to divide the country on communal lines, capture resources for a select few, and centralise decision-making by putting all power into the hands of one individual. Our opponents want an India in which there is no place for the poor, no place for those with a different religion or ideology. This is a dangerous idea. It has been the proud legacy of the Congress party to fight and defeat this idea since the birth of our nation".

refers to a third multifaceted "idea of India" which groups different views advocated by several subaltern groups. According to the author, this third idea opposes elitism and centralisation (163), which are the defining features of the two mainstream ideas. Recently, these subaltern "ideas of India", which I would compare with the concept of *little traditions*, have gained momentum. In any case, recent scholarly and non-scholarly works mostly debate the mainstream ideas. For the sake of convenience, I refer to the main ideas as "Indian secularism" and "Hindu nationalism", given that both terms are common and their choice of words focuses on similarity (*Indian/nationalism*) and contrast (*secularism*/*Hindu*).

2.2.1 Indian secularism

In the Western understanding of the term, *secularism* refers to the separation of temporal and spiritual powers and to a generalised indifference from the former towards the latter. According to Nandy (2003), however, the term *secularism* has two meanings in India: the Western one and a local Indian one in which *secular* is not the opposite of *sacred* but of *ethnocentrism*, *xenophobia*, and *fanaticism*. One can be secular by ignoring religion or by respecting every religion in the same way (34). Although the Indian state has not been secular in the first sense, it has imagined a common culture of India in terms of religious pluralism (enshrined in articles 25 to 28 of the Indian constitution),[101] although individual religions are often regarded as refractions of a greater Indian spirituality (van der Veer, 1994: 23).

Indian secularism has been cast as an antithesis of communalism (Kumar, 2008: 15), an ideology which emphasises the religious community as a social, political, and economic unit in antagonistic distinction from other groups (van der Veer, 1993: 20). This means that Indian secularism tries to avoid the opposite view: religious segregation, which would lead to separatism and defeat the nationalistic cause. As a result, this "idea of India" endeavours to let different religions coexist, supposedly with the same power balance between them. This adoption of modern values of pluralism and freedom is often regarded as a defining feature of Hindu civilisation (van der Veer, 2019: 45-46). This seems to mean that, even though all religions are to be equally respected, they are not on the same footing, given that every religion is interpreted through the Hindu prism.

https://www.thehindu.com/elections/loksabha2014/its-a-contest-of-two-competing-ideas-of-india/article5941163.ece (accessed on 3/5/2021).

[101] https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/ (accessed on 4/6/2024).

Nehru, for instance, is regarded as an important figure who promoted a secular view of India. Although he was more concerned with an economic ideology of development than with cultural nationalism (Deshpande, 2003: 77), in his work *The Discovery of India* (1985 [1946]) he discussed as much history and culture as economics, mostly Hindu history and culture, possibly because it would be difficult for the nation to work macroeconomically without the formation of an identity shaped by a common history and culture.

2.2.2 Hindu nationalism

The other relevant "idea of India", one which has been promoted by Hindu nationalistic discourses, states that the nation-state should be envisioned as a Hindu nation, here understood more as an ethnopolitical idea than as a modern religious one. Hindu nationalism was first theorised by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966),[102] who was not even a Hindu in the religious sense but an atheist. It was further developed by Madhavrao Sadashivrao Golwalkar (1906-1973).[103] Golwalkar (1939) wrote that the non-Hindu peoples of India must adopt the Hindu culture and language, respect the Hindu religion and glorify the Hindu race (55). Contrary to Indian secularism, Hindu nationalism is focused on a nativistic and atavistic interpretation of culture and identity. This ideology advocates that Hinduism is the historically and geographically legitimate "way of life" of India, which means that it should be valued above all others, and that it is the non-Hindus who have to adapt to Hinduism and not the other way around.

The idea of multiple nations within India has been something that the BJP has fought ardently (Chakrabarty and Jha, 2020: 228). I would equate this process with the socioculturally unifying tendency of *Sanskritisation*. However, as I have said, in the past *Sanskritisation* was akin to Brahminisation, given that the Brahmins were the main carriers of Sanskrit knowledge. In the modern age, with the vilification of the concept of caste, this concept is often associated with the powerful new middle class. As the British united India through the idea of empire and Indian secularists try to unite it around the idea of civic nationalism, Hindu nationalists try to unite it through the ethnopolitical concept of a pan-Hinduism inspired by the *ethos* of the new middle-class. This process is inclusive in the sense that it seeks to include the "pure" community that

[102] Savarkar's (1969 [1923]) *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* is deemed to be the work which launched the movement.
[103] Most studies on Indian nationalism trace its history from Savarkar and Golwakar until BJP-rule. Chakrabarty and Jha (2020).

existed before the incursion of foreigners, sometimes forcefully, and exclusive in the sense that it seeks to exclude the "impure" foreigners, as if the two communities have not intermingled through the centuries. In sum, Hindu nationalism envisions culture as a violent battleground where "native" identities are asked to join the battle against "alien forces" (van der Veer, 2014: 137).

The main religious community which is represented as foreign and antithetical to Hinduism in Hindu nationalistic discourses is the Muslim one (*Ibid.*: 220). Doniger (2009) states that the story of Hinduism as told by Hindu nationalists always includes a chapter on the "Horrid Things Those Bad Muslims Did" (454). Nowadays, this strategy is often adopted by massified popular culture, sometimes with explicit governmental support and sponsorship, as recent popular Bollywood films such as *The Kashmir Files* (2022) and *The Kerala Story* (2023),[104] which invariably depict Hindus as innocent and Muslims as brutal murderers, have shown. This discursive strategy is similar to the one used by colonial scholars who contraposed Christianity and Hinduism, as well as Christianity and other Asian religions, in similar terms. In fact, Hindu nationalistic discourse is more complex, given that a distinction is often made between past and present cultural values and that there is a "well-developed, concerted effort to remind Muslims of their original identity as Hindus" (Viswanathan, 1998: 171). This means that, much like Orientalist scholarship, Hindu nationalistic discourses tend to state that, instead of merely changing in an organic fashion, cultural essences get corrupted from their desirable, pristine state.

[104] AGNIHOTRI, Vivek (Director) (2022). *The Kashmir Files* [Film], Zee Studios; SEN, Sudipto (Director) (2023). *The Kerala Story* [Film], Sunshine Pictures.

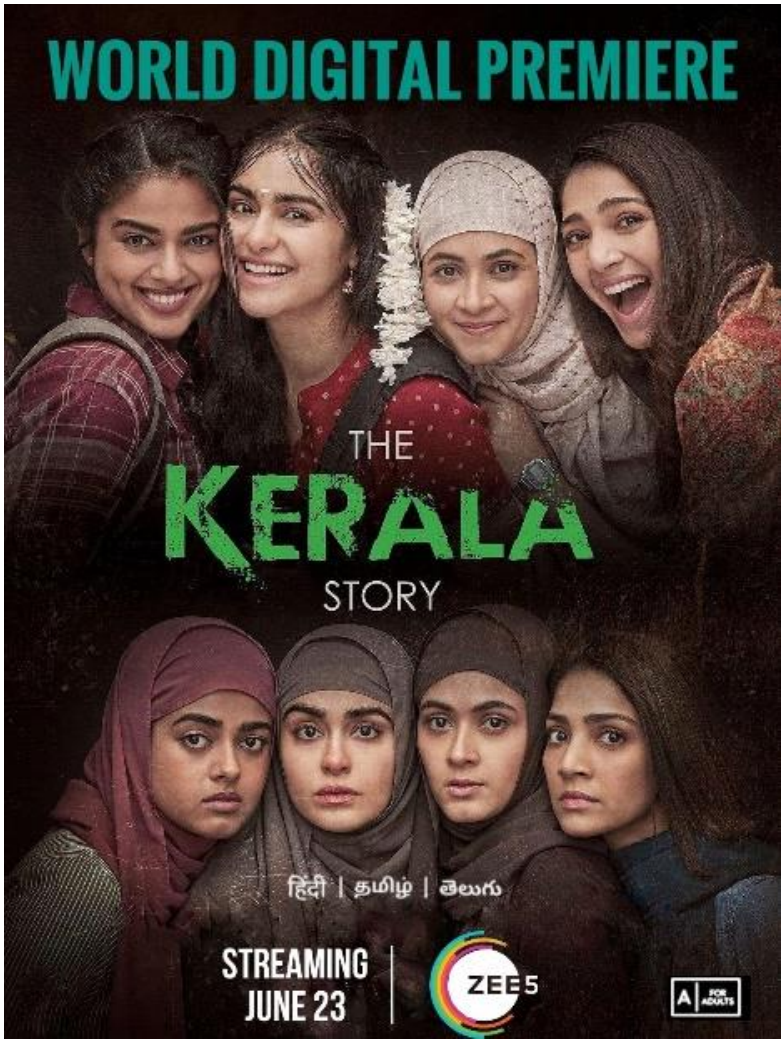


Figure 16 - Poster of Sudipto Sen's (2023) *The Kerala Story* [105]

This is one of the implicit ideas behind the film *The Kerala Story*, which deals with topic of *Love Jihad*, the theory according to which Indian Muslims have tried to marry Hindu girls into Islam to make their religion expand. [106] The film's depiction of Hinduism and Islam is clear in one of the posters used to promote it (Figure 16). The female protagonists are shown with happy and sad faces when wearing Hindu and Muslim clothes, respectively.

The extreme representations, common to such polarising Hindu nationalistic discourses, are clear: all Hindu girls are happy and free, while all Muslim girls are sad and oppressed. This fictitious representation is supposed to influence public opinion by substituting lived reality, even though such representations can afterwards influence and legitimate lived reality. As scholarship on Islam and perceptions of Islam have shown and as I show in this chapter in relation to Hinduism, lived reality tends to be much more complex than popular culture. In popular culture, though, representations can be controlled by one author or a select team of people instead of experienced by millions of Hindus.

[105] https://www.imdb.com/title/tt24268454/mediaviewer/rm2982358017/ (accessed on 9/9/2023).
[106] STROHL, David James (2019). "Love jihad in India's moral imaginaries: religion, kinship, and citizenship in late liberalism" *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 27-39; TYAGI, Aastha, and SEN, Atreyee (2020). "*Love-jihad* (Muslim Sexual Seduction) and *ched-chad* (sexual harassment): Hindu nationalist discourses and the Ideal/deviant urban citizen in India" *Gender, Place and Culture*, Vol. 27, pp. 104-125.

Despite these arguments of exclusion and re-inclusion of religious groups, the BJP considers that the Congress promotes a pseudo-secularism from which religious minorities benefit and the majority Hindu religion suffers. In other words, the BJP claims to give voice to a silent majority. Similar right-wing movements have emerged in contemporary democratic societies and have provided means for "silent majorities" to vent their anger. Such movements sometimes focus on identity markers, such as religion. However, the case of India seems unique in the way that it focuses on Hinduism and not on other more international religions, such as Christianity, Islam or Buddhism. Hindu nationalists have changed the concept of *secularism* in an even more radical fashion when regarding themselves to be the true secular representatives of India (van der Veer, 2019: 46). In short, secularism is regarded as a trait that religions possess or lack and not as an *a-religious* or irreligious phenomenon. Some religions are said to give rise to secularist tendencies while others are said to give rise to anti-secularist ones. In India, it is Islam which is often represented as intolerant and violent, while Hinduism is represented as secular (Brosius, 2005: 101). Much like many relevant concepts to which positive and/or negative values are attached, *secularism* has turned into an empty signifier which may mean whatever any single individual or group wishes it to mean, provided that the discursive intention is either to praise the *Self* or to criticise the *Other*.

2.2.3 A summary of the "idea of India"

Despite their conceptual differences, some scholars advocate that Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism have stemmed from the same root and have been similar in some ways (Nandy, 1998: 283; Nandy, 2003: 108; Guichard, 2010: 3/8). The concepts of unity and diversity are significant for both "ideas of India", given that both posit a fundamental historical, cultural, social, and religious unity that existed throughout the whole territory controlled by the British before the British came. In the end, the emphasis that each idea puts on unity and diversity is different. Indian secularism emphasises diversity and Hindu nationalism unity. If subaltern groups such as lower castes and tribal peoples are not included in the Hindu category, the "idea of India" as a major Hindu-majority state may collapse (Kurien, 2007: 137). For this reason, in the view of Hindu nationalists, subaltern groups constitute important vote banks and, as stated previously, there have been attempts to remind them of their previous identities as Hindus. Supporters of Indian secularism, by contrast, prioritises the concept of India and tends to accept the

coexistence of Hindus and non-Hindus because Hinduism itself, contrary to Christianity or the Abrahamic religions, is said to be inclusive and respectful towards difference.

While I acknowledge that their results have been not only different but antagonistic in their social effects, mainly in their explicit physical attitudes toward the Muslims, I argue in this chapter that, in some discourses, the representations of *Self* and *Other* in secularist and Hindu nationalistic discourses do not represent antagonistic poles. In some cases, both avowedly moderate Indian secularists and extremist Hindu nationalists conflate stereotyped views of the Indian nation and Hindu religion and contrast both positively with equally stereotyped ideas of the West and Christianity or, in an even more general sense, of Abrahamic religions, which tend to be conflated with the West. This, it is understood, is an attempt to carve a nation-state which is both recognisable as such and different from other nation-states, mainly the Western ones. The rise of political movements which endeavour to protect native culture against imperial physical or neo-imperial psychological invasions, however, are not unique to India or to postcolonial nations but are also evident in past colonising ones.

Other than the fact that nations and religions are always projects and not accomplished facts and must be constantly updated, discussions about the "idea of India" and Hinduism survive because: 1) of Indian and Hindu ethnocultural diversity, which has to be constantly made sense of and managed; and 2) of the relatively recent economic, political and cultural changes I have analysed since the last few sections of the previous chapter, and which include the neoliberal turn in 1991, the political rise of Hindu nationalism and the attempt to decolonialise Indian culture. A desired change which has failed to materialise lies in the lingering Western epistemological shadow, which, due to the impact globalisation, remains strong and is often regarded as a kind of neocolonialism.

In the following section, as a prelude to my treatment of nonfiction discourses by the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, I analyse how influential cultural critics Amartya Sen, Gurcharan Das, Shashi Tharoor and Rajiv Malhotra approach the modern tension between the two "ideas of India" and their relationship with religion. I chose Das's *India Unbound*: *From Independence to Global Information Age* (2000), Sen's *The Argumentative Indian: writings on Indian history, culture and identity* (2005), Malhotra's *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism* (2011), and Tharoor's *Why I am a Hindu* (2018), as well as his *The Battle of Belonging: On Nationalism, Patriotism, and What It Means to be Indian* (2020). These are the books

in which these authors most clearly construct their "ideas of Indian" and/or Hinduism. I choose two books by Tharoor because *The Battle of Belonging* and *Why I am a Hindu* deal with the concept of India and Hinduism, respectively. I organise my discussion thematically from the author I regard as the most moderate one, Amartya Sen, to the least moderate one, Malhotra, who is often regarded as a *Hindutva* ideologue (Kurien 2007, 156). Sometimes it is not entirely clear whether some authors, mainly Tharoor and Malhotra, are discussing the Indian civilisation, the Hindu religion, or both, which means that the use of these terms may sometimes feel confusing. It is important, however, to remark that these are stereotyped representations of both entities and that Indian civilisation includes many more religious and cultural phenomena other than Hinduism, whichever way it may be defined.

2.3 Representations of India, Hinduism and their *Others*

2.3.1 Amartya Sen's *The Argumentative Indian*

Amartya Sen's (2005) *The Argumentative Indian* focuses on Indian history, culture and identity. It was followed by *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (Sen, 2006), which deals with similar topics in more abstract terms. Sen's (2005) thesis is that India has a long argumentative tradition defined by the "need to interact with each other, in mutual respect, through dialogue" (17) and symbolised in modern times by the likes of Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru (288) and non-aggressive Hindu leaders such as Vivekananda (49). This focus on rationality and debate will set the tone for my later treatment of these same ideas by the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The mention of figures stereotypically associated with Hinduism, such as Vivekananda, does not mean that the author values Hinduism above other religious traditions. In fact, Sen is careful to write from a religiously detached point of view. He positions his work against two main adversaries: colonial Orientalism and Hindu nationalism.

Sen (2005) condemns the stereotype of India as a spiritual civilisation which contrasts with the West, often regarded as

> the main, perhaps the only, source of rationalistic and liberal ideas – among them analytical scrutiny, open debate, political tolerance and agreement to differ. The West is seen (…) as having exclusive access to the values that lie at the foundation of rationality and reasoning, science and evidence, liberty and tolerance, and of course rights and justice (285).

According to Sen, this stereotype has silenced the rationalist aspects of Indian culture into the present (155). As arguments against the stereotype, the author mentions the *Cārvāka/Lokāyata* (23-29) school, a materialistic school of Indian philosophy whose ideas are mostly known through secondary literature,[107] and quotes sceptical and empiricist passages from the Indian epic *Rāmāyaṇa* (26). By arguing for epistemological East-West commonalities, Sen explicitly tries to counter Orientalist discourses which focused on difference (153). The author considers that the Indian argumentative tradition has been compromised by the short-sighted Hindu nationalistic ideology, which has tried to establish borders dividing between native and foreign ideas (65). In his view, Hindu nationalism has roots in the Orientalist discourse of past cultural greatness against present degeneration (140). Sen also creates a somewhat romantic view of the past and a less romantic view of the present when praising the diversity and pluralism of ancient Hinduism and opposing it to the narrow-minded of Hindu nationalism, which is depicted as a kind of bowdlerised Hinduism. However, Sen avoids generalisations regarding Hinduism and associates his positive representations with Indian civilisation instead. He states that it would be wrong to regard democracy as "a gift of the Western world" (13) but also states that there is nothing unique about India that makes it "singularly suited to democracy" (*Ibid.*). The reason why Sen makes this distinction between "ideas of India" and Hinduism is clear. He writes that, while in the time of his writing supporters of Hindu nationalism constitute a small in number, there are many proto-*Hindutva* enthusiasts who regard Hinduism with some prominence (53). This means that, when associating positive traits with Hinduism and negative traits with other religious traditions, one may run the risk of creating an ontological hierarchy which would cater to the Hindu nationalistic taste.

Another Hindu nationalistic trait criticised by Sen is the attempt to find "foreign" scapegoats for Indian problems, such as the Muslim identity (58). Sen counters this approach by stating that "Indians - Hindus as well as others - can actually take some pride in the fact that persecuted minorities (such as Jews, Christians, Parsees) from abroad have come to India over many centuries, seeking a new and unpersecuted life" (49). Contrary to other secularist and to Hindu nationalistic discourses I will analyse, Sen clarifies that such tolerance, another trait I will analyse in relation to the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is not an essential trait but an historical

[107] GOKHALE, Pradeep P. (2015). *Lokāyata/Cārvāka: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

fact (16-17). Countering stereotypical Hindu nationalistic discourses, Sen integrates Muslims into his "idea of India". The most common examples of the argumentative Indian given throughout his book (and in similar books by secular writers) are the 3rd century BCE Buddhist emperor Aśoka and the 16th century Mughal emperor Akbar. As Aśoka is said to have created the oldest rules for debates (xii) and Akbar to have promoted debates among holders of different beliefs (39), both are positioned within the historical, argumentative tradition of Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru and Vivekananda. While Muslims are the stereotypical scapegoats of Hindu nationalistic discourses, Sen acknowledges that, as Indians have constructed their national identities against colonialism, a simplistic representation of the West also constitutes a likely candidate (139). The author regards it as paradoxical that, due to globalisation, nativist discourses are more influenced by outside ideas than by native ones (133). This is the reason why postcolonial Indian discourses "opt for a characterization of Indian culture and society that is rather self-consciously 'distant' from Western traditions" (139). This will be another recurrent topic in this chapter and, in fact, Sen is the only author whose discourse I analyse who never resorts to this otherising strategy. Paradoxically, this discursive strategy is similar to the one several Western Orientalist scholars adopted.

2.3.2 Gurcharan Das's *India Unbound*

In *India Unbound*, Gurcharan Das (2000) mentions Hindu nationalism *en passant* when mentioning its ambivalence for criticising Western-style modernity while being derived from it (80) and when stating that the ideology presupposes a desirable self-sufficiency and cultural superiority, which could be dangerous for the contemporary globalised world (346). However, rather than concerned with condemning Hindu nationalism, Das is mostly concerned with describing the economic rise of India since 1991 and the parallel emergence of the new middle class. In any case, as economics, politics and culture are interrelated, relevant representations of India and Hinduism emerge along the way. Most noticeably, while criticising Hindu nationalistic discourses of cultural superiority, Das often argues for India's singularity and greatness in a less moderate way than Sen. Like Sen, however, he is concerned with dissociating modernity from the West and reclaiming it for India and other postcolonial civilisations (342-343). The elements that Das emphasises are not only rationality but also commerce, a money economy, property, class relations, individuality, and equality. These are general traits whose potential prototypes could likely be found in both

Western and non-Western societies. My concern is not to prove or disprove such assertions but to remark on Das's intention to inform his readers about it.

Contrary to Sen, Das adopts the (neo-)Orientalist stereotype of Indian civilisation and of Hinduism as spiritual. As this concept will be relevant when I analyse the works written by Tharoor and Malhotra, as well as the nonfiction discourses by the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, I shall introduce it before I proceed with the analysis of Das's ideas. The cultural history of the Western definition of spirituality is traced by Carrette and King (2005: c. 1). As a modern concept, the idea of *spirit* became particularly relevant when philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) opposed it to matter and, as a result, posed a dual material and immaterial existence. According to this dichotomy, *spirit* is what distinguishes mankind from other beings and associates it with God. However, through the development of modern technology and cultural ventures which became associated with it, such as colonialism, the West became stereotypically associated with materialism. Modernist defenders of "Asian values" acknowledged that, while the West was able to develop science and technology and physically conquer Asian civilisations, it lacked cultural values (Shani and Kibe, 2019: 2), which means that native "spiritual" traditions emerged as a means of resistance against the materialistic West (van der Veer, 2014: 32).[108] The ideas that Westerners were materially superior but spiritually inferior and that native spiritual traditions found their way into Orientalist discourses. Max Müller (1860), one of the founders and towering figures of Orientalism, wrote in a study of ancient Sanskrit literature that the Hindu enters this world as a stranger, given that all his thoughts are directed to another world (181). This representation has remained alive since colonial times. Blank (1992), for instance, states that Indian ascetics have long been the guardians of India's soul and makes the generalisation that every Indian hero is a holy man at heart (111). This assertion refers to mythic heroes, such as Rāma, and to historical ones, given that the stereotype of the Hindu ascetic in modern popular culture has been embodied by several historical figures, most famously Gandhi.

Among the holy men and sages who have been significant for the development of the concept of the idea of both India and Hinduism as spiritual, special mention has to be made of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), whose heritage is reclaimed by all the

[108] See also KINGSTON, Jeff (2016). *Nationalism in Asia: a history since 1945*, Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell; KINGSTON, Jeff (2019). *The Politics of Religion, Nationalism and Identity in Asia*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield; Shani and Kibe (2020).

authors I analyse in this section. Vivekananda became famous in the West when he participated in the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, in which he represented Hinduism and introduced it to the West. The Parliament of the World's Religions is often regarded as the starting point of the international *New Age* movement.[109] Vivekananda preached a type of Hinduism called *Advaita Vedānta,* a monistic philosophy which considers that everything that exists derives from an ultimate unitary substance.[110] Vivekananda is said to have adopted the Orientalist discourse by placing emphasis on the timeless spirituality of Indian wisdom as a curative for the nihilism and materialism of modern Western culture (King, 1999: 93). He later became an important spokesperson for Hinduism in India only after he achieved success in the West. This seems to hint that more important than Vivekananda's definition of his religious tradition is the way in which he compared and contrasted it with Western religious tradition(s) and how, as a result, he fitted both within the same general epistemological system.

The idea that Indian civilisation and/or Hinduism were more spiritual than Western and/or Abrahamic traditions also found their way into anticolonial Indian discourse. In more nationalistic than theological terms, Chatterjee (1993) states that Indian anticolonial nationalism divided the world of social institutions and practices into two domains: the material and the spiritual. The West was said to have proved its superiority in the former domain. For this reason, it was considered that India should learn about materialism from the West. Nevertheless, the West was said to lack in the spiritual domain. As a result, Indian nationalistic thought considered that Indian spiritual values had to be nurtured in order to provide a national culture that would be an alternative to the Western one (6). Some Hindus universalised this idea and posited India as the axis for a dissenting global consciousness (Nandy, 1983: 80). This kind of representation is nowadays still reflected in popular culture and in new religious phenomena, in which many urbane Westerners have sought refuge (Clarke, 2006a).[111] Sometimes this

[109] During the 1893 Parliament, Vivekananda influenced Annie Besant (1847-1933), the then leader of the Theosophical Society. After the congress, she went to India for the first time and since then became involved in the Indian nationalistic movement and in popularisation of Indian thought in the West. BESANT, Annie (1922). *The Future of Indian Politics: A Contribution to the Understanding of Present-Day Problems*, Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House; RUDBOG, Tim, and SAND, Erik Reenberg (eds.) (2020). *Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society*, New York: Oxford University Press.

[110] DEUTSCH, Eliot, and DALVI, Rohit (eds.) (2004). *The Essential Vedanta: A New Source Book of Advaita Vedānta: A New Source Book of Advaita Vedānta*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, Inc.

[111] A mockumentary that reflects and plays with this kind of discourse and the way it is perceived in America (and, I would say, in the West in general) is *Kumaré* (2011), directed by Vikram Gandhi. Gandhi, a modern secular Indian-American unrelated to the freedom movement figure, impersonates the stereotype of an Indian sage. He lets his

representation comes associated with a kind of neo-Romantic or re-Orientalist discourse according to which India is again posited as a mystical haven. This representation is often detached from any nationalistic purpose and serves as a critique of values whose modern lives are considered to have begun in the West, such as capitalism, neoliberalism and consumerism.

Despite the fact that Indian forms of spirituality continue to be invoked as alternatives to Western imperialism and materialism, van der Veer (2014) regards this dichotomy as problematic, given that, the author argues, *spirituality* is a modern Western term (35) with no direct translation into ancient Indian languages. According to the author, the idea of the spirituality of India has been disseminated since the time of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) (45).[112] For this reason, the author concludes that this stereotype was derived from Western Romantic ideas (46), which were concerned with the ineffable world of the sublime. While it is clear that *spirituality* is a Western concept with a long Western intellectual history, this does not mean that India and other cultural centres did not have epistemological approaches which could be compared to the understanding of spirituality at any specific point in Carrette and King's (2005) chronology. Similarly, this does not mean that, in the contemporary globalised world, only the West should have a claim to defining the terms of spirituality. It is clear that, discursively, stating that members of one's group or of other groups are spiritual or material, two terms whose cultural positive or negative values may vary through time and space, does not describe anything in the ontological sense but is likely just a way to create positive or negative representations of different and, more often than not, conflicting identities.

I now come back do Das (2000). Following the stereotype of Indian civilisation as spiritual, the author writes that his father was both an engineer and "a mystic" (36) who spent most of his time in meditation. He quotes his father's boss as saying:

> "[t]he success of Western man (…) was due to his devotion to human reason. Science and engineering (…) were the result of subjecting the problems of the physical world to the test of reason. As a result, the West had made

hair and beard grow and puts on saffron clothes. He then invents a religion full of *New Age* jargon and rituals and tries to proselytise it among Americans in a small community in Arizona. GANDHI, Vikram (Director) (2011). Kumaré [Film], Kino Lorber.

[112] BARUA, Arati (ed.) (2008). *Schopenhauer and Indian Philosophy: A Dialogue Between India and Germany*, New Delhi: Northern Book Centre; BARUA, Arati, GERHARD, Michael, and KOßLER, Matthias (eds.) (2013). *Understanding Schopenhauer through the Prism of Indian Culture: Philosophy, Religion and Sanskrit Literature*, Berlin: Walter e Gruyter; Cross (2013).

> enormous progress and gained material prosperity. However, material progress wasn't everything (…). Excessive devotion to reason had turned Western man agnostic and made him lose touch with his spirit. Eastern man, on the other hand, retained the 'spiritual' in his everyday life. Even highly educated and successful Indians in Western professions continued to be drawn to the spiritual life. (…) A man's life was not complete unless it combined reason with the spirit (…) 'What we now need in India (…) is to create the industries based on the science of the West while retaining our spiritual tradition" (334-335).

It seems that Das accepts this discourse at face-value, given that he does not really try to deconstruct it and later adds that "[t]o this lonely and banal world India offers a spiritual guide to the art of living" (355). This statement shows that India not only possesses its own positive precolonial modernity but that it can also be applied to non-Indian realities. This trait of universal applicability will also be a topic of discussion when I analyse the discourses in the nonfiction by the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

While Sen opposes rationality and spirituality, Das harmonises both with materialism, the latter being a crucial concept in neoliberalism, whose adoption in India constitutes the central topic in Das's work. Indeed, the association of spirituality and materialism is common in contemporary neoliberal spiritualities, in which spirituality is often regarded as a precondition to the achievement of material gains (Aravamudan 2005, 257-258). Das (2000) states that, due to the scorn Brahmins felt for manual labour, India failed to combine knowledge with manual labour and create an industrial revolution (79). However, quoting an unnamed former editor of *Harvard Business Review*, the author explains that this may be an advantage. Given that "Brahmins have had thousands of years of experience in dealing with abstract philosophical and spiritual concepts" (165) and that "cyberspace, like spiritual space, is invisible" (*Ibid.*), he argues that Indians "may actually skip the industrial revolution and leap right into the information revolution" (*Ibid.*).

Contrary to Sen, Das creates several *Others*. Comparing India with the stereotypical exemplary model of America, where Das studied and lived, he states that India is the only modern nation where democracy preceded capitalism. He makes a quantitative difference to highlight India, given that he hints that America is the oldest modern nation, while India is one of the oldest civilisations (313). Das often focuses on competing non-Western nations, which are usually said to lack some modern traits and,

as a result, are represented as less exemplary as India. According to him, India's adoption of capitalism and democracy makes it better prepared for the future than China and Russia (xx), whose transitions into modernity are said to have been based on violent revolutions. Russia is said to have no experience with capitalism and China to have no precolonial financing system, while India is said to have both (236). Dismissing the violence that accompanied Partition and stating that, in the Indian's mind, this event does not count, the author adds that India has "permission to take the moral high ground" (57). It is unclear why Partition is singularised from other 20th century revolutions, which were also caused by internal and external factors. The result of claiming Indian moral superiority is the creation of a representational rift between a positive moral India and a negative immoral or amoral China and Russia, an opinion with each the Chinese and Russians would probably disagree. Finally, one notices the anxiety caused by "neocolonial" globalisation in the author's assertion that the preservation of Indian culture will save it from "the onslaught of the global culture" (xx). Das finds an explanation for the survival of Indian culture in the concept of social class as I have defined in the previous chapter. Das states that the old middle-class has leaned towards Indian secularism, while the new one has embraced Hindu nationalism (327). The fact that the new elite does not regard the West as superior makes Das believe that it should carry tradition and follow the path of development (349). While identifying himself generationally and ideologically with the old middle class, from which his family stems, Das clearly values the pragmatism and confidence of the new one, as well as its cultural protectionism, provided that it is not taken to a jingoistic extreme. As I have made clear in the previous chapter, Tripathi adopts this kind of discourse almost *verbatim*.

2.3.3 Shashi Tharoor's *The Battle of Belonging*

During both his diplomatic and political phases, Shashi Tharoor has focused on fiction and nonfiction works about India and Hinduism. While criticising Hindu nationalism like Sen, Tharoor does not tend to be as careful at avoiding discourses which, contrary to Tharoor's intentions, may sound too jingoistic. Tharoor's (2020) *The Battle of Belonging* is divided into six major sections: 1) intellectual history of the idea of nationalism; 2) history of Indian secularism; 3-4) history of Hindu nationalism; 5) comparison between Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism; and 6) arguments for the adoption of the former. The author identifies nine kinds of nationalism. Eight of them are related to identity and create binary rifts between *Self* and *Other*. Hindu

nationalism falls into the category of ethnonationalism and is said to be self-represented against representations of Islam. In Tharoor's opinion, given India's diversity, a kind of nationalism based on identity would produce undesirable results. Indian secularism falls into the category of *civic nationalism*, the desirable category which, according to the author's typology, is supposed to be unrelated to identity. Tharoor acknowledges that the genesis of civic nationalism lies among European philosophers and defines it as a nationalism of ideas to be respected rather than identities one is born into. However, he also associates this idea with Indian history. He quotes Vivekananda as saying that India offered shelter to persecuted nations and faiths and contrasted this tendency with the recent 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by the BJP government. This act determined that, with the exception of Muslims, members of persecuted religious minorities from neighbouring countries were allowed to find shelter in India.[113] In short, Tharoor refers to the trait of inclusiveness, which will also be relevant for my analysis of the nonfiction discourses by the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Besides Hindu nationalism, two *Others* emerge in Tharoor's discourse: Pakistan and the British. Tharoor often argues that religious nationalism is the "idea of Pakistan", so his fear is that India becomes more similar to its neighbour. As Tharoor writes against Hindu nationalism and its constant demonisation of Muslims, he is always careful not to represent Indian Muslims negatively and include them into his national idea. He writes that, when he wrote his book *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (2016), he spoke of 200 years of foreign (British) rule, while prime-minister Modi often condemns 1200 of foreign (Muslim) rule. Tharoor argues that, while Muslim rulers ended up assimilating into Indian culture, the English have exploited it. In my view, the temporal difference to which Tharoor points is important. *Otherisation* is also common in some Indian secularist (and, I would say, in most identity-based) discourses, such as Tharoor's works, with the difference that Hindu nationalists tend to push the historical threshold of *otherisation* further back in time.

2.3.4 Shashi Tharoor's *Why I am a Hindu*

Despite the dismissal of identities as a working tool for his nationalism, in *Why I am a Hindu* Tharoor (2018) gives pride of place to Hinduism. Quoting an unnamed

[113] MALIK, Shahnawaz Ahmed (2020). "Future of Citizenship Laws in India With Special Reference to Implementation of NRC in Assam" *Journal of Legal Studies and Research*, Vol. 6, N. 4, pp. 268-277.

scholar, Tharoor states that, like Judaism, Hinduism can be understood as a religion, and, like Hellenism, it can be understood as a civilisation (xiii). Elsewhere, he calls Hinduism a "culture" (257). As these terms have a wide range of intersecting meanings, Tharoor uses or discards them as he wishes to evoke different representations. Whatever Hinduism may be, Tharoor is comfortable with praising it. He calls it "one of the world's oldest and greatest faiths" (xii) and states that "as a Hindu I belong to a faith that expresses the ancient genius of my own people" (6) stretching "back into time immemorial" (*Ibid.*). Such appraisals seem to contradict the idea that civic nationalism is an impersonal ideology which does not resort to emotional representations of identity. Tharoor's remarks also refer to another set of interrelated traits I analyse in relation to the discourses of the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: the ideas of antiquity and unbroken continuity, as well as their implicit or explicit relationship with cultural superiority

Much like *The Battle of Belonging*, *Why I am a Hindu* is written in support of Indian secularism and against Hindu nationalism. The book is divided into three parts: 1) "My Hinduism" describes what Tharoor feels is the right kind of Hinduism, which is Indian secularism; 2) "Political Hinduism" traces the recent history of Hindu nationalism, which is represented as the "wrong" kind of Hinduism; and 3) "Taking Back Hinduism" argues for the substitution of Hindu nationalism for Tharoor's Hinduism. As Tharoor states that the struggle for "India's soul" will be against these kinds of Hinduism (262), it is clear that the national struggle is also a Hindu struggle. The fact that Tharoor chooses to organise his discussions about nation and religion in the same way shows how Hinduism is represented as more intimately associated with Indian civilisation than other religions. In fact, Tharoor describes "his" Hinduism in the same way he describes Indian civilisation, which is also similar to the way he defines civic nationalism. He states that Hinduism's openness is the basis of India's democracy (13). Later, he adds that, while he has written in *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* (1997), another work on modern India, that "any truism about India can be immediately contradicted by another truism about India" (41), therefore underscoring the trait of relativity, writer Rutvij Merchant has adapted this phrase to Hinduism: "Hinduism appears to be very much like India; an essential paradox, as any attempt at a truism about Hinduism can be immediately contradicted by another truism about Hinduism" (quoted in Tharoor, 2018: 41). Merchant has added that "[i]nterestingly, Shashi Tharoor's statement about India 'that the singular thing about the country is that

you can only speak about it in the plural', applies to Hinduism perfectly" (*Ibid.*). Such discourses seem to reveal that India's diversity is described as ontologically indissociable from Hinduism. Tharoor also writes that "India's secular coexistence was paradoxically made possible by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Indians are Hindus" (182). In the end, the question seems not to be whether Hinduism is at the centre or whether it shares its hierarchical place with other religions. Rather, it is: what kind of Hinduism should be at the centre?

Tharoor condenses modern stereotypes associated with Hinduism as enumerated by political scientist Jyotirmaya Sharma (2003), who lists a typology of stereotyped associated with Hinduism and concludes that Hindus have been represented as non-violent, tolerant, mild, inward-looking and spiritually inclined, non-materialistic and non-proselytising (7). Like Sen, Tharoor (2018) finds the roots of Hinduism's openness in the "philosophical disputes and arguments that have marked the faith for millennia" (*Ibid*.) and also points to Aśoka and Akbar as exemplars of secularism (185). However, while Tharoor's goal is similar to Sen's, he does not follow Sen's approach of deconstructing binary ideas. Instead, he makes use of stereotypes about India and its *Others*. Accordingly, Tharoor's Hinduism is "most plural, inclusive, eclectic and expansive" (xi). He also adopted the stereotype of Hinduism as more spiritual when writing that "[t]he Western faiths largely look outward to the heavens for their revealed truths; the Hindu looks within himself" (45). These theological ideas are depicted as ancient and ontologically continuous, while Hindu nationalism is represented as a new religious-political venture. Tharoor adopts an essentialist view according to which Hinduism has survived "with its essential nature unchanged, even as it has faced the vicissitudes of reformist movements like Buddhism and Jainism, military assaults from Muslim invaders, conquest and Islamic rule, the conversion activity of Christian missionaries" (59) and "syncretic movements like Sikhism" (*Ibid.*). While postcolonial cultures "from the Maldives to Malaya and Indonesia" (*Ibid.*) are said to have succumbed to colonialism, Hinduism is said to have absorbed from other faiths what it has deemed useful and to have survived intact (190). However, while Tharoor often states that "his" Hinduism has been practiced in a continuous manner for millennia, he mostly follows the history and discourses of modern Hindus associated with the anticolonial struggle, particularly Vivekananda, who is Tharoor's main influence (87).

Through the negative association with Hindu nationalism, Tharoor also creates an implicit Western Christian *Other*. He states that, while Hindu nationalism has created

a faith in opposition to other religions, especially Islam and Christianity (189), it has ambivalently "Semitised" Hinduism: "codified and doctrinaire, with an identifiable God (…), a principal Holy Book (…), a manageable ecclesiastic hierarchy, and (…) a unified race and a people to profess it" (181). Elsewhere, he states that his Hinduism does not have a Hindu Pope, a Hindu Vatican, a Hindu catechism and not even a Hindu Sunday (6) (in *The Battle of Belonging*, he states that there is neither a Hindu Sabbath nor a Hindu Mecca). While not referring directly to the main Abrahamic religions, the use of terminology associated with them (pope, Vatican, Sabbath, Sunday, Mecca) reveals Tharoor's discursive intentions. While the Abrahamic religions are constructed as frozen monoliths which cannot keep up with the times, Hinduism is constructed as never "uniform or unchanging, immovable or unalterable" (104).

This last comparison brings up a distressing ontological question, one which could also be applied to any religion or cultural phenomenon: if Hinduism is ancient and characterised by plurality, how can one make sure that two kinds of Hinduism practiced at different times or places belong to the same larger entity? While the Abrahamic religions were centralised and canonised before Hinduism and constructed their legitimating discourses upon the Darwinian evolution of the human spirit towards monotheism, writers like Tharoor tend to construct their contrastive Hindu identity by representing themselves as infinitely decentralised and expansive. Accordingly, following my idea that self-identification is the most legitimate evidence of one's belonging to an identity, Hinduism (or any other religion or identity) can become whatever a person who identifies himself/herself as belonging to that community wishes, provided that, at least for Tharoor, it does not become a Semitic-like religion like Hindu nationalism. By considering that the revenge of Hinduism against colonialism has been the integration of the positive aspects of other religions, Tharoor compliments the non-Indian religions which have become integrated into India and which, implicitly, seem to have become more Hindu-like. Tharoor condemns, for instance, the bigotry of the Pakistani state against the tolerance of the Mughals and of contemporary Indian Muslims, who have integrated themselves into the Indian nation. He also condemns the Western approach to Christianity against the integrated Saint Thomas Christians.[114]

[114] BAUMER, Christoph (2016). *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*, London: I. B. Tauris, c. 10.

Tharoor also praises the rationality of Hinduism. Here, the contrast with Abrahamic religions also becomes evident. Tharoor writes that Hinduism fits him better intellectually than "the other faiths of which I know" (6) due to the fact that it has no dogmas and, as a result, no heresies (10). *Dogma* and *heresy* may be implicitly associated with Abrahamic religions. More explicitly, Tharoor claims that "as a Hindu I belong to the only major religion in the world that does not claim to be the only true religion" (6), a dogma which, he adds, "lies at the core of the 'Semitic faiths', Christianity, Islam, and Judaism" (*Ibid.*). Christianity, Islam and Judaism are not the only major world religions (which Tharoor does not define). The statement that Hinduism does not claim to be the only true religion, however the term may be defined, is also more a preconceived positive stereotype than a description of what Tharoor does at the discursive level. It is clear that the author regards "his" Hinduism as true/real/genuine and Hindu nationalism as false/unreal/ungenuine. In fact, both of Tharoor's book I analyse are precisely about this duality.

Finally, Tharoor adopts another stereotype commonly found in Hindu nationalistic discourses when stating that Hinduism does not see the world in terms of absolutes and that "[b]lacks and whites are largely absent from its ethos" (268). This trait matters because Abrahamic religions are considered to follow a dualistic view of good and evil, while Western epistemology is considered to follow an Aristotelian dichotomic logic of true and false. In fact, in academic discourses this duality is often associated with Abrahamic religions and not with non-Abrahamic ones. Historian of religions Randall L. Nadeau (2014), for instance, writes that:

> "(…) duality is a fundamental characteristic of Western thinking (…) our tendency to think in dualistic terms is evident in politics, the arts, gender relations, morality and ethics, and virtually every other aspect of life (…) We in the West are familiar with [a] type of dualism, which we may call conflict dualism. In this, two basic forces are in collision, as opposites that struggle and clash: good and evil, right and wrong, black and white, true and false. This type of dualism found its way into the Jewish, Christian, and the Islamic traditions." (17).

In contrast to this representation, in "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay", Ramanujan (2004 [1989]) contrasted this approach with the relational and contextual Indian way of thinking. The paradoxical fact that Indian discourses, such as Tahroor's, while represented as relative and contextual, tend to create

decontextualised representations of the West and Abrahamic religions, much like colonial Orientalist discourses tended to do in regard to India and Hinduism, shows how such discourses aim to create positive and negative representations and not really to describe reality in relative and contextual ways.

In any case, attempting to remain true to India's relativism, Tharoor mentions stereotypically negative representations of Hinduism (restrictions on entry into temples, child marriages, *sati/suttee*). However, he also reveals some ambivalence when excusing these traits as "measures of self-defence during this turbulent period of Indian history, that devolved into pernicious social practices wrongly seen as intrinsic to Hinduism rather than as a reaction to assaults upon it" (104). Similarly, he acknowledges that Hinduism has been complicit with caste discrimination (75), but, quoting Vivekananda, he claims that this is a "purely social practice" (74), given that it is practiced by other religions in India. Finally, Tharoor discusses "superstition" and states that this is an emanation "of India society rather than of the Hindu faith" (76).

These arguments which try to convince readers that good traits are regarded as authentic, while negative ones are regarded as social, as distortions or as external influences could be made about any cultural system, including Western ones and different kinds of Christianity. It feels understandable that a person who belongs to a specific identity will try to represent it with the traits (s)he happens to like and excuse the ones (s)he does not. Again, this a question of essentialised thinking. Is there really such a thing as Indian civilisation and Hinduism or Western civilisation and Christianity? Or are there only people who state that they or others are Indians, Hindus, Westerners or Christians? If so, other than self-identification, who has the right to state what constitutes real Indian civilisation and Hinduism or real Western civilisation and Christianity? Anyone can state that a trait one dislikes is extraneous to one's group because some other group also practices. Given the diversity of human culture, it is unlikely that there are cultural practices which cannot in any way be compared with others that have been carried out by one identity. The same argument could be made in regard to positive traits, which are also often shared by different modernist discourses. However, it is not common to hear the argument that some positive trait is not a genuine trait of the identity community of the speaker or writer because it also exists in other identity communities. In sum, as religions tend to be holistic systems which deal with all aspects of life, one may fit in it whatever one values, while discarding what one abhors and ranking it as something else. One could adopt an Orientalist approach and

state that only the Ur-texts present the "real religion" and that modern practices are corruptions. However, if this were true, "pure" religions would be only mental constructs which nobody has ever practiced and will never practice.

2.3.5 Rajiv Malhotra's *Being Different*

The representation of Hinduism made by and for practitioners and non-practitioners has been of great importance for some Hindus. Kurien (2007) states that American Hindus have drawn on black and feminist discourses and have pointed to similar experiences of marginalisation. For this reason, they have demanded more positive representations of their religion. At the same time, they have requested that Hindu scholars also be represented in Western academia (241), which is a sensible suggestion, given the fact that culture is a complex subject which cannot be proved or disproved in lab experiments but depends unavoidably on the cultural presuppositions of the person conducting the research, which means that the diversity of specialised voices may positively contribute to more balanced views of culture. Even though most of the past scholarship on India and Hinduism was defined by the pejorative term of Orientalism, some preeminent Hindus still consider that modern scholarship follows a similar trend of denigrating Indian traditions.

The most important figure related to this movement is Rajiv Malhotra. I feel the need to introduce this author because he stands in clear ideological contrast to the three previous ones, who are outspoken supporters of Indian secularism from a clear traditional middle-class background. Malhotra migrated to America in order to work there and later became a Hindu activist. He started recruiting several other diasporic Hindus and mostly new middle-class Indians who work in the IT and business sectors, who are regarded as the new custodians of Indian traditions (Sajjanhar, 2024), to try to create a new representation of India and Hinduism in the mind of both native Indian devotees and mainly the Western English-speaking world, given that Malhotra and his peers usually communicate to their audiences in English.

In his books and prolific *Youtube* videos, Malhotra criticises Western scholars and Indians "deluded" by them. As Malhotra (2016a: xiii) states, all his books aim at confronting some specific prejudice against Indian civilisation and at influencing "mainstream" but "misinformed" Hindus. Of course, much like Tharoor decides what kind of Hinduism is right, Malhotra is the one deciding who are the misinformed and the rightly-guided Hindus. Despite their differences, both authors feel that they are

mainstream, informed Hindus and their goals is to convince their readership of their claims. Perhaps it is because it feels comprehensible that modern people should prefer to see their identities represented in modern, positive ways that the representations of Hinduism by these authors have been more qualitatively similar than different.

According to Kurien (2007), Malhotra devises his critique against the Western academia along four main lines. In Malhotra's view, modern academia:

1) is dominated by a Eurocentric perspective which takes Western culture as the centre and which ignores the contribution of other cultures;

2) uses an "Abrahamic" model, which is inappropriate to the understanding of Hinduism;

3) focuses on sensationalist and negative attributes of Hinduism; and

4) creates a false identity between India and the Muslim countries of South Asia (Pakistan and Bangladesh) and focuses on the internal cleavages and problems inside India (194-195).

As I shall demonstrate, Malhotra may be accused of the opposite strategies and simplifications, that is, of:

1) having an Indo-centric view, while ignoring the rest of the world;

2) using an exclusively "Hindu" model;

3) focusing on the puritan and celebratory attributes of Hinduism; and

4) creating a rift between Indian and the neighbouring countries and positing social harmony within India.

In *The Battle for Sanskrit: Is Sanskrit Political or Sacred?*, Malhotra (2016b) attacks Sheldon Pollock, an influential American Sanskritist who has translated and conducted research on Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa.* Malhotra criticises Pollock for considering that Hinduism divides between good heroes and bad villains and that this interpretation of Hinduism has influenced Nazi Germany. In Malhotra's view, the main goal of Western scholars such as Pollock is to "detoxify" Hinduism of the "poisons" allegedly built into Sanskrit and its texts (1). In *Academic Hinduphobia: A Critique of Wendy Doniger's Erotic School of Indology*, Malhotra (2016c) criticises Doniger's (2009) *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, which was banned in India, and Doniger's interpretations of Hinduism, which, according to Malhotra, focus on Freudian interpretations of violence and sex.[115] By contrast, Tharoor (2018) praises Doniger

[115] According to Malhotra's official website, his book has had great success, given that it put Doniger on the defensive and caused American universities to introduce changes in their syllabi.

scholarship as "brilliant" (211). *Hinduphobia* is a term apparently coined by Malhotra and apparently inspired by the more popular concept of *Islamophobia,*[116] which suggests that the representations of Hinduism in the Western media are similar to those of Islam.

Malhotra's most recent publications continue his representation of a civilisation under neo-colonial attack. In *The Battle for IITS: A Defense of Meritocracy*, he and co-editor Vijaya Viswanathan (2023a) argue that the Indian Institutes of Technology, which are marked by their excellency, are "under attack". This attack is supposed to be an American project perpetrated by Harvard University. In *Varna, Jati, Caste: A Primer on Indian Social Structures*, Malhotra and Viswanathan (2023b) argue that the caste system was originally benign and that it was turned into an oppressive system by the British. I deal with the topic of caste in the fourth chapter. Finally, in *Ten Heads of Ravana: A Critique of Hinduphobic Scholars*, editors Rajiv Malhotra and Divya Reddy (2023) restore the topic of Hinduphobia and refer explicitly to the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Rāvaṇa, who stands for the Hinduphobics, is the enemy of Rāma, who is representative of Hinduism. In the epic, Rāma is killed by Rāvaṇa. This book is intended to criticise the scholarship of ten Hinduphobic authors, each one standing for one of Rāvaṇa's heads. They include Romila Thapar, Shashi Tharoor, Ramachandra Guha, Sheldon Pollock, Wendy Doniger, Devdutt Pattanaik and Kancha Ilaiah, who play an important part in this dissertation. Tharoor, for instance, is called "the quintessential Macaulay putra" (Westernised Indian) and his Hinduism is derisively ranked as "everything-goes".[117] It is difficult to understand in which way Tharoor may be Hinduphobic, even though he is clearly *Hindutva*-phobic. Like Tharoor, however, Malhotra writes in favour of Hinduism. More than Das, however, Malhotra ignores Hindu nationalism. By ignoring it, Malhotra's association with the ideology becomes less obvious.

Given Malhotra's focus on IT, his "battle" against Western scholars does not occur only on paper. Given that many Hindu nationalist ideologues are themselves IT experts, the ideology finds a privileged means of dissemination on the internet (Gittinger, 2018).

---

https://rajivmalhotra.com/books/academic-hinduphobia/ (accessed on 28/04/2021). However, Doniger continues to be a respected scholar in academia.

[116] SHAHEEN, Jack (2014). *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. New York: Olive Branch Press; GREEN, Todd H. (2015). *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press; ZEMPI, Irene, and AWAN, Imran (eds.) (2019). *The Routledge International Handbook of Islamophobia*, London: Routledge; IQBAL, Zafar (2020). *Islamophobia: History, Context and Deconstruction*, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

[117] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLL53vnWedM (accessed on 13/6/2024), a conference talk by Divya Reddy about Tharoor's Hinduism, as well as the comments, which tend to be very supportive of the speaker and very critical towards Tharoor.

Malhotra's most popular video on *Youtube* is titled "Rajiv Malhotra's Encounter with a Hinduphobic Professor from Univ of Chicago #3".[118] In it, Malhotra answers the questions posed by Tyler Williams,[119] an assistant professor at the University of Chicago, where Pollock, Doniger and other influential Western Indologists have worked and taught. The questions concern the *insider*/*outsider* scheme devised by Malhotra, to which I will turn to shortly. The inclusion of one of the mythological retellers of the corpus of this thesis in *Ten Heads of Ravana* is also relevant. Malhotra uploaded a video titled "Demolishing Devdutt Pattanaik Point by Point in Detail",[120] in which he and Nityanand Misra (1982-)[121] criticise Pattanaik for knowing neither Sanskrit nor the "true" interpretation of the Hindu religious tradition, as well as for following only Westernised interpretations, mostly Doniger's one. According to Malhotra, Pattanaik's works, like those by Doniger, focus on sex and violence. The activist states that he has a problem with Pattanaik's works coming under the category of *nonfiction* and with the fact that Pattanaik considers the stories in his books to be *mythology*, which goes against Malhotra's beliefs.

Paradoxically, Malhotra resorts to the same kind of strategies he often criticises, at least when it comes to violent imagery. He uses martial language to criticise the power of Western universities, which he and his followers have found guilty of "invading" the sacred. He tries to "demolish" Devdutt Pattanaik. He promotes a "battle" for Sanskrit and for the Indian Institutes of Technology. Finally, given the plot of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, equating real people with Rāvaṇa implies that their heads should be cut, even if symbolically.

Malhotra and his collaborators have been trying to find alternative frameworks to Western representations of Hinduism. S. N. Balagangadhara (2007), a professor of Comparative Philosophy, states in the foreword to *Invading the Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America*, a book penned by several authors related to Malhotra, that non-Whites and non-Christians shall have an increasing impact on the affairs of humankind and that India shall be a global player of considerable political and

[118] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2ke7Higm-Y (accessed on 28/4/2021).
[119] https://salc.uchicago.edu/tyler-williams (accessed on 6/5/2021).
[120] *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtkMFLuOa3M* (accessed on 31/3/2021). As of the accessed date, this is Malhotra's second most popular video on *Youtube*.
[121] Malhotra introduces Misra as a "Sanskrit scholar". The website of the magazine *Swarajya* introduces him as someone who works in the "investment banking industry" and who is also an "amateur researcher, editor, and author in the field of Hinduism and Indology". https://swarajyamag.com/author/139577/nityanand-misra (accessed on 8/04/2021).

economic impact. For this reason, according to the author, the local intelligentsia ought to create its own discourse on Indianness independently of the one created by the West in the past three hundred years (vii). The new model is constructed along the lines of modern business, given that, according to the author, Indians are creative problem-solvers and that the Indian economy has been regarded as a positive engine for the world (Ramaswamy, Nicholas and Banerjee, 2007: 1-8).

Arvind Sharma (2007), a professor of Comparative Religion, summarises Malhotra's vision of the past, present, and future of the representation of Hinduism in his preface to *Invading the Sacred.* He writes that the history of the study of religions has consisted of different kinds of transmission: from 1) insider to insider; 2) outsider to outsider; 3) outsider to insider and 4) insider to outsider (xii). One could equate stage 1) with the process of *Sanskritisation*, stage 2) with Orientalism, stage 3) with re-Orientalism, and stage 4) with the paradigm shift Malhotra promotes. As Malhotra discusses with professor Tyler Williams, neither the term *insider* necessarily means "Indian" nor the word *outsider* means "foreign". Elsewhere, the author states that Hinduphobic discourse has also spread among Indian intellectuals (Malhotra, 2016a: xiii). In Malhotra's view, Hindus like Devdutt Pattanaik are outsiders. The definition seems to be related to the interpretation of Indian traditions (Hinduism?) that a particular individual might endorse. What unites and separates interpreters of Hinduism is not what they say, which has been much more marked by similarities than by differences, but whom they endorse and criticise.

Malhotra has also uploaded two video interviews with Amish Tripathi: "ITIHASA is not MYTHOLOGY" and "Will Dharma Win the West?". [122] Like Malhotra, Tripathi (2017b) writes that non-Westernised Indians would never accept the "atrocity literature" churned out by Western academics and NGOs (80). Even though, as the following chapters will show, extreme violence is a common topic and narrative strategy in Tripathi's fiction, Malhotra is more supportive of this reteller than of Pattanaik, possibly because the latter ontologically distinguishes between mythology and history, while the former is much more ambiguous in this distinction. Kurien (2007) states that Hindu American spokespeople characterise modern Hinduism according to a contemporary, politically correct, pluralist American discourse. In this view, Hinduism is represented as the only tolerant and pluralistic religion (185). Given that Hinduism

[122] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpKiPa7WoUE (accessed on 3/5/2021); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGwt7nVFOWA (accessed on 31/5/2024).

is said to have had a positive effect on Indian history and geography, the general argument states that it may have the same effect in the modern world, which is said to be in need of the same positive features, that being the reason why Malhotra and Tripathi discuss whether *dharma* will win the West.

I now turn to Malhotra's (2011) *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism*. The book begins with the statements that "this book is about how India differs from the West. It aims to challenge certain cherished notions, such as the assumptions that Western paradigms are universal and that the dharmic traditions teach 'the same thing' as Jewish and Christian ones" (1). It is strange that Malhotra mentions these "cherished notions", given that, as Sen (2005) remarks, Western Orientalist discourses mostly focused on differences between East and West. I would add that most serious contemporary academic studies, including those by Pollock and Doniger, also tend to conduct deep historical and philological analysis which go into minute spatial and temporal phenomena. The perennialist idea of world religions made famous in the West by Aldous Huxley's (1947 [1945]) *The Perennial Philosophy* and commonly adopted by *New Age* movements (Kahn, 2016a: c. 6) is posterior to Vivekananda and Gandhi's similar discourses. In fact, Huxley took the *Bhagavad Gītā* (and not the Christian *Bible*) as the highest expression of this universal philosophy. The idea of a discourse which is transverses distinct philosophical systems is already identifiable in Indian tradition, perhaps more clearly in the Jainist concept of *anekāntavāda* (Long, 2008: c. 5 and 6) or "pluralism", the idea that different paths may lead to the same truth, and its adoption and mixture with other Indian and Western concepts by well-known spiritual figures such as Gandhi. This makes it unclear whether this "cherished notion" is a (neo-)colonial Western idea, an ancient Indian one, or, as I prefer to regard it, a syncretic one in which the involved influences are not separable in absolute terms. Malhotra (2011) also criticises modern Indian gurus for adapting their discourses to Western Abrahamic ideas (35). However, such gurus are in no way forced to do so but simply follow cultural and economic demand, much like Malhotra has carved a market niche because there are many Indians and Hindus willing to listen to his ideas.

Malhotra defines the West as "the cultures and civilizations stemming from a rather forced fusion of the biblical traditions of ancient Israel and the classical ones of Greece and Rome" (1). This assertion makes it clear that the author adopts the Ur-texts approach and looks at religious and classical issues as essences. Furthermore, *forced* is meant to be negative, given that no individual belonging to an identity would like to

have his/her community described as a "forced" one. In order to refer to Indian religious traditions, Malhotra uses the expression "dharmic traditions", which, besides Hinduism, includes Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism (2). While these four modern religions stem from a common discourse, Malhotra bypasses the possibility that Buddhism and Jainism may have emerged as responses which challenged basic tenets of Brahminical religion, which is itself a controversial scholarly hypothesis (Frazier, 2011: 335-336), and that Buddhism disappeared from India for a long time and reappeared as an independent religion relatively recently and mainly among Dalits who protested against Hinduism (Fitzgerald, 1999). In any case, it is clear that for Malhotra Hinduism constitutes the overarching centre. The author invariably mentions it firstly and Hinduism is always present in his examples, while the other dharmic religions are mentioned mostly to support Hindu claims. Malhotra acknowledges that *dharmic traditions*, "while not perfect, offer perspectives and techniques for a genuinely pluralistic social order and a full integration of many different faiths, including atheism and science" (Malhotra, 2011: 2). This sounds similar to Tharoor's auto-critiques, but, while Tharoor excuses the hypothetical problems of Hinduism at some length, Malhotra mentions the subject only this one time, right at the beginning of his long book. It is also clear that the "dharmic traditions" correspond to Indian geography and civilisation, given that Malhotra's Buddhism is a general stereotype of Indian Buddhism deprived of the accretions associated with foreign traditions and that non-Indian religious traditions are ignored.

Malhotra mentions China as a successful neighbouring competitor to India. Initially, his evaluation seems positive. China is lauded as an example of globalisation without Westernisation through the deployment of "Confucian modernity" (14), a vague and uncommon concept whose meaning is not entirely clear.[123] However, Malhotra is careful to underscore that "I am not offering China as a model to follow in every respect but rather as an example of how a non-Western culture can represent itself

[123] Confucianism is a mostly worldly cultural system which deals with individual ethics and politics, which could be thought of as a kind of collective ethics. This system was hegemonic in China through most of the imperial period, through the 漢 Hàn dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) until the fall of the 清 Qīng dynasty (1644-1912). It was rejected during the Republican period, when it was considered that it was the reason why Chinese civilisation lagged behind the Western one. During the beginning of the Communist period, mainly during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Confucianism was also highly criticised. However, it is often said in academia that there has been a resurgence of some Confucian tenets and of the interest in Confucianism in contemporary China. BELL, Daniel A. (2010), *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; HAMMOND, Kenneth J. and RICHEY, Jeffrey L. (eds.) (2014). *The Sage Returns: Confucian Revival in Contemporary China*, Albany: State University of New York Press; BILLIOUD, Sébastien & THORAVAL, Joël (2015), *The Sage and the People: The Confucian revival in China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

successfully and autonomously in global discourse" (*Ibid.*) and to point out that Confucianism and communism do not possess an "integral unity" (*Ibid.*), which, as I will show shortly, is the positive-sounding way Malhotra defines the *dharmic* traditions throughout his book. In the end, it feels ambiguous that, for all his glorification of Hinduism and demonisation of everything Western, Malhotra describes his "idea of India" and Hinduism with the modern traits used by Western authors to describe the West, such as when stating that, while the West has described itself as modern and non-Western civilisations as retrograde, "on examination, the exact opposite would appear to be the case" (135).

These ideas show that neither celebratory Western and/or Christian discourses nor Indian and/or Hindu ones aim to reflect reality but rather to create it through stereotyped representations. Indeed, Malhotra acknowledges that he works with "broad definitions, generalizations and extreme contrasts" which, the author adds, have been correctly challenged by postmodern thinkers (1). This is a nuanced disclaimer that appears in the first page and ends up being meaningless amidst the lack of nuance of what follows. While there is no problem with Malhotra's approach, given that complex cultural phenomena can never be described in their ontological entirety and not even the most specialised scholarly work can capture entirely the particularities of its object, it may be regarded as problematic that the author chooses to contrast a modern liberal view of Hinduism with what often sounds like a medieval view of Christianity or, at least, contemporary representations of medieval Christianity. The broad definitions that Malhotra criticises, such as "[t]he reductionist prejudice that the West equals order and India equals chaos" (177), also reminds one of Orientalist scholarship. In contemporary postcolonial scholarship on India written by Indians and foreigners, such generalisations would sound dated. Similarly, the author's idea that "[f]rom a Western perspective, the dharmic traditions are passive, fatalistic and filled with despair" (131) resembles more Schopenhauer's view of Buddhism than any contemporary scholarly analysis of Hinduism (Cross, 2013). These seem more to be Malhotra's representation of Western representations of *dharmic traditions* aimed at creating ideological rifts and serve sociopolitical agendas than real contemporary Western representations of Hinduism.

Malhotra's nationalistic propensity is clear in other aspects, such as his refusal to look at Indian geography, history and society as anything but a homogeneous whole. According to him, "India (…) is, in Western terms, both civilized and barbaric,

primitive and sophisticated, secular and religious. It embraces both simple village societies and a long tradition of urban culture, unified leadership and high science in everything from politics to business to physics" (145). Malhotra regards both sides of any dichotomy as organically integrated into each other. He also regards attempts at separating them as an epistemically violent attempts at *divide and rule*.[124] This romantic view, one Malhotra has called "dharmic osmosis" or "integral unity", is contrasted with the Christian West, which, Malhotra argues, created his civilisation through what he calls "synthetic unity" (101) or, as quoted earlier, "forced fusion". Like the term *forced*, *synthetic* is meant to evoke negative feelings. Most people would likely choose something real, true, authentic, genuine to something synthetic. *Integral*, for its part, is meant to invoke positive feelings, given that it means "whole, entire, complete". When preeminent nationalist and philosopher Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), who is Malhotra's most quoted thinker in *Being Different*, devised his own type of yoga he called *integral yoga* (Clarke, 2006b: s.v. "Aurobindo, Sri", 52-53), not *forced yoga* or *synthetic yoga*.

Malhotra's explanation of *dharma* resembles Ramanujan's definition of the Indian way of thinking and Tharoor's definition of Hinduism: "dharma shies away from context-free, absolutist 'commandments', which end up as dogma and frozen canons of history" (79). As in Tharoor's discourse, the use of terms associated with Christianity (absolutist, commandments, canons, history) creates contrastive *dharmic traditions*. Linguistic differences between Malhotra and Tharoor often sound discursively irrelevant. Tharoor defines Hinduism as tolerant, while Malhotra prefers to speak of respect. In Malhotra's opinion, tolerance is what Christianity practices. By tolerating instead of respecting, Christianity creates a hierarchical rift between *Self* and *Other*. Clearly, this is not how Tharoor wishes readers to interpret him. However, as often happens in such ideologically charged discourses, representations are not always followed by corresponding deeds. While in Malhotra's mind "Indian traditions embody the approach of difference with mutual respect based on the radical idea that differences are not a problem to be solved" (25), it is unclear why the author has written so many pages promoting Indian's difference and criticising the West's inferiority in relation to India, something which most Westerners would probably find neither respectful nor tolerant. The corrective approach that Malhotra proposes to Western tolerance is "purva paksha", which the author describes as follows:

[124] MALHOTRA, Rajiv (2011). *Breaking India: Western Interventions in Dravidian and Dalit Faultlines*, New Delhi: Amaryllis.

> "This is the traditional dharmic approach to rival schools. It is a dialectical approach, taking a thesis by an opponent ('purva pakshin') and then providing its rebuttal ('khandana') so as to establish the protagonist's views ('siddhanta'). The purva paksha tradition required any debater first to argue from the perspective of his opponent in order to test the validity of his understanding of the opposing position, and from there to realize his own shortcomings. Only after perfecting his understanding of opposing views would he be qualified to refute them (…) Such debates encourage individuals to maintain flexibility of perspective and honesty rather than seek victory egotistically. In this way, the dialectical process ensures a genuine and far-reaching shift in the individual" (48).

Despite the use of the Sanskrit term *pūrvapakṣa*, which Malhotra often translates as the postmodern sounding expression "reversing the gaze", Malhotra's description sounds comparable to Sen's "argumentative Indian". It is unclear how reversing the gaze to refute the opponent, even if not "egotistically", entails respect or tolerance. Malhotra also follows the Orientalist discourse about the decay of Indian civilisation from its glorious origins. While Sen's argumentative Indian is said to have been threatened recently by Hindu nationalism, Malhotra's *pūrvapakṣa* "was not operative when Islam, Christianity and the European Enlightenment entered India (…) the dharmic philosophers tended simply to ignore these foreign entries or else defer to them by adopting the attitude that 'all is one'" (49). The conclusion seems to be that "foreign entries" are invariably negative and that *pūrvapakṣa,* if properly applied, should always be able to defeat them.

Like Das and Tharoor, Malhotra often resorts to the contrastive *spirituality* badge monopolised by Indian civilisation: "the Abrahamic traditions tend to focus outward; the dharmic ones, inward" (104). He acknowledges that there have been Christian mystics, but argues that they achieved higher states "by accident" (92) because they did not have formalised spiritual practices. He also states that such mystics were rejected by the centralised institutions. While the Western Ego is said to seek to manipulate the external world (145), it is unclear how Malhotra's self-description as a charismatic leader differs from what he criticises, given that he also has an individual and social interest in arguing for his point of view and, through his books, of influencing Hindus, who are part of the external world. In his effort to single-handedly defeat the West, Malhotra often describes how he participated in crowded inter-religious conventions

with “scientific luminaries, including Nobel laureates, most of whom had publicly proclaimed allegiance to Christianity” (141) and threw them off their guards when making them consider perspectives, which, according to Malhotra, are obvious for Indians and followers of *dharmic traditions*. Accordingly, he often writes pejorative and simplistic sentences, such as: “difficult for the linear mind to comprehend” (114); “[g]reat confusion arises in the Western mind” (146); “Western scholars are caught off-guard” (177); and “[r]are is the Western seeker who is able to follow through on his or her quest (…) Rarer still is the one who is able to forge a completely new and individual path of spiritual achievement” (344).

One of Malhotra’s main arguments for Indian uniqueness is that Sanskrit is untranslatable and that Westerners have committed epistemic violence when attempting to translate it into English. This means that the author regards language as the monopoly of a specific identity group. However, the same argument could be made for any language. The degree of difficulty of translation is never objective but varies according to the degree of proximity between the source and target languages and cultures. The same could be said about the way the author uses some English terms to fit what he regards as the Indian experience. This process is most visible in Malhotra’s approach to *science*, which, contrary to the term *religion*, tends to have a very positive and desirable meaning in contemporary societies. Due to the tension that Malhotra and Tharoor identify between Western religion and science, Malhotra dissociates the Judaeo-Christian idea of religion from Hinduism and states that dharmic traditions “might be more accurately referred to as therapies” (74). He also makes Indian spirituality and science come closer, given that he often calls spirituality “inner science” (his translation of the Sanskrit term *adhyātmavidyā*) and finds the roots of “outer” sciences in spirituality.

The representation of the ancient spiritual sage that emerges in Malhotra’s discourse is not that of the stereotypical world-rejecting gymnosophist, which would be a possibility, but that of the equally simplistic modern scientist working in a lab. One should note the use of modern terminology associated with science which is used to describe the positive attributes of *dharma* (italics are mine): “[i]n the dharmic traditions, *direct experience* and *empirical testing* are important for the acquisition of knowledge” (61). Discovering that the “silent mind is the equivalent of a clean *laboratory*” (72), the “rishis may be said to have pioneered *research* in the area of *experimental* phenomenology” (*Ibid.*). *Mantras* are “associated with the actual rishi (…) who

discovered, tested and *verified* it" (226). Hindu deities are "ahistorical forces and intelligences, analogous (…) to the *force of gravity*" (61).

Malhotra's representation of science also has implications for history. Judaism and Christianity are said to be history-centric. Influenced by Enlightenment ideals of progress, Orientalist representations of East and West were defined by the historical/ahistorical dichotomy. The West was integrated into a teleological discourse of material progress towards truth, while Eastern civilisations were living in a static, spiritual a-historicity (Kumar, 2014: c. 7). Much like some modern Indian authors may often reverse the values attached to materialism and spirituality, Malhotra (2011) reverses the Orientalist values attached to historicity. If science aims at universal truths, ideas such as *history* and *progress* are superfluous. Human discoveries can be historicised, but science cannot. Even though "dharma civilizations too have historical records, and Indians have a long tradition of historical memory" (64), the ahistorical methodology of dharmic traditions taps directly into such truths because it is based on "*first-person scientific empiricism* (…) which can be *replicated by others* and which are not based on God's interventions in history" (142). The result is that India cannot be divided into historical stages, given that "[a]ll stages coexist in India and frequently intermingle" (68), which makes "[t]he relationship of the past and the present in dharmic civilizations (…) as both continuous and changing" (82), another idea which, as I have shown, could have been taken from Tharoor. Malhotra concludes that India exhibits "simultaneously what the West calls pre-modern, modern and postmodern qualities" (*Ibid.*). In short, Malhotra's challenge to Western universalism is Indian and Hindu universalism.

Given his background, that of his collaborators and of the majority of his readers, Malhotra also frequently represents *dharma* through the language of IT, entrepreneurship and business-related practices. He compares *dharmic* traditions to computers, which can select from a vast range of components and still work as unified systems (372). More specifically, "[t]he Hindu 'sampradaya' [religious sect], or an individual guru, is the *systems integrator* who chooses the various *components* which constitute a 'total system solution' for the spiritual life of a particular *client*" (*Ibid.*). Sanskrit is said to be "like a *computer programming language* which gives rise to an infinite variety of *programs* while using a precise set of rules" (240). It is unclear in which way Sanskrit differs from other languages, given that recursion is a basic

principle of structural linguistics. Abhinavagupta,[125] a preeminent 10th-11th century philosopher from Kashmir, is said to have encouraged "many new *start-ups* and much *creative research* and *development*" (81). Western civilisation is said to use "*push marketing*" strategies, which force one to integrate against one's will, while Indian civilisation is said to use "*pull marketing*" strategies, which seduce costumers through inherent appeal (218), a very modern metaphoric instance of the Hindu "non-proselytising" stereotype. Finally, Malhotra compares *dharmic traditions* to Silicon Valley and Christianity to state-supplied, monopolistic Soviet products (373). In this metaphor, the fact that Silicon Valley is in America and not in India and that the Soviet Union was officially atheistic are not relevant for the representation Malhotra wants to convey and, as a result, are promptly ignored.

In his construct of diametrically opposed Aryan and Semitic mindsets, Malhotra hardly brings new ideas to the table and just reproduces or inverts Orientalist discourses reinterpreted through a neoliberal agenda. As Masuzawa (2005) shows in her study on the development of the concept of *world religions*, Christianity was *aryanised* and *desemiticised* in Orientalist discourses. Malhotra re-Semiticises Christianity and claims the Orientalist Aryan values to *dharmic traditions*. His main innovation consists of the osmosis between Hinduism and the IT sector, entrepreneurship and business, a trait in which, as I will demonstrate shortly, Malhotra and Pattanaik are more similar than different. Iwamura (2011) writes about the (re-)Orientalist stereotype of the "Oriental monk" imbued with great knowledge. Malhotra's depiction of the Aryan Sanskrit-speaking *ṛṣi* mixes Iwamura's Oriental Monk with Carrette and King's (2005) contemporary spirituality adapted to neoliberal contexts. In the process, Hinduism becomes a marketable product palatable to contemporary tech-savvy entrepreneurs.

To conclude this section, I would say that, given that nations and religions are not finished products but ongoing projects, the main goal of each author I have analysed is to correct historical mistakes and reclaim the national and/or religious entity each one of them feels to be the legitimate one. There are lines separating and uniting Indian secularist and Hindu nationalistic discourses. What sometimes unites them is their similar representations of India and what they regard as legitimate Hinduism: both are imbued with desirable modern traits acquired independently of the encounter with colonialism and globalisation. Sen dismisses religion altogether and does not focus on

[125] PADOUX, André (2017). *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

a foreign *Other*. The other Indian secularist and Hindu nationalistic discourses, however, contrast the positive modernist representation of India and Hinduism with negative representations of other nations and religions. Das, Tharoor, and Malhotra state that India and Hinduism include and respect everything. This representation, however, seems hard to sustain, given that neither secularists wish to include or respect Hindu nationalism nor Hindu nationalists wish to include Indian secularism. Similarly, neither accepts their representations of Abrahamic religions. Finally, while Indian secularists tend to follow Vivekananda's lead and emphasise that all religions are potentially similar and while secularists and Hindu nationalists emphasise that Hinduism does not create binarities, it is clear from the discourses I have analysed where Abrahamic religions and "correct" Hinduism would fit in a scale of black and white.

Western Orientalist and Indian re-Orientalist discourses are characterised by two main traits. The first one has to do with essentialism. It feels unreasonable that complex communities may be entirely material, rational, spiritual, historical, ahistorical or to entirely lack any of these traits. Representing them as such only serves the purpose of humanising and glorifying one identity and dehumanising another. The second problem is one of ontological continuity, which can also be easily stereotyped. Philosopher Thomas Kuhn (2012 [1962]) states that scientific knowledge entails epistemological "revolutions", that is, the entire substitution of previous epistemological edifices by new ones. Malhotra (2011b), however, regards dharmic "inner sciences" as special, given that "[s]piritual know-how is (…) cumulative as opposed to substitutive" (131). As science may be regarded as cultural system like any other, perhaps Kuhn's model of scientific revolutions could be applied to culture. As I have shown, Tharoor applies Malhotra's argument to Indian civilisation. One can argue for continuity and discontinuity for any cultural idea, given that it is difficult to prove conclusively whether specific cultural ideas are novel or whether they have existed as they are now since their inception. Entities sometimes carry elements from the past and sometimes create new elements and it is often difficult to pinpoint the difference. While English terms like *democracy* and *religion* have classical and modern roots, contemporary ideals of democracy are different from Athenian democracy and contemporary Christianity is different from Early Christianity (or Christianities). Similarly, non-Western societies may have come up with ideas that, to a greater or less extent, were in some ways comparable to modern ideals, while, like Athenian democracy and Early Christianity, not being ontologically indistinguishable from them.

In the following sections, I analyse how, while being better-known as storytellers, the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tend to discuss these same ideas about the Indian nation and the Hindu religion in their nonfiction.

2.4 The "idea of India" and Hinduism according to the contemporary retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Discourses on the "idea of India" have also figured in literature. The Indian English novel has been distinguished from its inception by a preoccupation with history and nation and the way these concepts have shaped the "idea of India" (Gopal, 2009: 5). This tendency has also been clear in the contemporary English-language retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The concepts of *history* and *nation* do not seem fit into *mythology*. However, the fact is that, following a modernised understanding of the concept of *itihāsa*, mythology is often used to legitimate history and the nation. Kanjilal (2007) states that retellings that seem to criticise dominant trends always put the Hindu worldview at the centre of discourse (155), which means that such critiques do not imply a reinterpretation of history and nation from a religiously detached point of view but a reinterpretation through a Hindu prism which keeps changing and adapting to contemporary times.

First, I aim to analyse the political leanings of the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: Anand Neelakantan, Devdutt Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi. They are the ones who most clearly discuss the "idea of India" and Hinduism. Both Neelakantan[126] and Pattanaik are critical of Hindu nationalism in their works and on social media. A common technique used by Pattanaik on his social media platforms is that of the dichotomy. His general model to compare Hinduism and Hindu nationalism is "Hinduism = X; Hindutva = non-X", with X referring to something positive and non-X, its opposite, to something negative.[127] In the acknowledgements of *Why I am a Hindu*, Tharoor (2018) calls Pattanaik India's most popular interpreter of Hinduism (xv). As stated previously, this is not Malhotra's view. Both Pattanaik and Malhotra consider *mythology* to be true. The difference between them is that Malhotra believes mythology to be factually true, while Pattanaik believes it to be psychologically true or

[126] https://www.facebook.com/itsanandneel/posts/3904821106202036/?paipv=0&eav=AfanKlkz-jw7NWxagFD0ssTb3BFUFv9BGvFSYRu0wyWI1d-_0OEUAp3IwSL82p4YgmE&_rdr (accessed on 26/4/2024).

[127] https://twitter.com/devduttmyth/status/1203677588134084608 (accessed on 8/6/2022); https://twitter.com/devduttmyth/status/1221304779655143424 (accessed on 8/6/2022); https://twitter.com/devduttmyth/status/1213705184561573889 (accessed on 8/6/2022).

as, Nehru has stated, "imaginatively true". Whether the plot of the *Rāmāyaṇa* really happened or not is not the main question for Pattanaik (see Figure 24). The relevant fact is that the *Rāmāyaṇa* reflects the complex workings of human psychology.

Tripathi (2017b) often tries to represent himself as politically moderate. He writes that the wisdom of the India consists of striking a balance and renouncing extremes (*Ibid.*: 38). According to him, two close-minded groups have been on the rise in India. He calls them "India-rejecters" and "India-glorifiers". In Tripathi's view, Indian culture would reject both (148). According to Tharoor (2018), Tripathi has achieved great success by reinventing mythological characters and the epics without surrendering to the prevalent bigotry of Hindu nationalism (256).[128] However, unlike Neelakantan and Pattanaik, Tripathi never condemns Hindu nationalism explicitly and, as I will show throughout this thesis, his discursive techniques tend to be similar to those used by Hindu nationalistic discourses. Tripathi's intentions seem to be sensible and similar to the one Malhotra (2011b) announces in the beginning of his *Being Different* when stating that *dharmic traditions* are not perfect. Nevertheless, much like Malhotra, besides writing that India had some bad centuries (Tripathi, 2017b: 34) and that Indians have created the illusion that they have always been non-violent (98), blindly revering positive modern traits imagined as Indian tradition and criticising negative traits imagined as foreign corruptions is what Tripathi does most of the time. In fact, Tripathi states that India returned to its "historical, argumentative confidence" (34) after the introduction of neoliberalism in India and the emergence of the new middle-class. In other words, Tripathi regards the precolonial past as great, the Muslim invasions, the period of British colonialism and even the post-independence period as times of foreign corruptions, and the neoliberal present as a return to the precolonial state in a way that sounds similar to Hindu nationalistic discourses. Accordingly, Varughese (2014) states that Tripathi's novels have been criticised for pushing Hindu nationalistic ideals (354).

[128] In "Myth and Memory", a conversation between Tharoor and Tripathi recorded in 2023, while both authors mostly compliment the other's work and Tharoor states repeatedly that Tripathi writes compelling page-turners, Tharoor mentions the hazards of many of Tripathi's creative inventions, such as the description of ancient India as scientifically advanced in an implausible way, which, according to him, may pander to a certain level of ignorance. This seems to be Tharoor's implicit way of saying that it panders to Hindu nationalistic discourses. Tripathi excuses himself by stating that this is a way of creating drama and "conveying philosophies" and not immutable truths. He then dodges the question and shifts the topic to one of his common discourses, with which Tharoor agrees, about the Indian education system not teaching enough about the positive features of the Indian past. This seems to contradict the idea that such inventions are merely drama and thought-experiments. Tharoor concludes the discussion by stating that mixing reality and fantasy actually discredits reality. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjQ6dgEBglE (accessed on 21/8/2024).

In sum, Tripathi's discourses are ambivalent in the sense that the author's explicit self-representation and implicit representation of *Self* and *Other* do not always match. When compared with the views of other Indians living in globalised neoliberal India, Tripathi's claimed rebellious and anti-elitist approach does not feel that much rebellious and is, in fact, rather conservative, given that the author always points to the precolonial past as an ideal point of reference. That is the reason why Tripathi is a successful writer and not a cultural agitator. He likely represents himself as rebellious and progressive due to the positive attitudes such features have acquired in a contemporary world whose culture and technology mutates constantly and due to the opposite negative attitudes often associated with conservatism. Not many conservative individuals would wish to have their views regarded as such, much like not many modern authors would like to be called with the often pejorative epithet "Hindu nationalist" and would be much more comfortable with the neutral or even positive term "secularist".

The authors' view on the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* movement, which they seldom mention in their fiction and nonfiction, confirms the views I have tried to outline. Neelakantan and Pattanaik wrote newspaper chronicles when the temple was inaugurated. Neelakantan's article, which is titled "Will India soar to greater heights or drown in the communal Cesspool?", cautiously states that the event would be regarded as positive only if it contributed to nation-building and for the rule of law and not for creating factionalism: "the euphoria generated by the Ram Mandir construction should be guided properly for nation-building".[129] This means that Neelakantan puts Indianness above Hinduism. Pattanaik's article, which is titled "The many Rams outside Ayodhya we haven't heard of", recalls Ramanujan's influential paper when stating that "there are several hundred Ramayanas, composed in the last 2,000 years, that deserve equal respect".[130] Again, more than celebrating Hinduism, the author celebrates the diversity of India through the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. Pattanaik (2013a) makes clear in his retelling that the Western material and Indian psychological approaches to the epic are antithetical:

> "The Ramayana, like the Mahabharata, is called itihasa, which can be translated in two ways: first, as history, a record of events of the past; second, as a story that is tense-neutral or timeless. Thus, it can be located

[129] https://www.newindianexpress.com/magazine/voices/2024/Feb/03/will-india-soar-to-greater-heights-or-drown-in-the-communal-cesspool (accessed on 27/4/2024);
[130] https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/devdutt-pattanaik-ram-beyond-the-hindi-belt-9121753/ (accessed on 27/4/2024).

> in a particular period (…) and place (…) and ascribed to a single poet (…); or it can be seen in psychological terms with each character representing a different aspect of our personality" (314).

In a rare reference to the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* movement in works by contemporary retellers, Pattanaik (2013a) analyses the movement in light of this Western (and Western-influenced Hindu nationalistic) materialist and Indian psychological duality. It is clear that Pattanaik regards the former as undesirable and the latter as desirable, given that adjectives such as *timeless* and *universal* are used in this context to be more positive than *time-bound* and *particular*:

> "For centuries, pilgrims have travelled to Ayodhya identifying it as the birthplace of Ram. But the exact location of the birthplace of Ram, in Ayodhya, is the subject of great dispute and political turmoil in India. Ever since colonial times, Hinduism has felt under siege, forced to explain itself using European templates, make itself more tangible, more concrete, more structured, more homogeneous, more historical, more geographical, less psychological, less emotional, to render itself as valid as the major religions of the Eurocentric world like Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The fallout of this pressure is the need to locate matters of faith in a particular spot. The timeless thus becomes time-bound and the universal becomes particular" (16).

One should notice that, despite claiming to have taken his stories from classical, regional, folk and even international sources, Pattanaik assumes that, before the intromission of Western discourses in India, especially in Hindu nationalism, there was a diverse but, in some sense, homogeneous way of interpreting Indian mythology. In Pattanaik's more implicit or Tripathi's more explicit way, this is a theme that will run through the nonfiction and fiction discourses of all male retellers, independently of their ideological leanings. Pattanaik not only criticises the historicist Western epistemological stance and its intromission in the Indian public sphere through Hindu nationalism but also tries to decolonialise contemporary globalised epistemology by reversing the gaze, a common expression which Pattanaik and Malhotra share, and looking at the West through Indian eyes. His works *Olympus: An Indian Retelling of the Greek Myths* (2016) or *Eden: An Indian Exploration of Jewish, Christian and Islamic Lore* (2022), for instance, seek to analyse the systems Pattanaik and Malhotra regard as the main ones shaping Western civilisation with the Indian "psychological" stance as the main point of reference.

The opposite argument of the previous quote (the Rāmāyaṇa is history, not a story), which is indeed usually associated with Hindu nationalistic discourses, often appears in online comments. A considerable number of English and Hindi comments to the *Youtube* trailer of Tripathi's documentary series *Legends of the Ramayana with Amish* (2022), which recurs much more to the materialistic localising strategy than Pattanaik's psychological approach tends to do, refer to this idea. The top comments in English and Hindi explicitly state that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is not a story but part of "our" (Indian? Hindu?) history, of "Human history", of "true history", of the "History of India", of "pure history of Hindu" (ungrammatical in the original), or even of "reality".[131]

In order to celebrate the inauguration of the temple, Tripathi hosted a documentary titled *Ram Janmabhoomi Temple: The Return of a Splendid Sun* (2024), whose celebratory nature is much more evident than in the discourses of the two other authors.[132] The "splendid sun" refers to the *Sūryavaṃśa*, the mythological "lineage of the sun" with which Rāma is associated. In English, "splendid sun" would also have a very positive connotation, given the everyday importance of the sun for human life and human cultures through time and space. Moreover, the idea of "return" points to the idea that this is not a new temple but the reconstruction of a previous one which had been destroyed by Muslims, the standard Hindu nationalist view of the controversy. Similarly, it may be understood as pointing to the comeback of India's historical and argumentative confidence as announced by the author in his nonfiction.

Kavita Kané and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the contemporary female retellers, do not tend to discuss the "idea of India" or of Hinduism in their nonfiction work. This does necessarily mean that I regard contemporary nationalism as a solely patriarchal endeavour. In the previous chapter, I have pointed to the importance of scholars such as Romila Thapar and Meenakshi Jain for the construction of ideas of Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism, respectively. I believe that Kané, Divakaruni and similar English-language female mythological fiction writers have been more concerned with the representation of oppressed Indian women and their liberation from the fetters of patriarchy, which has been more socially relevant than the representation of India and Hinduism and their liberation from the fetters of Western and Abrahamic epistemology.

[131] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGwofKQorEs (accessed on 19/7/2022).
[132] See promo in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mv26i96FoIU (accessed on 31/5/2024).

I will now enumerate the most common features of the contemporary "idea of India" and Hinduism according to Neelakantan, Pattanaik and Tripathi. My argument is that, despite their ideological differences, the three authors create similar positive representations of the Indian nation, Hindu religion, of the relationship between them, and of their contrast with Western civilisation and the Abrahamic religions. In the end, their distinction between what is native and what is foreign is more absolute and dichotomic than contextual. In the process, they tend to do what they condemn by taking advantage of discursive and narrative techniques which they often derisively associate with Western epistemology and the Abrahamic religions. Contrary to what I have done in the previous section and following the strategy I will adopt in the remaining chapters of this thesis, I analyse the authors together and organise my sections thematically. In order to demonstrate how such representations are often reflected pictorially, I resort to pictures and diagrams drawn by Pattanaik (2013b).

2.4.1 The idea of rural India

The idea that Indian civilisation and/or Hinduism originally stem from the Indian countryside, where one can find a culture unadulterated by Western discourses, is a common stereotype in the Indian public sphere. The same idea shaped the Western Romantic movement(s), which considered that the cultural roots could be found only in the rural *Völker* of developed societies or in the *noble savages* of so-called primitive ones. Khilnani (1997) states that Gandhi took these Western beliefs and created a representation of a pure Indian countryside opposed to the Westernised colonial city (125). Freelance journalist Asha Kasbekar (2006) states that Indian novels in English of the 1950s and 1960s were sceptical of the dominant forms of Indian culture and society and chose to find a more authentic India in traditional village life (98). These arguments reveal how real life and literature may influence each other. Both shape representations which may later be appropriated by the other.

A dichotomy used to differentiate these ideas and to which I have already referred to in relation to Tripathi's discourse is that of "real" rural *Bhārata* against urbane India. Referring to this dichotomy, Kanjilal (2017) notes that, when Jyoti Singh Pandey was raped and murdered in Delhi in 2012 (see introduction), Mohan Bhagwat (1950-), chief of the Hindu paramilitary organisation Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevaka Saṅgha (RSS), said that such crimes hardly take place in "Bhārata" but often occur in "India". He also said that, with the influence of Western culture, Bhārata becomes India and these incidents

become more likely (quoted in Kanjilal, 2017: 110). Bhagwat resorted to a common discursive strategy associated with Hindu nationalistic discourses, but sometimes also identifiable in secularist ones, according to which good things are originally Indian, while bad ones come from outside. Here, I must go back to the authors I have analysed in the previous section, given that I have not discussed this trait. As politician Milind Deora writes in a book edited by Tharoor (2013), the cliché "real India lives in villages" should disappear as most Indians begin living in cities. Accordingly, Das (2000) states that he grew up with no links with the village and that he never visited one until his 20s (135). This does not mean that romanticisation is absent. Das adds that, when first visiting a village, he found it "romantic and attractive" and was impressed by its self-sufficiency (*Ibid.*). He underscores that he then began to understand Gandhi's dream of building India through self-governing villages.

Tripathi (2017) finds positive vestiges of rural roots in Indian cities. He claims that India was likely the first country that democratised before it urbanised. For this reason, he adds, India is still rural and many city-dwellers possess the impulses of a "tribal society" (86). Given the usual pejorative English meaning of *tribe*/*tribal*, this hardly sounds positive. However, Tripathi adds that, due to such instincts, Indian politicians are not elected by an "abstract agglomeration of 'citizens' but by 'their own'" (*Ibid.*) and that "'their own' people legitimately expect to be looked after" (*Ibid*.). Tripathi ends his argument by telling the story of a Mumbai politician whose ten thousand fellow villagers appeared in Mumbai for his birthday. In Tripathi's mind, village tribalism leads to deep relationships which contrast with the anonymity of the modern metropolis.

Neelakantan (2015) is the contemporary reteller who most often resorts to this stereotype. He writes that, as in Indian villages one finds the willingness to think from all angles and points of view (510-515) and as villagers had made him see the traditional villains as champions of modern pluralistic values (Neelakantan, 2013: 6-8), it is there that he has sought creative inspiration for his fiction (*Ibid.*). In order to show that he possesses the authority to bring this romanticised tradition to urban centres, the author begins the biographical note in all his books by stating that he was born in a "quaint little village called Thripoonithura" (more commonly transcribed as Thrippunithura). Despite "being the seat of the Cochin royal family", the picture that the author paints is a pastoral one. Thripoonithura was "famous for its hundred-odd temples" and "the various classical artists it produced and its music school". Unfortunately, in the author's view, "[g]ulf money and the rapidly expanding city of Cochin have (…) wiped away all remaining

vestiges of that old world charm", as "[t]he village has evolved into the usual, unremarkable, suburban hell hole, clones of which dot India". In short, Neelakantan laments Bhārata's transformation into India.

2.4.2 The idea of unity

Tagore was concerned with uniting the diverse peoples of India into a single identity. This was regarded as a necessary approach to drive away the colonisers. The trait of unity has remained at the forefront of the debate, not so much because of the danger of imperialism but because of the hazards of globalisation, which urges nations to compete in the international arena. The existence of external competitors in the era of nation-states gives rise to the need of creating an identity which contains the diverse sub-identities existing in a given territory. In India, such sub-identities include religions, classes, castes, among others. In this sense, besides the "idea of India" as a nation-state, the spatiotemporally complex concept of Hinduism emerges as a privileged unity. Given the discursive diversity of Hinduism (and of most religious systems) through time and space and given the fact that whatever one may believe or do in one's normal life is probably written in some text or has been practiced by some group associated with Hinduism, as a stereotypical ditto puts, "everyone is a Hindu" (Gier, 2016: 33). According to Hindu nationalistic discourses, this would include apostates, converts which became "lost" to other religions, and entire religious systems which may have emerged as reactions to specific kinds of Hinduism.

I have considered the possibility that the *great* and *little traditions* have been unevenly represented, with the great ones playing a more eminent part. The interface between the two traditions seems to have occurred both upwards and downwards (Vatsyayan, 2004: 350-351). However, it is also relevant to analyse the discourse which has advocated the fundamental unity and harmony between them. This is an important concept in modern and contemporary representations of the "idea of India", in which there have been arguments to construct India and Hinduism as simultaneously unified and diverse. This discursive strategy is clear, for instance, in Pattanaik's strategy to take from several sources of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition and simultaneously argue for an overarching "Indian approach". However, this strategy existed before Pattanaik. Modern Indian secular thinkers claimed to have discovered an underlying unity in a national "vitality" or "spirit" shared by everybody but which nobody could fully manifest (Inden, 2001 [1990]: 198). Besides sounding Hegelian, Inden's reading of

these ideas sounds similar to Ramanujan's structuralist readings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, while the "idea of India" is real, it has no full manifestation in reality but is only partially represented in individual instances and it is from the conjunction of such instances that the abstract structure emerges.

Several authors resort to metaphors to describe the apparently paradoxical simultaneity of unity and diversity. Inden (*Ibid.*: 1) identified this trend in older Orientalist texts. The most stereotyped comparison regards Hinduism as a Banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*), a single living organism which possesses many branches. Malhotra (2011) recycles this metaphor and also likens "*dharmic* civilisations" to this tree. Conversely, he compares Western Judaeo-Christian civilisation to a "desert". Associating the former metaphor with the romantic view of rural origins, the tree is said to house many kinds of village life, and to be complex and old, yet coherent (215). Tharoor (2018) mentions the same metaphor when referring to Hinduism. The tree (and religion) is said to

> spreads its branches far and wide, and these in turn sink back into the earth to take fresh root in the welcoming soil. In the shade of the vast canopy of this capacious banyan tree, sustained by multiple roots and several trunks, a great variety of flora and fauna, thought and action, flourishes (37).

Recycling the content of this analogy between culture and nature, Pattanaik tweeted that Hinduism is like the Ganges River, given that it "has many tributaries and branches". [133]

[133] https://mobile.twitter.com/devduttmyth/status/1173855807487610880?lang=de (accessed on 6/6/2022).

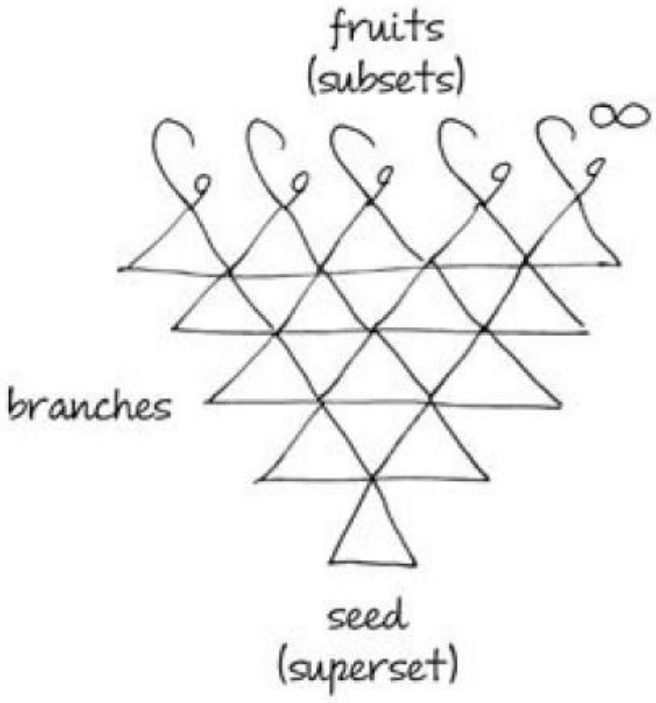


Figure 17 - Seeds and Branches (Pattanaik, 2013b: 50).

Figure 17, a drawing by the author, is a visual representation of this metaphor. The bottom part shows the seed (unity) which grows into many branches (diversity). These branches bear fruits that are both different, given that each branch possesses an individual existence, and similar, given that all come from the same seed.[134]

The unity in diversity of India and Hinduism is also represented by specific cultural symbols, such as the epic tradition, which is used as a metaphor or metonymy for Hinduism. Narratively, the epics have a main plot (the seed) with a tendency to sprout, given that it unravels into several subplots (the branches) with roots in various sources along the social stratum. In *Discovery of India*, Nehru (1985 [1946]) often mentioned the epic tradition as an example of the fundamental unity between different Indian traditions. In his view, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* encapsulated a common Indian cultural background that consisted of popular philosophy, tradition, history, myth and legend. For Nehru, this was "the typical Indian method of catering all together for various degrees of cultural development, from the highest intellectual to the simple unread and untaught villager" (99-100). Similarly, Tharoor (2018), a biographer and admirer of Nehru,[135] states that religion lies at the heart of Indian culture as a source of union, with the epics providing a common idiom to all Indians. The author gives the

[134] This diagram is the symbol often called "endless knot". Even though this symbol is found in the art of the ancient Indus Valley civilisation, about which I will talk in greater detail in the fifth chapter, it is transversal to many ancient and unrelated world cultures. Nowadays, it is more commonly associated with Buddhism, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, than with Hinduism. Furthermore, it has no connection to the nationalistic idea of unity in diversity. In Tibetan Buddhism, this symbol is interpreted as referring to the interconnection between all existence or, in Buddhist terms, between action and reaction or cause and consequence. BEER, Robert (2003). *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, Chicago: Serindia, s.v. "The Endless of Glorious Knot", pp. 11-12.

[135] THAROOR, Shashi (2003). *Nehru: The Invention of India*, New York: Arcade Publishing.

example of Doordarshan's version of the *Mahābhārata*, which, though usually considered to be a Hindu epic, was scripted by Rahi Masoom Raza (1927-1992), a Muslim (256). This argument clearly tries to debunk Hindu nationalism by pointing to positive Muslim contributions to Indian civilisation. Like Nehru and Tharoor, Malhotra and Dasa (2020)[136] write that classical and popular practices in India have shared the epic tradition, which is said to reflect an equilibrated interface between formal and folk traditions (xl).

In Tripathi's (2017) view, India has always been united in its religiousness and liberalism (12). By giving the title "Happily Religious & Liberal" (11-14) to one of his essays, the author once again turns himself and his generation into metonyms for his views. Conversely, he blames the old Westernised elites for having continued the policy of Divide-and-Rule implemented by the British and finds it urgent to protest against such policies differentiating between Indians based on religion (134). By inverting the common discourse that modern Hinduism was a colonial construction, Tripathi tries to show how foreign religions were positively moulded by Hinduism. Much like Tharoor does, he extols the positive influence that Hinduism exerted over Indian Islam and other Indian versions of what have been regarded as foreign religions, which means that the author has put national similarities above religious differences:

> if Indian Christians are not blamed for British excesses just because the British happened to be Christians, why should Indian Muslims be blamed for the vicious Turkic/Mongol/Persian conquests, just because these foreigners happened to be Muslims? We were slaves under foreign rule for centuries. Let's not blame our fellow Indians for the crimes of those barbaric foreigners (138).

While this seems to be a critique of Hindu nationalistic discourses against Muslims and Christians, the use of negative and highly sensationalist words (*vicious, slaves, barbaric foreigners*) makes Tripathi's discourse sound closer to the Hindu nationalistic discourses he seemingly criticises. Tripathi reverses the usual monolithic view of Islam and hypothesises that this religion can be divided into two variants. Given Islam's diffusion in time and space, I would argue that there are many more divisions for this

[136] Satyanarayana Dasa is one of Malhotra's frequent collaborators and also has a curriculum similar to those of Malhotra's other collaborators. He graduated in mechanical engineering and industrial engineering, went to America to work as a software engineer and, when he felt "an increasing yearning for the roots of his own spiritual culture", later went back to India to "wholeheartedly pursue his inner quest for truth". https://www.jiva.org/jiva-institute/satyanarayana-dasa/ (accessed on 13/6/2024).

and for every religion. In any case, the difference the author proposes is not the common one between Sunni and Shia Islam but between a liberal Indian (and Indonesian) Islam (69) and, it seems, all others, which are implicitly regarded as illiberal. In Tripathi's view, Indian Muslims have been among the most pluralistic Muslims found anywhere. For this reason, the author adds, they should be encouraged to spread their syncretic interpretations throughout the world (70). In Tripathi's discourse, Indian Islam is a *dharmic* religion and not a foreign one. Tripathi uses similar strategies to describe a positive kind of Indian Christianity (*Ibid.*) and positive representation of Sikhism, a religion which, in his words, is based on Indian *dharmic* philosophies infused with new reforms (xxiv). In opposition to this, he contrasts these local variations with the foreign versions of the same religions. Examples include the Islam of what Tripathi often calls "brutal foreign" (Tripathi 2020, xv; Tripathi and Roy 2020, xvii) Turkic-Mongol invaders, whom he ranks as the perpetrators of "one of history's bloodiest conquests" (Tripathi, 2017b: 137), or of modern Saudi Arabia (*Ibid.*: 20). He also criticises the Christianity professed by "hate-filled and racist" American Evangelists (*Ibid.*). Even though the author does not write anything about the issue, I would guess that his benevolent representation of Sikhism would not include violent Sikh fundamentalism and the attempts to establish an independent Sikh state by violent means.[137] Tripathi also adds that those oppressed by the caste system are Hindu (68) and that the key factor directing modern reforms in Hinduism has been the fear of losing marginalised Hindus to different faiths (69). Such nonfiction arguments acquire a fictional shape in Tripathi's (2020) novel about Suheldev, in which the author complains that this little-known story needs to be retold because India is divided and Suheldev is claimed by conflicting identities. In the end, though, Tripathi regards him as "a proud son of Mother India", regardless of his caste (xv). According to these discourses, concepts such as religion or caste becomes irrelevant, while that of "nation", which has been less relevant through history, becomes crucial.

2.4.3 The idea of spirituality

Following my introduction of Pattanaik's work, given the apparent openness to meaning of the term *spirituality*, the author's use of the term "psychological" may be regarded as a *spiritual* one, at least in the sense that Carrette and King (2005) describe

[137] KAPUR, Rajiv A. (1986). *Sikh Separatism: The Politics of Faith*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.

neoliberal spirituality. In fact, when opposing Western and Indian worldviews in the conclusion to *Mith = Mithya*, Pattanaik (2006) writes that "what mattered [for Indians] more than the landscape of the world was the landscape of the soul" (204), an antithesis I have quoted almost *verbatim* from Tharoor's *Why I am a Hindu?* and Malhotra's *Being Different*. It is clear that "the landscape of the world" is associated with stereotypes of Western materialism and "the landscape of the soul" with stereotypes of Indian spirituality.

Like Pattanaik, Neelakantan often rejects the term *spirituality*, which he tends to equate with superstition and to contrapose with rationality, with the former being regarded as undesirable and the latter as desirable. However, again like Pattanaik, Neelakantan also categorises these discourses as native and foreign or, at least, as influenced by foreign elements. In Neelakantan's (2015) opinion, for instance, the *bhakti* movement is said to be a superstitious movement which appeared in India in the advent of the Muslim invasions and which made the rational Indian tradition collapse into "blind devotion" (8-12). Neelakantan's assessment of previous native epistemological systems, regarded more as rational and philosophical than as spiritual or superstitious, is clearly more positive.[138]

Like Malhotra, Tripathi has no qualms with referring to Indian spirituality and sometimes with mixing it with modern discourses, such as scientific ones. Tripathi (2017) often mentions that, besides liberal, Indians are spiritual people, that being the reason why they remain aloof from sociopolitical realities. In his view, even though ancient India made great contributions to materialistic science, its greatest contribution was in the area of spirituality and philosophy (185). Conversely, the author criticises the consumerist West, which, in his view, has ripped "Mother Nature apart" (59) with its materialism and has not acknowledged that real happiness comes from within (*Ibid.*). Despite their different names, Tripathi's discourse does not differ qualitatively from Pattanaik's psychological one. Even though such terms may have contradictory meanings in the discourses of the three male retellers, "psychological", "rational" or "spiritual" or "from within" all point to similar modern worldviews and are meant to be contrasted with the "literal", "materialistic" and "from without" Western and/or Abrahamic approach.

138 https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/no-such-thing-as-absolute-truth-anand-neelakantan/articleshow/66912625.cms (accessed on 13/6/2024).

Tripathi adopts the re-Orientalist representation of non-Western societies as ecological havens and makes it implicitly clear that Indians have not ripped "Mother Nature" apart and have solely valued spiritual happiness. This discourse does not aim at correcting the West but at making Indians feel good "from within" while imagining themselves to be utterly different from their imagined *Other(s)*. However, India has become more consumerist since the introduction of neoliberal reforms and none of the authors under analysis has advocated that readers should attain spiritual liberation by letting go completely of material goods. Pattanaik's *sūtras* and Neelakantan's first nonfiction books are guides to achieve success in the material world and Tripathi (2017b) often ushers his readers to win money in *dharmic* ways (96-100).

Much like rationality and materialism, science and technology were important for the colonial world and remain so in the postcolonial one. It is understandable why nationalistic authors may obsess over science and technology. During the Enlightenment period, science emerged as an empiricist and materialist method irreconcilable with what came to be imagined as anti-empiricist and immaterial ones. Given science's success in shaping the modern world, followers of diverse religions, including Hindus and Christians, often go to great lengths to show that their worldviews presuppose the scientific method and, in the process, project the modern concept to previous eras and different places. Tripathi (2017b) also spiritualises modern science. In an article titled "Science, spirituality and my son, Neel", he claims that he loves science and that he often reads scientific papers. He tells the story of how, when he once went to CERN (European Organisation for Nuclear Research) with his family, the trip felt like a "pilgrimage", a term which would more typically refer to religious experience. He adds that he learned a spiritual lesson from the strong nuclear force, one of the four basic physical forces. As this force does not weaken as particles are pulled apart, the author takes the occasion to establish a metaphor between this natural property and the spiritual bond he shares with his son (177-178), a metaphor which, while potentially poetic and emotional, has no epistemological validity whatsoever. Even though discourses on materialism and spirituality are regarded as contradictory when considered through the worldview of materialistic determinism, in Tripathi's view, spirituality adapts to modern science and vice-versa.

2.4.4 The ideas of universality and inclusivity

As religious reformism tried to transform Hinduism along modernist ideals of science, rationality and progress, that is, a kind of modern discourse with a strong representation and claim for universality, it has downplayed the atavistic and contradictory aspects, such as issues of power related to caste and gender (Deshpande, 2003: 78). The modern brand of Hinduism has often been labelled *sanatana dharma*, "perpetual, eternal and universal Hinduism" (Doniger, 2009: 209-210). This is a kind of natural law which is supposed to apply to everybody, independently of one's social stance in life. This non-sectarian *dharma* is sometimes regarded as a construct devised by religiously-minded nationalists and to which nobody has ever adhered (Inden, 2001 [1990]: 198). Vivekananda is again an important figure in this kind of discourse in the sense that he created both the universalistic and nationalistic versions of Hinduism. In these roles, he is said to have inspired historical figures such as Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore. Gandhi was influenced by the nationalistic strand, while Tagore was influenced by the universal one (van der Veer, 2014: 49/179). Both strands tend to be intertwined, given that the argument of nativeness is often used to legitimise the power of Hinduism in India, while the argument of universality is often used to legitimise it abroad. Gandhi, for instance, defined Rāma's kingdom as both a perfect government and as a potential "universal religion" (quoted in Udayakumar, 2005: 174).

In his attempt to include every discursive and narrative version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in his major retelling of the epic, Pattanaik (2013a) clearly tries to aim at universality. Even though the author privileges what he regards as the native Indian epistemological stance inherited by Indian secularism and contrasted with the Western and Hindu nationalistic stances, he usually tries to refer to all these views in detached terms. In *Sita* and in other similar works, Pattanaik often refers to his sources in abstract terms. The most common ones include: *academicians*, scholars in general; *left-wing scholars* and *Western thought*, Western or Westernised scholars; *right-wing scholars*, scholars who support Hindu nationalism; and *rationalists*, commentators who follow historicist or culturalist approaches and interpret everything literally, that is, contrary to Pattanaik's psychological approach. As examples of these tendencies, Pattanaik accuses *academicians* of being hegemonic when writing that "politicians and academicians (…) wish to impose their views and dominate all discourse" (165). He also asks whether the *Rāmāyaṇa* is "history, as right-wing scholars insist" or "propaganda literature serving the interests of particular social groups, as left-wing

scholars insist" (xvii). Finally, he states that "Western thought prefers to locate the *Ramayana* in a historical and geographical context: who wrote it when where?" (6) and that a particular story in which a king kills himself is viewed by rationalists as being suicide and by devotees as being an act of devotion (313).

I have described how Das, Tharoor and Malhotra often describe Indian civilisation and/or Hinduism with potentially universal traits in both geographical and temporal senses. Pattanaik (2013b) points to a similar idea when using words such as "gaze", "construct", "code" and "design". According to the author, these words have always been appropriate to describe Indian tradition. However, they began to enter Western discourse only after the 1970s, with the rise of the postmodern works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes (57). The idea that India was postmodern long before the West and that it has gone beyond the postmodern stage is common in Pattanaik's works. In his view, a problem associated with the Western postmodern revolution lies in the fact that everything became relative and open to interpretation. This seems to be an allusion to Foucault's notion that there is no such thing as objective knowledge.

Figure 18 depicts Pattanaik's tendency to the universalise some Hindu features related to divinity when compared with other epistemological systems, such as the Western one and other Indian religious traditions. The term "Greek" points to an ethnonym and not to a religious tradition. "Science" seems to be contradictorily defined as a religion, given that it appears in a table along other religions, and as a non-religion, given that it lacks everything that other religions have. Like the term "Abrahamic", Jainism/Buddhism are collapsed into one concept, a kind of representation with which modern Jains, a religion which exists mainly in India, and Buddhism, a religion which exists mainly in Southeast and East Asia, would perhaps not agree with.

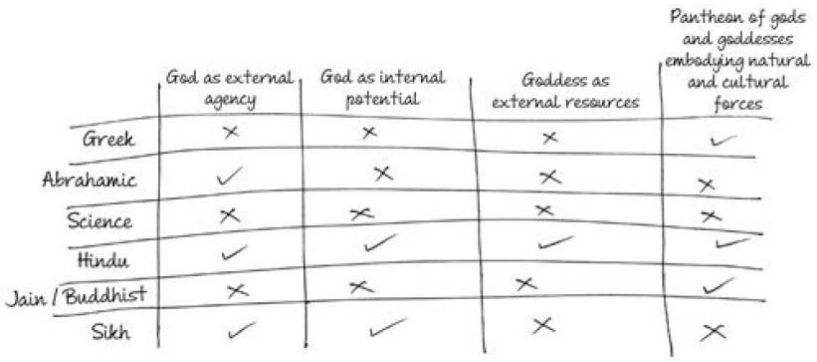


Figure 18 - The universality of Hinduism (Pattanaik, 2013b: 47)

The anxiety to create unity leads to the idea of inclusivity. These concepts have also been derived from Vivekananda's discourse (Mullick, 1993: 221) and associated with contemporary global ideals of respect towards difference. By stating that it is in the interest of Indians that there is inclusivity because it ensures stability, Tripathi (2017b) has shown that inclusivity may not always be a neutral and disinterested trait but may serve a specific discursive and sociopolitical function (101). The author calls India the "America" of the ancient world in the sense that it has accepted foreign refugees in pre-modern times (145), another idea taken from Vivekananda (Tharoor, 2020). For this reason, just as modern people Americanise themselves, foreigners are said to have *Indianised* themselves in the past (Tripathi, 2017b: 145). Here, the author has given a geographical spin to Pattanaik's historical arguments on postmodernism. Just as India post-modernised before the West and even before its encounter with the West, it also embodied the American dream before America existed.

Tripathi's propensity for mixing apparently irreconcilable discourses is comparable to Pattanaik's. The author describes himself as inclusive and receptive of contradictory religious discourses. He states that, besides Hindu deities, his *pūjā* (devotion) room at home has representations of the *Ka'aba*, the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, Gautama Buddha, Guru Nanak, Zoroaster and the star of David (10). These are symbols of religious elements from Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism, respectively. Nevertheless, throughout his fiction and nonfiction work, Tripathi clearly states that he is above all a devotee of Śiva, which means that his inclusive stance towards other religions stems from his devotion to this deity and to Hinduism.

Tripathi also mixes discourses unrelated to religious issues. In the dialogues of *Dharma: Decoding the Epics for a Meaningful Life* , Tripathi and Roy (2020) mix stories and concepts from the Indian epics with those from Greek and Egyptian myths and the discourses of several historical and contemporary figures and institutions, such as Chinese activist 劉曉波 Liú Xiǎobō (1955-2017), the Chinese Communist Party, Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430), psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856-1939, Jewish neuroscientist Viktor E. Frankl (1905-1997), American neuroscientist Paul MacLean (1913-2007), Indo-American *New Age* author Deepak Chopra (1946-). He also quotes from American popular culture in general. This

perennial one-size-fits-all approach to reality happens to be one of the mainstays of *New Age* spirituality, of which Deepak Chopra, Tripathi's "spiritual guru",[139] is a successful example (Clarke, 2006b: s.v. "Chopra, Deepak", 113-114). Despite Tripathi's chaotic proneness for inclusion, the centrality of India and Hinduism is always underscored. No matter how far he may go in space or time, he usually claims to be only following the inclusive culture of his country (Tripathi, 2017b: 11).

2.4.5 The ideas of tolerance and peacefulness

Due to its universality and inclusiveness, India is often represented as more tolerant towards difference than other nations. One of the founding moments of this representation of the "idea of India" was again the 1893 Parliament of Religions, when Vivekananda announced that he was proud to belong to a religion which had taught the world tolerance and universal acceptance (quoted in Mullick, 1993: 221). In van der Veer's (1994) view, the discourse on the tolerance of Hinduism has been intended to unite competing Hindu groups and to establish a difference between other groups which are stereotypically represented as "intolerant", mainly the Muslims (66-73). I would add the Christians, whose attempts at converting non-Christians are also often depicted as intolerant. However, in van der Veer's (1994) view, there is no reason to argue that India was a tolerant society in the precolonial period and has become more intolerant as a result of the colonial invention of Hinduism and its separation from other Indian or foreign religious traditions (201).

Most analyses of contemporary society end with postmodernism. However, Pattanaik (2013b) goes further. The author's view of India's improvement of the concept of postmodernism is related to the issue of tolerance. According to him, people (he does not specify who) now speak of *post-postmodernism*. The concept has been used by several authors from different fields of knowledge, even though the term does not seem to have an accepted fixed meaning (Rudrum and Starvis, 2015). In Pattanaik's perspective, the main tenet of post-postmodernism is to look at beliefs from the point of view of the believer. This view is said to demand empathy and less judgement (11). I doubt that the reader will be surprised if I say that Pattanaik's post-postmodern values are implicitly akin to the Indian approach. In his retelling, Pattanaik (2013a) uses the term in relation to the interpretation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. According to him, there have

[139] https://www.iimcal.ac.in/amish-tripathi (accessed on 2/6/2024).

been three dominant trends in the approach toward the retellings: 1) the modern gaze (only the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki in Sanskrit is valid); 2) the postmodern gaze (all *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings are equally valid); and 3) the post-postmodern gaze (respect the gaze of the believer) (xvii). The first approach seems to be the (re-)Orientalist one, given that it takes a panoptic and prescriptive Judeo-Christian based view of Indian tradition. The second approach, the postmodern one, takes a diverse and descriptive view comparable to what I have define as the "modern approaches" to the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The third approach, while vaguer, seems to aim at including the thoughts of other identities into one's own through empathetic assimilation and personal development.

The first and the third views are encapsulated in one of Pattanaik's drawings (Figure 19), which contrasts the approach of the "modern West" and that of "traditional India". The author relies on two dichotomies: a temporal (modernity/tradition) and a geographical (West/India) one. Pattanaik's choice of words hints that there are differences neither between traditional and modern India nor the traditional and the modern West. The figure which symbolises the "modern West" adopts a prescriptive stance, given that he feels that he has the moral duty to change the external world through the "right" rules and beliefs. The one which stands for "traditional India" believes that change should be internal and that such changes would be more receptive towards external realities, such as "other people's beliefs". The apparent conclusion is that the "modern West" is intolerant, while "traditional India" is tolerant.

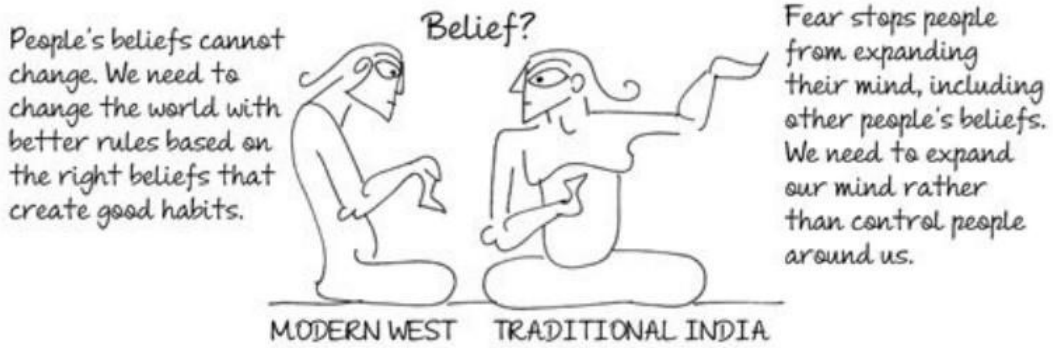


Figure 19 - Modern Western and Traditional Indian Epistemologies (Pattanaik, 2013b: 15)

Tripathi (2017b) often makes use of his modern keyword *liberal* and calls what I call Indian secularism by the less common epithet "religious liberalism". According to him, "the reason our myths stay alive is that unlike in most other countries, religion and

liberalism have not been historically at war in India" (21). Elsewhere, he adopts the essentialist view of reality when stating that most Indians possess "innate liberalism" (32). He explicitly urges his readers: "Let's be truly Indian. Let's be truly liberal" (66). In Tripathi's view, India has had a millennia-long tradition of freedom, which means that, according to the author, freedom of expression has always been the most Indian of values (160). In more specific terms, he states that the idea of religious liberalism involves the right one has to respect truth of someone else and to have one's own truth respected (12), a description which sounds similar to Pattanaik's post-postmodern idea of respecting the gaze of the believer.

In order to prove the inherent tolerance of India, one often finds the idea that in the past India gave shelter to non-Indians with different worldviews. Das is the only one of the four public intellectuals I have analysed who never mentions this idea. Tharoor (2020) writes that Vivekananda stated that he spoke for a land that granted exile to persecuted nations and faiths without asking about religion: "Jews, Parsis, several varieties of Christians, and, of course, Muslims". Again, the fact that Tharoor mentions Muslims last and emphasises them with the adverbial phrase *of course* reveals that he is writing against Hindu nationalism. Resorting to the same argument (Tripathi, 2017b), Tripathi calls India the "America" of the ancient world, given that it has accepted into its folds the bold, the wretched, the adventurous and the tortured (xxiv). Following this rationale, just as modern people Americanise themselves, foreigners are said to have Indianised themselves in the past (145).

As Indians and Hindus oppress neither citizens of other nationalities nor devotees of other religions, they are often regarded as peaceful. This trait may be associated with the Jain concept of *ahiṃsā*, "non-violence", internationally popularised by Gandhi and nowadays associated with Hinduism and India in general. It is may also be associated with the concept of *śānti*, Sanskrit/Hindi for "peace, tranquillity", another term which has entered the global lexicon. The focus on synonyms such as *tolerant, inclusive, peaceful, pacific* continues in works by 21st century authors. One of Tharoor books, for instance, is titled *Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century* (2012), a title which mirrors Vivekananda and Western historical concepts such as *Pax Romana, Pax Mongolica*, and similar Latin definitions. Again, according to Tharoor's discourses, if universalised, the peacefulness of "his" Hinduism may turn into world peace.

2.4.6 The idea of relativism

Relativism seems antithetical to universality. However, the public intellectuals and the male retellers under discussion, possibly under the influence of Ramanujan's "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?", often regard the relativism of Indian thought as a model which should be pursued by others, given that this trait allows one to be inclusive and tolerant towards other ways of thinking. As I have shown in relation to Tharoor and Malhotra's discourses, the issue of binary distinctions in Western hegemonic discourses and their absence in the Indian epistemological system is a common stereotype. This is also one of the main ideas behind Pattanaik's Western-based materialist view of reality against the Indian psychological one. The author includes in all of his works I quote in this thesis a set of verses which demonstrate India's relativism. They may appear in nonfiction passages or be uttered by fictional characters. The idea behind them is that Pattanaik's attempt to perceive the truth is one among many and that ultimate truth is inscrutable. The verses read as follows:

> Within infinite myths lies the Eternal Truth
> Who sees it all?
> Varuna has but a thousand eyes
> Indra, a hundred
> And I, only two" (2013, xvi/86; 2014, 36; 2015, 23)

In contrast to this, Pattanaik (2014) writes in his most acclaimed work in Indian queerness, which does not look like a very intuitive topic under which to discuss these issues, that Western thought is rooted in Greek mythology and is shaped by doubt and arguments in which a single "truth" is supposed to prevail. In this system, contradictory binary concepts are said to come into conflict and, in the end, one emerges victorious. Indian discourse, however, is said to be shaped by faith and discussions in which complementary truths mutually enrich themselves (3-36). In Pattanaik's view, Indians would not want to win an argument or reach a consensus. They would want to keep seeking alternatives (Pattanaik, 2013b: 50). In this system, binary concepts fuse and form a syncretic whole. With his verses, Pattanaik clearly positions himself within this imagined Indian discourse.

Figures 20 and 21 show that this does not mean that Pattanaik does not create absolutes or binarities. Figure 20 compares two foundational systems of Western civilisation: Judeo-Christian tradition, symbolised by the Bible, and classical Graeco-Roman tradition, symbolised by the Homeric epics. In Pattanaik's view, they are

different in their social outlook, given that Judeo-Christian tradition privileges reverence for external authority (God), while Graeco-Roman tradition privileges individualism. In any case, both are considered to have a one-sided view of reality. Figure 21 contrasts Graeco-Roman tradition and the Indian one. While Western civilisation is considered to privilege "one life" and "linear achievement", Indian civilisation privileges "infinite lives" and "cyclical introspection". Pattanaik includes the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, two texts stereotypically associated with Hinduism, but also the *Ādi Purāṇa*,[140] either referring to a Jain or a Hindu text, and the *Jātakas*, which are Buddhist texts. The representation that emerges is that the fusion of the classical and Christian worldviews stereotypically called "the West" are regarded as an essence and not as an historical process. The same may be said about the extreme dichotomy between the West and the Indian traditions as an ontological whole. In fact, even though reincarnation is one of the most commonly mentioned features of Indian religions in popular imagination, the three male retellers rarely mention it. This is the major exception, one in which, rather than describing Indian civilisation in independent terms, Pattanaik is mostly concerned with contrasting it with its *Other*.

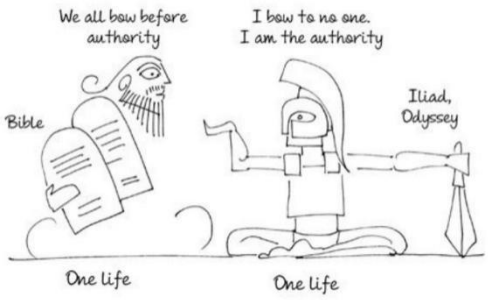


Figure 20 - Comparison between the Bible and the Homeric Epics (Pattanaik, 2013b: 27)

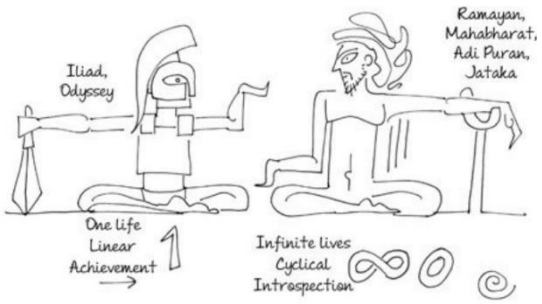


Figure 21 - Comparison between the Homeric Epics and the Indian ones (Pattanaik, 2013b: 27)

Despite the fact that relativism shapes the crux of Pattanaik's approach, it also exists in the discourses of other authors. Neelakantan (2018) states that one of his

[140] Even though the name may refer to a Jain text telling the story of the first *tīrthaṃkara* ("ford-maker", the name given in Jainism to the twenty-four beings which achieved spiritual enlightenment and propagated the creed), the name literally means "first *purāṇa*" and can therefore refer to the Hindu *Brahma Purāṇa,* the first of the 18 recognised major *Purāṇas*. This *Purāṇa* is not as popular as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, so it is not clear why Pattanaik would choose the former above the latter. In 2021, Pattanaik has published a short book titled *Adi Purana*: *Entire Veda as a Single Story*, which indeed tells the story of *Brahma Purāṇa*. This may mean that Pattanaik really points to this text. Furthermore, to my knowledge, Pattanaik never refers to the Jain text in other works. PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2021). *Adi Purana*: *Entire Veda as a Single Story,* Chennai: Westland.

mythical retellings is a personal explanation of how the tale might have happened. He emphasises that there are other interpretations, understandings and inferences and that it would be troublesome if there were none. Elsewhere, he claims that this is not his approach but how "the sons and daughters" of India have always celebrated their culture (Neelakantan, 2015: 515). According to Neelakantan, everyone and every faith has a place in the great "mosaic" of Indian culture, in which nothing is ever absolutely right or wrong. For this reason, the author considers that critical thinking forms the basis of Indian philosophy, given that Hinduism does not possess a concept of blasphemy and is open to criticism. While the mention of the term blasphemy is indicative of what Neelankantan is writing against, this is more explicit when the author states that reducing Hindu ideas to dichotomies between Semitic ideas of good and evil would do great injustice to the Hindu culture (8-12). Indeed, in an interview, Neelakantan states that the concept of good and evil did not exist before the Muslim and British invasions.[141]

As is clear in Neelakantan's discourse, one of the most commonly mentioned dichotomies is that of good against evil. According to Judeo-Christian theology, good and evil are in constant tension. This theological idea with clear narrative possibilities appears in non-religious Western and globalised narratives, which usually tell the story of a "good" hero(ine) who wrestles physically or psychologically with an "evil" villain(ess) and ultimately defeats him/her. The authors under discussion tend to substitute ideas of *good* and *evil* them for *dharma* and *adharma* when referring to Indian civilisation and Hinduism. *Dharma* is often said to differ completely from absolutist Western concepts. However, in globalised times in which cultural barriers become porous, such overarching terms with long intellectual histories easily turn into empty signifiers and mean whatever any specific author may wish it to mean. In theory, *dharma* is supposed to frame what is right and wrong in relative terms instead of absolute ones. However, in practice, in modern discourses the *dharma/adharma* dichotomy usually turns into a contrastive and absolutist way to create borders between an Indian and/or Hindu *Self* and a Western and/or Christian *Other*.

Subramaniam (2019) states that there has never been a binary division of good and evil in Hinduism and that Hindu mythology opens up modes and goals of life which go beyond the stereotype of good vanquishing evil (38). Referring specifically to the

[141] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bd1bSaVq870 (accessed on 3/5/2021).

Rāmāyaṇa, Tharoor (2007) writes that retelling the epic from the point of view of the villains would have been equivalent to retelling the Bible from the point of view of Satan, which would be considered blasphemous. However, in the author's view, this approach would be truthful to Indian cultural heritage (114). This discourse also finds consensus among mythological retellers. In an interview published in *Immortal India*, the interviewer states that (s)he feels people tend to look at the *Rāmāyaṇa* very simplistically when they demonise Rāvaṇa and deify Rāma. In his answer, Tripathi (2017) states that:

> "The idea of Ravan being a purely demented evil demon is, again, relatively modern. In the traditional Indian concept, there is no pure good and pure evil; it did not exist at all. In ancient Sanskrit, there is no exact translation for the English word, 'Evil' (…) This simplistic approach of viewing things in black or white terms is actually quite modern; it's not our ancient way. Life is never simple. Real life is complicated. Our ancient stories reflect this reality" (44-45).

It is implicit in Tripathi's words that the dichotomy between extreme points of good and evil kind was adopted from foreign influences. However, much like the English term *spirituality*, whose ancient existence in India the authors never discuss, the idea that good and evil existed or not in ancient India depends more on how these terms are defined in any given time and place, given that, much like religions, words and the ideas they point to are not essences fixed in time since their invention but change historically and geographically. In any case, Tripathi's idea of the Turkic-Mongol invaders of India as barbaric foreigners who conducted one of history's bloodiest conquests and of Indian as intrinsically liberal can hardly be said to present nuances of good and evil or to be relative in any significant way. While the representation of bloodthirsty Muslim armies ravaging peaceful India is fashionable in the popular media and is ideologically very convenient for Hindu nationalistic discourses, historian of religions Johan Elverskog (2010) shows that it is not traceable to textual remains of the initial Muslim presence in India, which tend to be much more nuanced. It is ironic that, for all their descriptions of Indian relativism against the Western absolutism which has infected the postcolonial schools and the globalised academia, academic discourses like Elverskog's study tend to be more relative and contextual than most of the native Indian discourses I have analysed.

Figure 22 shows how Pattanaik (2013b) also delves into this representation of the clear separability of good and evil in Western tradition. This is his representation of Greek mythology and Western thought, according to which one side of a conflict is represented as a hero and the other is represented as a villain, a victim or a martyr. Both sides claim their right for truth. In sum, all writers I have analysed, except Sen and Das, claim that Western thought makes divisions between good/right and bad/wrong, while traditional India does not. At the same, though, they imply that the Indian way is right and the Western one wrong.

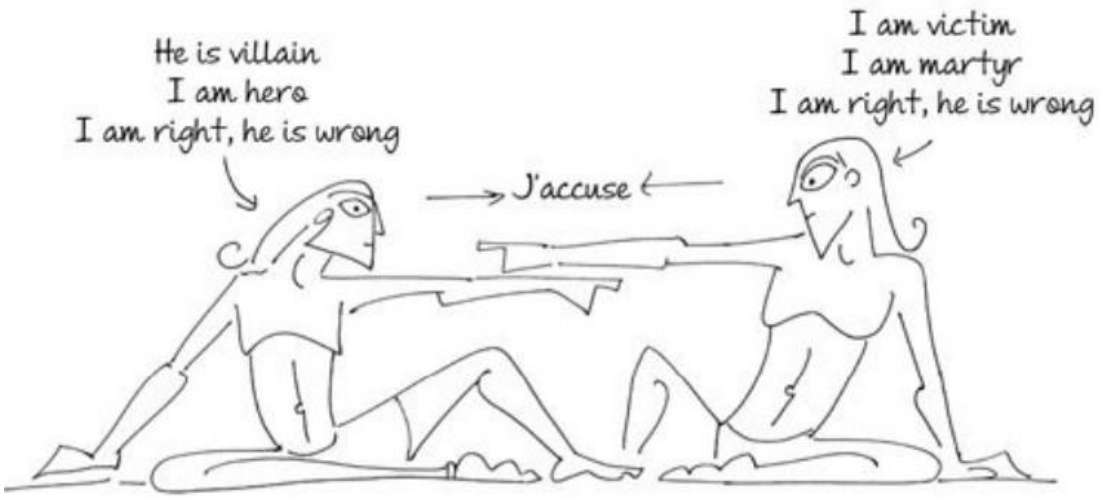


Figure 22 - The Hero and the Villain (Pattanaik, 2013b: 30)

The Indian propensity for relativism and rationality is often manifested in the idea of debate, that is, the human activity in which different and sometimes contradicting points of view are argued for or against. In Tripathi's (2017b) view, Hindus have always been encouraged to examine all aspects of a given subject and form their own opinions, including on theology and God (7). It is for this reason, he adds, that there is a tradition in Hinduism that imagines mythological tales with diverse and differing messages (22), thereby offering a foundation for alternative insights (23). As usual, Tripathi mentions himself and his family as an embodiment of this ideal. He pleonastically calls his family "a typical Indian family in the truly traditional sense" (50), given that they tend to debate a lot and without epistemological restraints. Similarly, Tripathi and Roy (2020) state that they wrote *Dharma: Decoding the Epics for a Meaningful Life* as an *Upaniṣad*, that is, as a dialogue in which several characters argue for their point of view, and not as a traditional nonfiction model, which is implicitly represented as a Western genre,

because such a model leads to "adversarial tribalism" (xviii). In this case, not only the term *tribalism* but also *adversarial* have very negative connotations. The authors do not explain why they have not followed the model of Platonic dialogues instead, a Western genre which would more easily be represented as dialogues between characters with different points of views than as nonfiction promoting adversarial tribalism.

Tripathi's (2017b) associations of his ideas of debate become clearer when analysing *Immortal India.* The author simplistically classifies world cultures as mythology-loving and history-centric ones, a dichotomy which immediately reminds one of Pattanaik's psychological and materialistic approaches in other words. According to Tripathi, the latter are based on facts which may generate hatred and derision against those who do not endorse them and the former are based on peaceful dialogue and mutual understanding (30). It is clear that, in Tripathi's mind, India constitutes a mythology-loving culture. The author does not specify which are the history-centric ones. However, it is easy to figure out that "Western culture" would be a major example. To help the reader make this connection, Tripathi tells the story of a trip he made to the United States:

> while in the US over a seven-week period in 2014, I found myself amazed by the animosity in their public debates. The so-called 'Left'and 'Right'commentators hold pre-decided positions on most issues. Their job: garner support for their camp, convinced as they are that theirs is the 'Absolute Truth' and the other side is 'Pure Evil' (76).

In semantic terms, the expression "gladiatorial matches" reminds one of "adversarial tribalism", which is what Tripathi and his sister say they want to avoid, while "absolute truth" and "pure evil" remind one of stereotypical representations of Western civilisation and Abrahamic religions. To underscore the validity of his argument, Tripathi emphasises that he did not devise such phrases but that he heard them as quoted. He adds that this kind of discourse has been storming the Indian media (76), an assertion which may be interpreted as being an attempt by the author to detach himself from Hindu nationalistic discourses. In order to counter this kind of discourse, Tripathi suggests the re-adoption of the tenets of mythology-loving cultures, which, the author adds, tend to be more liberal, respect different points of view and believe that perhaps there is no "One Truth" but many, depending on the perspective of the observer (30).

2.4.7 The ideas of antiquity and continuity

The traits I have analysed reveal that there has been an emphasis on the distinctive features that India is said to have possessed since time immemorial and which other civilisations, mainly the Western one, might lack. In Sen's (2005) view, most of the framework for criticising the hegemonic Western system tends to come from postcolonial discourse, so he remarks that it is ironic that the colonial metropolis supplies ideas and ammunition to postcolonial intellectuals so that they may attack the influence of that same colonial metropolis (133). This seems to be the reason why, conscious of this brand of re-Orientalism, Sen believes Indians often opt for a characterisation of Indian culture and society self-consciously "distant" from Western traditions (139). As Orientalist and re-Orientalist representations have emphasised distinctiveness, both have ended up being similar, the main difference lying on their results. According to Sen, the Orientalist representation of India was "grotesquely primitive", while the Hindu nationalist one is "dazzlingly glorious" (140). While I agree with Sen, my analysis has shown that avowed Indian secularist representations, such as Tharoor, Neelakantan and Tripathi's ones, also tend to be dazzlingly glorious in ways which remind one of similar Hindu nationalistic ones. While my goal is mainly to describe these discourses and not really to explain them, given that such explanations would be extremely difficult to prove, I would posit the hypothesis that the rise in celebratory representations of India and Hinduism in nonfiction English-language discourses and nationalistic mythological fiction with secularist ideas may be related to the political rise of Hindu nationalism and to the attempt by secularists to distinguish themselves from Hindu nationalists while, at the same time, adopting similar representations as a way to try to push the proto-*Hindutva* enthusiasts mentioned by Sen in *The Argumentative Indian* back to more moderate Indian secularism.

The argument of the antiquity of Indian and Hindu traditions is often used as evidence of India's cultural superiority. The fact that Neelakantan, Tripathi and Pattanaik depart from epics and myths reveals their intention to underscore both antiquity and continuity. Sen (2005) states that the contemporary interest for ancient India comes from the Hindu nationalistic movement and that non-Hindutva authors are more cautious (ix). Indeed, as I have shown, Sen cautiously avoids discourses which may overlap with Hindu nationalistic ones. However, Tharoor goes to great lengths to promote the antiquity and continuity of Hinduism and the way Hinduism has influenced contemporary India. Like Das and Malhotra, Tharoor often uses the vague term

"millennia". Mythological retellers follow this discourse. Tripathi (2017b) often writes variations of the idea that "India as a cultural and civilisational entity has existed for millennia" (140), despite India's political disunity, which is often regarded as a reason for India's conquest by foreigners: "culturally, India has always been one 'country', or civilisation. Politically however, we were, more often than not, divided" (*Ibid.*). Political division in India is said to have encouraged "millennia-impacting innovations" (140), an emotionally powerful yet intellectually vague statement. Which innovations? How many millennia ago were they created? Finally, Indian ancestors are said to have "conducted the show" (xxv) for most of Indian history and India is said to have been the most powerful, wealthy, liberal and innovative lands on earth (*Ibid.*), leading the world in terms of wealth and "GDP", knowledge and science (185). It is unlikely that the GDP of ancient India or of any ancient civilisation can be measured. However, the use of the term makes India sound remarkably modern.

In all these passages, India's history is represented as culturally uninterrupted. Tripathi states that, contrary to other ancient traditions which have been wiped out by Judeo-Christian epistemology, Indian thought has remained modern, given that Indians have always had a "genius" for modernising and localising myths (20). The author adds that this tendency is the reason why he feels India is the best country for a mythological reteller like him (110) and that, by reshaping ancient myths, he is merely following Indian tradition (111).

According to Tripathi, the greatness of India's past is not conveniently disseminated by the education system, given that, as he adds, very rarely is a country the inheritor of such great heritage and yet remains ignorant of it (53). Again, the author's use of hyperbolic statements such as "very rarely" is as powerful as it is vague. The expression implies that other countries are in the same condition as India, but which ones? Besides, which ones have great heritage and are aware of it? And which ones have never had great heritage? Tripathi also adds that, besides the great feats of past Indians, the famines engineered by British policies, the massive British drug-smuggling business in India and the "horrific brutality" of medieval Turkic invaders should also be taught, so that Indians should not be blamed for the crimes of those "barbaric foreigners" (138). In the end, Tripathi's discourse on education does not differ substantially from the one adopted by Hindu nationalists, who often profess historical distortions by purposefully omitting important and meaningful historical events from

textbooks, by stigmatising the Muslims as the main cause of India's misfortunes and by glorifying everything related to Hinduism (Guichard, 2010: 2).[142]

This idea of historical continuity has also led some authors to relate the concepts of distinctiveness and superiority with that of survival, most often despite adverse circumstances. Continuity and survival are two key concepts in nationalistic discourses. Any group who wishes to form or maintain a nation needs to find lasting temporal commonalities between its members. Nehru's (1985 [1946]) *The Discovery of India*, for instance, is said to have envisioned an India which was the cradle of many different cultures and which had acquired a degree of unity while surviving conquests and conflicts (Prakash, 1990: 389). Such conquests often refer to the Mughal empire and to the British empire, which are the foreign invasions which have most visibly shaped contemporary Indian memory, at least in North India. According to another discourse devised in Orientalist times and based on linguistic cues, the Dravidian were the original inhabitants of the subcontinent, which was invaded by Aryan speakers. This "invasion" is depicted in Neelakantan's (2012) novel and I shall discuss it in detail in the fourth chapter. However, this "invasion" tends to be strongly refuted by nationalistic discourses from North India, as I shall also show later.

Tripathi (2017b) often refers to the idea that India is the only ancient and classical culture which survives. His collection of essays and interviews opens with a poem by Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), one of the pioneers and towering figures of Pakistani nationalism. According to Tripathi, despite Iqbal's role in "poisoning" communal relations in pre-independent India, he was a great poet (xxiii). The poem reads:

> Greeks, Egyptians and Romans have all vanished from this world,
> But we are still here,
> There must be something special in us,
> That we have not been erased from existence,
> For the whole world had been against us for centuries (*Ibid.*)

In Tripathi's view, Iqbal was right. Greek, Egyptian and Roman epistemology were appropriated by the Judeo-Christian Western world, while ancient Indian culture, despite repeated "massive" physical and intellectual attacks, was engineered at the outset with equal doses of wisdom and flexibility to navigate changing times and retain

[142] See also RAZA, Danish (2014). "Saffronising textbooks: Where myth and dogma replace history" *Hindustan Times*, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/saffronising-textbooks-where-myth-and-dogma-replace-history/story-CauM4dmmsPGrjZ3APAvNxO.html (accessed on 28/1/2020); Thapar (2014).

its identity (xxiii-xxiv). In short, Indian culture changed as history demanded, but, at the same time, it remained the same. For this reason, "Thor has been banished from Scandinavia, Ra's sun has set in Egypt and Zeus lies buried in the snow at Mount Olympus (...) but the myths of Lord Ram reign strong in India" (19). Neelakantan (2015) repeats Tripathi's arguments when contrasting the survival of Hinduism with the demised of the religions of ancient Greece and Egypt (8-12).

Indeed, the gods of Norse, ancient Egyptian and classical Graeco-Roman tradition are not venerated as gods by major identity groups anymore. However, Tripathi makes it sound as if, besides Judaism and Christianity, Hinduism were the only other premodern religion in the world. Besides, Tripathi and Iqbal posit some kind of discontinuity between other world civilisations and continuity between ancient and modern India. Depending on how one looks at it, Greeks, Egyptians and Roman are still here. Even though they do not follow the same old religions, they still exist as a nation in the first two cases and as a city in the third and, in most cases, still trace their present condition to their past civilisation, even if they do not include the pre-Abrahamic religion. Furthermore, the way Tripathi phrases his commentary makes it sound as if Thor, Ra, Zeus and Rāma came from the same historical period. Even though many of the gods that Hindus worship nowadays are the same as in classical times, they have never lived outside of history but, as I show in the next chapter, they also change. Tripathi often emphasises that Hinduism has changed and adapted to changing times and places and, even though it was displaced by neither Christianity nor Islam, it influenced them. He seems to hint that, if a Hindu from purāṇic times lived now, he would be able to recognise and accept Tripathi's Śiva, who is very different from other historical depictions of Śiva, as the real Śiva. However, how can one be certain of that, given that nobody is a Hindu from purāṇic times? The same could be asked in relation to any religion. How can a contemporary Christian be sure that Jesus would recognise himself in modern Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant or any other representations? Finally, one must note Iqbal's discourse of victimisation according to which "the whole world has been against us for centuries". "For centuries" is as vague as "many millennia". I guess the statement would include the British empire. As Iqbal was a Muslim, would it also include the Mughals? Would it include the Indo-Europeans as opposed to the Dravidian, a distinction which has become irrelevant as a determiner of *Self* and *Other* in most North Indian discourses? Iqbal makes it sound as if India were the only nation which was victimised. However, have not all nationalisms and nation-

states, including Greece, Egypt and Italy, emerged after prolonged external and internal conflicts?

In *The Legend of Suheldev: The King Who Saved India*, Tripathi (2020) adapts the content of Iqbal's poem to his nonfiction. The author claims in the introduction that the plot of his novel is about the sole civilisation which, thanks to the "national heroes" who united it, refused to be wiped out like Pagan Rome, mystical Egypt, Greece, Zoroastrian Persia or idol-worshipping Central America. One should note Tripathi's choice of words. The term "pagan" has often been used in European discourses to refer to non-Christian religions. "Idol-worshipping" or simply "idol" was used by Orientalists as a pejorative term to refer to religions other than Christianity (Hart, 2000: 83). It was often used to refer to Hinduism. Following Tripathi's intention of reverting these evaluations and presenting alternatives to Western modernity, he and his sister Bhavna Roy (Tripathi and Roy, 2023) have recently published a nonfiction book on Hinduism titled *Idols: Unearthing the Power of Murti Puja*, in which the idea of *idol-worship* is depicted in a much more positive and modern light. "Mystical", like "spiritual", is a term with Orientalist overtone. It was used to refer to Indian culture and has been resuscitated by modern re-Orientalist discourses and associated with new religions. In all these discourses, the fact that contemporary representations of Western culture owe much to classical culture is ignored. One could ask why Tripathi and Neelakantan choose to ignore influential Greek philosophers and artists and focus solely on divinities as symbolic of antiquity and continuity. Nationalistic discourses are selective and have the goal of making the intended readership feel positive about their identity. Furthermore, the omission of Chinese civilisation, for which similar simplistic arguments of antiquity and continuity could be made, is as epistemologically incomprehensible as it is ideologically comprehensible.

While comparisons between the "idea of India" and the West have been evident in the writings of Indian authors, there have been other terms of comparison, most often neighbouring countries with which India has had a strained relationship or other emerging economies. The most common example of the former is Pakistan. Urban geographer and economist Abdul Shaban (2018) defines the original "idea of Pakistan" as a "theocracy" based on the past. Conversely, he describes the "idea of India" as developed around the principle of democratic modernity and inspired by a better future (31). Tripathi (2017b) also states that, contrary to what has happened in India, where Islam has been tamed, the insecure state of Pakistan twisted the ethical framework of

the "great Muslim religion" in order to commit heinous crimes (26). In his view, even though Islam is the official religion of Pakistan and not of India, India's interpretation of that religion is more legitimate.

While Tripathi (2017b) never mentions the antiquity and continuity of Chinese civilisation, he writes that Indians have had the strength of being a freedom-loving, passionate, rebellious and slightly insolent people and that they should never try to be like the orderly Chinese (37). (Social) order is a key concept in Confucian thinking and a trope Pattanaik (2013b) often uses in *Business Sutra* to characterise modern China. *Order* is often a positively charged concept. However, besides turning it into a stereotype of an entire nation, Tripathi turns it into a flaw. In another passage, he refers to both Pakistan and China. The former is said to have used violence to change its global status, while the latter is said to have used money. The author adds that, while resorting to money-making like the Chinese, neoliberal India should be *dharmic* and earn money the right way, given that this approach would earn good *karma* and bring happiness beyond what money can buy (100). Here, Tripathi emphasises religious values, which China is said to lack. This assertion implicitly represents the Chinese as earning money in the wrong (*adharmic*) way. However, due to the influence of Buddhism in Chinese history and culture and to the use of similar terms with different meanings, key concepts such as *dharma* (達摩 *dámó*, here referring to the teachings of the Buddha and not to the Hindu concept) and *karma* (羯磨 *jiémó*)[143] became part of Chinese long before they became part of Western languages.

The main argument of this discourse on antiquity and continuity is that, while India and Hinduism may have momentarily degenerated, they have never been wiped out. It is argued that there exists continuity between precolonial and postcolonial India, between religion in precolonial India and modern pan-Indian Hinduism, and between all previous retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* extending at least back to Vālmīki down Pattanaik, Neelakantan and Tripathi's retellings. Furthermore, this continuity is said to be absent in Homeric Greece as opposed to contemporary Greece, pharaonic Egypt as opposed to contemporary Egypt, and perhaps even between Han-dynasty China as opposed to the modern People's Republic of China, even though this is never stated explicitly. Such continuity exists because of the intrinsic Indian traits I have analysed.

[143] These two Chinese terms are direct phonetic transcriptions from Sanskrit. The one for *dharma* still exists. However, the one for *karma* is archaic. In any case, there exist modern native Chinese terms that refer to both Buddhistic concepts.

These traits have allowed Indian civilisation and Hinduism to change and reform while, in essence, remaining the same. For that reason, contrary to Homeric Greece or pharaonic Egypt, India has the perpetual seed to revert the process of degeneration, to become as great as it was "many millennia ago", and to be able to compete in a *dharmic* way against *adharmic* nations. This is not a unique phenomenon. In the contemporary global world, nations and religions may be regarded as consumable goods which have to lure consumers through effective advertising means. This process may be particularly relevant in postcolonial societies, which may feel the need to purge the remnants of their colonial past and imagine a native culture, although they are constrained by a non-native framework, which is the one that the old Westernised elites and the globalised youngsters have come to be able to decode. In the process, while described as utterly different, India and Hinduism have to become more similar to their *Others*.

In the end, India and Hinduism's main unchanging quality is said to be the fact that both keep changing themselves. It is argued that they can "modernise" in any way they want without losing their essence. Conversely, the essence of non-Indian nations and non-Hindu religions are defined by their dogmatic inadaptability, which means that, once their outer shell changes slightly, their essence also turns into something else. In a story told by folklorist A. K. Ramanujan (1991), a village carpenter states that he possesses an old knife which has run through his family for generations. Both handle and blade have been changed a few times, but, apart from that, he argues, the knife is exactly the same (xxi). This misleadingly simple story is symbolic of discourses on antiquity and continuity of any entity and not only of Indian civilisation, Hinduism, or any other civilisation or religion: when does an entity changes to the point that it becomes something else? In the end, any stereotyped idea of a nation or religion does not necessarily describe how that nation and religion are in the present but how whoever is representing them regards them as having been in the mythic past and how they wish it to become again. For that reason, the object of desire is an ongoing project that can never become fully materialised into the original "knife", which exists only in the mind.

2.5 A pot-pourri of the "idea of India"

As this chapter makes clear, through a process of selection, acceptance, refusal, summarisation, development, dissection, grafting, and reinterpretation, the stereotypical traits of the "idea of India" often appear across the English-language Indian public sphere and are never the invention and monopoly of any single author.

Pattanaik (2013b) is both effective in compiling theses discourses and resourceful in summarising them in his concise works. In the chapters "Introduction: Connecting Belief to Business" and "From Goal to Gaze: Decoding Western, Chinese and Indian beliefs" from *Business Sutra*, the author presents these traits in a systematic and concise way. He describes the Western, Chinese and Indian cultures as follows:

1) The West: sees India and China as exotic countries where the symbolic is preferred over the literal. The West's epistemological stance is concerned with finding one truth (25) and with establishing a clear line between what is right and what is wrong, who is good and who is bad (29). Consequently, Western epistemology rejects mythology, which is seen as false (8). This gives rise to an efficient system (41). The Western idea that one belief is superior to another creates a desire to evangelise and sell one idea and dismiss others (14). Such a system of thought came from cities such as Athens, Babylon, Jerusalem and, more recently, Paris, Berlin and London (40). From an Indian perspective, the West includes Europe, America, and also the Islamic world, given that the quest for objectivity has also shaped Islam (29).

2) China: sees India and the West as speculative rather than pragmatic. The main goal of China's thought is to bring social order (25). Its model is the "Forbidden City of the Dragon Emperor" (40), a vague phrase which conjures Orientalist images of exoticism but has no meaning whatsoever.[144]

3) India: sees China and the West as materialistic, given that both value things rather than thoughts. India is aware of the different goals of different people in different contexts and different lifetimes (25). For this reason, it does not reject the symbolical and psychological facets of mythology, the most popular mode of expression in the country (14). Conversely, Indian thought is suspicious of the quest for the objective and the absolute, which is regarded as the root cause of intolerance and violence (9). The "Indian" way comes from the villages (40), which offered refuge to philosophers and artists (41). These figures mixed their ideas with the local ones. What distinguishes this way from the Western and Chinese ones is belief in rebirth. This means that the

[144] The dragon is an imperial symbol and 龙 *lóng,* the character for "dragon", is a constituent of many compounds related to the emperor and to imperial life. However, there is no such thing as a "dragon emperor" or a compound with the ideogram "dragon" and the meaning of "emperor". In the Hollywood blockbuster *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (2008), directed by Rob Cohen, and in several documentaries, this nickname was given to 秦始皇 Qín Shǐhuáng (259-210 BCE), the first emperor of unified China and the founder of the 秦 Qín dynasty (221-207 BCE). Nevertheless, equating this founding emperor with the Forbidden City (in Chinese 故宫 *Gùgōng*, "old palace", or 紫禁城 *Zǐjìnchéng*, "the forbidden purple castle"), whose construction began in 1406, during the 明 Míng dynasty (1368-1644 CE), is an anachronism.

denominator of life is not one but infinity (38). The rebirth framework makes sure that everything is included and nothing excluded, given that what is not good in one life may perhaps be good in another one or in another context (41). As a result, the Indian way makes people accept infinitely diverse and paradoxical contexts existing simultaneously (39), and encourages a worldview comfortable with the absence of binary logics (*Ibid.*). Given this multiplicity and equal status of different beliefs, Indian faiths do not resort to conversion. Greater emphasis is put on changing the inner-self than the outer world, that is, matter (15). In short, Indian mythologies value the intangible and immeasurable subjectivity over the tangible and measurable objectivity, which means that they give more room for the irrational and for respect towards other worldviews (16). Pattanaik states that the global village is in need of this Indian approach, given that it might prevent the conflicts (16) one observes in the contemporary world.

The author continues by stating that, due to the virtue of being inclusive, the Indian way contains everything that the Western and the Chinese ways contain, which means that it is universal:

> ● The biblical way celebrates rule-following leaders. The Greek way celebrates rule-breaking heroes. India celebrates both (...)
>
> ● The Confucian way celebrates social responsibility while the Taoist way prefers individualistic harmony. India celebrates both (...)
>
> ● In Western thought, nature is danger (...) In Chinese thought, nature is power (...) In India, nature is both (42-43).

Pattanaik concludes his analysis by comparing Indian, Western and Chinese thought through Figure 23. Here, Indian thought represents the centre that contains and straddles the West and China. Pattanaik's representation of India and Hinduism is similar to Orientalist representations of Europe and Christianity: an Indo-centric view with the culturally hegemonic West and the economically successful China being relegated to the periphery.

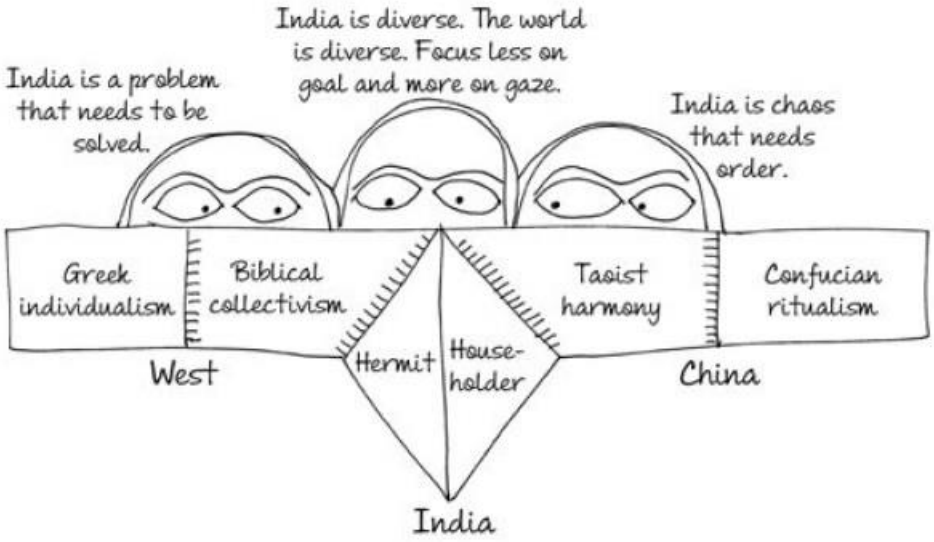


Figure 23 - India, the West and China (Pattanaik, 2013b: 67)

The Western and Chinese critiques of India to which Pattanaik points in this figure are themselves stereotypes about India and not the specific idea of any contemporary individual and much less of any national group, in which there are clearly more than just one representation of the *Other*. It is understood that the Western critique derives from Orientalist discourse and that this rationale was used by the British to legitimise colonialism in India. However, it is simplistic to state that this is the view held by academics, diplomats or even by non-specialists in the contemporary West. Similarly, Pattanaik never cites any specific Chinese source according to which "India is chaos". For that reason, rather than being a Chinese representation of India, this seems to be the representation of what Pattanaik believes the Chinese think about India. In sum, the ultimate goal of Figure 23 is to make Indian readers feel good about their national identity being put at the centre and feel bad about the West and China.

Predicting the range of responses to his work from several ideological sources, Pattanaik (*Ibid.*) includes a section titled "How to reject this book" in the end of *Business Sutra*. Here, the author playful invents quotes of reviews related to the issues analysed in this chapter. While reveals wittiness, the inclusion of this segment also reveals the fear that the content of *Business Sutra* may be ideologically "misinterpreted" by its readership. Rather than a joke, this section could be deemed as a defence. I quote some of the most telling examples other than the one in which Pattanaik states that *Business Sutra* is "spiritual mumbo-jumbo", which I have quoted earlier:

1. "*Business Sutra* is THE truth" (437) plays with the representation of Western claims for objectivity and epistemic superiority, here exaggerated by the use of capital letters.

2. "See, all wisdom ultimately comes from India" (*Ibid.*) pokes fun at the Orientalist notion of India as the fountainhead of world culture made famous by German Romantics and later adopted mainly by Hindu nationalistic discourses.

3. "This is Hindu right-wing propaganda" (*Ibid.*). Clearly, Pattanaik did not wish to be taken for a Hindu nationalist. However, the idea that India and Hindu consist of the centre and that all other national and religious phenomena are made peripheral or subordinate may be regarded as coming close to Hindu nationalistic discourses.

2.5 Rāma on the "idea of India"

In the last section of this chapter, I refer to what Pattanaik and Tripathi make the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* remark about the "idea of India". I focus just on a few scenes and discourses which are unrelated to what I analyse in the following chapters to show how the nonfiction discourses I analysed morph into narrative. Associating individual or group discourses with heroes and divinities is an effective strategy to make such discourses sound impersonal and universal. If Devdutt Pattanaik or Amish Tripathi say something, it may perhaps be open for debate, which is one of the traits of the "idea of India". It may be felt to be less so if it is Rāma who says it. An illustration by Pattanaik (Figure 24) is a good example of this. Like all illustrations by the author, the two characters are depicted through Indian-inspired iconography. They may represent any "traditional" Indian child and (grand)mother. The family discusses the psychological truth of the Indian epics and dismisses the historicist and materialist view of both Western and Hindu nationalistic epistemology. In the process, Pattanaik stays out of the picture. However, the mother's discourse mirrors that of the author: it is irrelevant whether Rāma existed or not and whether the *Rāmāyaṇa* happened or not as history. What matters is that, using Nehru's words, it is "imaginatively true" as a story. One should forfeit this rigid and prescriptive epistemology and adopt the post-postmodernist one in order to respect the gaze of the believer.



Figure 24 - The universality of the Hindu epics (Pattanaik, 2013b: 47)

In Pattanaik's (2013a) *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, Janaka invites the sages to his land of Āryāvarta, "land of the Aryans",[145] so that they can share their knowledge, exchange ideas and discover other ways of seeing the world. This "conference of intimate conversations that would eventually broaden the gaze of humanity came to be known as the Upanishad" (18). This passage points to the Indian way as one which has been founded upon debate and rational argument between differing positions. This strategy enables alternative ways to interpret the world without the imposition of a single truth. These fictional conversations are similar to the real conversations that Amish Tripathi says he holds with his family and which have also led him to write his modern *Upaniṣad* with his sister.

In a later passage, Rāma states that it is just *aham*, Sanskrit for "I/Self/ego", that creates notions of "better or worse". However, *ātmán*, "universal soul", "observes it all, and smiles" (53). Here, Pattanaik gives a modern spiritual spin to the *Advaita Vedānta* ideas promoted by Vivekananda. The *aham-ātman* dichotomy idea stands for Western and Indian worldviews. *Aham* is comparable to the psychological term *ego*, which is also the first-person pronoun in Latin and has a pejorative connotation in contemporary

[145] It must be borne in mind that, whenever the retellers have referred to the concept of "Aryan", they were not referring to the Nazi concept of a physically and culturally superior race but to the Indo-European speakers of India or sometimes to the population of the whole country.

psychological and spiritual discourses. It is said to create dichotomies between good/right and evil/wrong. Thus, it is equated with the Western worldview. *Ātman*, understood in modern spirituality as the "spirit" beyond the ego, is comfortable with contradictions, given that it is also beyond rationality. In other words, it is equated with the Indian worldview.

Sītā realises that human tales "contained a measuring scale that converted one into a hero and another into a victim". However, all "measuring scales are human delusions" (116). She is therefore able to adopt the relative "Indian way" and to escape the dichotomic Western views of storytelling, given that, as Rāma later confirms, only humans qualify events as good or bad (122). Accordingly, Śiva says that he supports Rāma and Rāvaṇa because the former will open the eyes of the latter and the latter will finally have his eyes opened (243). Similarly, Rāma admits that he was justly punished for mutilating the body of Rāvaṇa's sister and that Rāvaṇa was justly punished for abducting Rāma's wife. In Rāma's view, nobody is either "good" or "bad". Everybody has a mixture of positive and negative features.

In a conversation that Sītā holds with Hanumān, Hanumān asks her what human potential is. Sītā answers that it consists of seeing "the world from another's point of view, and make sense of it" (169). Here, the Western strategy of imposing one's own framework (proselytisation) is rejected and the tolerant Indian way of including the view of the *Other* is accepted. In a later passage, Hanumān states that he is able to understand and consider right the conflicting views of two different characters. Embodying the Western way, Lakṣmaṇa disagrees and asks Hanumān whether he does not feel that he needs to take sides. Hanumān responds that nobody is able to decide who is right or wrong (171).

Even though Pattanaik refers neither to India or to foreign nations, he makes the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* discuss the same features which have been attributed to the "idea of India" and their opposite counterparts, which have been attributed to foreign nations. This means that the narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa* functions as a strategy for constructing national features without referring to modern concepts such as "India", "the West", or "Muslim", terms which are never used by Pattanaik's characters. All the same, Pattanaik's discourse posits a cultural continuity between the pre-national and the national, given that ancient mythic characters discuss modern issues.

In *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku,* Tripathi (2015) is more explicit in his appraisal of the "idea of India" in detriment to other (inter)national ideas. Given the author's focus on

antiquity, continuity and survival, he is not as concerned with synchronicity as Pattanaik, which means that his lexical choices will be very similar when writing fiction and nonfiction. Tripathi's Viśvāmitra sounds like Vivekananda when stating that "India has a big heart", given that, "[i]f a foreigner comes here and accepts our land as his motherland, he is a foreigner no more. He becomes Indian" (181). This discourse plays with the "idea of India" as a tolerant nation which accommodates foreign ideas and people. In a later passage, the opposite discourse emerges. Tāṛakā embodies a European Orientalist of the Enlightenment period describing colonial India when asking how one can live by "disgusting" and "decadent" rules created by people who "worship everything in theory but nothing in practice" (196). As is common in most past and present mythological retellings, Viśvāmitra is depicted as a sage and Tāṛakā as a heinous monster.

I conclude that Neelakantan and Pattanaik represent themselves, India and Hinduism in ways which are comparable with Tharoor, while Tripathi represents the same entities in ways which are more comparable with Malhotra. The issue, however, is that, despite the clear ideological differences between these two groups, the representations of India and Hinduism made each of them share several discursive similarities at the qualitative level and mainly differ quantitatively, with Malhotra and Tripathi's discourses being much more celebratory and exaggerated in ways which make one think more easily of Hindu nationalistic discourses. The tendency to gather the most stereotypical arguments regarding contemporary positive representations of India and Hinduism or debunking old negative Orientalist ones and imbuing them with authority by putting them in the mouth of the mythological characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a productive discursive and narrative strategy. This is something I shall demonstrate in the remaining chapters, in which I analyse the representations of Indian society in the contemporary English-language retellings of the epic.

Chapter 3

Blessed in Mind and Muscle: Gender and Sexuality in the Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

This chapter analyses constructs related to gender and to the relationship between different genders in the contemporary English-language retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. I investigate how such constructs may influence and be influenced by social perceptions towards the same issue. Ancient and modern retellers have been concerned with the representation of ideal and counter-ideal character types. This kind of division between what is desirable and undesirable has led to numerous social divisions in the many versions of the tale. Representations of ideal and counter-ideal masculinity and femininity are the most common ones in the contemporary English-language retellings I analyse.

3.1 Gendering individuals, engendering India

Usually, one thinks of gender as an individual trait. Nevertheless, Tripathi and Pattanaik describe entire societies and reality in gendered terms.

Tripathi (2017b) states that societies can reveal two large "ways", which he calls "masculine" and "feminine". The author equates the former with compliance, truth, justice and honour, features which, the author adds, are embodied by Rāma. The latter is equated with freedom, passion and individuality, the opposite counterparts of the "masculine way". Even though Tripathi relates these traits to gender, he adds that they have nothing to do with men or women and that they only reflect ways of life. Men are said to be able to follow feminine ways and vice-versa and it is said that no person or society has ever been fully masculine or feminine (35-36). According to the author, India is more feminine than masculine, given that Indians are said to be "rebellious freedom-loving people" (37). If Tripathi states that these ways have nothing to do with gender, why does he give them such names? Even though these concepts are unrelated to men and women, they deal with their stereotyped representations. By calling them such names, Tripathi does not dissociate these stereotypes from their genders but reinforces their relationship.

The same dichotomy figures in Tripathi's (2015) novel,[146] with the difference that in it the "masculine" and "feminine ways" are not fancy concepts devised by a modern author but impersonal facts accepted by the wise characters of the narrative universe of the tale. When Rāma and his brothers receive their education in Vasiṣṭha's hermitage, Rāma states that the "masculine way" tends to lapse into intolerance and rigidity. Vasiṣṭha responds that the feminine way has the problem of creating divisions and shirking responsibilities (93-94). He adds that India is a confused nation, a mixture of masculine and feminine. However, if he were forced to choose, he would say that India is a feminine civilisation in decline (86), which means that the India of the novel is a mirror of the India in which Tripathi lives. Bharata, who also takes up the common stereotype of Indians as a divided people, states that India is a nation of rebels who argue and fight about everything and are unable to follow rules in the long term. However, he acknowledges that, while the masculine way produces quick results in the short-run, in the long-run India can succeed only through the feminine path of freedom (*Ibid.*). The propensity for debate, one of the important traits of the "idea of India" I have identified, is clear here. The characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* debate for and argue against every possible side of the gendered ways. However, they invariably end up reaching the same conclusions that Tripathi reaches in his nonfiction.

In a later passage, Rāma distinguishes between both ways when stating that masculine civilisations are difficult to change, given that they consider their laws to be universal, while feminine ones are more open-minded and liberal (196). Here, it is possible to see a gendered version of the debate about the main differences between Indian civilisation and the other civilisations that have played an important part in Indian history: the Muslim and the British and, in more general terms, a monolithic view of the West and of Abrahamic religions. India is described as a culture which promotes "feminine" freedom and open-mindedness in the long-term but which might use the "masculine" rigidity of Western and/or Abrahamic cultures in the short-run in order to unite the large and diverse nation. In the end, it is implicit, India shall remain distinct from its *Other(s)*. For now, though, it must achieve some degree of similarity by temporarily adopting the enemy's way in order to fight on par with him.

[146] From this chapter onwards, I refer to the contemporary *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings and to the characters and events they depict. In order to avoid repeating long titles, I point out the name of the authors and the date of publication of their novels. I mostly refer to the main fiction and nonfiction works I have pointed to in the introduction. Whenever quoting from other works by the same authors, I quote the name of those works in full.

Pattanaik (2013a) also creates strong dichotomies between both genders. His attempts are more ambitious than Tripathi's ones in the sense that he uses gendered terms as ontological categories to describe cosmic reality and not only society. The author states that the male form represents the mind, while the female form represents nature. He adds that, just like a man can create new life only through a woman's body, abstract thoughts can be materialised only through physical entities (xv). While, as I shall demonstrate, these ideas are present in both common Indian and Western epistemological systems, these descriptions may sound old-fashioned and disadvantageous for women, given that contemporary feminist discourses have criticised the view of men as more mentally capable than women and women as more physically attached to the world than men.[147] However, Pattanaik (2014) states that feminism was already present in ancient Hinduism, which pointed to the difference between the soul, which is ungendered, and the body, which is gendered. According to the author, the enlightened person points to the soul and not to the body and, as a result, is unconcerned with physical differences. In materialistic societies concerned with the body, this gendered discourse may be misinterpreted. However, in spiritual societies (India) this does not happen, given that such societies go beyond the notion of gender.

Indeed, gender was regarded as a mental illusion in ancient Hindu and Buddhist texts (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000: 22). Again, whether one calls it *soul* or *psyche*, Pattanaik resorts to the idea that the person who adopts the traditional Indian approach should be able to look at these ideas just as archetypical symbols without reflection in physical reality. I am not going to discuss whether feminism already existed or not in pre-modern India or any pre-modern Indian society, given that I believe that the answer to this question depends on one's epistemological stance, nor whether psychological symbols may have physical repercussions or not, given that I believe that this is not a yes or no question but depends on how such symbols are used. However, the example of Buddhism may show how these matters are contextual and not absolute. While *Buddhist feminism* is now a field of studies (Yeng, 2020), the most ancient Buddhist records that exist are quite negative in their descriptions of femininity (Young, 2018: 228). This shows how religions and cultural systems are flexible and can change and be inverted through time and space. Similarly, Gier (2014) argues that the psychologisation of reality has been historically conducive to violence, given that, once

[147] SMITH, Bonnie G., and ROBINSON, Nova (eds.) (2022). *The Routledge Global History of Feminism*, London: Routledge.

reality is psychologised, physical reality ceases to be regarded as important or valuable (183). Because of this trait, the author states he is forced to admit that, contrary to what contemporary popular representations of Buddhism as a peaceful religion would probably make most people believe intuitively, Buddhism has been the most violent religion in premodern Asian history (xii). I do not mean to say that the psychologisation of religion always leads to this result. I merely try to show that it is not a sufficient condition to avoid it.

Pattanaik (2013) also inserts this kind of gendered discourse in the mouths of the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In one passage, Sītā asks sage Viśvāmitra why he addresses nature as a woman. He answers:

> 'Because I see the mind as a man,' he [Viśvāmitra] said. 'This mind of ours seeks to control nature as man tries to control woman. The mind assumes ownership of nature as a man assumes ownership over his wife.'
>
> 'So my mind is male and the nature around me is female?' said Sita.
>
> (...)
>
> 'That is a figure of speech,' said Ram (...). 'The rishis [sages] have found it easy to explain the mind using the male body and nature using the female body. Do not take it literally.' (38)[148]

Pattanaik uses an arguable metaphor to compare two different realities. In the process, he dismisses possible differences between them. He also implies that this view of mind and matter was invented by ancient Vedic sages (*ṛṣi*). Besides imbuing the metaphor with a sense of antiquity, this conceptualisation of transcendent and immanent realities is described as having been a top-down one, going from the Vedic elites to the masses. In a later passage, though, Pattanaik states that different Indian philosophies imagined the supreme divinity as either masculine or feminine (*saguṇa*, "with form"), while others imagined it as without gender (*nirguṇa*, "without form"). In this passage, it is said that the masses were the ones who attributed a gender to the godhead, given that they wished for a more tangible experience (254). This turns the gendered conceptualisation into a bottom-up one. It is implicit in Pattanaik's

[148] The distinction between genders is mostly been applied to what is deemed as good and noble. What is bad, evil and unnoble is otherised or dehumanised and falls out of these human categories. In Pattanaik's (2013a) work, Lakṣmaṇa feels reluctant to kill Tāraka because she is a woman and Hindu scriptures urge devotees not to kill women. However, Viśvāmitra orders him to shoot and states that villains have no gender (39). In Kané's (2016) novel, besides saying the same words on the same scene, Rāma states that in war the enemy has no gender and that he has to be destroyed, be it a man or a woman (202).

description that the masses were not as able to apprehend the transcendent, symbolical world of the elites and that they felt the necessity to resort to the immanent one.

The dichotomy between mind and body has also been important in modern Western thought. In Christian thought, the transcendental Godhead has been regarded as male.[149] King (1999: 13) creates the following table of dichotomies derived from Enlightenment thought:

Public	Private
Society	Individual
Science	Religion
Institutional Religion	Personal Religion (Mysticism)
Secular	Sacred
Rational	Irrational/Non-rational
Male	Female

Table 1 - Enlightenment cultural dichotomies (adapted from King, 1999: 13)

King does not include *spirit* and *body*. However, I think it would make sense to place these concepts in the first and second columns of this table, respectively. The two columns are not on par with each other when it comes to the social attitudes towards them. In given times and places, the values in one of the columns may have more positive or negative views that those in the other one. Feminist scholar Rosemary R. Ruether (1975), for instance, regards the Western conception of "transcendental dualism", the placement of spirit above body, as a patriarchal construct which has historically incited disdain for both the natural world and women (195). This idea implies that, when the natural world is feminised or women naturalised, the expectation is that both shall bless, nurture, purify or perform any supportive maternal act without requirement for sustenance in return (Sherma, 1998: 97). Again, far from being removed from the physical world, psychological symbols may influence how different cultures think about the world and act in it. This would also apply to Pattanaik's construct of a traditional Indian psychological-only approach, given that even rejecting the physical world as an illusion would be a way of thinkig about the world and acting in it. Furthermore, it is clear that Pattanaik tries to influence the psychology of his

[149] In fact, in languages that, unlike English, have grammatical gender, *God* is usually a masculine noun, including in languages which have a neutral gender.

readers. Specifically, as I have said, he tries to convince them of the greatness of Indian civilisation and Hinduism and tries to pull them towards Indian secularist views. In the process, it is expected that the way Pattanaik's readers will act in the material world will also be influenced.

According to some mainstream schools of Indian philosophy,[150] women and nature are related as reproductive bodies and, due to this relationship, are to be treated in the same way. Both women and nature have been regarded as passive and subordinate to men (Baindur, 2015: 14). The clearest example of this perspective is the Indian dualistic philosophical system of *Sāṃkhya*, one of the orthodox (*āstika*) schools, that is, one which accepts the authority of the *Vedas.* Although only one of a few traditional Indian philosophical systems, *Sāṃkhya* has played an important part in shaping modern pan-Hinduism. The main tenet of this school is that reality is divided into *puruṣa*, Sanskrit for "man" and "soul", and *prakṛti*, Sanskrit for "woman" and "nature".[151]

In sum, both Tripathi and Pattanaik claim to create symbolic definitions. However, in the retellings, these dichotomies are often attributed to the characters' personalities. As I shall demonstrate, male characters tend to be described as more rational and women as more physical, emotional and sensitive towards others. This is the main bone of contention with discourses which try to separate the literal and the symbolic, a topic which has also animated discussions about Christianity. What are the criteria to define boundaries between the merely symbolical and the real? Who decides about such criteria?

Neelakantan (2012) states that traditional Indian wisdom has always attached more importance to the ability to control one's emotions in order to overcome the ego (5). In Neelakantan's novel, Rāvaṇa accuses Mandodarī of being too emotional and states that women shall never understand reason (438). Ultimately, though, overcoming the ego and the emotions in order to become more rational is an ideal that also applies to women. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, when Sītā feels downcast for having been abandoned by Rāma, Vālmīki's wife tells her that she is not some "weak-willed wench"

[150] For a description of the orthodox and heterodox schools of Indian philosophy, see SARMA, Deepak (2011). *Classical Indian Philosophy: A Reader*, Chichester: Columbia University Press.

[151] LARSON, Gerald James (1969). *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; LARSON, Gerald James, and BHATTACHARYA, Ram Shankar (eds.) (1987). *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies: Sāṃkhya*, Vol. 4, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; BURLEY, Mikey (2007). *Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga: An Indian metaphysics of experience*, London: Routledge.

and that she should "control her emotions" (320). The conclusion is that it is more desirable that women adopt traits which have traditionally been regarded as male ones.

In any case, it cannot be said that bodily existence is invariably reviled in the contemporary English-language retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as it has often been in Indian thought. In fact, given that world-rejecting values would contradict contemporary down-to-earth neoliberal ones, the opposite would be true. Ideal characters of both genders are described as possessing desirable intellectual and physical features, even though the tone of such descriptions tends to be different for men and women. Desirable bodily traits in men mainly rely on physical strength, while in women they have relied on sexual attractiveness. Both traits often come interrelated, as nowadays representations of strength and beauty tend to overlap. When men's bodies predict physical strength, they are regarded as handsome. Beautiful women are also increasingly described as strong, but the degree of importance of these traits when attributed to both genders is uneven. As I shall demonstrate, male and female authors are also different in the way they approach these ideas.

Describing the balance between bodily and mental virtues, Pattanaik (2013a) writes that, besides being young, handsome, strong, obedient and brave, Rāma is a prince with the mind of a sage, which is rare (38/54). For this reason, Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra, the two sages who educate him, focus on his mental development and on his martial and social duties, respectively (36). The author also describes Hanumān as possessing the body of a warrior and the aura of a sage (215). Similarly, Tripathi (2015) describes Hanumān as possessing a meditative and intellectual air holding the promise of "brutal violence" if required (351). In the same novel, Rāma feels impressed with the warrior-like behaviour of Viśvāmitra and states that courage is rare in a man of knowledge (259). Kané (2016) is the reteller who most often describes and links desirable bodily and mental qualities in relation to men. She describes Rāvaṇa as possessing a rare mix of beauty, power and erudition (15-16). Rāvaṇa says about himself that he is the best leader because he has the braveness of warriors and the wisdom of *ṛṣis*, given that he has mastered martial arts and the knowledge of the *Vedas* and other holy books (56). Kārtavīryārjuna is also described as a brilliant scholar and a fiery warrior (30-31) and Kumbakharna as blessed in mind and muscle (*Ibid.*: 39). In sum, the retellers describe desirable male characters with a mix of mental and bodily virtues. This ideal may seem obvious to people who live in the contemporary globalised world, in which these ideals have been normalised. However, I would say that this is a

cultural construct which exists only because in contemporary capitalistic societies both mental and physical abilities are regarded as having a positive influence on one individual's life and on society.

Given the modern attempt to equate men and women's roles, this physical and intellectual ideal is also applicable to women, mainly in the works by the female retellers. Kané (2016) describes Tāraka as possessing a mind as brilliant as her bewitching beauty (14) and Mandodarī as being the most desirable woman in the kingdom for possessing an unusual blend of beauty and brilliance (88). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, when Kaikeyī and Sītā meet, the former praises the latter by saying that there finally is another woman in the family with brains, guts and good looks (84). While men are noted for their physical power, women are mostly noted for their sexual attractiveness. In the end, even though most contemporary retellers describe the coupling of mental and physical virtues as "rare" or "unusual", the primary characters and most secondary ones are said to possess them.

Paola Bachetta (2020), a professor of Gender and Women's Studies, discusses how bodily and mental virtues often feature in Modi's biographies. According to her, such biographies depict Modi as a strong army commander, a profound thinker and a great self-made leader. These are regarded as "masculine" traits. He is also described as a person with a delicate heart, a feature which, according to Bachetta, is usually regarded in Indian as "feminine" (393). Similar literary ideas may be applied to real women. A study shows that men often use Indian matrimonial advertisements to find prospective wives who are fair, beautiful and cultured (Pandey, 2004: 417), that is, women like Kané and Divakaruni's female characters. These descriptions show how fiction and nonfiction may overlap, given that fictional ideals may be searched for in the real world and the real world may try to conform with fictional representations. If one considers these common stereotypes which circulate in the Indian public sphere, Tripathi's construct of a masculine and feminine ways may be summarised as follows: when society is peaceful but disunited, one should have the "freedom" and the "delicate heart" of a woman, but when society is menaced by external forces, one should be rational and use the "brutal violence" of a man. In this way, society may get united and quickly go back to being peaceful.

The contemporary celebratory idea of Indian mythological fiction according to which everything is simultaneously rare and commonplace tends to turn exceptionality into banality, given that it is more difficult to find *Every(wo)men* than super(wo)men

with brilliant minds, massive physical strength and dazzling beauty. Only Neelakantan (2012) and his contrarian interpretations of the epics stand out as different in this respect, given that his fiction often portrays ugliness, poverty and brutality, sometimes reinforced by their opposite desirable traits. This is most evident in Neelakantan's description of Meghanāda and Atikāya, two of Rāvaṇa's sons. The former is said to beautiful and graceful like a pure-bred horse and to exude intelligence and charm, a description which could appear in the work of any of the other retellers. The latter, for his part, is said to be merely a "huge hulk of black flesh" who surpasses "himself day by day with its own stupidity" (264), a kind of description which is much more unique to Neelakantan's fiction.

3.2 Ideas of masculinity

Discussions of a powerful and virile kind of masculinity are plentiful in the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Scholarly works on representations of masculinity in modern India often describe this phenomenon as a recent one which has emerged as a response to negative colonial stereotypes about Indians as effeminate and as a follow-up to contemporary global ideals of masculinity. King (1999) states that the British colonialists tried to represent themselves as imbued with the features on the left column of table 1, which were said to constitute the traits of masculinity. Conversely, they represented the colonised Indians with the features on the right column, which were said to constitute the traits of femininity. In other words, Europe was imagined as a manly and rational hero who would conquer and organise the feminine chaos that was India (Inden, 2001 [1990]: 17). The dichotomy between the male coloniser and the female colonised is the main object of analysis of historian Mrinalini Sinha's (1995) study *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in Late Nineteenth Century*, which analyses the colonial construction of the "Manly Englishman" against the "Effeminate Babu"[152] from Bengal. Macaulay (1895 [1841]: 611; quoted in Sinha, 1995: 15) wrote that "[t]he physical organisation of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy". Macaulay did not refer to mental "ways" like Tripathi but to "physical organisation". In such, discourses mind and body are often correlated, as that which is immanent and visible (the body) is indicative of that which is

[152] In Hindi, *bābū* means "father" and is usually an honorific by which to call elder and respected men, such as the English terms *mister* or *sir*. During colonial times, this word came to mean "Indian clerk who worked for the colonial administration". It is in this sense that Sinha uses it.

transcendent and hidden (the mind). In fact, Macaulay listed the negative mental traits of the Bengalees, even though he ended his appreciation by praising their passivity and spirit of sacrifice in the face of violence (Macaulay, 1895 [1841]: 611).

The distinction between ideal masculinity versus counter-ideal effeminacy has survived into postcolonial India. Descriptions of India made by Tripathi and his characters define it as mainly "feminine". Given that this trait is regarded as unfit for the times, there are legitimate reasons to "masculinise" the nation. Indian nationalists (and, in particular, Hindu nationalists)[153] often posit that Hinduism was more masculine in the deep past and that the religion lost its masculinity. They have attributed this loss to the influence of Buddhism, Jainism or metaphysical and non-violent strands of Hinduism (van der Veer, 2001: 104; Sharma, 2003: 13-14). This situation was regarded as having allowed India to be conquered by what was regarded as more masculine civilisations, that is, the Muslims and the British. As a response to these ideas, Hinduism came to be represented by examples of martial prowess by historical or mythical Hindu figures (Banerjee, 2012: 72-73). Tripathi (2020) explores the representation of masculine Hinduism as nationalism in his novel about the pseudohistorical character Suheldev. Similar highly virile popular representations of masculinity are also applied to Modi. There have been references to his "56-inch chest", said to be able and willing to bear the harshest burdens in service of the nation (Shirvastava, 2015: 334). In other words, the masculinity of mythic characters like Rāma, pseudohistorical ones like Suheldev and living personalities like Modi have been used for similar nationalistic purposes.

Discourses on masculinity and femininity throughout the history of India, however, have been variegated. Nandy (1983) speaks about three essential gender concepts in traditional India: that of *puruṣatva*,[154] Sanskrit for the "essence of masculinity", *nāritva*, the "essence of femininity", and *klībatva*, the "essence of hermaphroditism" (8). The author regards the former as the main one since the struggle for independence (5). This being so, even if there were instances of violent and virility masculinity in ancient India,[155] the truth is that, contrary to most contemporary representations of masculinity,

[153] Anand Patwardhan's 1995 documentary *Pitra, Putra, aur Dharmayuddha*, Hindi for "Father, Son and Holy War", deals with the construction of virile and violent ideals of masculinity in Hindu nationalistic discourses. PATWARDHAN, Anand (Director) (1995). *Pitra, Putra, aur Dharmayuddha*, Anand Patwardhan.

[154] The Sanskrit suffix *-tva*, as in the contemporary term *Hindutva*, creates general abstract nouns, from which the meaning of "the essence of (the root to which the suffix is attached)".

[155] Historian of religions Jarrod L. Whitaker has conducted research on how such ideals of violent and virile masculinity existed in the *Vedas*. Vedic mythology is rooted in a warrior society comparable to those of other Indo-

traditional Indian aesthetics did not invariably characterise heroes as being prone to violence (Kapur, 1993: 91). According to Nandy (1983), the nationalistic masculine tendency was inverted by Gandhi, who created a model in which masculinity and femininity were transcended and in which androgyny (*klībatva*) became the model (53). Gandhi inverted the protestant stereotype of masculinity prized by the British as the basis for political and social-economic dominance and associated it with violence and conquest. Conversely, he turned himself into the very English stereotype of the effeminate Indian and constructed it as the basis for his ideology of *ahimsā*, "non-violence", and *satyagraha*, "holding onto truth" through non-violent resistance (Young, 2001: 326). Even though Gandhi has become a world-famous symbol of modern India and of the ideals of peace and tolerance, the Gandhian androgynous gymnosophist is absent from the contemporary English-language retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which are exclusively about fierce male warriors.

Tripathi (2015) is the contemporary reteller who has written the clearest hypermasculine descriptions, one of the descriptive strategies which approximates this author to Hindu nationalistic discourses. Paradoxically, he is also the one who most often mentions Gandhi's positive legacy. Tripathi invariably describes the male characters with phrases like "muscular bulk" (3), "lean muscle" (64), "well-toned physique" (77), "massive build and sturdy musculature" (351). He also often describe the battle scars that mark the characters' bodies (101). Tripathi's Lakṣmaṇa possesses a "gigantic frame and towering height" (102) and is "built like a bull" (104). [156] Sage Viśvāmitra is said to be of gigantic proportions, even taller than the "gigantic" Lakṣmaṇa (171). This kind of ideal masculinity straddles the concepts of hero and villain, given the similarity between the physical description of Rāma and Rāvaṇa. Rāma is said to possess a "tall, lean and muscular frame" and a "battle-scarred, dark-skinned torso" (1), while Rāvaṇa is said to possess "battle-worn, swarthy skin", great height and "rippling and intimidating musculature" (13).

Conversely, traces of effeminacy in men are portrayed negatively by all contemporary retellers but Pattanaik. However, such negative portrayals consist mostly

European peoples and reflected in other Indo-European mythologies, such as the Greek and Norse ones, so it is not surprising that such similarities exist. WHITAKER, Jarrod L. (2011). *Strong Arms and Drinking Strength: Masculinity, Violence, and the Body in Ancient India*, New York: Oxford University Press.

[156] Phrases comparing ideal men to strong animals are common in ancient Sanskrit texts. Common epithets for heroes include *puruṣavyāghra, puruṣaśārdūla, puruṣasiṃha*, compounds formed by *puruṣa*, "man", and *vyāghra/śārdūla*, "tiger", or *siṃha*, "lion" meaning "a man who is like a tiger/lion" or "a tiger/lion among men". Even though less common, *puruṣapuṃgava*, from *puṃgava*, "bull", is also found in the Sanskrit epics.

of pejorative terms, given that there are no queer characters other than in Pattanaik's works devoted to the subject. In the following examples, there is a clear defence of the virile male warrior and leader against the effeminate or emasculated manners of other social groups. According to Tripathi (2015), a life of mundane excess has turned the merchant Kubera into an effete with an "effeminate manner" (12). Similarly, Kaikeyī asks her crying son Bharata not to be a "sissy" and to behave like the king he will be someday (43). In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Rāvaṇa complains about the "eunuch's way of fighting", which, he says, is unfit for an emperor (308). In Kané's (2016) work, Kaikasī calls her son Vibhīṣaṇa a "wimp" because he cannot defend himself and needs the help of his sister Śūrpaṇakhā (5). Likewise, Kaikasī criticises her husband Viśravas for being a coward and for being unable to defend himself the way their daughter Śūrpaṇakhā does, even though he is considered to be a great scholar (48-49).

Even though there are similarities in the descriptions of ideal masculinity in the works of all contemporary retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is possible to perceive some differences between male and female authors. Male authors, particularly Tripathi and Neelakantan, given that Pattanaik is mostly concerned with psychology, mostly celebrate warrior-like features for the advantages they confer in battle and governance. Again, it seems that the male authors are mostly concerned with grand social ideas such as the nation and its physical and psychological defence. Female authors, for their part, create similar representations in reference to sexual attractiveness. It seems that they are more concerned with the personal feelings felt by women than with grand social ideas. In Kané's (2016) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā admires Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa for their "innate masculine aura" (194) and she desires the latter because he is "beautiful, virile and wonderfully male" (199). Similarly, in Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā states that Rāma is the tallest and most striking of her suitors, at once fierce and handsome (20). In a later scene, Rāma tells Śūrpaṇakhā that his brother is more muscular than he is, which makes Lakṣmaṇa more desirable (147-148). Divakaruni contrasts such warrior-like ideals of beauty with the "ugly, woodcutter-hunter types" and with the sages, who are said to be "all scrawny and severe" (145).

While not always described as physically attractive, sages may embody mental ideals. There are recurrent descriptions of a spiritual dimension of masculinity, given that there is a cultural connection between the physical strength of the warrior and the celibacy of the sage. This concept has usually been instantiated in the ancient trope of the "celibate warrior" (Pattanaik, 2013: 229; Divakaruni, 2019: 298) or of the "warrior-

sage" (Tripathi, 2015: 334).[157] In Indian culture, celibacy has been co-related with the male ideal of self-control and rationality (Alter, 1994: 58), which is why it is normal that ideal descriptions of masculinity include more than just physical attributes.

Divakaruni (2019) is the author who most often describes the spiritual powers possessed by sages. These powers are mostly equated with magic, one of the defining markers of Orientalism[158] and global popular culture. It must be remarked that both exoticism and magic constitute ancient Indian literary tropes. However, the fact that such tropes are relatively absent in the works of other mythological retellers, including Kané's novels, seems to show that Divakaruni tries to place her fiction within pop culture with a globalised lure. Sītā states that sages possess "occult powers" that they have garnered through years of meditation (128-129). As a fictionalised character, Vālmīki is able to see what is happening far away during meditation and to teleport himself thanks to his *yogic* powers (342). Rāvaṇa accuses Sītā of luring him and states that he has spent too much time with her, a woman and a householder, which may diminish his spiritual merits (164-165). This conveys the idea that the bodily existence of women may distract men from spiritual practices. Even though in contemporary popular imagination materialism and spirituality are often regarded as antonyms, in this kind of discourse, which finds its roots in ancient Indian discourses and are also easily applicable to contemporary ideals, they are intertwined. Higher spirituality leads to greater physical powers and vice-versa. This means that it is through cultivation of body and spirit that men are able to become more "manly".

3.2.1 The idea of Rāma

The depiction of Rāma in the contemporary English-language retellings of the Rāmāyaṇa tends to be multifaceted. He is often described as the epitome of rationality and emotional detachment. These traits are often translated into legal and social concepts, given that Rāma is deemed as an ideal follower of the laws of society. Pattanaik (2013a) writes more than once that Rāma is *Maryādā Puruṣottama*, Sanskrit

[157] Anthropologist Joseph S. Alter has studied this phenomenon in relation to ancient and modern India, mainly through his ethnographic conducted with Indian wrestlers. ALTER, Joseph S. (1992). *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Alter (1994); ALTER, Joseph S. (2004). "Indian Clubs and Colonialism: Hindu Masculinity and Muscular Christianity" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 497-534; ALTER, Joseph S. (2006). "Yoga at the Fin de Siècle: Muscular Christianity with a 'Hindu' Twist" *The International Journal Of the History of Sport*, Vol. 23, No. 5, pp. 759-776. See also Gier (2014: Introduction).

[158] GOTO-JONES, Chris (2016). *Conjuring Asia: Magic, Orientalism and the Making of the Modern World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

for "the highest man [who respects] boundaries".[159] This is a Sanskrit concept which, according to Pattanaik, describes one who always follows rules and respects boundaries and is never affected by emotions (56/80/178/275). Following this ideal, Rāma tells Lakṣmaṇa that rules are rules and that he will always follow them, no matter how distasteful they may be (307). Similarly, in Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā states that, when Rāma makes a decision, such a decision is based not on emotion or impulse but on the pillars of rightness and duty, so that there is no way to change it (141), given that it is not the custom of Rāma's clan to go back on one's words (35), even when negative emotions are at play (238).

In his nonfiction, Tripathi (2017b) uses this mythological trope to try to unite Indians around the same national discourse. He states that there is a wealth of wisdom in the traditional Indian way, which means that Indians can choose to tap into it and lead better lives today (108). More specifically, he writes that Indians could learn to follow the rules from Rāma, as they have usually taken rule-breaking a little too far. If this were true, the author adds, Indian society would be less chaotic (46). It is relevant that, while Malhotra (2011) states that Westerns regard India as chaos and Pattanaik (2013b) that it is the Chinese who do so, Tripathi is the only concrete person who says so directly. In his fiction, Tripathi (2015) often follows a similar portrayal and turns Rāma into a pioneer of modern judicial systems. Rāma strives to unify the contradictory laws of Ayodhyā (117). Using Tripathi's symbolic language, Rāma "masculinises" feminine chaos. As Rāma states, the rule of law cannot be selective and has to apply to everyone. Even if some social groups do not appreciate a rule, they should not to break it (118). In short, Rāma is described as the ideal ruler of the "masculine way", the one who shall unify the diverse peoples of India in the short-term. In fact, Rāma states explicitly that he is an admirer of the way of the masculine, a life of "laws, obedience, honour and justice", and that he prefers and opposes it to a feminine "life of freedom without end" (210).

One may compare Rāma's propensity to follow and make others follow the rules to the discourse of the inclusiveness of Indian culture and how this trait may nowadays be translated into political ideas of social justice. Tripathi (2015) writes in the epigraph of his novel that "[y]ou live in Ram's kingdom (...) Fight for justice. Treat all as equal. Protect the weak". In Tripathi's tale, when Rāma battles with a forest-dweller, he calls

[159] This is also the title of one relatively unknown mythological fiction about Rāma. GAIROLA, Santosh (2020). *Maryada Purushottam Rama: The Story of Lord Rama*, Self-published.

him a great *ārya*, "Aryan, noble one", a term which would normally be applied to the ruling aristocracy of North India and not to "lowly" forest-dwellers.[160] Similarly, Pattanaik (2014) calls Rāma the one "who included all in his kingdom" (171). In Divakaruni's (2019) story, when Rāma is in the forest, he accepts the hospitality of many regardless of their caste, as long as their hearts are pure (119). While this passage mentions caste, Rāma is also described as tolerant toward women. In one of the few instances in which he breaks the traditions of his kingdom, he lets Sītā sit beside instead of behind him, as would be Ayodhyā's tradition (296). In short, Rāma is often depicted as the creator of a kind of *sanātana dharma* according to which the rights and duties of the social groups to which he does not belong are equal.

In other cases, Rāma's habitual lack of emotion and individuality, which may be interpreted negatively in a contemporary neoliberal context, often make him negatively insensitive towards the opinions and feelings of others. Pattanaik (2013b) states that the fact that Rāma upholds the laws more than his happiness dehumanises him and makes him look dispassionate (273-274). Elsewhere, the author acknowledges that people like Rāma may be predictable, dependent and not very pleasant (Pattanaik, 2013a: 308). Tripathi (2015) writes one of the scenes in which this trait is most evident. Rośnī, a friend of Rāma, is gang-raped. Rośnī is described as a woman of "impeccable character, a picture of grace and dignity" and as one who likes to help the poor and the destitute. This means that her description is similar to the more positive descriptions of Rāma. One of Rośnī's rapists, Dhenuka, is described as a villain. He states that women have been created for men's enjoyment (162). He is also a minor, and, according to Ayodhyā's rules, minors cannot be tried. Even though everyone in town feels outraged, Rāma refuses to punish Dhenuka on the grounds that the law cannot be broken and that judges should not give in to "savage, violent and inhumane" anger (144). Rāma's brother Bharata ends up fulfilling the will of the people. He tells Dhenuka that women have not been created for men's enjoyment but to be loved and then kills him (162). In this scene, Bharata's representation seems to be more positive than Rāma's, at least from a contemporary liberal perspective, one with which Tripathi is clearly concerned.

This episode is based on the 2012 Delhi gang rape case wo which I referred in the introduction. After the main incident, the media started calling Jyothi Singh Pandey, the student who was raped, by abstract and symbolic epithets. These included:

[160] THAPAR, Romila, WITZEL, Michael, MENON, Jaya, FRIESE, Kai, and KHAN, Razib. *Which of Us Are Aryans? Rethinking the Concept of Our Origins*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.

nirbhaya,[161] Sanskrit and Hindi for "fearless"; *jāgṛti*, Sanskrit for "awareness"; *dāminī*, Sanskrit for "lightning", from the name of the protagonist of a 2013 Bollywood film about a strong woman who decides to seek justice for the rape of a female relative; [162] *amānat,* "treasure" from the Arabic term *ʾamāna*, "loyalty, fidelity"; *Delhi Braveheart*; and *India's Daughter*[163] (Kanjilal, 2017: 105-110; Shandilya, 2015: 465; Singh, 2014: 168). While these epithets were used in order to protect the identity of the victim, they rapidly turned into abstract symbols, which reminds one of Pattanaik's discourse about the traditional Indian approach to mythology. They: 1) have turned a real woman into abstract qualities (fearlessness, awareness), natural and human phenomena (lightning, treasure); 2) have associated her with specific places (Delhi and India); and 3) have mixed reality and fiction (the character Dāminī). The epithet *Delhi Braveheart* also reminds one of Mel Gibson's film *Braveheart* (1995), which has no relationship whatsoever with contemporary Delhi or India.

Even though this was a defining media event in contemporary India and despite the fact that, as I shall demonstrate later, Tripathi represents himself as an ardent defender of women's rights, the scene in his novel defies easy explanations, given that the author most often depicts Rāma as a perfect, infallible character. Is this a defence of the rule of law against individual or even social feelings and desires, as Tripathi discusses in his nonfiction? This seems unlikely, given that in this case the innocent one suffers while the guilty does not. Is this an attempt to show how the traditional Indian approach is not simply to categorise characters in a one-sided manner as good or evil? This also seems unlikely, given that, as I shall demonstrate in the next section, Tripathi's description of Rāvaṇa is much less ambiguous. As the answer to these questions are unclear and as the scene departs from public opinion ideals, Tripathi's narrative choice was criticised in several online platforms. Blogger Ishita Bajpai (2020), for instance, expressed her disgust for Tripathi's narrative choice, which she called "objectionable and displeasing".

---

[161] This epithet, which was initially used to protect the victim's identity, has become more famous than her real name.

[162] SANTOSHI, Rajkumar (Director) (1993). *Damini* [Film], Sunny Super Sound.

[163] This is also the title of a documentary film about the incident. It features an interview with one of the alleged rapists. The film was banned in India. UDWIN, Leslie (Director) (2015). *India's Daughter* [Film], Berta film. For information on the rape case, see DWIVEDI, Amitabh Vikram (2014). "Rape in the Metropolis: The Geography of Crime in Delhi" *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, Vol. 3, https://glocalismjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/dwivedi_gjcpi_2014_3.pdf (accessed on 7/10/2021); LODHIA, Sharmila (2015). "From 'Living Corpse' to India's Daughter: Exploring the social, political and legal landscape of the 2012 Delhi gang rape" *Women's International Studies Forum,* Vol. 50, pp. 98-101; METHA, Deepak (2019). "Crowds, mob and the law: The Delhi rape case" *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 158-183.

Contrary to Tripathi, Neelakantan (2012) tries to turn Rāma into an ambiguous villain by adopting every one of the defects of which the character has been accused in scholarly papers and popular imagination. Given that this author's representation of Rāma is negative from the beginning, readers should have no difficulties in interpreting and accepting them. In one passage, Rāma is described as a puritan and self-righteous (475) man obsessed with his image as the perfect ruler. He is also described as someone who is manipulated by his counsellors (493). The term *puritan* originally referred to a group of British protestants and nowadays tends to have a negative connotation, as it does in Neelakantan's novel. Here, Rāma neither treats everybody equally nor includes everybody with a pure heart in his kingdom. He is the upholder of the Indian caste system and of other social divisions that I analyse in this and in the following chapter. These divisions are said to have been invented by the Brahmins, whom Rāma follows blindly. For this reason, even though Rāma looks "rational", he is unable to think for himself, given that this depiction of rationality in Neelakantan's work means following the most hegemonic group of society. As I have said in the previous chapter, Neelakantan privileges the rationality of traditional India against superstitions which, according to the author, are partly influenced by foreign elements. However, it is clear that the rationality envisaged by Neelakantan is a very different one, one which, rather than being associated with traditional Brahminical authorities, are much more focused on the neoliberal ideal of the free and independent individual.

Similar descriptions feature in Divakaruni's (2019) novel. Here, Rāma does not question Gautama's oppression of his wife Ahalyā because he considers Gautama a revered sage whose motives "should not be questioned" (135). When Rāma builds a golden statue of Sītā to replace the real one, he states that the priests have told him that the statue would suffice (345). Such depictions of Rāma seem to go against one of the main tenets of the "idea of India", the concept that everything is liable to be questioned. Later on, I will show how Divakaruni represents this rigid trait of Rāma's personality in a negative manner and recreates Rāma's female counterpart, Sītā, as the real flexible and open-minded character, not as a representative of any national "idea of India" but as a representative of positive femininity.

Classical versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, such as Vālmīki's version, usually feature scenes in which Rāma paradoxically goes against the rules. Such scenes, which tend to have an adverse effect on other characters, are some of the scenes which are often analysed in academic works and in popular imagination. The question storytellers and

academicians tend to ask is: how can one justify when it is legitimate or illegitimate to go against the rules? Who chooses the criteria? Most contemporary retellers include such scenes in their retellings and, in the process, question Rāma's dubious actions. In Kané's (2016) story, Śūrpaṇakhā criticises Rāma when she asks Sītā whether Rāma's mutilation of Śūrpaṇakhā fits in with his Rāma's image as the protector of the weak (238). In Neelakantan's (2012) version, Rāvaṇa enumerates several of the dubious scenes involving Rāma. He mentions: a) Rāma's banishment of Sītā; b) his killing of the monkey-king Bāli when Bāli is not aware of the attack, an action which is said to go against *dharma*; and c) his sending of attackers to invade cities and kill innocent men and women.

It must be stated that, even though Rāma is mostly described as an ideal male character in Tripathi's (2015) novel, the character created by this author is also very different in some ways from the more traditionally emotionless Rāma. Tripathi makes frequent mentions of Rāma's anger and hatred. He writes that Rāma hates Rāvaṇa "viscerally" (67) and that the anger that he feels is "overwhelming and beyond reason" (241). Pattanaik (2013a) mentions that poster art of the 1990s showed a violent Rāma who would rescue Sītā (India) from Rāvaṇa (anti-Hindu) forces, a strategy that Indians found to counter the Western interpretations of Rāma's effeminate depictions (208) (see also Nandy, Trivedy, Mayaram and Yagnik, 1995: 99; Banerjee, 2003; Pinney, 2004: 204). Tripathi's depictions of Rāma's anger, hatred and violence may be related to the ideal of a warrior-like masculinity whose representatives act towards what is wrong in society. In this case, while countering his avowed depiction of Rāma as a perfect follower of instituted rules, Tripathi's depiction of a more emotional Rāma seems to conform with both Hindu nationalistic ideals and with a general neoliberal propensity to value the individual emotion. Again, the way Rāma acts in the scene which deals with Rośnī's rape does not seem to conform with the character's unassailable anger towards his archenemy.

There are no instances of visual representations of a more effeminate Rāma in the contemporary retellings. In order to find them, one would have to go further back in time. Figure 25 shows the painting *Ram Vanvasi*, "Rāma in the Forest Exile" produced by the studio founded by Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906). Varma was the first important Indian painter to paint Indian themes using Western techniques and the most

famous Indian artist of the 19th century.[164] His style influenced contemporary Indian calendar art, the most common type of popular art in contemporary India. Visual representations of Indian deities and heroes (including hypermasculine ones), be it in poster art or in modern comics, often rely on the techniques developed by Varma.

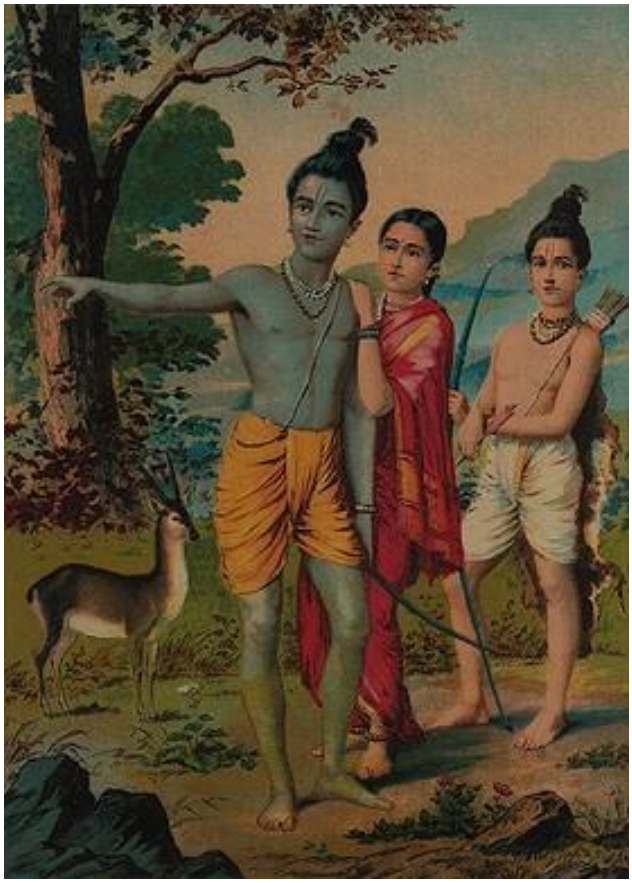


Figure 25 - Raja Ravi Varma's *Vanvasi Ram* (Debroy, 2021: 95)

In this painting, Rāma (and Lakṣmaṇa) is far removed in style from the one on the cover of *Ramayan 3392 aD* (Figure 7) and Tripathi's novel (Figure 11). His body is meagre, he is not in a fighting pose and has a calm and gentle smile on his face. Even though he is going through his forest exile and living as an ascetic, he feels neither anger nor hatred. He and Sītā are mainly distinguished through cultural rather than physical traits: clothing and hairdo. Rāma is distinguishable from Lakṣmaṇa because of his blue colour and because Sītā is hugging him.

Hanumān has recently substituted Rāma in this role of angry hypermasculine nationalistic hero (Chatterji, Hansen and Bloom, 2019). Of special relevance is the pictorial rendition drawn by Karan Acharya (Figure 26), a Keralite artist. This picture, titled "angry Hanuman", shows the frowning bust of a muscular Hanumān half-lit by saffron light. This rendition was praised by Modi.[165] Textual and visual depictions of Tripathi's Rāma seem more similar to Acharya's Hanumān than to Varma's Rāma.

[164] Pinney (2004); JAIN, Kajri (2004). *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*, Durham: Duke University Press.

[165] PANDE, M. (2018). "Angry Hanuman: This viral image that won Modi's praise symbolises today's aggressive, macho India'" *Scroll.in*, https://scroll.in/article/879108/angry-hanuman-this-viral-image-that-won-modis-praise-symbolises-todays-aggressive-macho-india (accessed on 15/8/2021); BHOWMICK, N. (2018). "Militant Hinduism and the reincarnation of Hanuman" *The Wire*, https://thewire.in/communalism/noidas-thrivingmilitant-hinduism-and-the-resurrection-of-hanuman (accessed on 15/8/2021).



Figure 26 - Karan Acharya's *Angry Hanuman* (Pande, 2018).

Even though spiritual and moral issues are still important, they have become subject to emotion and physicality, mainly in retellings with a more Hindu nationalistic bent, such as Tripathi's one. Together with the unflinching ability to follow social dogmas, physical strength is regarded as a need to strengthen society and to impose a "masculine" kind of order onto it.

3.2.2 The idea of Rāvaṇa

While Rāma is stereotypically depicted as someone who is never driven by feelings or thoughts, Rāvaṇa is stereotypically depicted as someone who is entirely driven by passions. Tripathi (2017b) states in his nonfiction that, much like people can learn from Rāma how to follow the rules, they can learn from Rāvaṇa "the perils of an almighty ego" (49). The term "ego", which has a negative connotation in contemporary English, is often used by the contemporary retellers to refer to Rāvaṇa but never to Rāma. According to Pattanaik (2013b), while Rāma always follows the rules, Rāvaṇa always defies them (273). The author comments that people often admire independent people who stand up against governments, change policies, make their mark in industry and society and shape the world with determination (281), an assessment which may sound like an appraisal of Rāvaṇa's egotism or of the ideal of contemporary people living in a neoliberal society. Nevertheless, Pattanaik adds that people realise that such rules only serve those who have created them, a conclusion which, as I shall demonstrate, is also one that Neelakantan reaches in his novel.

Pattanaik (2013a) equates Rāvaṇa's ego with animality. He states that, in Rāvaṇa, the animal instinct to dominate and be territorial is heightened (167), given that he behaves like the "territorial dominant beast" who drives away rivals, a behaviour which is said to be unbecoming of humans (141). By extension, individualism and egotism are also equated with animality. This association is evident in Kané's (2016) novel. Kumbhakarṇa states that Rāvaṇa goes crazy whenever he gets angry (7). On one such occasion, Rāvaṇa is said to be a "crazed, wounded animal, responding excessively and violently to anything and everything around him" (32). In contrast to this, Pattanaik (2013a) often states that the goal of the sage is to become more human or to rise towards divinity by outgrowing animal instincts. Accordingly, Rāma states that Rāvaṇa is capable of much more but that his ego does not let him be what he has the potential to become (173). This is one of the clear instances of Pattanaik's conflation of modern psychological discourses with new spiritualities. When applied to human society and to new religions, this narrative idea shows that, no matter how animalistic one may be, one always has a spark of divinity, a spark which can be cultivated to supplant one's animal instincts (Clarke 2006b, s.v. "Human Potential Movement", 286-288). Ultimately, while Pattanaik acknowledges that Rāvaṇa has the potential to achieve psychological wholesomeness, the fact is that this moment occurs neither in Pattanaik's version nor in any of the other retellings by the authors I analyse, in which Rāvaṇa invariably ends up being killed. A similar idea is also present in Divakaruni's (2019) novel, who is not so interested in the neoliberal and often business-oriented strand of spirituality promoted by Pattanaik. In Divakaruni's novel, it is said that Rāvaṇa is trapped in his demonic body and has forgotten who he really is (30). In this case, it is not physicality itself that is criticised. By calling Rāvaṇa's body "demonic", Divakaruni seems to say that there are non-demonic bodies, an idea which seems to conform with contemporary feminist discourses of the body not as something which is inferior to the "male" spirit but as something which has an independent, positive existence. This, as I shall demonstrate later in this chapter, complies with positive representations of the female body in the novels by the female retellers.

Despite his ego, descriptions of Rāvaṇa are often positive, mainly in the novels written by the female authors, who emphasise that Rāvaṇa is a complete man with respect to both physical and intellectual features. Kané (2016) states that he has good looks, wealth, power and knowledge and that his ego is his only fault (236). Rāvaṇa's mother Kaikasī states that her son has ended poverty in his kingdom and has been just

to everybody (142).[166] In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā (174-175) and Rāma (231) acknowledge that, despite his faults, Rāvaṇa is a good king who is loved by his subjects. It is remarkable that, while all three male retellers point to the contextual Indian approach which rejects absolutist divisions between good and evil, the female retellers, who never said anything about this trait of Indian civilisation and Hinduism, are the ones who have represented it more clearly in narrative terms. In any case, the inability to restrain one's ego is considered to be the ultimate sign of evil, including in the novels by the female retellers. In Kané's (2016) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā describes Rāvaṇa's ego as his battlefield, war, violence and enemy (122). It is for this reason, the author adds, that he always feels greed for more, a trait which invalidates his physical and intellectual virtues (142) and turns a potentially wise scholar into a "demon" (222). For this reason, Rāvaṇa is said to be "pure evil" (224-225). Tripathi (2015: 2) and Divakaruni (2019: 20) also state that Rāvaṇa is a "demon king", an epithet for Rāvaṇa which has become common in English literature, including in academia, and is perhaps a *calque* of *Rākṣasendra*, that is, "the Indra (prince, ruler) of the *rākṣasa*s", a mythological species about which I will discuss in the next chapter.[167]

Tripathi (2015) is the only reteller who consistently depicts Rāvaṇa as a ruthless villain. In his first appearance, when meeting Rāma's father Daśaratha, Daśaratha asks himself who that "monster" may be. He thinks to himself that he has heard of "demons" that drank blood and wine from the skulls of their enemies. Indeed, Rāvaṇa's first line, directed to Daśaratha, is "I look forward to drinking your blood" (14), a description which would hardly be fitting for a great scholar and just ruler. A few pages ahead, Rāvaṇa is described in the following way:

> (…) as he [Dashrath] turned to face another of the seemingly never-ending waves of Raavan's hordes, his gaze fell upon the monster who was the mastermind of this devastation. (…) Raavan was shrieking maniacally and hacking his way brutally through the Ayodhya outer infantry lines before they could regroup. This was not a war anymore. It was a massacre (25).

[166] Goldman, Goldman and Nooten (2009) also refer to this ambivalent attitude towards Rāvaṇa, given that he is regarded as a "ruthless tyrant and reckless criminal" and a "noble warrior and exalted monarch", but never as the one-dimensional villain common in many retellings (74-75).

[167] There is one graphic novel titled *Ravana: Roar of the Demon King*. SISODIA, Abhimanyu Singh (2011). *Ravana: Roar of the Demon King*, New Delhi: Campfire. According to popular etymology, Rāvaṇa's name comes from the Sanskrit root √*ru*, which means "to roar", which explains the "roar" in the title. This explanation underscores Rāvaṇa's bestiality and proneness for uncontrolled emotions.

The use of strongly negative vocabulary such as *hordes*, *monster*, *devastation*, *shrieking maniacally*, *hacking*, *massacre* reminds one of Hindu nationalistic descriptions of Muslim invasions of India,[168] including similar descriptions in Tripathi's nonfiction of Turkic-Mongol "barbaric foreigners". These descriptions sound paradoxical when read against Tripathi's idea that the idea of Rāvaṇa as a demented evil person is relatively modern and that the author tries to bypass these modern foreign influences and be truthful to authentic Indian heritage. This is an example of how, despite different wordings, etymological roots and intellectual histories, the differences between *dharma/adharma* and *good/evil* which is so dear to the construct of the "idea of India" created by public intellectuals and mythological retellers may sometimes be more a parameter to distinguish between Indian and its *Other(s)* rather than an epistemological or narrative approach with any substantial meaning.

The title and cover of Tripathi's (2019) novel about Rāvaṇa (Figure 27) reflects this depiction. The fact that Rāvaṇa is the "enemy of Aryavarta", that is, the enemy of the "land of the noble people" (India), is hardly positive. His helmet looks like the popular depiction of a Viking one. Viking helmets did not have horns, but this feature represents medieval Scandinavians as beastlike in popular imagination. In India, Indo-Persian warriors sometimes used horned helmets. However, the fact that this feature is associated with Vikings in contemporary imagination defines Rāvaṇa as a foreigner.

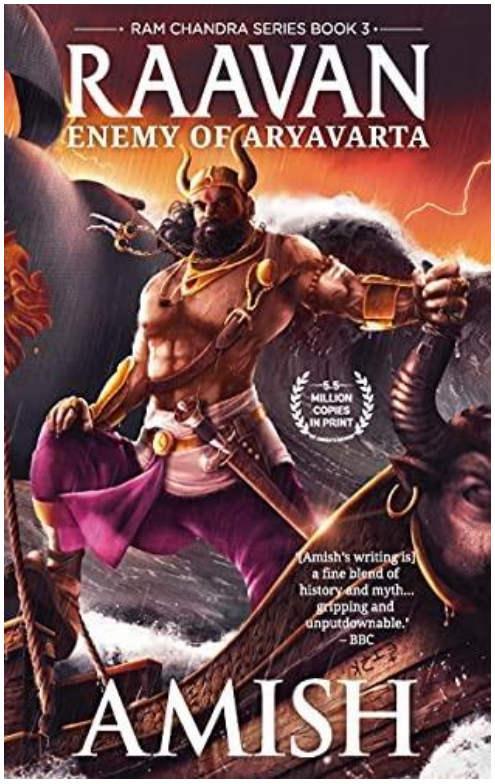


Figure 27 - Cover of Amish Tripathi's (2019) *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*[169]

[168] See contemporary English-language examples, such as: Vashi Sharma and Sanjeev Newar's (2017) *The Naked Mughals: Forbidden Tales of Harem and Butchery*, Vashi Sharma and Sanjeev Newar's (2017) *Islam Means Peace But*, Amit Agarwal's (2019) *Swift Horses Sharp Swords: Medieval Battles which Shook India*, Sandeep Balakrishna's (2020) *Invaders and Infidels: From Sindh to Delhi, the 500 Year Journey of Islamic Invasions,* Sandeep Balakrishna's (2020) *10 Lessons from Hindu History in 10 Episodes: Tales of Grit, Heroism and Valour*, and Manoshi Sinha Rawal's (2022) *Saffron Swords: Centuries of Indic Resistance to Invaders.*

[169] https://www.amazon.com/Raavan-Enemy-Aryavarta-Ram-Chandra/dp/9388754085 (accessed on 3/6/2024).

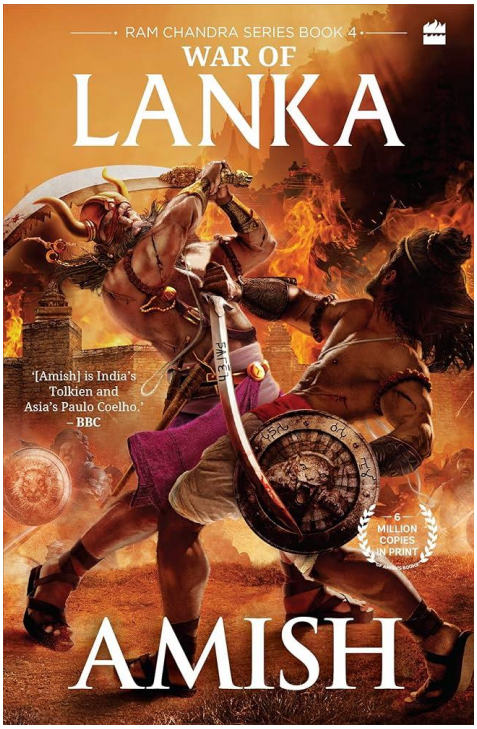


Figure 28 - Cover of Amish Tripathi's (2022) *War of Lanka*[170]

War of Lanka, the last instalment in Tripathi's series, depicts a one-to-one combat between Rāma and Rāvaṇa, who is again depicted with a horned helmet (Figure 28). In Figure 27, Rāvaṇa sails in a boat whose prow is the head of a fierce bull, which mirrors the way he looks. Finally, the wave and tempestuous weather in the background increase Rāvaṇa's inherent violence. Here, body and mind are depicted as being entangled with the natural world.

Neelakantan (2012) inverts Rāvaṇa's common demonic depiction in the same way he tries to invert Rāma's divine one. In the process, he describes Rāvaṇa as a contemporary neoliberal Indian who has achieved success through his talent, effort and modern ideals. Young Rāvaṇa is said to be a poor boy (15) with no royal blood nor great ancestry (204), while Rāma is said to come from a privileged family. In any case, Rāvaṇa manages to defy fate, control destiny with his own hands and become a great leader (458). Anthropologists Angana Chatterji, Thomas Bloom Hansen and Indologist and political scientist Christopher Jaffrelot (2020) attribute similar traits to contemporary populist leaders. Such leaders often claim to belong to the common people and to speak against the elites.[171] The authors give the example of Modi, who has described himself as an ordinary man from humble origins (2-3) who has made it to the highest political position in India through hard work and merit. It can also be said that Neelakantan turns the demonic Rāvaṇa into a populist leader who, while not necessarily possessing a spark of divinity trapped inside a demonic body as he does in Pattanaik's version, is down-to-earth and can rise up the competitive social ladder

[170] https://www.amazon.com/War-Lanka-Chandra-Book-Paperback/dp/9356291527 (accessed on 3/6/2024).
[171] URBINATI, Nadia (2019). *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

through individual effort, a kind of narrative which is much appreciated in the popular culture of contemporary neoliberal India.[172]

In Neelakantan's (2012) view, Rāvaṇa is a more complete man than Rāma, given that he has no control over his emotions and is therefore more prone to enjoy life in its totality (5). Rāvaṇa mentions "anger" when he asks his *guru* what else he should feel when observing the plight of his people and whether it is not anger that shall move him into action (37). In this regard, Neelakantan's Rāvaṇa is no different from Tripathi's Rāma. Conversely, Tripathi's Rāvaṇa and Neelakantan's Rāma are hateful villains who wish to destroy and control everything around them. These similarities and contrasts reveal that, even though the tone of these novels looks different, their deep structure is the same, given that they share the same representation of ideal and counter-ideal masculinities and that Neelakantan's contrarian approach mainly consists in swapping the names and not exactly in swapping the worldview. There are also important differences between both characters. Neelakantan's Rāvaṇa states that it was not the great sages (*maharṣis*) of Vedic times who built great civilisations but extraordinary men who never controlled their emotions (41). Accordingly, he says that he does not wish to become like Rāma, the perfect god, given that India does not lack gods but lacks men (354). Here, the author plays with colonial and postcolonial discourses on masculinity and the fear of emasculation felt in contemporary Hindu nationalistic discourses. He also plays with contemporary neoliberal ideas, given that the fact that, contrary to the most stereotypical depictions of Rāma, Rāvaṇa does not merely follow social rules is seen in a positive light. Just as Rāma is often said to never question neither the origins or legitimacy of social rules, Rāvaṇa is said to set his own codes and to create his own rules (60). Similarly, while Rāma is said to be a pawn of the larger group into which he melts, Rāvaṇa is depicted as an independent individual who thinks and works for his own benefit.

[172] One could compare Neelakantan's novel with the plot of *The 12th Fail*, one of the most popular Bollywood films of 2023. It tells a story purportedly based on a nonfiction book and, therefore, on real events, about a poor rural Indian young adult who, despite failing his 12th grade, later works himself to exhaustion until he becomes a respected civil servant. The film has a secularist bent and shows several figures related to the anticolonial and nationalistic movements, which implies that any Indian, such as the main character, can potentially succeed in life the same way they have done, and that doing so also constitutes patriotic service towards the nation. CHOPRA, Vidhu Vinod (Director). *The 12th Fail* [Film], Zee Studios. Online reactions to the film often state that this not just a "film" but an "emotion", a common reaction to cultural products which resonate among contemporary Indian audiences. https://www.facebook.com/SALUCraze/videos/12th-fail-is-not-just-a-flim-its-an-emotion%EF%B8%8Fpov-all-you-want-is-a-supportive-par/362414496435884/ (accessed on 3/6/2024).

Neelakantan also depicts a Rāvaṇa who often treats women with respect and as equals. The author opposes him to Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, the former because he kills thousands of men and women in order to rescue Sītā, said to be a wife he has never wanted, and the latter because he leaves his wife (Ūrmilā) alone in the palace for fourteen years (360). Unlike what happens in most retellings by other contemporary retellers, in this novel Rāvaṇa does not participate in Sītā's wedding competition and does not abduct her either because he desires her or in order to avenge his sister Śūrpaṇakhā's defilement. He does so because Sītā is his daughter, so he wishes to free her from Rāma's oppression and let her marry the person she loves, as is said to be a custom in Laṅkā. Again, this scene is not of Neelakantan's invention but exists in other versions of the narrative tradition in South India and abroad (Dhar, 2023: 280). Similarly, when Rāvaṇa's wife Mandodarī is raped, Rāvaṇa accepts her back and takes care of her (392-394). In this regard, Rāvaṇa is different from Rāma, who in every contemporary retelling abandons Sītā right after he rescues her, even though she has not had physical contact with Rāvaṇa and has never looked him in the eyes.

Paradoxically, in other scenes, Rāvaṇa insults Mandodarī (412-413) and rapes other women when he is afflicted by negative emotions. In the end, Neelakantan's Rāvaṇa is as controversial Rāma is in this and in other contemporary retellings. While Rāvaṇa often states he has good intentions towards his family and people, he is often overcome by passions which make him act against such intentions. Neelakantan's novels are full of such ambiguities in character development. The characters created by the author are always said to have great ideals which they later break. The reader often listens to the voices of other characters, such as Mandodarī, stating that Rāvaṇa's liberal ideas are just demagogic strategies to legitimate and advance his desire for power, an idea which reflects contemporary ideas of populist politics: "save your political speeches to fool the masses. You are fighting this war for your own selfish reasons" (412). While one often listens to Rāvaṇa's voice stating that, contrary to Rāma, he is just striving to build a free and equitable society in which people may have critical thinking like himself, his description is frequently comparable to Rāma's less positive ones, such as the scene in Tripathi's novel involving Rośnī. In short, rather than a duality between good and evil, Neelakantan often describes a world permeated by evil, including evil hypocritically disguised as goodness. In my view, as Neelakantan's narratives often seem to mix contradictory colonial, anticolonial, postcolonial, decolonial and regional discourses in a manner which reminds one of Pattanaik's attempt at universalism, there are many

ways to interpret his discourse. Perhaps Neelakantan's characters are hypocritical and do not make their thought and words match their deeds. Perhaps Neelakantan's novel was not properly edited and the author did not succeed in providing credible character development, given that having consistent characters who go against such consistency when there are plausible reasons to do so is often considered to be a sign of artful storytelling in contemporary narratives. Perhaps this is a playful narrative strategy which reflects one of the traits of the "idea of India" mentioned by Neelakantan and the other male retellers: that of feeling comfortable with logical inconsistences and accepting both sides of a paradox in a non-committed way.

3.3 The idea of femininity

De Zepetnek (1998) considers that gender discrimination is the foremost kind of discrimination and that its elimination is a necessary task in all cultural settings, given that it transcends other kinds of cultural, social and economic discrimination and that human interaction is most immediately marked by gender relationships (174). This is probably the reason why the issue of femininity and the condition of Indian women has been a major topic in most studies about ancient and contemporary India. The female retellers *Rāmāyaṇa* are clearly concerned with the issue because they belong to the identity group in question. Besides feeling empathy towards the plight of oppressed Indian women, the male retellers are probably concerned with representations of femininity because its most stereotyped traditional descriptions are not acceptable for modern global standards, which means that they have to justify, change or condemn them. As American Buddhist feminist Rita M. Gross (2002) states in her chapter on Buddhism for *Her Voice Her Faith*, a work in which female devotees introduce their own faiths:

> (…) in the contemporary world, religions usually claim they treat women well. Because the treatment of women has become a highly contested issue, no religion declares that it mistreats women or wants to be perceived as if it did. But claims are made about every religion, by both insiders and outsiders, that its women face real obstacles and difficulties (87).

As a result of the different approaches taken by the contemporary retellers, I will argue that there are fundamental differences between how the male and female retellers approach the issue. Female authors are much more concerned with representations of

female individuality, which includes the psychological states of women, and the differences between men and women. The male authors, for their part, are more concerned with the condition of women as one of a set of questions which pertains to both Indian civilisation and Hinduism, with assimilating men and women's roles and, as a result, of effacing their major differences. As hinted previously, Pattanaik represents gender as something that exists only in the psyche. Now, I show how Tripathi is concerned with assimilating men and women's roles and physical descriptions and that Neelakantan contrasts positive modern female characters against negative traditional ones, much like he does for male characters.

Scholarly and popular descriptions show that one could posit two main stereotyped representations of femininity in India: the *angel* (or *goddess*) and the *whore* (Das, 2009: 42). *Angel* refers to the devoted and self-sacrificing individual, while *whore* refers to the free, rebellious and dangerous one (Forbes, 1996: 1). This dichotomy is explicitly underscored in Neelakantan's (2018) most recent retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The author states that " Men had lost the capability to treat women as their partners, friends and equals now they were either to be despised, lusted over or won as a prize. And if they were inaccessible, to be either shamed as a whore or revered like a Goddess".[173] The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, which in some of its most popular versions features female characters who could fit easily into these categories, the angel Sītā and the whore Śūrpaṇakhā, has been relevant in the fixation of these stereotypes.

Women have been supposed to fit into limited roles in some ancient and contemporary conceptions of Indian society. Manisha Sethi (2002), a professor of Comparative Religions, states that, according to Hindu nationalistic discourses, women have had to conform with three ideals: 1) heroic mother, 2) chaste wife and 3) celibate warrior, all of which could be regarded as subcategories of the *angel/goddess* archetype. Definitions like "mother" and "wife" reveal what the object of devotion and self-sacrifice is. The concept of "mother" implies the concept of "child(ren)", while that of "wife" implies the concept of "husband". "Warrior" is a more independent definition. However, a warrior may also fight for the sake of other(s). Indeed, women may often be described as "warriors" not necessarily in the physical sense but in the psychological

[173] This kind of discourse was also frequent in Victorian England. AUERBACH, Nina (1984). *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

one, that is, as warriors who "fight" for their children, husband or for the entire nation.[174]

Some Hindu devotees try to counter negative characterisations of Indian women by stating that traditional Hinduism valued women as much as it valued men. Rather than condemning and trying to change past representations, which could be a discursive strategy, they justify those representations by arguing that interpretations have been wrong and that, if seen from another perspective, they may reveal powerful women. In this regard, it is often pointed out that Hinduism features a pantheon of powerful goddesses and that this paradigm was changed by foreign influences. Islam, whose attitudes towards women are often negatively represented in both Indian and Western media, tends to be the main target (Kurien, 2007: 177). Modi remarked during a world tour that India has been the only country where "God" was conceptualised in the female form (quoted in Subramaniam, 2019: 7). The fact that Modi referred to the notion of *God* as a concept itself and in the singular aimed at comparing Hinduism and the Abrahamic religions and not Hinduism and other religions, which may be argued to have no central concept of divinity in some cases or may be regarded to have several in others. There are goddesses in other living and dead religions. Even Judaism and Christianity could be said to possess an array of divine female figures. In contemporary Catholicism, the Virgin plays a key role, second only to that of God as expressed in the Holy Trinity. This does not mean that, in most times and places, Christianity has not been a patriarchal religion which posited a fundamental ontological difference between the mythicised Virgin Mary and women of flesh and bone. Finally, the Abrahamic religions, particularly Islam, are the ones which are known for positing the existence of a single indivisible deity. While in Hinduism different sects may focus on specific deities, the concept of a single God would feel odd.

Besides Hindu goddesses as humanised entities with an imagined bodily existence, Hinduism has an abstract definition of divine female essence, *śakti*, a

[174] One may consider the modern inversion of common positive and negative attitudes towards specific epithets. In ancient and modern patriarchal societies, the terms *angel* and *goddess* often have a positive connotation, while *whore* has a negative one. However, in the context of modern feminism, the concept of *angel/goddess* has been regarded as negative, given that it implies and reinforces the idea that women's dependence is good and independence is bad. The concept of *whore* implies some independence from patriarchal society and may be interpreted in a positive light. An example of this trend in India is the popular Bollywood film *Queen*, which tells the story of a traditional Indian girl who decides to embark on an independent single "honeymoon" to Europe after her fiancée calls off their wedding. In Amsterdam, she meets Roxette, a Pakistani girl who works as a pole dancer in a bar. Even though Roxette is as close as the film gets to the stereotypical Indian *whore*, she is depicted as a free, independent and confident girl. BAHL, Vikas (2013). *Queen* [Film], Viacom18 Motion Pictures.

feminine Sanskrit word which means "power" and which is also the name of the Goddess of pan-Hindu tradition. The name implies that in Indian culture "power" constitutes a feminine trait.[175] Much like in the example I gave in relation to Christianity, the fact that there are several goddesses in traditional Hinduism does not necessarily mean that real women have always been respected. Similarly, the fact that power may be understood as a feminine concept does not mean that real women are or have been supposed to possess real power. As Pattanaik states, symbols may remain psychological or, as I have argued, they may not and, usually, the difference between these possibilities is not simply one between the precolonial and colonial period. In fact, it has been said that, in India, goddesses have been idealisations of women, while real women have been considered to be just pale shadows of the same goddesses (Bose, 2010: 5-10). Just as different interpretations of the Bible have been used to humanise and dehumanise different groups, Hindu mythology has mythologised and empowered imaginary ideals of women in some cases while real men have subjugated and disciplined real women in others (Subramaniam, 2019: 54). Similarly, the fact that men may acquire power by realising their *śákti* does not necessarily imply that real women have been needed in the process (van der Veer, 2001: 81), much like Christian men and women may worship the Virgin without thinking that she is a projection of a living woman or is reflected in one.

Descriptions about the status of women in India and debates about the same issue are ever-present in the fiction and nonfiction of contemporary retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The condition of modern women is one of the most recurrent topics in Tripathi's (2017b) works. In his collection of essays, he writes that, across the religious/linguistic/caste/social segments of India, women have been the most oppressed (75). The author complains that, even though women have gained more rights, crimes against them persist (3). Expectably for readers who already know the author, he argues that the wisdom of the Indian past might provide arguments to end such crimes (23-24). In an interview transcribed in his nonfiction work, the author contrasts that ideal Indian past with the period when Turkic-Mongols and the British already in India. He also represents his neoliberal family as reflecting the values which existed before the latter period:

[175] One of the most important subdivisions of Hinduism is called Śāktism (the others are Vaiṣṇavism and Śivaism, which revere Viṣṇu and Śiva, respectively). CRADDOCK, Elaine (2005). s.v. "Shakti" in TAYLOR, Bron R. (ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum. Pattanaik has also written a book completely devoted to the topic. See PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2016). *Shakti: a female power*, New Delhi: Penguin Books.

> My family is populated with strong women: my mother, my sister, my sisters-in-law, my wife; (…) It's the standard model I am used to. (…) My parents did not differentiate between the boys and the girl while we were growing up. The rules were the same for us all. Secondly, let's look at our epics. Many of the versions of the epics that most urban Indians are aware of, at least in the modern day, are based on television serials from the 1980s. And many of them were based on late medieval interpretations of our epic stories. Yes, most late medieval interpretations of our epics tend to be patriarchal. Any society which has faced a lot of violence tends to become patriarchal. (…) And India did suffer horrific violence in the medieval era. But if you study the versions of our epics, of our myths, from an earlier era, it would not be so out-of-the ordinary to find very strong women, and interpretations that are not patriarchal. (...) So my stories, with very strong women characters, I would suggest, are more true to our ancient way" (43).[176]

In his retelling, Tripathi (2015) puts this kind of discourse in Rāma's mouth. Rāma feels appalled that society does not value capable women (72), a situation which he himself improves by allowing women to venture out alone at night (118). Later, he gives examples of ancient women sages, while stating that they were equal to men in mental abilities (213). He also states that there are "fools" who claim that women should not be allowed to study the scriptures or write new ones (254). Similarly, Rośnī does not approve that women be given money during the *rākhī* ceremony,[177] given that she believes them capable of earning money by themselves by doing the work of all the major castes: priests (Brahmins), merchants (*vaiśyas*) and labourers (*śūdras*). She adds that women do not possess only the physical strength and proclivity for violence, one of the stereotyped defining characteristics of masculinity, of the warriors (*kṣatriyas*) (105).

Following mythological tropes, in contemporary English-language retellings female characters are often said to be guilty of the patriarchy inflicted upon them. In order to understand this rationale, one must understand how patriarchy is often related to sexuality. Women are often depicted as sexually attractive and as being under the

[176] Monier-Williams (1863) made a similar argument. He stated that, in his time of writing and contrary to European nations, Eastern nations treated women as inferior. However, Indians could learn from the ancient epics to honour the weaker sex and restore women to their ancient liberty (55/59).

[177] Thread that is tied around a brother's hand by his sister so that he will remember his duty to protect her. JONES, Constance A. (2011). "Raksha Bandhan" in MELTON, J. Gordon (ed.). *Religious Celebrations: An Encyclopedia of Holidays, Festivals, Solemn Observances, And Spiritual Commemorations*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, p. 733-734.

social duty to be modest and conceal their attractiveness so as not to arouse undesired men, given that excessive female sexuality may be said to lead to male violence. Sexually aggressive women are often said to lead to anarchy (Ray, 2005: xxxiii), while sexually passive women have been said to uphold social order. As there usually exist cultural grounds to sanction sexually unruly men, such as rapists who attack modest women, the same is applied to sexually unruly women (*whores*) who do not follow conservative laws of sexual propriety and "seduce" men (Deo, 2016: 144). The question is that in most societies men have been the main ones to decide what seduces them or not and, therefore, who ranks as a sexually unruly woman.

In the most popular versions of the epic, both Sītā and Śūrpaṇakhā suffer from these views. Śūrpaṇakhā is physically punished for her sexual unruliness. Sītā is never sexually unruly, but, as she is abducted by Rāvaṇa, she usually also pays a price, as if she had been guilty of her abduction. In Kané's (2016) novel, these ideas on gender and gender relations acquire a narrative shape. Śūrpaṇakhā accuses her brother Rāvaṇa of being a rapist. Rāvaṇa responds that the woman he has raped is an *apsarā,* a term which is usually translated to English as "water nymph", but who Rāvaṇa calls "a temptress by profession" (120). This means that it was her fault and not his that she had been raped. Goldman (1993) states that this is a common excuse in traditional Indian stories, in which celibate men often have sex with irresistible *apsarās* and then curse them for what happened. The author also links this tendency to the modern attitude of holding women responsible for the sexual assaults inflicted upon them (375-376).

Despite the fact that the narrative universe of the most popular versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is usually regarded as a patriarchal one, the female characters of the contemporary English-language retellings rarely accept patriarchal oppression. Sometimes, they remain silent about their frustrations. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, after Ahalyā mistakenly betrays her husband Gautama with someone who dresses up like him, sage Gautama believes she has taken a vow of silence because that action will improve her merit. Only Sītā realises that Ahalyā is innocent, that she has never had the chance to tell her story and that she is only silent because women are not allowed to speak (134-135). This scene mirrors what later happens to Sītā when she is banished from Rāma's kingdom because she has forcibly lived with Rāvaṇa, with the difference that Sītā decides not to remain silent. Similarly, in Pattanaik's (2013a) work, Rumā, the wife of Sugrīva and later of Bāli, states that her husbands take women for vengeance

and to gain territories and that she is the one who ends up suffering, even though nobody hears her voice (178).

Other times, female characters are outspoken victims, even though their complaints appear only after long periods of silence. This is clear in instances involving Mandodarī. In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, she complains to her husband Rāvaṇa that she, like other women, has been silenced by men and has accepted everything they have done for their selfish reasons (412). Kané (2016) writes that Rāvaṇa and Mandodarī often fight, with the latter being the one who does not mince her opinions and provides a rational counterpoint to Rāvaṇa's uncontrollable emotions (150-151). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Rāvaṇa states that Mandodarī is the wisest woman in his life, but that he, being less wise, does not always pay heed to her counsel (176).

The concepts of silence and voice and how they are associated with power have been relevant in scholarly works on gender studies. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) accuses the West of "epistemic violence", that is, of constituting the colonial subject as *Other* (76), and of silencing it. Although heterogeneous in origin, this *Other* was constructed by the male elite. Spivak states that, as Indian men were constructed as silenced others, Indian women were doubly "otherised" and silenced by colonial men, colonial women, and by Indian men. For this reason, if one were poor, black and female, then one would be subaltern in three different ways (90).

Even though silence usually seems equated with traditional female roles and voice with modern ones, most depictions of femininity in the contemporary retellings tend to focus mainly on traditional traits. In any case, the contemporary retellers try to modernise them. One of the traditional female roles on which the retellers focus is the ability of women to generate new life. Male authors tend to describe this ability in social terms and relate it to the concept of the family. In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Kauśalyā feels downcast because she is a childless woman in a culture which values women for their ability to produce heirs (17). Similarly, in Pattanaik's (2013) retelling, sage Viśvāmitra states that a woman enables the rebirth of a family, given that she holds the promise of a new generation (52). The female retellers tend to focus more on the individual, joyful experience of birth, as both Kané's Śūrpaṇakhā and Divakaruni's Sītā describe pregnancy and childbearing as intimate moments which are emotionally relevant to the child-bearer and not only to the family or society.

While both male and female retellers try to give primacy to women, the characters in the retellings are always said to be more eager to have male children. Scholars point out that ancient Indian texts who deal with the issue state that the main goals of women and marriage is the production of a male child (Goldman and Goldman, 2017: 43; Vanita and Kidwai, 2020: 66). In the same way, in Tripathi's (2015) novel, before Rāma is born, his mother states that she hopes she will give birth to a boy (11). In Kané's (2016) version, Kaikasī wishes for the most powerful and wise boy to conquer the world and, when Śūrpaṇakhā is born instead, Kaikasī states that her daughter has cheated her of her plans (1). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, begetting a male child is regarded as desirable because Sītā's mother tells her that Mithilā can only be ruled by a man, given that no woman is strong or wise enough to rule it (14). In a later passage, Rāma dreams about what he will do together with his son. He thinks about riding horses, practicing archery and hunting in the forest, all of which are traditionally male past-times. Sītā asks him what would happen if she gave birth to a girl instead. Rāma hesitates and concludes that he could do the same things. In her role as the narrator, Sītā states that, "deep down, I knew it was a male child I was carrying" (289-290). It is not stated why she thinks and wishes so. In the contemporary retellings, there are no real instances of the opposite case: excerpts in which begetting a female child is said to be preferable.

Women are also often said to possess the ability and duty to perform household chores. Pattanaik (2013) associates this role with the previous one when writing that, beside bringing the promise of a new generation, women also bring new food, [178] a new culture and new thoughts that "enrich" the husband's household (61). As this is part of the tale, it is not clear whether this is supposed popular imagination, an extract or paraphrasing of some retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* or simply Pattanaik's interpretation and/or creation. Elsewhere, the author hints that there are intrinsic differences between the authoritative versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* written by men and the non-authoritative oral versions by women. According to him, the former tend to be concerned with grand ideas of war and leadership, traits associated with masculinity, while the latter tend to focus on domestic rituals and household issues (xix), that is, on traits associated with femininity. Indeed, Pattanaik's explanation seems to work for the contemporary

[178] Out of the many common epithets to refer to ideal housewives in India one of the most common has been *annapūrṇā*, formed by the Sanskrit terms *anna*, "food", and *pūrṇā*, "full of, filled with", therefore "full of food" or, more idiomatically, "provider of abundant food".

retellings written by the three male and two female authors I analyse. Giving shape to these ideas, in one of his stories, Pattanaik writes that Sītā's father never knew of the world that was the kitchen and her mother of the world that was the court. Accordingly, Sītā is said to have quickly "found her feet along the kitchen" (22). When Rāma is exiled to the forest and Lakṣmaṇa accompanies him, Sītā worries about who will feed them, provide them with water and make their bed (135). Indeed, judging from most descriptions in contemporary retellings, it seems as if men are as capable of fighting in grand wars as they are incapable of making their beds.

Dikakaruni's descriptions of household chores reveal how, rather than rejecting them as feminine or regarding them as insignificant when compared to grand issues associated with male roles, she tries to recreate them as very positive endeavours. Sītā states that Rāma appreciates her for the features that he considers domestic and womanly and does not realise how important and intricate they are and how they require deep intelligence of the heart (256-257). Often, everyday chores acquire a bigger social role. When Rāma and Sītā come back from the exile in the forest and find a chaotic Ayodhyā, it is Sītā who organises the kingdom and gets the palace back into shape (273-275). Similarly, Kauśalyā, who is described as the most conservative female character in Divakaruni's version, is said to find great satisfaction when her husband Daśaratha lets her fuss over him, lay out his clothes and fix his favourite dishes (67). However, Daśaratha often ignores her. For thar reason, Sītā devises a plan to help Kauśalyā get due attention. She tells Daśaratha that she, Sītā, wants to cook for him "with her own hands" (72). During the meal between Daśaratha and Rāma, Kauśalyā stays in the background. Daśaratha praises Sītā's skill and states that she has the brain of a "warrior" (*Ibid.*), equating for no apparent reason Sītā's traditional feminine traits with a traditionally masculine one. It is clear that, while *warrior* traditionally means a male combatant engaged in a physical war, here it is meant to mean "strong-willed, determined".[179] On another occasion, mimicking this meal, Sītā asks Daśaratha whether

[179] This is also a positive clichéd meaning that the term "warrior" has gained in new spiritualities, which, as I have shown, is also a relevant kind of discourse for Pattanaik and Tripathi. Some titles which show this would include: Dan Millman's several books about the "peaceful warrior", such as his 1980 *Way of the peaceful warrior: A Book That Changes Lives*, Bhakti Tirtha Swami's (1996-2006) collection *Spiritual Warrior I-VI*, John-Roger's (1998) *Spiritual Warrior: The Art of Spiritual Living*, Paul Brecher's (1999) *The Way of the Spiritual Warrior*, Quin Sherrer and Ruthanne Garlock's (2010) *The Spiritual Warriors Prayer Guide: Find Breakthrough in Any Situation*, Jock Brocas' (2011) *The Book of Six Rings: Secrets of the Spiritual Warrior,* Ana Werner's *(2020) The Warrior's Dance: A Seer's Guide to Victorious Spiritual Warfare,* Ashok Kumar Malhotra's (2021) *Wisdom of the Tao Te Ching: The Code of a Spiritual Warrior*, Emma Stark and other's (2021) *Lion Bites: Daily Prophetic Words That Awaken the Spiritual Warrior in You!*

he allows Kauśalyā to join them. Sītā and Rāma "school" Kauśalyā by telling her to dress with simple elegance, to stay in the background, to have no intense conversations, to say nothing about the dishes she cooks and to enjoy the moment with no expectations (73). The meeting turns out to be successful. Daśaratha and Kauśalyā get closer and Rāma ends up saying that Sītā is a "miracle worker" (*Ibid.*). Divakaruni's Sītā is said to operate deep changes in women's condition by making Daśaratha pay attention to Kauśalyā. However, it could be argued that she simply helps Kauśalyā behave according to patriarchal rules.

In his tendency to assimilate gender roles, Tripathi (2015) makes Lakṣmaṇa say to Sītā that she may discuss war strategies (a male role) with Rāma, while he attends to the "womanly chores" of cooking. Sītā answers that there is nothing womanly about cooking and that men figure among the best chefs of India (337). In fact, one could argue that the fact that professional cooking has tended to be a male-dominated profession[180] despite the fact that cooking has been a female chore in most traditional societies would probably present a better argument in support of patriarchy than for equal gender roles. Tripathi also depicts some women as too domestic and unaware of the reality of the outer world. Sītā's sister Ūrmilā embodies this role most clearly. When Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā are exiled into the forest, Ūrmilā expresses her wish to go with them in order to cook the most divine meals so that the exiled may return fat and healthy from their "fourteen-year holiday" (316). As I shall demonstrate, Tripathi's Sītā embodies a clearer modern female ideal.

[180] HARRIS, Deborah A. and GIUFFRE, Patti (2015). *Taking the Heat: Women Chefs and Gender Inequality in the Professional Kitchen*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

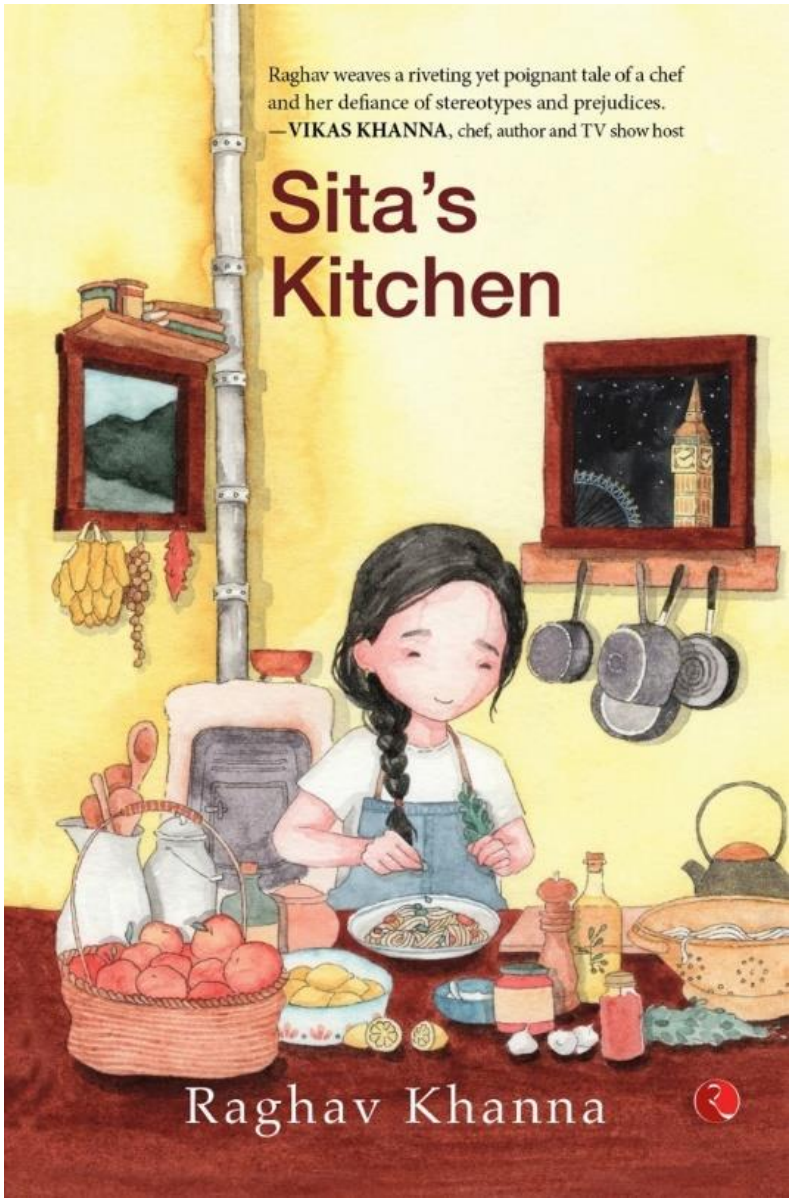


Figure 29 - Cover of Raghav Khanna's (2021) *Sita's Kitchen*

Figure 29 shows the cover of Raghav Khanna's (2021) novel *Sita's Kitchen,* which plays with the ideas I have discussed. This is not an adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It tells the story of a male Indian chef who works in London and who comes to a village in India on a business trip. There, he comes across Sītā, an excellent cook of "authentic" food. Sītā starts learning modern cooking skills and becomes a great chef.

Khanna, a male author, tries to modernise the notion of Indian femininity, shifting it from the private kitchen in a remote but "authentic" Indian village to the world of male-dominated *haute cuisine* in cosmopolitan but "inauthentic" London. Sītā is depicted alone and wearing casual clothes in what looks like the kitchen of a private home, even though one can see London's landscape in a window or picture hanging on the wall. Khanna envisions a world in which women play their traditional roles, though with a modern outlook. In the end, Sītā is cast as a "neo-traditional" woman.

The last examples show how the home has traditionally been regarded as the female realm. Pattanaik (2013a) speaks of the threshold quality of the household, which separates the "domesticated inside" from the "wild outside" (67). While Pattanaik's description sounds like a general cultural one, Chatterjee (1989) refers to the division

which anticolonial Indian nationalists made between the inner spiritual world of the home (*ghar*)[181] and the outer profane world of material gain (*bahira*, literally "outside") (624-630). Elsewhere, Chatterjee (1993) argues that nationalists developed and popularised an ideology whereby women were responsible for protecting the spiritual essence of national culture at home and keep it away from bad Western influences. In short, the dichotomy between the home and the world[182] has been associated with women and men, respectively. For this reason, as the home was been associated with women and spiritual Indian values, women ended up standing for the idea of the national culture.

As the nation was projected as an extension of the family, women's role as citizens included raising children, inculcating patriotism and supporting men (Belliappa, 2013: 58-59). This notion is expressed in the Hindi expression *Bhārata Mātā,* "Mother India", a common epithet for the nation. It is also the title of one of the most famous Bollywood classic films, *Mother India* (1957), which tells the story of a single woman who struggles to raise her children in poverty and hardship,[183] as the poster of the film (Figure 30), in which Mother India is depicted as a Christ-like figure, shows.

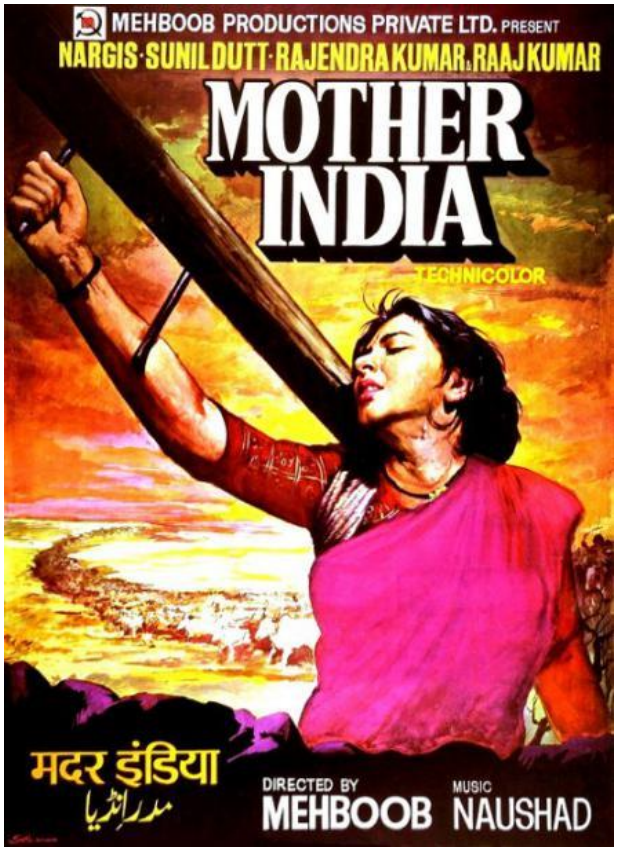


Figure 30 - Poster for Mehboob Khan's (1957) *Mother India*[184]

[181] *Gṛhalakṣmi*, "the Goddess of wealth of the household", whose first morpheme is derived from the same root of the one Chatterjee uses, is a common epithet to describe ideal housewives.
[182] *The Home and the World* (in Bengali *Ghare Baire*), is the title of a 1916 novel by Rabindranath Tagore. It analyses the dichotomy between the civilisations of the coloniser and the colonised and about the role that men and women may play in it. TAGORE, Rabindranath (2005). *The Home and the World*, London: Penguin Books.
[183] This metaphor of the Hindu nation personified as a mother and her dishonored sons has recently reappeared on the internet (Brosius, 2005: 302). See also Veer (1994: 125); Banerjee (2003: 177-178).
[184] https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050188/ (accessed on 27/6/2022).

Given these cultural constructs which circulated in both nonfiction and fiction discourses, women who have tried to go out of the inner spiritual world and enter the outer world of men have been deprived of their femininity and have faced charges of immorality (Loomba, 2019: 11). In other words, they have been described as *whores*. This relationship between women and domestic space has also been symbolised by the concept of *purdah*, which refers to the system of social gender exclusion.[185] According to this system, which, as the original Persian term (in modern Persian, *parde*) reveals, was influenced by Islam, women were supposed to be shielded from unrelated men through physical barriers, such as clothes, curtains (the meaning of the Persian term) or walls. The contemporary retellers describe Rāma's city of Ayodhyā as more sexually conservative and segregated than other places in the epic, including Rāvaṇa's Laṅkā. *Purdah* sometimes features as a marker of distinction between both cities. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā states that most Ayodhyān women from princely families do not stray far away from their husband's palaces once they marry (54), that queens do not make many public appearances (290), and that they sit in hidden places where they can see without being seen (297). She also states that she is jealous of the freedom given to men, who can go wherever they want (110). In Kané's (2016) novel, Sītā admires Śūrpaṇakhā's sexual independence and tries to tell her that she comes from a world where there is suspicion against women's power and desirability when unrestrained by male control (239-240). When, after being maimed by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, Śūrpaṇakhā covers her face and returns to Laṅkā, Rāvaṇa asks derisively when the women of Laṅkā started wearing veils for sex segregation (205).

In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, it is said that, in Ayodhyā, women are scarcer on the streets than men and that they are veiled and do not stare directly at men but only at their own feet (213). It is stated that Rāma never looks at Sītā and avoids touching her (450). The author has also mentioned the issue of widowhood and continuing devotion to late husbands, another topic of frequent discussion regarding traditional Indian society in literature and society (Sogani, 2002). Rāvaṇa comments that he has never seen such submissive women in his entire life as those of Ayodhyā. He compares widows there to those of Laṅkā and states that, contrary to the former, the latter mourn for a brief period and then carry on with their lives (Neelakantan, 2012: 215/295). Conversely, when Rāma kills Rāvaṇa and conquers Laṅkā, Mandodarī becomes a

[185] JEFFERY, Patricia (2000). *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah*, New Delhi: Manohar.

widow and is said to have to sit with great dignity and self-control (450) without being able to see daylight again (454).

Great importance is given to female celibacy and the contemporary authors resort to several mythic and historical tropes to discuss this topic. According to Pattanaik (2013a), the concept is different when applied to men and women. He describes holy men as ones who are attached to no woman (44). However, the ideal of holy women refers to ones who are attached to only one man (*Ibid.*). Therefore, the independent unchaste woman is said to threaten social stability, while the monk who fails to remain celibate does not, given that he lives independently from society (119).[186] Pattanaik's description seems to mean that, while for men celibacy is an individual choice, for women it is a social imposition which, when followed, ensures merit and divinises them. Conversely, when this sanction is ignored, that individual choice may turn women into *whores*.

Female celibacy is also said to give rise to spiritual powers. In Pattanaik's (201a) work, Hanumān states that he knows that chaste women can gain magical powers that give them control over the elements, mainly fire (201). Sītā has to undergo two trials by fire (*agniparīkṣā*) in order to prove her chastity, one after she is rescued by Rāma and another when, after rumours about her chastity start spreading, Rāma wishes to confirm the first trial. In the first instance, the god of fire *Agni* states that he cannot burn Sītā because she is pure in mind and body and fire burns only impure things (251-252). In this work, this trial has a positive representation. Conversely, in Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Sītā regards it as a "monstrosity" (459).

Fire is also related to sacrifice, specifically to the practice of *suttee*, the custom according to which widows had the social duty to leap onto their husbands' pyre (Datta, 1988). Pattanaik (2013a) tells the story of how Meghanāda's wife resorts to *suttee* after her husband is killed (233). In Neelakantan's (2012) story, Śūrpaṇakhā says that she will commit *suttee* once Rāvaṇa kills her husband Vidyujjihva, who is Rāvaṇa's enemy, and Rāvaṇa feels shocked that his sister says she will do something which is associated with his negatively represented traditionalist enemies (195). Similarly, Vedavatī, an ascetic woman whom Rāvaṇa comes across in the forest, claims that she could jump into her husband's funeral pyre and the people who would have otherwise treated her like an animal would erect temples and treat her like a goddess (215).

[186] KHANDELWAL, Meena (2004). *Women in Ochre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Pattanaik (2013: 118-119) and Kané (2016: 241) tell a story, which according to Pattanaik comes from the Baiga[187] Rāmāyaṇa, in which the idea of the fire trial is adapted to the male realm, given that Lakṣmaṇa also performs this action in order to prove his faithfulness to Ūrmilā. When he comes out of the fire uninjured, he asks Rāma whether he needs more evidence that he has been faithful in both versions, therefore making it implicit that fire is the best way to judge one's chastity. While in Pattanaik's version, Lakṣmaṇa undergoes the trial in order to prove his fidelity to Ūrmilā, in Kané version she does it to show that he is "mad about" her. In short, Kané's version underscores the topic of love, which is a central topic in both her retelling and Divakaruni's. It must also be underscored that in these two retellings Lakṣmaṇa undergoes the fire trial out of his own will, while in all contemporary retellings Sītā is asked by male characters to undergo it.

Even though womanly virtues are often symbolised by behavioural clues, desirable female features tend to rely as much on looks as male ones. However, female ideals mostly refer to beauty. Conversely, strength and propensity for violence are usually considered to be negative female traits. In Kané's (2016) novel, for instance, Śūrpaṇakhā is accused of not behaving like a girl, given that she is always fighting, squabbling and hitting boys (8). The focus on womanly beauty in contemporary popular culture in India seems to follow a global trend according to which popular images of women tend to be associated with elegance, glamour, sensual bodies and charm (Dasgupta, Sinha and Chakravarty, 2012: 7). In one study about Indian matrimonial advertisements, men are said to emphasise beauty when finding potential partners and that ideal female beauty is associated with fairness, slimness and physical attractiveness (Ramasubramaniam and Jain, 2009: 264). Rupal Oza (2006), a professor of Gender and Women's Studies, and anthropologist Susan Dewey (2008) have described the Indian Miss World Pageant as a particular instance in which women's bodies and beauty have served as conduits through which the nation has been advertised. According to the author, through this pageant, women have been valued for espousing their empowerment and conformity to traditional gender roles, fair skin, extraordinary height, and good cultural knowledge about the United States and Europe (2).[188]

[187] Tribe of Central India. GAUTAM, Rajesh K. (2011). *Baigas: The Hunter Gatherers of Central India*, New Delhi: Readworthy Press Corporation.

[188] This is clear in the documentary *The World Before her Eyes*, which follows two Indian girls. One participates in the annual beauty pageant, where she is evaluated according to global standards of beauty and intelligence. In the film, every candidate has several "teachers" who teach how to behave during the competition so that candidates

In the contemporary retellings, most desirable female characters are indeed described as tall, slim and fair-skinned. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, the shape-shifter Śūrpaṇakhā tells Rāma that she may turn tall and slim, soft and curvy and golden-haired like the pale women of North India (147). This idealisation of North Indian women also occurs in Neelakantan's (2012) work. Here, two characters comment that North Indian women have fair complexions and breasts like mangoes (202). Lau and Varughese (2015), who have conducted research on the covers of chick-lit Indian novels in English, state that such covers mostly depict attractive, fair, slim and young women in a solitary state (85). This description would fit the book covers of the novels by Divakaruni (2019, Figure 14) and Kané (2016, Figure 15), which show a young, attractive and lonely Sītā and Śūrpaṇakhā, respectively. This make it seems that these two works are, at least in visual terms, consciously inserted into this wider genre. Khanna's *Sita's Kitchen* (2021, Figure 29) also fits this category.

While male retellers acknowledge the preponderance of "mind" and "rationality", female ones tend to attach equal importance to materiality and to the fulfilment of positive emotions. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, the magic bow[189] tells Sītā that she is trapped in her body. Sītā states that she never thought of her body as a prison (45). This description provides a counterpoint to that of Rāvaṇa's "demonic body". Throughout the novel, Sītā also often mentions the pleasures of sex (65) that she enjoys with Rāma, something which is absent from the other contemporary retellings.

Looks are considered to be indicative of other female virtues. In Kané's (2016) novel, when Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa kill Tāṛakā's relatives, her rage transforms her from a beautiful and scholarly *yakṣa,* a category of mythological beings which is usually associated with nature, into a hideous and demented demon. Her beauty and mind become "disfigured" and she turns ugly in heart and appearance (147). Similarly, Tāraka tells her daughter Kaikasī that she has a "sharp tongue" which does not conform with her looks (13). Femininity, looks and behaviour are interrelated in a complex way in Kané's retelling. In one instance, this relationship is implied with respect to male characters. When Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa maim Śūrpaṇakhā, she asks herself how something so beautiful can be so wicked and cruel (Kané, 2016: 202). These

have more chances of winning the final prize. PAHUJA, Nisha (Director) (2012). *The World Before Her* [Film], Storyline Entertainment.

[189] In Divakaruni's tale, the magic bow which Rāma lifts in Sītā's wedding contest is an anthropomorphic character who often engages in dialogue with Sītā.

descriptions make it seem that being beautiful is akin to being intelligent and softspoken, while being ugly is akin to the opposite traits.

Most contemporary retellers describe women as more caring and empathetic towards others than men. In Divakaruni's (2019) story, Rāma tells Sītā that she is tender-hearted and that it is right and necessary that women should be so (56). Sītā then wonders whether kings should not be able to feel the hurt of others as women do (*Ibid.*). When Sītā witnesses Lakṣmaṇa and Rāma responding to Śūrpaṇakhā's provocations, she finds that they are cruel, given that she thinks that maybe Śūrpaṇakhā and her people do not follow the same social rules they follow (148). Sītā then criticises Lakṣmaṇa for mutilating Śūrpaṇakhā, who, in Sītā's view, is just an infatuated, happy and trusting girl (150/252). Similarly, in Pattanaik's (2013a) retelling, when Śūrpaṇakhā is disfigured, Sītā is the only one who realises that she is not an animal but a fellow human being and that, in her eyes, Rāma is the villain and she is the victim. In this case, it seems that there is not so much a focus on female emotions but more on the trait of relativism and on the idea that there is no ultimate good and evil, here conveyed through a female perspective, but, in any case, more concerned with the often-called "Indian approach". In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, when Sītā thinks Śūrpaṇakhā is dead, she feels determined to find her body and give her a proper burial (153). She wishes to do the same with other enemies whom Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa kill. However, the brothers refuse to comply and state that enemies do not deserve such respect (152). Later, when they come back to Ayodhyā, Sītā wishes to make the prejudiced citizens of the kingdom see beings of other races and realise that they are not evil, stupid or dangerous, and that they can be noble and admirable (257). When, after killing Rāvaṇa, Vibhīṣaṇa asks what should be done with the women of Laṅkā who guarded Sītā, Rāma states that they must be punished. Sītā states that they were just following orders and must be set free. Vibhīṣaṇa replies that it is magnanimous that Sītā is able to forgive her "torturers" so easily (250). In her return, Sītā is also careful enough to be hospitable to the different species she has encountered outside of Ayodhyā and to provide food for the enemies whom Rāma has defeated (275). Finally, given that her sons Lava and Kuśa, who are born in the forest after Sītā is banished from Ayodhyā, are deprived of their father's education, Sītā educates them alone and is happy that they become kind to the humans and animals around them (331).

This discourse which states that women are more empathetic than men has had an effect outside of literary representations.[190] In her comparison of nationalist and feminist movements in India, political scientist Nandini Deo (2016) discusses how the male-led nationalist movement in India has been exclusionary, willing to use violence and comfortable with using the coercive force of the state. However, according to her, the women's movement has been inclusive, given that it has shunned violence, has been more egalitarian in its hierarchy, and has been uncomfortable with seizing state power (3). Similarly, environmental activist and scholar Vandana Shiva (1988) speaks of modern science and development, whereby the "male mind" conquers "female nature", as exclusionary projects of Western patriarchy (xii-xiv). The author contrasts this approach with one adopted by local Indian women, who are said to possess an inclusive and caring attitude towards their surroundings due to the fact that they are an intimate part of the environment (37). In these scholarly cases, as in Divakaruni's novel, stereotyped representations of India and the West are dismissed and it is men who are regarded as materialist and absolutist and women as spiritual and relative. It is paradoxical that, while nationalistic discourses emphasise the relative and inclusive quality of Indian thought, the essentialised idea of femininity in these academic discourses and their reflection in Divakaruni's Sītā, more as a woman than as an Indian, sounds more relative, open-minded and inclusive than any character, male or female, in the retellings by male authors, who tend to concentrate much more on these traits of the "idea of India".

Independently of whether women are said to be heroines or villainesses, a common theme in Kané's and Divakaruni's retellings is that they tend to share some kind of relationship due to the fact that they belong to the identity category of womanhood, much like male authors, most clearly Tripathi, tend to focus on overarching ideas of Indianness and sometimes Hinduness. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, when Rāma is exiled to the forest, Sītā feels "starved" for female companionship, mainly when she meets Ahalyā (133) and Śūrpaṇakhā (142), two characters who, except for their gender, differ from Sītā in several individual and social ways. When

[190] Views which focus on extreme differences and/or similarities between men and women are often shrouded in controversy, given that such essentialising extremes may work for and against women's rights. This kind of strategy features on scientific discourses outside of India. A good example is the 1982 study *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* by psychologist Carol Gilligan. Gilligan argues that women and men have different moral concepts of the world, with the former being more empathetic and caring towards others. GILLIGAN, Carol (1982). *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Sītā writes her version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, she has a vision of several female characters from all walks of life, including Kaikeyī, Ahalyā, Śūrpaṇakhā, Mandodarī and Ūrmilā. They tell her: "write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten—or maligned and used as cautionary tales. 'Yes,' I said to them. 'Yes, I'll write your stories as best as I can, for without them, mine can't be complete.'" (4). This passage seems to mean that, despite all their differences, there is something more important than the differences which unites Sītā and all these characters: the experience of female oppression under patriarchy.

While some retellings mention the fact that Mandodarī refuses to receive Sītā in her palace after Rāvaṇa abducts her, the reasons to why she does so differ. In Pattanaik's (2013a) work, she does so because she feels that Sītā's presence may bring bad luck to the household (137). In Kané's (2016) story, though, she does it in order to protect Sītā from Rāvaṇa. Mandodarī tells Śūrpaṇakhā that, if she is able to protect Sītā or any woman, she will do so (216-219). The relationship between women is also acknowledged by male characters. In Kané's novel, when Śūrpaṇakhā attacks Sītā in the forest, both Lakṣmaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa ask her how she can make another woman suffer (203).

Again, the idea that women possess a deep connection based on the fact that they are women also plays a role in academia. In her paper *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984), a professor of Gender and Women's Studies, shows how feminist discourses have classified the interests and desires of so-called "third-world women" according to the representation of such women made by Western scholars. This image tends to consist of a simplistic concept of "the average third-world woman" (337) as a coherent group made out of different "classes, religions, cultures, races and castes" (335). The author concludes by stating that the construction of the sexually constrained, poor and ignorant third-world woman stands in contrast with that of the free, educated and modern Western woman. Western women have often felt that they have the duty to help their non-Western *sisters*, an intimate epithet one often comes across in such discourses.[191] This kind of feminist

[191] One may consider works with titles such as Sally Roesch Wagner and John Fadden's *Sisters in Spirit: Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Influence on Early American Feminists* (2001), Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall and Linda Gordon's *Dear Sisters: Dispatches From The Women's Liberation Movement* (2001), Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer's *Sisters of the Revolution: A Feminist Speculative Fiction Anthology* (2015), Sydney Thorne's *Mary Ward: First Sister of Feminism* (2021), Elora Shehabuddin's *Sisters in the Mirror: A History of Muslim Women and the Global Politics of Feminism* (2021), Stephanie Chinn's Here Sister, *Let Me Help You Up: Messages of Sisterhood,*

discourse is similar to Orientalist representations of East and West. The *white man's burden*, the expression made famous by Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), turns into the *white woman's burden*. This attempt to unite all women under the same overarching identity is also a characteristic of identity politics and one of the traits of the contemporary English-language of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, who tend to try to unite their readers under the same "idea of India", Hinduism, or femininity, while mostly bypassing other identities. Perhaps this happens because, while not privileged middle class Western writers like the ones Mohanty describes, Divakaruni and Kané are in any case privileged middle class Indian writers. While they are both Indian and female, as Sen (2006) argues in *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, everybody belongs to many identities and the complete social person emerges as the conjunction of all those identities and not of just one or, in this case, of two of them (xi-xiv). In the end, Indian feminists, a category in which Divakaruni and Kané are included, may have used discursive techniques which remind one of similar ones used in nationalistic discourses, particularly when looking at the past in order to exalt the status of female mythological characters and to criticise them through a modern feminist lens (Gangoli, 2007: 124-125). However, one may also argue that they try to reform ideas of femininity through the stories and characters which some of their readers know best and which, for that reason, are more relatable, influential and, for these reasons, more likely to influence their worldviews.

3.3.1 The idea of Sītā

With one major exception, Sītā is represented by all contemporary retellers as an active and resourceful character who shows moderate decorum in public situations. Great emphasis is put on her ability to think and make important decisions. Pattanaik (2016) published a retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* for children with the title *The Girl Who Chose: A New Way of Narrating the Ramayana*. In it, the author lists five important choices that Sītā makes throughout the epic. In Tripathi's (2015) novel, for instance, contrary to what happens in any other retelling, Sītā "decides" that Rāma will be the victor of her wedding contest (*svayaṃvara*) because she has fallen in love with him. For that reason, she trains him to win the competition. Conversely, Śūrpaṇakhā, described as a villain, is negatively impressed that Rāma lets Sītā make decisions for

Self-Care, and Body Love (2021), and Courtney Daniella Boateng and Renée Kapuku's *To My Sisters: A Guide to Building Lifelong Friendships* (2023).

him (344). Much like *sister* has become a term of endearment between women in feminist discourses, *choice* has become a term of freedom, independence and empowerment.[192]

As I said in relation to Divakaruni (2019) when introducing her life and work, these new views on Sītā are attempts at "correcting" popular interpretations and to show that the real Sītā was not counter-ideal when interpreted through a modern lens. This means that popular interpretations are regarded as inventions, fabrications or corruptions, a discursive strategy which, as I have said, has been common in recent English-language works about the Indian epics which I do not analyse in detail. Divakaruni, who, like Pattanaik, prizes the diversity of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, does not resort to the Hindu nationalist technique of valuing the Vālmīki's version above all others. In fact, in her novel, Sītā states that Vālmīki did not describe the epic correctly and that she sees her own version as "a record of the truth" (351). In the following passage, it is clear that the "record of the truth", at least the truth about the female characters of the epic, can only be described and understood by another female character, a description which underscores the importance of voice and of giving the voice to those who are being represented. In the beginning, she talks to Vālmīki, who states about his version of the epic:

> 'I wrote what the divine vision showed me,' he [Vālmīki] said.
>
> 'It must have been a god that brought it to you, then, and not a goddess,'
>
> I said drily. 'For you haven't understood a woman's life, the heartbreak at the core of her joys, her unexpected alliances and desires, her negotiations where, in the hope of keeping one treasure safe, she must give up another'(2).

It does not come across as self-evident why Pattanaik (2013a) gives the title *Sītā* to his major retelling, given that he does not focus on her. The cover of the book (Figure 8) does not even show the "real" Sītā. It shows Rāma sitting beside the "ideal" golden doll which he always keeps next to him. In any case, Pattanaik, like Divakaruni, often

[192] One may considers works with titles such as Angela Bonavoglia, *The Choices We Made: Twenty-Five Women and Men Speak Out About Abortion* (1991), Rosalind Pollack Petchesky's Heather Remoff and Heather Trexler Remoff's *Sexual Choice A Woman's Decision: Why and How Women choose the Men They Do as Sexual Partners* (2000), Gloria Feldt's *The War on Choice: The Right-Wing Attack on Women's Rights and How to Fight Back* (2004), Grace Cornish's *10 Good Choices That Empower Black Women's Lives (*2010), Sophie Gilbert's *On Womanhood: Bodies, Literature, Choice* (2023). The term is stereotypically associated with the feminist slogan "my body, my choice", which is often used to discuss the abortion controversy, and is also the title of a 2019 book (*My Body, My Choice*) by Robin Stevenson.

states that Sītā is a more active and independent character than the demure and obedient wife of traditional narratives (83/135). In one passage, Rāma accuses her of never listening to him, given that she has gone to the forest when he has told her to stay at the palace, has stepped out of the hut when he has told her to stay inside, and has insisted on performing the fire trial when he has tried to free her from her wifely duties (274). It is precisely due to this rebelliousness that Rāma decides to build a golden statue, an ideal Sītā "pure as gold" (300).

In one chapter of Pattanaik's retelling adapted from the Sanskrit *Adbhutarāmāyaṇa,*[193] when Rāma finds an enemy, Sītā turns into a monster with wide red eyes, red skin, unbound hair and many arms. She picks several weapons and kills the enemy. Pattanaik adds that everyone who is present realises then that Sītā is Gaurī and Kālī. The former is said to be the benign form of the Indian Goddess, while the latter is the goddess' fiercest form, one that is usually depicted with a necklace of human skulls and drinking blood (253-254). In other books on Indian mythology, Pattanaik often mentions the triad Gaurī, Durgā and Kālī as three different aspects of the deity, depending on her level of "domestication", a term which the author often uses and which can be interpreted as belonging to the "domestic" realm, as is common in patriarchal societies, or as belonging to "human culture" or, more specifically, to Indian culture, which, as I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, is the sense Pattanaik has most often attributed to this term.[194] In this retelling, Pattanaik states that Durgā stands between the bride Gaurī, the most domesticated, and the warrior Kālī, the least domesticated (242).[195] This discourse conforms with descriptions of Hindu goddesses as benign protective deities who sometimes erupt into destruction in order to confront evil. After this metamorphosis, Sītā "had allowed herself to be rescued. She was the independent Goddess who had made Ram the dependable God" (253-254). In a later passage, Sītā tells Lakṣmaṇa that Rāma is dependent because he is bound by social rules and reputation, while she is independent, able to do as she pleases and love him despite the social circumstances (278). Through his choice of words, Pattanaik inverts the more

[193] Another version of the epic attributed to Vālmīki. GRIERSON, George A. (1926). "On the Adbhuta-Ramayana" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London*, Vol. 4, Nº. 1, pp. 11-27.

[194] PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2000). *The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the Eternal Divine*, New Delhi: Inner Traditions; Pattanaik (2006).

[195] Another dichotomy which Pattanaik (2013a) focuses on is that between Durgā, the strength that one gets from outside and that is granted through tools, rules and property created by humans, and Śakti, the strength that one gets from inside and which nature confers on us, a gendered instance of the materialism/spirituality dichotomy. Rāma states that, as he and Sītā have lived in the midst of nature for so long, they have learned to value Śakti and not Durgā (172).

common idea according to which men are independent and women dependent. Here, women are not only guilty of being abducted and/or raped. They do it on purpose so that their male saviours may prove their masculinity and their social bondage to them.

Despite descriptions of frenzy and independence, most of the times Pattanaik seems to try to strike a balance between modern and traditional ideas. He often depicts Sītā as the devoted Hindu wife concerned with domestic activities. In one passage, when Sītā is in Rāvaṇa's garden, the women of Laṅkā wonder why she feels equal to men while insisting on walking behind her husband. Sītā tells them that those are social rules which are artificial, contextual, functional and necessary (146), which I interpret to mean, while at the psychological level men and women are the same, at the material one they are not. She later shows great devotion and sacrifice when she is banished from Ayodhyā and teaches servants how to cook for Rāma, clean his room and prepare his clothes (276). Even though Pattanaik grafts several conflicting versions of the epic, in the end Sītā's infernal form appears only when she is confronted with the enemy *Other* and not with the men to whom she is socially bonded, no matter how inimical they may be.

Contrary to Pattanaik's novel, Divakaruni's (2019) one clearly focuses on Sītā, given that she is the narrator and is present and active in most scenes. Going against the trend of "demythologising" the epics, Divakaruni depicts Sītā as an embodied goddess, not only in her author's preface, but in the narrative itself. This means that her actions may be regarded as *charters* for the actions of real women. Even though she sometimes contradicts people who call her "goddess" (7), Sītā says that she feels she is not an ordinary person (27) and that most of her actions belong to the goddess (45). Similarly, the magic bow tells her that it is imparting his strength to her because she is "obviously" (28) a goddess who will need strength for her sacrifice and the many battles she will fight (27). Sītā is therefore described as a Christ-like figure who will "save the world" (*Ibid.*), not through active engagement with the world, but through sacrifice.

Divakaruni also tries to describe a more independent Sītā than most retellings, at least nominally. She is said to be able to untangle "knotty situations" (37) and to be able to save herself (245). She describes herself as "unusually stubborn" (25), given that she questions meaningless age-old customs, such as the fact that her kingdom can be ruled only by a man (14). She also states that her mother is the *de facto* ruler of Mithilā, given that she is sharper of intellect and clearer of vision than her father and as she balances kindness with justice (9). After her wedding contest, Rāma refuses to

marry her so that his brothers will not become jealous. Sītā speaks her mind, stating that his refusal would disgrace her family (36). She then becomes horrified at her impudence, given that women are not supposed to speak in such a way about their marriage, and fears that Rāma may reject her. However, she believes she should have said something, given that marriage is a crucial moment in life (36). When Rāma obeys Kaikeyī's wish to have him exiled, Sītā states that: "Ram and I have never fought, but I was ready for it now" (105).

Divakaruni makes Sītā keep hovering between moments of independence followed by feelings of guilt. From beginning to end, Sītā states that she will become independent and later takes back her words. It is understandable what Divakaruni means by "correcting" the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Scholars tend to agree that, rather than a submissive wife, the Sītā of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is an independent minded, strong-willed and even sharp-tongued character (Goldman, Goldman and Nooten, 2009: 51). The Sītā of folklore, whom Divakaruni also quotes as a source of inspiration, is said to be even more rebellious than that of classical versions (Kishwar, 1997). Nevertheless, even though the author promises from the beginning that she will revive Sītā's truth and even though the reader, who has access to her thoughts, knows that she is not just passively accepting patriarchy without thinking about it, Divakaruni's hundred-page novel mostly consists of Sītā thinking that she will do something about patriarchy until, in the climatical last scene, she actually raises her voice and acts against Rāma.

A keyword Divakaruni often uses in relation to Sītā is *endurance*. In one of her recurrent revelatory dreams, Sītā encounters many female characters from all walks of life. They tell her that she must "*endure,* they seemed to say. *Endure as we do. Endure your challenges*" (322) (italics in the original). When Sītā wakes up, she concludes that the word *endurance* does not mean giving in to life's problems. It means dealing with them smartly until one surpasses them in strength (*Ibid.*). The concept of endurance is related to a lesson which Sītā's mother imparts to her daughter and which she initially does not accept: the fact that women are not allowed to reveal their emotions openly but must suffer in silence and speak up only at proper times. Given that, throughout the novel, Sītā suffers in silence from the most mundane to the most crucial moments, it is hard to fathom what such proper times might be. In one mundane scene, Sītā goes to Ayodhyā and Daśaratha arranges two palanquins for her and her sister Ūrmilā. Sītā wishes to accompany Ūrmilā. However, Daśaratha thinks it improper. Sītā insists, but her mother presses her arm and tells her that she must "choose her battles" and the right

time to complain (53). The theme of endurance, however, is often related to Sītā's relationship with Rāma. Such scenes are more crucial for Sītā than riding a palanquin. Sītā states that she slowly learns to choose the time and place for frank talk with Rāma (64) and to hold "bitter words" whenever she does not wish to interrupt Rāma's ideals (68). When Rāma thwarts Sītā from following him into the forest, she wants to tell him that not all women are as weak and helpless as he thinks. However, she then tells him that her "wifely duty" is to follow and take care of him (111-112). In another passage, she states that she does not mind enduring discomfort, given that she is happy to do it for Rāma (299). When she asks him to catch the golden deer, Rāma feels confused and states that Sītā does not usually demand anything (156). In the end, as the chase of the golden deer leads to her abduction, Sītā promises she will stay out of Rāma's way and will never ask anything from him again (162).

Divakaruni's Sītā is someone who is aware of how other women are treated in society and dislikes what she observes, even though she knows that she cannot change the situation completely. Rather than initiating a lost battle against patriarchy, she uses her powers to help other women and other subaltern characters. She states that she has taken a special interest in the lives of the destitute women of Ayodhyā, so she receives them in the palace, listens to their complaints, and begins helping them financially so that they may be able to start their own businesses. She also rewards employers who employ women (288). As Rāma has come to teach men against the "darkness" that Rāvaṇa embodies, Sītā feels she has come to teach women a lesson which is "quieter" but just as important (262). In the end, Sītā feels impressed when the people of Ayodhyā cheer for her, given that the majority of her work is done "behind the scenes" (306). It seems that, even when women are described as proactive, their actions are modest, quiet and stem from private spaces.

When Sītā undergoes the first fire trial, she states that she is no longer the Sītā of old, "strong and silent, patient and deep, forbearing and forgiving" (245). After the trial, her words turn out to be meaningless and her (re)actions remain unchanged. Only by the end of the novel, when Rāma asks Sītā to undergo a new fire trial, does she undergo a character arc:

> For the sake of my daughters in the centuries to come, I must now stand up against this unjust action you are asking of me. (...) I bless my daughters, who are yet unborn. I pray that, if life tests them - as sooner or later life is bound to do - they'll be able to stand steadfast and think

> carefully, using their hearts as well as their heads, understanding when they need to compromise, and knowing when they must not. (...) Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more! (357)

Similar to Rāma, who speaks of justice and mercy, Sītā says that women must balance duty with love (355). The depiction of Sītā sounds more positive than that of Rāma, given that she emphasises love, while he emphasises emotionally detached justice. As a feminist, Divakaruni favours Sītā's approach. However, this ending creates an ambiguous image for future women. Sīta's refusal to engage with patriarchy does not involve raging against prevailing social values. It involves being swallowed back into the earth and quitting society and the world.

I find the frequent disparity between word and deed of both male and female retellers relevant. While the male retellers frequently laud Indian civilisation and Hinduism as inclusive and tolerant, Divakaruni's Sītā is the most inclusive and tolerant character of all retellings, given that she is the one who most clearly helps subaltern characters such as other women, lower-castes and even inimical species and does not only let them fend off for themselves individually according to neoliberal rules. However, while Divakaruni writes in her author's preface that her and the original Sītā are not silent, demure and long-suffering, in fact she is so throughout most of the novel. Historian of modern India Sumit Sarkar (1996) calls the tendency to recreate Sītā as a more palatable modern woman while at the same time imposing limits on her as "deferential assertion" (284), which means showing one's intention to reveal indignation, albeit in a self-controlled way which ultimately thwarts one from revealing any indignation at all. Divakaruni's depiction of Sītā conforms with general descriptions of what some scholars call the "new Indian woman"[196] and which I previously called the "neo-traditional" woman. The new Indian woman is said to be an ambivalent character who is modern and urbanised but also rooted in tradition, that is, who is not completely Westernised. New Indian women are allowed to follow their modern desires according to formal "adjustments" which ensure that such desires do

[196] RAJAN, Rajeswari Sunder (1993). *Real and Imagined Women. Gender Culture and Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge; MANKEKAR, Purnima (1999). *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics. An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood and Nation in Postcolonial India*, Durham: Duke University Press; Thapan (2004: 415-416); LAU, Lisa (2006). "The New Indian Woman: Who is she, and what is 'New' about her?" *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 29, pp. 156-171; LAU, Lisa (2010). "Literary Representations of the 'New Indian Woman': The Single, Working, Urban, Middle Class Indian Woman Seeking Personal Autonomy" *Journal of South Asian Development*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 271-292; DHAWAN, Nandita Banerjee (2010). "The Married 'New Indian Woman': Hegemonic Aspirations in New Middle-class politics?" *South African Review of Sociology*, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp. 45-60.

not disrupt patriarchal values (Dhawan, 2006: 56). Accordingly, Arti Dhand (2008), an expert on the Hindu epics, states that readers of modern renditions should not feel that they are reading women's perspectives, given that bold and powerful women tend to represent male ideals of femininity (14-15).[197] Other scholars advocate that Sītā may represent a traditional Indian approach applicable to both genders. Sītā's way of dealing inwardly with her problems is usually regarded as acceptable for both men and women in ancient and modern India (Sutherland, 1989: 79). As I have shown, one of the commonest representations of Rāma is also that of a perfectly rational man who never lets his actions be influenced by external factors. This means that Indian women may not endorse patriarchy when they take up Sītā as their role model, given that she may be seen as a person whose sense of social duty is superior to that of Rāma (Kishwar, 2001: 304). Divakaruni seems to aim for this kind of representation, given that she clearly represents Sītā as a more human and relatable character than her love interest.

While Divakaruni values female virtues and opposes them to typical male ones, Tripathi (2015) depicts female characters as stereotypical male warriors. In my view, while it is clear that Tripathi tries to improve women's representations, the fact that he basically represents them as indistinguishable from men makes him a representative of Dhand's idea of male representations of femininity. In her first appearance in his novel, Sītā, who in this novel is the "prime-minister" of Mithilā, is seen catching a thief. She is said to have a lean and muscular physique and to look like a "warrior in the army of the Mother Goddess" (230-231). Lakṣmaṇa suggests to Rāma that they help her. However, Rāma states that Sītā has the situation under control, which means that she is independent. When Sītā manages to defeat the thief, she turns to his partners and playfully asks whether anyone else wants a "cracked rib, free of charge" (232). Here, there is no complementarity between the domestic and the outside worlds. The world of the warrior is shared by both genders, given that Sītā tells Rāma that bows and arrows are his "thing", while "swords and spears" are hers (327).

[197] Due to the conservative nature that Sītā sometimes has in popular imagination, she is sometimes disregarded as a model for modern feminists. Feminist author Ira Mukhoty (2017) does not include her in her study *Heroines: Powerful Indian Women of Myth & History*. However, she includes Draupadi, the main female character of the *Mahābhārata*, given that Draupadi is often considered to be a less meek character. MUKHOTY, Ira (2017). *Heroines: Powerful Indian Women of Myth & History*, New Delhi: Aleph. *Song of Draupadi*, Mukhoty's first novel, is a retelling of the *Mahābhārata* from the perspective of Draupadi, just like Divakaruni's (2008) *The Palace of Illusions*. MUKHOTY, Ira (2021). *Song of Draupadi*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.

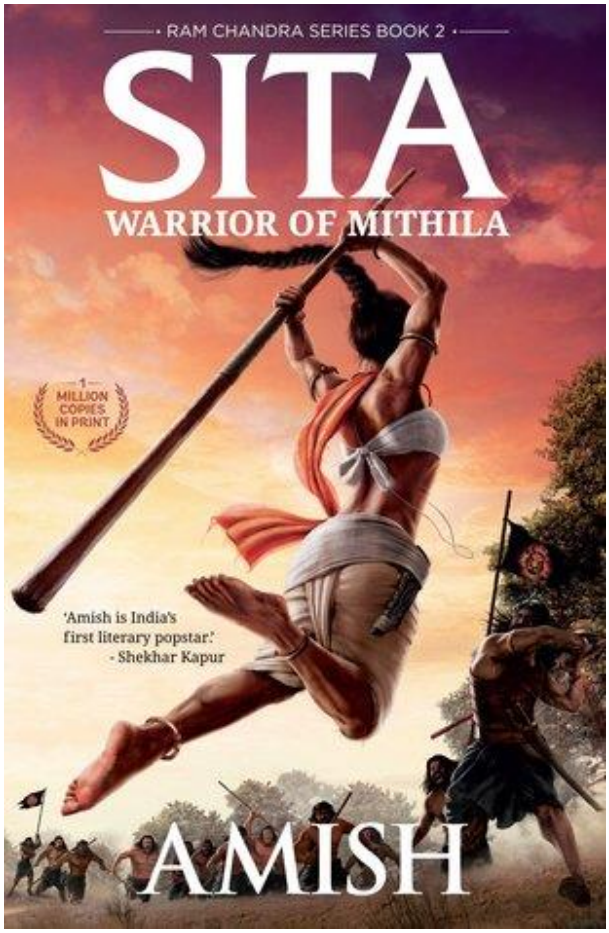


Figure 31 - Cover of Amish Tripathi's (2017a) *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*

Sītā's masculinity is emphasised by the title and cover of *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017a) (Figure 31), the second instalment in Tripathi's *Ram Chandra* series. The cover shows a slim and muscular girl jumping and holding a huge club in her hands. She is about to fight against a group of male warriors. As Tripathi's Sītā is distinguished from Rāma (Figure 11) and Rāvaṇa (Figure 27) only due to her clothes and hairdo, she looks more warrior-like than in representations in which she appears quiet and lonely (Figure 14) or performing "womanly" chores in private spaces (Figure 31).

The tendency to hyper-masculinise female characters confirms gender binaries, given that courage and activism are often equated with manliness (Loomba, 2019: 17). By turning ideal women into men, Tripathi follows a common nationalistic strategy. In modern India, men are often considered to be in charge of the movement to "free women", a strategy to control the feminist movement and to make the Indian movement seem different from the Western one (Narayanan, 1999: 29). Deo's (2016) work shows how nationalism and feminism have been close cousins in India, given that both kinds of discourse stemmed from the same root as a means of protest against colonial rule (38).

Tripathi's hypermasculine characterisation is achieved to a much more modest extent in Divakaruni's (2019) novel, mainly in the first pages and chapters, which, again, makes the tone of Divakaruni's development part contrast with both the beginning and the climax. Sītā's mother asks her whether she wants to have secret lessons on martial arts and Sītā answers that she "loved the idea of being a warrior" (9). Contrary to most male characters in Tripathi's works, who often enjoy displaying martial skills to prove

their strength, Sītā learns and uses such skills only for purposes of self-defence and uses only her body as a weapon (80). In this way, she feels better prepared to face the "wild world" (10), that is, the world outside of her domestic space. When Śūrpaṇakhā tries to attack her, contrary to what happens in the other contemporary retellings, Sītā defends herself by kicking Śūrpaṇakhā's legs from under her and, while Śūrpaṇakhā is off balance, by delivering several punches to her stomach (229). Again, Sītā's empowerment seems useful when she is defending herself from the enemies coming from the wild world and not from the allies from the domesticated world.

A similar description is made in regard to Kaikeyī, who, after Śūrpaṇakhā, tends to be the less ambiguously evil female character in contemporary retellings. In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Daśaratha states that he enjoys his "verbal battles" with her in the same way he enjoys physical battles with warriors and that her sharp words can "even draw blood" (307-308), another association of a female character with the traditionally male martial world. Even though in Divakaruni's (2019) story Kaikeyī is a villain and Sītā a heroine, there are several parallelisms between them. Both are trained in martial arts. However, Kaikeyī uses such skills to attack, a tendency which Divakaruni portrays as negative. Kauśalyā, the most conservative female character in the novel, calls Kaikeyī's actions "barbaric" and "unwomanly" (87-88). In any case, Kaikeyī is described as the most powerful person in the palace. For that reason, Sītā learns from her how to use power (49-50), even though, again, during the rest of the novel Sītā uses power in a much more moderate and socially acceptable way.

Apart from Sītā and Kaikeyī, other minor woman characters are depicted in a similar manner to male ones in Tripathi's (2015) novel. Samīcī, the police and protocol chief of Mithilā and a character invented by the author, is described as a short-haired, tall, dark-skinned and muscular woman bearing on her body the "scars of honour from battles well fought" (242). Another female character who undergoes a radical metamorphosis is Mantharā. Usually described as the ugly and wicked maidservant who encourages Kaikeyī to ask Ayodhyā's throne for her son Bharata and to exile Rāma to the forest, in Tripathi's retelling she is a self-made businesswoman and the wealthiest and most powerful merchant in India (105) or, in other words, the stereotypical neoliberal ideal of the "leader", about whom I shall have more to say in the next chapter.

Neelakantan's (2012) description of Sītā provides an interesting contrast to Divakaruni and Tripathi's one. Following the author's common discursive and

narrative strategy, much like he describes Rāma as blindly following the Brahmins, he inverts the typical contemporary representations and describes Sītā as a conservative woman who blindly conforms with patriarchal values. Sītā complains to Rāvaṇa that, in her culture, women are worshipped as goddesses and have morals, while in Laṅkā woman are loud, move around unveiled and intermingle with men chosen by them, instead of being obedient to their fathers. In other words, Neelakantan's Sītā regards Laṅkān women as whores. In her view, such women are "creatures of pleasure" and so are men, which means that in Laṅkā "men are like women" (436) and vice-versa. Neelakantan's Sītā advocates a world in which women are biologically and culturally segregated. As these values do not conform with modern urbane ones, Sītā, like Rāma, functions as a stereotype of the cultural wrongs stereotypically associated with negative representations of traditional India.

3.3.2 The idea of Śūrpaṇakhā

Sītā is often considered to be the opposite representation of femininity of Śūrpaṇakhā. Both are regarded as common types of women in world folklore and mythology. Sītā is "good, pure, light, auspicious, and subordinate", while Śūrpaṇakhā is "evil, impure, dark, inauspicious, and insubordinate" (Erndl, 1991: 82). The former may be regarded as the female version of the *Maryādā Puruṣottama,* the submissive wife who knows her boundaries, while the latter is the over-sexualised woman who freely vents her feelings and desires. One may associate stereotypical representations of Sītā with the idea of the *angel/goddess* and of Śūrpaṇakhā with that of the *whore*.

While both male heroes and villains are praised for their virile looks and physical feats, the situation with female characters is different. Sītā is unambiguously praised for her beauty. Śūrpaṇakhā's description, however, tends to be ambiguous in different retellings (Pattanaik, 2013a: 126), possibly because the species she belongs to is often regarded as a shapeshifting one. In contemporary globalised popular culture, morality and appearance are often correlated. Besides morally virtuous, heroes and heroines are often depicted as handsome and beautiful, while villains and villainesses are often depicted as ugly. In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā is beautiful and her skin is as white as snow (340). In Neelakantan's (2012) one, she is dark and plump (194) and is said to be the ugliest creature her father has ever seen (17-18). In Divakaruni's (2019) version, she is a shape-shifter who can go from extreme beauty to extreme ugliness (148), even though she is said to be originally ugly.

Figure 32, a drawing of Śūrpaṇakhā made by Pattanaik, is an example of a counter-ideal of beauty. This is a common way of depicting this character in iconography and may be aesthetically contrasted with the cover of Kané's (2016) novel (Figure 15). Besides having little and dishevelled hair and pointy teeth, the character in this picture is "ungendered", given that no biological/cultural clue tells the reader that it represents a woman.



Figure 32 - Śūrpaṇakhā by Devdutt Pattanaik[198]

Modern retellings of the epic are said to portray Śūrpaṇakhā as a more complex character than the authoritative versions, given that they delve into her motivations and rethink her agency (Richman, 2008: 178), much like Divakaruni tries to do with Sītā. This seems to mean that, while in patriarchal interpretations Sītā and Śūrpaṇakhā are often opposed, in feminist ones they tend to be assimilated in their role as victims of patriarchy. Different retellers have used Śūrpaṇakhā as a medium to criticise the manipulation of women's sexuality and the justification of violence against women in Indian society (Luthra, 2014: 145). Kané (2016) follows this trend and, in many ways, her Śūrpaṇakhā is comparable to Divakaruni's Sītā, even though, in others, they are substantially different. In Kané's novel, Śūrpaṇakhā is a simple woman who wishes to lead a happy life with her husband and son but who is unable to do so because of the political games played by her brother Rāvaṇa, who kills her husband, and by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, who kill her son. Similar to Sītā in every retelling but Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā's happiness is limited by patriarchy. Contrary to Divakaruni's Sītā, Kané's (2016), however, Śūrpaṇakhā does not merely reflect upon her condition and

[198] https://devdutt.com/articles/judging-surpanakha-and-ravana/ (accessed on 28/6/2022).

decides to remain silent and passive most of the times. Her quest for revenge is active. Kané's main narrative strategy consists of the fact that, apart from the killing of her husband and child, the major twists of the epic tale are caused by Śūrpaṇakhā.

Initially, Śūrpaṇakhā educates her son to avenge her husband's death by killing Rāvaṇa. When her son is killed by Lakṣmaṇa, she turns Rāvaṇa against Rāma and her brothers against one another. She then seeks to destroy Rāma's and Sītā's life. Unlike Tripathi's masculinised Sītā, Kané's Śūrpaṇakhā is physically powerless, given that she needs to resort to male characters in order to operate her revenge. However, she is intellectually powerful, given that she can use her wits and the information she possesses in order to turn male characters into puppets, manipulate them, and fulfil her goals. Kané often emphasises such intellectual abilities in her novels. She promotes the education of women and instigates reading habits in her protagonists, who always wish to become educated and love to read books. Even though in this novel Śūrpaṇakhā is said not to excel at her studies, she has a passion for reading (79-80), a feature which is absent in all other contemporary retellings. In any case, while Kané's retelling sounds revolutionary in its depiction of feminist values, Pattanaik (2013) mentions the same plot twists caused by Śūrpaṇakhā and states that they figure in Kampar's Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa*, which, the author adds, humanises Śūrpaṇakhā by turning her into a wronged and lonely woman (123-125/271-273). In short, Kané's novel is influenced by a previous authoritative version, in this case, one which is pre-feminist, even though Kané modernises it to conform with present feminist values.

In Kané's (2016) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā is a victim of patriarchal values since early on. As a child, she complains that she is excluded from the conversations between her father and brothers, who always talk about themselves and never about her, even though she is the most filial child (35-36). As other female characters in other contemporary retellings, Śūrpaṇakhā is silenced by men. She is also victimised by female characters, including her mother Kaikasī. Kaikasī's descriptions of her daughter do not match Śūrpaṇakhā's depiction on the cover of the book (Figure 15). Kaikasī calls her a scrawny "dark monkey" (2) and states that she has neither grown in brains, height nor looks, given that she is a "stunted dwarf in every sense" (12). Later, entangling physical and mental features, she states that Śūrpaṇakhā has always been ugly in her looks and in her twisted, mean and vindictive mind (174). Śūrpaṇakhā's father Viśravas is more positive in his assessment. He says that Śūrpaṇakhā is hot-headed and impulsive like Rāvaṇa (34), that both share the same "mad passion" and that Śūrpaṇakhā equals her

brother in strength and significance (31). Due to such traits, which are contrary to the ideals of the self-controlled *angel*/*goddess*, Kaikasī accuses Śūrpaṇakhā of ruining larger social groups, starting from her family, her city and ending with her entire race (269). Instead of building a family and bringing social order, Śūrpaṇakhā causes chaos. It is as a result of this capacity for destruction due to unrestrained feelings that she has been regarded as less than ideal.

In fact, Śūrpaṇakhā herself acknowledges that her desire for revenge has turned her into a "monster" (282). Due to her looks and actions, she is called names such as "witch", "devil" and "monster" and adjectives such as "unvirtuous" or "ruttish" (201). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Rāma calls her an "immoral, unnatural creature" (149). In Kané's (2016) version, the repeated mention of such epithets affects Śūrpaṇakhā in such a way that she starts believing in them (8-9). In one scene, she looks at the mirror and sees that she is a "dark, skinny, gangly chit of a girl with a burgeoning bosom" (20). In the first chapter of the book, which is a fast-forward to Śūrpaṇakhā's next life, Kṛṣṇa tells her:

> You were born a beautiful princess Meenakshi, (…) but your wickedness turned you into a monster—Surpanakha, the woman as hard as nails…' he explained. 'Do you remember me? The man who rejected you and in your wrath you took a terrible revenge on me, my wife Sita and my brother Lakshman…?' (xiii).

The fact that Śūrpaṇakhā's uncontrollable anger is said to have turned an innocent girl into a monster reminds one of Simone de Beauvoir's (1908-1986) influential idea that gender is a kind of performance and that one is not born but becomes a woman,[199] in this case, a monstrous one, and that patriarchal values constrains the potential for female self-fulfilment.

Śūrpaṇakhā is also described with words or phrases related to the animal kingdom, which shows her symbolic bestiality. She is said to have feline features and is called by names such as "wildcat" (9), "hellcat" (11), and "tigress" (117/201). The English noun *tigress* is not an individual metaphor created by Kané. It has the fossilised meaning of "fierce or passionate woman" and does not necessarily carry a negative meaning with it.[200] Śūrpaṇakhā is also said to have "feline eyes" (69). When she marries

[199] In French, "On ne naît pas femme, on le devient". BEAUVOIR, Simone de (1949). *Le deuxième sexe*, Paris: Gallimard, p. 13.

[200] One may consider works with titles such as David DeVire's *Tail of the Tigress: Views on the Road to Gender Equality* (2016), Abhijit Naskar's *The Bengal Tigress: A Treatise on Gender Equality* (2017), Gregg Michaelsen's

Vidyujjihva, he tells her that, during the wedding she looked more like a "tigress" than like a shy bride (131). In one of her vindictive moments, Śūrpaṇakhā says that she is like the jungle's tigress and that, when trapped, she is the most dangerous and vicious of beasts (175). Her bestiality is evident in the scene in which she is attacked by Lakṣmaṇa. Her eyes are said to be wild and her long black hair is said to fall over her face, which makes her look demented (201). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā also changes her shape from that of a beautiful young maiden to that of a creature with a black and monstrous face, gigantic jaws, pulsing red eyes, hair writhed like snakes, fang-like teeth which drop a greenish poison and long and curved nails like scimitars (148/229). These textual descriptions mirror Figure 32.

In Kané's (2016) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā's proto-feminist grandmother Tāraka is the one who tries to raise her self-confidence by convincing her that she is beautiful and smarter than everyone thinks and by telling her that she should not be ashamed of her body and femininity:

> 'Never be ashamed of your body, your femininity, Meenu [Śūrpaṇakhā],' said Taraka, giving her a meaningful smile. 'Beauty should be flaunted, and don't start off that you aren't one! Beauty lies in your head and heart, you have to believe it. But for that first you have to love yourself. Love is magic (22).

Śūrpaṇakhā grows up and, whenever she feels desperate, "she recalled her Nani's words: 'love yourself, love your body, love your mind and love with your heart. Love is magic'" (77). Just as with Divakaruni's (2019) Sītā, Kané's female characters regard love as a female feeling. Similarly, both retellers focus their retellings on this feeling, which is a common topic in contemporary chick-lit (Perec, 2008: 2012). Nevertheless, while in Divakaruni's novel love makes women accept their duties, Kané's description brings to mind the concept of *self-love*, an individual feeling which enables women to improve their lives.

In the end, contrary to the usually steadfast Rāvaṇa and Rāma and similarly to Divakaruni's (2019) Sītā, Kané's (2016) Śūrpaṇakhā conforms to the idea of the caring woman. In the last scene of the novel, when she is about to finish her revenge by killing Lakṣmaṇa, his wife Ūrmilā and their son, she feels unable to do so, given that she sees

---

Unleashing The Tigress Within: How to Attract Great Men into Your Life (2020), Silvia Pettem's *In Search of the Blonde Tigress: The Untold Story of Eleanor Jarman* (2023), and Elizabeth Lev's *The Tigress of Forlì: Renaissance Italy's Most Courageous and Notorious Countess, Caterina Riario Sforza de' Medici* (2024).

in them a reflection of her family (288-289). Ūrmilā tells Śūrpaṇakhā that she is only an angry person who has been a victim of her own wrath (290-292). The idea is similar to the one which is used to describe Rāvaṇa in most contemporary retellings. If it were not for their anger, Rāvaṇa and Śūrpaṇakhā could forfeit their bestial condition and become better human beings. However, while Rāvaṇa's bestiality is unmotivated in the contemporary English-language retellings, in Kané's novel Śūrpaṇakhā's bestiality is motivated and justified. The fact that, contrary to Lakṣmaṇa, Ūrmilā can understand Śūrpaṇakhā's feelings and identify with them, shows how female characters are emotionally receptive to their own feelings and to the feelings of others. In sum, Kané's Śūrpaṇakhā revolts against patriarchy soon in *Lanka's Princess* and, in the end, is able to control her anger, while Divakaruni's Sītā is able to control her anger throughout most of *Forest of Enchantments* and only revolts against patriarchy in the end. In the end, both works seem to favour a kind of "new Indian woman" who has a modern, independent mind and is able to confront patriarchy but is also able to negotiate with it. However, it must be remarked that, while Divakaruni invariably portrays Sītā in a positive way, Kané portrays Śūrpaṇakhā as going too far in her uncontrolled rage and desire for revenge, even though both feelings come out as justified in sociocultural and narrative terms. In any case, even though Śūrpaṇakhā ultimately redeems herself, it can be said that Divakaruni's Sītā is less ambiguously depicted as a model for the new Indian woman.

3.4 The relationship between men and women

In this section, I analyse the representation of the relationship between both genders. The empathy between women described in the retellings is often contrasted with the cultural rift between men and women, with one gender usually being said to be unable to understand the other. In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Mandodarī accuses Rāvaṇa of not being able to think how women suffer (412). Similarly, in Divakaruni's (2019) work, Sītā accuses Rāma of: being unable to understand the problems of pregnancy, given that he is not a woman (141); being unable to understand the complexity of female existence (257); only caring for his male citizens; and being unable to understand the impact his actions will have on women (355).

Despite the rift between genders, complementarity is regarded as the goal of marriage. With few exceptions, which I analyse in the following section, all contemporary retellers invariably promote monogamous, heterosexual relationships.

Tripathi (2015) mentions what he calls the human archetypes of the *aryaputra*, literally "son of a noble one" (the author translates the term as "gentleman") and of the *aryaputri*, "daughter of a noble one" ("lady"), and about their union, said to be a human partnership of perfect complementarity (284). In a conversation about marriage, Rāma tells Sītā that one should get married only if one finds another person whom one admires and who might help and receive help in the fulfilment of life's purpose (245). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, the magic bow talks about the perfect connection of male and female in which both are both equal and different. This, the bow continues, allows a relationship based on love, respect and mutual knowledge of the beloved's strengths and weaknesses (28).

Complementarity in love is also described in qualitative terms. The ideal lover is regarded as someone who is as good or better than the other partner. In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Rāma states that he wants a woman who is better than him (79). In Pattanaik's (2013a) retelling, when Sītā inadvertently raises the bow of her wedding contest, her mother asks herself who will marry such a strong girl. Sītā's father responds that she will marry someone as strong or stronger (47). In most instances, however, it is the woman who complements or "completes" the man, a description which seems to hint at men's superiority. In Pattanaik's retelling, it is said that Sītā sits on Rāma's lap and that, as a result, she completes him (265). This is a common depiction in calendar art. The epigraph to one of the chapters reads that Sītā followed her husband to the forest "to ensure he never felt incomplete" (63). In another passage, Sītā compares marriage to a bow in which the man is the shaft and the woman the string, which is "needed to complete it" (82).

The wedding competition[201] which precedes the marriage of Rāma and Sītā is a key event in every contemporary retelling. In pre-modern India, this event, while apparently not a common kind of marriage, consisted of a competition whose rules were determined by the bride-to-be or her father. The winner would get the bride (Mani, 2005: c. 7). Resorting to his common strategy of representing pre-modernity as modern, Tripathi (2015) describes the competition as an ancient tradition through which the girl could "freely" choose among the prospective bridegrooms or demand some kind of competition, in which the winner would win her hand (224). Neelakantan (2012) resorts

[201] Sītā's and Draupadi's wedding competitions (*svayaṃvara*) are key narrative events in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. In the former, the suitors have to lift a divine bow. In the latter, they have to hit the eye of a suspended fish with an arrow merely by looking at its reflection in a pot of water on the ground. Tripathi (2015) describes Sītā's competition with the rules of Draupadi's one.

to his contrarian representation and, in his novel, Rāvaṇa complains about the barbarity of women being seen as commodities or prizes to be won at contests like "prized cows" in a cattle market (295). Something similar happens in Pattanaik's (2013a) version when the author describes the fire trial. When Rāma wants Sītā to undergo the trial in order to prove that she is chaste, Lakṣmaṇa reminds him that Sītā is not "a trophy to be displayed" (251).

Marriage is often associated with physical symbols. These are different for both genders and establish a visual and conceptual difference between the roles of husband and wife. The bride's jewellery is remarked as one example by Pattanaik (*Ibid.*: 66). When it comes to women, Pattanaik often mentions bonded hair as a symbol of bondage to culture and untied hair as signifying freedom (135), as happens in his drawing of Śū rpaṇakhā (Figure 32). When Hanumān visits Sītā in Laṅkā, for instance, she gives him her hairpin, which is said to be a symbol of her commitment to Rāma (195). Fine clothing is also said to be something that women have to wear in order to uphold the reputation of their husband's house (285). After Rāma defeats Rāvaṇa, Vibhīṣaṇa tells Sītā that she needs to be dressed the way the "wife of a victor" should be (238).

The retellers oppose a modern ideal of marriage as the union of two people in love with that of marriage as a political deal, which is seen as undesirable.[202] While in contemporary India arranged marriages have been historically considered superior to love ones, given that the former do not allow social boundaries to be crossed, modern love marriages are now common among the urban middle class (Kurien, 2007: 38). The dichotomy between politics and love and the focus on love relationships is attested in every retelling. In Neelakantan's (2012) retelling, politics is often said to belong to the realm of men (120/123/129). In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Rāma states that marriage is a sacred partnership between two souls and not a political alliance between two power centres. As Tripathi states in relationship to most premodern Indian cultural elements, Rāma adds that love marriages are an ancient Indian practice which should be revived (215). Pattanaik (2013a) states that the idea of falling in love is a key motif in Sanskrit literature. The author mentions that Sītā is not just the prize of a contest, given that she is in love with Rāma since their first meeting (55). While this may be true (Baldissera, 2016), the fact that Pattanaik and other retellers have treated *love* as an essence and not

[202] Pattanaik has a book on marriage, which the author calls "India's favourite ritual". PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2021). *Marriage: 100 Stories Around India's Favourite Ritual*, New Delhi: Rupa Publications India.

as a cultural fact whose parameters change through time and space may lead to the conflation of pre-modern ideas of love with modern ones. In Kané's (2016) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā also wants to marry Vidyujjihva for love. This is said to be "a privilege few have" (123). Her brother Rāvaṇa accepts the marriage for his own political gain, given that Vidyujjihva is his rival. In all contemporary retellings but Tripathi's one, Rāma goes into exile because of a boon that his father Daśaratha has granted to his wife Kaikeyī when she helped Daśaratha in war. In Tripathi's (2015) version, Rāvaṇa invades Mithilā and the only way to stop his troops is for Rāma to deploy a destructive divine weapon and later undergo some kind of punishment for it. Viśvāmitra asks Rāma whether he will use the weapon for the good of others. Rāma answers "I will do it for Sītā" (276).[203]

The role that both genders play in ideal alliances also tends to be ambiguous. In Pattanaik's (2013a) retelling, Sītā states that, if a wife does not find satisfaction in her husband, she should try to "accommodate", while he should strive to "grow" (43). Wives are expected to conform to their husbands' decisions, while husbands are expected to "grow" and take better decisions. Pattanaik, however, gives no hints as to who should evaluate such decisions. It is clear that, following the author's common strategy, it should be some impersonal psychological force. The author also discusses how fidelity is regarded in modern times as a patriarchal concept which is imposed on women, while, "for many men and women", it is an expression of love (294). As the author does not refer to any specific retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* nor to any of his usual and similarly general sources (academicians, rationalists, and left-wing or right-wing scholars), the expression "many men and women" sound like a camouflaged way to convey the author's opinion. Elsewhere, Pattanaik states that, while modern renditions focus on Rāma's banishment of Sītā, they rarely focus on the fact that he decides to remain faithful to her and never marries again. He claims that such "incomplete narratives" are often qualified as "women's perspectives" and disclose a negative representation of Rāma which has gained many admirers in the West, given that they have reinforced a particular image of India and Indians (305). One could state that Pattanaik points to an patriarchal representation of India according to which all women

[203] The marriage of Rāma and Sītā is often regarded as the ideal monogamous marriage in popular imagination. Tripathi's (2015) Rāma emphasises the fact that monogamous marriages are ideal, given that polygamy is unfair to women (215) and offensive to the wives (245). It is possible that the strong emphasis that Tripathi's Rāma puts on monogamous relationships stands in contrast with the Muslim tradition of marrying up to four wives, even though Tripathi has never written anything explicitly about this issue.

are oppressed. This is another example in which it is clear that Pattanaik steers away from his attempts at impersonality and clearly defends the Indian psychological and emotional concept of love against what the author regards as a Western view, given that the use of the subjective term *incomplete* contrasts with the implicitly *complete* Indian approach to the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Whichever way they may be defined, gender differences imply different social roles. Nationalism is considered to prescribe roles for women as bearers of the nation's children and for men as protectors of their territory and their women (Oza, 2006: 6). Divakaruni (2019) gives Sītā a panoply of roles which relate her to other social actors: "goddess, daughter, sister, lover, warrior, mother" (ix-x). Sītā herself does something similar when she describes Rāma as "monarch, father, warrior, husband" (3). Such epithets and the social duties attached to them are often related to members of the opposite gender. When describing desirable and undesirable male paradigms, every contemporary reteller is concerned with identifying what constitutes a good leader. In Divakaruni's lists, this corresponds to the role of the "monarch", which is applied to Rāma. This is the only quoted social role which seems to have no female counterpart in Sītā's epithets, even though, as Divakaruni states, women are often the *de facto* rulers acting from behind the scenes. Leadership is therefore the main male social role. In every retelling, Rāma and Rāvaṇa are or become leaders of their respective kingdoms and great attention is paid to the way they manage to bring fortune or misfortune to their subjects.

In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Rāma states: that leaders must be an example of innocence, given that only in this way shall they be apt to pronounce judgement on others (66); that they must exert self-control (94); and that they must privilege justice, even if tempered with mercy, otherwise they will be perceived as weak and their kingdom will be overrun by lawbreakers (251). As I have stated previously, both the negative trait of weakness and the positive ones of innocence and mercy are often conflated with femininity in popular imagination. In Divakaruni's view, while leaders should possess masculine traits, it is beneficial that they also possess feminine ones. This description puts great emphasis on the *Other*. What matters is to be just and merciful towards the *Other.* Accordingly, leaders must have a caring attitude.

In Tripathi's (2015) universe, *Viṣṇu,* the Hindu god of whom Rāma is considered to be an avatar, is a title given to the greatest leaders remembered as "Propagators of Good" (18) rather than a name of a specific Hindu god. According to Vasiṣṭha, a good

leader must love his country more than he loves his own soul (41). Rāma and Sītā state that India needs a leader who leads by example (73) and sacrifice (287), who uplifts his subjects so that they achieve the best of their abilities (152), and who provides balance and peace when there is too much violence and activity when there is too much passivity (*Ibid.*). While Tripathi states that strong rulers should know how to strike a balance between the masculine and feminine ways, he is not as concerned as Divakaruni with creating this balance for the sake of the *Other*. In Tripathi's description, what matters is building a strong India.

In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, it is stated that leaders who are contemptuous of death are admired (206). In one of the many popular protests depicted in the novel, the protesters say that they do not wish to have "cruel weaklings" for leaders (135). More than Tripathi, Neelakantan describes leaders as powerful warriors willing to sacrifice themselves without fearing even death. While "sacrifice" and "endurance" are key concepts to understand femininity in Divakaruni's novel, the senses in which Tripathi uses "sacrifice" and Neelakantan "contempt of death" are different from the notions associated with femininity in *The Forest of Enchantments*, which again refer to sacrifice towards the head of the household and not so much towards the nation. Nevertheless, Neelakantan's retelling has a more pessimistic view on leadership. Bhadra states that, whatever their origins or the ideals they advocate, leaders just care about their power (130). This is the main representation of Rāma and Rāvaṇa in the novel, despite the noble intentions of the latter, which the reader knows through Rāvaṇa's narration. The similar description of virile leadership in Tripathi's and Neelakantan's novel is probably the reason why the former's Rāma looks so similar to the latter's Rāvaṇa and vice-versa. Even though their roles are swapped, the hero archetype is similar. More than concerned with the state, Divakaruni is concerned with the individual members and subaltern groups which constitute the fabric of the state, even though she emphasises women.

The most well-known epithet for ideal women in North Indian cultures has been that of the *pativratā*, the wife who is entirely "submissive to her husband". Sītā is often said to be the ideal model for this role, given that she remains faithful to Rāma even in the worst circumstances, including when she is kidnapped and humiliated (Pauwels, 2008: 6-9; Wilhite, 2014: 68). One can see these values pertaining to women's roles, especially the ideal of the *pativratā* and that of the *gṛhalakṣmi* (see note 227), in an

often-quoted passage from the *Manusmṛti*, a text that has functioned synecdochically as a prescriber of traditional roles in Indian society*:*

> (...) A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house. In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons'. She should not have independence. A woman should not try to separate herself from her father, her husband, or her sons, for her separation from them would make both (her own and her husband's) families contemptible. She should always be cheerful, and clever at household affairs; she should keep her utensils well polished and not have too free a hand in spending. When her father, or her brother with her father's permission, gives her to someone, she should obey that man while he is alive and not violate her vow to him when he is dead. (Doniger, 1991: v. 146-151).

All contemporary retellers try to change this view, which clearly sounds very negative under a modern light, either by completely inverting it, as Tripathi tends to do, or by reinterpreting it in a more positive like, as Divakaruni tends to do. Like men, women are said to be socially bound to some extent, even though their duties are usually said to be different. Pattanaik (2013a) writes that Sītā is bound by "wifely obligations" (265). When she decides to follow Rāma into the forest, she is praised for choosing to be true to her role as a wife (85-86). In another passage, Pattanaik reverts to the idea that Sītā is an independent woman able to make choices. The author states that it is not clear whether Sītā follows Rāma because that is her social duty or because she loves him. In any case, following his common idea of female independence of their preference for love over duty, Pattanaik adds that, while Rāma tilts towards following social norms, Sītā tilts towards following emotions (83), which means that her choices are free and independent (145). Again, Pattanaik seems to imply that Rāma is the real unwilling victim of circumstances, while Sītā is a willing victim. Tripathi (2015), who makes women and men's roles come closer, makes Sītā remind Rāma that she is his wife and it is her duty to take care of him (264). Divakaruni (2019) also makes Sītā state that Rāma is not the only one who knows where his duties lie (45). When Sītā wishes to follow him to the forest exile and he tries to thwart her, she asks him whether her duty is not to take care of him. He answers that her duty is to obey him (116) and, as a queen, to take care of the people of the kingdom, mainly the women (288). In sum, while most contemporary retellers try to recreate male and female roles in a positive

modern light, there is a gap between such roles, even when taking into consideration that Tripathi turns Sītā into a prime-minister, given that most important social rules are taken by Rāma and not by Sītā. Men's duties are directed toward society and ideal roles tend to consist of positions of leadership. This public side tends to be absent in descriptions of women's roles, which usually consist of private duties towards one's husband, household, or, at most, towards other women.[204]

The fact that in Sanskrit texts women who transform into men often wish to remain so, while men who turn into women consider this to be a catastrophe (Vanita and Kidwai, 2020: 17-18) seems to show the literary hierarchical imbalance between both genders. The dependence of women on men is sometimes associated with the ultimate salvation of the former. In every version of Ahalyā's story in contemporary retellings, for instance, Rāma turns her from a rock into a human being once again. Something similar happens in the story of Kubja and Kṛṣṇa as told by Kané (2016) in the first and last chapter of her novel. According to this tale, due to her wickedness, Śūrpaṇakhā is cursed to be reborn as Kubja, a poor and ugly hunchback woman, an example in which an interpretation of the concept of *karma* leads to the entanglement of personality and looks. When Kubja meets Kṛṣṇa, he turns her into the stereotype of contemporary female beauty: a woman with creamy and glowing skin, firm, full breasts, a slender waist and flaring hips over slim, long legs (x), traits which describe her as sexually attractive.

Female retellers sometimes invert the dependent and independent social roles. They imply that men need their women more than women need their men (Kané, 2016: 294) and, focusing on the ever-present topic of love, that it is merely unconditional love that makes women dependent. This idea is evident in depictions of Mandodarī and Sītā. Both are depicted as brave for loving their husbands unconditionally (155). It makes sense to see Divakaruni's (2019) novel as a *Bildungsroman* in which Sītā grows up and learns about the nature of love. Sītā states that she learns her first lesson about it, the idea that love is powerful, early on in the novel (6). In the last paragraph, Sītā states that she has forgiven Rāma long ago because of her immeasurable love and compassion (358).

Bharati Ray (2005), a historian of Women Studies in India, states that, besides being described as procreative agents and as tools for men's enjoyment, two roles I

[204] These descriptions of male and female roles would also apply to Victorian Britain and to most of the Western world before the advent of contemporary feminism.

have already analysed, Indian women have been historically described as repositories of men's honour (xxxi). Men, mainly husbands and brothers, have been regarded as possessing the duty of protecting women, which is a metonymic way of protecting their own honour. Referring to this issue, Thapar (2014) writes that:

> 'Honour' becomes a euphemism for (...) control, frequently involving extreme violence against women (...) it is always the woman who has to burn (…) to prove her chastity (…) [and] in order to protect the male honour of her husband (261-262).

Pattanaik (2013a) often writes that the concept of honour is found in many cultures and is not specifically Indian or Hindu (140/252). This, he adds, is the reason why women have been seen as objects and have had their freedom denied (148). Pattanaik also states that, in many communities in India, grooms carry a sword during the marriage in remembrance of the time when women were at risk of being abducted (67), yet another symbol used in marriage in order to demarcate gender roles. This is an ethnographic symbol and not a literary one, which implies that its reality probably goes beyond the psychological dimension so often claimed by the author. While the book *Marriages in Indian Society*, edited by economist Prakash Chandra Mehta, often refers to swords, knifes and daggers being held by grooms in different kinds of Indian marriages, the reason is never the one stated by Pattanaik. In the closest description, which describes the Adiarnataka scheduled caste of Karnataka, Debabrate Mondal (2005) states that a sword to be used "to protect against evil spirit influences" (10). In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Mantharā also states that nothing disarms men like a decent woman, who must always "be honoured and protected" (103). The idea of honour seems to be one of the main reasons for the ideal of the passive wife who can restrain her emotions, given that unrestrained emotions may hurt the family (Kané, 2016: 173). The opposite idea, that is, the idea that men should be protected in order to preserve the honour of women, is not attested in any contemporary retelling. This idea has even been interpreted in a negative light. In Kané's (2016) novel, when Śūrpaṇakhā tries to defend her brother Vibhīṣaṇa, their mother Kaikasī states that he does not need her protection because he is both a boy and older than she is (5). While the character points to both gender and age, the fact that gender is mentioned in the first place implicitly makes it seem to be a more important criterion.

The idea of honour is also used to describe Sītā and Śūrpaṇakhā in the contemporary retellings. In fact, this issue constitutes the main trigger of the plot of the

most widespread *Rāmāyaṇa* versions. Sītā's abduction and Śūrpaṇakhā's defilement are seen as pretexts for the central war of the epic (Kané, 2016: 59). As a result, female characters are often represented as synecdochical symbols for a larger group, which means that their representations affect the representations of the communities they belong to, instead of as individual women. This is precisely the cultural fact that feminist retellers such as Divakaruni and Kané have been trying to change. In Pattanaik's (2013a) work, Kauśalyā states that Sītā should never suffer because she embodies the prosperity of Rāma's clan and suffering would bring misfortune to the husband's household (84). When Hanumān visits Sītā in Laṅkā and suggests that he carries her back to Ayodhyā himself, she states that Rāma should rescue her, given that his honour is at stake (196). Later, Rāma states that he has saved her for his family's sake. Sītā is considered to be a blot on his family's name, given that she has "chosen" to live under another man's roof rather than killing herself (251). Even though Sītā is pure in mind and body, she is accused of not being pure in reputation (273). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā's mother tells her daughter that the virtues she has taught her, which include self-defence, healing, kindness and righteousness, are not valued by men, given that they may hurt their pride (46). Later, when Rāma rescues Sītā, he asks whether she understands that her virtue has to be above suspicion (245).

The idea that Śūrpaṇakhā's brothers should avenge her for her defilement in order to preserve the family's honour is emphasised in several retellings (Tripathi, 2015: 350; Kané, 2016: 207/238; Divakaruni, 2019: 189). As I have stated previously, in Kané's (2016) novel Śūrpaṇakhā instigates Rāma's and Lakṣmaṇa's fury on purpose, given that she knows that Rāvaṇa will rescue her in order to regain his lost honour (191). She also provokes Rāvaṇa by asking him what people would say if he could not "defend his sister, his clan, his race... his honour?" (211). This means that she realises how important honour is for a man and how manipulating it may be a cunning strategy to destabilise social order. Kumbhakarṇa also states that he and his brothers are protective, possessive and custodial towards Śūrpaṇakhā (246) and that they act as her guardians (120). In Neelakantan's (2012) retelling, the fact that Śūrpaṇakhā is in love with an enemy of her brothers is seen as an issue which concerns the kingdom, the country, the race, and civilisation (Neelakantan, 2012: 196).

Despite the common descriptions of wives as servile to husbands, husbands are also usually said to be limited by social roles, although to a less oppressive extent. According to Pattanaik (2013a), the husband is supposed to be servile to his family,

given that Indian culture considers the family to be superior to the individual (90). While the concept of family includes one's wife, it does not include only one's wife. Accordingly, Pattanaik acknowledges that the fact that Rāma values his family more than his wife has been a cause of deep resentment to women across India (252). Throughout Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā often criticises Rāma for thinking about the good of society, while ignoring her needs (31/40/110/244). In Kané's novel (2016), the same happens when Sītā asks Rāma whether public opinion matter to him more than his wife (279). Even in Neelakantan's (2012) novel, which values Rāvaṇa's individualism and ridicules Rāma submission to the Brahmins, Rāma is not criticised as an example of masculinity, as Divakaruni's Sītā and Kané's Śūrpaṇakhā are exalted as examples of femininity. Rather, he stands for traditional North Indian values.

In sum, I would say that discourses by male authors seem more preoccupied with criticising previous, undesirable representations of femininity (Neelakantan), creating abstract, psychological ideas of this gender (Pattanaik), or assimilating female representations to male ones (Tripathi) for the sake of the positive reputation of India civilisation rather than with prizing female individuality for the sake of women themselves. In the postcolonial cultural battle between India and its *Others*, the female condition is one of the many elements which is regarded as being in need of reform for the good of the nation. This approach contrasts with the ones adopted by Kané and Divakaruni, who entirely devote their creative energies to the valorisation of Indian femininity and female individuality defined against patriarchy.

3.5 Alternative genders and sexualities

Discourses on alternative genders and sexualities (*klībatva*) are rare in the contemporary retellings. They are mentioned exclusively by Pattanaik, who is a homosexual and, as a result, regards himself as a member of the queer community he often writes about.[205] Besides legitimating his own identity, the purpose of his discourse seems to be to demonstrate that the "idea of India" as a diverse and plural culture has allowed for the existence of instances which fall out of the social ideal.

The modern ideal of monogamous heterosexual marriage in India looks similar to that of protestant Christianity. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, introduced in

[205] https://devdutt.com/my-father-cannot-be-gay/ (accessed on 14/6/2024); https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/features/devdutt-pattanaik-comes-out-of-the-closet/articleshow/65872282.cms (accessed on 14/6/2024).

colonial rule and abolished in 2018, criminalised homosexual relationships between adults (Kasbekar, 2016: 15; Subramaniam, 2019: 21-22). Contemporary homophobia in India seems to have risen from the fact that Hindus have had to refashion themselves as hypermasculine in order to conform to Victorian ideals (Marueemootoo, 2014: 118), which means that ideas on sex and sexuality, including alternative genders and sexualities, may have been derived from colonial law and colonial cultural influences (Bacchetta, 1999, 2020). The most complete scholarly work on alternative genders and sexualities in Indian narratives is *Same-sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* by literary historian Ruth Vanita and medieval historian Saleem Kidwai (2020). The authors state that Indian authors who have tried to defend Indian culture have claimed that ancient Indian tradition was similar to that of the coloniser, given that it also endorsed the monogamous heterosexual nuclear family. However, this ideal is said to have been corrupted during the medieval period (196), when counter-ideal non-monogamous and non-heterosexual relationships began appearing. This is the common nationalistic argument, one we have already encountered a few times, according to which everything that is regarded as bad and wrong in contemporary India is regarded as coming from outside of the national borders.

A cultural product that is related to the issue of queerness and the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the film *Fire* by Indo-Canadian director Deepa Mehta (1996). This film tells the story of two women, Nītā and Rādhā, who are married into the same household. Their husbands are negatively represented. Rādhā's husband, a devout Hindu, embodies all of the "traditional" views related to gender and sexuality, the ones which are, for example, criticised in Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura*. Sītā's husband, by contrast, is depicted as too modern and globalised. He is violent, does not care about religious or social mores, only cares about *kung fu* and erotic films, and has a Chinese lover. Feeling deep anguish toward their relationships and identifying with each other's plight, Nītā and Rādhā begin a lesbian relationship. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is mentioned several times. Sagar's *Ramayan* series is shown on television and the male characters often extol it as the paragon of Indian values. Once, the main characters go to a theatrical performance about Sītā's fire trial, which is related to the title of the film. In these scenes, the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, as represented by the series and the theatrical performance, embodies the main Indian discourse on traditional gender roles. The character Nītā was originally called Sītā, but the Indian Central Board of Film Certification made the director change her name (Ghosh, 2010: xiii). In the series, Sītā acts as the traditional

wife, even when she has to suffer. In the film, when Nītā and Rādhā are alone, Nītā wears men's clothes, dances to the sound of contemporary music, and hugs and kisses Rādhā. In one scene, she argues with her husband. When he slaps her, she slaps him back.

Despite being a film and being a 20th century work, I discuss *Fire* because it shows a very different and more progressive take on the *Rāmāyaṇa* than the neo-traditional contemporary retellings I analyse. In some ways, Mehta's Nītā seems to be what Divakaruni hints her Sītā will be in the first nonfiction and fiction pages of *The Forest of Enchantments*. Furthermore, Nītā is not just a mirror-image of a male warrior as Tripathi's Sītā. In any case, Mehta's description of female bondage in victimhood against patriarchy is comparable to both Divakaruni and Kané's retelling, with the major difference that the latter two authors never make such bondage result in a love and/or sexual relationship. For all these reasons, I regard Nītā as the least conservative version of Sītā in gendered and sexual terms among all those that I analyse in this thesis. In my view, this shows how popular versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* do not necessarily have to be conservative or to mix traditional values with modern ones.[206]

While Tripathi (2017b) never deals with queerness in his fiction, he states in his nonfiction that section 377 of the Penal Code has been an "egregious and illiberal section" which should be repealed (63).[207] In the author's view, ancient India had a liberal attitude towards non-mainstream sexual practices (65) and ancient stories make positive references to alternative sexualities (64). Tripathi adds that it was the British colonial mindset influenced by Christianity which created negative representations of this issue (65). The author reverses the argument of the authors quoted by Vanita and Kidwai. In any case, much like in their discourses, what Tripathi regards as undesirable is regarded as a foreign corruption. During colonial times, the main weapon of resistance was stating that Indian culture was once like the coloniser's and that it was because of some past degeneration that India had allowed itself to be colonised. Striving for sameness would be a way of neutralising hegemonic British interests. In postcolonial times, nations do not have to adapt to past colonisers but to the views of the globalised world, which in many ways is culturally very different from Victorian

[206] The mythical framework of the film is also enhanced by the name Rādhā, the name of Kṛṣṇa's most famous milkmaid (*gopī*) lover.

[207] Tripathi published his book one year before the law was revoked. It is not that he predicted or influenced the outcome of the decision. He was merely giving voice to what was a generalized prediction at the moment of his writing.

Britain. Striving for sameness allows nationalistic Indians to represent themselves as modern participators in the global world. The best way to achieve such sameness is by stating that India has always professed modern global values and just needs to be true to its roots, which is what Tripathi usually does. In any case, as I have said, while Tripathi's fiction often tends to mirror his nonfiction, this, just like Tripathi's depiction of Rāvaṇa, is not one of those cases, given that the author always represents ideal relationships as both monogamous and heterosexual.

According to Pattanaik (2014), Indian mythology makes frequent references to *queerness*. Such stories, the author adds, stand in contrast with the ignorance and rigidity of modern Indian society (see also Nanda, 1999: 20; Subramaniam, 2019: 104-105; Vanita and Kidwai, 2020: 27).[208] Pattanaik states that some Indians, such as Tripathi, have blamed the British, the Muslims, the Buddhists and other non-mainstream Hindu traditions for the present situation. Whoever is to blame for, the main idea remains unchanged in this kind of discourses: previously, Indian society was plural, flexible and liberal and later became inflexible and oppressive. It sounds as if India was powerless when confronted with the religious and cultural *Other* and had no authority to assert itself, except for the past few years, when neoliberalism allowed it to make a cultural comeback.

In *Sita*, Pattanaik (2013a) tells a folk tale about how, when Rāma comes back to Ayodhyā, he finds a group of *hijṛās* waiting for him at the city's gate. The term *hijṛā* refers to what has been called "the third gender" in the Indian subcontinent. The social boundaries of this category have not been as clear as those of man/woman or husband/wife. The term usually refers to men who cross-dress as women. The group is sometimes associated with religion, given that the community tends to be Hindu and has a specific pantheon of deities and unique rituals. When Rāma asks the *hijṛās* what they are doing there, they state that, when Rāma went into exile, he told men and women to return to the city. Nevertheless, as *hijṛās* are neither men nor women, they waited for him there (264). According to Pattanaik, through this tale, the marginalised sexual minority of *hijṛās* legitimises itself (*Ibid.*). This story is retold in an augmented version in Pattanaik's (2014: 171-176) *Shikhandi*, a collection of tales drawn mostly from the *Mahābhārata*, given that this epic has more narrative material regarding alternative

[208] Doniger (2009: 331) and Nanda (1999: 20) state that Indian mythology tends to be homophobic and that the *Manusmṛti* openly condemns queerness. Likewise, sociologist Jyoti Puri (1998) states that Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* treats homosexuality with repugnance (180).

genders and sexualities. However, the fact that this *Rāmāyaṇa* tale is the closing one in the collection seems to show more that it is central in such discourses rather than merely an afterthought.[209]

This representation of gender and sexuality is different from the ones I have presented because it is applied to a specific subaltern group and not to the ideal or counter-ideal characters. However, the caption of Pattanaik's story, which reads "Ram, who included all in his kingdom" (171), shows that the protagonist of the story is Rāma and not the *hijṛās*. Rāma is described as the legitimiser of the *hijṛās* and, in this role, he represents a larger ideal which includes smaller ones without being necessarily associated with them. In sum, it could be argued that in this story the representation of the *hijṛās* gets "domesticated" by an overarching patriarchal and heterosexual discourse.

While gender is the most important individual and social marker in the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is not the only one. Markers based on other biological and cultural clues are almost as important in defining the *Self* and the *Other*. The next chapter analyses the next three relevant markers: caste, class and species.

[209] This story told by Pattanaik is also told in anthropologist Serena Nanda's (1999) *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. This is the most complete extant ethnographic work on the community and Nanda uses this story to make the same argument as Pattanaik makes, so it is possible that the latter took the story from this more scholarly work.

Chapter 4
Caught in Indra's Net: Other Divisions in the Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

In this chapter, I analyse representations of social categories other than gender: caste, class and species. I deal with these divisions in the same chapter because in the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* they tend to be associated with one another.

4.1 Nature and culture

The first important distinction between characters in the contemporary English-language retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is that between the human and the non-human or between culture and nature. Human beings are said to possess culture, while non-human beings, who live close to nature, are said not to possess it. This dichotomy (nature or nurture), which is also common in the history of Western philosophy, is one of the most important topics in Pattanaik's works. The author writes that humans are special beings because they are the only ones who possess imagination (2013a: 17/104) and the only ones who can imagine themselves outside of nature (2013b: 48). Pattanaik defines human conscience as the boundary between nature and culture. In one passage, he writes that this is not merely a trait of humans but specifically of Indian and, specifically, of Hindu thought: "Indic thought, particularly Hindu thought, starts with an observation: the human ability to imagine that enables us to position ourselves outside nature" (2013a: xv). Pattanaik adds that the quality of imagination makes humans judgemental (107). Nature, however, never divides between heroes, villains and victims but only between predators and preys (117). Again, as being judgemental in this way is described as a trait of Western culture by Tharoor and Malhotra, as well as by all male retellers, it seems as if Indians are implicitly said to be non-judgemental. Pattanaik is ambiguous in the sense that his ideas do not always match. India thought is specifically said to resort to imagination, which is said to be a mark of human culture and to be judgemental, despite the fact that Indian thought is usually stereotypically regarded as being non-judgemental.

Pattanaik continues developing his confusing argument by stating that in nature there are no rules but just a universal "natural law" (178). Humans are the only ones who can contradict such laws and create their own rules (26). Such rules, the Hindu *dharma* included, while believed to be universal like the "natural law", is said to be

artificial and liable to change (178). I would say that the concept of a "natural law" did not exist before human beings came into the scene, which means that the idea that there exists a "natural law" is itself a cultural fact. Given that Pattanaik writes the term in English and provides no Sanskrit translation, as he sometimes does, it is not clear what "natural law", a concept which, in its modern guise, appeared in the Enlightenment period in Europe, may be. It is possible that the author was thinking of the Vedic concept of *ṛta*, "order, law, rule, truth", a term used in the *Vedas* and usually compared to the nowadays more common idea of *dharma*.[210]

Some of the cultural rules to which Pattanaik alludes are related to power and strength. The author refers to the laws of heredity in which the oldest son inherits power as a cultural construction. In nature, though, only strength and the instinct to survive are said to matter (2013a: 77/178). This means that nature does not define who the winners or the losers are in any predetermined way but works like a meritocracy. The concepts of a "natural law" of the "survival of the fittest" also sounds more relatable to the ideas of Darwinian evolutionism and Spencerian social Darwinism, two theories which were widely discussed in modern Indian English writing, than to premodern Indian philosophical ideas.[211] The author considers that the neglect of social laws and the choice of simply grabbing pleasure and enjoying life constitute materialistic and hedonistic ways of life (97-98) closer to nature. Ideally, humans follow social laws out of a sense of duty, including laws that may bring displeasure, just as Rāma is said to do.

As hinted in the previous chapter, Pattanaik often speaks of acculturation processes as "domestication". This means that the process of integrating social rules constitutes a departure from one's "wild" animal nature and an integration into a "domesticated" human one. Pattanaik mentions the encounter between Sītā and Śūrpaṇakhā, who embody culture and nature, respectively, as a violent one. Śūrpaṇakhā is the wild animal who follows hedonistic pleasure with no regard for social rules, while Sītā is the domesticated human who has been de-individualised and integrated into the larger cultural system in which the whole is more important than the parts. In such an encounter, the cultural rules of marriage come under threat and, in order to uphold them, the "wild beast" (Śūrpaṇakhā) also needs to be "domesticated" (2013b: 268). Śūrpaṇakhā's domestication consists of mutilation in every contemporary retelling.

---

[210] HECKAMAN JR., Curtis R. (1980). *Towards a Comprehensive Understanding of Ṛta in the Ṛg veda* [M.A thesis], McMaster University.

[211] BROWN, Cheever Mackenzie (2012). *Hindu perspectives on evolution: Darwin, dharma and design*, London : Routledge.

Pattanaik is not the only author who refers to the nature/culture dichotomy. Tripathi (2015) states that humans moved away from nature when they began to embrace cultural norms of right and wrong instead of nature's urges, therefore giving rise to the concept of "civilisation" (291). In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Rāvaṇa states that he believes that a society can only be "civilised" when it treats its women and downtrodden people well (292). In short, contrary to nature, culture and civilisation are not limited to the social Darwinist logics of the "survival of the fittest". It also includes the Human Rights discourse. The retellers often use English terms and dichotomies such as "nature", "culture", "civilisation" and "barbarism". As these have been common in historical Western discourses, it seems difficult to dissociate them from their English and European intellectual history. The concept of civilisation, as it is understood in English, French and German, has referred to "Western civilisation".[212] This is one of the hegemonic ideas which is criticised by postcolonial and decolonial studies, particularly by Orientalism as it was developed by Edward Said. Postcolonialism and, more specifically, decoloniality, have tried to re-establish non-Western cultures to the status of civilisations on par with the West or, as I have shown in the second chapter, sometimes as superior to it. By focusing on such discursively charged English terms, it seems that the contemporary retellers also try to decolonialise them.

The ideal of self-control is usually considered to be the clearest sign of culture and civilisation. The opposite situation, unrestrained emotion, is regarded as a sign of nature and barbarism. Depictions of Rāma and of Rāvaṇa imply that the former is more human and "cultural", while the latter is less human and more "natural". Pattanaik (2013a) states that Rāma does not care about nature as he cares about culture: "Ah, but Ram is a king, not a sage. He does not care for nature as much as he cares for culture" (165). The same could be said about Sītā and Śūrpaṇakhā in popular Indian imagination and in the contemporary retellings, whose authors, in most cases, often state, either explicitly or implicitly, that they try to debunk popular imagination. Western discourses regarding colonialism and imperialism were similar to the ones applied to these characters.[213] In Orientalist discourses, the British colonisers, like Rāma and Sītā,

[212] FEDERICI, Silvia (ed.) (1995). *Enduring Western Civilization: The Construction of the Concept of Western Civilization and Its "Others"*, Westport: Praeger; MAZLISH, Bruce (2005). *Civilization and Its Contents*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

[213] Inden's (2001) *Imagining India* provides a synthesis of the way European Orientalists constructed the discourse about the West and India as one between civilisation and barbarism.

tended to be regarded as human, cultured and civilised, while the colonised Indian, like Rāvaṇa and Śūrpaṇakhā, were regarded as bestial and primitive.

4.2 The idea of caste

While social discrimination based on the concept caste has been legally abolished (article 15 of the Indian constitution)[214], the concept keeps haunting the mind of most authors writing about contemporary India. The English term *caste* does not have an exact counterpart in any Indian language and this, contrary to more positive modern concepts about which the same argument could be made, is something which is often underscored by contemporary Indian authors (Tripathi, 2017b: 82). The concept includes two realities for which there are two different Sanskrit words: 1) *varṇa*, which literally means "colour", from the root √*vṛ*, "to choose, to select"; and 2) *jāti*, from the root √*jan*, "to be born".[215] The former refers to endogamic social groups and, in its conception, may be roughly comparable to the three estates of the European Middle Ages plus the latter idea of the *bourgeoisie*. The latter includes a greater number of social groups divided by profession, religion, ethnicity, region or other social clues and, as a result, refers to more minute groups than *varṇa*.

Even though *jāti* has been more socially relevant than *varṇa*, literary texts, the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* included, tend to focus on the latter. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that literature, more specifically popular literature, often aims at simplified narrative systems with well-defined groups to which the reader can easily attach any given character. In short, the English seem to have derived their understanding of the term *caste* from the simplest Indian interpretation provided by Brahmin informers. Nowadays, the contemporary retellers use the term in the same way. The four *varṇa* of traditional Hinduism include the *brāhmaṇas* (Brahmins, priests), the *kṣatriyas* (warrior, rulers), the *vaiṣyas* (farmers, merchants, traders), and the *śūdras* (labourers) (Zimmer, 1951: 151-169). There are also outcastes, those who fall outside the system and who have been called by several different names. They are officially

[214] https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/ (accessed on 4/6/2024).

[215] The term *caste* is derived from the Portuguese *casta*, "kind, variety, usually referring to animal or vegetal species". The concept was firstly used by Portuguese chroniclers Tomé Pires and Duarte Barbosa, who were active during the beginning of the 16th century. CORTESÃO, Armando (ed.) (2005) [1944]. *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to China, Written in Malacca and India in 1512-1515*, 2 Vols., New Delhi: Asian Educational Services; DAMES, Mansel Longworth (ed.) (2016) [1918]. *The Book of Duarte Barbosa, An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean,* 2 Vols., Oxford: Ashgate Publishing.

called *Scheduled Castes* (SC). The most common non-English terms have been *Dalit* and *Pariah* (for others, see Doniger, 2009: 37-38).[216]

Most colonial accounts of India made caste the immutable pillar of Indian society and the main trait which distinguished it from other human societies. The concept was considered to be related to every area of Indian life: race, occupation, religion, status, land control, psychic security, birth, death, marriage, and education (Inden, 2001 [1990]: 82-83). Caste gained greater prominence in Orientalist discourses when, near the end of the 19th century, it was recognised as a Hindu phenomenon and outcastes began being regarded as separate identities (Rao, 2009: 2). Such categorisations were also motivated by British projects such as the census,[217] which created and cemented social divisions (5). The subsequent appearance of caste in the political discourses of the lower and the upper castes adopted the colonial version as being authentic (8). In other words, the English reinterpretation and amalgamation of the concepts of *jāti* and *varṇa* were reintegrated into Indian discourses in a re-Orientalist fashion.

The attitudes towards caste in Indian society have changed throughout time. During the Nehruvian era, from the period of independence until the 1990s, caste was one of the few traditional Indian institutions which was described as completely negative (Deshpande, 2003: 98-100), as it often is in the contemporary Western world. The concept of caste based on birth was regarded as a backwards trait that had paralysed India civilisation and had allowed the West to surpass it in social and material terms. Similar discourses exist in the West in relation to how the three estates of feudal Europe stifled the "progress" of the continent during the so-called "Dark Ages" and how the gradual rise of the bourgeoisie, which relied more on talent than on birth, motivated economic and cultural progress.

In the past few decades, though, Hindu nationalists have been turning the concept of caste into a benign and religiously inspired division of labour, an original principle of "communal"[218] race harmony, or, inspired by the neoliberal narrative of individual psychological self-development, a kind of non-hereditary meritocracy that was perverted by the Muslims or the British (Connerney, 2009: 152; Basu, 2020: 7). Ideas

[216] A term which Doniger does not mention is *bahujan*, "majority society", often used in the compound *Dalit-Bahujan*, here in the sense of being a majority which has been oppressed by a privileged minority *(*Narayan, 2006: 37).

[217] BARRIER, N. Gerald (ed.) (1981). *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, New Delhi: Manohar.

[218] The term "communal" is not used in the way it often is in discourses pertaining to modern India, the intercommunal sense of "generating conflict between different communities", but in the intracommunal sense of "shared by all the members of a community".

of "division of labour", "communal" and "non-hereditary meritocracy" reflect modern social and economic concerns, given that these concepts are often discussed by opposing socio-economic ideologies like capitalism and communism. The idea that the originally flexible caste system became fossilised and oppressive after thousands of years, sometimes due to the influence of the Muslims or the British, is also said to be a common strategy adopted by Hindu Americans who try to counter negative views about India (Kurien, 2007: 174). According to this argument, before the arrival of foreigners, India possessed a native social system which encouraged the rise of a bourgeoisie.

Blank (1992) states that, according to Indian urban dwellers, caste does not exist in India anymore (122). Indeed, "untouchability" has been formally abolished by article 17 of the Indian Constitution (Rao, 2009: 2).[219] However, the fact that something does not officially exist does not mean that it does not exist unofficially. If the concept had been wiped out, why would it be discussed by contemporary Indian authors? During the nationalistic struggle, even though caste was the main social division in the countryside, the upper and middle classes ignored it (Das, 2000: 151). However, in view of the lesser influence that global discourses have had on the countryside, caste has not disappeared overnight.[220] In Das's (*Ibid.*) view, at the turn of the millennium, the lower castes still constituted the poorest, most illiterate, most exploited and most disadvantaged social groups in India (160).

After the status of Indian women, caste is the most debated topic in Tripathi's (2017b) *Immortal India*, which includes an article titled "Bane of casteism" (80-83). The author claims that "the heinous caste system" is one of the many "corruptions" that have crept into Hinduism (xxv), which means that the concept did not exist in "original" Hinduism. As the author adds in "Bane of casteism", "scientific evidence" has been published in "various scientific papers", such as the *American Journal of Genetics*, *Nature* and *Nature Academy of Sciences Journal*, which has shown that Indians of different genetic groups interbred until 400 CE (81-82). In the author's view, the contemporary concept is a distorted merger of the concepts of *jāti* and *varṇa*, which Tripathi creatively translates as "birth-community" and "personality, nature" (82), all English terms which have much more positive connotations than the term *caste*. Tripathi adds that this merger appeared about 1600 to 2000 years ago (82), which not

[219] https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/ (accessed on 4/6/2024).

[220] Stalin Kurup's 2007 documentary *India Untouched: Stories of a People Apart* aims to show that, contrary to urban discourses, the concept of caste remains pervasive in rural India. KURUP, Stalin (Director) (2007). *India Untouched: Stories of a People Apart* [Film], Drishti Media, Arts and Human Rights.

only ranges from the proposed 400 CE but pushes the date a little bit further to the 8th or 9th century, that is, after Islam had already appeared in the subcontinent. It must be added that, while Tripathi is overly concerned with going back to the roots and reforming Hinduism when it comes to concepts with negative values in modern times, such as *caste*, he is not overly concerned with more benign concepts associated with Hinduism which do not figure in the *Ṛgveda*, which means that this going back to the roots is highly selective. Tripathi adds that the merger was later categorised by the Portuguese into the single word *casta* (*Ibid.*), which mixed "personality, nature" and "birth".[221] The author concludes his article in martial, nationalistic language:

> (…) caste discrimination must be actively opposed and fought against by all Indians; this must be done for the soul of our nation. Annihilating the birth-based caste system is a battle we must all engage in at a societal level. We will honour our ancient culture this fight (83).

Pattanaik (2013b) states that *jāti* was neither as rigid as it is often described nor as flexible as one would like it to be. As for *varṇa*, the author states that the Orientalists adopted this term and used it to describe Indian society as a whole. Pattanaik adds that, given that the term *varṇa* originally meant "colour", it referred to the "colour of thought". The author acknowledges that this meaning may be interpreted as defensive (61). Indeed, in ancient Sanskrit literature, the term *varṇa* usually means just "colour". It may also refer to the "colour" of human skin. The idea that it refers to personality, as Tripathi states, or to "colour of thought" seems to be recent.[222] According to Pattanaik, Brahmins such as Manu and Western academics have tried to force certain categories of *jāti* into those of *varṇa*. This means that certain communities classified by birth (*jāti*) have been said to possess intrinsic mindsets (*varṇa*) and that one's psychic life is dependent on one's birth. This would go against the contemporary idea of free will and the ability to rise above one's innate limitations. It would also go against the

[221] Tripathi's argument coincides with academic ones, with the difference that, while contemporary scholars talk about this merger in a neutral way, the reteller regards it as establishing a marker between an ideal past Golden Age and the deteriorated far and recent past. MCLEOD, John (2002). *The History of India*, Westport: Greenwood, pp. 26-27.

[222] While this meaning does not appear in any of the dictionaries in *Wisdomlib* (https://www.wisdomlib.org/), it appears in a few commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gītā* in which, rather than "colour of thought", *varṇa* is explained as "colour of the mind". CHATTOPADHYAYA, Sudhakar (1973). *Racial Affinities of Early North Indian Tribes*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, p. 32; CHIDBHAVANANDA, Swami (1965). *The Bhagavad Gita*, Thirupparaithurai: Sri Ramakrishna Tapovanam, p. 284; SATCHIDANANDA, Swami (1988). *The Living Gita: The Complete Bhagavad Gita: A Commentary for Modern Readers*, Buckingham: Integral Yoga Publications, p. 59; DUNEJA, Prabha (ed.) (1998). *The Legacy of Yoga in Bhagwad Geeta*, New Delhi: Vijaykumar Govindram Hasanand, xxv; KRETSCHMER, Heiko (2001). *Sanskrit Bhagavad Gita Grammar: An Introductory Course Based on Śrīmad Bhagavad-gītā and Śrīla Jīva Gosvāmī's Śrī Hārināmāmṛta-vyākaraṇam*, Vol. 3, Vrindravan: Shri Krishna Balarama Mandir, p. 54.

stereotypical neoliberal discourse, which is the one that Pattanaik adopts, according to which individuals are responsible to their own station in life and that, if they belong to a "lower caste", that is not because they were born into it but because they have not worked enough to progress into the next "colour of thought".

Varṇa is not the only Sanskrit term that Pattanaik (2013) reinterprets in a contemporary way. In the epigraph to his retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it is written that *dharma* means "human potential, not righteous conduct". I have pointed to this concept in relation to Rāvaṇa's spark of divinity which may be cultivated to unleash his hidden potential. The concept of "human potential" is often used in new religious contexts (Clarke 2006b, s.v. "Human Potential Movement", 286-288) and, as Carrette and King (2005) have shown, in neoliberal settings (72/76/129). "Righteous conduct" is how Neelakantan (2012) translates the term in the glossary that he includes at the end of his novel (498).[223] Even though the concept of *dharma* is full of historical and cultural nuance (Hiltebeitel, 2011a), the latter translation has been more common in different kinds of texts, including in academia. Historically, the term *dharma* mostly refers to the different duties that different (groups of) people should perform. In his reinterpretation, Pattanaik claims that the concept does not accentuate social boundaries but, in fact, destroys them, given that *dharma* refers to how human beings may aim at a higher social position, including at a higher *varṇa*.

Pattanaik also reinterprets the concept of *Veda.* In accordance with his views on Indian epistemology, the *Vedas* are more psychological than social (2013a: 35). This means that traditional Indian thought is supposed to be understood symbolically and that it never developed a view of human nature characterised by materialistic determinism. As the plural implies, the *Vedas* do not constitute just one text. The term may be understood in several ways. It may include only the *Saṃhitās,* the four texts used in ritual, but it may also include later commentaries and developments of the *Saṃhitās.* The *Vedas* are said to belong to the category of *śruti,* "that which is heard", which means that they are regarded as eternal and uncreated. The first and oldest text (the *Ṛgveda;* Doniger, 2005) and the most recent category of *Vedas* as the term is understood in its wider meaning (the *Upaniṣads*) are different in style and content. The former consists of poetic hymns in honour of a pantheon of deities which are

[223] These confusing statements have generated heated online discussions. In *Quora*, a popular question-and-answer social network which is popular in India, one user has asked "What does dharma mean - righteous conduct or human potential?". Answers range between the former, the latter, both or none. https://www.quora.com/What-does-dharma-mean-righteous-conduct-or-human-potential (accessed 5/6/2024).

comparable to those of other Indo-European peoples. These hymns present less philosophical speculation than the latter *Upaniṣads*. Their main use was apparently to propitiate deities in order to get boons in return. The *Upaniṣads* are mainly concerned with epistemological and ontological speculations. In this sense, depending on how one interprets the abstract and modern concept of *psychological*, it may be said that they are more psychological than the previous texts. However, Pattanaik generalises and extends the features of the *Upaniṣads*, which, in epistemological terms, have been more influential for the creation of modern Hinduism than previous texts, to the other *Vedas*. Given that the different texts that constitute the wider meaning of the term present changing worldviews and that the main feature that unifies them is that they have all been regarded as sacred Hindu texts, it seems far-fetched to make overarching generalisations like stating that they are all "psychological". In any case, in his reinterpretation of key terms such as *varṇa*, *dharma*, or *Vedas*, Pattanaik represents Hinduism as a psychological attitude which depends only on the human potential of the individual and not as a materialistic system which depends on society at large.

Besides making generalisations and reinterpreting terms related to Hinduism, Pattanaik (2013b) applies the most common negative attitudes associated with the term *caste* to globalisation. He accuses globalisation of turning contemporary societies into "neo-caste" systems in which people are not valued for who they are (*varṇa*) but for their lifestyle (*jāti*), given that the rich are considered to be smart and the literate to be good (63). As I have described, mythological retellers, Pattanaik included, also relate physical, intellectual and emotional traits. This global tendency, the author adds, also occurs in modern business contexts, in which one's *curriculum* is more important than one's attitude or potential. One may now pause and consider for a moment how discourses on caste evolved. Orientalist scholars denigrated Indian culture for its backwardness on the grounds of its caste system and tried to introduce the social ideals of the Enlightenment period in India. Nowadays, Tripathi and Pattanaik tend to invert the argument when stating that Indian culture did not have any social structure based on birth and that contemporary global culture is the one which introduced and forced such a system throughout the world and, in the process, stifled the original Indian meritocracy.

Pattanaik (2013a) also alludes to the nature/culture dichotomy when explaining the dilemma of caste. According to him, as nature is not judgemental, nothing in nature is "contaminated". Only culture divides between the "pure" and "impure" and cast out

those who are regarded as impure (164), so that mere touch can result in the loss of reputation (145). This idea refers to one of the main tenets of the concept of caste, at least at it has been interpreted in texts such as the *Manusmṛti* (Doniger, 1991), according to which members of higher castes should not touch those of lower ones and vice-versa. As I have stated previously, one of the most common names for outcastes in English is *Untouchables*, which explicitly refers to this idea. Pattanaik's (2013a) argument gets more complicated. Social hierarchies based on notions of purity and impurity are cultural to the extent that hierarchies are human creations and they are natural because they stem from the animal drive to dominate (275) and not from the human ability to expand the mind in the quest for *Brahman* (297), the ultimate reality which pervades everything that exists. In sum, both the concept of caste and resistance against it are confusingly regarded as both natural and cultural drives, which Pattanaik tends to regard as distinguishable ontological entities with equally distinguishable laws.[224]

The contemporary retellings by both Tripathi and Pattanaik fictionalise these modern reinterpretations of the concept of caste. In Pattanaik's (2013a) retelling, Rāma asks Lakṣmaṇa not to forget the human yearning to dominate: the rich with their wealth, the educated with knowledge, the beautiful with beauty, and those who have nothing with the idea of purity (273). Elsewhere, Rāma states that, while cultural rules can produce such hierarchies, their ultimate purpose is to "inspire humanity" and not to tame it (57). The idea of *inspiring humanity* reminds one of neoliberal terminology and the associated genre of "inspirational literature", perhaps better-known as "self-help literature" or "self-improvement literature". [225] Pattanaik's argument means that humans must be able to look beyond culture and notice that cultural dichotomies are artificial constructs. However, if nature is characterised by the drive to dominate the *Other*, a description which does not sound very positive, what remains beyond nature

[224] Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) analysed the dichotomy between purity and impurity across several cultures. She determined that this dichotomy exists in every culture, albeit it varies locally. In order to distinguish what is pure from what is impure, the author used the Austronesian term *taboo*, which is nowadays common in the English language. The concepts of purity and impurity may be said to be natural and cultural in the sense that they exist universally in the structuralist sense, even though the specific instantiation of this structure differs from culture to culture.

[225] One may consider works with titles such as Simon Sinek's *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (2009), Clare Josa's *The Little Book Of Daily Sunshine: Bite-Sized Inspiration To Light Up Your Day* (2012), Cyndie Spiegel's *A Year of Positive Thinking: Daily Inspiration, Wisdom, and Courage* (2018), Gifford Thomas' *The Inspirational Leader: Inspire Your Team To Believe In The Impossible* (2019), Stephen M. R. Covey, David Kasperson, McKinlee Covey and Gary T. Judd's *Trust and Inspire: How Truly Great Leaders Unleash Greatness in Others* (2022), Matt Tenney's *Inspire Greatness: How to Motivate Employees with a Simple, Repeatable, Scalable Process* (2024).

and culture? Perhaps some kind of psychologically transcendent state (spirituality?) which makes "enlightened" beings rise above both? I do not think that the answers to these questions are very relevant and I just point them out to show how this kind of discourse is merely meant to "inspire" and not really to mean something in a logical sense.

Tripathi's (2015) characters reflect the author's common belief that the rise of the concept of caste based on birth was the main reason for the "emasculation" of ancient India, an event which, in both fiction and nonfiction discourses by this author, is said to have led to the plethora of social divisions in Indian society and to have made the Muslim and British invasions possible. Tripathi's Rāma often discusses caste. He states that the concept of being noble (*ārya*) refers to how one conducts oneself and not to birth (119). Later, he states that birth is "completely unimportant" (264). Therefore, he expects people to rise above their limitations and become better, given that only then will the creation of a perfect society be possible (288). According to Tripathi's Rāma, in the "Middle Ages", the caste system became rigid, sectarian and politicised, which means that it degenerated from its original purity. The concept of Indian Middle Ages is inspired by the same denomination in Western historiography and it tends to have a negative connotation in both. However, this Indian period is not as clear as the European one, whose beginning and ending points tend to enjoy scholarly consensus. The expression "Indian Middle Ages" usually refers to the centuries that preceded Muslim rule and those when Muslim rule was prevalent.[226] Tripathi's novel takes place in 3400 BCE, long before Tripathi's supposed merger of *varṇa* and *jāti* that led to the deterioration of "original Hinduism" and the coming of the Muslims. Therefore, one can only wonder what the concept of "Middle Ages" in this temporal plane might mean. In Rāma's view, the fact that the concept of caste was bastardised weakened the native peoples and allowed them to be conquered by foreigners. However, in the world of the novel, once the system was made flexible again, the natives regained their strength and defeated the foreigners (220). As I shall demonstrate in the fifth chapter, the explanation

[226] Satish Chandra's *History of Medieval India,* currently the most authoritative work on the subject, deals with the period between 800 until 1700. CHANDRA, Satish (2007). *History of Medieval India (800-1700)*, Hyderabad: Oriental Blackswan. Hindu nationalist historian Meenakshi Jain, who has dismissed Chandra's account as "Marxist", published a textbook on the subject which goes from roughly 650 until the death of emperor Aurangzeb (1618-1707). JAIN, Meenakshi (2002). *Medieval India: A Textbook for Class XI,* New Delhi: National Council of Educational Research and Training; JAIN, Meenakshi (2003). *Flawed Narratives: History in the Old NCERT Textbooks,* New Delhi: Delhi Historians Forum. Iqtidar Alam Khan's *Historical Dictionary of Medieval India* goes from 1000 until 1526. See KHAN, Iqtidar Alam (2008). *Historical Dictionary of Medieval India*, Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.

to the concept of *Middle Ages* is easy, given that the date 3400 BCE is not to be taken at face-value and that Tripathi's universe is more meant to mirror contemporary India and current collective memory than to be a historical recreation of 3400 BCE. The concepts of "caste", "native people", "foreigner" and "reform" are not even supposed to point to this archaeologically and culturally obscure period. They are supposed to be a summary of the contemporary anxiety that Tripathi feels in relation to the past (*caste*), present (*native people* and *foreigner*) and future (*reform*).

Tripathi's Sītā also comments that no two entities are born the same, a statement which invalidates the concept of *jāti*. Therefore, people should be allowed to do what they want and pursue their talents (*varṇa*) rather than the professions of their parents (*jāti*). The latter, Sītā states, may lead to unhappiness and social chaos and to many talented people doing lowlier works (289), which, I would add, would be extremely undesirable in a neoliberal context. Sītā concludes that the caste system must be destroyed for the good of India, lest foreigners might take advantage of the divisions created within society and invade it (290), yet another prophetic premonition of the coming of the Muslims and the British. According to Tripathi, valuing individual talent (*varṇa*) contributes to social unity, while valuing birth (*jāti*) leads to disunity. Social unity is defined as a trait of the "masculine way", while disunity is a trait of the "feminine way". Following the author's concepts and logic, the concept of *varṇa* is associated with the former and *jāti* with the latter. While privileging individuality, *varṇa* is said to lead to a better sense of communal union derived from healthy competition.

The association of the concepts of *varṇa* and *jāti* and those of individualism and collectivism are clear in one of Pattanaik's drawings for *Business Sutra* (Figure 33). This drawing shows two characters. The one on the left privileges the concept of *varṇa* and considers that the way to "psychological" progress towards a higher mindset comes through outgrowing animal instincts and helping others in their psychological growth. According to both Pattanaik and Tripathi, this was supposed to be the original meaning of *caste*.[227] Pattanaik calls this action *uddhāra,* which the author translates as "thought

[227] It should be noted that, in modern popular imagination, this representation is associated with Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Mahāyāna term *bodhisattva,* literally "essence of enlightenment", which has also become common in English discourse, refers to awakened beings who may reach *nirvāṇa*, "extinction (from the illusory physical world of *saṃsāra*)". However, they decide not to do so before they can help all beings reach it too. KAWAMURA, Leslie S. (ed.) (1981). *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Hinduism*, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press. One may interpret Pattanaik's discourse as an attempt to integrate a feature associated with a different religious tradition into mainstream Hinduism, something which, as I will show later, the author often does. This seems to strengthen

upliftment". This translation feels as modern as translating *varṇa* as "colour of thought" or *dharma* as "human potential". While *uddhāra* means "uplifting something" in the physical sense, its reinterpretation as "thought upliftment" seems to be a modern one inspired by *New Age* and neoliberal discourses. However, this kind of interpretation exists in the English term *upliftment*.[228] The character on the right, who values *jāti*, does not resort to "thought upliftment" through cooperation. He resorts to social dominance and competition (nature).

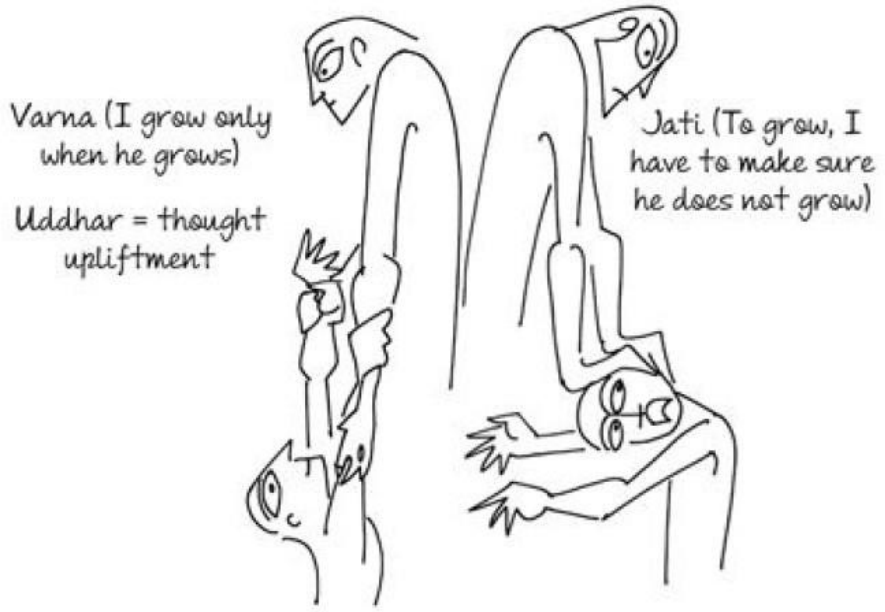


Figure 33 - *Varṇa* and *Jāti* (Pattanaik, 2013b: 63)

In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Bharata and Śatrughna have a discussion with sage Vasiṣṭha which mixes some of the topics related to the nature/culture dichotomy and to the issue of caste. Bharata believes that, as the law of nature states that the strong always win, the government has to protect the weak, a socialist approach which could be compared to that of the *varṇa* concept in Figure 33. Śatrughna states that it is better for society if the strong win, given that, if nature's laws are contradicted, the weak will oppress the strong and society will collapse. It is clear that Śatrughna's argument is not

the argument I made in the second chapter that there has been an attempt to approximate representations of Hinduism with those of modern Buddhism.

[228] One may consider works with titles such as Trevor A. Kellman's *Upliftment: A Story of Inspiration* (2012), Lester Zoom Headley's *Stimulations for Positive Engagement & Upliftment* (2017), Elaine Udeagha's *Inspirational Quotes for Spiritual Upliftment* (2018), and Linda Gates' *Spiritual Nourishment: Christian Messages for every day spiritual upliftment* (2018).

really one about nature but politics, specifically with neoliberal ideas, and that the explicit mention of the "natural process" (84) could just as well be substituted with the idea of "market laws". Vasiṣṭha praises Śatrughna and states that he has "carefully studied the reasons for the decline of India" (83-85) or, following my political translation, Vasiṣṭha states that the Indian collapse happened due to the substitution of an original proto-neoliberalism for socialism. This means that Vasiṣṭha and Śatrughna do not agree with Pattanaik's argument that one should rise above nature and culture but that the best is for culture to follow nature's course. It is implied that it is for the reason that India allowed the weak to become powerful that it declined. The argument given by Tripathi's characters contradicts the epigraph of the novel, which states that one who lives in Rāma's kingdom should protect the weak. The concept of meritocracy is the opposite of privileging an individual for having been born into a hegemonic or subaltern group. In Tripathi's view, those who should be helped are the talented, irrespective of their strength. Therefore, the positive concept of weakness in Tripathi's discourse may be interpreted as having the more restricted meaning of "weak, but potentially talented".

Neelakantan (2012) also devises similar discourses on *caste*. The author writes that, contrary to the tradition of Rāvaṇa's people, which emphasises individual talent, Rāma believes that he has to make rights equal for everybody. For this reason, the rights of the minorities become an obsession for the ruling classes (302). This obsession is not described positively. In one scene, Rāvaṇa's son Meghanāda holds his hand out to Bhadra and invites him to ride a horse with him. People feel impressed that a prince is sharing a ride with a "stinking beggar". In the end, Bhadra recognises that his benefactor is just scoring political points and that even the charity of the rich "smack of selfishness" (378). According to Neelakantan, hegemonic discourses on equality do not stem from an ideological/moral belief. They are pragmatic political moves to please the masses, which is an important strategy in modern democracies. The scenes in both Tripathi and Neelakantan's novels are references and perhaps critiques of contemporary political phenomena related to caste, mainly the Mandal Commission. The authors seem to hint that such policies have disrupted the traditional Indian way of privileging talent over birth (in this case, underprivileged birth) and point to them as important reasons for India's historical and present weaknesses, given that both privileging the high-caste because they are high-caste or the low-caste because they are low-caste is regarded as undesirable in a contemporary neoliberal context. It is considered that, even

if the intentions of such policies were noble, they accepted and strengthened the negative interpretation of the concept of *caste* and turned it into a hegemonic resource in reverse (Das, 2000: 157).

I now analyse representations of the idealised view of caste in "original" Hinduism as it is represented in the relevant contemporary retellings. In one scene in Pattanaik's (2013a) work, Vasiṣṭha instructs king Daśaratha not to confuse *brāhmaṇa-jāti*, the birth-community of the priests, with *brāhmaṇa-varṇa*, the mindset of a priest. The former is said to refer to a person who is born into a Brahmin family and the latter to a person who strives to go towards the "limitless mind". This is another example of Pattanaik's skilful use of language, here in a way that can be interpreted as referring to the ultimate reality of *Brahman* or to the achievement of one's true potential in a neoliberal context. This ideal, Pattanaik adds, can be achieved by anybody, as one rises from the mindset of a follower (*śūdra*), to that of a merchant (*vaiśya*), a warrior (*kṣatriya*) and finally to that of a seer (*brāhmaṇa*) (34). While Pattanaik endeavours to destroy traditional hierarchies and stated that anyone can develop human potential, he created a new hierarchy, given that having the mind of a follower constitutes the counter-ideal and having the mind of a seer the ideal.

The idea of an existing hierarchy of different mindsets and the idea that one can climb up that hierarchy is depicted in Figure 34, which is another drawing by Pattanaik. It shows an upright serpent "climbing up" the four *varṇas*, with the Brahmins at the top and the *śūdras* at the bottom. The two highest castes are conflated with leadership, which is another key term in neoliberal terminology,[229] and the two lowest ones with subjection. The image of the serpent evokes the concept of *kuṇḍalinī yoga.* According to this tantric practice also popular in international *New Age* discourses (Clarke, 2006b: s.v. "Sahaja Yoga", 544-545; s.v. "Siddha Yoga Dham", 588-589), *kuṇḍalinī* is a kind of spiritual energy that lies dormant in one's spine. Through the practice of *yoga*, one can activate this energy and make the serpent rise through seven higher spiritual centres (*cakra*, Sanskrit for "wheel") in the human subtle body (*sūkṣmaśarīra*).[230]

[229] One may consider works with titles such as John C. Maxwell's *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You* (1998), Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (2002), Simon Sinek's *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (2009), John Gordon's *The Power of Positive Leadership: How and Why Positive Leaders Transform Teams and Organizations and Change the World* (2017), Leif Babin and Jocko Willink's *The Dichotomy of Leadership: Balancing the Challenges of Extreme Ownership to Lead and Win* (2018), and L. David Marquet's *Leadership Is Language: The Hidden Power of What You Say--and What You Don't* (2020).

[230] SHAMDASANI, Sonu (1996). *The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga: Notes on the Seminar Given in 1932 by C. G. Jung*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.



Figure 34 - Fluid mindsets expand with wisdom (Pattanaik, 2013b: 62)

In another passage in Pattanaik's (2013a) novel, when Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa first meet Hanumān, they remark that he speaks Sanskrit, even though he does not look like a Brahmin. This implies that caste differences entail differences in language and appearance. Hanumān answers that physical clues such as aural (language) and visual (appearance) perception do not turn one into a Brahman, while "expanding the mind" does (199). Pattanaik also mentions a character who is a Brahmin by birth, though he has never sought the *Brahman* (245). This is a play on the words *brāhmaṇa*, "priest", and *Brahman*, the ultimate reality form which everything stems. Both terms come from the same Sanskrit root, √ *bṛh*, "to expand". Even though Pattanaik often reinterprets terms such as *varṇa* and *dharma* as referring to thought and talent, the term which points to the ultimate reality probably meant just "expansion, vastness, immensity". The idea that it means "to expand the mind", an idea which Pattanaik uses *passim* in his *Sita* and *Business Sutra*, is yet another modern-sounding expression with great *New Age* and neoliberal potential.[231] What Pattanaik implies is that belonging to a specific *jāti* is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition to reach enlightenment, while possessing a specific kind of "colour of thought" (*varṇa*) is.

[231] One may consider works with titles such as Andrew Pessin's *The 60-Second Philosopher: Expand Your Mind on a Minute or So a Day* (2009), Kathryn Harwig and Jean Harwig's *Become a Psychic Wanderer: Expand Your Mind & Soul Through Travel* (2013), and José Silva Jr. and Ed Bernd Jr.'s *Expand Your Magnificent Mind: More Insights on Success from José Silva* (2023).

The story of Śambūka seems to be the most cited *Rāmāyaṇa* tale when it comes to discussions about caste. In the retellings in which this story figures, Śambūka is a *śūdra* who begins acting like a Brahmin and who, as punishment, is slain by Rāma. In ancient retellings, Śambūka is often stigmatised and despised for departing from socially acceptable caste norms (Richman, 2008: 27). However, since at least the 8th century Rāma's actions have been criticised (*Ibid.:* 112). In modern *Dalit* discourses, the story is supposed to show that Rāma murdered lower caste people and suppressed their rights (*Ibid.:* 142). For this reason, it is sometimes used as a charter for the modern-day mistreatment of the lower castes (Goldman and Goldman, 2017: 110).

In Pattanaik's (2013a) retelling, Śambūka refuses to be inferior to the higher castes. He asks Rāma why hierarchy needs to exist. Rāma kills him with the excuse that the king has to uphold the rules of society and not let hierarchic boundaries be crossed, otherwise society may crumble. Such actions conform with Rāma's traditional role as the creator and preserver of social cohesion. When he returns home, Rāma meets a Brahmin child who states that he would rather be a Brahmin like Śambūka, who follows *brāhmaṇa-varṇa* and understands the *Vedas*, than like his father, who follows only *brāhmaṇa-jāti* out of his natural instincts to dominate and feel strong, yet has no true knowledge (287-288). The introduction of this character by Pattanaik reveals the dissociation between representation and reality. Culturally, Śambūka is placed at the bottom of society. In psychological terms, he is at the top. The child's father is in the opposite situation. In other words, besides a resistance symbol in *Dalit* discourses, Śambūka can also be the symbol of a neoliberally-minded individual and, in that position, be represented as opposed to the elites who did not do anything to justify their power.

In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Śambūka is a child who learns that, contrary to what the Brahmins state, the *Vedas* are the monopoly of neither a single caste nor profession, given that they have been composed by poets from different *jāti*: "fishermen, priests, woodcutters, potters, hunters" (478). Śambūka reverts to the previous social situation by translating the verses of the *Vedas* into a language that the common people understand. He sings about a world without borders, wars or discrimination. A Brahmin then incites Rāma to kill Śambūka and he does so on the grounds that, as a king, he has to uphold *dharma* (478-485). Like Pattanaik, Neelakantan creates an intelligent Śambūka who, despite coming from a lowly condition, achieves the higher knowledge of the instituted powers through talent and effort.

Figure 35, one of the few illustrations in Neelakantan's (2012) novel, shows who represents the ideal and the counter-ideal. Rāma is represented as a huge and ruthless man and Śambūka as a small and innocent boy. The reader does not see Rāma's face. However, Śambūka's expression of horror and helplessness is clear. The former is represented as the oppressor and the latter as the oppressed who stands for all the oppressed characters in the novel and in contemporary Indian society, much like Divakaruni's Sītā stands for all Indian women. The fact that Śambūka is depicted as a child enhances the ideas associated with him and the contrast between him and Rāma.



Figure 35 - Rāma kills Śambūka (Neelakantan, 2012: 483)

Neelakantan's Śambūka acknowledges that the *great tradition* has been appropriated by the hegemonic social groups and that the subaltern ones have been barred from it, even though they are said to have helped shaping it in the first place. Śambūka only wishes to dismantle hegemony and restore power to the subaltern groups. Neelakantan's Rāma is regarded as a counter-ideal when it comes to caste. He is unable to reform society and follows only established rules. In other words, he is a negative pre-modern stock character who is unable to evolve psychologically and undergo a character-arc but remains unchangeable in his mentality and actions. Pattanaik's Rāma, however, is more positive and modern, given that he, at least, has the potential to grow psychologically, an important narrative strategy in neoliberal discourses.

Rāvaṇa is also depicted as a model of a person who defies hierarchy due to his merit. In this role, he tends to succeed far longer than Śambūka. In Kané's (2016) novel, it is said that Kārtavīryārjuna seeks immortality by virtue of his birth, while Rāvaṇa does so through worth (34). In Neelakantan's (2012) version, the one in which this representation of Rāvaṇa is most clear, Rāvaṇa dismisses the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads* as "humbug". Later, though, he finds out that they are great philosophical texts and that what they discuss is unrelated to the knowledge propagated by the Brahmins, given that they do not mention the "curse of caste" and give Rāvaṇa great determination to destroy

that system (35). Again, in Neelakantan's discourse, as in the discourses by the other contemporary male retellers, the traditional elites are represented in a negative way. The society Rāvaṇa wishes to create is fair, contrary to the one led by Rāma, and he often states that he has the duty of "civilising" Indian society and thwart the curse of caste from expanding from Rāma's northern kingdom to the rest of India (212-213).

Some episodes of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition also tend to defend Rāma and the *Rāmāyaṇa* as symbols of liberation from the caste system. The clearest example is the story of Śabarī, a tribal woman that Rāma encounters in the forest during his exile (Pattanaik, 2013: 163-165a; Divakaruni, 2019: 305). Śabarī offers Rāma wild berries that she has caught in the forest. However, she tastes them before handing them to him. Divakaruni's (2019) version focuses on Śabarī, the subaltern female character and her positive actions of pure and simple devotion:

> I [Sītā], too, loved it, this tender story about an illiterate tribal woman who had been told by her guru that Ram-the-divine would come to her. Trusting in her guru, she'd waited for him all her life, gathering a basket of fruits for him each day, even though the people of her tribe mocked her for her blind faith. When, in the course of his search, Ram had stumbled upon her humble hut, she was old and near death. Delighted, she'd offered him the fruits she'd gathered that day. She'd bitten into each to make sure it was sweet enough. And Ram had happily eaten these and blessed her for her simple and deep affection (5).

Pattanaik's (2013a) version focuses mostly on how the male characters react to the issue of caste. Lakṣmaṇa feels shocked that his brother accepts berries bitten by an outcaste. Rāma tells Lakṣmaṇa that Śabarī is verifying whether the berries taste well and are safe to eat (164). Instead of disrespectful, she is being considerate. In Pattanaik's view, this story illustrates the Rāma of the people, the one who evolved through the *bhakti* tradition and who, contrary to the Rāma of the priests, rises above social taboos (165).[232] Figure 36, another drawing by Pattanaik, illustrates this scene. This picture follows the discourse that Pattanaik creates around the character of Śambūka. Lakṣmaṇa acts like Rāma when the latter meets Śambūka in the same version, while, as the caption states, Rāma expands his mind and, as a result, follows the neoliberal ideal common to Pattanaik's discourses or the Indian ideal of inclusiveness

[232] Pattanaik adds that one of Rāma's common epithets is *Patita pāvana* (286), a Sanskrit phrase which means "saviour of the polluted", which also brings back ideas of purity and impurity.

and the ability to "imagine" the world from the point of view of the *Other*. Lakṣmaṇa, for his part, embodies the exclusivism and egotism of Western epistemology.

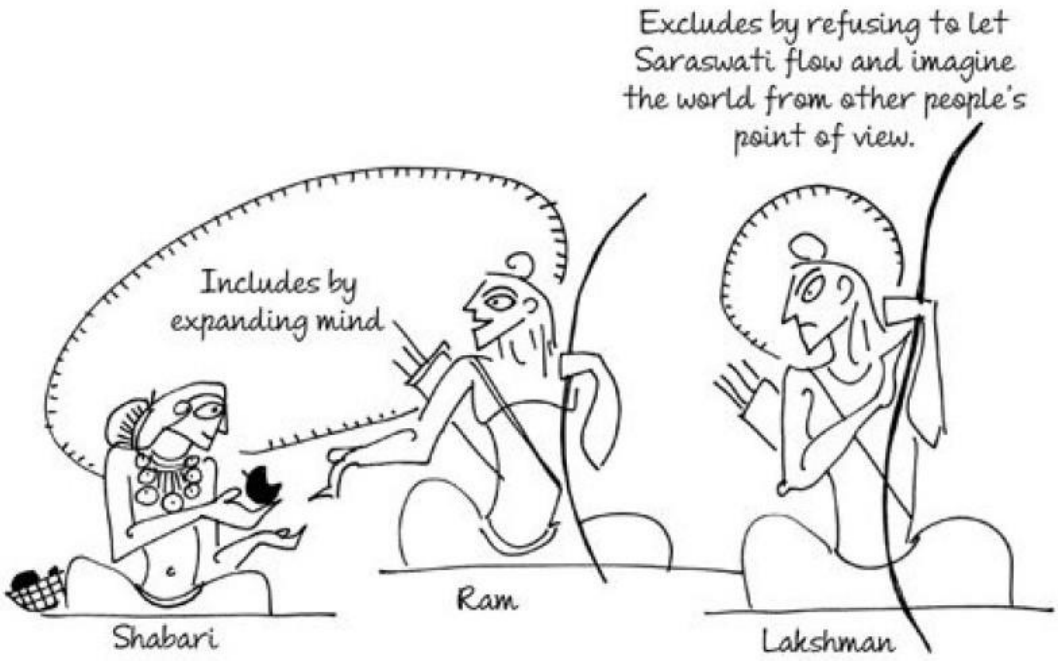


Figure 36 - Rāma accepts Śabarī's berries (Pattanaik, 2013b: 343)

While the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* condemn the concept of caste based on birth, sometimes they also justify it. Neelakantan's (2012) Rāvaṇa often questions whether the caste system is false and whether a virile man like him is equal to the weak and frail commoners (114/143/231/362). Something similar occurs in Pattanaik's (2013a) novel when Vālmīki decides to stop being an *outcaste* thief and turns into a *ṛṣi* and many people of different castes in Ayodhyā decide to abandon their households and also become hermits. Such actions are said to disrupt the familiar structures and hierarchies of society (286). The author inserts this part into the chapter about Śambūka and does not state what source it is from, even though this episode seems to provide counterpoint to the better-known one in which a washerman decides to complain when, after Sītā is rescued, he thinks that other wives may wish to abandon their husbands. In any case, this episode seems to hint that, while the concept of *jāti* is oppressive and that of *varṇa* is not, not everybody should rise to the mindset of a Brahmin, otherwise society will not function as a cohesive unit. Even if such ambiguous discourses on caste are rare, Pattanaik and Tripathi's concept of "mindset" and "colour

of thought" point to the *kṣatriya* and Brahmin castes as ideal, given that it is implied that people should strive for mental and spiritual wisdom and bodily strength. After all, as per Figure 34, these two *varṇas* are described as the "leaders", while the other ones are described as "followers" who are still on their way to leadership.

All the same, one often finds critiques of the appropriation of the concept of *jāti* for the personal gain of Brahmins, an anti-elite discourse which is common to the three contemporary male retellers and sounds like contemporary populist discourses (Bell, 1992). Pattanaik (2013) states that initially the Brahmins were the transmitters of Vedic knowledge (culture), not its interpreters or owners. This is also the position defended by Neelakantan's Śambūka. Nevertheless, according to Pattanaik, the Brahmins used their power to dominate society. The author has added that it is ironic that the carriers of knowledge on how to expand their minds ultimately failed to do so (20-21) and ultimately followed natural instincts. This negative portrayal of Brahmins is even more evident in Neelakantan's works. His representations focus on behaviour. In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Brahmins are blamed for destroying the old sense of equality that existed among Rāvaṇa's kingdom and for imposing casteism and untouchability (345). Priests are said to be hypocrites, given that they preach meekness and poverty, while never practicing their precepts (38). Rather, they are said to be "high class robbers" (177) who destroy Rāvaṇa's culture (261) by taking hold of the temples and all of the important positions and by pushing the other social groups away from them (302). They are also described as croaking nonsense texts like frogs and as performing meaningless rituals instead of undertaking useful action (19/22/78). The idea of Brahmins as frogs who "croak" nonsense texts appears in the *Ṛgveda* (Doniger, 2005; 7:103) and in later Sanskrit literature. The Brahmins used to pray to the gods in order to propitiate them and get some boon in return, such as rains for the crops. Frogs also start croaking when rains come (Elst, 2011: 46), whence the association.[233] Conversely, in Neelakantan's (2012) novel, the people who are said to do something useful, such as carpenters, masons and farmers (*śūdras*) become subjects to the Brahmins (20). The modern ideal of useful, practical action is one which is commonly emphasised by Neelakantan. The fact that Neelakantan creates a practically and independently-minded Rāvaṇa to a readership of practical and rationally-minded

[233] This is one of the many tendencies which ridicule the Brahmin caste in Hindu oral tradition. Another example is that of the *trickster* figure from South India called Tenali Rama, himself a Brahmin who often ridicules the excessive ceremonies of his counterparts. SHULMAN, David Dean (1985). *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 180-200.

Indians shows that the representation made of the inaction of superstitious Brahmins and the action of the *śūdras* is seen as negative and positive, respectively. These portrayals of the Brahmin caste may also be said to constitute a critique of the old middle class, which was mainly constituted by Brahmins whose families collaborated with the British. Here, one may realise the thin boundary between the concepts of caste and class.

4.3 The idea of class

At first sight, caste and class seem to be different concepts. The former is an old local concept related to birth, while the latter is a modern economic concept which began to be used in the 19th century following the major changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and which may now be applied to any contemporary capitalistic society. In any case, both concepts may be regarded as complementary and the main difference between them may be regarded as lying on the fact that caste is considered to be a closed system and class an open one (Brosius, 2010: 17). This description would not apply to some contemporary discourses, such as that promoted by Pattanaik, who describes caste as a perfectly fluid psychosocial system. In any case, due to their perceived similarities, it is argued that the concepts of caste and class should be analysed together (Jaffrelot and Veer, 2008: 17).

It sounds anachronistic to talk about the concept of class in the universe of the *Rāmāyaṇa* or in any other context prior to the time of the Industrial Revolution, but the truth is that, possibly due to the polysemic nature of the term, English-speakers tend to use it indiscriminately in situations which may or may be not related to modern socioeconomics. This happens in Neelakantan's novel, which often depicts a technologically advanced *asura* society with industrial cities like those of the contemporary world, and in the retellings which create less contemporary universes, such as Pattanaik's one. References to the concept of class are often based on one's physical appearance. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā states that differences in attire in Laṅkā suggest differences in "social class" (175). When she sees Trijaṭā for the first time, she states that she is not beautiful as Mandodarī, though "clearly of the same class" (183). Tripathi (2015) mentions the undyed garments of the "common class" (228). Neelakantan (2012) states that different standards of behaviour are expected from the nobility and from the common people (394). These descriptions reveal that, like caste, class is related to one's outward appearance and general behaviour.

Sometimes, when the retellers mix terms related to both concepts of caste and class, the line separating them becomes blurrier. Tripathi (2015) writes that Daśaratha feels a "kṣatriyan disdain for the trading class" (7). Given that *kṣatriya* refers to the warrior caste, it seems that "trading class" would refer to the caste of farmers, merchants and traders (*vaiśya*).[234] In another passage, when Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa go to the hermitage in order to be educated, they live not like "nobility" but as "children of working-class parents" (52). The term "working class" refers to the caste of servants (*śūdra*). Besides mentioning the "merchant class" (464), Neelakantan (2012) mentions the social evils "propagated by the priestly class" (35), which refers to the Brahmin caste.

I have analysed how the masculine ideal is associated with the knightly representation of the landed aristocracy and how the wisdom of the clergy is likewise praised, even though this group is criticised for its lack of practical knowledge or for having degenerated into a hegemonic group unable to keep up with changing times. I now turn to representations of the other classes: the middle class of merchants and traders and the working class or, as they are often called, the "common people".

Neelakantan's (2012) descriptions of the middle class are bleak and coloured by the dark humour which run through his entire novel. In this sense, Neelakantan's work seems to be the most performative and playful ones, which sometimes makes it more difficult to understand the ideology behind this author's discourses than it is to understand the ideology beyond the discourses of all other contemporary retellers. Sometimes, it seems that Neelakantan is deliberately obscure and contradictory in order to show highlight his "contrarian" perspective, which is a metonymy to his view of Indian civilisation. In one scene, Bhadra, the low-caste narrator, pretends to belong to a "good middle-class family that valued morality and honour above all and ignored the jeering laughter all around me as I kicked my screaming wife again" (487). Theoretically, the middle-class is said to possess the politically correct view of respect towards subaltern groups, in this case women. However, in practice, this class is said to retain patriarchal values. Even though Neelakantan establishes a difference between the Brahmins and the *vaiśya* caste or middle class, there are similarities in their descriptions. Members of such privileged social categories tend to use their status in

[234] One could also state that the term *kṣatriya* refers to the landed aristocracy and compare this social relationship to that between the landed aristocracy and the merchants and traders (who formed the new bourgeoisie of the early Industrial Revolution in England), given that they also felt disdain for each other.

order to break social rules or to exert their hegemony on rulers and commoners. The middle-class is said to care neither about spiritual hegemony nor about who rules, as long as its members are allowed to be rich (72).

Just as Rāma, who in Neelakantan's novel symbolises premodern India, is a prey to the Brahmins, Rāvaṇa, perhaps like contemporary populist leaders, is described as a prey to the middle class. Rāvaṇa, who is portrayed as an idealist who fights for the rights of the common people (*śūdras* and outcastes), is said to forget his ideals and to become intoxicated with the compliments that the bourgeoisie showers on him. In order to comply with their wishes, he gives them new residences, bungalows and pleasure gardens built where before there had been huts and farms, diverts natural waterways to the cities, and confines families of commoners to spaces as big as those occupied by a "rich man's chariot" (427). The poor are said to have no choice but to flock to the cities and work as servants to the privileged.

While the commoners stand next to Rāvaṇa, given that they identify with "the poor boy who had risen from poverty" (132), the "foreign-educated, Sanskrit-speaking, betel-chewing wealthy" escape their responsibilities or shift to the winning side of battles (477-478). The adjectives the author has used in this example seem to point to the old middle class. This class was mostly foreign-educated and, even nowadays, it is mainly the well-to-do who have the opportunity to study or even to go abroad. Sanskrit is the classical language of North India and of Hinduism, whose sacred texts were transmitted by Brahmins. Finally, betel was popular among the rich in the past. Nowadays, it is socially widespread. Nearly every street stall in India sells it and it is consumed by rich and poor, even though it seems to be losing popularity among the *nouveau riche*.[235]

In Tripathi's (2015) novel, it is not the "middle class" but the "nobility", a term which the author often uses pejoratively, that is described as scheming and plotting to enrich itself on account of Daśaratha, who is said to be a weak and distracted ruler (43). Even though the characters (Rāvaṇa and Daśaratha) and the name given to the larger identity group (*middle class* and *nobility*) are different in Tripathi and Neelakantan's retelling, the representation of their relationship is similar. The difference is that Neelakantan refers to the middle class as a stereotyped mixture of ideas pertaining to

[235] GUHA, P. (2006). "Betel Leaf: The Neglected Green Gold of India" *Journal of Human Ecology*, Vol. 19, Nº. 2, pp. 87-93; AHUJA, S. C., and AHUJA, Uma (2011). "Betel Leaf and Betel Nut in India: History and Uses" *Asian Agri-History*, Vol. 15, Nº. 1, pp. 13-35; BHAKTA, Jatindra Nath (2017). *Betel Vine: Nature's "Green" Gold*, New York: Nova's Science Publishers.

the old and new middle classes, while Tripathi's nobility only refers to the old one, that is, to the social group who derived all of its privileges from birth. Accordingly, Tripathi's Rāma states: "nobility is about being noble (…). It's about the way of the Arya. It's not about your birth, but how you conduct yourself. Being a noble is a great responsibility, not a birthright" (119). This conforms to the latter's nonfictional representations of these two classes, given that, as I have shown in the first chapter, Tripathi claims to belong to the rebellious Indian youth (new middle class), which is said to have a completely different approach to life and the world when compared to the old "nobility" (old middle class). In sum, there is indeed a confluence of ideas of caste and class in the retellings by Neelakantan and Tripathi. Both concepts relate to power and, more specifically, to the ruler, whom the highest caste (Brahmins) and the highest classes (middle classes/nobility) are said to be able to manipulate. The ideal in both authors, as well as in Pattanaik's *Sita,* is to have a leader who, being as much "human" as he is "humane", is rational, exerts self-control and rises above the domineering urges of nature and judgemental urges of culture instead of succumbing to the lure of elite power.

Most retellings are also conscious of the powerlessness of the common people, a category which may include the lower castes or the outcastes and the lower classes. This group is often described as being in perpetual conflict with the elites. Even though the ideal characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* belong to the elite in all contemporary retellings, they are often said to lean towards the common people and to be against the elites. Neelakantan (2012) depicts several social revolutions in which the common people try to counter the hegemonic power of the elites and gain access to power. However, the author states that, while social revolutions might improve the lot of the common people and make them "more civilised", there shall always exist hegemonic groups against subaltern ones (301). Rather than overturning social roles, shifts in power are said to make different individuals or social groups occupy the same roles of previous power structures.

In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Rośnī is said to be a rare figure who is "popular with the masses as well as the classes" (115). This implies that, despite the phonetic similarity, the "masses" and the "classes" are ontologically different. In conversation with Rośnī, Rāma says that he is not sure whether he will be a good chief of the police because people do not like him. Rośnī tells him that he has only interacted with the elite, who is in control, but that there is another Ayodhyā where those who were "not born-

right" exist. They, Rośnī states, will be sympathetic towards those whom the elite ostracises (113-115). Later, the elite becomes unsatisfied when Rāma enforces similar laws for everybody and makes circumvention of the law impossible (115). In short, in this case Tripathi's Rāma is described in an opposite way to Neelakantan's Rāvaṇa. While the latter pampers the "elite" and lets its members circumvent the rules, Tripathi's Rāma creates a system according to which the masses and the classes are judicially equal. In India and other democratic countries, judicial parity is a common topic in discussions related to political corruption. In fact, it is a common distinctive marker between democratic and non-democratic societies. This means that, as a legislator, Rāma ends corruption and brings democracy to India. The diversity of Rāmas recreated by the contemporary retellers when interpreted through the light of modern politics presents several characters: a hegemon who endorses the elites and oppresses commoners, as in Neelakantan's version, or a populist who criticises the elites and identifies with the commoners, as in Tripathi's version.

Divakaruni (2019) also recreates a Rāma who is much more a Rāma of the people than that of the elite. Vasiṣṭha makes a bed of scratchy grasses for Rāma and Sītā on the grounds that, before Rāma's is crowned as king, he should experience the hardships of his poorer subjects. As Rāma lies down, he promises Sītā that, in his kingdom, every man will have a voice and nobody will fail to receive justice (96). Later, when coming back from his exile, he orders the creation of new organisations to house, feed and teach the destitute (287). In these descriptions, what in hindsight could be called Rāma's positive socialist tendencies could be compared to Sītā's actions. However, while Rāma sometimes hover in the morality of his actions, at least when interpreted through Divakaruni's modern feminist lens, Sītā is consistently positive in her relationship with the *Other*.

The fact that the common people live in less urbane and less socially complex settings and the elites vice-versa seems to imply that the former have a more "natural" way of life and the latter a more "cultural" one. Neelakantan implies this idea when writing that the common people too could become more "civilised". The tendency to depict commoners as uncivilised brutes is clear in Tripathi's (2015) novel, in which the most relevant representative of a commoner is Dhenuka, the minor who rapes Rośnī. Dhenuka is said to be the son of a village chief and to be famous for his rude and uncouth behaviour (139), as well as his "bestiality" (143). Even though Rāma refuses to sentence him on the grounds that the law forbids so, he states that Dhenuka is "[a]

hardened criminal, a blot on society whose soul will tone for his deed for at least a million births" (197). Dhenuka's punishment is not to be decided by human law but by the metaphysical wheel of rebirth. Such statements are not made in regard to the elite, given that the several contemporary retellers tend to consider that even the Rāvaṇa is not a demented demon and has the potential to become more human.

Most heroes and villains of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are Brahmins and *kṣatriyas*, which makes them high caste and upper class, given that they usually live in luxury. Neelakantan's (2012) novel is the sole exception to this, given that it focuses on subaltern groups. Throughout the novel, commoners are referred to by a huge array of epithets that point to their subaltern condition. Descriptions rely on intellectual, physical and sensorial clues. Neelakantan writes that commoners are "black-skinned, low-living, simple-minded, illiterate and innocent millions" (243) who are invisible to the government (303/376), even though they have "to toil, to live, to strive, and to die, for the high and mighty" (283). Bhadra, one of the two narrators, is a low caste and low-class person. He is said to have bow legs, a pot belly, curly hair, a skin "as dark as midnight" and to have no respectability whatsoever, given that he is the "commonest among common people" (80). In short, Bhadra is the reverse of the stereotype male warrior. Such descriptions are espoused by Bhadra himself, who states that he feels like a lowly creature, a small worm, an "impotent, good-for-nothing bastard" who dares to dream of dining with kings and of changing history but who has been forgotten and cast away by the powerful (127). Stench, which could be related to the matter of purity, constitutes another sensorial feature associated with commoners. Rāvaṇa thinks that Bhadra's stench is "overpowering". While it is stated that Rāvaṇa can keep his eyes away from visually unappealing elements, the stench feels unbearable. He is said to feel so impure that he feels a sudden urge to wash his hands before he touches his son, lest he pollute him with Bhadra's stench (266).

Neelakantan also focuses his novels around diverse common social and political attitudes towards commoners. Besides Rāma being described as following traditional Indian values and Rāvaṇa neoliberal ones, Vidyujjihva emerges as a third major force in the novel. He is described as a (proto-)communist. This is an ideology in which both birth (*jāti*) and talent (*varṇa*) would collapse, given that, according to communism, everybody is supposed to share the same material wealth, regardless of differences in both internal and external attributes. Vidyujjihva states that he wishes to create an equal and just world where there will be neither kings, landlords nor other exploiters of the

people, such as priests, magicians and traders. A council of people shall determine what to allot to each one. Vidyujjihva promises that the world he aims to create will belong to the common people, whom he asks to join his revolution (182-183). Bhadra, however, thinks that every ideology is just a play act that powerful people use in order to become more powerful and exert their hegemony. The idea that every ideology is structurally similar despite superficial differences and that all ideologies lead to the same ultimate result is a major theme in Nelankantan's novels. No matter how pro- or anti-elite a character or group might be, Neelakantan's characters tend to appropriate political discourses only for personal gains. In Bhadra's view, though, the common people do not care about ideologies. In the end, they just want to ensure enough meals, sex and a chance to improve their lives (183-185). Similarly, according to Bhadra, virtues such as kindness, courage, morals, principles, sympathy constitute the luxuries of "the rich, the noble, the high-caste, the fair-skinned" (279). Such descriptions of commoners as beings who just wish to satisfy natural urges and non-commoners as possessing cultural virtues makes the former seem closer to nature and animality than to culture and humanity. In the end, while described as helpless, Bhadra also possesses some influence on the plot. As in Kané's (2016) novel all important plot twists are attributed to Śūrpaṇakhā, in Neelakantan's (2012) some are attributed to Bhadra. It is Bhadra who, like Kané´s Śūrpaṇakhā, starts spreading rumours about Sītā's chastity and makes Rāma banish her from Ayodhyā (487).

The conclusion in relation to the common people that Neelakantan reaches is similar to the one that the feminist retellers reach in relation to women. Hegemonic groups, the high castes and classes in the Neelakantan0s case and men in Divakaruni's one, often describe reality as if the subaltern groups needed them in order to survive, while the opposite that is true. Neelakantan (2012) states that the powerful would never be able to achieve their power without the commoners (284). This means that power is contextual and cannot exist without its counterpart. Much like Divakaruni's Sītā states that the women of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have been "silenced" and have never been praised for their sacrifices, Neelakantan's Bhadra concludes that neither kings nor bards would acknowledge the heroic deeds of the common people (334), which means that they have also been "silenced". Finally, as there seems to be an identification between women characters in the novels by female authors, the same tendency happens in relation to commoners in Neelakantan's retelling. When Bhadra joins Rāvaṇa's armies and fights

wars in foreign territories, he acknowledges that he is killing, raping and looting people like him, the poor and hungry of other countries (342).

This ontological identification through emotion is also often resorted to in political discourses. A relevant example in the West would be the rise of communism, which tried to gather the *proletariat* in a battle against the *bourgeoisie*. In contemporary India, something similar happens in relation to the concepts of caste/class. In the past few decades, the concept of caste has been used for the creation of new political identities and new alliances of identities between subcastes and castes that were previously thought to be distinct (Mines, 2009: 76). Numbers are just as important to create minority groups and to gain enough visibility to confront the majority as they are to define majority groups. By creating a representational rift between the middle class and the commoners, the retellers achieve a similar representation. The fact that there are many similarities between the descriptions of the social status of women and those of the lower castes and classes justifies the existence of the general social group *subaltern*, as opposed to the elite. The contemporary retellers are as preoccupied with finding differences between identity groups as they are with finding points of identification, a kind of anxiety which is related to the dilemma expressed in the unofficial Indian motto of "unity in diversity". As the contemporary retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are either female or are in touch with at least middle-class women, representations of femininity tend to be more positive and independent. Divakaruni and Kané's female protagonists do not try to become men. They have their own positive, independent identities. However, descriptions of the lower castes and lower classes are either negative or, when they are positive, consist of the neoliberal argument that, if such groups try hard enough, they may either improve their *varṇa* or their socioeconomic position in life and become "leaders" like their superior *varṇas* and classes.

4.4 The idea of species

Ancient and contemporary retellings also include humanoid mythological species with no obvious counterpart in reality. As most academic studies and contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* try to "demythologise" and rationalise the story, these non-existent species are often compared with human groups, either current ones or others which are still very present in collective memory. The most common term in the retellings to refer to such groups is that of *race*, which was a common concept in

English and other European languages to refer to different human groups until the recent past. Given the violence that interpretations of this term originated, the term ended up acquiring a pejorative meaning and is now considered to belong to the realm of pseudoscience. In scientific discourses, this term has been substituted by others, mostly *ethnicity*. Unlike race, ethnicity presupposes neither intellectual nor biological differences. Major superficial differences between different ethnic groups are considered to be cultural in nature. I analyse how the major mythological species of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are represented and how they may be regarded as being associated with existing human groups.

4.4.1 *Asuras* and *Rākṣasas*

Neelakantan's (2012) novels tend to depart from the premise that Indian society has been structured around the concept of different species, which are associated with existing Indian communities. The concept of species is also related to caste and class. When Rāvaṇa invades Ayodhyā, the reigning king Anaraṇya refuses to shake his hand and to fight with him. He states that he will not be polluted by a *śūdra*, a concept related to caste. Rāvaṇa answers that he is not a *śūdra* but an *asura* (210), a concept related to species.

A term which is usually used interchangeably with *asura* is that of *rākṣasa*, even though, as Pattanaik (2013a) makes clear, the terms originally refer to different beings (50). Goldman and Goldman (2017) refer to the *rākṣasas* as a weaker species of creatures who never threaten human *dharma*, while the *asuras*, who are half-brothers of the gods, are more powerful and threatening (55). It is because both are regarded as evil opponents of humans and of the benevolent *devas* (the species I will describe in the next section), respectively, that they have been classified as one species (Hale, 1999). Even though Rāvaṇa and his people are called *asuras* in the title of Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Rāvaṇa is more often considered to be a *rākṣasa.*[236] Given that the retellers often use these terms interchangeably, I also do so.

Divakaruni (2019) translates the term *asura* as "not-God (...) [i]mplying they were better" (289). In Sanskrit, the prefix *a-* may denote negation and *sura* may mean "god". However, gods are not often called *sura*. This means that Divakaruni's

[236] A Hindi *Rāmāyaṇa* retelling which was not included in the *corpus* of this dissertation is titled *Ravan: The King of Rakshasas*, by Sharad Tandale. TANDALE, Sharad (2019). *Ravan: The King of Rakshasas*, Pune: Newera Publishing House

explanation is likely derived from popular etymology. There is no scholarly consensus on the origins of the term. In Divakaruni's novel, Sītā states that *asura* is the name that the most militant *rākṣasas* call themselves, which means that the difference between them in this retelling is more ideological than ontological. All the same, Sītā acknowledges differences between them. *Rākṣasas* are said to be bestial, while *asuras* are said to be civilised and sophisticated. For this reason, as Sītā claims, they do not seem to belong to the same "race" (174-175). The *Asuras* are also said to be socially fragmented. In Kané's (2006) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā wishes to marry Vidyujjihva. However, Rāvaṇa refuses on the grounds that such a marriage should be conducted because Vidyujjihva is the king of a ferocious, brutal and boorish *asura* clan with its own set of rules and values (97). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, *rākṣasas* are said to have many different tribes, each one calling itself a different name and looking differently from others (127). Such descriptions of diverse counter-ideal species are antithetical to those of ideal masculinity, given that ideal male characters tend to look and act in similar ways and to give rise to a unified concept of normative masculinity. Goldman and Goldman (1996) speak of differences between the *asuras* and the *rākṣasas* as one of social class (66), an historicist approach which hints that the concepts of species and class may be intertwined. *Asuras* are regarded as upper class and *Rākṣasas* as lower castes or outcastes, which explains and justifies their increased civility and lack of it, respectively.

Pattanaik (2013) derives the term *rākṣasa* from the Sanskrit root √*rākṣ*, "to guard, to protect". This is also a popular etymological definition and is likely false. In any case, while popular etymologies may point to false linguistic origins, they often point to true representations. Pattanaik states that the *rākṣasas* are the "guards of the forest" and their way of life is said to one devoid of rules and one which favours strength, brute force and competition (48). Humans are said to be the only ones who can abandon nature and follow *dharma* (292). In other words, *rākṣasas* follow no cultural rules (57), which means that they are unambiguously non-human. In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Rāma is told a more modern version. Here, not only is Rāma schooled on the classical of is nation but it implied that in 3400 BCE Sanskrit was already old. Furthermore, one should note that, like every character and group in Tripathi's fiction, the *rākṣasa*s are said to be great warriors:

> (…) the Rakshasas are warriors, Prince Ram. Do you know what the word 'Rakshasa' means? It's derived from the old Sanskrit word for

> protection, Raksha. It is said that the word Rakshasa emerged from their victims asking to 'be protected from them'. They were the finest mercenaries of ancient times (182).

The attempt to find an historical inspiration for these mythological species has given rise to several fringe theories. Goldman (1986) lists that the *asuras* and *rākṣasas* have been associated with native tribal peoples of South India and Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese Buddhists and even the aboriginal population of Australia (49). Pollock (1991) adds cannibals, primitive cave-dwellers, animal-like shamans, tribal masked dancers, Indian communities whose name derived from the many names by which *rākṣasas* have been called, and Muslims (69-70). [237] Such possible groups point to specific geographic regions (South India, Sri Lanka, Australia), religions (Buddhism, Islam, Shamanism) and to autochthonous groups (natives, aborigines, primitives, cave-dwellers). Pattanaik (2013a) claims that the *othering* of the *asuras* and *rākṣasas* has been a technique that "civilised" nations have used in order to justify warfare (111). As usual, though, he emphasises India's uniqueness when stating, while Western scholars tend to regard such creatures in social terms, Indian scholars prefer to regard them psychologically (219). In his view, it seems, the dividing line between an *asura*/*rākṣasa* and a human being consists of "mindset" (*varṇa*). This means that the very concepts of *asura* and *rākṣasa* are fluid and not determined by birth.

The depiction of *asuras* is often ambiguous. As they are described with ideal and counter-ideal physical attributes, they are sometimes said to be shape-shifters or, alternatively, to be creatures who are able to look good and beautiful on the outside but who are wicked and ugly on the inside. In Kané's (2016) novel, Agastya turns *rākṣasas* into monsters, "their true form in all their ugliness - from within and outside" (46). Divakaruni (2019) describes their ugly form as consisting of "fanged teeth, long, curved nails, red eyes, and hair that spiralled wildly from their heads, waving like serpents" (182), a textual description which coincides with Pattanaik's visual depiction of Śū rpaṇakhā (Figure 32).

When it comes to behaviour and personality traits, in the contemporary retellings *asuras* often depart from the ideal. They are said to be violent. In Kané's (2016) view, this is their main distinctive trait, given that *asuras* are depicted as prototypical warriors (68) without humane sentiments (289). Śūrpaṇakhā is said to be "an asura girl - all fight

[237] Goldman and Goldman (2017) also mention interpretations of *rākṣasas* as ancient matrilineal societies (46).

and fire" (69). When Rāma meets her for the first time, he receives her warmly and states that she is the first *asura* woman he meets and that most males have attacked him (197). In the end, Śūrpaṇakhā's lust shows that she is no better than her male counterparts. *Asuras* are also said to engage in immoral acts such as drinking, promiscuousness, treason and betrayal, all of which show their inability to exert self-control. They are also characterised as "permissive" (84). In short, their internal freedom from moral rules is conducive to unrestricted behaviour. In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Rāvaṇa's father, who is not a *rākṣasa,* states that *rākṣasas* form the most blighted race, given that they engage in "debauchery, sodomy and avarice" (175). In Pattanaik's (2013a) version, contrary to humans, *rākṣasas* know the meaning of neither fidelity nor celibacy, which, as I have shown, are represented in the works of all contemporary retellers as positive traits. They have intercourse with whomever they wish and this is said to be the most "natural thing" to do (43/105). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Daśaratha insults his wife Kaikeyī, who is fully human, by calling her *rākṣasī* (the female form of *rākṣasa*) due to her immorality (104).

Gender is also important for the definition of *asuras*. In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, *asura* men are said to be materialistic and women to be aggressive and amoral. Such characterisations often collapse into a single identity, given that *asura* women are said to be brought up like boys (291-292). Even though the indiscriminate use of violence and sexual unruliness constitute gender counter-ideals, here these traits are associated with non-human species, which shows that specific dichotomic personality traits tend to be associated across real or mythological identity groups.

As non-humans, *asuras/rākṣasas* are said to be in permanent conflict with humans. Besides when it comes to depictions of female oppression, Divakaruni (2019) tends to create her mythology literary universe as a fairytale-like one, which means that there are no explicit associations between mythological species and real beings in her retelling. In her novel, the *rākṣasa* Tāraka fashions clothes out of the skins of the Brahmins she has killed (38). For this reason, Rāma is sent to destroy the *rākṣasas* who, as they get stronger and more organised, increasingly disrupt the rituals of the sages (34/130). It is often stated that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa slaughter thousands of them and they are usually praised for such actions (12/38). Lakṣmaṇa states that *rākṣasas* cannot be treated with human courtesy because, not being human, they neither understand nor appreciate such courtesy. Rāma confirms this statement by stating that they cannot be trusted and that the best thing one can do is kill them (150).

According to Pollock, who writes specifically about Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, rather than seeing *rākṣasas* as a different species, some passages characterise them as psychological human counter-ideals and as beings whose moral ugliness is related to their physical appearance (72). Not only in the canonical Sanskrit version but also in some contemporary retellings, which may or may not follow the canonical version closely, it is possible to say that an *asura*/*rākṣasa* refers to a human being who is unable to exert rational self-control, given that such beings are always overcome by emotions and act without paying attention to social mores. In most modern cases in which the tales are psychologised or historicised, the main differences between humans and *asuras/rākṣasas* tend to be more psychological/cultural than ontological.

As I said in the previous chapter, when Śūrpaṇakhā states that she will commit *suttee* in Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Rāvaṇa feels shocked that an *asura* woman is willing to follow the custom of a *deva* widow (195). This example plays with gender concepts, but the author has also referred to notions that pertain to other categories: *asura* and *deva*. This means that Śūrpaṇakhā is depicted as a humanoid woman whose identity is determined by the fact that she belongs to another culture. Except for what concerns such customs and different ways of thinking and acting, *asuras* often look, behave and sound like human beings. Thapar (1989) states that while Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* obscures their identity by turning them into demons, they are "people" with ways of life different from those of Ayodhyā (8). In short, they are projections of humans who, while different and foreign, are also recognisable (Pollock, 1991: 82). As Neelakantan writes in relation to Rāvaṇa's anger, sometimes counter-ideal characters may even look more human and relatable in their fallibility than ideal characters.

As female characters can be transformed from counter-ideal women into ideal ones by ideal men, the same may happen with *rākṣasas*. Pattanaik (2013) interprets not only of Rāvaṇa but *rākṣasas* in general meeting Rāma as a story of "mind expansion" (163). Just like the savage becomes cultured in contact with the civilised and the student becomes wise when in contact with the *guru*, the non-human is humanised through contact with the human. Viśvāmitra states very clearly that "demons"[238] are only humans that others refuse to understand or tolerate and that being like them is *adharma* (111). For that reason, when Rāma defeats Rāvaṇa and gives his kingdom to Vibhīṣaṇa, who is also a *rākṣasa*, he tells him to expand his mind and encourage other *rākṣasas* to

[238] An English pejorative term that reflects neither the etymological nor cultural intricacies of *asuras/rākṣasas* but which has been the most common translation of these terms.

follow *dharma* (249).[239] If one uses English terminology stereotypically associated with neoliberal discourses, as the author often does, one may state that, in Pattanaik's representation, Rāma emerges as a transformational team leader who inspires and uplifts his teammates to unleash their hidden human potential and improve their output.

Vibhīṣaṇa is a relevant character when considering the transformation of *rākṣasas* into humans. He is usually depicted as an *asura*/*rākṣasa* who, contrary to his siblings and other *rākṣasas*, is able to exert self-control. Because of this trait, he defects to Rāma's side. Accordingly, his representation tends to be more positive and humane than that of other *asuras*/*rākṣasas* in the contemporary retellings. The only predictable exception is Neelakantan's (2012) novel, in which Vibhīṣaṇa is described as a traitor who destroys his brother's dream of creating a free society and instead decides to help Rāma establish the oppressive caste system in Laṅkā out of a desire to hold on to power.

The behaviour of *asuras* often reveals their lack of culture, which means that the difference between *asuras* and humans is comparable to the difference between nature and culture. In Kané's (2016) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā describes her own people's "savage manners" (80). In Neelakantan's (2012) version, Rāvaṇa states that *asuras* behave like children, so the *devas*' mission is to "civilise them" (73). The fact that "savages" and children lack culture and education and have to grow and be educated into "civilisation" constitutes a common metaphor in Orientalist discourse (Murti, 2001: 18) and, as such, was a good excuse for colonial, imperialistic and, when one thinks of Rajagopalachari or *Amar Chitra Katha's* retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, nationalistic endeavours.

In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Lakṣmaṇa states that *asuras* are "savages" and "animals" with whom communication is impossible (193). Here, *Asuras* and the idea of their bestiality is explicitly associated with their religion:

> the Asuras were demonic fanatics who had controlled almost the entire Indian landmass thousands of years ago. They were finally defeated by the Devas, respected today as Gods, in brutal battles fought over a protracted period of time. (...) Indra, the leader of the Devas, ensured the expulsion of the Asuras from India (87-88).

While this passage is encoded in the Vedic duality between *Devas* and *Asuras*, terms such as *demonic fanatics* and their expulsion from India, which is itself an anachronistic term, show that these associations are not merely mythological. The

[239] Goldman and Goldman (1996) also refer to the characterisation of *rākṣasas* in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* as the radical antithesis of the *dharmic* rules followed by civilised humans (65).

asuran approach to divinity, which consists in devotion to only one god and to the elimination of other gods and their believers, sounds similar to descriptions of the proselytising tendencies of the Abrahamic religions in nonfiction discourses by the contemporary male retellers and Indian public intellectuals like Tharoor and Malhotra. The *Asuras* regard their enemies as inferior and "all efforts to impose the concept of the One God upon minds that do not respect diversity will only result in intolerance" (91-92). As *diversity* and *tolerance* are such important keywords in descriptions of the "idea of India", it is clear that Tripathi's *asuras* are not described as Indians. The actions of the *asuras* are described as "wrong" and "evil" (196-197). It is also said that

> (…) as time went by, these believers held on to their faith in the Ekam [one, unity] but became exclusionist, demanding undivided devotion; their God was true, the other Gods were false. They grew to hate those who didn't believe in their One God, and ultimately began to kill them (92).

In *Immortal India*, Tripathi (2017b) explains that this mentality is wrong and contrary to his imagined intrinsic spirituality of India:

> (…) while there may be material gains from religious conversions, spiritually, it is almost always negative. Why? Because spiritual growth happens with internal focus, when you attempt to seek truth within yourself; not when you try to prove 'other religions' as false (679).

In fact, in Tripathi's (2015) fiction, the *asuras* are explicitly said to preach their religion and consider those who follow it to be their equal, a description which reminds one of Christian missionary efforts and of their counterpart, the self-representation of the non-missionary tendency of Hinduism. The *rākṣasī* Tāraka, for instance, states that: "if they come to our side, reject their false beliefs and listen to the call of the Ekam, they will save their own souls" (195). As the expression "save the souls" may stereotypically be associated with Christianity, this description makes her sound more like a Christian missionary than a demon. Again, the *asuras*, conflated with the devotees of Abrahamic religions, only think about the external, materialistic conversion of people, while followers of the opposite tendency, one which is clearly conflated with the "idea of India", is to let spiritual transformation come from within.

In another passage, an *asura* warrior states: "The Asura spat again, before screaming loudly. 'You excreta of vermin? Do you think you can defeat us? The True Lord is with us. Your false gods cannot protect you! You will all Die! Die! Die!"

(Tripathi, 2015: 186). The use of verbs such as *spat* and *screaming loudly* clearly depart from the self-controlled human being, which is the human ideal in all contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The *asura's* use of insults such as *excreta of vermin* and his repetition of the verb *die* also points to his inherent violence. Finally, the expression *True Lord* is often used to identify Jesus and Allah and less commonly to refer to Indian deities.

Religion is said to unify the *asuras*, which in Tripathi's language means that they follow the "masculine way". In another passage, Viśvāmitra states that the *asuras* are neither uncivilised nor evil. However, their understanding of *dharma* is old-fashioned and invalid for the modern world (201-202). Rāma also states that their law is "obsolete". Intrinsically, though, *asuras* are said to be good and able to reveal their goodness if they become more enlightened and have effective leaders (207). This more balanced idea of the *Other* sounds similar to Pattanaik's narrative of spiritual transformation and of one's progress from an inferior mindset to a superior one. Even though Tripathi's interpretation of the *asuras/rākṣasas* is mostly negative, he also leaves room for the betterment of these "species": just as the West tried to improve India with Western rational "Enlightenment", India shall improve the now obsolete West with spiritual "Enlightenment".

The fact that Śukrācārya, the leader of the *asuras*, is said to have migrated from Egypt to Ayodhyā, which has later become a sacred city to the *asuras* (181), seems to also associate the *asuras* with the Muslims. Tripathi refers to pharaonic Egypt as a great civilisation that, unlike India, was wiped out. This does not seem to be the role that Egypt plays here. Like most countries in the Middle East, Egypt was conquered by the Muslims shortly after Muhammad (-632 CE) revealed the Muslim religion. Since then, it has remained one of the most culturally powerful Muslim countries. Tripathi's strategy may also be an echo of the Muslim-Hindu conflict in present-day Ayodhya. The fact that Tripathi calls Rāvaṇa's troops "barbaric hordes" (33), the same name he uses to refer to the Turkic-Mongol peoples who invaded India, points in the same direction, as in the following nonfiction passage: "Imagine you're a fierce Mongol/Turkic warrior in the Middle Ages, a proud soldier in one of the most fearsome armies ever. Your conquering horde has brought death and devastation to China, Arabia, Europe and India" (Tripathi, 2017b: 96).

The fact that the Turkic-Mongol hordes did not come from Egypt does not seem to invalidate that, in the author's fiction, these places and their peoples are imagined as

forming a larger cultural entity due to the Muslim religion. The English term *horde*, which the author uses frequently in his fiction and nonfiction, is a Turkish term which was originally used to refer to the Tatars. Even though the ultimate origin of the word is unknown, it has cognates in modern Turkish *ordu*, "army", Mongol *ord*, "palace, mansion", and in the national language of modern Pakistan, Urdu, a truncated version of Persian for "language of the horde" (*zabān-e ordu*). It is not known whether the author was aware of this etymology or not. If he was, the use of this term in conjunction with his common condemnation of Turkic-Mongol invaders, the idea that Ayodhya's invaders come from Egypt, and critiques of Pakistan aims at a general representation of Islam and its associated peoples. If he was not, he has in any case taken advantage of the pejorative semantic value of the term. Apart from these clues, Tripathi accepts the idea that the worldview of the *asura* is obsolete, which means that the Indian alternative constitutes the best response for the modern globalised world. This also means that Tripathi gives preference to his Indian versions of Christianity and Islam against the foreign ones, which may also be implicitly regarded as obsolete.

When it comes to religion, similar discussions appear in Kané's (2016) and Neelakantan's (2012) novels, though here the roles are inverted and are much less obvious in their association with real human groups. In Kané's (2016) version, Viśravas, a *deva*/*ṛṣi*, asks Tāṛakā, an *Asura*, whether she believes in God. She responds that she does, though she believes in a God who does not make social distinctions, contrary to Viśravas' god, who has created division among the people (14-15). This author, however, is not as preoccupied with associating the bad god with the West and the Abrahamic religions and the good gods with India as Tripathi is. In Neelakantan's (2012) version, the *devas/ṛṣis* are the ones who conquer the *asuras* or are allowed to live among them. They are also the ones who undertake missionary activities and demand that the conquered worship a single and formless God, which the author calls *Prajāpati Brahmā,* Sanskrit for "Brahmā, lord of all the creatures". This concept, the author adds, is alien to the *asuras* and leads to divisive riots (22/28). This shows of Neelakantan's self-styled contrarian way also functions at the species level. Just like Neelakantan's Rāma is similar to Rāvaṇa and vice-versa, Neelakantan's *devas* are similar to Tripathi's *asuras* and vice-versa. In Neelakantan's case, the difference is not between India and foreign nations but between different Indian groups. However, the dichotomies related to the unity/multiplicity and unity/division of transcendent deities and the immanent beings who worship them assume paramount relevance. These

discourses reveal how the themes of religion and autochthony tend to be interrelated. In Neelakantan's novel, the *asuras* are said to constitute the original inhabitants of India. Aa a result, non-*asuras* can be regarded as foreign, even though they are neither explicitly nor implicitly compared with the Muslim or the British as they are in Tripathi's retelling. The *asuras* are described through positive, proto-modern traits, as theirs is said to be "a way of life, a culture of equality and freedom, a tradition that valued material pleasure and celebrated life" (344). They are said to be a decentralised, democratic and free society in which an elected village *pancāyat*[240] holds power, while the king only has nominal power (21/427). The use of the term *Pancāyat* associates the proto-democratic traditions with rural India. The *asuras* are also said to have no complex rituals (22), even though the ones they have are said to be superstitious (205), which, as I have said, is a term with a very pejorative connotation in Neelakantan's writings. The *asuras* are also said to be economically, culturally and technologically superior to their competitors (425). Contrary to Tripathi (2015), though, Neelakantan (2012) states that the *asura*s are the ones who lack unity (24), given that they always fight between themselves and cannot agree on a decision even during war (63). For this reason, they are said to be "lethargic" (188). Neelakantan reinvents what happened before the coming of the Muslims and the British through an Orientalist lens, one according to which Indians, here conflated with the *asuras*, while more advanced, lived in a timeless realm devoid of "progress" and, as a result, became prone to be ravished by more "progressive" peoples, which in this case are the *devas*.

4.4.2 *Devas* and *ṛṣis*

Just like *asura* and *rākṣasa,* the terms *deva* and *ṛṣi originally* refer to unrelated beings, even though the contemporary retellers, most notably Kané (2016), tend to use them interchangeably. These beings are defined in psychological opposition to the *asuras*/*rākṣasas*. In Kané's (2016) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā states that being a *deva* or an *asura* is more a matter of attitude involving beliefs, feelings, values and dispositions to act in certain ways (69). The *devas* are always described in the contemporary retellings as human(-like), mainly due to their intelligence and wisdom, traits which are represented by their cultural values. In Kané's novel, just like the *asura* are said to be

[240] Traditional social system in Indian villages in which five leaders take decisions. CHATTERJEE, Biswajit, and GHOSH, Dilip Kumar (2003). "Globalisation and Decentralise-Governance: Reflections on Panchayats in India" *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 129-146; MULLEN, Rani D. (2016). "Panchayat Raj Institutions" in KOHLI, Atul, and SINGH, Prema (eds). Routledge Handbook of Indian Politics, London: Routledge.

warriors prone to violence, the *devas* are said to be educated, intelligent, saintly and spiritual scholars. Such differences lead to Viśravas, a *ṛṣi* who marries into an *asura* family and goes to live in the *asura* kingdom of Laṅkā, being regarded as an outsider (68-69) and to feel out of place. Here, Viśravas plays a similar narrative role to that played by Vibhīṣaṇa in most other retellings, given that he is said to possess a unique trait among a group of beings characterised by the opposite trait.

In Tripathi's (2015) novel, contrary to the *asuras*, the *devas* follow several gods and are divided, given that they are unable to agree on their way of life (92): "the Devas (…) were always divided and hence did not attempt to force their ways on others." (93). In this novel, the invasion by *asuras* is regarded as possessing positive results, given that it makes the *devas* organise themselves and become united under a single banner. Again, this fictional passage is apparently made to mirror how British colonialism allowed Indians to get together under the banner of Indian nationalism. In sum, it is clear that *devas* embody the inclusive, tolerant, non-proselytising but socially divided spirit of traditional India and that, as such, they are regarded as followers of the "feminine way", which is defined by Tripathi with similar traits:

> (...) didn't these attacks unite the Devas? Maybe the Devas should acknowledge the few positives that emerged from that horrific violence. They were forced to confront the evil that the caste system had descended into; they needed unity. (…) The united later-age Devas finally defeated the Asuras, who lost because of their fanatical rigidity" (210).

The only exception to the civilised nature of the *devas* is found in Neelakantan's (2012) novel. Here, the *deva* invasion of *asura* lands is described as an instance of colonialism. In this case, an oppressive society (the *devas)* invades and conquers a previously free and just one (the *asuras*). Contrary to the democratic *asuras*, the *devas* have an advanced and centralised administrative system in which a king reigns supreme. This system is said to enable the quick implementation of decisions (63), an ability which reveals social cohesion (and Tripathi's definition of the masculine way). In contrast, the culture of the *devas* is said to be "exotic, semi-civilised, nomadic and barbaric" (379). Neelakantan again condenses several Orientalist tropes in a short list. "Exotic" means that a given culture is physically distant and psychologically unfathomable; "semi-civilised" and "barbaric" mean that it does not even constitute a civilisation as understood in Western terms; and "nomadic" means that it has not developed a sense of place and belonging, as contemporary nation-states are supposed

to have done. All these adjectives may be regarded as having acquired a pejorative value in postcolonial times. Their use presupposes that there are opposite groups: familiar, civilised and sedentary, traits which tend to be equated with cultural normality, refinement and superiority. The *asuras* describe the *devas* as ruthless barbarians who have no scruples and no sense of fair play or *dharma*, given that they resort to Machiavellian ways to achieve their goals (365). The d*evas* are also said to be more superstitious than the *asuras.* Rāvaṇa, for instance, complains that his mother follows the *deva* custom of asking astrologers about everything (120). Again, Neelakantan's *devas* and Tripathi's *asuras* are the opposite sides of the same coin. Both constitute a people that possess unified beliefs who allow them to unite society and to conquer and ravage physically weaker but psychologically more virtuous peoples.

In Neelakantan's novel, the fault for the substitution of mental abilities (*varṇa*) for birth (*jāti*) is attributed to the *deva* invasion, given that the *devas* are said to be divided between the pure and the impure based on their birth (352). This is the author's narrative explanation for the degradation of traditional Indian values, which was neither gradual nor psychological but happened quickly and through physical conquest:

> (…) every common Asura knew that this war would determine the future of India and its millions of poor and black people. If this war was lost and Rama won, then we would be kicked into the ditch forever (…) We would fight for Ravana (…) This was the decisive war – the war between good and evil (345).

It is remarkable that, despite the repetition by all three male authors that the idea that good and evil did not exist in ancient India, the war between the *Devas* and the *Asuras* is described here as one between good and evil. When Rāma conquers Laṅkā, he divides society into the four main castes, assigns a profession to each of them (452), and creates a *dharma* in which everyone knows one's place (455), as in the following victory discourse after Rāvaṇa's defeat:

> (…) the peaceful order of varnashrama dharma [caste duties] has been restored. No longer shall the men who clean drains and toilets think that they are equal to those who learn Sanskrit and chant the Vedas. (…) Everyone has their place and knows his place (457).

This means that, before the invasion, Laṅkāns must have followed a kind of *sanātana dharma* that did not make distinctions based on birth. Rāma tells outcastes not to grieve because their condition is the result of previous lives and only the

fulfilment of their duties might ensure a better rebirth (*Ibid.*). Here, Neelakantan introduces the concept of *karma*. Even though common in new globalised religious phenomena and in modern English discourse, the retellers do not allude to it often. Ontologically, *karma* may explain *varṇa/jāti*, at least if these concepts are understood as modern Indian authors tend to interpreted them. In its modern English interpretation, the term *karma* means the same as the proverb "you reap what you sow" and explains success in this life.[241] If one is talented, one achieves success. This is also the modern meaning of *varṇa*, at least in Tripathi and Pattanaik's discourses. Within the worldview of Indian religions, *karma* usually determines one's next life. In short, *karma* explains individual differences since birth (*jāti*).

Life within the social system brought by Rāma is described as "simple", "straightforward" and "static" (471-472). Like *lethargic*, *static* sounds like a common description of Indian civilisation in Orientalist discourses (MacKenzie, 2015: 27). Conversely, the *asura* kingdom is said to value people based on talent and hard work (292/352/376/447), which are the ideals in a neoliberal context. The *asura* are said to form a dynamic, competitive and materialistic world (471-472). According to Rāma, such a world is dangerous and disrupts social order (456). One could equate Rāma's kingdom with the traditional caste system of India and Rāvaṇa's one with an imagined "Golden Age" of India prior to it becoming lethargic/static and also with the India of post-1991 neoliberal reforms, which is regarded as the mirror image of that Golden Age. In Neelakantan's novel, these periods have been chronologically inverted, given that the *asura* kingdom is said to be more ancient than the *deva* one. In short, the dynamism, competition and materialism of neoliberal India is represented as a return to the roots. Even though "competitive and materialistic world" does not sound positive, Neelakantan endorses these ideas more clearly than he endorses the values of the caste system.

Another consequence of the *deva* invasion is that "Chinese and yellow haired barbarians" are said to start controlling trade in the Indian ports (464) and talented Indians are said to migrate to China and Europe, where, according to Neelakantan, only merit (*varṇa*) matters (476). Again, this description defines caste as a North Indian phenomenon. The author posits that, before Rāma introduced the system, India (or at

[241] TULL, Herman Wayne (1989). *The Vedic Origins of Karma: Cosmos As Man in Ancient Indian Myth and Ritual*, New York: State University of New York Press; NEUFELDT, Ronald W. (ed.) (1995). *Karma & Rebirth, Post Classical Developments*, New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications; BRONKHORST, Johannes (2011). *Karma*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

least Laṅkā) was like China and Europe. Neelakantan creates a discourse according to which talented Indians escape India as refugees and create a diasporic movement in order to flee the caste system and put their talent to good use for the benefit of foreign nations. Like Tripathi, Neelakantan considers such historical and cultural changes to be the reason for the India's decline.

The discourses around the *asuras/rākṣasas* and *devas*/*ṛṣis* makes one think of Orientalist discourses, which established differences between the *Self* and the *Other* in terms of the idea of (proto-)nationhood. As I have shown, both in his fiction and nonfiction, Tripathi endeavours to associate the values of what he calls "Medieval India" with the coming of foreigners, starting with the Muslims. Neelakantan, however, pushes foreign invasions and corruptions further back in time. In 1786, British philologist Sir William Jones (1746-1794) postulated that Sanskrit and the modern languages of North India and classical European languages came from the same root. What is now called the Indo-Aryan invasion theory or Indo-Aryan migration theory (Bryant and Patton, 2005) soon followed. This theory, which was mainly developed and endorsed by the German Orientalist Max Müller (1823-1900) based on his readings of the *Vedas*, posited that India had a native dark-skinned population, the Dravidians, who were invaded and pushed to the south by light-skinned Aryan, who were Indo-European invaders (van der Veer, 2001: 140-142; Anthony, 2007: 6-11; Kurien, 2007: 29).[242] The Dravidians are usually associated with the Indus Valley civilisation.[243] This theory has been supported by linguistic and literary evidence and has lacked in archaeological clues (Connerney, 2009: 74). This is the reason why it was controversial and remains so. Neelakantan clearly equates the *asuras/rākṣasas* and the *devas/ṛṣis* with the Dravidian and the Aryan, respectively. In short, the author makes a historicist interpretation based on what is seen as controversial history, even though this literary

[242] Subramaniam (2009), who comes from Tamil Nadu, discusses how such ever-present racial theories have affected her personal life (148-149). This seems to show that these Orientalist representations, while firmly rejected by Indian nationalists in historical terms, remain alive in cultural terms.

[243] Bronze age civilisation (heyday 2600-1900 BCE) whose remains were found on the banks of the Indus River, in what is now Pakistan. The two biggest and most important settlements associated with this civilisation are Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. WHEELER, Mortimer (1953). *The Cambridge History of India, Supplementary Volume: The Indus Civilization,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; ATRE, Shubhangana (1987). *The Archetypal Mother*: *A Systemic Approach to Harappan Religion*, Pune: Ravish Publishers; THAPAR, Romila (2002). *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*, London: Penguin Books; HABIB, Irfan (2002). *The Indus Civilization: Including Other Copper Age Cultures and History of Language Change till c. 1500 BC*, New Delhi: Tulika Books; Possehl (2002); CHAKRABARTI, Dilip K. (ed.) (2004). *Indus Civilization Sites in India: New Discoveries*, Mumbai: Marg Publications; MCINTOSH, Jane R. (2008). *The Ancient Indus Valley: New Perspectives*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

effort may be regarded as "evidence" which adds to the linguistic evidence and makes up for the lack of archaeological remains.

In Orientalist scholarship, the Aryan-Dravidian controversy also featured gendered traits. Sanskritist Gustav S. Oppert (1836-1908) defined the Dravidians as a feminine group who worshipped Mother Earth. The Aryans were said to possess almost only male gods (Oppert, 1863: 387-388/622). Later Indologists, such as Heinrich Zimmer (1951), saw the early Dravidians as constituting a peaceful matriarchal society and the later Aryans a violent patriarchal one (259/569). The former idea was adopted by feminist scholars, such as archaeologist and anthropologist Maria Gimbutas (1991). Based on the scarce archaeological evidence of female figurines found in places such as Willendorf in Austria and Çatal Hüyük in Turkey, Gimbutas posited the existence of a peaceful and widespread cult of the mother Goddess in Stone Age Europe, that is, before the arrival of the Aryans. Such theories influenced feminist Neo-paganism, according to whose discourse the dichotomy between a past peaceful matriarchal period and a present violent patriarchal one remains common. The main goal of the supporters of such conceptions of previous positive civilisations substituted by later negative ones, whichever way they may be described, has usually been to go back to the past matriarchal "Golden Age".

The issue pertaining to the Aryan and Dravidian civilisations has also been related to discourses on caste. Jyotirao Govindrao Phule (1827-1890), one of the foremost anti-caste activists of colonial India, used the Aryan invasion theory to explain the suppression of the lower castes and untouchables (Rao, 2009: 12). Phule saw the high castes as Aryans and the lower ones as Dravidian. Later, *Dalit* activists followed Phule's ideas and began describing pre-state tribals as glorious and opposing them to the invading Aryan tribes (xi). The first Western anthropologists who dealt with matters of caste viewed the untouchables, who were conflated with the Dravidians, as uncivilised and degraded. Later anthropologists reversed this evaluation and established an opposition between the oppressive culture of the Brahmins or Aryans in general and the free nature of the untouchables (Michael, 1999: 26). This is the discursive and narrative stance that Neelakantan takes in his novel. In sum, Neelakantan's literary representations of the *asuras* and the *devas* condense the evolution of Western anthropologist and Indian activist discourses and, in that sense, are just "contrarian" when compared with contemporary nationalistic discourses, which, as I will show

shortly when I temporarily switch to Tripathi's ideas, tend to focus on the unity of Aryans and Dravidians.

The scientific status that Max Müller attributed to the Aryan-Dravidian dichotomy has created a rift between Brahminical Sanskrit civilisation and that of the speakers of Dravidian languages, which is said to have enabled the development of narratives of belonging and exclusion (van der Veer, 2001: 138). While such oppositions were first endorsed by missionaries, most notably Robert Caldwell (1814-1891), in order to lure Dravidian peoples into Christianity, it acquired a more relevant political effect when Dravidians began using the theory to demonstrate that they were the native inhabitants of India and that, resorting to the *appeal to tradition* strategy, they had greater legitimacy than the Aryans (*Ibid.*: 49/140-142). Orientalist scholar Christian Lassen (1800-1876) was the first one who transposed this interpretation onto the narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa.* Lassen considered that the tale described the Aryan invasion of the Dravidian lands. The Aryans were symbolised by the society of Ayodhyā and the Dravidians by the wildness of the *rākṣasas* (Thapar, 1989: 8). Here, one can discern the root of another one of Neelakantan's ideas.

According to Thapar (2019), there have been two Indian views on the Aryan-Dravidian question. The first, often endorsed by Hindu nationalists and *New Age* movements such as the Theosophists, states that such races never existed and that the Harappan people were the same as the Aryans, who were the fountainhead of world civilisation (156). According to this theory, there was no invasion. Harappans migrated from what is now Pakistan to the southern extremities of the subcontinent. "Out of India" theorists (Kurien, 2007) even consider that Indo-European Aryans migrated and spread civilisation from India to Iran and then to Europe, an idea similar to the one adopted by the Nazis, who regarded themselves as the descendants of those Aryans and, as a result, as ethnically and culturally distinct from Semitic peoples.

The idea that there was no difference between Aryans and Dravidians is endorsed by Tripathi (2017b). The author claims that there were neither Aryan gods nor Dravidian gods but only Indic Gods (40). "The Myth of the Aryan Invasion Theory" (119-122), an essay in *Immortal India,* is devoted to this subject. In this case, "myth" clearly does not have the positive value it has in other expressions used by the author, such as "mythology-loving cultures". It is supposed to point to the falsity of this colonial theory. Tripathi's decolonial inversion of previous discourses is relevant and shows how power dynamics influences the concepts of *truth*: Indian mythology are not

just myths in the ontological sense, while colonial "science" is. In his article, Tripathi states that it was impossible that a small band (the Aryans) could have convinced the more populous, advanced and urbane Dravidian, a description which mirrors Neelakantan's descriptions of *devas*, to migrate to South India without leaving any archaeological or genetic remains. Tripathi, who has no training as a linguist, archaeologist or geneticist, concludes that: 1) there was no Aryan race; 2) the Harappan and the Vedic cultures were the same; and 3) the whole population of contemporary India are descendants of that original culture. As a result, in Tripathi's mind, the contemporary nation-state of India finds one of its legitimation strategies in the idea of a people who, while politically divided throughout most of recorded history, is genetically united. According to this view, as I will show later, it makes sense that Tripathi (2015) makes Rāma call a tribal person by the epithet *Aryan*, given that both the most prestigious Indian prince and the most obscure tribal are regarded to share exactly the same genes. Debunking the Aryan invasion/migration theory has also been of uttermost importance to other modern Indian authors, as the following titles show: Paramesh Choudhury's *Aryan Invasion Myth* (2003), A. L. Chavda's *The Aryan Invasion Myth: How 21st Century Science Debunks 19th Century Indology* (2017), Shiv Satry's *Tearing Down the Aryan Invasion Myth* (2020), Rituraj Singh's *Aryan Invasion Theory: The Truth of Colonial Hegemony and Leftist Dogma* (2021), Shiv Satry's *Aryan Invasion: Myth or Fact? Uncovering the evidence* (2021), and Joy Sen's *The Aryan Invasion that Never Was* (2022).[244]

The other view that Thapar (2019) mentions, one which is endorsed by most independent scholars, is that the concept of Aryans did not exist since Harappan times but was a latter concept introduced by a distinct culture (156). Most contemporary scholars believe that they originated in the steppes north of the Black and Caspian Seas, in southern Ukraine and Russia, and spread from there to both India and Western Europe (Anthony, 2007: 5). Elsewhere, Thapar (2014) acknowledges that, while the concepts of an Aryan and Dravidian races may not possess scientific validity, given that the theory relies solely on linguistic and literary evidence, they are embedded in the mind of Indians, that being probably the reason why Tripathi feels the urge to write a whole article and Neelakantan a whole novel about the issue. According to Thapar,

[244] Western scholars and authors who have been supportive of Hindu nationalism have also participated in this venture, as David Frawley's *Myth of the Aryan Invasion of India* (1994), Stephen Knapp's *The Aryan Invasion Theory: The Final Nail in its Coffin* (20012), and Koenraad Elst's *Still No Trace of an Aryan Invasion: A Collection on Indo-European Origins* (2018) reveal.

popular Indian imagination tends to consider Aryans to be superior and Dravidians inferior (305-322). While many of the past Orientalist ideas are nowadays regarded as biased, this does not mean that all ancient Indians were "Harappan" or "Indic". Differences between the warrior-like Vedic pantheon of gods and other less warrior-like deities who do not figure in the *Ṛgveda* and who latter supplanted the Vedic pantheon would still have to be explained. However, it is politically convenient that Indians are represented as unified since millennia ago, as this representation enhances the contemporary nationalistic preoccupations and the effort to follow Tripathi's "masculine way".

Finally, in his construction of the *asura* and *deva* species, Neelakantan also mirrors modern *Dalit* discourses, such as those of Kancha Ilaiah (1952-), who, while not himself a *Dalit*, is perhaps the most influential active *Dalit* activist. In his *Post-Hindu India: A Discourse on Dalit-Bahujan, Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution*, Ilaiah (2009) discusses how the non-Hindu castes were responsible for the technological innovations of ancient India and how they were later thwarted by Hindu Brahmins (xii-xxi).[245] Ilaiah considers Hinduism to be the most casteist and sexist religion and the *Rāmāyaṇa* to be the ultimate *charter* to maintain the untouchables oppressed (xxiv). For this reason, Rāma represents the "fascist Aryan traditions" and, as such, is unable to provide an integrative, social service-oriented model of living (271), a social role which must be delegated to the "spiritual proto-democratic traditions" of the native Indian people (279). Ilaiah's discourse, which basically sounds just like a nonfiction version of Neelakantan's novel, is based on the dichotomy of Aryans and Dravidians, a dichotomy that, according to Tripathi, does not even exist. Just like the Nazis compared themselves to the Indians of old invented by German Romantics, Ilaiah does the same in reverse by calling the Aryan traditions "fascist" and by bringing them into the present. Neelakantan is a storyteller who writes fiction and Ilaiah an activist who, at least nominally, writes about reality. However, their discourses and conclusions are similar, with the important difference that Neelakantan describes the Dravidians as the authentic, pure Hindus who were displaced by inauthentic, impure Hindus.

Whatever the differences between *asuras/rākṣasas* and *devas/ṛṣis* may be, the most common narrative strategy in the contemporary retellings is that there is permanent conflict between them. In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, the *asuras* are said to be sure

[245] See also Gadgil and Guha (1995: 57). Even though the authors do not adopt a pro-Dalit stance, they also consider that the Brahmins marred the scientific and technological development of India.

that the *devas* deserve to be hated, irrespective of their social standing (207). In Kané's (2016) version, even though they are married, Kaikasī (an *asura*) and Viśravas (a *ṛṣi*) feel great enmity towards their consort's clan. Kaikasī accuses her husband of wishing to destroy her race and states that she would rather die fighting than be subject to the *ṛṣis* (54-55). In Pattanaik's (2013a) more balanced view, one which always allows for psychological growth and fluidity between identities, it is said that *asuras* fear their way of life will be destroyed, but that *devas* have good intentions, though they should not find pleasure in domination like animals but should learn something from the *asuras* (40).

Sometimes, the contemporary retellers hint that such enmity happens due to cultural ignorance, which leads to stereotyping, and that mutual knowledge would lead to better understanding between the involved species. In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, young *asura* boys who wish to join the military state that their mothers told them that the *devas* have committed atrocities and that they have horns and tails, which they hide under their clothes (202). In Western Judeo-Christian discourses influenced by Graeco-Latin depictions of demons and satyrs, the devil is symbolised by horns and a tail, two symbols which point to its bestiality. However, in traditional Indian iconography, these elements do not have the same negative meaning. That (horned) cows are sacred in India is one of the most stereotypical representations of modern Hinduism.[246] Tails are associated with monkeys, who also have a more positive image in Hinduism than in Western discourses. One could think of Hanumān, who is a monkey-like creature and one of the most important deities of the modern Hindu pantheon.

In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Śatānanda, the religious advisor of Mithilā, tells Sītā that the *rākṣasas* are wild and fierce, breed in darkness, practise dark magic and feed on human flesh. Sītā asks Śatānanda whether he has ever seen one. Śatānanda refuses to answer and rebukes Sītā's father for not disciplining her daughter (7-8/38/127). In this passage, Śatānanda goes on the defensive by resorting to the feminine stereotype of the *angel* who does not question (male) authority, while Sītā embodies the empathetic character who is concerned about the *Other*. Later, when Rāvaṇa abducts Sītā, he tells her that he does not eat human flesh and that most *asuras* do not,

[246] SIMOONS, Frederick J. (1974). "The Purificatory Role of the Five Products of the Cow in Hinduism" *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, Vol. 3, pp. 21-34; KOROM, Frank K. (2000). "Holy Cow! The Apotheosis of Zebu, or Why the Cow is Sacred in Hinduism" *Asian Folklore Studies,* Vol. 59, pp. 191-203; ROBINSON, Catherine, and CUSH, Denise (2006). "The Sacred Cow: Hinduism and Ecology" *Journal of Beliefs & Values: Studies in Religion & Education*, Vol. 18, Nº. 1, pp. 25-36; VALPEY, Kenneth R. (2020). *Cow Care in Hindu Animal Ethics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

even though the *ṛṣis* have never taught that to people (168). Again, it is relevant that is mainly Divakaruni who does not only claim that identities are relative and contextual but actually points to possible solutions to misunderstandings between identities.

I must also say something about the intermingling of "pure" *devas* and *asuras*. As the concept of purity is implicit in all contemporary retellings, different castes and races are usually considered to be unrelated to one another, to the extent that they are described with different physical and intellectual features. Cross-breeding among different species tends to be said to produce hybrids and such children are said to possess no place in the fabric of society, given that they occupy an undefined "third space". In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, the one which most clearly resorts to this presupposition, Rāvaṇa is a half-caste born of a Brahmin father and an outcaste mother. He complains that his father reveres the Brahmins and despises outcastes and half-castes, who never mix with the Brahmins (11). Mahābalī, Rāvaṇa's spiritual mentor, states that Rāvaṇa's incompetence is due to his mixed blood (29). These descriptions show that, in the narrative universe of Neelakantan's novel, when individuals belonging to the same pure identity breed, they give birth to a "complete" being who can fit into the social system. Conversely, when individuals belonging to different pure or impure identities breed, they give birth to an "incomplete" being.

Kané's (2016) analysis of the concept of interbreeding between different beings is more positive. Śūrpaṇakhā and her brothers are born of a *ṛṣi* father and an *asura* mother. It is said that Kaikasī, an *asura*, married Viśravas, a *ṛṣi*, in order to give birth to children with a *ṛṣi* brain and *asura* blood, that is, great warriors with great minds (18). By joining the best halves of different identities (just like by complementing male and female virtuous in marriage), the end result is said to be positive. However, Kārtavīryārjuna states that, except for Vibhīṣaṇa, the siblings are more *asura* than *ṛṣi* (31), which seems to mean that they are more emotional than rational. Vibhīṣaṇa's exceptionality is therefore justified by biological arguments. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, when it is implied that Sītā may be Rāvaṇa's daughter, she states that she would kill herself if she had *rākṣasa* blood (194), which means that blood also influences one's temperament. In the end, it does not matter whether cross-breeding is regarded as desirable or undesirable. The children of such intermingling in the contemporary retellings tend to be stigmatised and their fate is unfortunate, given that, in Kané's (2016) novel, the best warriors with the best minds end up being defeated by the "pure" *ṛṣis*.

4.4.3 *Vānaras*, *Nāgas* and tribal people

Asuras/rākṣasas and *devas*/ *ṛṣis* are the major species in the contemporary retellings. However, there exist many others. Another important one is the *vānaras*, a monkey-like species who help Rāma rescue Sītā. As Goldman (1986) states, while the *asuras* and *rākṣasas* have been interpreted as hostile aborigines, the *vānaras* have been depicted as aborigines who, while living in a primitive state, are well disposed towards the Aryans (27). In this kind of representation, *vānaras* are monkey-like humans. Pattanaik (2013a) suggests that the Sanskrit term *vānara* may mean "less than human" or "forest man" (157).[247] The author adds that, from a rational point of view, this species may point to forest tribes who had monkeys as totems (*Ibid.*), which also makes them monkey-like humans. While mentioning this historicist interpretation, Sanskritist Rosalind Lefeber (1994) claims that, in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *vānaras* are unambiguously monkeys (38). This confusion between the human and animal kingdoms is evident in Divakaruni's (2019) novel, in which, when Sītā sees the *vānaras* for the first time, she is unsure whether they are monkeys or hairy men (172).

As usual, Pattanaik (2013a) interprets the species of *vānaras* psychologically. The author states that the monkey is a symbol of the "restless mind" (6),[248] that is, of human beings who are unable to exert self-control. Here, the concept points towards animality. Pattanaik's interpretation of the *vānaras*, like that of the *asuras*, sounds Darwinian-like. The *vānaras* are a step away from animal nature, given that the strongest male tries to keep territory and females for himself by killing opponents (170). Sugrīva, for instance, states that he will outgrow his animal instincts, become more human and submit to *dharma* (179), a description which is similar to Pattanaik's

[247] The origins of the term are unknown. Pattanaik's explanations are two of the most popular ones. The term is usually interpreted as coming from Sanskrit *vana*, "forest", and *nara*, "man", that is, "man of the forest".

[248] This interpretation, which is popular in *Mahāyāna* Buddhist sects of China and Japan, seems to never have been widespread in Hinduism and, as a result, seems to be another of several appropriation of specifically Buddhist symbols into modern Hinduism by the author. Mandarin Chinese has the term 心猿 *xīnyuán* (Japanese *shinen)*, whose characters mean "heart" and "ape". The term means "restless passions". There also exists the idiom 心猿意馬 (Mandarin Chinese, *xīnyuán yìmǎ*; Japanese *shien iba*), which means "the heart of a monkey and the mind of a horse". The expression characterises a person unable to exert self-control, something regarded as undesirable in Buddhist thought. The phrase 心猿 has mostly been applied to 孙悟空 *Sūn Wùkōng*, the monkey-king of the Chinese tale 西游记 *Xīyóu Jì* (*The Journey to the West*). While Sūn Wùkōng has been compared to Hanumān, given that the former is also a powerful and playful monkey who helps his master in his journey to get Buddhist writings from India, such terms seem to have never been used to characterise Hanumān, at least in the most popular versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. CARR, Michael (1993). "'Mind-monkey' Metaphors in Chinese and Japanese Dictionaries" *International Journal of Lexicography*, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 149-180; OWEN, Stephen, and POLLOCK, Sheldon (2018). "Sorting Out Babel: Literature and Its Changing Languages" in POLLOCK, Sheldon, and ELMAN, Benjamin (eds.). *What China and India Once Were: The Pasts That May Shape the Global Future*, New York: Columbia University Press.

description of Rāvaṇa, including in the sense that it would fit the common neoliberal discourse appropriate both for corporate leader wannabes and well-to-do adepts of new spiritualities.

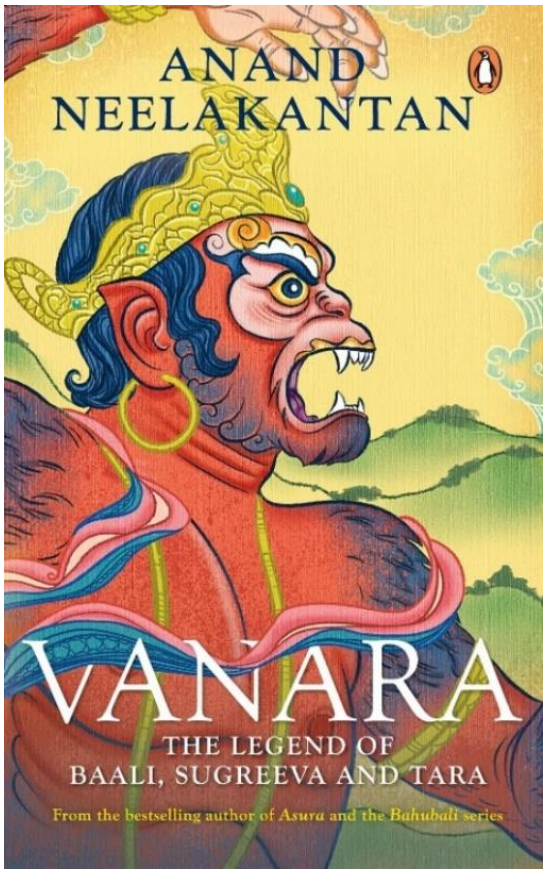


Figure 37 - Cover of Anand Neelakantan's (2018) *Vanara: The legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara*

Figure 37 shows the cover of Anand Neelakantan's (2018) novel *Vanara: The legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara*, an adaptation of an important subplot of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, including of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. The picture, an original illustration by Mihir Joglekar, depicts a fierce *vānara*. His eyes and mouth are wide open and the position of his body seems to show that the character (probably Sugrīva when he is trying to get revenge from his brother Vālīn) is ready to attack. He is depicted as a less than ideal humanoid character, given that, besides his monkey-like features, he looks unable to exert rational self-control. This picture could be visually compared to Karan Acharya's Angry Hanumān (Figure 26).

According to Pattanaik (2013a), the main difference between the *vānaras* and the *asuras* is that the former tend to serve humans unquestionably (219). If one considers how Hanumān is revered in contemporary India (Lutgendorf, 2007a), this may be interpreted as a symbol of devotion (*bhakti*), but also as one of oppression. Rāvaṇa states that the *vānaras* are Rāma's servants and that, if they follow him instead, they will be free from his rules (221). This representation of the relationship between the *vānaras* and Rāma is similar to the relationship between Rāma and the Brahmins, at least as it is depicted in Neelakantan's (2012) novel: one of unconditional subservience.

In Pattanaik's retelling, in any case, this relationship is represented in a much better light.[249]

In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, the *vānaras* are semi-civilised half-breeds that have appeared in Central India due to the miscegenation between *devas* and *asuras* (24/232), a biological explanation which turns them into ultimate subalterns. They are said to be ugly and hairy creatures who use primitive weapons and who try to emulate the advanced *asuras* (450). This means that, even though they are born of "pure" *asuras*, their "impurity" makes them less physically and mentally capable than their ancestors. For this reason, they are said to lead a miserable existence in the forests until they get united and become a political threat to competing urbane groups. The *vānaras* are also regarded as impure by the *devas*. *Monkey-man*, one of the etymological interpretations of the term *vānara*, is a common insult throughout Neelakantan's novel (10/272). It is used by *asuras*, *devas* and by the *vānaras* themselves. Even though monkeys do not possess a negative representation in Hinduism, in English the epithet *monkey-man* would hardly be positive. During colonial and imperialist times and in contemporary racist discourses, the term is often used to refer to black-skinned Africans.[250] In Neelakantan's novel, the semantic value of the English term turns the commonly positive Hindu representation into a pejorative one.

In the first novel of Tripathi's (2015) tetralogy on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *vānaras* do not play a preponderant role, given that they only appear later in the story. However, similar subaltern species appear, such as the *nāgas*, who constitute a mysterious race "of people born with deformities" (5/80). As usual in the contemporary retellings of the epic, physical deformities predict a whole range of non-physical traits. The *nāgas* are said to be a hated, feared and ostracised people (*Ibid.*). Jaṭāyu, a semi-divine bird who in most retellings tries to save Sītā when she is abducted by Rāvaṇa, is a *nāga*. While Jaṭāyu is described textually and visually as a vulture who can fly in the most popular versions of the narrative, in this novel he is a human whose deformities make him look like a vulture. He has a hard and bony mouth like a bird's beak and fine and downy hair-like feathers. Just as the *vānaras* are derisively called *monkey-man* in

[249] Lutgendorf (2007a) also compares both species when stating that *vānaras* and *rākṣasas* possess superpowers (extraordinary strength and the ability to change shape) and characteristic flaws (unbridled sexuality and intense familial disputes) (45).

[250] https://theconversation.com/comparing-black-people-to-monkeys-has-a-long-dark-simian-history-55102 (accessed on 7/7/2022); https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/why-monkey-is-racist/236674 (accessed on 7/7/2022).

Neelakantan's novel, Jaṭāyu is called a *vulture-man* by Lakṣmaṇa in Tripathi's version. Lakṣmaṇa is also said to hold superstitions against *nāgas* and to be unable to trust them (333-334).

In Sanskrit, *nāga* means "snake". This is also the name of a mythical kingdom and its people, who have also been interpreted as possibly having snakes as their totems. *Nāgas* play an important role in the canonical *Mahābhārata* and also appear in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. Although the terms are not etymologically related, Naga is also the name of an ethnic group that lives in the North-eastern Indian state of Nagaland.[251] Their name does not come from Sanskrit but from a Tibeto-Burman language, a different language family from Indo-European, and may mean something like "pierced ears", a common practice among this ethnic group (Vashum, 2000: 12). In his travelogue on the region, author Jonathan Glancey (2012) writes that Nagaland has been historically portrayed as a land of ruthless guerrillas and exotic natives, a description which sounds similar to that of Tripathi's *nāgas* and Neelakantan's *vānaras*. It seems unlikely that the majority of Tripathi's readership is aware of the different etymological roots of the terms referring to the mythological beings and to the real Indian community. It is possible that such descriptions of a demythologised species may be conflated with existing groups which have been depicted in popular imagination in similar ways, mainly when, as I have shown in the previous section and will continue to show in the following chapters, Tripathi tends to find similar equivalencies between fact and fiction among other mythological elements of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Finally, I must say something about the *Ādivāsī,* "original inhabitants", the tribal people of India. This category has been defined independently of caste, given that there exist the official designations of *Scheduled Castes* (SC) and *Scheduled Tribes* (ST) (articles 341 and 342 of the Indian constitution).[252] Colonial thinking did not just create discursive divisions between superior Westerners and inferior Indians. They also distinguished between two groups of Indians: the civilised who had a religion, lived within territorial boundaries and were "superior", and the primitive, who had none of these features, were scattered throughout the forests and were "inferior" (Thapar, 2014: 305-322). Elite Indians during the colonial period tried to reproduce themselves as

[251] THONG, Tezenlo (2016). *Colonization, Proselytization, and Identity*: *The Nagas and Westernization of Northeast India*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; WOUTERS, Jelle J. P. (2018). *In The Shadows of Naga Insurgency: Tribes, State and Violence in Northeast India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press; JAMIR, Chongpongmeren (2020). *Christianity in Northeast India: A Cultural History of Nagaland from 1947*, London: Routledge.

[252] https://legislative.gov.in/constitution-of-india/ (accessed on 4/6/2024).

normative and the tribal groups as their primitive *Other* (Banerjee, 2006). This means that the same distinction that most Orientalists made between Europeans and Indians was applied to Indian society, with the elites and the subaltern occupying the place that Europeans and Indians played in the wider discourse, respectively. However, for purposes of nation-building, tribal groups had to be integrated through "civilising missions" and through instruction in the national language, history, culture and traditions (Xaxa, 2019: 49-53).

The Scheduled Tribes have been defined as groups distinguished by "tribal characteristics" and by their spatial and cultural isolation (Galanter, 1984: 147). According to modern scholars who accept the Aryan invasion/migration theory, native peoples integrated Aryan society and formed the lower castes, while others escaped to uninhabited areas. Mirroring this view, the literature after the *Ṛgveda* is said to increasingly mention forest-dwellers living on the fringes of Aryan society (Michael, 1999: 17). The idea that the lower castes are tribal people who retain "tribal characteristics" and that tribal people are those who never became lower castes reveals how difficult it is to define what "tribal characteristics" are. Tripathi (2017b) says that even city-dwellers retain the moral code of a "tribal society" (86), which would mean that, even though most city-dwellers have never contacted with a tribal person, they may have "tribal characteristics".

Names reveal how the division between the concepts of tribe and caste have not been clear-cut, given that the Scheduled Tribes have been integrated into local hierarchies and have formed the lower caste *Niṣāda* (Doniger, 2009: 38). However, there has been a difference between the concept of lower caste and tribals. The former community has been numerous enough to gain a political voice, while the latter has not constituted a significant vote bank and has been discriminated against (Guha, 2011). In fact, while the contemporary retellers, mainly the male ones, often discuss the historically and discursively important concept of *caste*, they rarely engage with the concept of *tribe*, probably due to their spatial and cultural isolation and to their relative irrelevance for contemporary urbanites. Even though a considerable part of the *Rāmāyaṇa* takes place in the forest, the concept of "tribe" and tribal characters rarely appear. When they do, their descriptions is more stereotyped than nuanced, likely because the retellers are city-dwellers who know about Indian tribes through means other than direct experience. The most common stereotypes related to tribes have regarded them as less-than-human savages or as "noble savages" uncorrupted by

modernity. These are extreme discursive descriptions which do not differ drastically from Western descriptions made by armchair *philosophes* who read about such savages in travellers' accounts. In Western discourses, stereotyped dichotomic views are most famously represented by Thomas Hobbes' (1588-1679) idea of man's life in nature as nasty, brutish and short, and by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) "noble savage" (Williams, 2012).

According to Pattanaik (2013a), tribal societies live in harmony with nature, while non-tribal societies always seek something new in intellectual and material terms (culture), often at the cost of nature (26). This description fits the stereotype of the "noble savage". In Tripathi's (2015) novel, when Rāma and his brothers are being educated in the forest, they intermingle and train with local tribals. Like all ideal characters in Tripathi's works, they are "brilliant warriors" (52). One of them, a character with whom Rāma spars, is called Matsya. In Sanskrit, *matsya* means "fish", so the notions of non-human groups and the animal kingdom get intertwined. While Rāma begins the battle by uttering the words "[t]ruth. Duty. Honour", Matsya states "[v]ictory at all costs" (53). These mottoes conform to Pattanaik's (2013a) human ideal of self-restraint and obedience to social rules and the counter-ideal animal instinct to dominate through strength, which means that Tripathi's description of Matsya fits the stereotype of the savage living in a nasty and brutish condition. In other passages, though, Tripathi also resorts to the stereotype of the "noble savage". He claims that tribal traditions are more "liberal" than urban ones, given that they empower women and let them marry whoever they love (75/77). The use of the term "liberal", a Latin term whose contemporary political, economic and social meaning in modern European languages is recent, feels decontextualised when applied to tribal Indian societies. Such descriptions play with the trope that rural India is more modern than urban India and that it is there that pre-Muslim and pre-British values can inspire urban Hinduism. Despite the fact that Tripathi's first description is negative and this one positive, both represent tribal peoples as living unbound by non-tribal rules.

Tribals are also conflated with the *asuras* and the *vānaras*. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, when Śūrpaṇakhā appears to Sītā for the first time, her description sounds more like that of a tribal woman than that of an *asura*. Sītā states that Śūrpaṇakhā is naked, possibly because the "tribe" to which she belongs does not "believe" in clothing (142). Śūrpaṇakhā then asks Sītā what "tribe" she belongs to (143). Neelakantan (2012) describes Kārtavīryārjuna as a tribal monarch and as a descendant of an aborigine tribe

purportedly formed by the original inhabitants of India (24). These groups are said to be plunderers who invade civilised villages and cities, ransack houses, kill men and gang-rape women (57). This is another stereotyped version of the less-than-human savage. As in this novel the *vānaras* are said to be *mestizos* who inhabit the intermediary space between the *devas* and the *asuras*, they lead a tribe-like existence in the forests of Central India. In sum, from the *vānaras*, to *nāga*s, to tribal people, to *asuras* and to *vānaras* back again, I have come full circle. In the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, such non-human groups are often compared to one another through similar descriptions.

4.5 The ideal of skin colour

The issue of skin colour tends to be relevant in the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and in contemporary Indian pop culture. This concept is more pervasive in descriptions of caste, class and species than any other physical, intellectual or sensorial trait, that being the reason why I decided to keep a separate section for it. There seem to be no major sociopolitical discourses within India that have referred to "whites" or "blacks", even though in colonial discourses there were clear and general differences between the "white" colonisers and the "black" colonised. Identifying social groups in India with matters related to caste, class and community and all of these with matters related to skin colour has been a common strategy in modern *Dalit* discourses. *Dalits* belong to the poorest classes and form specific communities. For this reason, they have tried to redefine themselves and build solidarity with "black" resistance movements across the world (Rajashekar, 2009). Therefore, even if skin colour does not form wide identity categories like gender, caste or class, its relevance as a means of social distinction must be singled out.

Neelakantan (2012) often refers to the fair skin of the *devas* and of "cross-breeds" (106) and reserves the attribute of black skin to the *asuras*. Blank (1992) states that the *asuras* embody the worst possible racial stereotypes, given that they are usually described as foul-smelling, ugly, fat, hairy, violent, half-naked cannibals, but most of all, as black-skinned (237-238). This, in fact, is the way Neelakantan derisively describes most of his common *asuras*. Due to the desirability and undesirability of white and dark skin in pop culture representations, skin colour predicts other social

clues, such as intellect and social status (Subramaniam, 2019: 150).[253] The contemporary Indian middle and upper classes tend to privilege white or lighter skin. This tendency is reflected in marriage advertisements, which commonly seek "fair" women, and in the many skin-whitening creams in the market (Thapan, 2004: 424). One of the most famous brands is called *Fair and Handsome* and *Fair and Lovely* in its male and female versions, respectively. These names do not imply that being fair is a necessary or sufficient condition to being handsome or lovely. However, they reveal that both concepts are represented as correlated to each other.

In the contemporary retellings, skin colour is often referred and all physical, intellectual and psychological associations that come with it often prove to be true. In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Trijaṭā, a *rākṣasī*, is "dirty, dark, fat and ugly" (436). In Kané's (2016) version, Śūrpaṇakhā fears that her darkness makes her unattractive, given that, even after being encouraged by her grandmother Tāṛakā, she insists that she is "not fair", even though she is attractive (87). Śūrpaṇakhā's father also states that his daughter is as pretty as her mother, "though a shade darker" (2). In these cases, adversative clauses reveal how fair skin is associated with beauty and black skin with ugliness. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā states that she prefers darker skin and praises her late husband for his beautiful dark skin (143). While this is the single appraisal of black skin, it is not unambiguous. While in Divakaruni's novel Śūrpaṇakhā is represented as a female victim and not as an evil demoness, her representation is not as positive as Sītā, the real protagonist of the novel, who never reveals this kind of preference. Conversely, in Tripathi's (2015) novel, in which Śūrpaṇakhā is explicitly said to be a beautiful but demonic foreigner, her skin is said to be as white as snow (340).

In Neelakantan's (2012) version, the antagonists are said to have fair skin and the protagonists to have black skin. This does not mean that black skin is represented in a

[253] https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/india-bollywood-brownface-hnk-intl/index.html (accessed on 27/8/2021); https://www.aljazeera.com/program/101-east/2010/9/7/a-whiter-shade-of-pale-skin-whitening-in-india (accessed on 27/8/2021). It must be added that preference for white skin is not unique to India but is common to many other countries in Asia. LI, Eric P. H., MIN, Hyun Jeong, BELK, Russell W., KIMURA, Junko, and BAHL, Shalini (2008). "Skin lightening and beauty in four Asian cultures" *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 35, pp. 444-449; RODRIGO-CALDEIRA, Deborah (2016). *White Skin as a Social and Cultural Capital in Asia and its Economic Markets*: *Basic Study Research Paper in Business Communication*, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2973408 (accessed on 7/7/2022); SHROFF, Hemal, DIEDRICHS, Phillippa C., and CRADDOCK, Nadia (2018). "Skin Color, Cultural Capital, and Beauty Products: An Investigation of the Use of Skin Fairness Products in Mumbai, India" *Frontiers in Public Health,* Vol. 5; BETTACHE, Karim (2020). "A Call to Action: The Need for a Cultural Psychological Approach to Discrimination on the Basis of Skin Color in Asia" *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 15, Nº 4, pp. 1131-1139.

positive way, as is often the case in postcolonial African or Afro-American discourses. In fact, the use of the adjectives *black* and *dark* as insults or as pejorative terms are too many to list in their entirety. Rāvaṇa says of a group of people that he comes across in the forest that they are too dark to be *devas* (26). This means that skin colour is the major distinguishing feature between species. Later, Rāvaṇa weeps for the blackness of the skin of the *asuras* (31). He regards this colour as dirty and evil. However, he rejoices for having a fairer complexion than his counterparts (352). Bhadra states that even the gods would flinch when looking at the colour of his skin. For that reason, he concludes that his people have been born with the wrong skin colour (345). The mention of the idea of "birth" correlates this trait with the concept of caste. Adopting the rationale of "culture versus nature" to which Pattanaik often refers, Neelakantan (2012) acknowledges that the focus on fair skin constitutes a cultural precept, given that nature does not discriminate between skin colours (495). However, while Pattanaik's characters often go in a psychological quest to expand their minds and rise above nature and culture, in Neelakantan's pessimistic rendition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* the characters fail in their ideals and revert to a beastlike condition. In the end, even though Neelakantan's (2012) novel is pervaded with violence against people of subaltern species, castes and classes, one cannot say that these groups are glorified in any meaningful way as they have been in other postcolonial or decolonial works of fiction and nonfiction.

4.6 The idea of foreignness

Unlike modern narratives, such as Bollywood films, in which foreigners are often depicted or in which Indians often go abroad, the narrative universe of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is usually geographically limited to the subcontinent. However, some retellers depict foreigners rather explicitly. As stated previously, Neelakantan (2012) mentions "the Chinese and yellow haired barbarians" (464) and Tripathi (2015) writes that Śukrācārya originally comes from Egypt (181). Possibly because the concept of Europe would be absurd during the imagined premodern timeframe of the epic, Europeans are never called by this name. They are mentioned according to physical traits or to the traits of their land. Besides "yellow haired barbarians", Neelakantan (2012) calls them "barbarians from colder lands" (78). However, as I shall show in the next chapter, it cannot be said that Tripathi and Neelakantan are overly concerned with chronological accuracy.

In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Śūrpaṇakhā is said to be the child of a *mleccha*, one of the most common terms in Sanskrit to refers to non-Aryans. The author describes this group as consisting of fair-skinned, light-eyed and light-haired foreigners, given that, the author adds, nobody east of Egypt has blue eyes. These descriptions of fairness of skin and lightness of hair and eyes coincide with the Nazi concept of how ideal Aryans were supposed to be. According to Tripathi, the *mlecchas* live "half a world" away towards the northwest and have violent ways and incomprehensible speech (340). These descriptions touch upon the same characteristics that Orientalists used in order to describe colonial Indians. Like Neelakantan, Tripathi mentions their geographic provenance and physical appearance. However, he adds descriptions of behaviour and language. As Europe and Egypt are located to the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent, by making such descriptions, Tripathi reminds the reader of Muslims and British or Americans, given that other Western religious or national identities are less relevant in the author's fiction and nonfiction.

According to Thapar (1971), *mleccha* is a word that so-called Aryans began using around 800 BCE. Initially, it referred to people who could not speak Sanskrit. This is a linguistic trait to which Tripathi refers when mentioning their "incomprehensible speech". According to Thapar, physical markers were not as relevant as linguistic ones, even though they also existed (*Ibid.:* 408), which likely means that Tripathi has been as much inspired by the Sanskrit term and mythic tropes as with modern ideas of foreignness.[254] In different eras, the term *mleccha* has also been used to refer to mixed castes, technologically backward tribes and peoples living along the frontiers (414-415). Even though the emphasis on the several possible *mleccha* traits varies in Tripathi's text, all of them are present.

Thapar (*Ibid.*) also remarks that the *Ṛgveda* never uses the term *mleccha*. Instead, it uses the term *dāsa*, often translated as "slave/servant", and also used to describe native Indian tribes. According to Thapar, the *dāsas* are said to be treacherous, black-skinned "demons" who speak a foreign language (410).[255] In modern times, the term

[254] It could be said that *mlecchas* represent what one would now call *barbarians* in English. This term was used by ancient Greeks to refer to those who could not speak Greek. In fact, as Thapar (1996) acknowledges, the relationship between barbarism and language has relevant parallelisms in other classical traditions. For the complete etymology and history of the term *mleccha*, see Thapar (1971).

[255] In Sanskrit, there also exists the term *dasyu, "*barbarian", which is related to *dāsa.* Besides referring to "real" people in ancient India, the term also referred to a specific group of mythological demons. The word was also used in Sanskrit with the insulting meaning of "thief, robber, bandit". DESHPANDE, Madhav M., and HOOK, Peter E. (eds.) (1979). *Aryan and Non-Aryan in India*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; PARPOLA, Asko (1988). "The

has been used by upper castes to refer to those they wish to maintain at a social distance. It has also been used as an insult to Muslims (Thapar, 1996a: 13). While *dāsa* is uncommon in the retellings, Neelakantan (2012) writes that, when the *devas* conquered India, they called the native inhabitants *dāsas* and made them perform hard physical labours (23). This description, another allusion to Orientalist scholarship on the *Vedas,* on the origins of the caste system and on its anticolonial reaction (Figueira, 2002: 154-158), conforms with the *Brahmanic* ideal of leading an intellectual/spiritual life and of delegating labour to a class of servants constituted by subaltern castes, classes and communities. This means that, in this novel, the Vedic *dāsas* are conflated with the *śūdra* caste.

Hatred and, more often than not, violence between different social or mythological groups is evident in the contemporary retellings. Violence is instigated by the irrational and barbarian *Other* and by those described as ideal and, supposedly, self-restrained. In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Rāvaṇa complains that he defeats a kingdom without any bloodshed. He states that he cannot accept that he has become a hero without heroics (116). In Tripathi's (2015) version, when he fights against Rāvaṇa, Daśaratha, who is supposed to be a self-restrained character, screams to his soldiers to show no mercy when killing the *asuras* (22). One could compare these fictive battles with the real "battle for Sanskrit" to cut the "ten heads of Rāvaṇa" that Rajiv Malhotra has launched in order to "demolish" those who have "invaded" the sacred realm of Hinduism. In short, the contemporary retellings tend to regard the epic as portraying individual and civilisational battles between humanity and bestiality and, in some cases, mainly in the retellings penned by the male authors, humanity and bestiality is associated tends to be associated with specific human groups. One could state that the contemporary retellers base their stories in mythic templates and that, in general terms, contemporary global narratives tend to focus on tension and conflict between individuals and/or groups, such as the protagonist(s) and the antagonist(s). However, in my opinion, literary analysis does not necessarily consist only of what has been done but also in imagining what could have been done. It is clear that, in many cases, the retellers modernise or even invert many mythic elements as per their ideology and that they might have chosen to focus less on individual, national, taxonomic or gender

Coming of the Aryans to Iran and India and the Cultural and Ethnic Identity of the *Dāsas*" *Studia Orientali,* Vol. 64, pp. 195-302.

divisions and to provide more diplomatic denouements to their narratives. In many cases, contemporary globalised narratives do not really only on *Hollywoodesque* dichotomic views of the world. They often try to deconstruct stereotyped narrative templates and create new narratives which go beyond the traditional narrative of good versus evil. Given the notable diversity and flexibility of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, I find it remarkable that, up to now, no successful English-language retelling has gone beyond this conflict-ridden view of the world.

In the previous two chapters, I considered how biological and cultural traits are used to catalogue Indian and non-Indian societies through individual and internal traits. However, external traits are as relevant for social definitions as internal ones. The time and space in which bodies and minds move may sometimes predict who and how these bodies and minds are. These traits, time and space, are the subject matter of the two final chapters of this thesis.

Chapter 5

Rise and Fall of the *Rāmarājya*… and Rise Again: The Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Time

In the next two chapters, I delve on the concepts of time and space as they are represented in the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa.* Even though these concepts are interrelated, I look into them in two separate chapters for practical purposes. At first sight, both concepts seem to be independent from human issues. However, one could ask whether ideas of time and space could be related to individuals and whole identity groups, that is, are there specific times and places that are said to be ontologically related to specific groups? My goal is to demonstrate that, in some cases, there often are and that such groups overlap with the ones I have analysed in the previous chapters: those divided along the lines of gender, caste, class and species. I begin with the concept of time.

5.1 The idea of time

Most contemporary English-language retellers set their novels in a vague mythical past. However, there have been attempts at dating the plot. Pattanaik (2013a) states that, according to astrological calculations, Rāma was born on the 10th of January, 5114 BCE (16), a date which is comparable to D. K. Hari and D. K. Hema Hari's date (5100 BCE), which I mentioned in the first chapter. However, as stated previously, Pattanaik is much more concerned with localising and dating the epic in abstract psychological terms. This means that what matters is to pinpoint what could happen at any time and place. Claims about timelessness, however, do not say anything about timelessness itself, given that anyone making such claims lives in a specific time and place.

As stated on the back cover, Tripathi's (2015) version is set in 3400 BCE. This is a more general date than Pattanaik's calculation. However, it is still specific. What is the reason behind it? 3400 BCE is roughly considered to be the beginnings of the Indus Valley civilisation (Wright, 2009: 1). While there are more ancient archaeological remains in the subcontinent, it is difficult to relate them to contemporary India. One may consider how a small Indus valley seal with a horned figure sitting in a *yogic* position is often interpreted to be a proto-Śiva (Fogelin, 2007: 25-28) (Possehl, 2002:

142) (Figure 47).[256] The seal may represent something else. There is no evidence of textual references to Śiva, given that the Harappan writing system has not been deciphered yet.[257] In any case, Tripathi starts at the beginning or, at least, at what he believes to be the beginning of "modern" India. Tripathi (2022) has even adapted the opposite "archaeological" strategy. In the last novel of his *Rāmāyaṇa* series he reproduces a representation of Rāma sculpted by Rāvaṇa (Figure 38), a fictional sculpture which is identifiable as the Harappan figurine often called "priest-king" (Possehl, 2002: 115) (Figure 39).



Figure 38 - Tripathi's (2022) portrayal of Rāma

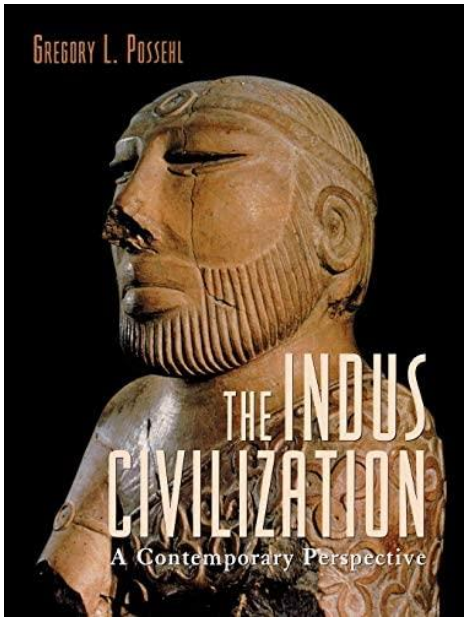


Figure 39 - Cover of Possehl's (2002) book depicting the Harappan Priest-king

3400 BCE reminds one of the almost parallel date of the comics *Ramayan 3392 aD*. Some editions of the comics include a quote from a review by Tripathi, which means that he is acquainted with the series. The reason for the choice of this date by the authors of the comics is also unclear, given that nothing specific is known to have happened in India in 3392 BCE. While this number has no symbolic meaning in Indian tradition, the symbolic mirroring of the dates of the foundation of the Indus Valley

[256] This figurine is also often called *Paśupati*, Sanskrit for "lord (*pati*) of the beasts (*paśu*)".
[257] ZIDE, Arlene R. K., and ZVELEBIL, Kamil V. (eds.) (1976). *The Soviet Decipherment of the Indus Valley Script: Translation and Critique*, The Hague: Mounton; FAIRSERVIS, Walter A. (1983). "The Script of the Indus Valley Civilisation" *Scientific American*, Vol. 248, Nº. 3, pp. 58-67, available online at https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-script-of-the-indus-valley-civi/ (accessed on 15/9/2021); PARPOLA, Asko (1994). *Deciphering the Indus Script*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; ROBINSON, Andrew (2002). *Lost Languages: The Enigma of the World's Undeciphered Scripts*, New York: McGraw-Hill, c. 10.

civilisation and a post-apocalyptic future reinforces the idea that the past and the future are symmetric. Finally, one should also note that Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* is said to occur in 1900 BCE, which is not only roughly the end of the heyday of the Indus Valley Civilisation (Wright, 2009: 1) but also one the earliest proposed dates for the composition of the *Ṛgveda* (Oberlies, 2024 [1998]: 24), which is often regarded as the textual beginnings of Indian civilisation, as much as the Indus Valley civilisation is regarded as its archaeological beginnings.

The other retellers do not mention precise dates. Divakaruni and Kané are little concerned with the history of India. Only Neelakantan is concerned with it and uses several discursive historical tropes to interpret past and present. As an example, writes one relative hint when Bhadra states that a specific event would condemn his "country to darkness for many millennia to come" (Neelakantan, 2012: 227). This means that the story takes place "many" millennia ago and shows how Neelakantan is concerned with emphasising India's pattern of growth and decadence and not so much with identifying the archaeological roots of the modern country, which is Tripathi's main discursive concern.[258]

One of the most common discursive strategies related to time in Tripathi's fiction and nonfiction is to divide time into different eras. These are often based on the social categories I have analysed. The concepts of a "masculine" and "feminine" ways are also related to notions of time. Tripathi (2015) states that these ways are cyclical. Whenever one of the tendencies reaches its apogee, it begins declining and gives rise to the opposite way. Vasiṣṭha describes the reign of emperor Bharata, the one who inspired India's Hindi name, as the apogee of the feminine way of freedom and passion. Later, this way is said to have become corrupt and decadent and to have given way to the masculine one, which at its peak is regarded as efficient and egalitarian, despite the fact that it later becomes fanatical, rigid and harsh towards the weak (85-86). Despite the difference in the names of the involved groups, the pattern of rise and fall is mirrored by the *asura* empire in Neelakantan's (2012) retelling.

[258] There are some contemporary English-language retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* set in contemporary India, but they have been not as influential as the ones I analyse. The most popular is *The Missing Queen* by Samhita Arni (2013). There are also two films, *Raavan* (2010) and *Raavanan* (2010), made simultaneously in Hindi and Tamil, and the Bengali short film *Ahalya* (2015). RATNAM, Mani (Director) (2010). *Raavan* [Film], Reliance BIG Pictures; RATNAM, Mani (Director) (2010). *Raavanan* [Film], Reliance BIG Pictures; GHOSH, Sujoy (Director) (2015). *Ahalya* [Film], Royal Stag Barrel Select Large Short Films.

The feminine way is said to be slow, although it ends up becoming stable and durable, while the masculine one is said to be quick. According to Tripathi, the masculine way can also be stable and durable, provided that its followers learn from the past (93-94). Given that Vasiṣṭha describes India as a feminine civilisation in decline and that the *asura* civilisation, which is conflated with the Muslims and the British, is said to be masculine, Rāma feels that the masculine way needs to be revived. However, as the *asuras* are in decline, Rāma feels that one should improve their way and not merely imitate them (*Ibid.*). Tripathi adopts the Orientalist trope according to which India was a "feminine" civilisation defined by lethargy, while the British civilisation is defined by short periods of rapid change (progress). The author calls for a masculine way for India in the short-run. However, following the author's argument, this way should be different from the one endorsed by the Muslims and the British, who are implicitly said to have not learned from the past and to have made their notions of progress neither stable nor durable. I regard this kind of discourse as an example of Bhabha's (1994) idea that the colonial (or, in this case postcolonial) subject is "almost the same, but not quite" (86). Tripathi suggests that modern Indians should temporarily adopt the ways of the ex-coloniser, while not fully imitating them.

Tripathi (2017b) also categorises human eras according to caste (*varṇa*). He states that there are four ages that occur in an endless cycle. "We" are said to have recently emerged from the *Age of Militarism* (*kṣatriya*), in which the main currency was violence and the most iconic figures were violent warriors. It is unclear whether Tripathi refers to India or to the humanity. As this is a book about India and for Indian audiences, it would make sense if the term pointed to "we, Indians". However, as the author gives examples of foreigners, perhaps he means "we, human beings". The author specifically mentions Saladin (1137-1193) and Richard the Lionheart (1157-1199) (97). It is relevant that, among countless possible national and religious examples, Tripathi chooses adversarial figures from Muslim and British history. While Tripathi's Rāma and Suheldev are virile *kṣatriya* warriors in tune with Hindu nationalistic representations of Hindu masculinity, they are never explicitly described as representative of the aggressive *Age of Militarism.* These representative choices make the referent of the pronoun *we* in the beginning of this paragraph even more difficult to fathom. In Tripathi's view, "we" now live in the *Age of Money* (*vaiśya*). This is a clear reference to the neoliberal present and, in general terms, to the capitalist world. The author states that the transition to this age in India was brought about by Gandhi, who

built on parts of ancient Indian philosophical heritage (98). While it is stereotypical in Western and Indian pop culture to contrast Gandhi's ideas of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) with the warring tendencies which have permeated modern history, it is less obvious to associate Gandhi's proneness for asceticism, his preference for traditional village economies and his disregard for modern capitalism (Dasgupta, 1996) with contemporary capitalism and neoliberalism. Tripathi also mentions the *Age of Knowledge* (Brahmin) and *The Age of Individualism* (*śūdra*) (96-98). It is not clear why *śūdras* are equated with a sense of individualism, given that they are often represented as pawns of powerful groups.

The same eras are mentioned in Tripathi's (2015) novel. He states that, whenever a way of life becomes inefficient, a new leader guides people towards a better social order. Accordingly, one *Viṣṇu*[259] guides India from the *Age of Kṣatriya*, which has degenerated into violence, into the *Age of Brahmin* (37). In a later passage, Rośnī justifies violence when stating that there is virtue in non-violence only when one is not living in the age of *Age of Kṣatriya* (151). However, India is said to have progressed from that stage and to have ushered into an age during which violence has been swapped with knowledge. In Tripathi's nonfiction view of these stages, modern India has progressed from the *Age of Militarism* to that of the *Age of Money*. However, in his novels, India has progressed to the *Age of Knowledge*. In Orientalist discourses, ancient India was more stereotypically associated with knowledge than with money. This representation survived into postcolonial times in the Western pop culture figure of what Iwamura (2011) calls the calm, meditative "Oriental monk", who is one of the main staple figures of the representation of not only Hinduism, but also of other Asian religious traditions, such as Taoism or Buddhism. Indians from the western coast historically engaged in trade in the Indian Ocean (Alpers and Goswami, 2019).[260] However, that is considered to have begun in post-Vedic times and to be less relevant for pop culture representations of both India and Hinduism. In any case, by confusing the *Age of Knowledge* with the *Age of Money* in his fiction and nonfiction, Tripathi apparently equates knowledge with money and, in fact, education (knowledge of

[259] I remind the reader that, in Tripathi's universe, this is the title of a leader and means "Propagator of Good".

[260] See also CHAUDHURI, K. N. (1985). *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; PEARSON, Michael, and GUPTA, Ashin Das (eds.) (1987). *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; PEARSON, Michael (ed.) (2015). *Trade, Circulation, and Flow in the Indian Ocean World*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; MALEKANDATHIL, Pius (ed.) (2016). *The Indian Ocean in the Making of Early Modern India*, London: Routledge; COBB, Matthew Adam (2019). *The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity: Political, Cultural and Economic Impacts*, London: Routledge.

English, technology, business) is regarded as the surest means of getting money in contemporary India.

Tripathi's tendency to divide time into different eras seems to reflect both colonial historiography and Indian cosmological notions of time. Periodisation was foundational in the development of the colonial history of India (Thapar, 2014: 9-10). Due to its influence in both colonial and native discourses, James Mill's (2010 [1818-1823]) *The History of British India* is of particular relevance. Mill was a colonial historian who never went to India and never learned any Indian language. He famously divided Indian history into three periods: Hindu, Muslim and English. The first corresponded to a Golden Age, the second to a period of decline and the third to one of modernisation. Mill created periods of Indian history according to static, overarching civilisations based on the religion of the most powerful ruling authority of each period and, in the process, annihilated any internal cleavages and temporal changes within each of these periods. The author hinted that the times when the Hindus and the Muslims had been the hegemonic driving forces of Indian history were gone and the time of the British had arrived. However, one may question whether there was a united Hindu civilisation in the past. Similarly, there never was a Muslim polity which encompassed the whole subcontinent and followed a cohesive political strategy (Kurien, 2007: 171).

Mill's chronology became popular, including in postcolonial discourses, given that, contrary to the even more essentialising Hegelian or Marxist theories, he regarded India as subject to change and reform and not as a static civilisation (Khilnani, 1997: 158). His temporal scheme is similar to Tripathi's one. Mill and Tripathi use the same arguments in order to prove the same points. Only their outcomes are different. This difference stems from their identity groups. Mill was an Orientalist coloniser who was trying to create the rationale for hegemonic domination over the colonised. His argument was that Indian civilisation had decayed, so the British had to civilise it again. Tripathi is a postcolonial author who grew up in neoliberal India. The argument in both his nonfiction and fiction is that India was conquered by the Muslims and the British because it decayed, so neoliberal Indians have to make it great again. In Tripathi's discourse, Muslim and English are implicitly depicted as masculine *Kṣatriya* civilisations, while India is depicted as a feminine *Brahmin* civilisation in the past and a feminine *Vaiśya* civilisation in the present, even though it needs to temporarily change the gender balance towards masculinisation in order to surpass its economic and

cultural competitors, which are mainly represented by the West and Abrahamic religions in the discourses by this author.

There is also a relevant difference between Mill's and Tripathi's base for periodisation. Mill posited a linear kind of time. Tripathi states that history repeats itself, which means that time is cyclical. Tripathi's way of dividing time and societies according to human traits reminds one of the concept of *yuga*, the Sanskrit term for "age, era". Pattanaik (2013a) alludes to these eras. Like Tripathi's eras, the traditional *yugas* are four in number (*kṛta* or *satya*, *tretā*, *dvāpara* and *kali*), occur in an endless cycle, begin as ideal and ultimately fail and collapse, when the cycle begins anew (59).[261] Philosopher Anindita N. Balslev (1999: 41) and historian Romila Thapar (2005: 19-20)[262] discuss the Indian cyclical concept of time in comparison with the linear Judeo-Christian one. According to Thapar, the former is a-historical and unable to differentiate between myth and history. It imagines a world consisting of Golden Ages, periods when social rules are upheld, and of periods of decline, when the lower castes take the positions of the higher ones and women are liberated (23). According to Roy W. Perrett (1999), a professor of Indian Philosophy, the Hindu ideal is to break away from the cycle of creation, which means that history is not supposed to be relevant knowledge in India (320-321).[263] Clearly, this is not the contemporary neoliberal ideal, given that the new Indian middle class has been as concerned with Indian history as with Indian mythology and, more often than not, with a conflation between both.

I must warn the reader of the obvious. Both ideas of time as linear and as cyclical are overarching ideas which, while finding some degree of validation in interpretations of ancient religious texts, do not necessarily mean that the West has invariably prized history and that India has never prized it. Not all Westerners or Indians guided their lives exclusively based on close readings of religious texts in pre-modern times, although this is a generalising fallacy which has been common in colonial scholarship and in post-secular popular imagination. Thapar (2005) argues that, while the concept

[261] ZIMMER, Heinrich (1946). *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, London: Pantheon Books, p. 13-19; JAHN, Karl (1957). "The Yugas of the Indians in Islamic Historiography" *Der Islam*, Vol 33, pp, 127-134; GONZÁLEZ-REIMANN, Luis (2014). "The Yugas: Their Importance in India and their Use by Western Intellectuals and Esoteric and New Age Writers" *Religion Compass*, Vol. 8, Nº. 12, pp. 357-370.

[262] Thapar's work is an adapted version of an earlier study. THAPAR, Romila (1996). *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[263] THAPAR, Romila (2011). "Historical Traditions in Early India: c. 1000 BC to c. AD 600" in FELDHERR, Andrew, and HARDY, Grant (eds). *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, *Vol. 1: Beginnings to AD 600*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; ALI, Daud (2012). "Indian Historical Writing, c. 600-c. 1400" in FOOT, Sarah, and ROBINSON, Chase F. (eds). *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, *Vol. 2: 400-1400*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

of cyclical time has been relevant for cosmological purposes, the concept of linear time is apparent in historical sources related to secular states (20). Along with Graeco-Roman thought, Judeo-Christian thought has exerted the greatest influence on modern Western epistemology. However, most modern Western histories do not report only loose facts. They try to find patterns that show how history may repeat itself.[264] Essentialised depictions of time and history are more helpful in perpetuating stereotypes regarding East and West than in revealing something about Eastern or Western epistemological considerations.

Just like the concept of reincarnation, the concept of cyclical time does not constitute a central narrative strategy in most contemporary English-language retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The Indian cosmological idea that reality is cyclic and that the past will become the present and vice-versa frames Pattanaik's (2013a). The novel begins and ends with Rāma letting one ring fall into a crack on the ground and Hanumān reducing his body size to fetch it back. When he goes down the crack, he sees many rings and learns that the *Rāmāyaṇa* has happened many times and will occur again: Rāma and Sītā will reincarnate in every *tretā yuga* and Hanumān will go down to fetch another ring (312). In another passage, Pattanaik remarks that, in the *Adbhutarāmāyaṇa,* Sītā convinces Rāma to take her to the forest exile because she tells him she has done so in other versions of the tale (83). Therefore, in Pattanaik's view:

> That there are many Rams and many Ramayana s is a recurring theme in Indian mythology. It indicates that life is not linear; there is no full stop. Life is cyclical; what goes around comes around. Such a view of time will never respect history, for what is the past is also the future. That is why in many Indian languages the word for tomorrow and yesterday is the same, for example 'kal' in Hindi (314).[265]

Despite Pattanaik's assertion, the idea of cyclic history is much less important in the other contemporary retellings. It is also present to a lesser extent in Tripathi's (2015) novel, even though it is not narratively relevant in the same way it is in Pattanaik's retelling. When Lakṣmaṇa mentions the *Manusmṛti* in order to prove one point, Sītā

[264] In Hindi, there exists the phrase "itihāsa apne āpa ko doharātā hai", which translates as "history (*itihāsa*) repeats (*doharātā hai*) itself (*apne āpa ko*)", which is a loan translation from the English expression "history repeats itself".
[265] Pattanaik also states that this is the reason why in Hindi the words for yesterday and tomorrow are the same: *kal*. Rushdie (1981) has made the same remark in his novel *Midnight's children*: "No people whose word for 'yesterday' is the same as their word for 'tomorrow' can be said to have a firm grip on the time" (106). While aesthetically interesting, it is hard to prove that this linguistic fact reveals a deeper cultural fact.

states that he has to specify which *Manusmṛti* he is talking about, given that each age has one Manu (322).

I now turn to the idea that there was once a Golden Age which must be revived. According to Smith's (1999) typology of nationalism, this concept is crucial in determining what is desirable and undesirable for the future of nations (65-67/262). Even though this concept exists in Hinduism, Judeo-Christian and other religions, this is not a mere philosophical or theological idea but may be politically appropriated by nationalistic discourses. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, the Golden Age tends to be equated with *Rāmarājya*, Sanskrit for "Rāma's kingdom", the idea that the kingdom that Rāma established was the ideal prototype for the present nation, at least in contemporary nationalistic discourses. *Rāmarājya* could be conflated with the first *yuga.* However, the epic is often considered to have taken place in the transition from the second (*tretā)* to the third *yuga* (*dvāpara*).[266] According to Indian cosmology, we are now living in the *kali yuga*, the age of decline. This means that the next age will be the first golden age again, even if in the middle there is *pralaya*, Sanskrit for "dissolution, melting".[267] In sociopolitical terms, any attempt at trying to avert decline and to bring back prosperity may be regarded as an attempt at reinstating *Rāmarājya* and emulating the *kṛta yuga*. In nationalistic terms, this attempt has often been interpreted as a reinstatement of the real Indian which existed previously to foreign incursions by Muslim and by the British.

The concept of *Rāmarājya* could be used to show differences between theological and nationalistic discourses. Modern politicians, most notably Mahatma Gandhi, used the term in order to envision a united India. However, Gandhi's interpretation was unorthodox, given that he is said to have transformed the epic's divine autocracy into a populist democracy (Lutgendorf, 1995: 254). In his 1996 paper, "Betraying a futurist: The misappropriation of Gandhi's Ramarajya", Indian activist S. P. Udayakumar (1996) shows how the Gandhian concept was permeated with heroes, had no villains, and endorsed the empowerment of the masses. In the author's view, the concept has been misappropriated by Hindu nationalists, who have created a limited notion whose emphasis has been on the villains and whose main goal has been to empower to the

[266] Even though the tale takes place in a later less perfect age, Goldman and Goldman (2017) speak of Rāma's inauguration as king as a recreation of the *kṛta yuga* (3). This means that, while one may be living in a specific age, better past ages may be emulated.

[267] Sometimes translated as "Apocalypse", even though *pralaya* is ontologically different from the Judeo-Christian Apocalypse.

Brahmanical orthodoxy and the entrepreneurial new middle class (982) (see also Srikrishna, 2008). I would say that, in the present, this nationalistic notion constitutes a new kind of "divine autocracy", but one that is based on the money of the entrepreneurial middle class rather than on Brahmanical knowledge, even though, as I have been showing through this thesis, the entrepreneurial middle class has been trying to take the reins of Brahminical knowledge.

Universalising nationalism has been a common Hindu nationalistic tendency. Relatively unknown author Rakshith D. (2022)[268] has recently published *Ramarajya: How India Can Establish an Ideal State of Mankind*. This work is similar to Tripathi and Roy's (2020) *Dharma: Decoding the Epics for a Meaningful Life* in style, given that it is composed of dialogues on issues related to modern India and the world. In the book, the young Seetha (Sītā) becomes prime-minister of India and has to deal with local problems (air pollution, terrorism and the Covid pandemic) in conversation with modern characters adapted from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. One could note the parallel with Sītā as prime-minister of Mithilā in the retellings by Tripathi, who has become a source of inspiration for many mythological fiction writer wannabes, mainly ones with Hindu nationalistic tendencies such as a Rakshith D. The author's proneness to nationalistic discourses is present in his book's *Amazon* page in a way which is much more evident than in the discourses by the three male authors of my corpus, including Tripathi. Rakshith D. writes that he envisions "a futuristic India in which we achieve self-sufficiency and are no longer reliant on other countries, as well as becoming a worldwide power vacuum, displacing western countries".[269] Given that, at the time of the book's publication, the second and third economically most powerful countries in terms of GDP were China and Japan, other than due to historical reasons which still weigh heavily on postcolonial collective memory, it is unclear why the author is focused so much on dethroning Western countries.

Rakhshit D.'s book is visually mirrored by *Ramrajya*, a political drama which came out in 2022.[270] The synopsis in *IMBD* reads that the film "shows how Lord Rama's principles can be used to solve new age problems like corruption, caste

[268] Described in the back cover as an "entrepreneur, educator and aspiring author". In other words, a typical representative of the entrepreneurial new middle class to whom Pattanaik tends to direct his neoliberal guidebooks.

[269] https://www.amazon.in/Ramarajya-Rakshith-D-ebook/dp/B0BQRSBRSQ/ref=mp_s_a_1_1?keywords=ramarajya/qid=1693529743/sr=8-1 (accessed on 1/9/2023).

[270] RAI, Nitesh (Director) (2023). *Ramrajya* [Film], Li Helio Films.

discrimination, religious conflicts etc",[271] a roll of sociocultural preoccupations similar to those listed by Rakshith D. The film relies on the trope of the tall, handsome and strong larger-than-life hero (Lucky) common to most contemporary *Bollywood* blockbusters. Lucky grows up in the spiritual comfort of an *āśrama*, which is representative of Indian spiritual traditions. When he becomes an adult, he goes out to the wild materialistic world and, embodying the ideal of the warrior-monk, single-handedly fights (morally and physically) the shorter, uglier and weaker villains who are corrupting India.



Figure 40 - Poster of Nitesh Rai's (2023) *Ramrajya*[272]

The protagonist is textually and visually compared with Rāma, for example, in a poster/scene in which his figure is superimposed with that one of Rāma's famous poster which was created and disseminated during the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* movement (Figure 40). This film may be regarded as a companion piece to Rāma's new temple, which was inaugurated soon afterwards. [273]

[271] https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12001718/ (accessed on 5/9/2023).
[272] https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12001718/mediaviewer/rm1089930753/ (accessed on 5/9/2023).
[273] See also the 2018 film *Ramarajya*, which tries to reflect Gandhi's understanding of the term and, as a result, differs drastically from this version, whose values are much more clearly associated with Hindu nationalistic ones. KENGAPUR, Neel (Director) (2018). *Ramarajya*, Bhuvi Creations.

The concept of *Rāmarājya* has been interpreted as that of a kingdom in which the privileged exert power and the dispossessed know their limits, and as a kingdom where there is freedom for everybody (Lutgendorf, 1991: 374). These descriptions of time could be compared to the idea of two common representations of Rāma in different versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition: that of the priests and that of the people.

In any case, despite the popularity of the term *Rāmarājya*, the retellers do not use it often. In Tripathi's *Ram Chandra Series*, the concept is mentioned in a short tagline on the back cover of the first novel, which reads: "Ram Rajya. The perfect land. But perfection has a price. He paid that price" (Tripathi, 2015), which, besides being a description of *Rāmarājya* as the ideal India, may also be interpreted as a call to action for Indians to adopt a similar attitude. Tripathi mentions the concept in his previous *Shiva Trilogy* series. This story takes place after that of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, so Rāma and his rule are often mentioned. In *Immortals of Meluha*, the first instalment, a character states that Rāma established the "Indian way of life", given that he created "our systems, our rules, our ideologies, everything" (Tripathi, 2010: 7). This is the reason why *Rāmarājya* is the "gold standard of how an empire must be administered" (*Ibid.*). In other words, *Rāmarājya* is neither only a myth nor a historical fact but a continuous project which should be carried out in contemporary India.

Pattanaik (2013) states that *Rāmarājya* is described as the age of perfection during which rains come on time, women never become widows, sons outlive their fathers, there is no hunger or disease, and the arts flourish (266). In short, this epoch is one during which nature and human culture live in harmony. Divakaruni (2019) describes Rāmarājya as "heaven on earth" (315), which, as Sītā states, Rāma shall establish on earth with her help (126). In the end, though, the kingdom is said to become "lax" (315). While in Hinduism there exist concepts that could be translated as "heaven" (for example, *svarga*, which refers to Indra's heaven) and the idea of *Bhūloka Vaikuṇṭha*, "Viṣṇu's heaven on earth", the idea of heaven on earth and its use as an expression seems to be much more common in English. The fact that Divakaruni states that this heaven on earth becomes lax represents a rare instance when this author has followed the common discourse of the rise and fall of India, which, as I have said, may be related to either cosmological ideas, even though, in other discourses more concerned with history, it may also have been influenced by colonial historiography.

As Divakaruni's description reveals, the Golden Age of Rāma points to the past and to the future. Tripathi's nonfiction and fiction arguments that the present should

strive to follow the ideal past show that Rāmarājya was a Golden Age because it was traditional and not revolutionary and that tradition should continue into the present. Tripathi (2017b) often mentions his relationship with his predecessors, which are related to the past. The author frequently uses terms such as "ancestors", "inheritors" and "descendants", which are meant to ontologically link different generations. The characters in his fiction use similar words. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are described as "inheritors of the proud Kshatriya tradition of the Raghukul"[274] (Tripathi, 2015: 2). Rāma states that he cannot be against the *devas*, given that he is "one of their descendants" (*Ibid.:* 201) and that he has to honour the agreements that they have made (*Ibid.:* 323). It can be said that Rāma is seen as the ideal to be emulated also in the sense that he emulates his ancestors and maintains a sense of genealogical continuity between past and present. Tripathi's characters also point to the future in ways that sound millenarian and messianic.

Rāma is said to have the role of someone who shall institute a perfect society based on the past. Most of the times, Rāma is not immediately acknowledged as a great leader by other characters. However, Lakṣmaṇa states that there will come a time when the world will know how great he is (110-111). He adds that Rāma will play an important role in history and will be a good *Viṣṇu* for India (207-208). Vasiṣṭha also states that Rāma will become the next *Viṣṇu* and "rewrite the future of their nation" (306). Underscoring the idea of millenarianism, Sītā states that Rāma is the kind of man who comes along once in a millennium (303) and that there will be one day when people will see him as one of the "greatest leaders ever" (304). The fact that Tripathi wrote these words in hindsight makes his characters sound like prophets. These interpretations of Rāma also seem much closer to the Hindu nationalistic Rāma of the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* movement than to the impersonal, psychological Rāma who, in Pattanaik's understanding, is only an archetype within the human mind. Finally, it could be said that, even though Tripathi and the other contemporary English-language male retellers repeatedly state that there is no good and evil in Indian civilisation, these extremely positive descriptions of Rāma are discursively opposed to the author's very negative representations of Rāvaṇa as a brutal maniac.

Even when *Rāmarājya* is not regarded as an ideal, as in Neelakantan's (2012) retelling, one notices the same narrative techniques in relation to the concept of time.

[274] The Solar Dynasty, which takes its name from Raghu, one of its rulers. THAPAR, Romila (2002). *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*, London: Penguin Books.

This seems to mean that the idea of a "Golden Age" is mostly functional. This idea is clear in "Guru", the fourth chapter of Neelakantan's novel. During a conversation, Rāvaṇa and his mentor Mahābalī talk about the great *asura* empire of the past, the miserable condition of the *asura* in the present, and the need to have a heroic figure who can take the empire back to its former glory in the future (27-32). Mahābalī states that he sees the *asura* as a people who revel in a real or imagined past and who wish for a miracle to save their race (29). He also sees Rāvaṇa as one who can rewrite history by giving the lost empire back to the *asuras* and by redeeming their civilisation (37), again, a description which could be applied to Tripathi's Rāma and to his leadership abilities. In a later passage, Rāvaṇa says something which, due to the discursive similarities, could have come from Tripathi's nonfiction:

> We built magnificent cities and made leaps of progress in science, art and culture. (...) However, on the march towards progress, we made some mistakes. We strayed from the path of righteousness that our great leaders of yore had so painfully walked upon. We lost purity of thought and the simplicity of life (351-352).

As a discursive strategy, the idea of initial purity followed by its loss or corruption and the reversion to the initial state has been relevant in both Indian and Western systems associated both with the microcosmic level, which refers to individual consciousness, and macrocosmic ones, which refers to reality as a whole. In Indian philosophy, most prominently in the *Upaniṣads,* there is the idea that *Brahman* is the original unified reality which became divided into the multiple elements of reality and that the human goal is to try to revert the process and go back to that initial unity. In Western philosophy, a similar idea is most clear in Plotinus' Neoplatonic philosophy, according to which the original unity which emanated into the multiple elements of empirical existence is called *nous* (*νους*, Ancient Greek for "mind, reason, understanding") (Hatab, 1982). Both ideas were conflated by Aldous Huxley (1947 [1945]), who thought that world philosophies constituted a "perennial philosophy" (*philosophia perennis*), an idea which is also crucial to *New Age* movements.

In political and social terms, the idea that eras are cyclical and alternate between success and failure and that there was once a Golden Age that will make a comeback in the future tends to prompt the discourse of the need to "reform". *To reform* may be understood as meaning the reversion of the cyclical process to hark back to the Golden Age (Lutgendorf, 1997: 42). Tripathi (2017b), who is again the contemporary reteller

who most clearly makes use of this kind of discourse, often suggests to reform the many "corruptions" existent in India (71) and to revive the ancient approaches that were put into practice before the arrival of the Muslims and the British (104). It must be underscored, however, that, in Tripathi's discourse the idea of reform has the meaning of "neoliberal reforms" according to which civilisational and religious ideas are commodified, sent away to the free market and then have their feasibility tested in a competitive context, as the author has stated in an article titled "On Religious Conversions":

> Besides the obvious efforts of faith-based groups in education and health, what can be the other material positives? What do you think will happen if we subject any group to competition, where they lose their own flock to others? Obviously, reforms! Efforts will be directed towards making themselves more attractive to their own followers, perhaps even to others (68).

The idea of reformation is also reflected in Tripathi's (2015) fiction. In his novel, Rāma states that he is not a fan of everything that his ancestors did, even though some practices are "worth reviving" (215). He also tells the *asuras* that they are law-abiding people because they follow masculine way. However, their laws are not working anymore, which implicitly means that they need a "reformed" masculine way (197). As I have said, these are also regarded as the reforms which the *devas* and, by extension, contemporary Indians, should adopt. Rāma advocates civic nationalism in opposition to religious nationalism or communalism. He states that the new masculine way should be based on laws and not on faith, given that laws can change and keep up with the times, while faith easily becomes dogmatic (207). Tripathi implies that civic nationalism gives way to progress, while religious nationalism makes civilisations static, which leads to their decline and to losses in competition against civilisations which are able to maintain their apogees.

In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, Rāvaṇa does not merely wish to revert to an idealised past. He wishes to follow his own rules and to create society anew, given that he is "sick" of the ancient traditions and superstitions of India and the way they stifle the "march towards progress" (167), a kind of discourse which, like Tripathi's one, could be regarded as a neoliberal recreation of Indian mythic tropes and colonial historiography. Contrary to Tripathi's Rāma, Neelakantan's Rāvaṇa hates the elderly and the values they represent (42). However, his vision of the future is bleak. He states

that the new generations are unscrupulous and arrogant and that the values of his generation are fading away (277), a discourse which seems to mirror Das's representation of the old and new middle classes and which is the opposite of Tripathi's (self-)representation. The former class is said to be static, even though they have moral values, and the latter vice-versa. Rāvaṇa's ideology of breaking with the past and forging a new future reminds one of fascist discourses on the "New Man".[275] In the end, though, there is some irony in Neelakantan's discourse, given that, while he plays with all kinds of contradictory cultural discourses, he is as much influenced by Indian tradition as Tripathi is. The main difference between these authors is that Neelakantan seems to remain truer to the "idea of India" as a cultural system which is comfortable with paradox. As much as the relationship with the past may differ, some ideas regarding time and history are ever-present in the works of these two authors: 1) historical time is cyclical and defined by periods when specific groups and their associated ideologies are in power; 2) in any given cycle there is a perfect era; 3) humankind is now living through challenging times, but 4) there is hope for the perfect era to return through the hands of a charismatic leader who shall reform society.

5.2 The strategy of anachronism

Even though the plot of the contemporary retellings is supposed to have taken place in ancient India, one often comes across depictions of elements of modern life, something which is again most evident in Neelakantan and Tripathi's retellings. This constitutes the best evidence that these retellers are more concerned with reinterpreting the Indian present and conjecturing about the future through the prism of collective memory than with reconstructing the past. The intention and effects behind the use of anachronisms is clear: past and present become temporally and culturally closer. The past becomes imbued with modernity and is equated with nativeness, while the present becomes imbued with a sense of ethnic, cultural and even technological continuity. It is said that tradition and modernity are the most ubiquitous themes in the popular imagination of contemporary India (Deshpande, 2003: 25). This has resulted in a selective cultural blending which gathers the best of both worlds (47). This blend has

[275] SAUNDERS, Thomas J. (1998). "A 'New Man': Fascism, Cinema and Image Creation" *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 12, Nº. 2, pp. 227-246; PONZIO, Alessio (2015). *Shaping the New Man: Youth Training Regimes in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press; DAGNINO, Jorge, FELDMAN, Matthew, and STOCKER, Paul (eds.) (2018). *The "New Man" in Radical Right Ideology and Practice, 1919-1945*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

been called by different names. Subramaniam (2019) calls it "archaic modernity" (7), while sociologist Meenakshi Thapan (2004) calls it a "respectable modernity enshrined in tradition" (415). Both definitions reveal how the terms *tradition* and *modernity* do not necessarily defy Aristotelian logics. The concept of a "new Indian woman", which I have referred to in the third chapter, seems to be a specific instantiation of this more general cultural discourse, which could also be applied to other identity groups, including to the Indian and Hindu ones. Are there also new Indians and new Hindus, that is, Indians and Hindus who are simultaneously traditional and radical? Here, one should be reminded of Neelakantan and Tripathi's representation of themselves as both strict followers of Indian traditions and as rebels.

A common technique adopted by Neelakantan and Tripathi to achieve this kind of duality is to assimilate contemporary civic, social, political, economic, scientific, technological and religious concepts with previous ones. Sanjay M. Nandagawali (2017), a professor of English studies, wrote a paper on the anachronisms Tripathi has used in his series *Shiva Trilogy*. As I have said, this series is supposed to take place in 1900 BCE. However, it refers to later inventions, such as iron metal and soap. Besides, characters refer to modern scientific theories, such as the colour theory of light. This tendency to describe the past as indistinguishable from the present is also clear in Neelakantan's (2012) novels. In *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, the *asura* empire is described as the most scientifically and technologically advanced ancient civilisation and, in that role, it differs little from contemporary times. This portrayal gives the author the opportunity to parade several contemporary inventions. In the following paragraphs, I refer to some of such anachronisms.

I first deal with religion. Tripathi's discourses, in particular, are interesting in the sense that they show how the author tries to approximate Indian and Hindu traditions with both modern nationalistic and religious concepts. In Tripathi's (2015) novel, when Vasiṣṭha is praying in front of the statues of three of his *deva* ancestors, he asks them: "[g]uide me, O Holy Trinity" (38). The character is not referring to the Indian *trimūrti,* the triad of Hindu gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, often described as the creator, the preserver and the destroyer of the universe, respectively. He is referring to a triad imagined by Tripathi himself, one composed of ancestors. The concept of *trimūrti* in Hinduism emerged during Puranic times, long after 3400 BCE. Given the relevance of the triad in Christianity, Western scholars associated the Hindu *trimūrti* with the

Christian Holy Trinity.[276] Therefore, besides constituting an anachronism, the expression "Holy Trinity" also constitutes an issue of linguistic and cultural translation. By using the English expression, Tripathi associates the Hindu concept with the Western one, which means that he invents a pre-Puranic trinity based in content on the Puranic *trimūrti* and in style on the Christian Trinity. In his nonfiction, Tripathi (2017b) states that the British emphasised the conservative *Manusmṛti* as if it were the most important Indian text, when in fact it was just one among other more liberal ones. The author adds that the Indian constitution is the most recent Indian *smṛti* (64), that is, the most recent religious text created by Indians. Here, the relationship between religion and state is obvious. In modern secular states, constitutions are supposed to be secular. However, the fact that Tripathi calls the Indian constitution a *smṛti* associates political modernity with a long tradition of texts associated with Indian civilisation and Hinduism.

There are also anachronistic descriptions of modern secular life. In Tripathi's (2015) novel, there are frequent mentions of the "police", one of the institutions that Rāma "reforms" (112). In Neelakantan's (2012) retelling, Rāvaṇa mentions "national defence" (22) and the *devas* are accused of engaging in "terrorist attacks" against the *asura* empire (340). Institutions such as the police and concepts such as national defence or terrorism make no sense in the temporal plane of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, they reflect the modern anxiety of an interconnected world where threats can come from outside and inside.

Some passages of the retellings mix modern political and economic concepts. In Tripathi's novel (2015), Bharata is a liberal with "libertarian views" (296) who follows

[276] The first Western descriptions of the *trimūrti* were made by Portuguese chroniclers. They used the concept to imagine Hinduism as a kind of degenerate Christianity. In around 1515, Tomé Pires, wrote that every Malabar Indian believed in the Father, the Son and The Holy Ghost (126v.). In a later passage, he wrote that the Brahmins of Cambay (Khambat), believed in the Virgin (*śakti*) and in the Trinity, which means that they had been Christians whose faith had been deformed by Muslims (130v.). CORTESÃO, Armando (ed.) (2005) [1944]. *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: an account of the east, from the Red Sea to Japan, written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515/The Book of Francisco Rodrigues rutter of a voyage in the Red Sea, nautical rules, almanack and maps, written and drawn in the east before 1515*, London: The Hakluyt Society. In 1517, Duarte Barbosa (§ 87) wrote that the Hindus called such trinity *Bermabesma Maçeru*, a corruption of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Mahīśvara, Sanskrit for "great (*mahat*) Lord (*īśvara*)", an epithet of Śiva. DAMES, Mansel Longworth (trans.) (2016) [1918]. *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: an account of the countries bordering on the Indian Ocean and their inhabitants*, 2 Vols., London: The Hakluyt Society. In 1552, João de Barros (I, iv, 9) wrote that the Hindu Brahmins and the Christians had three people in their Trinity, contrary to the Muslims, who contradicted this idea and said that God was one. BARROS, João de (1618). *Década Primeira da Ásia de Ioão de Barros dos Feitos que os Portugueses fezerão no Descobrimento & Conquista dos Mares & Terras do Oriente,* Lisboa: Jorge Rodriguez. See also GONDA, J. (1968/1969). "The Hindu Trinity" *Anthropos*, Vol. 63/64, Nº. 1/2, pp. 212-226; BAILEY, G. M. (1979). "Trifunctional Elements in the Mythology of the Hindu Trimūrti" *Numen*, Vol. 26, Nº. 2, pp. 152-163. D'COSTA, Gavin (1999). "The Trinity and Other Religions: Genesis 18, Judaism and Hinduism in two works of art" *Gregorianum*, Vol. 80, Nº. 1, pp. 5-31.

a "decentralising style" (320). Likewise, the merchant caste is said to be under a "draconian" system of regulation (9). The use of such terms, which, either in positive or negative interpretations, are crucial to neoliberal discourses, constitutes a problem of translation. If the target-audience of the retellings is composed of globalised English-speaking middle class Indians, emulating the hypothetical speech of the characters of the canonical Sanskrit version of epic by using archaic language would make Tripathi's work less commercially appealing. The most familiar approach tends to be to translate unrelatable old concepts to relatable contemporary ones. Such temporal analogies are comparable to the spatial analogies that Orientalists made between East and West, as when they simplified Hinduism and made it look similar to Christianity so that it would more relatable to Europeans while, in the process, Hinduism was sometimes discursively turned into a corrupted variation of Christianity. Here, contemporary English-speaking authors living in a neoliberal society use terms associated with the neoliberal world while, in the process, making it seem as if such concepts not only existed but were commonplace in premodern India in more implicit or explicit ways. More pessimistic that Tripathi, Neelakantan (2012) projects significant problematic issues of contemporary India into the past. The author merges the concept of corruption with that of Vedic sacrifice (*yajña*).[277] Just like the Vedic devotees bribed deities to get something in return, contemporary citizens bribe officials. In Bhadra's view, from birth to death, Indian culture trains people "to bribe and to take bribes and endorse bribes" (432).

One of the most common anachronisms related to economics is the application of mythic templates to modern business, a strategy which, as Carrette and King (2005) show, is not only common in Indian and Hinduism but also in other national and Asian and non-Asian religious contexts. Pattanaik's (2013b) *Business Sutra* is entirely devoted to this kind of anachronism. This work is not academic. However, in *Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharata*, Amrita Narlikar and Aruna Narlikar (2014), specialists in Global and Area studies and in Indian writing in English, respectively, achieve the same goal by means of the *Mahābhārata* tradition and by means of a contemporary academic style. The authors state that they followed

[277] Conversely, in 2016, referring to the recent policy of "demonetization", Modi wrote on *Twitter* that he saluted the people of India for participating in the ongoing *yajña* against corruption, terrorism and black money. In this case, *yajña* is said to eliminate corruption. https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/806777130499522561 (accessed on 14/7/2022).

the tradition that uses the texts of Chinese legalist philosopher 孫子 Sūnzǐ (sometimes transcribed as Sun Tzu, 544 B.C.E-496 B.C.E), Italian philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) to understand modern statehood, statecraft, war and bargaining (2). This book was followed by several similar fiction and nonfiction business- and IT-related books based on this epic: N. Balasubramanian's *The Bhishma Way: Ancient Dharma for Modern Business and Politics* (2015), Meghdoot Karnik's *Dronacharya at the Workplace and Other Short Stories* (2016), Raghu Ananthnarayanan's *Leadership Dharma: Arjuna The Timeless Metaphor* (2016), Anil Chawla and Debashis Ghosh's *Pandavas: The Tech Warriors* (2017), Nanda Mehak Mahajan's *Break Your Leadership Chakravyuh : Stories and Learnings from Indian Mythology* (2020), Asha Kaul and Vishal Gupta's *Demystifying Leadership: Unveiling the Mahabharata Code* (2021), Zubin D'Souza's *The Dharma of a Leader: Executive Management and Ethical Leadership Secrets Derived from India's Epic, the Mahabharata* (2021) and Raghu Ananthanarayanan's *Five Seats of Power: Discovering the Best You Can Be Through the Mahabharata* (2022).

Likewise, several papers published by Indian management scholars discuss the relevance of the Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* for modern management (Muniapan, 2007; Pandey and Waly, 2010; Sharma, 2016). It is not clear why Vālmīki may be a better authority on business and IT than other ancient or modern representatives of the diverse tradition. In these papers, one can see the neoliberal idea that everything can be commodified, including the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, its divine protagonist and scholarship associated with both. The title of the paper by economist Balakrishnan Muniapan (2007) reads "Transformational leadership style demonstrated by Sri Rama in Valmiki Ramayana". While the concept of "leadership" is important in some contemporary retellings I analyse, "transformational leadership" is a modern concept that, due to the publication of a vast array of self-help books, has become associated with the business world. [278] J. K. Sharma (2016) argues that the *Rāmāyaṇa* deserves better

[278] For a serious scholarly analysis of this subject, see BASS, Bernard M. and RIGGIO, Ronald E. (2006). *Transformational Leadership*, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. For more popular takes on the issue, one may consider titles such as Hugh Blane's *The 7 Principles of Transformational Leadership: Create a Mindset of Passion, Innovation, and Growth* (2017), Raghurami Reddy Etukuru's *The Art and Science of Transformational Leadership: Unleashing Creativity, Innovation, and Leadership to Embrace Transformative Change* (2018), Narendra Verma's *Fearless Leadership - Lead to Win: Unleash your Potential through Transformational Leadership and Self Development* (2022), Nick Lemire's *Unleash transformational leadership* (2023), as well as examples directly related to Indian history and culture, such as Dipaali Pulekar's *Transformational Leadership of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj: Ageless Inspiration* (2020).

implementation in management strategies due to the modernity of its precepts. The author compares the kings of the past with the CEOs and managers of the present. Just like the ideal man Rāma looks up to his ancestors, contemporary Indians are supposed to look up to Rāma when they conduct business and run contemporary corporations.



Figure 41 - Detail of cover of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013b) *Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management*

Figure 41, Pattanaik's (2013b) drawing for the cover of *Business Sutra,* depicts a man in a contemporary business outfit. The title and the cover image merge past and present into a holistic syncretic unity. The position of the man's body and other pictorial elements are akin to the depiction of the Hindu god *Brahmā,* given that he sits on top of a lotus flower (*padmāsana*), has four heads (*caturmukha*), wears Brahmā's headdress (*jaṭāmukuṭa*) and has both arms raised (Stutley, 2019: s.v. "Brahma").

One of the appendixes which Pattanaik (2013b) includes in his work is titled "Business Sutra Vocabulary" (425-432). It lists the Sanskrit words the author uses throughout the book. The appendix consists of a table with three columns. The first one transcribes the Hindi/Sanskrit term, the second explains its meaning in a business context and the last one its conventional context. Again, this shows how translation is processed in semantic terms, given that these terms clearly had no "business context" meaning in ancient Sanskrit,[279] even though, again following Carrette and King's (2005) ideas, neoliberal discourses have been able to transform ancient religious discourses with no relationship to free markets whatsoever and make them fit their premises. The

[279] The "conventional context" is often simplistic and does not deal with the nuances that the Sanskrit terms may imply. Stating that a *rākṣasa* is a "demon who grabs" simplifies the modern discussion around the term as I analysed it in the previous chapter, which mostly consisted of a rundown of descriptions by contemporary retellers and not on a comprehensive history of the literary use of the term.

following table is a summary of Pattanaik's glossary with the terms I quote in the following paragraphs:

***Business Sutra* Vocabulary**		
	Business context	**Conventional context**
Karta[280]	the one who gives the directive	a leader
Karya-karta[281]	the one who follows the directive	a follower
Rakshasa	one who takes things by force	demon who grabs
Ram	he who follows the rules at any cost to help others grow on their terms	the royal form of *Viṣṇu*
Ravan	he who breaks the rule for his growth at the cost of others	king of the *rākṣasas*
Yajaman[282]	the one who initiates the offer of exchange	patron
Yagna	the process of exchange	Vedic fire ritual

Table 2 - *Business Sutra* Vocabulary (adapted from Pattanaik, 2013b: 425-432)

Pattanaik brings again the discussion of caste (*varṇa*) into the world of modern business. As figure 34 shows, the higher castes are associated with leaders (*kartās*) and the lower ones with followers (*kāryakartās*), concepts which figure in the glossary. In Pattanaik's modern translation, *yajña* is not the precursor of modern "corruption", as Neelakantan creatively puts it in his novel. It is the much more positive "process of exchange" in a business context. In fact, the first sentence of "Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management", the section which retells mythological stories and interprets them through a modern lens, is "[b]usiness is yagna, the ritual described in the oldest and most revered of Hindu Scriptures, the Rig Veda" (Pattanaik, 2013b: 69). The author means that, much like Vedic priests during a sacrifice, a businessman must let go of something and invest it in order to expect something greater in return. While the more common translation of *yajña* as "Vedic sacrifice" also implies a degree of linguistic and cultural translation (Ferrara, 2016), its translation as "business" sounds more concerned with modernising the term rather than with finding a close linguistic

[280] Hindi term for "doer".
[281] Hindi term for "doer of the work" or "worker".
[282] Hindi term for "doer of the *yajña*" or "sacrificer"

and cultural approximation in the English language. In this way, *yajña* does not sound like a ritual which began to be celebrated long ago in an unfamiliar society but as something that is happening in contemporary Indian corporations on a daily basis.

Events and characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are often recreated in *Business Sutra*. The subchapters of the book which include tales from the epic are: "He who takes a call is a karta" (110); "A yajaman has the power to take and give life" (116); "The size of the contribution does not matter" (118); "Every decision has a consequence" (126); "If the decision is bad, the yajaman alone is responsible" (152); "Business is seduction" (164); "If strategy is the force, then tactic is the counterforce" (192); "Culture provides only a temporary framework for our social body" (238); "Things help us position ourselves" (244); "The loss of possessions reveals who we really are" (254); "A relationship is about thoughts, not things" (260); "Rules domesticate the human animal" (268); "We dislike those who are indifferent to rules" (272); "Rules can be oppressive" (274); "We want to live by our own rules" (280); "We respect those who uphold rules" (284); "Rules need not determine our value" (285); "We want to be seen as we imagine ourselves" (324); "A cruel gaze focuses on our compliance rather than our capability" (326); "We use work as a beacon to get attention" (336); "How we see others reveals who we are" (342); "The Other reveals our inadequacy" (350); "Growth is about pursuing thoughts not things" (358); "Growth happens when more people can depend on us" (362); and "To teach, we have to learn to let go" (392). These captions present short aphorisms common to ancient practical philosophy books, such as those associated with Greco-Roman moralists (Malherbe, 1986), and to modern "transformational leadership" self-help books, which are often inspired by practical Greco-Roman philosophy. One should note how most of Pattanaik's aphorisms are related to the neoliberal mentality according to which individuals are responsible for their own growth, which means that the road to success involves firstly finding out one's "authentic" self and then treading the path towards personal development.

As the examples are numerous and repetitive, I analyse the first one ("He who takes a call is a karta") as a representative case, also because it is related to other issues I already referred to in the third chapter. This subchapter (depicted in Figure 42) tells the story of Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā. According to Pattanaik, a line (*Lakṣmaṇa Rekhā*)[283]

[283] Sanskrit for "Lakṣmaṇa's line". This famous episode, which is included in all contemporary retellings, features neither in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* nor in Tulsīdās' *Rāmcaritmānas*. It first appeared in the Bengali *Kṛttivāsī Rāmāyaṇ*, one of the versions which inspired Divakaruni's (2019) *The Forest of Enchantments*. NAIR, Rukmini Bhaya (2020). "Lakshman Rekha" in NAIR, Rukmini Bhaya, and DESOUZA, Peter Ronald (eds.). *Keywords for India: A Conceptual*

is drawn around Sītā to keep her protected. She is ordered not to go beyond it. Inside the line, the laws of culture apply and Sītā is Rāma's wife. Outside, there is nature, where cultural conventions are said to be irrelevant. Rāvaṇa comes to Sītā in the guise of a hermit begging for provisions. If Sītā chooses to obey Rāma, she is a "obedient follower" (*kāryakartā*) and Rāma a "responsible leader" (*kartā*). Following the modern paradigm of Sītā as an independent character, Sītā chooses to take the call and takes responsibility upon herself. This proactivity transforms her into a *kartā*, even though her decision does not lead to a desirable outcome. Pattanaik's conclusion reads: "[t]o build a business, we need decision makers and decision followers. He who takes decisions is the karta. He who follows decisions is called a karyakarta" (110). In this story, Sītā is "translated" from the passive and submissive wife of popular Indian imagination into the "new Indian woman" who, like men, is able to change her fluid mindset (*varṇa*) and turn from a follower into a leader. In the process, she becomes a role model in corporate "transformational leadership".

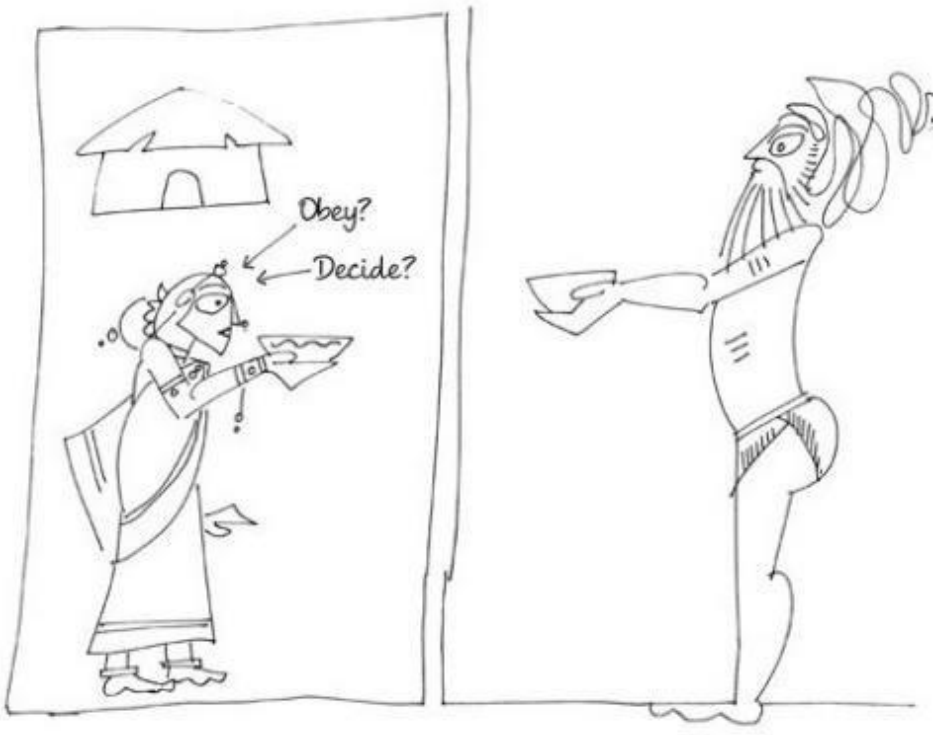


Figure 42 - Sītā's choice: obey or decide? (Pattanaik, 2013b: 111)

Lexicon for the 21st Century, London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 215-216. Online users who clearly take a Ur-approach towards the *Rāmāyaṇa*, often state that, because this episode is not mentioned in Vālmīki's version, it is a "myth". https://www.quora.com/Is-Lakshman-Rekha-a-myth-that-is-not-mentioned-in-the-Valmiki-Ramayana (accessed on 15/6/2024); https://www.reddit.com/r/politicalhinduism/comments/pnzv54/did_you_know_this_entire_scene_of_lakshman_rekha/ (15/6/2024)

Science and technology are also depicted as ancient Indian phenomena. I have already shown in the second chapter how a similar strategy is often resorted to by Malhotra. These two fields constitute the main topics in the descriptions of *asura* cities in Neelakantan's (2012) novel, with the author using a hyperbolised discourse that capitalises on the discovery of advanced (for their times) sanitation and storage systems in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro (Khan, 2014). During colonial times, science and technology were crucial for the development of the discourse about the cultural superiority of the colonisers over the colonised. In postcolonial times, several decolonial discourses have tried to deconstruct colonial ones by valuing traditional, local science and technology or by conflating them with Western knowledge. In the Indian case, Hindu nationalistic discourses are the main ones which have been concerned with validating ancient Sanskritic legacy (sometimes called "Vedic sciences") as akin to modern Western science (Nanda, 2003; Subramaniam, 2019: 61-62; Prakash, 1999). Recent titles associated with Vedic sciences include: Alok Kumar's *Sciences of the Ancient Hindus: Unlocking Nature in the Pursuit of Salvation* (2014), Choudur Satyanarayana Moorthy's *Gleanings from Rig Veda: When Science was Religion* (2014), Vanamali's *The Science of the Rishis: The Spiritual and Material Discoveries of the Ancient Sages of India* (2015), Suresh Soni's *India's Glorious Scientific Tradition: Rediscover the Rich Scientific Heritage of India* (2016), T Muralidharan's *The Scientific Basis of Hinduism* (2017), Alok Kumar's *Ancient Hindu Science* (2019), Ganesh Swaminathan's *From the Beginning of Time: Modern Science and the Puranic Universe* (2020), Madhavendra Puri Das's *The Big Bang and The Sages: Modern Science Catches Up With The Ancient Purāṇas* (2020), Siddhart Chhabra and Devin O'Rourke's *Heretic Science: Ancient Sages Knew The Age of The Big Bang Within 0.1% of The Modern Value* (2020), and Manoj Jain's *Hinduism in a New Light Book: Illuminating the Scientific Approach to Understand the World's Oldest Religion* (2023).

In the preface to *Vanara: The Legend of Bali, Sugreeva and Tara*, Neelakantan (2018) writes that one of the approaches used in modern mythological fiction consists of the addition of fantasy elements in order to project the patriotic representation of an advanced past. Neelakantan mentions divine weapons (*astras*) becoming nuclear missiles and flying chariots becoming fighter jets. According to him, these depictions may instil pride in Indian readers and cover their insecurity complex caused by two

hundred years (roughly the period of de fact British power in India) of lost scientific progresses. While Neelakantan's words sounds like a critique of such strategies associated with Hindu nationalism, which the author tends to criticise explicitly, the author paradoxically follows this tendency, given that he tries to demythologise the epics and to explain the fantastic elements through plausible scientific and technological principles. One could imagine, as some contemporary retellers and modern fringe theories often do, that, despite the inexistence of archaeological evidence, fantastic descriptions in ancient stories refer to scientific and technological innovations that were lost and "reinvented" in the West in modern times. The main narrative strategies related to this issue are the appraisal of traditional Indian sciences and, more commonly, the incorporation of contemporary scientific theories and technologies into the narrative, which is supposed to take place in an ancient setting.

Neelakantan (2012) states that *āyurveda*,[284] a *vānara* medical system which relies on plants instead of on chemical powders, is "legendary" (386). In chapter 38 of *War of Lanka*, Tripathi (2022) also makes the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* discuss this medicinal system, which is said to have "an answer to everything". The appraisal of traditional systems is also common in the West, where, due to the expansion of *New Age* religions and the increasing mistrust of conventional medicine, traditional healing systems, mostly the Indian and Chinese, have turned into popular alternatives to artificial chemical compounds, which are in some popular discourses regarded as worse than natural ones (Tan, 2001: 283).[285]

The tendency to conflate contemporary science with traditional Indian knowledge has also been common in scholarly circles. Some popular works have analysed the epistemological similarities between scientific discourses and ancient Eastern cosmologies. However, stating that there are epistemological or ontological similarities in some ideas is not akin to saying that two phenomena are similar. Even in science, when something new is discovered about some concept, that concept may be

[284] KHARE, C. P., and KATIYAR, Chandra Kant (2012). *The Modern Ayurveda: Milestones Beyond the Classical Age,* Boca Raton: CRC Press; MUKHARJI, Projit Bihari (2016). *Doctoring Traditions: Ayurveda, Small Technologies and Braided Sciences*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; KHARE, C. P. (ed.) (2020). *Evidence-Based Ayurveda: Defining a New Scientific Path*, London: Routledge.

[285] See also FURNHAM, Adrian, and FOREY, Julie (1994). "The Attitudes, Behaviors and Beliefs of Patients of Conventional vs. Complementary (Alternative) Medicine" *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 50, Nº. 3, pp. 458-469; MORREIM, E. Haavi (2003). "A Dose of Our Own Medicine: Alternative Medicine, Conventional Medicine, and the Standards of Science" *Journal of Law, Medicine and Ethics,* Vol. 31, pp. 222-235. Besides *āyurveda*, one often sees similar discourses applied to *yoga*, sometimes mixed with the term "meditation", and *vāstuśāstra*, "geomancy", "the science (*śāstra*) of buildings (*vāstu*)".

regarded as changing to something entirely new. This was Kuhn's (2012 [1962]) idea and it makes one think how careful one has to be when comparing two phenomena and posing either epistemological or ontological similarities. While the edifice that supports a conclusion matters to modern science as much as the conclusion itself, comparisons between modern science and ancient mythologies have mostly focused on conclusions. An influential example of this tendency is the book *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*,[286] written by theoretical physicist Fritjof's Capra (1975). This work, which features a chapter on Hinduism, postulates that the monistic ideas of Brahman and Tao are comparable to the modern scientific theory of the Big Bang, given that all three ideas posit that everything that now exists stems from the same undivided source. Astrophysicist B. V. Sreekantan and physicist Sirsir Roy's (2020) more recent *Understanding Space, Time and Causality: Modern Physics and Ancient Indian Traditions* features similar comparisons. The fact that the concept of Big Bang shares structural similarities with the concepts of Brahman and Tao means neither that the epistemological causes and effects of these concepts are interchangeable nor that they are ontologically similar.[287]

Some modern scientific theories mentioned in contemporary English-language retellings include:

1) Evolutionism: Pattanaik (2013a) comments that the inclusion of monkeys (*vānaras*) and bears (*bhallūkas*) in the narrative may be regarded as an early understanding of evolutionism and that some people (the author does not specify who) have proposed that these species may be the "missing link" (188). As usual, Pattanaik merely states this idea without committing himself to it. However, given the reception of Darwinism in India (see note 259), this discussion seems understandable. Makhan Lal Sen (1941), who translated Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* into English, asked in the introduction of his translation: "wo are the Vanaras? Some say they are anthropoid apes: while others, more scientific, are of opinion that they are Darwin's missing link" (viii).

[286] *Tao* is derived from the Chinese 道 *dào*, which, as a concept, has been as complex in Chinese traditions as *dharma* in Indian ones. CHAN Wing-Tsit (1963). *A Source Book on Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, especially chapter 7, titled "The Natural Way of Lao Tzu".

[287] See the following post from a Centre for Mindfulness in Scottsdale, which tries to prove that the experience of meditation is also akin to the Big Bang: https://www.stressbeaters.com/2019/07/30/how-is-mindfulness-meditation-related-to-the-big-bang-theory/ (accessed on 14/7/2022).

Contrary to Pattanaik, this author committed himself to this historicist interpretation, give that he stated that the Darwinian explanation was "more scientific".[288]

2) The *Big Bang:* Tripathi (2015) also mixes Indian mythology with the modern concept of the Big Bang. He writes that the universe was born when the *Ekam*, Sanskrit for "one", "split into many in a great big bang, thus activating the cycle of creation" (35). The fact that Tripathi uses a Sanskrit term (*ekam*), which is also the name of the exclusivist god of the *asuras*, tries to relate Indian and Western epistemologies through the medium of language, with the translation helping the discursive translation of *ekam*, which in this case seems to point more to the concept of *Brahman* than to the Abrahamic god, as a modern "scientific" concept;

3) The last Ice Age: In a later passage, Tripathi makes his characters comment on the last glacial age, which ended about 12.000 years ago.[289] The Ice Age has produced fuel to several modern fringe theories related to advanced ancient civilisations,[290] so it is little wonder that Tripathi, who often tries to creatively legitimate India as an advanced ancient civilisation, includes it. Vasiṣṭha asks whether Rāma and his brothers know about the origins of the Vedic people of the current age (*yuga*). Śatrughna states that it is believed that "thousands of years ago" the land was covered in sheets of ice and the level of the sea was much lower. Vasiṣṭha states that Śatrughna is wrong in one detail. The Ice Age is a "fact", not a "belief". Here, Tripathi tries to show that the modern distinction between provable facts and unprovable beliefs was regarded as relevant in his fictional universe of 3400 BCE India. Śatrughna continues by stating that, during the Ice Age, there were two civilisations in India, the *Sangamtamil*[291] in the south, which partly encompassed Laṅkā, and *Dwarka* (Dvārakā) in the north, in modern-day Gujarat. After the Ice Age, both became submerged. However, the survivors, led by Manu, managed to escape to the north and began life

[288] This discussion is also held on the internet. See the following post on reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/india/comments/3vqlo8/does_anyone_else_think_that_the_vanars/ (accessed on 8/6/2024).

[289] WOODWARD, Jamie (2014). *The Ice Age: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[290] One may consider works with titles such as Charles H. Hapgood's *Maps of the ancient sea kings: evidence of advanced civilization in the ice age* (1966), James I. Nienhuis' *Ice Age Civilizations* (2006), Robert M. Schoch and Catherine Ulissey's *Forgotten Civilization: New Discoveries on the Solar-Induced Dark Age* (2012), Rose Flem-Ath and Rand Flem-Ath's *Atlantis beneath the Ice: The Fate of the Lost Continent* (2012), and Frank Joseph's *Atlantis and the Coming Ice Age: The Lost Civilization - A Mirror of Our World* (2015)

[291] *Sangam* refers to a period of Tamil history and literature from the first centuries before and after the modern era. The period takes its name from "academies" which are said to have been instituted in the region of Tamil Nadu during that time. The existence of such academies is not attested by archaeological or independent textual evidence. ZVELEBIL, Kamil Veith (1974). *A History of Indian Literature: Tamil Literature*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz; RAJESH, V. (2014). *Manuscripts, Memory and History: Classical Tamil Literature in Colonial India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

anew there (64). This story seems to be derived from three sources: ancient Sangam literature, according to which the ancient Tamil civilisation was submerged (Ramaswamy, 2003: 203);[292] archaeological excavations of shipwreck remains along the coast of modern day Dvārakā; and the *Matsya Purāṇa*, which tells the story of how Viṣṇu incarnation (*avatāra*) as a fish saved Manu, the first human being, from a deluge. With the help of ancient literature, mythology and archaeology, Tripathi tries to find the roots of Indian civilisation in an Indian Atlantis that "existed" prior to the Indus Valley civilisation. Even though none of this is established "fact", the idea that it is supported by the last glacial age makes it sound more factual. I should have more to say about how Tripathi arrived at the idea of these two civilisations later on in this chapter.

More than the abstract ideas of theoretical science, however, it is the physical evidence of concrete technology mentioned mainly by Neelakantan and Tripathi which sounds relevant in legitimatising the close relationship between past and present. While not necessarily anachronistic, some descriptions of technological creations resort to superlatives in order to augment the feats of ancient Indians. In Tripathi's (2015) novel, the author uses the term "massive" as a descriptive 32 times. Ayodhyā's wealth is symbolised by its "massive" canal of "celestial" dimensions (34). Mithilā has a university with a "massive" dome (254). Viśvāmitra seems to embody a previous reincarnation of Henry Ford when he is said to build a factory to "mass-produce" *somras,*[293] a beverage which confers strength and immortality (292). When comparing the feats of ancient India with those of ancient Egypt, which is widely known in popular culture for its ancient civilisation, particularly for building pyramids, Neelakantan (2012) focuses more on qualitative innovations rather than on quantitative ones. He states that, while the Egyptians were busy building great tombs to bury themselves, the

[292] See also RAO S. R. (1987). "Submerged city and shipwreck in Dwarka" *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology,* Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 252-254; GAUR, A. S., SUNDARESH, TRIPATI, Sila, GUDIGAR, P., VORA, K. H., and BANDODKER, S. N. (2001). "A Group of 20 Anchors from the Waters of Dwarka, on the Gujarat Coast, India" *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology,* Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 95-108; GAUR, A. S., SUNDARESH, and TRIPATI, Sila (2004). "An Ancient Harbour at Dwarka: Study Based on the Recent Underwater Explorations" *Current Science*, Vol. 86, No. 9, pp. 1256-1260.

[293] Divine drink described in the *Vedas* and in Zoroastrian texts. WASSON, R. Gordon (1971). "The Soma of the Rig Veda: What Was It"? *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 91, No. 2, pp. 169-187; FLATTERY, David Stophlet, and SCHWARTZ, Martin (1989). *Haoma and Harmaline: The Botanical Identity of the Indo-Iranian Sacred Hallucinogen "Soma" and its Legacy in Religion, Language and Middle Eastern Folklore*, Berkeley: University of California Press; WOHLBERG, Joseph (1990). "Haoma-Soma in the World of Ancient Greece" *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 333-342; HOUBEN, J. E. M. (2003). "The Soma-Haoma problem: Introductory overview and observations on the discussion" *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1. The word Tripathi has used*, somras*, seems to be an invention. It was likely inspired by the Sanskrit term *rasa*, which originally meant "liquid, fluid, sap" and now also means "taste, flavour, feeling".

"democratic council of the Asura kingdom" was busy laying roads, building hospitals, drainage systems and everything that was considered useful. This is another reference to the Indus Valley civilisation, often noted to have possessed such public facilities (Khan, 2014). According to the author's fiction, such progresses were interrupted when the *asuras* were invaded by the *devas* (21).

I now mention specific technological anachronisms which make Neelakantan and Tripathi's fiction sound remarkably similar to Malhotra's nonfiction. Neelakantan (2012), who acknowledges that mythological weapons are often compared to modern ones, calls such weapons "flamethrowers" (355). In Tripathi's (2015) novel, Viśvāmitra states that he wishes to conduct "a few scientific experiments" with the *astras*, described as "biological weapons (...) of mass incapacitation" (265-267). The description of the *astra* that Rāma unleashes to stop Rāvaṇa's attack in Mithilā sounds more like an atom bomb than a biological weapon. The use of nuclear power has been a relevant topic in Hindu nationalistic discourses[294] and, in particular, the nuclear tests commissioned by the BJP in 1998 have been claimed to symbolise a return to a Golden Age of Vedic missile power (Rajagopal, 2001: 280). With his fiction, Tripathi enhances this representation and pushes the Golden Age to an earlier time, one of Harappan missile power.

One of the most commonly described technological devices is Rāvaṇa's flying chariot (*puṣpakavimāna*), which Rāvaṇa uses to kidnap Sītā. According to Pattanaik (2013a), its existence may lead one to believe that ancient Indians knew about "aeronautics" (258). The author adds that artists have visualised the chariot in many ways, ranging from a chariot pulled by donkeys, horses or swans, to modern aeroplanes (*Ibid.*), and that long essays have been written on how it might have been fuelled (133).[295] In Tripathi's (2015) novel, the chariot is described as a conical shaft made of

[294] PERKOVICH, George (1999). *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation*, Berkeley: University of California Press; SARDESAI, D. R., and THOMAS, Raju G. C. (eds.) (2002). *Nuclear India in the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan; FREY, Karsten (2006). *India's Nuclear Bomb and National Security*, London: Routledge; DAS, Runa (2007). "Encountering Hindutva, Interrogating Religious Nationalism and (En)gendering a Hindu Patriarchy in India's Nuclear Policies" *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 370-393.

[295] See some contemporary online examples, most of which contain depictions of the flying device ranging from traditional to contemporary ones, in : https://airpowerasia.com/2020/08/27/vimana-the-ancient-indian-aerospace-craft-time-for-indigenisation/ (accessed on 8/6/2024); https://medium.com/@adeshbhatt/saubha-the-most-advanced-hi-tech-aircraft-viman-of-ancient-hindu-science-6884fd25c7a3 (accessed on 8/6/2024); https://medium.com/@miabaliga/indian-vedic-science-part-4-6cf954dfde77 (accessed on 8/6/2024) https://www.myindiamyglory.com/2021/09/20/pushpak-vimana-of-ramayana-era-5677-5577-bce-was-hot-air-balloon/ (accessed on 8/6/2024). One may also consider works with titles such as David Hatcher Childress' *Vimana: Aircraft of Ancient India & Atlantis* (1991) and *Vimana: Flying Machines of the Ancients* (2014), Maharishi Bharadwaaja's *Vymaanika Shaastra: Or Science of Aeronautics* (2017) Enrico Baccarini and Kavya Vaddadi's *Reverse Engineering Vedic Vimanas: New Light on Ancient Indian Heritage* (2018), Dri Kutuananda Nath's *Machines Von*

a “strange, unknown” metal. It has massive rotors that swing powerfully in a circular motion and many portholes covered with thick glass on its sides (237). This description resembles more a helicopter than a chariot. This “chariot” is depicted in the cover of Tripathi’s novel (Figure 11), in which one may see Rāma pointing an arrow in its direction. Here, the device resembles more the stereotypical idea of a flying saucer than a helicopter. Perhaps the intention is to depict Rāvaṇa as an “alien”, as in the cover of Tripathi’s *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* (Figure 27).

In Neelakantan’s (2012) retelling, the *asuras* are able to build a flying machine because they are deemed to be great architects who have achieved immense technological progress. Maya (Māyāsura), the greatest architect of the *asuras*, is said to be a “mad scientist” and his scientific achievements are mistaken for black magic by the Brahmins. The inclusion of the popular contemporary stock character of the “mad scientist” turns Neelakantan’s discourse into a globalised science fiction one. This representation also attempts to demythologise the epic by implying that ancient “magic” was a kind of technology which less advanced peoples were unable to understand. However, given the fact that the invasion of the *devas* is regarded as having destroyed technological progress, Mahābalī states that he does not know how much time will pass before man masters the sky again (464). In hindsight, Mahābalī sound like a prophet. In short, Neelakantan implies that Indians knew how to fly millennia ago, although their knowledge was lost and forgotten until machine-propelled flying was “reinvented” in the West. In Neelakantan’s novel, these technological marvels of the *asuras* are contrasted with those of less advanced aborigines, who are said to use only “bamboo arrows”. These arrows are “regarded as toys” by both the *asuras* and the *devas* (91). The representation that Neelakantan makes in relation to aborigines is similar to that of Orientalist scholars in relation to Indians. The *Self* is intellectually advanced and this quality allows it to “grow” technologically. The *Other* remains in an intellectually childlike state, that being the reason why their technology is only made of “toys” (Murti, 2001: 18).

Tripathi also focuses on the scientific advances the Indians have made in medicine in both his nonfiction and fiction. The Sanskrit medical treatise *Suśrutasaṃhitā* (*Suśruta’s Compendium*), an ancient text about medicine written in the first centuries

Aryans: How technology went to Germany from India (2020), and contemporary science fiction novels such as Mainak Dhar’s *Vimana: When the gods fly in where will you hide?* (2018), and Vadhan’s *The Vimana Transcripts* (2021).

BCE or CE, is noted for including valuable information about medicine and surgery in ancient India.[296] The compendium includes nose surgeries.[297] While such nonfiction medical procedures are interesting and relevant, their inclusion in nonfiction and fiction discourses related to mythological narratives may lead to confusion between what was known and done in *Suśruta's* time and the ahistorical time of mythology, which can be imagined as having happened much earlier than the time of the original text, which is itself uncertain. Possibly for this reason, Pattanaik (2013a) claims that, after Śūrpaṇakhā has her nose cut by Lakṣmaṇa, Rāvaṇa's surgeons have it "repaired" (282). This description implies that Rāvaṇa's surgeons knew about modern rhinoplasty. Tripathi (2017b) also states that the surgery performed in the compendium was successful and that modern rhinoplasty follows a variation of the same process (51). In his novel, Tripathi (2015) states that painful "surgeries" are needed to remove the scars from Śūrpaṇakhā's face (309). He also describes other modern surgical procedures. When Rāma is born, Kauśalyā refuses that surgeons perform a C-section on her (17). The examples of rhinoplasty and C-sections mirror a speech Modi gave during the inauguration of a hospital in Mumbai in 2014. Modi stated that *Karṇa*, a character from the *Mahābhārata* who was born outside his mother's womb, proves that genetic science existed at the time of the epic. He also stated that Gāṇeśa proves that plastic surgeons could put an elephant's head in a human body (quoted in Subramaniam, 2019: 5-6). These examples show that anachronisms can also be used in political discourses, which are supposed to be more realistic than literature.[298]

The strategy of merging different temporal frames in Neelakantan and Tripathi's retellings tends to occur as much between different pasts as between past and present. This narrative technique reinforces the idea of historical continuity. Rajagopalachari (1968), for instance, stated that the "original" Hindu epics were not original at all, given

[296] BHISHAGRATNA, Kaviraj (1907). *An English translation of the Sushruta Samhita based on original Sanskrit text*, 3 Vols., Calcutta: Kaviraj Bishagratna.

[297] SORTA-BILAJAC, Iva, and MUZUR, Amir (2007). "The Nose Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Sushruta's Legacy" *Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery*, Vol. 137, pp. 707-710; CHAMPANERIA, Manish C., WORKMAN, Adrienne D., and GUPTA, Subhas C. (2014). "Sushruta: Father of Plastic Surgery" *Annals of Plastic Surgery,* Vol. 73, No. 1, pp. 2-7.

[298] See also https://theprint.in/science/vedic-plastic-surgery-to-test-tube-karna-non-science-claims-flowed-from-modi-downwards/174757/ (accessed on 15/7/2022); https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/28/indian-prime-minister-genetic-science-existed-ancient-times (accessed on 15/7/2022); https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/comment-the-two-faces-of-mr-modi/article6553304.ece (accessed on 15/7/2022). While most of the newspaper articles express astonishment towards Modi claims, others support them. See https://qz.com/india/288867/modi-was-half-right-worlds-first-plastic-surgeon-may-well-have-been-indian-but-he-wasnt-shiva/ (accessed 15/7/2022), which, by reminding the reader of Suśruta and his *Compendium*, informs the reader that Modi was "half-right".

that Vālmīki built on the "inherited bricks of national memory" prior to his time (9), a statement which implies that, while Vālmīki is nowadays regarded as ancient, he was just a cultural mediator of something which was even more ancient. While this is as clear for the putative author Vālmīki as for any author, given that nobody writes in a cultural vacuum, Rajagopalachari's choice of words may be regarded as problematic, given that it is less clear that Vālmīki had the same idea of nation that Rajagopalachari had. Figure 43 shows another such approximation between different pasts. It shows the cover of Tripathi's (2020) pseudohistorical novel, here with the alternative title *Suheldev & The Battle of Bahraich*. Suheldev is not a mythical character like the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Although his historical existence is disputed, he is believed to have lived in the 11th century CE, when the Muslims had already arrived in India. Despite the differences between the story of Suheldev and that of the *Rāmāyaṇa,* they are assimilated both in textual and visual terms. Both narratives deal with battles against what are imagined as foreigners and their subsequent expulsion. In the *Rāmāyaṇa,* the two sides are regarded as having disappeared from collective memory and as having become abstract *devas/ṛṣis* and *asuras/rākṣasas* or, as happens in Neelakantan and Tripathi's novels, they are metaphorically reconverted into groups with disputed (the Aryans and Dravidians) or certain (the Muslims and the British) existence. In *Suheldev*, natives and foreigners constitute clearer groups: the Hindus from Maharashtra and, using two terms which Tripathi has often used to describe them in his nonfiction, the barbaric hordes of Turkic-Mongol invaders who formed the Ghaznavid kingdom.

This narrative comparison is supported by a visual one. The cover of *Suheldev* is aesthetically similar to those of the *Ram Chandra* series (Figures 11, 27, 28 and 31). Like Rāma and Sītā, Suheldev is depicted as a fierce hypermasculine character ready to attack and defeat the foreigners. In this regard, Suheldev is also comparable to Tripathi's Rāvaṇa. Nevertheless, other visual clues distinguish him from the *rākṣasa*. While Rāvaṇa is depicted as a foreign "Viking", Suheldev is depicted as a Hindu. His horse has a trident (*triśūla*), one of Śiva's symbols (the god Tripathi venerates), drawn on his head. The trident can also be seen in the flags of Suheldev's army on the background.

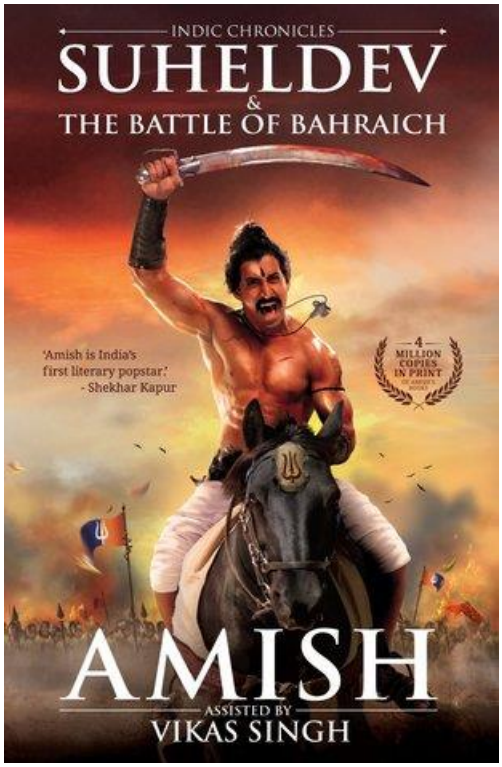


Figure 43 - Cover of Tripathi's (2020) *Legend of Suheldev: King Who Saved India*

The atmosphere of the cover of this book, such as the misty sky in gradated shades of red and orange, is also mirrored in the covers of Tripathi's retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In their narrative and visual strategies, Tripathi's fiction and nonfiction work towards the same goal. Whether the author discusses mythology, pseudohistory, legitimate history or contemporary India, there are thematic and pictorial symbols tying up these periods into a greater ontological whole.

Tripathi's *Suheldev* is comparable to the Marathi king Shivaji Bhonsale I (-1680), a historical figure (Laine, 2003) who is much more heavily mythologised by Hindu nationalistic discourses as a fierce defender of Hinduism against Muslim invaders than Suheldev, even though, as Truschke (2021: c. 6; see also Gier, 2014: 15-18) shows, Shivaji did not describe him and his group and his enemies along religious lines, as contemporary Hindu nationalists tend to do.[299] The attempt to textually or visually identify different mythical, pseudohistorical and historical periods also occurs in the present and with living figures. A picture (Figure 44) featured in several websites compare Indian prime-minister Modi with the historical Shivaji. The visual comparison

[299] Shivaji is the subject of several popular fictional works, including a volume of *Amar Chitra Katha* comics. PAI, Anant (ed.) (1971). *Shivaji*, Mumbai: India Book House.

is achieved through the setting. Shivaji and Modi descend the stairs. Their postures mirror each other. They also wear similar clothes, use similar accessories, and have similar beards and moustaches. A similar rendition from a post in the Facebook page *Narendra Modi Club* notes: "Waw Modi ji looks like Sivaji Maharaj".[300] This description reveals that this association is positive and, as a result, Modi is regarded as a great defender of Hinduism, possibly against the threat of Islam.[301]



Figure 44 - Narendra Modi as Shivaji Bhonsale I[302]

Shivaji has grown into a myth. Despite the difference in style, Shivaji's painting feels as staged and unreal as any of the covers of Tripathi's novels. Even though he is alone, the character is represented as heroic. The unnaturalistic colour of the sky, in several versions a gradation of yellows and oranges, makes the painting feel as if it is set in a fantasy world. The fact that Modi is compared to him turns Modi into a modern myth, a heroic man who is able to change the course of history even when doing something as trivial as descending the stairs. One could also compare Tripathi's

[300] https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=178009083729103&id=104829844380361 (accessed on 15/7/2022).

[301] See https://english.gnsnews.co.in/congress-angry-over-pm-modis-comparison-with-chhatrapati-shivaji-maharaj-case-registered/ (accessed on 15/7/2022), a news article about the Congress' indignation towards a similar textual comparison between these figures.

[302] https://twitter.com/DILIPKUMAR9990/status/1285550993690615810 (accessed on 15/7/2022).

representation of Suheldev and Modi's comparison with Shivaji with L. K. Advani's *Rāma Ratha Yātrā* (described in the first chapter), when a living politician and a modern car were adorned with the clothes and accessories of mythic heroes and chariots of olden days. Whatever one's perspective towards *itihāsa* and the physical reality of mythology may be, there seems to be little doubt that mythology can indeed elicit a very affective response and move people to real physical actions.

Tripathi also imaginatively advocates that the ancient civilisations of the Indus Valley civilisation were the same as the Vedic one, something which is not factually certain and is the subject of great controversy (Bryant, 2001: c. 9). In Tripathi's case, the merging is not supposed to be symbolic, as in the case of the merging of the *Rāmāyaṇa* universe and Medieval India. It is supposed to be a historical fact, even if it must be aided by symbolic representations.



Figure 45 - Rāma's name in the Indus Valley script according to Tripathi (2015)

There is an image of a golden coin (Figure 45) in the spine of Tripathi's (2015) novel. This is what the author supposes could be Rāma's name written in the undeciphered Indus Valley script. According to a Facebook post by the author, [303] the three symbols mean *prince*, *fish* (wish would stand for the god Viṣṇu and his avatar as Matsya), and *sun*, given that Rāma belonged to the solar dynasty (*Sūryavaṃśa*).

In "Science validates Vedic History",[304] an article Tripathi published in *India Today*, the author claims that a group of Indian scholars have "deciphered" the Indus Valley script through the analysis of an artefact called the *Nāga stone*, which the author equates with the Rosetta stone, the artefact which famously allowed Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832) to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs. The scientists in Tripathi's article are said to have concluded that the Indus Valley script was used to

[303] https://m.facebook.com/101533859936997/photos/a.120787158011667/790832031007173/?type=3&p=49 (accessed on 9/9/2021).

[304] https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/nation/story/20131223-indus-valley-script-vedic-history-naga-stone-1144609-1999-11-30 (accessed on 9/9/2021).

represent Sanskrit and not a Dravidian language, contrary to what the Aryan Invasion Theory would predict. This finding reveals that the Harappans and the Indo-Europeans were one and the same people. According to Tripathi, it also proves a theory devised by British author Graham Hancock (1950-), who stated that the ancient Indian Vedic Civilisation descended from a more ancient Tamil and Gujarati civilisations. The article is illustrated by an image of the *Nāga stone* (Figure 46).

This discovery would be revealing news for any archaeologist or linguist working on this field. The problem is that the first paragraph of the article and a disclaimer at the end state that this is a fictional piece. However, the text is written as a news article reporting on archaeological/philological discoveries. There are neither linear actions, dialogues nor character arcs. As in similar articles, there is just a description of the finding, some quotes from an interview with the involved "archaeologist", and some final comments by the chronicler. It seems likely that most readers would not pay attention to the disclaimers. They would probably pay attention to the headline, the picture and possibly the thought-provoking information presented in the article. Furthermore, there is a wealth of webpages, posts in social networks and *Youtube* videos spreading similar information and announcing it as factual. In fact, Tripathi's article appears in another webpage, *Sanskriti Magazine*, which is described as "Sanskriti digital platforms are an effort to raise awareness and educate about Indian Heritage, Achievements, Practices and Values".[305] The difference is that, in this case, there is no disclaimer that this is a fictional piece.[306] In sum, this article reveals how storytelling and scientific discourses may work closely to "create" reality.

I tried to trace the origin of the picture in Tripathi's article (Figure 46), but I could not find its ultimate source. It clearly shows Rāma, Sītā, Lakṣmaṇa and Hanumān in the common depiction of Indian calendar art, such as in the cover of Rajagopalachari's retelling (Picture 4), albeit here made to look like an archaeological seal of the Indus Valley civilisation, such as the already mentioned *Proto-Śiva* or *Paśupati* seal (Figure 47).[307] The same image appears in *Sanskriti Magazine*'s article titled "Debunking the myth of Aryan Invasion Theory", in which it is labelled as "Naga Stone with 3

[305] https://www.sanskritimagazine.com/ (accessed on 15/6/2024).
[306] https://www.sanskritimagazine.com/scientific-validation-of-vedic-history/ (accessed on 8/6/2024).
[307] See https://www.quora.com/Where-was-the-Rama-Lakshmana-Sita-and-Hanuman-seal-excavated-from-How-old-is-it-Is-there-some-information-about-it (accessed on 8/6/2024), in which a user (Katakam Manas Teja) discusses this anachronism.

languages, of which Brahmi has helped decipher the Indus Valley Script". This article makes no reference to Tripathi whatsoever.[308]

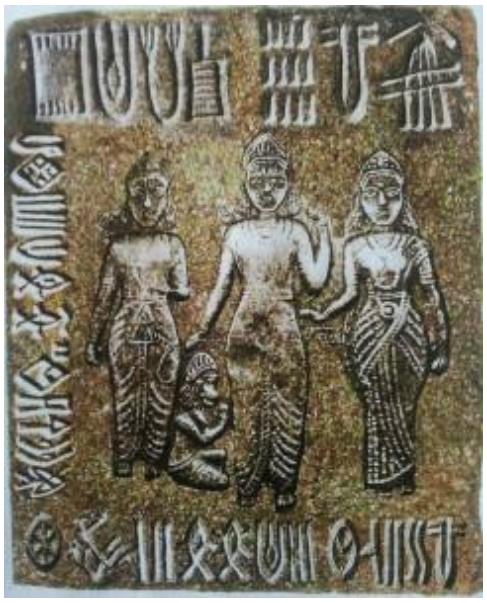


Figure 46 - The fictional *Nāga stone*[309]



Figure 47 - The real *Paśupati* seal[310]

In this article, one may realise the origin of the story of the last Ice Age that Tripathi (2015) mentions in the conversation between Vasiṣṭha and Rāma's brothers. Furthermore, in an answer to a reader's question posted on Facebook, Tripathi, who begins by stating that he merely writes fiction, makes a reference to "western historians like Graham Hancock" and mentions the "two ancient, civilisations which existed in the area of modern Tamil Nadu and Gujarat", therefore making the association between these texts clearer.[311] Graham Hancock is a British best-selling author famous for his pseudoscientific theories involving ancient civilisations. He is often criticised or at best ignored by the scientific community.[312] In Hancock's (1996) best-known work, *Fingerprints of the Gods*, which was publicised with the tag-line "the evidence of earth's lost civilization", the author analyses several monuments from distant and

[308] https://www.sanskritimagazine.com/debunking-the-aryan-invasion-theory/ (accessed on 8/6/2024).
[309] https://www.sanskritimagazine.com/debunking-the-aryan-invasion-theory/ (accessed on 8/6/2024).
[310] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shiva_Pashupati.jpg (accessed on 8/6/2024). See also Possehl (2002: 59).
[311] https://www.facebook.com/authoramish/photos/admin-fan-query-of-the-week-this-one-comes-from-reader-rohan-dattaamishs-answer-/498561806900865/?_rdr (accessed on 8/6/2024).
[312] https://www.dailysciencejournal.com/graham-hancock/ (accessed on 15/7/2022); https://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/defant-analysis-of-hancock-claims-in-magicians-of-the-gods/ (accessed on 15/7/2022); https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/no-there-wasnt-an-advanced-civilization-12-000-years-ago/ (accessed on 15/7/2022).

unrelated ancient civilisations in order to prove that they stemmed from the same unidentified advanced civilisation. This is an archaeological approach which could be compared to Joseph Campbell's psychological approach to mythology, the one Pattanaik also adopts. Tripathi does not quote Hancock directly. However, he probably takes this theory from parts three and four of Hancock's (2003) *Underworld: The Mysterious of Civilization*, in which the author deals with India and mentions the archaeological findings in Dwarka and the ancient Tamil Sangam texts which refer to ancient floods.[313] Even though the fictional scholars who found the *Nāga stone* are Indians, there is a clear attempt to find justification and support from an English-speaking non-Indian author and from comparisons with phenomena that are important for Western history and culture (the *Rosetta Stone*). In this case, the chosen Western scholar is one who is not respected in academia, although he has acquired cult status among enthusiasts of fringe science. In this case, however, the accepted scientific validity of what is said is less important than the content of the discourse itself. At the same time that Tripathi tries to fictionally prove his theories through the authority of a disputable British author, he tries to validate his arguments by mixing them with less disputable theories like the big bang or the ice age, which are legitimated as "facts".

Tripathi concludes his article by stating that the "decipherment" of the Indus Valley Script reveals India's true past and that, for this reason, the history books that teach about a radical division between Aryan and Dravidian civilisations must be updated. The author is clearly unsatisfied with how the Indian education system teaches Indian history to young citizens. As I have said in the second chapter, even though Tripathi clearly defines Indian civilisation as a mythology-loving and not a history-centric culture, he argues in favour of teaching Indian children about the great historical feats of precolonial India as well as the historical crimes perpetrated in India by Muslims and by the British.[314] In this case, fictional arguments are made to reveal the

[313] In order to support his ideas, Hancock often quotes David Frawley (1950-), one of the best-known Western Hindu nationalists. An article on Hancock's book published by the *The Guardian* states that, despite the fact that the author has been criticised, the findings in Dwarka may prove that the "lunatic was right all along". https://www.theguardian.com/education/2002/feb/06/artsandhumanities.highereducation (accessed on 15/7/2022).

[314] Guichard (2010) shows how Hindu nationalists have (re)constructed the concept of Indian history in order to advance their ideological goals. This is also the main theme of "Re-Visioning Indian History: Internet Hinduism", the eight chapter of Kurien's (2007) work. See also BHATTACHARYA, Neeladri (2009). "Teaching History in Schools: the Politics of Textbooks in India" *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 67, pp. 99-110; THAPAR, Romila (2009). "The History Debate and School Textbooks in India: a Personal Memoir" *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 67, pp. 87-98; RAZA, Danish (2014). "Saffronising textbooks: Where myth and dogma replace history" *Hindustan Times*, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/saffronising-textbooks-where-myth-and-dogma-replace-history/story-CauM4dmmsPGrjZ3APAvNxO.html (accessed on 22/9/2021).

"true" past and to provide an excuse to change history books. Such conclusions reveal that Tripathi's and Hindu nationalistic "scientific" ideas are neither bumped into by chance nor made through deduction and testing. They are concocted beforehand to fulfil sociopolitical agendas. The issue regarding the *Nāga stone* and the Indus Valley script conforms to an idea enunciated by van der Veer (1994), according to which nationalistic thought requires that archaeology, philology and history deliver facts to prove that the imagined nation exists in and beyond history (137).

When focusing on the topic of Indian history and education, Tripathi (2017b) mixes ideas of time and space. He states that reducing Vedic studies to a "right-wing project" is an affront to India's past, which belongs to everyone in the subcontinent (151). The author is clearly right, given that history and ideally every field of human knowledge should look at its object as a whole and not select only the parts which are more convenient. The real issue, however, lies in how history and other fields of human knowledge are approached, given that Tripathi's hypotheses, which are common to Hindu nationalistic discourses, are supported by fictional stories and not by cogent evidence. As Tripathi's article and the answer to the reader's question on *Facebook* show, Tripathi is usually careful to state that he merely writes fiction. However, as *Sanskriti Magazine's* reproduction of Tripathi's fictional piece and the *Youtube* comments to Tripathi's documentary series show, the threshold between reality and fiction is often blurred in ways that do not seem to concern Tripathi as much as the way history is taught in Indian schools.

Just as Tripathi argues that, to his mind, non-Hindu lower castes are Hindu, here he argues that the historical theories that he endorses are not the legacy of a specific group in which he happens to be included but of a larger community associated with space. In order to straddle the cultural differences between such groups, Tripathi (2017b) focuses in his nonfiction on "natural" similarities by arguing that every Indian has some proportion of Ancestral-North-Indian (ANI) and Ancestral-South-Indian (ASI) genetic material, despite differences in religion, language, caste and even national boundaries (that is, Pakistan and Bangladesh) (152). Even though the author does not quote it, his main inspiration is the paper on genetics "Reconstructing Indian population history" (Reich, Thangaraj, Patterson, Price and Singh, 2009), which introduced the terms that Tripathi uses. The main conclusion of these authors is that ANI is genetically close to Middle Easterners, Central Asians, and Europeans, while the ASI "is as distinct from ANI and East Asians as they are from each other" (489), which does not sound as

homogeneous as Tripathi's conclusion. The authors also say that ANI is higher in upper-caste and Indo-European speakers and that the only place with ASI-only ancestry is the Andaman archipelago (*Ibid.*). In short, while Tripathi's assertion does not go against this article, which indeed states that ANI and ASI tend to be mixed to varying degrees in the subcontinent, it presents only an ideologically convenient part of the results.

In his novel, Tripathi (2015) provides a similar argument about the "genetic" unity of India through Hancock's theory. He writes that, even though some groups have tried to see themselves as the sole direct descendants of Dvārakā, the truth is that, given the intermingling among different tribes across India, everybody could claim descent from the *Sangamtamil* and Dvārakā, which in the author's fiction act as stand-ins for the ASI and ANI, respectively. Sītā concludes that the pure descendants of both civilisations have disappeared and that what has remained is their common descendants, that is, the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and, by extension, the writers and readers of its contemporary retellings. Sītā concludes that this argument is "irrefutable" (323-324), yet another assertion that this story is a "fact" and not a "theory". In the end, Tripathi's goal in writing Rāma's name in the Indus Valley script launches discussions on genetics, history, archaeology, culture, religion and nation, given that it makes Rāma seem more ancient than he probably is and makes the Indus Valley script seem more recent than what it is believed to be. In the process, through his fiction and nonfiction, Tripathi skilfully constructs a nationalistic idea of ontological unity.

In his book chapter "Religion and Asia's middle classes", anthropologist Daromir Rudnyckyj (2014) presents a case study regarding contemporary Islam in Indonesia. The author writes about entrepreneur Ary Ginanjar (1965-) and his program *Emotional and Spiritual Quotient*, which promotes Muhammad, the final Muslim prophet, as a precursor of modern business leadership, the Five Pillars of Islam as conducive to modern capitalism and the *Quran* as predating Western scientific discoveries. These examples are similar to some I have analysed in relation to Hinduism. This shows that such neoliberal and pseudoscientific discourses are not unique to India and/or Hindu nationalism. They are part of a web of middle-class religiosity in contemporary Asia and, in more general terms, of contemporary neoliberalist societies, new spiritualities and nativistic right-wing discourses, who understandably wish to

align their worldviews with what is globally valued nowadays, that is, mainly material prosperity, science and technology.

The concept of history is not related only to time. In some contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, time is associated with physical spaces enclosed by boundaries. That is the reason why one can talk about the "history of India", as if, when crossing the boundary to a neighbouring country, one is entering a different national history. In the next chapter, I analyse the issue of space.

Chapter 6

Everything In Its Right Place: The Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Space

The concept of space is as relevant as that of time for some contemporary retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Different concepts of space either divide and ascribe locations to specific groups or unite groups into the greater space of the modern nation-state. In this last chapter, I analyse these ideas in detail.

6.1 The idea of space

One significant anachronism which is often resorted to by Tripathi (2015) and Neelakantan (2012) consists of the use of the name "India" to designate the place in which the action of the *Rāmāyaṇa* takes place. This tendency has been similar to attempts by Hindu nationalists, who have tried to project modern concepts of nation back into the past (Nandy, Trivedy, Mayaram, Tagnik, 1995: 63). Some scholars have stated that the fixation of the geographical "idea of India" was achieved by the British colonial administration at the same time that Hinduism came to be considered a pan-Indian religion (Sweetman, 2001: 215; Khilnani, 1997: 155). Before such conceptualisations, Indians were said to have no national consciousness, at least not in the sense they now have, something which could probably be said about any modern nation as per Anderson's influential concept of nations as "imagined communities". Even Nehru was said to have envisioned India as consisting of a network of states from Iran to Thailand (Banerjee, 2010: xxxv-xxxvi), an idea that would be difficult to sustain in contemporary times, when Iran, Thailand and countries in-between are considered to be geographically and culturally independent from India and from one another. *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843*, written by geographer Matthew Edney (1999), is the most comprehensive study about the colonial construction of India as a geographical entity. According to Edney, Indian nationalists adopted the British concept and projected it three millennia into the past, as if India's natural frontiers meant some kind of political unity (16). Following this discourse, Savarkar (1969 [1923]), the pioneer of Hindu nationalism, wrote about Hindu and Hindustan as "native terms" for the region between the Himalayas and the sea, and about India as "perfectly designed by the fingers of nature as a geographical unit" (32).

The idea of a natural map has been translated into cultural ideas. Metaphors between the female body and the map of India are particularly plentiful (Lal, 2023: 158-171). The study which analyses this comparison in the most detailed way is *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*, written by cultural historian Sumathi Ramaswamy (2009). The most influential representation of India is that of a motherly figure. The genderless land tends to be humanised and feminised as a mother who cares for its inhabitants. This representation permeates relevant national symbols, such as the Indian national anthem *Vande Mātaram*, Sanskrit for "I bow to the Mother".[315] In the process of the creation of this representation, both land and womanhood are "divinised". Figure 48 reveals the associations between the concepts of *land*, *femaleness* and *divinity*. It shows the main object of cult in the *Bhārata Mātā Mandir*, "Temple of Mother India", which is located in Varanasi and which was inaugurated by Gandhi in 1936 (Ramaswamy, 2009: 155-169). It consists of a map of "Undivided India".



Figure 48 - *Bhārata Mātā Mandir* (Temple of Mother India), Varanasi[316]

[315] BHATTACHARYA, Sabysachi (2003). *Vande Mataram: the Biography of a Song*, New Delhi: Penguin Books.

[316] https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bharat-mata-mandir-varanasi-1302175-2018-08-01 (accessed on 12/7/2022). Another picture of the map can be seen online at the official website of Varanasi. https://www.varanasi.org.in/bharat-mata-mandir-temple-Varanasi (accessed on 21/9/2021).

In other common depictions, including some found in the temple, the association between the land and the female figure is even more obvious. Figure 49 shows the cover of a Hindu nationalistic booklet titled *Mother's Call* (*mā̃ kā āhvāna*, written in Hindi above the drawing). This painting reveals a serene and benign motherly/goddess-like figure calling her "children" with open arms. The identification of her "children" with Indians is made through the map and the flag held by the figure.[317]



Figure 49 - *Mother's Call* (Brosius, 2005: 181)

Figure 50 shows a painting made during the campaign for the 2014 Indian general elections, when Modi was elected as prime-minister. Like figure 49, this picture shows the map of India painted in saffron colours, the colour which is associated with Hinduism. Here, though, Mother India is replaced by Modi. The look on Modi's face looks similarly serene and inviting. He makes an auspicious V sign, which stands for "victory" (in the elections? For India?), with his hand. In this picture, Modi stands as a symbol of the nation. In sum, the personalisation of maps and the mapping of human figures in India constitutes a cohesive discursive language with clear narrative and visual symbols. Through these symbols, "imagined communities" may turned into real ones and real people may be imbued with a mythical aura.

[317] In similar but more modern representations, Mother India holds an Indian flag. https://www.news247plus.com/news/4231/RSS-will-worship-039Mother-India039-on-Republic-Day (accessed on 12/7/2022).



Figure 50 - Narendra Modi as "Mother India"[318]

The concept of mapping India is also relevant for the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Neelakantan's (2012) novel features a fictional map of India in the beginning (Figure 51). Tripathi's official website shows two maps: one in the subsection "The World" of *Shiva Trilogy* and another in the subsection "The World" of *Ram Chandra Series* (Figure 52). Pattanaik's *Sita* does not include any map. However, the author uploaded what he has called a "Conceptual political map of India" (Figure 53) in his social media accounts. Divakaruni's and Kané's retellings and social media do not feature maps, another hint that these authors have been much less concerned with the "idea of India" as a nationalistic endeavour. The use of maps by the male retellers reflects the idea that discussions about the distinctiveness of the nation and its physical mapping are often interrelated, given that both endeavours may establish physical and intellectual borders between the nation and its *Others*.

[318] https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/modi-clamps-kashmir-india-loves-64986105 (accessed on 12/7/2022).

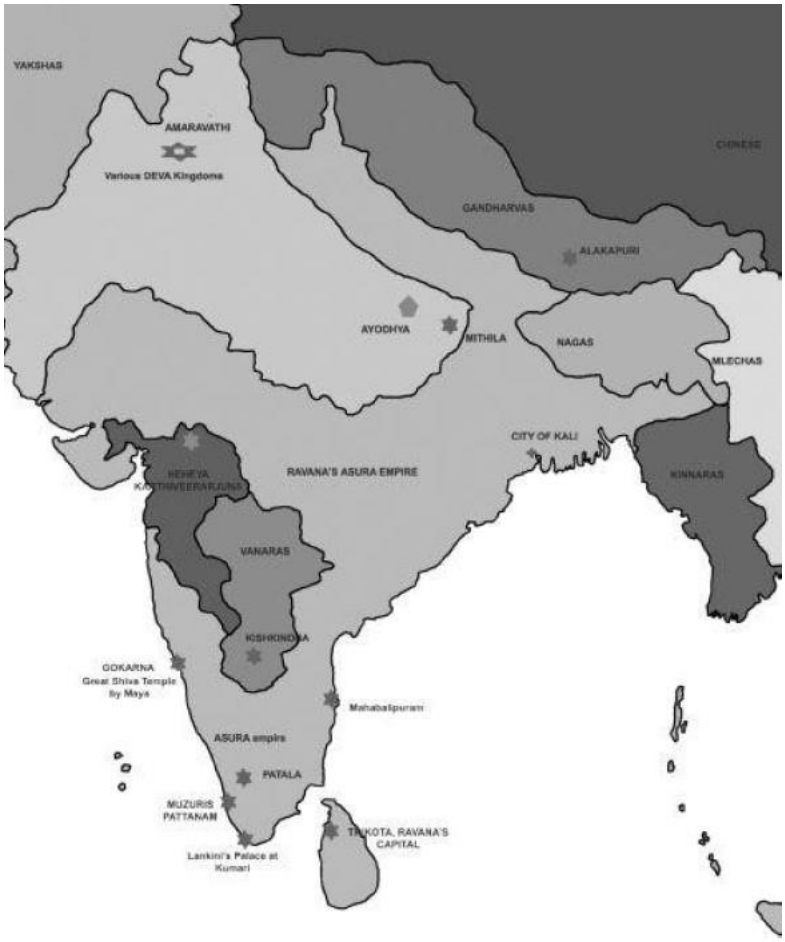


Figure 51 - Neelakantan's (2012: 6) Map of India

The heading of Neelakantan's map reads "Ancient India at the Peak of Ravana's Asura Empire". The fact that the *Asura* empire refers to the land occupied by Dravidian-speakers before the coming of the Aryans means that this empire "existed" before the concept of India as a nation. What represents the nation of India is divided into small territories. However, it is possible to make out the outermost borders of the country. What Neelakantan calls "various DEVA kingdoms" (northwest) corresponds to the states where Indo-European languages are spoken: Rajasthan, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and also Pakistan. Not all such states are included. Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Goa (see Figure 54), and Sri Lanka fall within Rāvaṇa's kingdom. This means that this map is supposed to represent the conquering process by the *devas*. There are two small kingdoms inside the *Asura* empire, the proto-communist state of Kārtavīryārjuna and the kingdom of the *vānaras*. The former is located in what would be Maharashtra. Kerala is known for its communist

political leanings.[319] As of 2023, this state is ruled by a Left coalition led by communists. The modern Communist Party of India consists of a merger of the Maharashtra Communist Party, disbanded in 1991, and the Kerala Communist Party. It is possible that Neelakantan, in his tendency to mix mythology with several historical discourses and contemporary sociopolitical preoccupations, tries to depict the near past. The inclusion of the kingdom of the *vānaras* in modern Karnataka, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh conforms with the idea that this is a liminal space between the *devas* and the *asuras*. According to the Aryan invasion/migration theory, which Neelakantan uses as a narrative frame, the *devas* would start conquering the northernmost territories of the *asura* kingdom. Nowadays, these states have Dravidian languages as their official statal language: Kannada in Karnataka and Telugu in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, which, just like the main southern Dravidian languages, Tamil and Malayalam, have lexical influence from Sanskrit to varying degrees (Krishnamurti, 2003: c. 10.2). The fact that the *vānaras* are described as semi-civilised half-breeds in Neelakantan's novel may possibly be explained by the fact that they occupy a liminal space between linguistic and cultural spheres.

One should also notice the kingdoms surrounding India-Pakistan. These are populated by non-human species other than the *asuras* and *vānaras.* The space occupied by the *yakṣas* corresponds to Afghanistan. The *gandharvas,* a class of mythological beings regarded as musicians of the gods, occupy part of Nepal and Bhutan. There is a Nepalese caste of professional musicians called *Gandarbhas*.[320] In other words, the *gandharvas* are a mythic group that likely inspired an existing one. In this novel, the existing group is transformed back into myth. *Nāgas* and *mlecchas* also appear. The former community occupies the northeastern states of India, including Nagaland, a placename which, as I have said previously, is etymologically unrelated to the Sanskrit term *nāga.* However, this group is described as Indian. In fact, in the map, the *nāga* kingdom straddles into what would be modern West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and also Bangladesh. The *mlecchas*, people who cannot speak Sanskrit, and the *kiṃnara*s, another mythical species of celestial musicians, are placed in modern Myanmar. There are many languages in Myanmar and the Indo-European ones constitute just a small

[319] FIC, Victor M. (1970). *Kerala, Yenan of India: Rise of Communist Power: 1937-1969*, Bombay: Nachiketa Publications Limited; NOSSITER, T. J. (1982). *Communism in Kerala: A Study in Political Adaptation*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

[320] SHAHU, Man Bahadur (2013). "Gandharva, Music and Globalization" *Democrat Professors' Association, Nepal: Journal of Academia*, Vol. 2, Nº. 2, pp. 73-79.

group . Burmese, the official language, is a Sino-Tibetan language and, as a result, structurally very different from Sanskrit. Finally, even though there are neither city nor people names in modern China, its borders are also delineated. This visual "silence" regarding China corresponds with the textual silence of China as an ancient surviving civilisation in the nonfiction nationalistic discourses about India's antiquity and continuity, which I analysed in the second chapter.

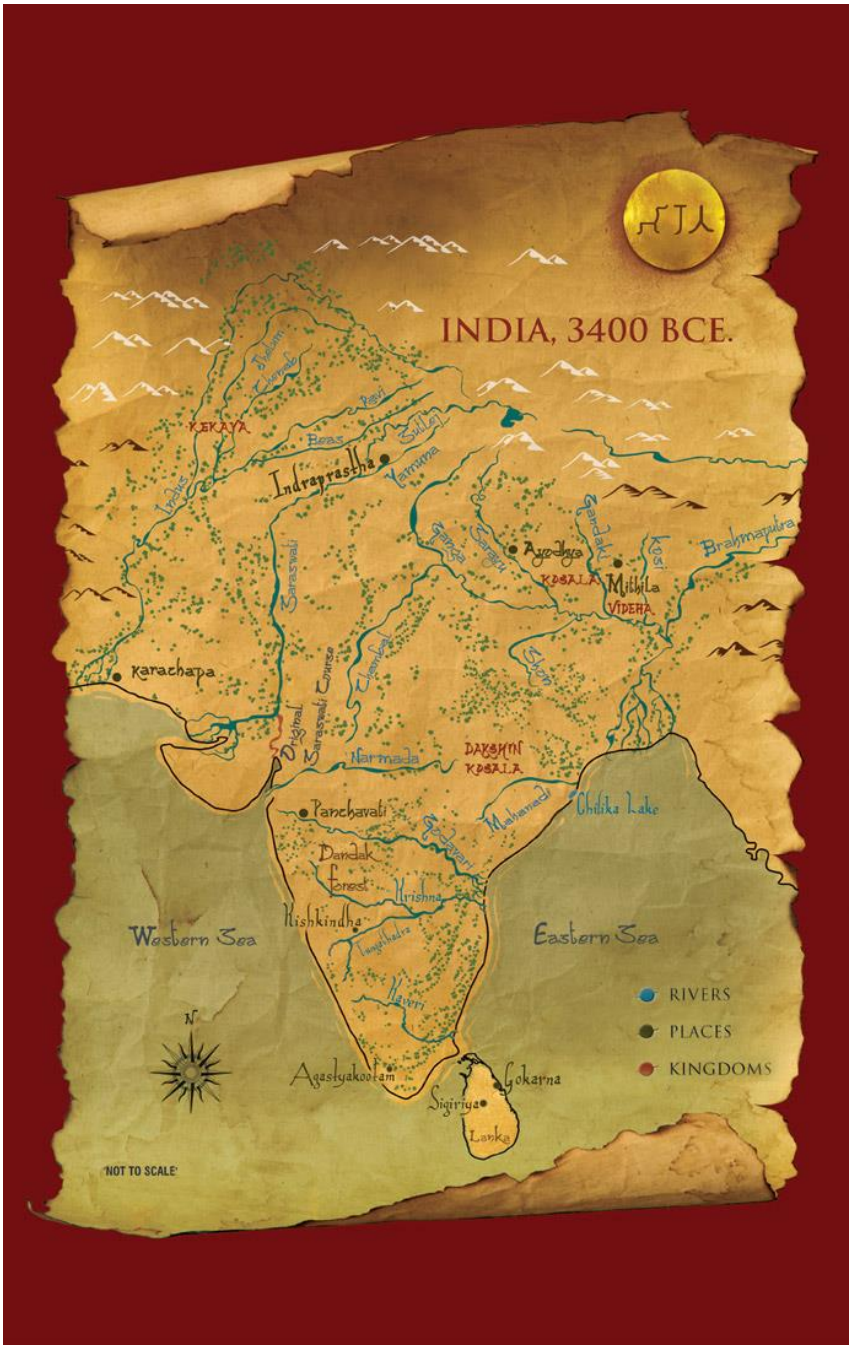


Figure 52 - Tripathi's map in *Ram Chandra Series*[321]

[321] https://www.authoramish.com/ram-chandra-series-the-world/ (accessed on 12/7/2022).

Tripathi's map introduces some innovations. Contrary to Neelakantan, Tripathi specifies the period the map represents: India, 3400 BCE. The date is topped by what I would interpret as an archaeological remain from Harappa, possibly the way the author imagines "India" would be written in the local writing system. This map has fewer names of kingdoms and places. However, it includes rivers. While in Neelakantan's map the borders between kingdoms are delineated, in Tripathi's they are inexistant. There are no borders between India-Pakistan-Bangladesh and the surrounding countries. However, the Indian subcontinent is dotted with small green points. Beyond those points, in what would be Afghanistan, China and Myanmar, there are only mountains. Tripathi disguises the differences within the Indian territory, which would include Pakistan and Bangladesh, and, just like Savarkar did, emphasises the natural differences between this territory and the surrounding ones. As the author often states in his nonfiction and as the caption "India, 3400 BCE" emphasises, India has existed for millennia as a "natural" entity. This idea of ancientness is emphasised by other elements, such as the Harappan coin and the map itself. Unlike Neelakantan's map, which looks like a modern digital one, Tripathi's looks handwritten. Besides, it is inscribed in what looks like a derelict parchment scroll. This is probably supposed to mean that this map was made in the distant past and that it was unearthed in a library or archaeological excavation like the fictional *Nāga stone*.

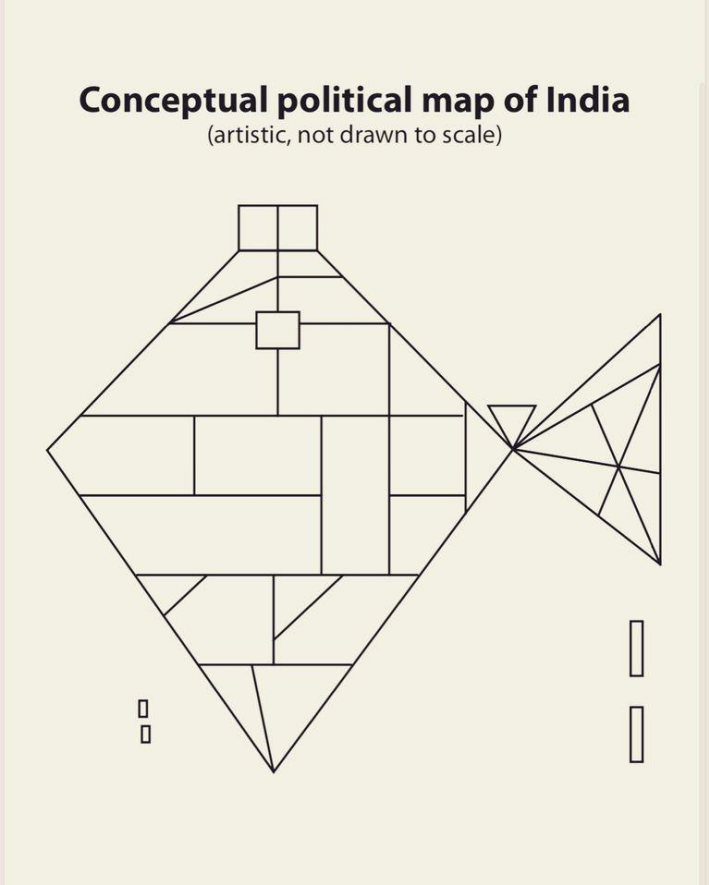


Figure 53 - Pattanaik's conceptual map of India[322]

Pattanaik's map is different from the previous ones. Tripathi's map tries to be exotic at the geographical and temporal levels. It aims at pleasing the reader with its aura of mystery and not at giving relevant geographical information. Neelakantan's map is schematic and easier to decode. Pattanaik's map looks like an abstract diagram. Without a label, it would be hard to realise that it represents India. The useless comment "(artistic, not drawn to scale)" seems like a joke and, given the author's propensity for playfulness, probably is so. Pattanaik turns the irregular international and interstate borders of India into perfect straight lines and the states into geometric shapes. This visual strategy reflects Pattanaik's encyclopaedic tendency. As his drawings reveal (Figures 8, 9, 10, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 32, 33, 34, 36, 41, 42), the author often strives for simplification. Most of his drawings consist of black-and-white pencil figures whose lines suggest the human body. Many include tables or diagrams representing logical ideas. In the process, the geographic and temporal variations of the

322 https://www.facebook.com/devduttmyth/posts/conceptual-political-map-of-india-not-drawn-to-scale-can-be-used-by-students-to-/3268174056528753/?__rdr (accessed on 12/7/2022).

iconography of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and of Indian history and culture are stripped to their bare essentials. In a *Facebook* publication, Pattanaik writes that this map can be used by students who wish to understand India. The author assumes a role similar to that assumed by Rajagopalachari or Anant Pai, that of the adult teacher who is an expert on Indian matters and who shall teach the "children" of the nation about the history and culture of India.[323]

I now return to the discussion of the anachronism which consists of the use of the term "India" in the retellings. Tripathi (2015) uses this term, or its related adjective *Indian*, 85 times throughout the first instalment of his retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In *Suheldev*, in whose temporal plane this term would also be anachronistic, he uses them 328 times (Tripathi, 2020). Neelakantan (2012) uses it (often preceded with the cardinal directions, mainly "north", "south" and "central") 77 times in *Asura*. By making use of an *argumentum ad antiquitatem* and applying the term "India" to a reality that existed in an abstract past, Tripathi and Neelakantan create a discourse in which the geographical, historical and cultural "idea of India" as a nation-state is legitimised. Even though Divakaruni (2019) and Kané (2016) never use these terms in their retellings, they often use the term *country*, a term which feels odd when applied to the temporal plane of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Again, in this case there is no intention of trying to make the nation look more ancient than it is. There is perhaps some transference from the Sanskrit term *deśa*, which means "place, region, territory, kingdom" in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* and now means "country, nation" in Hindi. Pattanaik (2013), the author who seems less concerned with history and more concerned with psychology, is the only reteller who uses neither the terms *India/Indian* nor *country* during the narrative.[324]

Many of the titles of the 65 chapters of Neelakantan's (2012) novel (the chapters in Tripathi's novel do not have titles) point to issues that may be associated with the semantics of nationalism:

[323] In a post with a short video, Pattanaik explains how to use the map by pointing to the geometric shapes and stating which Indian state they refer to. https://www.facebook.com/DevduttPattanaikFandom/videos/974072043043568 (accessed on 12/7/2022).

[324] Besides "India", other names for the modern nation are mentioned. Tripathi (2015) mentions the jambu fruit, the Sanskrit name for the rose-apple (*Syzygum cumini*), and how it has been consecrated with the ancient name for India, Jambudvīpa (178), which is also the name Tripathi gives to the Indian subcontinent in his online description for his map of India (Figure 50). In fact, the opposite is true. The Sanskrit term *dvīpa* means "island", even though it can have the more general meaning of "land, continent". As a result, the placename Jambudvīpa means "island of the rose apples". Neelakantan (2012) also uses this name once and transcribes it as Jambu Dweepa (21).

1) War: “Captives” (3), “Devil’s Raid” (6), “Lore of the Losers” (7), “Looming War” (44), “War Without Ethics” (46), “Victors and Their Ways” (61);

2) Betrayal: “Traitor” (11), “Betrayal” (14);

3) Revolution: “Revolutionaries” (22), “Revolution Comes Home” (23), “Death of a Revolutionary” (24), “Riot” (34);

4) Leadership and Heroism: “The Untouchable King” (26), “A Country Thanks its Hero” (36), “A Hero Returns” (51), “End of an Idealist” (54), “Did I Fail as a King?” (58);

5) Patriotism: “Patriot” (32), “For My People” (46); and

6) Martyrdom: “Funeral of Martyrs” (57).

Neelakantan’s and Tripathi’s main characters often reveal quasi-religious nationalistic pride for their roots. In Tripathi’s (2015) version, Vasiṣṭha states that: “my great country must be rejuvenated with the blood and sweat of patriots. This soil is worth more than my life to me. I love my country. I love my India” (39). In this passage, as is often the case in nationalistic discourses (Hearn, 2006: 31), the land and its human inhabitants are ontologically associated, given that human “blood” and “sweat” symbolically merge with the “soil”. When asked whether he is ready to forge a new “masculine way” for India, Rāma answers: “I will certainly try (...) It is my duty to my motherland; to this great country of ours” (94). Later, Rāma unifies the concepts of space and time when he kneels down and, after picking up a handful of soil and smearing it on his forehead, whispers: “[m]ay the land of our ancestors... the soil that was witness to great karma... bless us” (324).

The *devas* are not the only ones who are described as highly nationalistic in this novel. The *asuras* also state that India is “our holy land. We want to live in India. We cannot be happy outside of its sacred embrace” (198). The phrase “Holy Land” is common in Hebrew (*'Éretz Hakodesh*), ancient Greek (*Ἅγιοι Τόποι*), Latin (*Terra Sancta*), and Arabic (*Al-ʾarḍ Al-muqaddasa*) in discourses related to the Abrahamic religions and is used to refer to a place in the Middle East. Again, this expression may be regarded as associating the *asuras* with the Muslims and the British. There is also a modern Hindu nationalistic “idea of India” as a “holy land”, which is how the Sanskrit term *Āryāvarta* is often translated into English. Etymologically, *Āryāvarta* means “abode of the noblemen”. The translation of *Āryāvarta* as “holy land”, much like the translation of *trimūrti* as “Holy Trinity”, shows the hypothetical influence of discourses related to other religions on Hinduism.

In the contemporary retellings written by male authors, the concept of "India" and its epithets often work as geographical, historical and cultural unifiers. According to Pattanaik (2013a), the two Indian epics cover "the length and breadth of India" (104), given that the *Rāmāyaṇa* follows a vertical (north-south) axis and the *Mahābhārata* a horizontal (west-east) one.[325] Neelakantan (2012) often covers this length and breadth by referring to the country's "natural" borders. Rāma is said to roam all over India (300). Rāvaṇa and other *asura* rulers are also said to rule over the whole country, here also called a "holy land" (35). When Rāvaṇa hears that there are great nations to the north of his kingdom, he states:

> I would travel across the length and breadth of India. I wanted to climb the snow clad mountains of the Himalayas, swim against the dangerous currents of the Ganga raging in her full monsoon fury. I dreamed of passing through the thick forests of the Vindhya[326] and Sahyas[327] (17).

When Rāvaṇa embarks on his flying chariot to attend Sītā's wedding competition, he feels proud when he sees "India" laying down below "with her riches and sorrows" (290). He again mentions the Himalayas and the Ganges River and states that they belong to the *asuras* and that he wishes to throw the *devas* back to the wilderness beyond the Indus River (*Ibid.*). The Himalayas in the north and the seas in the south are often mentioned as the vertical borders of India (322), while the Indus River in the west and the Brahmaputra in the east are mentioned as the horizontal ones (21). Another name for India often used by Tripathi (2015) (74 times) is *Sapta sindhu*, Sanskrit for "seven rivers", an epithet that often appears in the *Ṛgveda* and is therefore imbued with a sense of antiquity and sacredness. In Tripathi's novel, *Sapta sindhu* is identified as the land that lies north to the Narmada River (5), which flows through the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. These vertical and horizontal borders are clearly delineated in the maps used by the retellers (Figures 51, 52 and 53).

One of the most common kinds of comments that Pattanaik (2013a) writes throughout his retelling consists of the listing of pilgrimage villages and towns across India in which the actions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are popularly believed to have taken place

[325] Pattanaik (2013a) states that scholars suppose that the action of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* does not go beyond Central India, while Hindu devotees and pilgrims believe that sites associated with the epic are located in Sri Lanka (104). Other cultural traditions in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition is influential, mainly in Southeast Asia, have also associated local sites with characters and events of the epic.

[326] Mountain range which divide between North and South India.

[327] The Western Ghats, a mountain range that roughly runs parallel to the western coast of India.

(xxi). Understandably, Ayodhyā and Laṅkā are the most salient examples. Other placenames related to events in the epic include: Sītāmaḍhaḍhī, Bihar (10); Nāśika, Maharashtra (119/135/136); Rāmēcuvaram, Tamil Nadu (119/230/260); Hajazārībāga, Jharkhand (119); Simlipāla, Odisha (119); Lepākṣi, Andhra Pradesh (136); Maṃḍora, Rajasthan (142); Hampī, in Karnataka (162); Badrīnātha, Uttarakhand (229); Ṛṣikeśa, Uttarakhand (260) and; Bānda, Uttar Pradesh (286). The author includes other placenames in long enumerations. Sometimes, he points to different possibilities for a single event. He states that there are places associated with the killing of Vālīn in Karnataka, Kerala and Assam (178) and that the stones the *vānaras* used to build the bridge to Laṅkā came from Karnataka or Andhra Pradesh, which are famous for their big rocks (209). The following map (Figure 54), which highlights the states mentioned in this paragraph, reveals that Pattanaik indeed covers the length and breadth of India from north to south and from east to west.

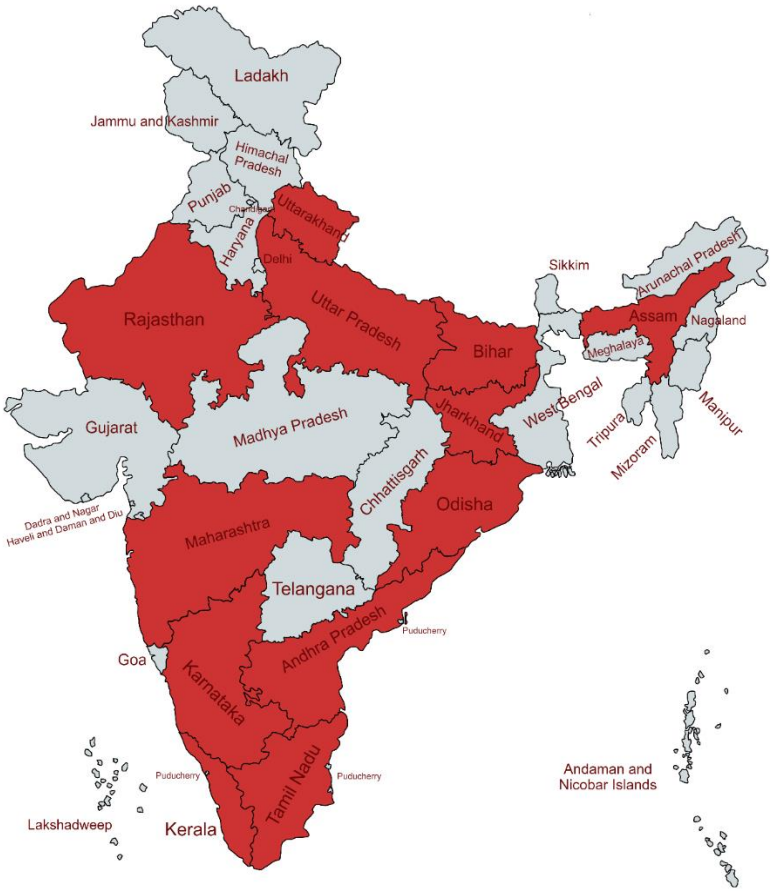


Figure 54 - Map of India with states containing sites mentioned by Pattanaik emphasised in red[328]

[328] Made by the author on https://www.mapchart.net/india.html (accessed on 13/7/2022).

Pattanaik also mentions general and specific spots. General places include the caves in which Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā are said to have rested during their forest exile (114) and the *Rāmacaraṇacinha,*[329] "footprints of Rāma", which, the author adds, are much revered by pilgrims (59/96). Specific geographical features include rivers and mountains, such as mount Kangchengjunga (235), the third highest mountain in the world, located between the Indian state of Sikkim and Nepal. The author also mentions the *Rāma setu*, "Rāma's bridge", a stretch of limestone shoals which connects South India to the island of Sri Lanka. Pattanaik states that many people have tried to break this natural barrier in order to facilitate maritime trade. However, this project has had many opponents, given that many regard the "bridge" as a sacred historical monument (209).[330] In English, this site is better-known as "Adam's Bridge" due to the legendary association between Adam and the island of Sri Lanka. According to Muslim folklore, it was there that Adam "landed" after he was expelled from the Garden of Eden.[331] In Hinduism, the geological formation is associated with the bridge which the *vānaras* built in order to reach the island. Even though he does not quote any specific historian, Pattanaik states that Sri Lankan historians have not endorsed such claims. Given that Sri Lanka is an independent and culturally distinct nation-state and that its major religion is Buddhism, stating that the bridge had been built by a Hindu god from North India would be similar to stating that this is an Indian landmark.[332] Hindu Tamils have crossed to Sri Lanka through the maritime space between the island-nation and India. In association with the myth, the land bridge easily turns into a symbolic metonymy for the many historical crossings. While one cannot reduce the conflict which has affected Sri Lanka since the 20th century to one between Buddhism and Hinduism (or Islam), the progressive ontological merging of Buddhism, the "national" religion of the

[329] PANDE, Vikrant, and KULKARNI, Neelesh (2021). *In The Footsteps of Rama: Travels With the Ramayana*, New Delhi: HarperCollins.

[330] Subramaniam's (2019) third chapter "Return of the Native: Nation, Nature, and Postcolonial Environmentalism" deals with the controversy around the *Rāma setu*. See also GRANOFF, Philip (1998). "Rāma's Bridge: Some Notes on Place in Medieval India, Real and Envisioned" *East and West*, Vol. 48, Nº. 1-2, pp. 93-115.

[331] ABEYDEERA, Ananda (1992). "Paths of Faith: Following the Blessed Footsteps of Adam to Ceylon" *Diogenes*, Vol. 159, pp. 69-94; Elverskog (2010: 83); Lopez (2013). In Central Sri Lanka, there is also a mountain (Adam's Peak) which is associated with Adam. In its summit, there exists what is said to be a sacred footprint. Muslims have considered that the footprint belongs to Adam, Hindus to Hanumān and Buddhists to the Buddha. Given the importance of the island in the development of the Buddhist religion, of Pali literature and of the transmission of the religion and its texts to the Southeast Asia, the association between geographical phenomena with the Buddha becomes comprehensible. However, there seem to be no major Buddhist legends associating *Rāma setu* with him.

[332] https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/indian-court-proceedings-to-declare-adams-bridge-as-indian-heritage/ (accessed on 16/7/2022).

majority, with the Sinhalese ethnic group and the Sinhalese language has conferred an ethnoreligious and ethnolinguistic dimension to it (Gier, 2016: 45-66).

In his documentary series *Legends of the Ramayana with Amish* (2022), Tripathi travels to several places mentioned by Pattanaik. There is a difference between this series and the retellings. The retellings are mostly textual, but the documentary series relies on visuals. While Tripathi describes Indian culture as mythology-loving, here it he also depicts it as history-centric, given that he tries to map mythological elements onto reality. A small teaser on *Youtube* filmed on location discusses the *Rāma setu*. Tripathi is shown pointing to the sea and framing the story with the statement: "there is a belief that there was a bridge here". Next, a pile of stones is shown. The author asks: "were these stones used to construct the Ram Setu?". He adds that "corals also explain the floating stones", an attempt at "scientifically" legitimating the myth. Ritesh Arya (1968-), an Indian geologist and the invited "expert" for this segment, concludes that "this was an engineering marvel in the olden times".[333] In chapter 14 of Tripathi's (2022) *War of Lanka*, the "scientific" construction of this bridge is discussed by the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in similar terms. They also mention the possibility that the floating rocks were corals and the fact that the artificial bridge is so technologically advanced that it looks natural. In sum, Tripathi is concerned with associating myth with physical truth and not just with vague psychological ideas like Pattanaik.

The relevance of the geological formation for Hindus had already been remarked upon by Subramanian Swamy (2008), an Indian politician who often writes books defending Hindu nationalistic enterprises, in *Rama Setu: Symbol of National Unity*, whose nationalistic aspirations are clearly stated in the title. In 2022, there came out a Bollywood film titled *Ram Setu*.[334] It tells the story of a sceptical Indian archaeologist who initially believes neither in the *Rāmāyaṇa* nor in the possibility that the *Rāma setu* may have been built by Rāma and his peers. On further investigation and through "scientific" methods, he finds out that he turned out to be wrong. Fiction and nonfiction, as well as text, image and sound, again work towards the legitimation of the same geographical and historical argument, with Tripathi's ambiguously fictional takes on the *Rāma setu* appearing among both equally ambiguous and much less ambiguous ones.

These descriptions of sites that become inviolable due to their association with mythic characters and events reflect Smith's (1999) idea of the "territorialisation of

[333] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Fn1Jec5b0k (accessed on 19/7/2022).
[334] SHARMA, Abhishek (Director) (2022). *Ram Setu* [Film], Zee Studios

memory", a concept according to which ancient heroes and the places associated with them come to be venerated with quasi-religious devotion (151). Indeed, the *Rāmāyaṇa* often functions like travel or pilgrimage literature. Several scholars deal with the concept of pilgrimage in the Indian context (Bhardwaj, 1983; Kinsley, 1998; Feldhaus, 2003). Anne Feldhaus (2003), a professor of Religious Studies, conducts research on how characters and events of the epic have been identified with places in the state of Maharashtra. She remarks that these religious identifications have not straddled into politics. The most comprehensive study about pilgrimage in India is *India: A Sacred Geography* by Diana L. Eck (2013 [2011]), a professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies. Eck's work features a chapter titled "Following Rāma: The *Rāmāyaṇa* on the Landscape of India", which deals with the pilgrimage sites related to the epic (399-440). According to Eck, the imagined landscape cast by the network of India's *tīrthas* (Sanskrit for "sacred pilgrimage spaces"), many of which are drawn from the epics, contribute to the indigenous Indian sense of nationhood, given that these places create a geographic "idea of India" as whole and organic and with defined the centre and its peripheries. This means that, in some cases, myth-making and map-making may be regarded as a double-sided venture in India. Myths may refer to places and places may be associated with myths. The concept of celebrating and physically or intellectually visiting places that are relevant for a community group also reminds one of historian Pierre Nora's (1984-1992) concept of "places of memory" (in French, *lieux de mémoire*). This expression refers to the idea that places may symbolise collective memory. The association of space with a story related to memory or belief may trigger emotion. Such stories may be real and remembered at the individual level or be less clearly real and remembered at the collective level. Humans across different cultures have the tendency to find parallels between natural elements or human sites of dubious origins with stories. Geological formations that look like human-made bridges or holes on the ground that look like human footprints are good examples. The creation and manipulation of places and stories may also play a political role in the creation and manipulation of emotions. In this regard, it is understandable why Deshpande (2003) states that pilgrimage may involve questions of hegemony, power and territorial control (93). Although in differing degrees, in the contemporary retellings written by male authors, devotion to the Indian landscape often straddles into devotion to the Indian nation. For this reason, such retellings may be regarded as functioning like "literary pilgrimages". Through them, readers are able to travel through sacred places and gain

a sense of veneration for the collective memories that such literature instils while staying still and perhaps even far away from their "holy land".

Like Pattanaik, Tripathi (2015) often refers to placenames inside and outside India, even though, in another naming strategy which mixes fact and fiction, he changes their orthography. This makes their identification and association with real topography more difficult, even though, in most cases, it is possible to retrieve what the author might have been thinking when creating such names. The most noteworthy examples are Karachapa (7), described as a port-city with a fort and the place where Daśaratha fights Rāvaṇa for the first time, and Pariha, described as the foreign land beyond the Western border of India (37/198).

The city of Karachapa is already mentioned in Tripathi's (2010) *The Immortals of Meluha*, the first instalment of *Shiva Trilogy*, from which the author the author derives the narrative universe of his *Rāmāyaṇa* series. In *The Immortals of Meluha*, Karachapa is called a "decadent city of sin" (46). In *Ram*, the description and name of the Karachapa seem to refer to Karachi and its Manora Fort, built in 1797 and captured by the British in 1839.[335] Rāvaṇa is said to have "dotted the Indian peninsula with port-forts" (Tripathi, 2015: 321), just like the British did. It is unclear why Tripathi chooses the name *Karachapa*. While this term does not point to any Sanskrit/Hindi compound, it would be possible to decompose it into several Sanskrit/Hindi words. However, they do not make much sense as a whole, which means that any interpretation would be pure speculation. In Hindi, *chāpā* may mean "raid", which is what Rāvaṇa does there. In any case, the idea that Karachi is part of India and not of Pakistan and a comparison of Rāvaṇa's actions with those of the British East India Company are likely not innocent.

Pariha refers to Persia or modern Iran. In *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, the third instalment of Tripathi's (2013) *Shiva Trilogy*, this land is often called the "land of the fairies", which is also the title of the 36th chapter. As such, the name seems to come from the Farsi term *peri*,[336] a kind of being which, due to the ontological and linguistic similarity, is often translated into English as "fairy", even though these beings have different etymological and cultural roots. The Persian term is also used in modern Hindi. Tripathi has seemingly added the Persian pluralising suffix *-hā*, which means that *perihā* would indeed mean "fairies". Given that *-hā* is not a pluralising suffix in any

[335] RUSTOMJI, Behram Sohrab H. J., and KATRAK, Sohrab K. H. (2008). *Karachi During the British Era: Two Histories of a Modern Cit*y, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Eck (2013 [2011]: 424-427).
[336] ADHAMI, Siamak (2000). "PAIRIKĀ" *Encyclopædia Iranica*, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/pairika (accessed on 8/6/2024).

Indo-Aryan language, it is unlikely that the majority of Tripathi's readers would understand this etymology. Tripathi's term resembles the ancient Sanskrit one for Persia, *Pārasika*. However, to modern Indians, it would probably bring to mind the term *pariah*, one of the many terms for "outcaste".[337] In any case, as Pariha is described as the land beyond the Western borders of India where the majority of the *asura* live (198), there seems to be yet another identification of the *asuras* with the Muslims. In short, *Pariha* is described as a foreign land, while *Karachapa* is not. Indeed, the partition between India and Pakistan tends to be regarded as a blotch in the history of Indian nationalism[338] and, despite the division between the nations, Tripathi describes Pakistan as a geographical part of India.

As Pattanaik states, more than differences between west and east India, the retellings focus on distinctions in a north-south axis. These cardinal directions have symbolical meaning in Indian tradition. Pattanaik (2013a) states that Rāvaṇa is reviled as a demon and Kubera as a god because the former is associated with the south, which symbolises death, while Kubera is associated with the north, which indicates permanence and stability (50). The author adds that humans live in the north (in *Āryāvarta*, another name for North India),[339] the *demons* in the south (Laṅkā), and the *vānara* between the human and devilish realms (Kiṣkindhā), a place which, following the author's most common strategy, is explicitly said to be as much geographical as psychological (157). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, king Daśaratha has a dream in which he rides a donkey towards the south. The court astrologers prophesise that this is a portent of destruction and dishonour, given that the south is said to be the direction of the death-kingdom of Yama (93).[340] In Tripathi's (2015) retelling, Rāma states that, whenever India faces an existential crisis, its regeneration or reform often comes from the Indian peninsula, the land that is located to the south of the Narmada River, which

[337] *Pariah* is derived from the caste name *Parayar*, who worked as drummers. In Tamil and Malayalam, the word for "drum" is *parai.* MCGILVRAY, Dennis B. (1983). "Parayiar Drummers of Sri Lanka: consensus and constraint in an untouchable caste" *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 10, Nº. 1, pp. 97-115.

[338] MENON, Jisha (2013). *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan and the Memory of Partition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; SVENSSON, Ted (2013). *Production of Postcolonial India and Pakistan: Meanings of Partition*, London: Routledge; SINGH, Amritjit, IYER, Nalini, and GAIROLA, Rahul K. (eds.) (2016). *Revisiting India's Partition: New Essays on Memory, Culture and Politics*, Lanham: Lexington Books; JAIN, Sanjeev, and SARIN, Alok (eds.) (2018). *The Psychological Impact of the Partition of India,* Los Angeles: Sage; RANJAN, Amit (2019). *Partition of India: Postcolonial Legacies*, London: Routledge; SAINT, Tarun K. (2020) *Witnessing Partition: Memory, History, Fiction*, London: Routledge; ROY, Anjali Gera (2020). *Memories and Postmemories of the Partition of India*, London: Routledge.

[339] As the title of Tripathi's (2019) third instalment of his *Ram Chandra* series is *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta,* it could be regarded as meaning "Rāvaṇa: Enemy of North India".

[340] See also SAYERS, Matthew R. (2013). *Feeding the Dead: Ancestor Worship in Ancient India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 65.

he calls the *Pitṛbhūmi*, Sanskrit for "the land of the ancestors", apparently a variation of the more common *Pitṛloka*, "realm of the ancestors", the Vedic term to refer to an abstract afterlife realm populated by deceased ancestors (McDaniel, 2018). He also calls it the "land of our regeneration" (325) because, according to him, south is the direction of death, which Indians consider auspicious, given that death makes regeneration possible. He adds that "death is believed to be inauspicious in some foreign lands to the west of us; to them it signifies the end of everything" (325). As usual, as Tripathi turns his referents obscure by using implicit language within a mythological setting, expressions such as "foreign lands to the west of us" and the idea that death "signifies the end of everything" seems to point to the materialistic view of the world which is often stereotypically associated with the West and Abrahamic religions. By pointing to such cultural differences when it comes to ideas of death and reincarnation, Tripathi constructs Indians and non-Indians as antithetical, given that, in his mind, what the latter consider to be the most negative moment in life is considered by the former to be positive.

The north-south axis is also associated with social differences. According to the Aryan migration/invasion theory, the distinction between the Aryan and Dravidian civilisations is not only ethno-linguistic. As it is considered that the Aryans conquered India from north to south and that Dravidians fled in the same direction, this distinction is also geographical. While the theory remains controversial in academia and is discredited by most Indians, social stereotypes based on a geographical north-south axis persist in popular culture. The route of ancient pilgrimages in India is said to suggest corridors of contact between North and South India and the places located far away from these corridors are said to be more prone to house *unsanskritised* forest-dwelling peoples (Bhardwaj, 1983: 225). Pattanaik (2013a) mentions stories about sage Agastya, who also features in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, moving from north to south. According to the author, such stories suggest the migration of Vedic ideas and their transformation following contact with southern peoples (114). In Pattanaik's tale, Rāma is instructed to go south so that his exile may let those who live in the forests (*rākṣasas*) "expand their minds" (111). As a result, specific instantiations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition can be regarded as a tale about how civilisation spread from North to South India. Even Tripathi, who most commonly rejects social divisions within India and tries to imagine the modern nation-state as a quasi-homogeneous entity, derives modern Indian culture

and genetics from two ancient and questionable northern and southern civilisations, *Dwarka* and *Sangamtamil*.

Neelakantan (2012) also capitalises on geographical differences. As the author resorted to his "contrarian" way, in his novel Rāma's missionary work from North to South India is not depicted as one of civilisation and enlightenment but one of barbarism and oppression. As I have said, the southern civilisation of India is represented with positive proto-modern attributes, something which may likely be explained by the fact that Neelakantan is a southern Indian. As Richman's (2008) states, southern retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tend to depict the humanoid species of the tale in a more humane light than northern versions (28/175), given that these groups tend to be identified with South Indian communities. However, given Neelakantan's propensity to contradict himself and include conflicting historical and contemporary stereotypes about Indian society at a pan-Indian level, the novel is also full of insults between north, central and south Indians. When Rāvaṇa embarks on his flying chariot in order to attend Sītā's wedding competition, he speaks of Central India as a no man's land of shrubs, jungles and dunes (290). After the conquest of Laṅkā by the *devas*, Bhadra finds refuge in Kārtavīryārjuna's kingdom in Central India. Kārtavīryārjuna is said to re-establish the aboriginal *Ādi Draviḍa* (Original Dravidian) empire.[341] Resenting the presence of refugees, the locals start beating Bhadra with a stick and calling him a "black south Indian". It is said that the *Ādi Draviḍas* hate north Indians even more and that regionalism ultimately makes Kārtavīryārjuna's empire crumble (492).

The tendency to depict economic, political and sociocultural conflict between North and South India (sometimes called the *North-South divide*)[342] is relatively common in Indian popular culture. Indologist Rachel Dwyer (2006) shows how modern

[341] *Ādi Draviḍa* is a positive epithet attributed to the *Parayar* (*pariah*) caste. BALASUBRAMANIAM, J. (2016). "Migration of the Oppressed and Adi Dravida Identity Construction Through Print" *Contemporary Voice of Dalit,* Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 41-46.

[342] DESAI, Santosh (2008). "The great North South debate rages" *The Times of India*, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/The-great-North-South-debate-rages/articleshow/2949925.cms?referral=PM (accessed on 3/11/2020); REDDY, Gautami (2013). "Labels and Stereotypes" *The Hindu*, https://www.thehindu.com/features/education/labels-and-stereotypes/article4817438.ece (accessed on 2/11/2021); BETIGERI, Aarti (2018). "India: the north-south disparity" *Lowly Institute*, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-north-south-disparity (accessed on 21/9/2021); PAUL, Samuel, and SRIDHAR, Kala Seetharam (2015). *The Paradox of India's North South Divide: Lessons from the States and Regions*, 2015. New Delhi: SAGE Publications; GEORGE, T. J. S. (2020). "Why North and south do not meet" *The New Indian Express*, https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/columns/t-j-s-george/2020/jul/12/why-north-and-south-do-not-meet-2168473.html (accessed on 3/11/2020); https://newint.org/blog/majority/2011/06/03/racism-xenophobia-india-migrants (accessed on 15/6/2024); https://thewire.in/society/why-indians-are-the-most-racist-people-on-earth (accessed on 15/6/2024).

Bollywood cinema often depicts contemporary Hindus from South India as figures of fun (141). A relevant example for comparison purposes is the 2013 blockbuster *Chennai Express*, directed by Rohit Shetty and starring Shah Rukh Khan (1965-), one of the most famous actors and most powerful people in India. Khan plays the role of a North Indian who mistakenly goes to Chennai, the capital of the southern state of Tamil Nadu, and falls in love with a local girl who has been promised by her father to a local man, the antagonist. By countering the contemporary ideal of the love marriage and privileging political marriages between families, South India is described as lacking in modernity. Contrary to Khan and the character he depicts, who is handsome, fair, tall, thin, and neatly combed and shaved, south Indians, with the exception of the main female and the main antagonistic male roles, are ugly, dark-skinned, short, fat, and have long and dishevelled hair and beards, just like the "common people" in Neelakantan's (2012) novel. South Indians rarely speak, given that they do not know the national language (Hindi) and their mother tongue (Tamil) would not be understood by northern audiences. They also often engage in violence. Despite being tall, handsome and muscled like Tripathi's (2015) heroes and villains, the antagonist rarely speaks. He has a constant furious look on his face and often engages in fighting.

In one scene, the protagonist gets lost in a forest, where he comes across an overweight, cross-eyed dwarf who speaks to him in animal-like tongue clicks. The protagonist tries to imitate him. An excerpt uploaded on *Youtube* by the production company that made the film is titled "Shah Rukh Khan tries to talk in Tamil".[343] However, Tamil has no clicks. No Dravidian, Indian or Asian language does. This phenomenon, which exists only in Southern Africa, is associated with the languages of the Khoisan, who are sometimes derisively considered to be the last "primitive" people in the world. This means that, in this film, Tamil is represented as primitive-like. While it is possible that the creators did not want to be offensive and just wanted to create a funny scene within a light film for huge audiences, the fact that they reinforced with existing stereotypes is not probably going to do away with them. Figure 55, a screenshot of this scene, reveals how the encounter between a tall, handsome and stylish Indo-European speaker from North India and a dwarfish, ugly and scruffy Dravidian speaker from South India reveals how Neelakantan, or even Tripathi, at least when describing his non-human species born with deformities, have played with similar stereotypes and

[343] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orNJEVGY4hY (accessed on 16/7/2022).

associated them with the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.[344] While with the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition one can always get away with the excuse that it is all fiction, as Tripathi does, Bollywood films, which resort to more realistic audiovisual strategies, unavoidably represent contemporary India, even if in a caricaturised way, to Indians and to neighbouring Asian countries, where the industry is also popular.



Figure 55 - Screenshot of Rohit Shetty's (2013) *Chennai Express*[345]

The concept of borderlands is also relevant. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, disputes between different groups tend to occur in liminal geographical spaces. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, the forests which limit the kingdom are called "forest-borders" (69), an expression which is not usually hyphenised in English. This term is possibly a translation of Sanskrit *vanānta*, which literally means "end of the forest", or *agrevaṇa*, the "skirts of a forest", or some vernacular Bengali version of a similar compound. Sītā states that she and Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa cross "from city to forest, from the known world to the unknown" (118), another description which defines the skirts of the forest as a kind of threshold. Besides forests, Neelakantan and Tripathi often mention mountain ranges and rivers, which also appear as clear borders in Tripathi's map (Picture 52).

[344] These associations are clear-cut and the film was a huge success, but no papers seem to have been written on this subject. In any case, the film generated a wave of online criticism. See https://livingwithlili.weebly.com/friday-reviews/chennai-express-review-a-major-disgrace-to-india (accessed on 16/7/2022); https://www.michigandaily.com/michigan-in-color/what-bollywood-thinks-of-me/ (accessed on 16/7/2022); https://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/the-mythical-madrasi/article5032236.ece (accessed on 16/7/2022); https://tribune.com.pk/article/18707/chennai-express-a-trainwreck-of-a-masala-film (accessed on 16/7/2002); https://aditi-ramaswamy.medium.com/the-dark-side-of-bollywood-477a259be4be (accessed on 12/7/2022).
[345] https://www.pinterest.pt/pin/100486635409162121/ (accessed on 12/7/2022).

Divakaruni (2019) follows the mythical trope of dangerous borders in the clearest way. Following my introduction on criticism about her works in the first chapter, it seems possible that she does so in a re-Orientalist fashion, given that in her works she tends to make a clear distinction between the normal world of everyday life and a wonderful world of magic. In her novels about the Indian diaspora, these two worlds are usually represented by modern America and traditional India. In her retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, similarly to other popular versions, they are represented by the safe world of Ayodhyā and the magical world of the forest which, as I shall describe later in this chapter, is also intimately associated with the female world. For all purposes, it is difficult to ascertain where mythical influences might end and contemporary re-Orientalist representations begin. The fact is that Divakaruni uses the following tropes about borders between the normal, known world and the abnormal, unknown world more often than the other contemporary retellers, including Kané. Natural borders may divide between places inhabited by different human(oid) groups. Janaka is often exhorted to line out the borders of the kingdom in order to protect it from the *rākṣasas* (8). Daśaratha sends Rāma to the northern borders in order to settle a land dispute between tribes (93). Later, Bharata and Śatrughna are stationed in the borderlands in order to keep an eye on the "wild tribes" (302). Finally, when Rāma is made king, he is said to take care of the "troubles" at the borders (312). Borders are regarded as places where social tensions rise, given that it is there that at least two identities clash and may attack or be attacked.

While, contrary to what she tends to do with the topic of femininity, Divakaruni seems to use these mythical tropes with no relation to contemporary events, clearer hints at the contemporary danger and necessity to defend national borders figure in similar descriptions in Tripathi's (2015) version. Śatrughna states that:

> It's [the government] needed for a few essentials that individuals cannot provide: an army to protect the borders from external attack, a system of basic education for all. One of the things that differentiates us from animals is that we do not kill our weak. But if the government interferes to such an extent that the weak thrive and the strong are oppressed, society itself will collapse over time (84).

The fact that Tripathi uses modern terms like "government", "army" and "external attack" shows that, contrary to Divakaruni, this author does not aim to create a fantasy

world where the monstrous unknown lurks beyond the borders but to describe the real preoccupations of modern nation-states.

The distinction between centre and periphery also exists in cultural spaces. In his novels, Neelakantan (2012) often mentions that lower castes and lower classes live in slums on the outskirts of cities (95). He mentions that, besides having been born with the wrong skin colour, Atikāya was born "in the wrong side of the city" (424), that is, far from the centre, where the higher castes and classes live. Tripathi (2015) states that even animals stay away from the boundaries of a hermitage, given that in the centre they may have previous warnings of external attacks and defend themselves better (177). Such descriptions seem to mean that in cities, villages and hermitages, being close to the centre is akin to being safer and closer to humanity. The more one distances oneself from the centre, the more one straddles into nature and animality. Such descriptions show that borders are the first to suffer attacks and the places that most require patrolling.

In order to understand how political reality may make the understanding of mythic tropes easier to grasp, one may look at the most politically problematic places in contemporary India. Most are located near borderlands: Punjab, Kashmir, the north-eastern states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura) and the maritime border between Sri Lanka and India (see Figure 54).[346] Paula Banerjee (2010), whose work deals with the condition of Indian women near the country's borderlands, states that whenever states create borders, they also create "bordered existences", which include women and other marginal groups (228). In other words, the centre tends to be conflated with notions of safety, humanity and culture,

[346] For Kashmir, see SCHOFIELD, Victoria (1996). *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War*, London: I. B. Tauris; BOSE, Sumantra (2003). *Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Path to Peace*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press; BHATIA, Mohita (2020). *Rethinking Conflict at the Margins: Dalits and Borderland Hindus in Jammu and Kashmir*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For Punjab, see JEFFREY, Robin (1986). *What's Happening to India?: Punjab, Ethnic Conflict, and the Test for Federalism*, Basingstoke: Macmillan; SINGH, Gurharpal (2000). *Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case-Study of Punjab:* Basingstoke: MacMillan Press. For north-eastern India, see DAS, Samir Kumar (2007). *Conflict and Peace in India's Northeast: The Role of Civil Society*, Washington: East-West Center Washington; MISRA, Sanghamitra (2011). *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India*, London: Routledge; RAMIREZ, Philippe (2014). *People of the Margins: Across Ethnic Boundaries in North-East India*, New Delhi: Spectrum Publications; GOGOI, Dilip (ed.) (2016). *Unheeded Hinterland: Identity and Sovereignty in Northeast India*, New Delhi: Routledge; VANDENHELSKEN, Mélanie, BARKATAKI-RUSCHEWEYH, Meenaxi, and KARLSSON, Bengt G. (eds.) (2018). *Geographies of Difference: Explorations in Northeast Indian Studies*, London: Routledge; OINAM, Bhagat, and SADOKPAM, Dhiren A. (eds.) (2018). *Northeast India: A Reader*, London: Routledge; BARUAH, Sanjib (2020). *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*, Stanford: Stanford University Press; GOGOI, Dilip (2020). *Making of India's Northeast: Geopolitics of Borderland and Transnational Interactions*, London: Routledge. For Sri Lanka, see BOSE, Sumantra (1994). *States, Nations, Sovereignty*: *Sri Lanka, India and the Tamil Eelam Movement*, New Delhi: Sage Publications; KRISHNA, Sankaran (1999). *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka, and the Question of Nationhood*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

while the periphery tends to be conflated with danger, bestiality and nature. I am not stating that the mythical tropes gave rise to political reality. However, the fact that they mirror political realities to a certain extent and that the retellers mostly use them as they are or merely adapted them to modern terms, while changing other mythical tropes to fit their ideologies, seems to mean that they are not as concerned with changing perceptions on geographically bordered existences as they concerned with changing perceptions of Indian existence in relation to the West or of female existence in relation to patriarchy.

Spatial descriptions in the contemporary retellings often reflect the dichotomy of nature and culture. There are places that are regarded as untouched by humans (natural) and those that have been created by them (cultural). The former are often symbolised by the forest. Given that Rāma is exiled to the forest for 14 years and that Sītā is banished to the forest by Rāma, a part of the plot of the epic takes place there. Cultural spaces are symbolised by the city or the palace, given that the retellings often take place in a royal setting. Pattanaik (2013a) states that the plot (he does not mention any specific retelling) of the *Rāmāyaṇa* draws a sharp distinction between the *grāma*/*kṣetra*, Sanskrit for "settlement", and the *vana*/*āraṇya*, Sanskrit for "forest" (117). The author writes that in every cosmic cycle, Sītā and Rāma are always at peace in the palace and in the forest, given that neither is either overawed by culture or intimidated by nature (xiv). The titles of Divakaruni's retellings of the *Mahābhārata* (*The Palace of Illusions*, 2008) and the *Rāmāyaṇa* (*The Forest of Enchantments*, 2019) reveal a similar contrast. In the beginning of the latter, the author explicitly mentions this dichotomy, given that Sītā tells Vālmīki that his *Rāmāyaṇa* has captured the tales of "the palace and the forest" (Divakaruni, 2019: 2).

The contrast between the forest and the city in Indian philosophy has also been studied by scholars (Lutgendorf, 1997: 27; Baindur, 2015: 110-111). Lutgendorf (2007a) regards the nature/culture dichotomy to be a Judeo-Christian construct comparable to the city/forest dichotomy of Indian tradition (395). Here, one should remark that, as I have shown in the fourth chapter, Pattanaik tends to focus a lot on the former dichotomy, which would mean that, rather than regarded his approach as an Indian one, it would probably make sense to regard it as a syncretic one. Like the identification of "mind" with masculinity and "body" with femininity, these similar dichotomies constitute another correlation between some strands of Hindu and Judeo-Christian thought. Even though the colonial encounter caused the exploitation of India's

forests and the development of Indian colonial cities for commercial and industrial purposes, the dichotomy between "settlement" and "forest" already existed in popular imagination thanks in part to the epic traditions, both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, in whose narratives this dichotomy plays a key role. However, one should note the use of terms such as *illusions* and *enchantments* in the titles of Divakaruni's novels. While these may be traceable to common Sanskrit terms such as *māyā*, which may be translated as "illusion" and less commonly as "enchantment", the modern exotifying English terms, the fairytale world they suggest when applied to the places they describe, and the covers of the novels, which unambiguously define them as contemporary chick-lit fictions (Figure 14),[347] may provide evidence that the author adopts re-Orientalist strategies to cater for her target audience(s).

6.2 The idea of the city

Descriptions of cities, mostly Ayodhyā and Laṅkā, are relevant in both ancient and contemporary retellings.[348] Even though these cities tend to be identified with Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh and with Sri Lanka, their identification with the cities of Vālmīki's epic is uncertain and likely unprovable. As I have said previously, Pattanaik (2013a) resorts to his common strategy of ascribing a psychological dimension to such placenames. Referring to the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* movement, Banker (2011) similarly states that Ayodhyā is not a place in Uttar Pradesh but a place "in our hearts", where "temples" have the ability to live forever in a way that no physical temples are able to, another interpretation which could be interpreted as trying to psychologise reality. In fact, the idea that "God lives in the heart, not in temples" was not of Banker's invention. It was already a stereotype in the sense that it was the most common argument found in letters written by the general public to various Indian newspapers during the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* movement (Viswananthan, 1998: 172).

Both Ayodhyā and Laṅkā tend to mirror the kinds of beings who inhabit the, *devas* and *asuras*, respectively. Tripathi (2015) describes Ayodhyā as a great city until the moment when the *asura* make it go into decline: "The magnificent court hall and the throne were symbolic of the power and might of the Ayodhyans; or at least, they had been so, once upon a time. Peeling paint and fraying edges spoke volumes of the

[347] See https://www.amazon.in/Palace-Illusions-Chitra-Banerjee-Divakaruni/dp/1400096200 (accessed on 9/6/2024) for the cover of the most widespread edition of Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*.
[348] Ayodhyā and Laṅkā have turned into models for cities in other Indian works of literature (Lutgendorf, 1997: 21). See also Ramanujan's (2004 [1970]) essay "Towards an Anthology of City Images" (52-72).

decline of this once-great kingdom" (99). This decline is perhaps a subtle allusion to the *Rāmjanmabhūmi* controversy. As usual, Neelakantan (2012) inverts this description. In his view, the cities of the north, Ayodhyā included, are "shanty towns" when compared to the cities of the south (23/214).[349] Rāvaṇa describes Ayodhyā as the worst city he has visited in North India. It is said to be filled with filthy narrow and winding streets where people live and make their physiological necessities. Poor children are said to run around naked and flies to buzz over the corpses of animals feeding on refuse (208). This kind of representation, which is absent from all other contemporary retellings, conforms to the stereotype of "Dark India" that has been popularised by the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009).[350] Mithilā, Sītā's city, is also described by Rāvaṇa as cultural and economic "backwaters" (294).

Neelakantan's descriptions of cities in South India sound more similar to those Tripathi makes of cities in North India. Muzuris, which appears in Neelakantan's map (Figure 51), is said to be the ancient capital of the *asuras.* It corresponds to Muziris, an ancient and unidentified port on the Indian Malabar Coast.[351] The city is described in Indian and Western historical sources, most prominently in Tamil *Sangam* poetry and in the *Peryplus of the Erythraean Sea (Περίπλους τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς Θαλάσσης*, 1st century CE), an ancient navigation guide.[352] Muzuris is said to be a centre of arts and culture and the most cosmopolitan city in the world, given that it is said to possess streets and places of worship for "Greeks, Romans, Syrians, Sumerians, Mesopotamians, Chinese, Arabs, Jews, Devas, various Asura tribes and Egyptians" (93). Neelakantan mixes the names of several human groups with those of *devas* and *asuras*, which shows that, in his retelling, the latter are supposed to be human groups just like the others. In this and other novels, Neelakantan also refers to the difference between the centre and the

[349] Again, Neelakantan does not merely invert common representations of the most popular versions of the epic but follows other sociocultural ideas, in this case contemporary ones. Despite the negative stereotypes against southern Indians which I have mentioned, there are also discourses which emphasise that South India as richer and more urbane than North India. https://www.economist.com/leaders/2024/02/29/india-could-be-ruined-by-its-political-and-economic-divisions (accessed on 15/6/2024); https://www.fairobserver.com/world-news/india-news/indias-south-has-wealth-but-the-north-has-the-numbers/ (accessed on 15/6/2024); https://thewire.in/politics/is-indias-north-south-divide-a-challenge-to-hindutva (accessed on 15/6/2024).

[350] MENDES, Ana Cristina (2010). "Showcasing India Unshining: Film Tourism in Danny Boyle's Slumdog Millionaire" *Third Text*, http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/10.1080/09528822.2010.491379 (accessed on 2/12/2020).

[351] MATTHEW, K. S. (ed.). *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris*, London: Routledge; VARGHESE, Rachel A. (2017). "What constitutes Muziris? Past and the production of heritage destinations in the south Indian state of Kerala" *Journal of Tourism History*, Vol. 9, Nº. 2-3, pp. 178-192; KUNNAPPILLY, Anitta G. (2018). "The trade of the port of Muziris in ancient times" *The International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 30, Nº. 3, pp. 519-525. See also https://frontline.thehindu.com/other/article30180002.ece (accessed on 17/7/2022).

[352] HUNTINGFORD, G. W. B. (ed.) (1980). *The Peryplus of the Erythraean Sea, By an Unknown Author*, London: The Hakluyt Society.

periphery based on class issues. The rich are said to live in the "neat and clean" central regions and the poor are "dumped at the outskirts" (95).

I now turn to Laṅkā. Pattanaik (2013a) states that many scholars have challenged its identification with Sri Lanka, given that the island was formerly known as Sinhala[353] and was called Laṅkā only in the 12th century. According to the author, the clues in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* suggest an area in the Deccan plateau (137-138), that is, in Central India. I reckon that most Indians and non-Indians would think that Laṅkā and Sri Lanka refer to the same place. Perhaps they think that Sri Lanka was called Laṅkā since Rāvaṇa's time and not that the modern island is called Sri Lanka due to its association with the epic. There are Sri Lankan discourses defending the former idea (Henry, 2022).

Kané (2016) describes Laṅkā as a tall, imperious, lavish, luxurious and powerful lost golden city (1). It is said that there is no poverty there and that even the humblest have a pot of gold (82). However, in a description which makes Laṅkā mirror the kind of beings which inhabit it, Śūrpaṇakhā states that, even though there are signs of wealth, Laṅkā has little signs of culture (77). Kumbhakarṇa calls it the land of the sensuous and sensuality, given that he and his family, who rule the city, are *asuras* (69). Just like the *asuras* are said to be able to physically (but not psychologically) emulate the *devas* and distance themselves from the ugly and primitive *rākṣasas*, so are cities said to be able to look materially rich and remain culturally poor. Divakaruni's (2019) description is very different. She describes Laṅkā as an island inhabited by monsters and located in the faraway Southern Ocean (20). She also refers to the surrounding ocean as "monster-infested" (173). Kané emphasises the mythic trope that the bestial antagonists of the epic are able to emulate humanity at the material level, while Divakaruni underscores the antagonists' difference and the distance and danger of the their city when compared with the familiar home, a narrative strategy which, as I have stated, the author also uses in her non-mythological fiction. In short, Ayodhyā and Laṅkā are often said to be similar in material terms. Both are lavish and powerful. However, they are different when it comes to cultural, psychological and spiritual terms, given that the beings who inhabit them turn them into places of self-control (*devas*) or debauchery (*asuras*).

[353] From the Sanskrit term *siṃha*(*la), "*lion", which gave rise to the English term *Ceylon*. OBEYESEKERE, Donald (1999). *Outlines of Ceylon History*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, especially pp. 1-4; Doniger (2009: 665).

6.3 The idea of the forest

Forests have had several meanings in Indian tradition. Given their prominence in contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, I will spend some time with their analysis. I argue that, except in two cases, forests tend to be associated with negative feelings and subaltern characters, who tend to be described as better integrated in the forest than in the city. One example includes Brahmins who renounce society to seek knowledge. While this is an ancient mythic trope, it does not have great repercussions in reality, given that no urban reteller living in a neoliberal setting would promote abandoning society and material prosperity for the wilderness, except for Pattanaik, who as usual interprets this abandonment as a metaphor for the human psyche. The other exception is women, who tend to be depicted as possessing a closer relationship with nature and, as a consequence, with the forest. My aim is to show how, while Pattanaik interprets this trope symbolically, both Kané and Divakaruni reinterpret it in a positive feminist light.

Historians David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (1995: 10) catalogue representations of the Indian forest as: 1) a home and source of resources for its inhabitants; 2) a home for bandits and rebels; 3) a home for wild animals and disease and 4) a place of distinction between the primitive and the civilised. The first point may be regarded as positive, while the other three may be regarded as negative. In the contemporary retellings, these different representations of the forest are often associated with different characters and/or groups. Contrary to the city, the forest is depicted as a place which is foreign and inappropriate for human beings. This description reflects Arnold's and Guha's last three points. However, not all descriptions of the forest have been negative. This duality is explained by two possible Sanskrit terms for "forest": *āraṇya* and *vana*. Meera Baindur (2015), a professor of Indian Philosophy, writes a detailed analysis on the understanding of the concept of *nature* in Indian philosophy. She describes *āraṇya* as a deep, dark and undomesticated forest where humans are unable to reside. Conversely, she describes *vana* as a less dense category, most often a grove of trees, where humans can dwell (111). A common translation for *āraṇya* is "wilderness". Even though both concepts point to the same place, they reflect different representations.

Sometimes, the forest is represented positively in a Romantic and bucolic way. According to Pattanaik (2013a), the forest becomes idyllic when Sītā's sons grow up there, bathe in rivers and play with deer. The author adds that, when there are natural

disasters or hungry animals or there is not enough food to pick, the forest is hardly idyllic (290). Neelakantan's (2012) Rāvaṇa also calls the forest "idyllic" (307), as life there is said to be simpler than in the city. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā states that the forest is mysterious, unspoiled, beautiful (27) and peaceful (352), even though at night it becomes a wilder place which is not to be trusted (336), given that night creatures take over it (321).

Most of the times, though, the representation is negative. Pattanaik (2013a) defines the forest as a place with no boundaries and no rules. He adds that a city where boundaries and rules are not respected becomes akin to a jungle (103). The absence of boundaries is said to also entail the absence of violations (105). Hanumān states that "fairness" is a concept for cities. In the jungle, all that matters is survival (175). As a result, boundaries, rules and the possibility of violating those rules are regarded as markers of culture, which gives rise to social justice. This means that *devas* create cities permeated with culture, while *asuras* create places that look like cities but are actually nature in disguise. Pattanaik adds that, as wilderness (*āraṇya*), the forest is of no value to humans, given that there humans become like animals. Without human intervention, the forest remains a jungle, a place of fear and hostility where only strength matters and where creatures are regarded as predator and prey (40). It is said that, in the wilderness, animals and plants do not see Rāma as a member of the royal family that ought to be respected (91/117). Domesticated, though, the wilderness is said to be valuable to humans (32). According to Pattanaik, the processes of "domestication" of places and creatures are similar. Just like non-humans may "expand their minds" and turn into humans, natural forests may turn into places of culture. Again, while Pattanaik uses mythical tropes and, in this case, does not necessarily adapt them to the neoliberal context, he still creates a hierarchy in the sense that it is always Rāma, the superior man, who is represented as "domesticating", not only nature, but beings from different genders, castes and species.

Tripathi's (2015) Rāma defines the forest as a place from where one cannot see the lights of a human settlement (88) and describes the Daṇḍaka forest as "impenetrable" (4). Viśvāmitra's counsellor advises Rāma to keep himself protected within the walls of the city, given that it would not be possible to keep him safe when alone in the jungle (240). Rāma warns Lakṣmaṇa that they should be together, given that they are in the forest, where there is danger of being alone, and not in the hermitage (69). Lakṣmaṇa states that life in the forest exile will not be easy and that they will face death everyday

(319). Nature is regarded a place of danger where life is not guaranteed, while culture enables the creation of places where the human body is protected. In Kané's (2016) novel, Vidyujjihva is said to have lived for years in "trouble infested" Daṇḍaka (97), the forest to which Rāma is exiled. Vidyujjihva tells his prospective lover Śūrpaṇakhā that he cannot give her the riches that Rāvaṇa showers on her, given that he has always lived in the "frugality" of the forest (132). One may fit Arnold and Guha's categories into these representations. As an idyllic place, the forest enables a good relationship between nature and human beings (point 1). As a dangerous place, it is fit only for animals and bandits/rebels (points 2 and 3). The antithesis created by these ideas explains point 4. An idyllic place is conducive to civilisation and a dangerous one to barbarism.

Discussing modern practical approaches rather than abstract ones, ecologist Madhav Gadgil and historian Ramachandra Guha (1995) have classified India's population in relation to their attitude towards the forest according to three broad categories: 1) *omnivores*, urbanites who (ab)use the forest; 2) *ecosystem people*, the forest people who live according to the rhythms of nature; and 3) *ecological refugees*, the *ecosystem people* who are displaced for the good of the *omnivores* (4). In the contemporary retellings, Rāma and his peers often play the role of the *omnivores* and the *rākṣasas* the role of the *ecosystem people* and *ecological refugees*. Pattanaik (2013a) writes that the rules of purity and impurity, which are so important in the palace, do not apply in the jungle (289). This means that caste is to be regarded as a cultural concept and not a natural one. For this reason, the lower caste character Śambūka states that he prefers to live in the forest: "Here I am no one's servant. I am equal to all other creatures in the forest. I prefer the forest to the city. There is wisdom here" (287). In other words, nature is regarded as a place where one can abandon one's social condition. This is a positive depiction of the *ecosystem people*. However, Rāma tells Śambūka that he should not romanticise the forest. As in the wild only strength matters, there is no way to help the weak. In the city, however, there are social structures that grant "meaning, purpose and validity" (*Ibid.*). This representation depicts the *omnivores* as harbingers of civilisation.

Despite Pattanaik's statement that the notions of purity and impurity are absent in the forest, Tripathi (2015) writes that the forest people (tribals) never marry outside their community in order to maintain their sense of purity or because they regard city-dwellers, who have strayed away from nature's path, as inferior (77). Pattanaik and

Tripathi present different views on nature and the way it gets reflected on the human condition. Pattanaik sounds Hobbesian in his description of a solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short life without culture, while Tripathi sounds Rousseauean in his description of civilisation as a distortion of a purer "natural" culture. In both cases, though, there are clear spatial lines dividing between the civilised and the uncivilised.

The distinction between city and forest also tends to be related to that between the human and the non-human. In points 1 and 3 of their Indian representations of the forest, Arnold and Guha state that the forest is the place inhabited by the humans who use their resources in an ecological way (*ecosystem people*) and as the place of wild animals and disease. Ancient Indian narratives usually characterise the forest as the habitat of the non-human, which includes ghosts, ghouls, spirits and water nymphs (Baindur, 2015: 110). In both ancient and contemporary retellings, forests are said to be the abode of the *rākṣasas* and *vānaras*, which are represented as more human than animal-like. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā speculates that she is being sent to the forest in order to cleanse it of the "dark forces" (124) and of the "unholy ways" of the *rākṣasas*, as well as to spread the light of civilisation (135). After Rāvaṇa is defeated, *rākṣasas* and *vānaras* go back to Ayodhyā with Rāma. It is said that these creatures must be a frightening sight for the city-dwellers, who have never been in the forest and had been brought up on the tales of the terrifying creatures who lived there. For that reason, Sītā feels that she has been optimistic in thinking that humans, animals and *rākṣasas* could coexist in peace (267-268). Again, Divakaruni seems unique in the sense that, even though the author remains aloof from nationalistic discourses, her Sītā is described as a character who, rather than merely "expanding minds", actually tries to do something to unite the diverse characters of the epic. The fact that other urbane characters are depicted as different is clearly meant to positively represent Sītā as a extraordinary character.

In Neelakantan's (2012) novel, the forests are said to become hiding places for guerrillas belonging to *asura* tribes (26). Armies are sent to the southern forests to take back the territory lost to the rebels (138). When Rāvaṇa dies and the *devas* and *vānaras* take Laṅkā, many *asuras* flee to the jungle, even though they are later recaptured and brought back to the cities (446). Here, *asuras* are described as *ecological refugees*. These descriptions also correspond to Arnold's and Guha's idea that the forests are the abode of bandits and rebels. The idea that the forests provide shelter for *ecological refugees* and revolutionaries, a common discourse in Neelakantan's novels, reminds

one of the Naxalites, which are groups of Maoist guerrillas who have been active in the Indian forest and rural areas.[354] One should also be reminded of the fact that Neelakantan describes Vidyujjihva as a proto-communist leader active in the forest, a description which conflates him with a forest-dwelling Naxalite. As usual, it seems that the author has not only tries to resort to historical discourses and cultural tropes in order to rationalise his retellings but also tries to mirror contemporary reality in them.

Pattanaik (2013a) states that the Vedic ritual may be seen as a metaphor for the clearing of the forests and the creation of fields for human settlements. According to him, one may also interpret the ritual as the incursion of the Aryan tribes from the Gangetic plains into the southern forests. Finally, the author states that *ṛṣis* can be equated with the proselytising efforts of missionaries and evangelists. This kind of interpretation is said to have been popularised by European colonisers to justify their imperialist intentions (41). As usual, these are historicist interpretations which Pattanaik quotes for the sake of diversity, inclusion and for didactic purposes, but which do not conform with the author's thought. Accordingly, in a later passage, he states that, while one may interpret Rāma's incursion into the south as an act of colonialism, one may also interpret it symbolically. The forest is the "undomesticated mind", which seems to be a reference to the Sanskrit term *asthira*, most commonly translated as "unsteady mind", while the arrival of Rāma marks the gradual awakening of "human potential" (111), or, in Pattanaik's modernised lingo, *dharma*. In short, the undomesticated mind is compared to a natural forest (*āraṇya*), an analogy which seems to be invented by Pattanaik and which, while loosely reminding one of Sanskrit concepts, seems to also owe to modern psychology, including through its neo-spiritual and neoliberal filter. The author hints that, through culture brought by a "culture hero",[355] the untamed mind is said to become domesticated and safe like a city. Mirroring this description, Pattanaik writes that the forest does not turn Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā into savages. Thanks to their presence, monkeys and bears become civilised (262) and awaken to human potential.

[354] The term is derived from the village of Naksalbāḍī, in West Bengal, where the movement originated in the 1960s. MUKHERJEE, Arun Prosad (2007). *Maoist 'Spring Thunder': The Naxalite Movement (1967-1972)*, Kolkata: K. B. Bagchi & Company; CHITRALEKHA (2012). *Ordinary People, Extraordinary Violence: Naxalites and Hindu Extremists in India*, London: Routledge; SAMADDAR, Ranabir (ed.) (2019). *From Popular Movements: The Naxalite Decade*, London: Routledge. Most online newspapers from India keep specific sections devoted to news related to the subject.

[355] LONG, Jerome H. (2005) [1987]. "Culture Heroes" in JONES, Lindsay, (ed). *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 3, Detroit: Thomson Gale, pp. 2090-2093.

Besides being associated with animals, outcastes, tribals and humanoid species, the forest is regarded by all contemporary retellers as the space allocated to high caste elders who abandon culture in order to give way to the next generation (Pattanaik, 2013a: 33). Life in the forest is said to consist of *vanaprastha āśrama*, "the stage of life of going to the forest", the third of the four stages (*āśrama*)[356] of life that higher castes are supposed to follow and the first one that requires disengagement from society. Pattanaik states that:

> Most writers present Sita's life in the forest in a tragic mood as they equate life in the forest with poverty, not wisdom. They forget the wisdom of India that regards wealth only in functional terms and not as an indicator of self-worth. The sage is never poor even though he has nothing (292).

Pattanaik does not explain who "most writers" could be. Premodern writers? Modern writers? Both? In the contemporary globalised world, exile to the forest would indeed likely constitute a tragedy for most urban dwellers. If ancient writers are included, it seems strange that Pattanaik considers that they would not know what his so-called premodern wisdom of India would be. If it includes modern writers, then this is another instantiation of a discursive strategy to which the contemporary male retellers often resort, that is, the idea that they are the representatives and spokespersons of Indian wisdom. In any case, this seems to be another example of the stereotype about the spirituality of India against its materialism. Despite its possible dangers and associations with violence and dark magic, the forest is said to be a place conducive to spiritual growth, provided that a given individual is able to exert self-control. While the *rākṣasas* use magic for evil purposes, ascetics use it for benign ones. This description reveals how notions of space can lead to opposite outcomes, depending on the creatures involved, given that the representation of high caste sages living in the forest is different from that of non-human beings.

Tripathi (2015), who, like Pattanaik, is usually willing to modernise his language and adapt it to the modern capitalistic context, writes that the "untamed forests" belong to the forest peoples, who "rent" them to *gurus* (51). Divakaruni (2019) also states that most sages (*ṛṣis*) live in hermitages on the edge of the forest, closer to civilisation, for

[356] One should not confuse the term *āśrama* in the sense of "different stages of life that higher caste men should perform in order to fulfil their *dharma*" with the sense of "place where holy men live a life of asceticism". OLIVELLE, Patrick (1993). *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution*, New York: Oxford University Press.

increased safety and other practical reasons (138). In Rāma's perspective, by pacifying the forests and getting them rid of *rākṣasas*, he and Lakṣmaṇa are doing a service to those sages (151). In Kané's (2016) novel, Viśravas states that he is a *ṛṣi*, whereby he cannot stay in the palace, since his identity lies in the forest hermitage (73). In a pejorative description of Tantric Shaivite ascetics (*sādhus*)[357] and their uselessness in a contemporary neoliberal context, Neelakantan (2012) describes ascetics who live in the jungle as people who smear their bodies with ashes, wear skulls and bones as ornaments, and stand in acrobatic postures for hours without doing anything useful. In a more positive light, he adds that, contrary to urban priests, jungle ascetics are blind to casteism. This description reveals that in nature social boundaries are regarded as disappearing. For that reason, like Pattanaik's Śambūka, Bhadra is said to prefer the freedom offered by hermitages (474-475).

Finally, different spaces have been associated with gender. Neelakantan (2012) writes that:

> There was something mysterious about this land [India]. When great conquering armies succeeded in their mission and settled down between the great Indus-Ganges plain, they seemed to lose their tough edge and got rounded and feminine. The land changed them from great barbarians to gentle creatures with a taste for the fine things of life. This happened to all the great conquering armies before the Asuras, and you can see it now happening to the present Deva kingdoms of the north.
>
> And it happened to the Asura people as well. But the kings wanted to think of themselves as the descendants of great warriors who swept through the country. (51-52).

This is yet another playful adoption of Orientalist discourses by the author, in this case, the idea of an Aryan invasion/migration and the idea that Indian civilisation was feminine (Sinha, 1995). In Neelakantan's case, the idea of "femininity" is associated with local geography. In fact, Macaulay wrote something similar when he mentioned that Indians were "enervated by a soft climate" (quoted in Sinha, 1995: 15).

From colonial Orientalist and postcolonial nationalistic perspectives, this kind of emasculation tends to be regarded as deeply negative. While there are positive association between women and nature in contemporary discourses, these often tend to

[357] GROSS, Robert Lewis (1992). *The Sadhus of India: A Study of Hindu Asceticism*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications; BOSMIA, A. N., GRIESSENNAUER, C. J., and TUBBS, R. S. (2013). "Use of the human calvaria and skull as alms bowls and drinking vessels by Aghori ascetics in present-day India" *Child's Nervous System*, Vol. 29, N. 10, pp. 1785–1787.

be patriarchal constructions. Besides the common expression "Mother India", there are ancient Sanskrit expressions that point to the comparison between the female body and the land, such as *Bhū-devī* or *Bhūmi-devī,* "Earth-goddess".[358] Baindur (2015) discusses the representation of nature as a feminine goddess in Indian history and culture and concludes that the connection between women and nature has often led to the devaluation and exploitation of both, given that both have been represented as the receptacle of men's seed (14-16).

These ideas are mainly reflected in Pattanaik's (2013a) retelling, which is full of comparisons between cultural facts (agriculture and marriage) and natural ones (sex, birth, forests and rivers). There are also descriptions of the ways in which men and women, here symbolised by Rāma and Sītā, are related to such associations. The author writes that every village in India is associated with a goddess (*grāmadevatā*),[359] whom he calls "the domesticated earth who sustains the village" and who "receives seed and bears children, the plants" (194). One of the village goddesses (*grāmadevatās)* that Pattanaik mentions is *Mumbadevi,* "goddess Mumba", the tutelary goddess of Mumbai (194). In fact, Mumbadevi is the name of the fictionalised city of Mumbai in Tripathi's *Ram Chandra Series*. Similarly, an important character in Tripathi's latter novels is *Kanya kumārī,* Sanskrit for "maiden princess". Kanyakumari is also the name of the southernmost point of the Indian subcontinent,[360] which makes it an important natural border. Pattanaik (2013a) states that the agricultural symbols used in traditional Indian weddings transform the groom into the "farmer" and the bride into the "farmed land". The author mostly alludes to this cultural idea in neutral terms, although, in the following passage, his claim that this may sound "distasteful" reveals that it differs from modern gender ideals and that, in this case, the author probably does not wish to be associated with this idea: "wedding rites in India have symbols that are rooted in agricultural practices that the modern mind may consider distasteful, ideas that describe the man as the farmer who plants the seed and the woman as the field who germinates the seed" (61).

[358] NAGARAJAN, Vijaya (1998) "The Earth as Goddess Bhū Devī: Toward a Theory of 'Embedded Ecologies' in Folk Hinduism" in NELSON, Lance (ed.). *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, New York: State University of New York.

[359] PADMA, Sree (2013). *Vicissitudes of the Goddess: Reconstructions of the Gramadevata in India's Religious Traditions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[360] In English, better-known by the name Cape Comorin, an Anglicised version of the Sanskrit name.

In other passages, the author seemingly interprets this cultural idea in a positive way, given that he relates it to the discourse of feminine freedom of choice. Rāma states that no one can claim Sītā, given that, like the earth, Sītā is the one who allows herself to be claimed (158). Pattanaik also states that Rāma "seeped into the earth" that contained Sītā and caused the "seeds to germinate" (312). Later, when Rāma abandons Sītā and she goes back to the forest, she unties her hair, one of the symbols of marriage, that is, of culture. Following this decision, the author adds that "when the farmer abandons the field, the field is finally free to return to being a forest" (279). In the author's language, this again means that Rāma "domesticates" Sītā into culture. However, in the end, she freely chooses to revert to undomesticated nature.[361]

Comparisons between sex, the female body and the land often acquire a violent dimension. The personification of the motherland, the idea that it should be protected by national citizens and the idea that it can be raped by foreigners seem to be common ideas in nationalistic discourses (Billig, 1995: 4). Referring to the drug-smuggling promoted by Western colonisers in India and China during the 19th century,[362] Tripathi (2017b) remarks that some Chinese and Indian businessmen collaborated "in this rape of their motherlands" (129). In another passage, the author writes that Hindu scriptures state that the gods abandon a land in which women are not respected, so that every patriotic Indian should respect women (168). This is a quote from the *Manusmṛti* which Tripathi (2015) also uses in his retelling of the epic. Kaikeyī says it when she learns that Dhenuka is not going to be tried for having raped Rośnī (155).

The previous chapters have shown that comparison between women and the land tends to be intimately related to the question of male honour. Retaining one's honour and protecting one's property may be regarded as demonstrations of manliness. Following this idea, Pattanaik (2013a) writes that in some communities of ancient times women were related to property. Upon marriage, the husband came to live at the woman's house and gained new property through her. In the author's view, this is the reason why many women of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are given the name of their homeland

[361] In Pattanaik's (2013a) retelling, a similar comparison is made between rivers and women. Viśvāmitra states that, as the Ganges enables the rebirth of humanity and vegetation, women enable the rebirth of a family. He also applies this metaphor to marriage, which he calls a river that creates "fertile riverbanks" (52).

[362] OWEN, David Edward (1968). *British Opium Policy in China and India*, New Haven: Yale University Press. MARKOVITS, Claude (2008). "The Political Economy of Opium Smuggling in Early Nineteenth Century India: Leakage of Resistance?" *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, Nº. 1, pp. 89-111; BOEHME, Kate (2015). "Smuggling India: Deconstructing Western India's Illicit Export Trade, 1818-1870" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 25, Nº. 4, pp. 685-704; BAUER, Rolf (2019). *The Peasant Production of Opium in Nineteenth-Century India*, Leiden: Brill.

(180).[363] It is also perhaps for this reason that Vasiṣṭha instructs Rāma and his brothers that a husband can only claim wealth and property when his wife is by his side (66). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, for instance, Kauśalyā is described as a "sought-after prize", given that her dowry included half of the kingdom of Kosala, from which her name is derived (67).

Kané (2016) tells a story from Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* that interweaves the identification between the female body and the land, the duty that males have in protecting both and the description of physical rape as akin to destroying the land. The tale talks about how king Daṇḍa raped Aruja. When he learns about this, Śukrācārya, Aruja's father, curses the king and his land. Given that Daṇḍa is unable to distinguish and respect the boundaries between man and animal, the land is cursed to become a jungle. Kané's concludes that "[a] daughter's rape had spurred her vengeful father to turn a happy kingdom into a wasteland" (181-182). This story is also mentioned in Pattanaik's (2013a: 103-104) retelling. Here, this story is told in a neutral way to explain the psychological or cultural idea of how the mind creates boundaries. Given the present age of increasing nationalism(s), however, it does not take a stretch of the imagination to turn these psychological concepts into nationalistic ones and to represent the nation as weak and in dire need of physical protection against invaders who may come and "rape" land and women, as one may see in Tripathi's discourse on the rape of the motherland. Kané (2016), for her part, is more interested in the feminist potential of this "strange story" (181), a less neutral way to call it, given that Śūrpaṇakhā compares her story to Aruja's one and, because of it, decides to get revenge from the male characters of the novel.

In the contemporary retellings, women are often said to possess a more intimate relationship with the forest than men, who usually fear it and describe it as dangerous. In Kané's (2016) novel, Tāraka is said to have been born as a forest nymph (*yakṣiṇī*) with a "natural affinity towards the woods and the mountains" (14). Viśravas reinforces the idea that men are intrinsically afraid of nature. He fears that Tāraka is involved in "supernatural sorcery" through which she may control the wilderness she rules over (14). The association between femininity and nature, particularly the forest, is even clearer when one considers Divakaruni's (2019) Sītā and Kané's (2016) Śūrpaṇakhā, who are both described in very similar ways in their close relationship with nature. In

[363] Sītā is also often called Maithilī, given that she comes from Mithilā.

Divakaruni's (2019) novel, the identification between Sītā and nature begins in the title and cover and ends in the back cover. The cover (Figure 14) depicts a Sītā drawn in *Pahāṛī* style.[364] This anonymous 19th century painting[365] is titled *Virahiṇī Nāyikā*, a Sanskrit phrase composed of *virahiṇī*, "woman who is separated from her husband", and *nāyikā*, "mistress".[366] This painting does not point to any specific real or fictional woman. It was associated with Sītā because the painting and the character are associated with the novel. In the painting, "Sītā" sits alone in the forest. She holds a palm leaf in her arms. Perhaps this is the leaf in which she is meant to write her *Rāmāyaṇa*. The back cover of Divakaruni's novel depicts stylised leaves and flowers. In other words, even before reading the novel, the reader can predict that the depiction of the intimate relationship of women and nature shall be positive. In Divakaruni's novel, Sītā assumes the role of a tutelary goddess. Once, she is explicitly referred to as an "earth-goddess" (9), an English term which should immediately remind Indian readers of the concept of *Bhū-devī* or *Bhūmi-devī*. In another passage, she presses her cheeks against the ground and prays that "Mother Earth" gives her strength (184). Contrary to male characters in Tripathi's retellings, she mentions neither India nor the blood of patriots, which means that her association with the land is depicted as being one of natural belonging and not of cultural nationalism.

One of Sītā's most common epithets is "daughter of the earth", a literal translation of the Sanskrit term *bhūputrī*. In most versions of the epic tradition, she is said to be found by her father Janaka beneath the soil instead of being born from a woman's womb. A 2011 feminist graphic novel retelling of the epic told from Sītā's perspective is titled *Sita, Daughter of the Earth: A Graphic Novel* (Udwin, 2011). This association is emphasised in Pattanaik's (2013a) and Divakaruni's (2019) retellings. Pattanaik (2013a) writes that Sītā has always been associated with vegetation (4). When Sītā is found, Janaka calls her *Bhūmija*, Sanskrit for "born from the earth". Her most well-known name, Sītā, is the Sanskrit term for "furrow", the place where she is found (10). Pattanaik likewise derives Ahalyā's name from the Sanskrit *hala*, "plough", to which

[364] Painting style inspired by Persian miniatures and made in the mountainous Himalayan regions (whence the name, which means "from the mountains" in Hindi) of North India during the Moghul period. GOSWAMY, B. N. (1981). "Leaves from an Early Pahari Ramayana Series: Notes on a Group of Nine Paintings in the Rietberg Museum, Zurich" *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 43, Nº. 1,/2, pp. 153-164; GOSWAMY, B. N., and FISCHER, Eberhard (1992). *Pahari Masters: Court Painters of Northern India*, Zürich: Artibus Asiae Publishers.

[365] https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1989.335 (accessed on 18/9/2021).

[366] Common motif of *Pahāṛī* painting. The Cleveland Museum of Art, which houses this painting, translates the phrase as "Love-Torn Heroine".

is added the negative prefix *a-*, thus forming "unploughed [field]" (44). A furrow is a "ploughed field". This means that Sītā's and Ahalyā's name may be compared to nature and contrasted between themselves. In Tripathi's (2015) novel, despite Sītā's masculinised depiction, she states that "daughter of the earth" is her favourite nickname (264). In Neelakantan's (2012) retelling, Sītā is never called by this epithet. However, when Rāvaṇa sees her for the first time he states that she looks like a "goddess of the forest" (307).

According to Pattanaik (2013a), as Sītā is the daughter of the earth, when she enters the forest, she is said to cause it to bloom (105). In a latter passage, the author adds that when winter begins to wane women tend to embrace Aśoka trees (*Saraca asoca*),[367] given that gardeners believe that in this way the trees will bloom faster (138). These descriptions resemble two important modern Indian ecological movements: the *Chipko movement,* which began in Uttar Pradesh in 1973, and the *Apikko movement,* which began in Uttarakhand in 1983. This suggests how such mythic tropes may influence cultural behaviour. *Chipko* and *Appiko* mean "to embrace" in Hindi and Kannada, respectively. Both movements involved non-violent forms of protest in which local women demonstrated against the destruction of forests by hugging trees. Both movements have been traced to the Khejarli Massacre of 1730, which involved the Bhisnoi, a Hindu community from the northern states of India. In 1730, the Bhisnoi, led by a woman called Amrita Devi, protested against the destruction of trees by Abhai Singh (1702-1749), the Maharaja of Jodhpur. Singh wanted to build a palace in the place of Bhisnoi's grove. However, the women thwarted his troops by hugging the trees.[368]

The gendered and ecological importance of this event is reflected in the fact that, in 2001, the Indian government instituted a national award called *Amrita Devi Bhisnoi Wildlife Protection Award.* Besides being relevant for ecological discourses, Amrita Devi and the women of the *Chipko* and *Apikko* movements have been relevant for

[367] In Hindi, the *Saraca asoca* is also called *Sītā Aśoka,* given that Sītā is said to have sat among such trees when she was a captive in Laṅkā. http://www.flowersofindia.net/catalog/slides/Sita%20Ashok.html (accessed on 12/9/2021).

[368] JAMES, George A. (2005). s.v. "Appiko Movement" in TAYLOR, Bron R. (ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum; CRADDOCK, Elaine, and LAL, Vinay (2005). s.v. "Chipko Movement" in TAYLOR, Bron R. (ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum; LAL, Vinay (2005). s.v. "Bhisnoi" in TAYLOR, Bron R. (ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum; JAIN, Pankaj (2011). *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, Surrey: Ashgate. Gosling (2001) has also devoted a chapter to these movements.

Indian feminist discourses.[369] These modern movements are not seen in isolation. They are interpreted in continuity with the premodern past. This means that they are not supposed to represent innovations, as recent terms such as *ecofeminism* would indicate. In fact, the relationship between women and nature is another idea which exists beyond mythology, modern literary fiction and cultural behaviour and straddles into modern academia. In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, Shiva (1998) states that Indian women have always stood at the forefront in the life-enhancing conservation of forests, given that they have protected nature as *prakṛti*, the force that supports life, and have challenged the Western conception of nature as a resource to be exploited (xv). According to this description, men are regarded as *omnivores* and women as *ecosystem people*. In these mythological, literary, cultural and scholarly associations, the association between women and nature stems from a positive feminine discourse and not from a negative patriarchal one. This seems to hint that the relationship between patriarchy and feminism does not necessarily imply the complete rejection or inversion of ideas. It may merely imply the inversion of affective values attached to such ideas. In other words, stereotypes with likely negative individual and social consequences for women may be reinterpreted in a positive way. I would compare this gendered tendency to reevaluate such cultural discourses with the civilisational tendency to reevaluate negative Orientalist stereotypes as positive postcolonial ones, such as the idea of the spirituality of India.

Due to her close relationship with nature and contrary to male characters, Sītā is usually said to learn to deal with the forest. In Pattanaik's (2013a) novel, she learns how to communicate with animals after spending a long time observing them. She later shares everything she learns with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa (114). Rāma warns her that they are living in a forest and not in a garden and that there is "danger lurking in every corner" (121). In other words, the garden is represented as a replica of a forest created by humans. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā calls the palace garden her joy (288) and her favourite responsibility (303). As a narrative symbol, the garden provides counterpoint to the hermitage, which is a city within a forest. In other words, the hermitage, the garden and the palace may be regarded places where the wilderness is domesticated.

369 https://feminisminindia.com/2020/09/11/when-amrita-devi-and-362-bishnois-sacrificed-their-lives-for-the-khejri-tree/ (accessed on 21/7/2022).

Sītā is also often said to be able to transform nature. In Pattanaik's (2013a) novel, Rāma tries to get Sītā back after he expels her from Ayodhyā. He asks Lakṣmaṇa to tell Sītā that 14 years alone in the palace have been worse than 14 years with Sītā in the forest, given that she has transformed wilderness into a wonderful place (303). Other examples of Sītā's proximity to nature and the forest are the frequent passages in which she feels as much empathetic towards other humans as she feels towards the forest and its creatures. This, as I have said previously, is mainly evident in Divakaruni's (2019) version, in which Lakṣmaṇa does not approve of Sītā's friendship with forest creatures, given that they are depicted as dangerous shape-shifters (139). When Sītā is banished from Ayodhyā, she teaches her sons "the secrets of the forest" (291), which includes forbidding the killing of any creature. This affinity between women and nature goes beyond the animal kingdom. Sītā feels distressed when she sees the soldiers of her father's army destroying the forest. She asks them not to harm the trees because the forest is their home and humans are mere visitors there (55). In a similar scene, Rāma wishes to make the forest safer for ascetics. However, Sītā states that she and Rāma are only visitors, adds that the forest possesses its own rules, rhythm, "savage beauty", and that it belongs more to *rākṣasas* than to humans (151). While particularly emphasised in Divakaruni's ecofeminist discourse, in Pattanaik's (2013a) retelling, Sītā also asks Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa whether they can enjoy the presence of the animals instead of hunting them. Rāma answers that they are kings, warriors and hunters and that they are supposed to hunt in order to maintain their skills intact (121).

The last trait associated with the relationship between femininity and nature is Sītā's innate affinity towards plants and their healing capacity. Another skill that Sītā teaches her children in Pattanaik's (2013a) retelling is the ability to recognise and use medicinal herbs (331). Sītā states that she has a mysterious gift with plants because, like plants, she is earth-born. When she touches a plant, she knows its healing properties right away. In general terms, this skill is not associated to femininity only in Indian tradition. Women also tend to be associated with herbal healing in other traditional societies. This association has been revived in modern feminist discourses. The modern stereotype, reflected in academia through works such as Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India,* is that, while men and science have strayed from the natural world, women and alternative medicinal practices have maintained a close

relationship with nature.[370] Accordingly, Sītā and other female characters, including Kaikeyī, are said to be "healers" in Divakaruni's (2019) novel, much like the aboriginal *vānaras* are said to have invented *āyurveda* in Neelakantan's story. No individual male character is described as a "healer", neither in Divakaruni's novel nor in any contemporary retelling. In Divakaruni's story, in fact, Sītā does not even need the medium of plants. Patients are healed merely by her touch (7).

Pattanaik (2013a) also resorts to nature to invert the popular stereotype that Rāma was a free character and Sītā an oppressed one. According to him, while the ideal city is said to be a cultural place in which rules are upheld by the leader, the wilderness is said to be a space devoid of rules. For this reason, the forest is depicted as socially less oppressive. The seventh chapter of Pattanaik's retelling is titled "Freedom" and begins with the caption: "[h]e remained trapped in culture, but nature set her free" (255). Here, *he* refers to Rāma and *her* to Sītā. In his retelling, female characters often refer to nature's freedom and cherish it, which means that women are supposed to be closer to nature and less eager to follow cultural rules. After her banishment, Sītā is said to be able to leave her bridal clothes and instead wear the clothes made of leaf and bark that "she has always wished to wear" (285). When she first sees Śūrpaṇakhā, she comments on how freeing it is to walk around naked (142). Pattanaik states that in the forest Sītā is nobody's daughter, daughter-in-law or wife. She is just a woman who is free to do as she pleases (112). When talking to Rāma, she states that she feels that the forest exile is bad for him and good for her, given that in the forest there is freedom and no rules or rituals (122). As in nature there are no cultural dichotomies, Sītā learns that there one does not see dichotomies such as charity/exploitation or selfishness/selflessness. She considers this to be a perfect situation. Rāma counter-argues by stating that he feels afraid because he sees only plants and animals feeding on each other. In a perfect society, however, humans should not feel afraid (115). When the exile ends and Rāma and Sītā go back to Ayodhyā, Sītā dreams about the forest and misses the "freedom of the wild" (276). This kind of representation also exists in Tripathi's (2015) novel, in which Sītā states that forests are considered to be dangerous and cities considered to be safe. However, she states she has never been as happy as when living in *Daṇḍakāraṇya*.

[370] STEIN, Diane (1990). *All Women are Healers: A Comprehensive Guide to Natural Healing*, Berkeley: Crossing Press; FISHER; Sue (1995). *Nursing Wounds: Nurse Practitioners, Doctors, Women Patients, and the Negotiation of Meaning*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press; EHRENREICH, Barbara, and ENGLISH, Deirdre (2010). *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, New York: The Feminist Press; BELLEBUONO, Holly (2014). *Women Healers of the World: The Traditions, the History, and the Geography*, New York: Helios Press.

Rāma tells her that he understands how she has suffered in the world of the "civilised" (between inverted commas in the original) (334). In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Sītā knows that, in spite of its hardships, she will miss the forest (312), given that she is aware that she will never live in such freedom once she is crowned queen (154).

In Pattanaik's (2013a) novel, when Rāma abandons Sītā in the forest, she again notices that the forest has no boundaries, that there is nothing pure or polluted, and that everything has value. As Sītā states, culture excludes what it does not value, while nature includes everything. Sītā then weeps for Rāma, who is said to be locked by cultural rules, while she can enjoy whatever she wants and whenever she wants in the forest (280). Just as Neelakantan's (2012) character Bhadra enjoys the forest for its lack of social divisions, Divakaruni's (2019) Sītā enjoys going back to the hermitage community, where everyone trusts and accepts her (352). This is yet another instance in which the subaltern experience of women is associated with the subaltern experience of the lower castes or classes. Finally, when Sītā refuses to go back to Rāma, Pattanaik (2013a) states that she turns away from the rules of society and chooses the freedom of nature, given that, contrary to men, she does not need society (305). This means that social life is depicted as being relevant only for men, at least until the stage of life when they decide to abandon it, that being the reason why they are more attached to the city.

I end this discussion about Sītā, femininity and space with the best-known example related to such ideas. In Pattanaik's (2013a) novel, when Rāma cries out for help in the forest and Lakṣmaṇa draws his line on the ground (*Lakṣmaṇa Rekhā*), Lakṣmaṇa says to Sītā that, in the forest, she is "just a woman for the taking" (130). Lakṣmaṇa tells Sītā not to step out of the line, given that inside it she is protected. Any man who tries to cross the line will burn into flames (*Ibid.*). Like the hermitage, Lakṣmaṇa's line is a domesticated boundary created inside the forest, in this case in order to protect Sītā. The expression *Lakṣmaṇa Rekhā* has come to be used to define both the boundary between culture and nature and the patriarchal subjugation of Indian women. According to the *Hindustan Times,* Kailash Vijayvargiya (1956-), who was until 2023 the National General Secretary of the BJP, used the concept of the *Lakṣmaṇa Rekhā* in relation to the 2012 Delhi gang-rape and murder. He stated that

> [t]here is only one word – limits (*maryādā*). If there is a violation to these limits, Sitā will be kidnapped. There's a Lakṣmaṇa's line

(*Lakṣmaṇa rekhā*) drawn for everybody. If somebody crosses it, that person will face Rāvaṇa. He will kidnap Sitā.[371]

Again, one may see how mythological tropes do not tend to have only a psychological dimension but may influence how people think and act. According to Vijayvargiya, humans are supposed to respect cultural boundaries. If they do so, nothing bad happens. Vijayvargiya mentioned the term "limits" (*maryādā*). This means that Rāma is depicted as the ideal, given that he is the *Maryādā Puruṣottama*, the "perfect man who knows the boundaries". Sītā, who crosses the *Lakṣmaṇa Rekhā,* does not know her limits, which means that she is not ideal and has to pay for her transgression. Vijayvargiya applied this case to human society in general. However, the ideal is represented by a man and the counter-ideal by a woman. Besides, the event which inspired this conflation of mythology and reality involved a girl who was said to have transgressed her boundaries and who, as a result, was raped by men. Finally, Vijayvargiya, who is a man, was the one who got to decide the limits, who transgressed them and the price that the transgressors should pay. In short, this discourse tries to justify in a modern garb the traditional idea that women are to blame for the violence inflicted upon them.

Pattanaik's assessment of the way Sītā embodies the mindset of a modern businesswoman and his representation of her crossing the *Lakṣmaṇa Rekhā* as an entrepreneurial decision is more positive than that of Vijayvargiya, as Figures 42 and 56 show.

[371] "Women will be punished like Sītā if they cross their limits: Kailash Vijayvargiya" (2013) *Hindustan Times*, https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/women-will-be-punished-like-Sītā-if-they-cross-their-limits-kailash-vijayvargiya/story-6MbfNNnxckK58otG5DZyKO.html (accessed on 28/1/2020).

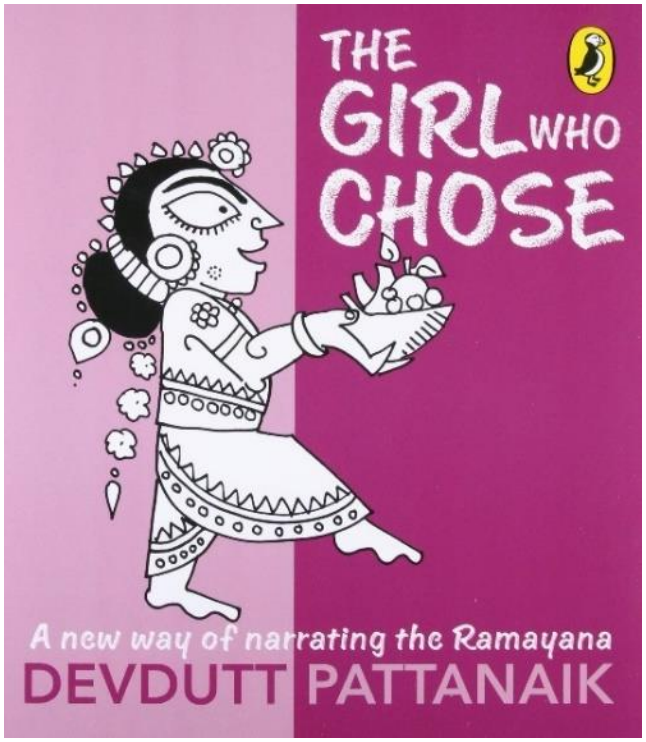


Figure 56 - Cover of Pattanaik's (2013) *The Girl Who Chose: A new way of narrating the Ramayana*

Figure 56 shows the cover of *The Girl Who Chose: A new way of narrating the Ramayana*, one of Pattanaik's (2013) versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* for children. In this case, the line (*rekhā*) is represented as dividing between two rectangles coloured with different shades of purple. A confident Sītā knowingly crosses the boundary. The illustrator emphasises her action of stepping forward and, as the title states, abiding by her choices.

There are no associations with business in this case, given that this is a book for children and not for adults. However, there is a clear attempt to represent traditional Indian women as emancipated and pro-active in their personal and professional lives and to inculcate such ideas into the minds of Indian English-speaking children.

Although they often represent antagonistic kinds of women in most popular versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, when it comes to her relationship with nature and the forest, the description of Kané's Śūrpaṇakhā is similar to that of Divakaruni's Sītā. In Kané's (2016) novel, the forest is initially a private place where Śūrpaṇakhā is able to vent her anger away from the public's view (33). In this case, Śūrpaṇakhā is different from Sītā, who, following the ideal of self-control, tends to stay calm and composed even during the most adverse situations, except in Tripathi's novel, in which, just like Rāma, she feels unassailable anger towards social injustices. However, like Divakaruni's Sītā, Kané's Śūrpaṇakhā is said to find the opulence of the palace stifling and to prefer the rustic peace of the hermitage and the jungle (79/268), given that there she is said to have everything for herself (177-178). Śukrācārya states and Śūrpaṇakhā learns by experience that in the forest there are neither boundaries nor social impositions. As the laws of the jungle are different, Śūrpaṇakhā believes animals to be truer to nature, while men are said to have turned against nature (177-178). Even though

Śūrpaṇakhā sees the forest as a battlefield where human power is useless and humans have to survive like other animals, she loves it and finds beauty in the wilderness, given that it has a "natural discipline" that all creatures have to respect (182). When Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa find her, they say that they are impressed to find a lonely woman in the dangerous forest. Śūrpaṇakhā answers that the forest is idyllic and that she is free there. Both brothers end up calling her their "host" and the "lady of this forest" (196). Similarly, in Divakaruni's (2019) novel, when Śūrpaṇakhā encounters Sītā and learns that she comes from Ayodhyā, she states that he has never heard of it, given that she does not keep track of cities and prefers the freedom of the forest (143). When Śūrpaṇakhā finds Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, she repeats that she is not much for palaces and prefers living the natural life because she speaks her mind and does not follow rules of propriety, which, she adds, would be troublesome for her in court (146). This, much like in Pattanaik's depictions, means that women are angels/goddesses or whores only when they are judged in courts (city). In nature, female ideals and counter-ideals collapse. When away from men's view in the forest, Sītā and Śūrpaṇakhā are not different. They are "sisters" united by gender.

Occasionally, one finds descriptions which reveal that women are not intrinsically associated with the forest. Pattanaik (2013a) remarks that, while holy men are said to find wisdom in hermitages, most ancient and modern authors of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition have depicted women sent to the forest more in the role of victims than in the role of sages (100). It is clear that women are regarded as victims in the city because they are subject to patriarchy and in the forest because men have traditionally been the ones associated with the spiritual pursuits which enable one to let go of social and material desires. By representing the freedom of the forest and female affinity with it, Pattanaik and other moder retellers authors, such as Divakaruni, have tried to invert this representation, mainly in scenes in which male characters are said not to believe that women can last for a long time in the forest and such beliefs later prove to be untrue. In Pattanaik's (2013a) retelling, for instance, when Rāma is about to go into exile, he tells Sītā that the forest is no place for a princess and that she must wait for him in the palace. In Divakaruni's (2019) novel, Rāma states that Sītā has no idea of the dangers that lurk in the forest and that it is impossible for her to survive for 14 years among the wild beasts, *rākṣasas* and black magic (109-112). However, in both cases, these fears are proved to be unfounded.

6.4 The idea of the village

Even though the village is relevant for the definition of the "idea of India" and Indian village life has been an important topic in Indian English literature (Singh, 1989: 209-213), this concept is almost absent in the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Mostly, what is depicted are the extremes of culture and nature: cities and forests. Whenever the retellers wish to create counterpoint between these extremes, they tend to point to hermitages, which may be regarded as replicas of cities in the forest, and gardens, which may be regarded as replicas of forests in the city. The few representations of the Indian village tend to idealised in a neo-Romantic way. According to Tripathi's (2015) novel, during his education in Vasiṣṭha's hermitage, Rāma visits a local village. Vasiṣṭha later asks him what he thought of the experience. Rāma states that village life is wonderful and idyllic and that villagers lead a more civilised life than city-dwellers, given that they follow simple laws which have remained unchanged for centuries. He concludes that city-dwellers could learn from villagers (61).

Neelakantan (2012) also depicts villages as positive places. Bhadra states that, despite being small, his village has everything that is necessary for a good life (43). After the *devas* attack and destroy it and Bhadra seeks revenge from them, he often wishes to go back to that simple life (133). He fantasises that he would have a small hut, a faithful wife, beautiful children, some fields to till and lots of free time to enjoy (349). In another scene, Rāvaṇa visits his prime-minister, who has moved to the countryside. Rāvaṇa speaks of his home as a neat and cosy hut surrounded by farm animals, fruit trees and a pond. He states he understands why his prime-minister has wished to escape the palace to that "rustic haven", given that, rather than choosing poverty, he has chosen "rich simplicity" (397).[372] As usual, Neelakantan is the only one to go against this urbanite tendency of representing village life as completely opposed to the oppressive modern metropolis. Bhadra claims that he sometimes exaggerates when making the life of a common farmer seem better than what it is (108). Again, this

[372] Even though this tendency to idealise village life is defined as Indian, it is not exclusive to India. Throughout much of European art history, the term *pastoral* defined different kinds of art which described the idealised beauty and simplicity of nature and villages. Such works of art were often created by city-dwellers who knew little about village life. Nowadays, the pastoral genre is neither a major literary, pictorial nor musical one. However, English terms such *pastoral*, *rustic*, *bucolic* or *idyllic*, the one which the contemporary retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tend to use the most, retain the meaning of an idealised yet naively urban view of the countryside.

shows how aware Neelakantan is of stereotypes and how he often attempts to both follow and deconstruct them, often in ambiguous ways.

Conclusion

The *Rāmāyaṇa* after 2020

In this thesis, I have tried to understand how the retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* written in the second decade of the 21st century have depicted Indian society and culture. I have focused each chapter on a topic related with relevant issues pertaining to contemporary Indian society: gender, caste/class/species, time/history, and space/geography. Figure 57, which depicts one of the protests related to the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, encapsulates some of these topics in ways that remind one of the manner in which contemporary English-language retellings have been engaged with modernity in both real and potential terms.



Figure 57 - "India to hang 2012 New Delhi gang rape convicts on January 22" (Aljazeera)[373]

The largest poster reads: "JUSTICE: Burning Ravan every year won't help… he never touched Sita!! Why not burn the inhuman rapists??". The picture points to myth and reality. It describes a real event and is a response to it. However, it also refers to the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition, which I have summarised in the first chapter. The real event and the myth are related to matters of gender, which I have analysed in the third chapter, given that the perpetrators and the victim involved in the event and the myth were

[373] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/7/india-to-hang-2012-new-delhi-gang-rape-convicts-on-january-22 (accessed on 12/7/2022).

several men and one woman and that the real event sparked a heated discussion about the condition of women in modern India in ways which reminded at least the creators of this poster of the epic. The connection with the issues of humanity and animality, which I have analysed in the fourth chapter, is subtler. The rapists are called "inhuman" and the drawing of the hapless woman (Sītā? Jyoti Singh? An abstract Indian woman? All of them?) humanises her and evokes empathy in ways that are also similar to the manner in which Dhenuka is represented in Tripathi's (2015) novel and all positive female characters are represented in the works of Divakaruni and Kané.

"Burning Ravan every year won't help" refers to *Dusshera* (in Hindi, *daśahrā,* "ten days") celebration. This festivity is associated with the *Rāmāyaṇa*, specifically with Rāma's defeat of Rāvaṇa, in several regions, mostly in North India. As a ritual that is celebrated every year to commemorate a past event, this picture is related to time, which I have analysed in the fifth chapter. In several places in North India, the festival ends with the burning of giant effigies of Rāvaṇa, his brother Kumbhakarṇa and his son Meghanāda/Indrajit.[374] This is the burning of Rāvaṇa to which the poster alludes. Given that this ritual is specific to some regions of India and that it has different characteristics in different places, a fact which shows the diversity of Indian tradition, this picture is also related to space, which I have analysed in the sixth chapter. By being re-enacted every year, the myth straddles into reality. However, as the poster states, this re-enactment stands somewhere between myth and reality, given that it never becomes a *charter*. This idea underscores how the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition has been used to (re)interpret the "idea of India" and the tension between traditional and modernity, a subject which I have analysed in the second chapter.

In Indian mythology, fire saves the chaste and burns the profligate. However, as the poster states, the mythic being (Rāvaṇa) never committed the act he is punished for, while the real men who raped Jyoti Singh Pandey were not punished for years after this photo was taken. They were hanged in 2020, as the newspaper article that includes this photo reports.[375] This picture reveals the complex relationship between myth and reality. Myths influence reality and both are influenced by representations of reality. Through the events and characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, myth may provide a cohesive textual and visual language through which it may be possible to interpret the Indian past, frame the

[374] This event is also depicted in Tripathi's documentary series *Legends of the Ramayana with Amish.* One can see it in the following *Youtube* trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGwofKQorEs (accessed on 19/7/2022).
[375] See also https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/20/india-hangs-four-men-over-2012-delhi-bus-gang-rape-and-murder (accessed on 12/7/2022).

present and envision the future. However, myths never become completely mixed with reality or vice-versa. The retellers try to make these concepts come closer and reach some balance. However, such balance is never achieved, neither in India nor in any other nation-state. Contrary to colonial Orientalist stereotypes, neither India nor any nation-state has ever been lethargic. Societies and cultures keep changing. Reality and its representations change with them. Finally, myth and its representations also need to change so that they can influence reality and be influenced by it. This means that, even though the important topics such as nation, religion and femininity tend to be regarded by popular imagination, public intellectuals and literary writers as essences which can be transformed until they reach a desirable state, I regard them as elusive projects which have to be constantly updated and which are, in a sense, utopias which exist only in the mind.

In 2020, the *Ramayan* TV series was re-aired on television amid the global Coronavirus lockdown. It is said that it broke new audience records. The show was supposed to lure older citizens into staying at home. However, it also resonated across the younger generations.[376] As I was writing the first draft of this conclusion in 2021, a new retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was published by DK (Dorling Kingsley), a well-known publisher of illustrated reference books for general readers. *The Illustrated Ramayana: The Timeless Epic of Duty, Love, and Redemption* follows the earlier (Ahmed and Das, 2017) edition of a similar retelling of the *Mahābhārata*, *The Illustrated Mahabharata: The Definitive Guide to India's Greatest Epic*, for which Pattanaik worked as a supervisor. This new version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is based on the translations of the epics by Bibek Debroy (1955-), an Indian economist who has translated the canonical *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. This work draws mainly from Vālmīki's version. However, it also contains variations from other sources, including versions from other countries. It also includes small texts explaining historical and cultural concepts relevant to the text and to Indian culture, and photographs or other

[376] BELLMAN, Eric (2020). "Coronavirus Lockdown Creates Captive Audience for '80s Show" *The Wall Street Journal,* https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-lockdown-creates-captive-audience-for-80s-show-11588082808 (accesed on 29/10/2021); RODRIGUEZ, Jeanette (2020). "India Uses Mythological Reruns to Keep the Vulnerable Indoors" *Bloomberg*, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-28/india-turns-to-mythological-reruns-to-keep-the-venerable-indoors (accessed on 29/10/2021); "Ramayan sets world record, becomes most viewed entertainment program globally amidst coronavirus lockdown" (2020). *Deccan Herald* https://www.deccanherald.com/entertainment/ramayan-sets-world-record-becomes-most-viewed-entertainment-program-globally-amidst-coronavirus-lockdown-832608.html (accessed on 29/10/2021); PATEL, K. & BINJOLA, H. (2021). "Impact of Ramayana and Mahabharata Broadcasted during Lockdown Resulting in Some Covid-19 Situation Acceptance- Conducted through Online Survey in India" *KnowEx Social Sciences*, Vol. 1, Nº. 2, pp. 37-59.

artistic representations related to the *Rāmāyaṇa*. *The Illustrated Ramayana* is a new encyclopaedic retelling of the epic that may prove appealing to non-academic foreign readers, given that it tries to be exhaustive like Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* but is much less interested in creation a stereotyped essence of India against an equally stereotyped representations of the West. Finally, in September 2022, after a cricket match between India and Pakistan, a group of about 200 Hindu men protested on the streets of Leicester, England, by shouting *jaya śrī Rāma*, "victory to Lord Rāma" and attacking Muslims. According to *Aljazeera* columnist Somdeep Sen, a professor of International Development Studies, this event marked the moment when Hindu Nationalism stopped being just an Indian problem and became an international one.[377] The re-run of the series, the publishing of *The Illustrated Ramayana* and the protests in Leicester reveal that the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition will likely continue to shape Indian society and continue to be shaped by the Indian and global markets. Therefore, my work is unfinished. It is ongoing and, like the epic, straddles into cyclical time.

Conclusions by chapter

In the first chapter, "The *Rāmāyaṇa* then and now: From Powerful Narrative to Narrative of Power", I traced the historical and cultural significance of some of the most relevant retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* to understand the works by the five contemporary English-language retellings I have chosen. Ashwin Sanghi, a popular mythological writer who mainly writes detective novels based on ancient Indian history and mythology,[378] states that 21st century mythological fiction constitutes a harmless attempt at entertaining and not at educating or enlightening (quoted on Kanjilal, 2017: 197). However, in its most widespread literary versions, including the contemporary English-language ones, the *Rāmāyaṇa* tends to go beyond mere entertainment. It has a social role which, as I have shown, can be partially explained in light of economic, political and sociocultural dynamics. From Dutt's oppositional retelling to the TV series, the retellings I analysed in this chapter had the main goal of uniting different groups of

[377] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/20/leicester-call-for-calm-after-hindu-muslim-unrest-in-uk-city (accessed on 23/1/2023); https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/9/26/violent-hindu-extremism-is-now-a-global-problem (accessed on 23/1/2023).

[378] Just as Tripathi is often compared to J. R. R. Tolkien and Paulo Coelho, Sanghi is often compared to Dan Brown. https://www.inuth.com/lifestyle/books/5-reasons-why-ashwin-sanghi-is-indias-dan-brown/ (accessed on 19/7/2022). Sanghi has never written anything related to the *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, he wrote a novel that is indirectly related to the *Mahābhārata*: *The Krishna Key*. Just like Dan Brown's novel, it mixes religion (Hinduism), conspiracy theories and murder mysteries. SANGHI, Ashwin (2012). *The Krishna Key*, Chennai: Westland.

people into an "idea of India" or of fragmenting the national concept into smaller subnational groups. Given the increasing impact of globalisation due to the introduction of neoliberal policies and to the political polarisation and interest in precolonial Indian culture caused by the rise of Hindu nationalism, the contemporary English-language male retellers try to reclaim their "ideas of India" and of Hinduism. Divakaruni and Kané, the female retellers, are much less concerned with the "idea of India" and much more concerned with the idea of the (Indian) woman. Much like, following common views in neoliberal views, the male retellers consider that contemporary India has not been psychologically decolonialised yet and that, as a result, it has not freed itself form the shackles of Western epistemology, the female retellers consider that Indian femininity has not freed itself from patriarchy.

In general terms, what unites all five contemporary retellers is the fact that they all considered that one can and should look at precolonial culture and, more specifically, at the influential characters and episodes of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, to find solutions to national and social problems. At the same time, though, they modernise tradition by either conflating it with modern globalised nationalistic, neoliberal and/or feminist values. Rob Wilson, a professor of Literature, and Wimal Dissanayake (1996), a professor of Cultural Studies, give the name *global-local nexus* to a new world-space of cultural production and national representation that is simultaneously globalised and localised (1). This expression encapsulates the function that the retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have performed in the second decade of the 21st century.

In the second chapter, "Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism: Ideas of India and Hinduism", I discussed representations of India as a nation, of Hinduism as a religion and of the way both are intertwined or not in the discourses of contemporary Indian public intellectuals and of the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. There exist two major sociopolitical representations of India: Indian secularism, which tends to be associated with the anticolonial and post-independence periods, and Hindu nationalism, which has been gaining ground in the past few years and decades. The former has mostly been inclusive and has respected the diverse identities within India, while the second one has been exclusive and has emphasised the Hindu identity above others. However, as I discussed in my analysis of the discourses on the "idea of India" by Amartya Sen, Gurcharan Das, Shashi Tharoor, and Rajiv Malhotra, representations of India tend to go beyond such simple dualism. The first three authors advocate Indian secularism. However, while Sen is very careful to dissociate India from Hinduism,

Tharoor mostly conflates both and dissociates them from what he stereotypically considers to be the values of Western and Abrahamic civilisations. Rajiv Malhotra, who is often regarded as a Hindu nationalist, tends to do the same, which means that, despite the fact that Tharoor and Malhotra are ideological rivals, their representations of India and Hinduism have been at least qualitatively comparable.

Like Tharoor and Malhotra, the contemporary male retellers of the *Rāmāyaṇa* use the epic to defend their "ideas of India". Pattanaik and Neelakantan are clear supporters of Indian secularism. Tripathi often writes explicitly in favour of political moderation and sociocultural diversity, but, as I discussed, both his nonfiction and fiction discourses tend to be politically ambiguous and, at times, seem to be very similar to Hindu nationalistic ones. In any case, even though they use terms which can have very different meanings in other contexts, such as "psychological" (Pattanaik), "contrarian" (Neelakantan) or "liberal" (Tripathi), all three authors mostly conflate what they regard as the essential traits of India with the essential traits of Hinduism and contrasted them to the essential traits of Western civilisation and Abrahamic religions. Such dichotomic representations are frequent, regardless of the fact that one the traits of the "idea of India" which has been noted since Ramanujan's (2004 [1989]) "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay" and has been accepted by most of the public intellectuals and by all the male retellers I analysed is that Indian epistemology is contextual and does not tend to create "black and white" dichotomies like the epistemological systems of Western civilisation and Abrahamic religions. Buddhologist Donald Lopez (2013) analyses how, in its first encounters with Orientalists, Buddhism, much like Hinduism, was depicted in a very negative way as an idolatrous religion. Elsewhere, Lopez (2008) argues how, already in colonial times, the Buddha began to be depicted as an individualistic, democratic, anti-casteist, feminist and scientific social reformer of Brahmanic Hinduism and how, picking up this representation, contemporary postcolonial Buddhists tend to follow the trend by depicting Buddhism as a "scientific" religion which may be regarded as an alternative to the "unscientific" Christianity. Similar developments occurred in contemporary Western Buddhism, which is mainly practiced by the Western middle-class and by American superstars (Coleman, 2001). While it is clear that a similar representation of Hinduism has been successful in India, it remains to be seen how successful it will be in shifting the representation of Hinduism abroad.

In sum, even though the contemporary English-language male retellers try to stay away from the stereotyped dichotomies characteristic of Western thought (Table 1), a reading of their retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* gives rise to similar dichotomies. Table 3 reveals the stereotyped dichotomies related to India and the West or Hinduism and Abrahamic religions which I derived from reading their fiction and nonfiction works:

India	West
Village	City
Pluralistic	Singular
Spiritual	Material
Universal	Restricted
Tolerant	Intolerant
Superior	Inferior
Divided	United

Table 3 - Dichotomies between India and the West as per the discourses of the contemporary English-language male retellers.

Figure 58, the cover of Pattanaik's (2018) *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, reveals this dichotomic epistemological framework which emphasises similarity and difference. The title includes the terms "versus" and "comparison", while the picture depicts a Janus-faced character facing opposite directions. The faces mirror each other. In the textual and visual cases, the former element underscores difference and the latter similarity. As in Orientalist discourses, the terms in a dichotomy are said to be different, while mirroring and defining each other.

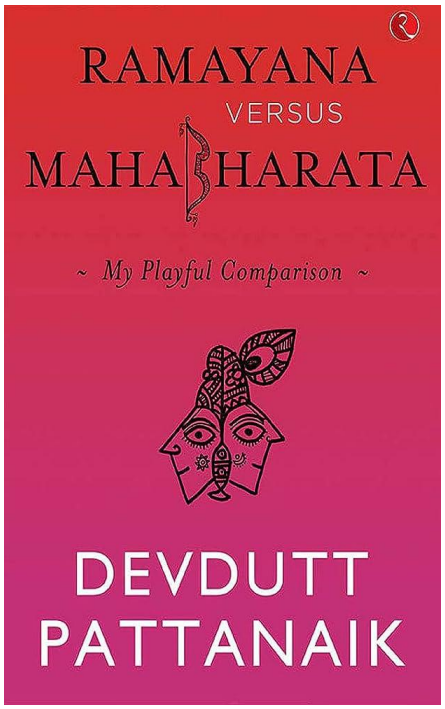


Figure 58 - Cover of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2018) *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*

In the third chapter, "Blessed in Mind and Muscle: Gender and Sexuality in the Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*", I analysed how the contemporary retellers tend to be concerned with gender and the relationship between the genders in ways which may again be regarded as both different and similar. Much like the *New Age* discourses described by Carrette and King (2005), Pattanaik mixes traditional Indian philosophy and neoliberal discourses to describe the characters as sages or potential sages. Tripathi is much more concerned with globalised representations of masculinity as represented by both superheroes and superheroines and makes both men and women as highly virile in ways which, given the author's propensity for nationalism, may be interpreted as mirroring similar Hindu nationalistic representations. Neelakantan represents the traditional villains and villainesses with attitudinal traits prized in modern, neoliberal societies and the traditional heroes and heroines with the Indian traditions which have been criticised by colonial historiography and anticolonial or postcolonial Indian discourses. It could be said that the three male retellers are more concerned with the issue of femininity as an important national and religious question, which is understandable, given the fact that they do not belong to the identity group in question, even though they are all Indian and Hindus. Divakaruni and Kané, for their part, are more careful in distinguishing Indian men and Indian women. They are much more concerned with depicting the emotional lives of individual women. As they tend to follow common tropes of contemporary chick-literature, they focus more on love than the male retellers. Rather than accepting the polarised stereotypes of the positive *angel/goddess* and the negative *whore*, they create different versions of "new Indian women" who can both be free, independent and modern, while negotiating with some of the tenets of patriarchy. Divakaruni's Sītā has imagined a world in which women accept their oppressed condition, while using their resourcefulness to gain power and subtly exert their wills, while Kané's Śūrpaṇakhā has been depicted a woman who refuses this state of affairs and disrupts patriarchy through revenge, even though she ultimately redeems herself. In any case, I would say that there is a substantial difference between Divakaruni and Kané's protagonists and that, due to her incontrollable rage, Kané's Śūrpaṇakhā is not represented as positively as Divakaruni's Sītā. Even though the rage that Kané's Śūrpaṇakhā feels is narratively justified and comprehensible and that, for that reason, she comes out as a more relatable

character than in any other of the four retellings, she is never exactly said to be a model for Indian women or women all over the world as Divakaruni's Sītā is.

In general, all authors describe ideal men as strong and ideal women as attractive, intelligent, resourceful and active. One could ask whether these ideals are not influenced by globalised models, given that postcolonial authors often suggest that contemporary consumerist materialism has spread globalised ideas of "authoritative masculinity" (Connell, 1998: 10-11) and "desirable femininity" (Appadurai, 1996: 45). Regardless of the fact of whether specific retellers depict stereotypically negative characters as positive or vice-versa, they mainly try to attach importance to the modern ideal of individualism, given that most male and female characters take individual actions and choices in order to improve their position in life. The contemporary retellers tend to acknowledge the mythical trope according to which self-control and the limitation of one's instincts as the ideals for both genders, given that excessive feeling is often represented as leading to individual and social chaos. At the same time, though, they try to attach relevance to feelings with positive individual and/or social results, provided that they are moderate in nature. The relationship between a man and a woman (marriage) is said to be ideally built upon unconditional love and not upon politics. Positive ideals for men, women and marriages, as well as descriptions of alternative genders and sexualities, are said to have been present in precolonial Indian tales and traditions. For this reason, contemporary Indians are encouraged to learn these modernised versions of the stories and use them as a blueprint for their lives. Finally, even when the retellers claim that the stories they tell are merely symbolic or entirely fictional, they often represent or reflect real men, women and events. They discuss modern India and the modern world and comment on specific events, such as the 2012 Delhi gang-rape. Modern figures, such as prime-minister Modi, are often described with the same cultural and literary tropes as the characters of the epic and (pseudo)historical figures. In the process, Modi may be turned into a modern-day mythic character with great physical and intellectual features associated with both stereotypical male and female virtues.

In the fourth chapter, "Caught in Indra's net: Other Divisions in the Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*", I considered how the contemporary retellings represent ideas related to caste, class and species. Following the neoliberal ideal of self-development and self-improvement, Pattanaik interprets all these concepts as fluid psychological ones. Tripathi follows contemporary Hindu

nationalistic discourses to represent caste in the same way (Malhotra and Viswanathan, 2023b). Neelakantan mainly depicts caste as the divisive social system which made Indian civilisation decay. Following the stereotypical distinction between a Westernised old middle class and a more jingoistic new one, both Tripathi and Neelakantan create a great rift between different "elites" as well as between the "elites" and the "common people", even though both represent their protagonists as populist leaders who belong both to the new "elites" and to the "common people". Similarly, these retellers represent the main mythological species in their retellings with the positive traits of stereotypical representations of India and Hinduism and their enemies with the negative traits of stereotypical representations of foreignness, be it the West and the Abrahamic religions or of the imagined corruption of India's original meritocracy. In any case, all male retellers try to depict precolonial (or, in the case of Neelakantan, pre-Aryan) Indian civilisation as possessing neoliberal values prized in contemporary India at all these sociologically relevant levels. Such values include the possibility to pursue one's talents and to change one's social position, just as the new middle class has been doing since such reforms. Divakaruni and Kané also resort to mythological tropes to posit great social differences between opposing groups of characters, mainly when it comes to mythological species, in order to create narrative tension and conflict, even though they do not conflate them with existing contemporary identities. Again, they are mostly interested in reinterpreting stereotypes of femininity and not exactly of these other social divisions. This means, for example, that Kané's Śūrpaṇakhā is mainly depicted in a positive way as a strong oppressed woman and not as an *asura*. Similarly, Divakaruni emphasises Sītā's empathetic role in trying to include the *Other* as a female character and not necessarily the outcaste or the low class themselves.

In general, it can be said that, given that the contemporary English-language retellers often try to rationalise the epics, *asuras/rākṣasas* do not really tend to be described as nonhuman but rather as counter-ideal humans whose traits are conflated with negative stereotypes associated with other groups, such as the common people, tribals and foreigners. This gap between the ideal and the counter-ideal is defined by a series of external/physical (looks, skin colour, and clothing) and internal/cognitive (attitudes and beliefs) clues. Most retellings call for social justice for certain social groups, including the lower castes and the poor. However, the individual and social

ideals which are described do not tend to be associated with such groups. The mental and spiritual abilities stereotypically associated with Brahmins, the good looks and strength stereotypically associated *kṣatriyas*, and modern liberal middle class values are prized above alternatives. At best, retellers such as Pattanaik and Tripathi state that individuals are able to participate in neoliberal society and rise up from less desirable social conditions to more desirable ones. Neelakantan, who has made literary success through his representations of the losers, shows no hope for such groups. Even though he seems to have a voice and play a major part in his retelling, Bhadra is far from an ideal character, as he does not correspond to the fictional larger-than-life characters that *Dalit* discourses often turn into real ones for political purposes (Narayan, 2006: 170). These representations may be contrasted with Divakaruni and Kané's representation of women. While in Tripathi's retelling ideal women basically turn into men and in Pattanaik's one gender is to be ultimately regarded as a psychological trait with no real physical importance, in the retellings by the contemporary female retellers there is no such attempt. In fact, these authors value femininity as such. These different representations of women and other subaltern groups feel comprehensible, given that the society which has influenced the literary world of Indian English-language mythological fiction has been composed of middle-class women, while, at least so far, it has less obviously been composed of other previously subaltern groups.

Table 4, which follows the conclusions of my fourth chapter, summarises the most common stereotyped ways in which the contemporary English-language retellers use mythological tropes in their works. While I pointed out some neo-Romantic exceptions in which some of the traits on the right column are naively depicted as closer to nature in a pastoral way, I would say that both more and less historicist versions of the epic tend to conflate such traits with the other subaltern groups I analysed in chapter four.

Human (*deva, ṛṣi*)	Non-human (*asura, rākṣasa*)
Ideal	Counter-ideal
Culture	Nature
Self-control	Passions
Peaceful	Violent
Rules	Lack of rules

Native	Foreign
Rational	Irrational
Chaste	Voluptuous
City/palace/hermitage/garden	Forest/wilderness
Centre	Periphery
Safe	Dangerous
Beautiful	Ugly

Table 4 - Dichotomies inside India according to the contemporary English-language retellings

In the fifth and sixth chapters**,** "Rise and Fall of the *Rāmarājya*… and Rise Again: The Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Time" and "Everything In Its Right Place: The Contemporary English-language Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Space", I analysed how the retellings have (re)created notions of time and space. Tripathi creatively tries to fit the different social divisions I have analysed in the previous two chapters into eras which may have been inspired by the idea of different positive and negative *yugas*. These ideas are discussed in both his nonfiction as in his fiction. The other male English-language retellers sometimes conflate social divisions with similar values, even though they do not necessarily associate them with different time periods.

1) gender: freedom and imagination (feminine) or law and order (masculine);

2) caste: knowledge (Brahmin), violence (*kṣatriya*), money (*vaiśya)* or work (*ṣūdra*);

3) class: past (old middle class) and present (new middle class); and

4) species: culture/civilisation (*devas*, human) and nature (*rākṣasa/asura*, animal).

There is also a unified concept of time, that of a mythical Golden Age, which refers to the kind of society which the contemporary English-language retellers have represented as ideal: be it a time when psychological symbols were valued over their physical materialisation, as in Pattanaik's discourses, precolonial Indian before the coming of the Muslims and British and before Indians became Westernised, as in Tripathi's fiction and nonfiction discourses, and the Dravidian kingdom before the Aryan "invasion", as in Neelakantan's narrative. In all cases, there is an attempt to approximate this imagined past and the neoliberal present. Added to the fact that all

male retellers often write nonfiction texts to explain their fiction, I interpret this as meaning that these constructs are not so much what these authors regard their "idea of India" to have been but what they ideally want it to be in contemporary times. This psychological and/or physical approximation between the ideal past and the present is achieved through the use of anachronisms and through the mixture of an old mythic language and a modern neoliberal and, mainly in the cases of Neelakantan and Tripathi's novels, a scientific one. As usual, Divakaruni and Kané are so much concerned with assimilating past and present at the national or religious level. However, they are concerned with assimilating them at the gender level and to turn mythical characters into ideals to whom real contemporary women may look up. While the female retellers also create polarised representations of the human and nonhuman as a common mythological and narrative trope, they are less concerned with attaching specific values to caste or to the main divisions of the middle class in contemporary India, even though they clearly distinguish between oppressed femininity and oppressive masculinity.

Geographical divisions tend to rely on the mythological and cultural binarity *city/village/palace/hermitage* and *forest/wilderness*, with the garden and the hermitage functioning as liminal places. Humans are represented as inhabiting the city/village, even though they can domesticate the wilderness and turn it into an inhabitable forest. The most quoted example is that of the hermitage, a place where the elderly Brahmins undergo their *vanaprastha* stage of life. Non-human creatures tend to inhabit the forests, even though *asuras* are also capable of building cities. Such cities, such as Laṅkā, look similar to human ones in shape. However, they differ in their culture. The cities of *asuras* are said to be wild and debauched, which means that they are conflated with the wilderness. The distinction between centre and periphery is also important when it comes to species, given that ideal humans are said to inhabit the centre, while counter-ideal non-human beings, which may or may not be conflated with counter-ideal human beings, are said to inhabit the periphery, a term which refers to borderlands, where conflict is often said to occur. These tropes are resorted to by both male and female retellers. Pattanaik, however, refers to it much more than the other male retellers, given that the symbols of the cultured city and of the natural forest are convenient for the discourse that the author usually wishes to convey, that of "domesticated" psyches against "undomesticated" ones, in this author's works usually described through globalised neoliberal ideas according to which the ideal is to progress from the wild

mind of a follower to the tamed mind of a transformational leader. Divakaruni and Kané often resort to the same trope not so much for such abstract, psychological reasons or for business purposes but to create positive associations between femininity and nature in ways that sound similar to contemporary ecofeminist discourses.

While Kané and, above all, Divakaruni use the exotifying mythological trope of describing a safe, familiar space against an unsafe, unknown one, they do not necessarily associate the former with India and the latter with other nations or civilisations. In the case of the male retellers, though, the unified idea of space may be understood as pointing to the nation-state of India, a concept which is often and anachronistically alluded to in the fiction by Neelakantan and Tripathi. While Pattanaik does not resort to this anachronism, his nonfiction texts, in-text comments and even titles also tend to be concerned with the opposition between India and other nations and civilisations. After all, his business guide is not titled *Business Sutra: A Very Pattanaikian Approach to Management* and his retellings of Greco-Roman and Abrahamic myths are not titled *Olympus: Pattanaik's Retelling of the Greek Myths* or *just Olympus: a Retelling of the Greek Myths*. They are titled *Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management, Olympus: an Indian Retelling of the Greek Myths* and *Eden: an Indian Exploration of Jewish, Christian and Islamic Lore*. In the retellings by the male authors, India is constructed as both as an idea through its geographical and cultural elements. The idea of the nation stands in contrast to its surroundings, civilisations which are regarded as having invaded India, and other civilisations of past and present which are regarded as having achieved political, economic, scientific and technological feats and which, for that reason, provide both ideals to which Indians can look up and with which they can compete. The frequent mention of important cities, forests, mountain ranges and rivers and the statement that sometimes distant and different landscapes belong to "India" often turn the retellings into a kind of literary pilgrimage whose purpose is to instil the geographical and cultural "idea of India" in the mind of the readers.

General conclusions

Even though all retellers build their narratives on social, temporal and geographical divisions, there tends to be a fundamental unity above such divisions, a worldview with physical and psychological features to which every woman can resort,

in the case of the female retellers, and to which every Indian and/or Hindu can resort, regardless of one's gender, caste or class, in the case of the works by male retellers.

At first sight, the works by Pattanaik, Neelakantan and Tripathi look very different and sometimes even contradictory in their literary strategies. Ambiguities and contradictions could prove difficult to analyse, given that analysing literature and culture consists of finding, describing and interpreting patterns. However, I have identified clear literary and cultural patterns between their works. The retellings tend to be functional. Different events and characters may be depicted in different ways across different retellings. However, the functions that they play in the greater representational scheme is often similar and tends to follow mythological tropes, even though the real individuals or groups with which such tropes are imaginatively associated may vary. The stereotypes of the ideal masculine and ideal feminine, the human and the non-human and the safe and unsafe spaces are clear in the works by all five contemporary retellers. To these stereotypes, the male retellers add dualistic representations of Indian and foreign cultures, as well as of enlightened and degenerate epochs, which have been of great relevance for nationalistic discourses. These representations remind one of the concepts of Orientalism and re-Orientalism. It is clear that the three male retellers criticise the negative representations of India and Hinduism against positive representations of the West created by Western Orientalist scholarship. However, while all of them claim that what they regard as Indian epistemology does not create such representations, they end up creating similar antithetical constructs of India and the West. In their representations, the Orientalist positive and negative associations tend to be merely inverted, that is, the positive Orientalist stereotypes about the West and Christianity are reinterpreted as negative and vice-versa, that being the reason why I regard such discourses as re-Orientalist.

While the male retellers try to fit all kinds of Indian citizens into the larger concept of Indianness or, in Tripathi's case, sometimes even the concept of Hinduness, and while the female retellers try to fit all kinds of women into the larger concept of femininity, I would not say that either the male or female retellers create any kind of unique and legitimate representation for other kinds of subaltern identities, given that the traits stereotypically associated with higher castes and classes are prized above others.

Playing with historical and contemporary stereotyped discourses, Neelakantan (2012), the author who most often deals with subaltern groups, makes his characters

apply such pejorative traits to themselves and to their "races". This author tends to be ambiguous in relation to the elites and the subaltern groups. In his nonfiction passages, he often claims to be against the former and to value the latter. However, when it comes to storytelling, subaltern groups are described with the worst possible stereotypes listed on the right column of table 4.

Tripathi (2015) claims *ad nauseum* to be a defender of women's rights and an opposer of the caste system. Instead of having their own identity, the subaltern groups that Tripathi depicts positively are mere imitations of ideal hegemonic characters. Strong women, lower castes, low classes and tribal people are turned into smart masculinised warriors and are conflated with ideal urbane and educated Indians, given that, in the author's view, Indian culture is homogeneous. In short, subaltern groups are *Sanskritised*, although this process of *Sanskritisation* is filtered by English language and culture. No attention is paid to the nuances of subaltern cultures, which are just assimilated into the larger Indian one. According to Tripathi, this culture has existed for millennia and has degraded at some point, so the duty of modern Indians is to resuscitate the greatness of the past by reforming the present.

Pattanaik resorts to the neoliberal narrative that subalterns have the "human potential" to "expand their minds" and rise to the condition of the hegemons, which means that the latter constitute the desirable state. The author often states that Western and Hindu nationalistic authors analyse the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Indian mythology in material terms. While analysing reality only in material terms may be negative, it is not clear why analysing it only in psychological terms may be positive. By making people and events psychological, they may cease being people and events and become ideas. Sītā ceases to be a reflection of existing Indian women and their anxieties and becomes the golden statue in men's minds. Jyoti Singh Pandey ceases to be a young Indian woman who was raped in contemporary India and becomes "fearless" and "India's daughter", two timeless and spaceless stand-ins for a feeling and a nation-state. Psychological interpretations exist only when they happen in the mind. When they are put into books and those books become bestsellers and influence the psyche of individuals and societies, they become sociopolitical.

Finally, while Divakaruni and Kané are clearly more concerned with a specific subaltern group within Indian and other national societies, these authors also rely on identity stereotypes and tend to essentialise a specific kind of middle-class English-speaking female identity with femininity in general.

From cover to back cover, from image to text, every minute detail is chosen because it plays some role in the larger discourse any specific author may wish to convey. As a last example, I refer to one minor detail that most readers would perhaps overlook: the chapter headers in each of the five novels. In the beginning of every chapter of Neelakantan's (2012) novel, there is an image of a ten-headed (*daśamukha*) Rāvaṇa (Figure 59), a common feature in the iconography of this character. There are several narrative explanations and legends as to why Rāvaṇa is called so. In "Dasamukha", the preface, Neelakantan tells one version. *Asura* king Mahābalī asks Rāvaṇa to let go nine of his heads that represent negative emotions and to leave only the one that represents intellect, given that, as Neelakantan states, "[t]raditional Indian wisdom places importance on the control of one's emotions and projects the intellect alone, as the being supreme" (5). However, Rāvaṇa refuses to do so, given that he wants to be a free and complete man.[379] This means that the chapter header reminds the reader of who Rāvaṇa is and what he represents: freedom, independence, individualism, and completeness, some of the contemporary neoliberal ideals whose importance Neelakantan emphasises in his recent nonfiction.

Tripathi (2015) uses chapter headers and chapter dividers. The chapter headers consist of a bow and arrow (Figure 60). These, like every other textual and visual clue in the novel, remind the reader of the hypermasculine and martial tone of the Tripathi's *Rāmāyaṇa* universe and its focus on violence and honour. The chapter dividers consist of the three characters depicting Rāma's name in the Harappan writing system (Figure 45). These remind the reader of the link between past and present that the novel is supposed to represent.

Divakaruni's (2019) novel uses the image of a tree as chapter header and chapter divider (Figure 61). As this is a novel about Sītā, Indian women and the concept of womanhood, this symbol, like the title and the cover of the novel (Figure 14), reveals the association between the concepts of femininity and nature.

[379] This version of why Rāvaṇa has ten heads was invented by Neelakantan. However, it is now used by online users in conjunction with folk explanations or explanations derived from classical sources. In the process, Neelakantan's contemporary legend has turned into an official version. https://hinduism.stackexchange.com/questions/15150/what-do-the-10-heads-of-ravana-signify (accessed on 19/7/2022); https://www.sanskritimagazine.com/indian-religions/hinduism/significance-ten-heads-ravana/ (accessed on 19/7/2022); https://agamya.wordpress.com/2015/03/26/the-ten-heads-of-ravana-the-dasamukha/ (accessed on 19/7/2022); https://www.scoopwhoop.com/why-does-ravana-have-ten-heads/ (accessed on 19/7/2022).

In Kané's (2016) novel, the chapters are divided by a stylised floral pattern (Figure 62). The association here is not as obvious as in Divakaruni's novel. It is possible that this pattern was chosen for aesthetical reasons, but, given that this is a novel about Śūrpaṇakhā and bearing in mind the discourses on the relationship between women and nature, it is not decontextualised. The same would not happen if a floral pattern had been used in Tripathi's novel or if Rāma's imagined name written in the Harappan alphabet had been used in Kané's novel. In that case, these symbols would not convey the same ideas that the authors convey in their textual fiction. Even though Tripathi focuses on the role of women, he associates them with "manly" ventures like war and violence. In Tripathi's universe, weapons would be more symbolic of women. In his novel, Sītā is not interested on herbal healing as in Divakaruni's novel, even though, as I have said, she states that bows and arrows are Rāma's "thing", while swords and spears are hers. As a result, the fact that Tripathi uses a bow and arrow as chapter headers seems to be symbolic of Rāma. Even though she resorts to similar stereotypes, Kané has no interest in championing Rāma or ancient Harappa as fountainheads of feminism, in disproving the Aryan invasion/migration theory, or in proving the fundamental unity of Indian society and culture across time and space.[380]



Figure 59



Figure 60



Figure 61



Figure 62

Ideas for further research

I have discussed the discourses that the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* have created about India, Hinduism and gender. I could have taken other approaches and could have included other materials in my dissertation, so I would like to propose such ideas as material for future research. As all five retellers except Tripathi have written adaptations of the *Mahābhārata,* it would be relevant to analyse them, either

[380] Pattanaik is the only reteller who does not use chapter headings or chapter dividers.

from the points of view I have adopted (social categories, time and space) or from other relevant ones.

Comparison and contrast with other major Asian narrative traditions could be relevant. Some works discuss the similar role that the *Rāmāyaṇa* has played in India and the one that the *Vessantara Jātaka*, the story of the last birth of the Buddha before he was born as Siddhārtha Gautama, has played in Southeast Asia, mostly in Thailand. Steven Collins (2016), a professor of Buddhist Studies, uses the introduction of *Readings of the Vessantara Jātaka,* which was edited by the author, to draw this comparison. In the process, he quotes some of the most influential Indologists I have also referred to, such as Paula Richman and A. K. Ramanujan. In *Thailand's Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jātaka and the Idea of the Perfect Man,* Patrick Jory (2016), a professor of Thai Studies, shows how this story was adopted to serve the ideological needs of the Thai monarchy, which the author regards as perhaps the most hegemonic monarchic family in the contemporary world. Jory analyses how the story was treated as a solemn reflection of worldly power and how lighter comic versions of the tale had been forbidden. In *Of Beggars and Buddhas: The Politics of Humor in the Vessantara Jataka,* anthropologist Katherine A. Bowie (2017) shows how the same story was used by subaltern groups as a humorous tool to counter centralised power. As the similarities between this case and the *Rāmāyaṇa* seem evident, it would be relevant to find similar examples in the Asian context, draw comparisons between them, and make a narrative typology of tales that have been used both as means of hegemonic power and subaltern resistance.

Many of the ideals depicted in the contemporary retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are similar to those depicted in English Victorian literature. The ideal Indian woman (*angel*, *goddess*, *pativratā*, *gṛhalakṣmi*, and *annapūrṇā*) is similar to the Victorian *angel in the house.*[381] The counter-ideal Indian woman (whore) is comparable to the Victorian *fallen woman,*[382] the woman who has lost her sexual "innocence". Śūrpaṇakhā also shares some characteristics with the *madwoman in the attic*,[383] the woman devoid of human reason. The same could be said about masculine ideals and counter-ideals. There are scholarly comparisons between the modern idea of virile Hinduism and that of

[381] From the title of a poem by Victorian writer Coventry Patmore (1823-1896). PATMORE, Coventry (1854). *The Angel in the House: The Betrothal*, London: John W. Parker and Son West Strand.
[382] WATT, George (2016). *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*, London: Routledge.
[383] From a character in Charlotte Brontë's (1816-1855) *Jane Eyre.* BRONTË, Charlotte (2001). *Jane Eyre*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Victorian "muscular Christianity".[384] While it is a risky subject, given that in culture it is difficult to conclude when correlation also hints at causation, it would be relevant to make a comparative study between these literary and cultural traditions and understand how much contemporary tropes in Indian literature in English may have been influenced by mythological tropes, by British ones or by both.

I have only discussed what the retellers and scholars have said about contemporary India, Hinduism and gender. However, given that nowadays social networks abound and play an important role in the public sphere, any reader is able to share his/her opinion. This phenomenon has increased the relevance of Reception Studies. As I write these lines (16/6/2024), the retellings I have analysed have the following number of reviews in the social network *Goodreads*: Pattanaik (2013), 578 reviews; Tripathi (2015), 2798 reviews; Neelakantan (2012), 1485 reviews; Divakaruni (2019), 1705 reviews; and Kané (2016), 195 reviews. Online Indian stores, blogs, *Youtube* videos, and other popular social medial networks also contain reviews and comments by users. As the retellings have generated debates involving ardent supporters of Indian secularism, Hindu nationalism and feminism, it would be relevant to analyse the reactions they have provoked.

Even though I have analysed several visual elements associated with the textual ones, my research's focus was literature. As the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been adapted to several media (graphic novels, cartoons, TV series and films, board games, etc…), it would be useful to conduct more comprehensive research on those and understand whether the discourses I have identified in literature tend to be similar or different in other media.

I am glad I was born in a time and place where I was able to conduct this research.

João Pedro Oliveira

16/6/2024

[384] ALTER, Joseph (2004). "Indian Clubs and Colonialism: Hindu Masculinity and Muscular Christianity" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 497-534; ALTER, Joseph (2006). "Yoga at the Fin de Siècle: Muscular Christianity with a 'Hindu' Twist" *The International Journal Of the History of Sport*, Vol. 23, No. 5, pp. 759-776.

References

ABRAMOVITZ, Moses (2012). "Theorising the neoliberal welfare state for social work" in GRAY, M., MIDGLEY, J. and WEBB, S. (eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Social Work*, London: SAGE Publications.

AHMED, Bushra, and DAS, Rajrupa (eds.) (2017). *The Illustrated Mahabharata: The Definitive Guide to India's Greatest Epic*, New Delhi: DK.

ALPERS, Edward A. and GOSWAMI, Chhaya (eds.) (2019). *Transregional Trade and Traders: Situating Gujarat in the Indian Ocean from Early Times to 1900*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ALTER, Joseph S. (1994). "Celibacy, Sexuality, and The Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 45-66.

ALTMAN, Michael J. (2017). *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representations of India, 1721-1893*, New York: Oxford University Press.

ANDERSON, Benedict (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.

ANTHONY, David A. (2007). *The Horse, the Wheel and Language: How Bronze-age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

APPADURAI, Arjun (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

APPADURAI, Arjun (2013). *The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition*, London: Verso.

APPADURAI, Arjun, KOROM, Frank J., and MILLS, Margaret A. (1991). "Introduction" in APPADURAI, Arjun, KOROM, Frank J., and MILLS, Margaret A. (eds). *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

ARAVAMUDAN, Srinivas (2005). *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

ARISTOTLE (2013) [4th century BCE], *Poetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ARJANA, Sophie Rose (2020). *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi: Orientalism and the Mystical Marketplace*, London: Oneworld Academic.

ARNI, Samhita (2013). *The Missing Queen*, New Delhi: Zubaan.

ARNOLD, David, and GUHA, Ramachandra (1995). "Introduction" in ARNOLD, David and GUHA, Ramachandra (eds.). *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays of the Environmental History of South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press.

ARORA, Anupama, and KAUR, Rajender (2017). *India in the American Imaginary, 1780s-1880s*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

ARVINDSON, Stefan (2006). *Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ASSMANN, Jan (2011). *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ATHAVALE, Pandurang Vaijnath (1976). *Valmiki Ramayana: A Study*, Bombay: Satvichar Darshan Trust.

BACCHETTA, Paola (1999). "When the (Hindu) Nation Exiles Its Queers" *Social Text*, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 141–66.

BACCHETTA, Paola (2020). "Queer Presence in/and Hindu Nationalism" in CHATTERJI, Angana P., HANSEN, Thomas Bloom, and JAFFRELOT, Christophe (eds.). *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BAINDUR, Meera (2015). *Nature in Indian Philosophy and Cultural Traditions*, New Delhi: Springer.

BAJPAI, Ishita (2020). "Was Adding Nirbhaya In Your Books Really Needed, Author Amish Tripathi?" *ED Times*, https://edtimes.in/was-adding-nirbhaya-in-your-books-really-needed-author-amish-tripathi/ (accessed on 23/6/2022).

BAKKER, Hans (1991). "Ayodhyā: A Hindu Jerusalem: An Investigation of 'Holy War' as a Religious Idea in the Light of Communal Unrest in India" *Numen*, Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 80-109.

BALDISSERA, Fabrizia (2016). "Ways of Presenting Love in Ancient Sanskrit Literature" *Interfaces*, Vol. 2, pp. 34-51.

BANAJI, Shakuntala (2018). "Vigilante Publics: Orientalism, Modernity and Hindutva Fascism in India" *Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture*, Vol. 25, N. 20, pp. 1-18.

BALSLEV, Anindita Niyogi (1999). *A Study of Time in Indian Philosophy*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.

BANERJEE, Paula (2010). *Borders, Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond*, Los Angeles: SAGE.

BANERJEE, Prathama (2006). *Politics of Time: "Primitives" and History-Writing in Colonial Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BANERJEE, Sikata (2003). "Gender and Nationalism: The Masculinization of Hinduism and Female Political Participation" *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 167-179.

BANERJEE, Sikata (2012). *Make me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India*, SUNY Press.

BANKER, Ashok K. (2013). *Ramayana Series: The Complete Edition*, AKB eBooks.

BASU, Anustup (2020). *Hindutva as Political Monotheism*, Durham: Duke University Press.

BASU, Manisha (2016). *The Rhetoric of Hindu India: Language and Urban Nationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BAUDRILLARD, Jean (1983) [1978]. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities... Or the End of the Social, and Other Essays*, New York: Foreign Agents Series.

BELL, Jeffrey (1992). *Populism and Elitism: Politics in the Age of Inequality*, New York: Regnery Publishing.

BELLIAPPA, Jyothsna Latha (2013). *Gender, Class and Reflexive Modernity in India*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

BHABHA, Homi (1990). "Introduction: Narrating the Nation" in BHABHA, Homi (ed.). *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge.

BHABHA, Homi (1994). *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.

BHARDWAJ, Surinder Mohan (1983). *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

BHATT, Chetan (2001). *Hindu Nationalism*: *Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths*, Oxford: Berg.

BHATTACHARYA, Sabyasachi (1997). *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915–1941*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, India.

BHATTACHARYA, Sabyasachi (2017). "Rethinking Tagore on the Antinomies of Nationalism" in TUTEJA, K. L., and CHAKRABORTY, Kaustav (eds.). *Tagore and Nationalism*, New Delhi: Springer.

BILLIG, Michael (1995). *Banal Nationalism*, London: SAGE Publications.

BINKLEY, Samuel (2011). "Happiness, positive psychology and the program of neoliberal governmentality" *Subjectivity*, Vol. 4, N. 4, pp. 371-392.

BLANK, Jonah (1992). *Arrow of the Blue Skinned-God: Retracing the Ramayana Through India,* New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

BOSE, Mandakranta (2010). *Women in the Hindu Tradition: Rules, roles and exceptions*, London: Routledge.

BOSE, Mandakranta (2016a). "Designing women: Felicitous malice in a Bengali Rāmāyaṇa" in BROCKINGTON, John, BROCKINGTON, Mary, and BOSE, Mandakranta (eds.). *The Other Rāmāyana Women: regional rejection and response*, New York: Routledge.

BOSE, Mandakranta (2016b). "Tales of the Dispossessed: Women in the Rāmāyaṇa" in BROCKINGTON, John, BROCKINGTON, Mary and BOSE, Mandakranta (eds.). *The Other Rāmāyana Women: regional rejection and response*, New York: Routledge.

BOSE, Mandakranta (ed.) (2004). *The Rāmāyaṇa Revisited,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BOURDIEU, Pierre (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

BOWIE, Katherine A (2017). *Of Beggars and Buddhas: The Politics of Humor in the Vessantara Jataka in Thailand,* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

BRECKENRIDGE, Carol A., and VEER, Peter van der (1993). "Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament" in BRECKENRIDGE, Carol A., and VEER, Peter van der (eds). *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

BROCKINGTON, John (1984). *Righteous Rama: The Evolution of an Epic,* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

BROCKINGTON, John (2004). "The Concept of Dharma in the Rāmāyana" in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, No. 32, pp. 655-670.

BROCKINGTON, John (2016a). "Re-creation, refashioning, rejection, response... How the narrative developed" in BROCKINGTON, John, BROCKINGTON, Mary, and BOSE, Mandakranta (eds.). *The Other Rāmāyana Women: regional rejection and response,* New York: Routledge.

BROCKINGTON, John, BROCKINGTON, Mary, and BOSE, Mandakranta (eds.) (2016). *The Other Rāmāyana Women: regional rejection and response*, New York: Routledge.

BROCKINGTON, Mary (2016b). "Narrator and audience: Women's role as re-creators of the tradition" in BROCKINGTON, John, BROCKINGTON, Mary, and BOSE, Mandakranta (eds.). *The Other Rāmāyana Women: regional rejection and response*, New York: Routledge.

BROSIUS, Christiane (2005). *Empowering Visions: The Politics of Representation in Hindu Nationalism*, London: Anthem Press.

BROSIUS, Christiane (2010). *India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity*, New Delhi: Routledge.

BRYANT, Edwin (2001). *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BRYANT, Edwin and PATTON, Laurie L. (2005). *The Indo-Aryan controversy: Evidence and inference in Indian history*, London: Routledge.

CAMPBELL, Joseph (1968). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

CAPRA, Fritjof (1975). *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, Boulder: Shambala.

CARRETTE, Jeremy, and KING, Richard (2005). *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, London: Routledge.

CARRIER, J.G. (1992). "Occidentalism: The World Turned Upside Down" *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 19, pp. 195–232.

CHAKRABARTY, Bidyut, and JHA, Bhuwan Kumar (2020). *Hindu Nationalism in India: Ideology and Politics*, Abingdon: Routledge.

CHAKRABARTY, Dipesh (1992). "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" pasts?" *Representations*, Vol. 37, pp. 1-26.

CHATTERJEE, Amal (1998). *Representations of India, 1740-1840: The Creation of India in the Colonial Imagination*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

CHATTERJEE, Partha (1987). *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

CHATTERJEE, Partha (1989). "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India" *American Ethnologist*, Vol 16, No. 4, pp. 622-633.

CHATTERJEE, Partha (1993). *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

CHATTERJEE, Partha (2002). "Introduction: History and the Present" in CHATTERJEE, Partha and GHOSH, Anjan (eds.). *History and the Present*, New Delhi: Permanent Black.

CHATTERJI, Angana P., HANSEN, Thomas Bloom. and JAFFRELOT, Christophe (2019). "Introduction" in CHATTERJI, Angana P., HANSEN, Thomas Bloom and JAFFRELOT, Christophe (2019). *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CHHIBBER, Pradeep K., and VERMA Rahul (2018). *Ideology: The Changing Party Systems of India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CHOPRA, Rohit (2008). *Technology and Nationalism in India: Cultural Negotiations From Colonialism to Cyberspace*, New York: Cambria Press.

CLARKE, Peter (2006a). *New Religions in Global Perspective*, London: Routledge.

CLARKE, Peter (ed.) (2006b). *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, London: Routledge.

COLEMAN, James William (2001). *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

COLLINS, Stevens (ed.) (2016). *Readings of the Vessantara Jātaka*, New York: Columbia University Press.

CONNELL, R. W. (1998). "Masculinities and Globalization" *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 984-1014.

CONNERNEY, Richard (2009). *The Upside-Down Tree: India's Changing Culture*, New York: Algora Publishing.

CROSS, Stephen (2013). *Schopenhauer's Encounter with Indian Thought: Representation and Will and Their Indian Parallels*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

D., Rakshith (2002). *Ramarajya: How India can Establish an Ideal State of Mankind*, Chennai: Clever Fox Publishing.

DAFTUAR, Swati (2015). "Ancient mythology in modern avatars" *The Hindu*, https://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/swati-daftuar-on-ancient-mythology-in-modern-avatars/article7540669.ece (accessed on 13/3/2019).

DAS, Gurcharan (2000). *India Unbound*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India.

DAS, Gurcharan (2009). *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

DASGUPTA, Ajit K. (1996). *Gandhi's Economic Thought*, London: Routledge.

DASGUPTA, Sanjukta, SINHA, Dipankar, and CHAKRAVARTI, Sudeshna (2012) *Media, Gender and Popular Culture in India: Tracking change and continuity*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications India.

DASGUPTA, Shamik, and SINGH, Abhishek (2007). *Ramayan 3392 AD*, 16 Vols., Singapore: Virgin Comics.

DASGUPTA, Subrata (2007). *The Bengal Renaissance: Identity and Creativity from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore*, New Delhi: Permanent Black.

DATTA, V. N. (1988). *Sati: A Historical, Social and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow Burning*, New Delhi: Sangam Books.

DAVIS, Richard H. (1996). "The Iconography of Rama's Chariot", in LUDDEN, David E. (eds) *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Series.

DEBROY, Bibek (consultant) (2021). *The Illustrated Ramayana: The Timeless Epic of Duty, Love, and Redemption*, New York: DK

DEO, Nandini (2016). *Mobilizing Religion and Gender in India: The role of activism*, London: Routledge.

DEOL, Harnik (2000). *Religion and nationalism in India: the case of the Punjab*, London: Routledge.

DERNÉ, Steve (2008). *Globalization on the Ground: Media and the Transformation of Culture, Class, and Gender in India*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications India.

DESHPANDE, Satish (2003). *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*, New Delhi: Viking.

DEWEY, Susan (2008). *Making Miss India Miss World: Constructing Gender, Power, and the Nation in Postlibelarization India*, New York: Syracuse University Press.

De ZEPETNEK, Steven Tötösy (1998). *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.

DHAND, Arti (2008). *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahābhārata*, New York: State University of New York Press.

DHAR, Parul Pandya (2023). *The Multivalence of an Epic: Retelling the Rāmāyaṇa in South India and Southeast Asia*, London: Routledge.

DHARWADKER, Vinay (2012). "Guest Column: Censoring the 'Rāmāyaṇa'" *PMLA*, Vol. 127, N. 3, pp. 433-450.

DHAWAN, Nandita Banerjee (2010). "The Married 'New Indian Woman': Hegemonic Aspirations in New Middle-class politics?" *South African Review of Sociology*, Vol. 41, No. 3, pp. 45-60.

DIMITROVA, Diana (2014). "On otherism and othering: an introduction" in DIMITROVA, Diana (ed.). *The Other in South Asian Religion, Literature and Film: Perspectives on otherism and otherness*, New York: Routledge.

DIMITROVA, Diana, and BRUIJN, Thomas de (eds.) (2017). *Imagining Indianness: Cultural Identity and Literature*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

DIRKS, Nicholas (2001). *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

DIRLIK, A. (1996). 'Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism' *History and Theory*, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 96–118.

DISSANAYAKE, Wimal (1986). "Exotic Other: Western representation of India in English literature and film" *World Englishes*, Vol. 5, No. 2/3, pp. 177-187.

DIVAKARUNI, Chitra Banerjee (2008). *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel*, New York: Doubleday.

DIVAKARUNI, Chitra Banerjee (2019). *The Forest of Enchantments*, New Delhi: HarperCollins India.

DIVAKARUNI, Chitra (2022). "Between Scylla and Charybdis: What Should a Writer Write About, and How?" in SINGH, Amritjit, FIELD, Robin E. and NAJMI, Samina (eds.). *Critical Perspectives on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni Feminism and Diaspora*, Lanham: Lexington Books.

DODSON, Michael S. (2007). *Orientalism, Empire, and National Culture: India, 1770-1880*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

DONIGER, Wendy (2009). *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

DONIGER, Wendy (Trans.) (1991). *The Laws of Manu*, London: Penguin Books.

DONIGER, Wendy (Trans.) (2005). *The Rig Veda*, London: Penguin Books.

DOUGLAS, Mary (1966). *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*, London: Routledge.

DWYER, Rachel (2006). *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema,* New York: Routledge.

EAGLETON, Terry (1993). *Ideology: An Introduction*, London: Verso.

ECK, Diana L. (2013) [2011]. *India: A Sacred Geography*, New York: Harmony Books.

EDNEY, Matthew (1997). *Mapping an Empire: the Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ELIOT, Charles (1954). *Hinduism and Buddhism: An Historical Sketch*, Vol. 2, New York: Barnes and Noble.

ELST, Koenraad (1991). *Ayodhya and After: Issues Before Indian Society*, New Delhi: Voice of India.

ELST, Koenraad (2002). *Ayodhya: The Case Against the Temple*, New Delhi: Voice of India.

ELST, Koenraad (2011). "Humour in Hinduism" in GEYBELS, Hans, and HERCK, Walter Van (eds.). *Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities,* New York: Continuum.

ELST, Koenraad (2023). *Forever Ayodhya*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International.

ELVERSKOG, Johan (2010). *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Pres, 2010.

ERNDL, Kathleen M. (1991). "The Mutilation of Surpanakha" in RICHMAN, Paula (ed.). *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

FELDHAUS, Anne (2003). *Connected Places: Region, Pilgrimage, and Geographical Imagination in India*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

FERNANDES, Leela (2006). *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

FERRARA, Marianna (2016). "One Yajña, Many Rituals: How the Brahmanical Ritual Practices Became the 'Vedic Sacrifice'", *Annali dell'Università di Napoli, Sezione Orientale,* Vol 76, N. 1-2, pp. 166-198.

FIGUEIRA, Dorothy M. (2002). *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity*, New York: State University of New York Press.

FIGUEIRA, Dorothy M. (2014). "How Does It Feel to Be the Solution? Indians and Indian Diaspora Fiction: Their Role in the Marketplace and the University" in

DWIVEDI, Om Prakash, and LAU, Lisa (eds.). *Indian Writing in English and the Global Literary Market*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

FILLIOZAT, Pierre Sylvain (2000) [1992]. *The Sanskrit Language: an Overview. History and structure, linguistic and philosophical representation, uses and users*, New Delhi: Rekha Printers.

FITZGERALD, Timothy (1999). "Politics and Ambedkar Buddhism in Maharahstra" in HARRIS, Ian (ed.), Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-century Asia, London: Continuum.

FOGELIN, Lars (2007). "History, Ethnography, and Essentialism: The Archaeology of Religion and Ritual in South Asia" in KYRIAKIDIS, Evangelos (ed.). *The Archaeology of Ritual*, Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology.

FORBES, Geraldine (1996). *Women in Modern India: The New Cambridge History of India*, Vol. IV. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

FOUCAULT, Michel (1977) [1975]. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, London: Allen Lane.

FRANKLIN, Michael J. (ed.) (2006). *Romantic Representations of British India*, London: Routledge.

FRAZIER, Jessica (2011). *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hindu Studies*, London: Bloomsbury.

GADGIL, Madhav, and GUHA, Ramachandra (1995). *Ecology and Equity: The use and abuse of nature in contemporary India*, New York: Routledge.

GALANTER, Mark (1984). *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

GANDHI, Leela (1998). *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.

GANGOLI, Geetanjali (2007). *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*, Hampshire: Ashgate.

GHOSH, Ranjan (2007). "India, Itihasa, and Inter-Historiographical Discourse" *History and Theory*, Vol. 46, Nº. 2, pp. 210-217.

GHOSH, Shohini (2010). *Fire: A Queer Film Classic*, Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

GIER, Nicholas F. (2014), *The Origins of Religious Violence: An Asian Perspective*, Lanham: Lexington Books.

GIMBUTAS, Marija (1991). *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe*, New York: HarperCollins.

GITTINGER, Juli L. (2018). *Hinduism and Hindu Nationalism Online*, Oxford: Routledge.

GLANCEY, Jonathan (2012). *Nagaland: A Journey to India's Forgotten Frontier*, London: Faber & Faber.

GOLDMAN, Robert P. (1986). "Introduction" in GOLDMAN, Robert P. (ed./trans.). *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An Epic of Ancient India, Vol I: Bālakāṇḍa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

GOLDMAN, Robert P. (1993). "Transsexualism, Gender, and Anxiety in Traditional India" *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 113, No. 3, pp. 374-401.

GOLDMAN, Robert P. (2004). "Resisting Rama: Dharmic Debates on Gender and Hierarchy and the Work of the Valmiki Ramayana" in BOSE, Mandakranta (ed.). *The Rāmāyaṇa Revisited*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

GOLDMAN, Robert P., and GOLDMAN, Sally J. Sutherland (2004). "Rāmāyaṇa" in MITTAL, Sushil, and THURSBY, Gene R. (eds.). *The Hindu World*, New York: Routledge.

GOLDMAN, Robert P., and GOLDMAN, Sally J. Sutherland (2017). "Introduction" in GOLDMAN, Robert P. (trans./ed.), and GOLDMAN, Sally J. Sutherland (trans.). *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An Epic of Ancient India, Vol VII: Uttarakāṇḍa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

GOLDMAN, Robert P., and GOLDMAN, Sally J.Sutherland (1996). "Introduction" in GOLDMAN, Robert P. (ed.). *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An Epic of Ancient India, Vol VI: Sundarakāṇḍa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

GOLDMAN, Robert P., GOLDMAN, Sally J. Sutherland, and NOOTEN, Barend A. van (2009). "Introduction" in GOLDMAN, Robert P. (trans./ed.), GOLDMAN, Sally J. Sutherland, and NOOTEN, Barend A. van (trans.). *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An Epic of Ancient India, Vol VI: Yuddhakāṇḍa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

GOLWALKAR, M. S (1939). *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur: Bharat Prakashan.

GOPAL, Priyamvada (2009). *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

GOPAL, Sarvepalli, THAPAR, Romila, CHANDRA, Bipan, BHATTACHARYA, Sabyasachi, JAISWAL, Suvira, MUKHIA, Hasbans, PANIKKAR, K. N., CHAMPAKALAKSHMI, R., SABERWAL, Satish, CHATTOPADHYAYA, B. D., VERMA, R. N., MEENAKSHI, K., ALAM, Muzaffar, SINGH, Dilbagh, MUKHERJEE, Mridula, PALAT, Madhavan, MUKHERJEE, Aditya, RATNAGAR, S. F., BHATTACHARYA, Neeladri, TRIVEDI, K. K., SHARMA, Yogesh, CHAKRAVARTI, Kunal, JOSH, Bhagwan, GURUKKAL, Rajan, and RAY, Himanshu (1990). "The Political Abuse of History: Babri Masjid-Rama Janmabhumi Dispute" *Social Scientist*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 76-81.

GOSLING, David L. (2001). *Religion and Ecology in India and Southeast Asia*, London: Routledge.

GRAMSCI, Antonio (1977) [1948-1951]. *Quaderni del Carcere*, 4 Vols., Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore.

GROSS, Rita M. (2002). "Buddhism" in SHARMA, Arvind and YOUNG, Katherine K. (eds.). *Her Voice Her Faith: Women Speak on World Religions*, Boulder: Westview Press.

GUHA, Ramachandra (2011). *The Enemies of the Idea of India*, Kottayam: D C Books.

GUICHARD, Sylvie (2010). *The Construction of History and Nationalism in India: Textbooks, controversies, politics*, London: Routledge.

GUPTA, R. K. (1994). "Trends in Modern Indian Fiction" *World Literature Today*, Vol. 68, No. 2, Indian Literatures: In the Fifth Decade of Independence, pp. 299-307.

GUPTA, Suman (2012). "Indian 'Commercial' Fiction in English, the Publishing Industry, and Youth Culture" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 46, No. 5, pp. 46–53.

HALBFASS, William (1990) [1988]. *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

HALBWACHS, Maurice (1968) [1950]. *La Mémoire Collective*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

HALE, Wash Edward (1999). *Asura in Early Vedic Religion*, New Delhi: Motilal Barnarsidass.

HALL, Stuart (1988). "Minimal Selves" in APPIGNANESI, Lisa (ed.). *The Real Me: Post-modernism and the Question of Identity*, London: The Institute of Contemporary Arts.

HALL, Stuart (1996). “Introduction: Who needs ‘Identity’?” in HALL, Stuart, and GAY, Paul du (eds.). *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London: SAGE.

HALL, Stuart (1997a). “The Work of Representation” in HALL, Stuart (ed.). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage.

HALL, Stuart (1997b). “The Spectacle of the Other” in HALL, Stuart (ed.). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage.

HALL, Stuart (2019). “Culture, Media and the ‘Ideological Effect’” in HALL, Stuart, and MORLEY, David (ed.). *Stuart Hall: Essential Essays Vol. 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies*, Durham, Duke University Press.

HAN, Sam and NASIR, Kamaludeen Mohamed (2016). *Digital Culture and Religion in Asia*, London: Routledge.

HANCOCK, Graham (1996). *Fingerprints of the Gods*, New York: Three Rivers Press.

HANCOCK, Graham (2003). *Underworld: The Mysterious of Civilization*, New York: Three Rivers Press.

HANSEN, Thomas Bloom (1999). *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

HARDGRAVE Jr., Robert L. (2022) [1965]. *The Dravidian Movement*, London: Routledge.

HARI, D. K. and HARI, D. K. Hema (2010). *Historical Rama*, Bangalore: Sri Sri Trust Publications.

HART, William D. (2000). *Edward Said and the Religious Effect of Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

HASAN, Zoya (1996). “Communal Mobilization and Changing Majority in Uttar Pradesh” in LUDDEN, David E. (ed.) *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Series.

HATAB, Lawrence J. (1982). “Plotinus and the Upaniṣads” in HARRIS, R. Baine (ed.). *Neoplatonism and Indian Thought*, Norfolk: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies.

HAWLEY, John Stratton (2015). *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

HEARN, Jonathan (2006). *Rethinking Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

HENRY, Justin W. (2022). *Ravana's Kingdom: The Ramayana and Sri Lankan History from Below*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

HILTEBEITEL, Alf (1998). "Empire, invasion and India's national epics" in *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 387-421.

HILTEBEITEL, Alf (2011a). *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative*, New York: Oxford University Press

HILTEBEITEL, Alf (2011b). "The Primary Process of the Hindu Epics" in ADLURI, Vishwa (ed.), and BAGCHEE, Joydeep (ed.). *Reading the Fifth Veda: Studies on the Mahābhārata, Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel*, Vol. 1, Leiden: Brill.

HIRST, Jacqueline Suthren (2018). "Ātman and brahman in the principal Upaniṣads" in COHEN, Signe (ed.). *The Upaniṣads: A Complete Guide*, London: Routledge.

HOBSBAWM, Eric (1983). "Introduction: Inventing Traditions" in HOBSBAWM, Eric, and RANGER, Terence (eds.). *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

HUTTON, Patrick H. (2016). *The Memory Phenomenon in Contemporary Historical Writing*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

HUXLEY, Aldous (1947) [1945]. *The Perennial Philosophy*, London: Chatto & Windus.

ILAIAH, Kancha (2009). *Post-Hindu India: A Discourse on Dalit-Bajuhan, Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution*, Los Angeles: Sage.

INDEN, Ronald B. (2001) [1990]. *Imagining India*, Cambridge: Indiana University Press.

IRWIN, Robert (2006). *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies*, London: Penguin Books.

IRWIN, Robert (2010) [2004]. *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*, London: Tauris Paperbacks.

IWAMURA, Jane Naomi (2011). *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

JAFFRELOT, Christopher (1996). *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s*, Delhi: Penguin.

JAFFRELOT, Christopher, and VEER, Peter van der (2008). "Introduction" in JAFFRELOT, Christopher, and VEER, Peter van der (eds). *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China*, Los Angeles: Sage.

JAFFRELOT, Cristopher (2007). “Introduction: The Invention of Ethnic Nationalism” in JAFFRELOT, Cristopher (ed.). *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

JAIN, Meenakshi (2017). *The Battle for Rama: Case of the Temple at Ayodhya*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International.

JAIN, Nirmala (1989). "Comparative Literature: The Indian Context" in DEV, Amiya and DAS, Sisir Kumar (eds.). *Comparative Literature: Theory and Practice*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

JENKINS, Richard (2014) [1996]. *Social Identity*, London: Routledge.

JONES, William (1807). *The Works of Sir William Jones*, Vol. 4, London: John Stockdale and John Walker.

JORY, Patrick (2016). *Thailand’s Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jātaka and the Idea of the Perfect Man*, New York: Suny Press.

KAHN, Joel. S. (2016). *Asia, Modernity, and the Pursuit of the Sacred: Gnostics, Scholars, Mystics, and Reformers*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

KANÉ, Kavita (2015). *Sita’s Sister*, New Delhi: Rupa Publications.

KANÉ, Kavita (2016). *Lanka’s Princess*, New Delhi: Rupa Publications.

KANÉ, Kavita (2019). *Ahalya’s Awakening*, New Delhi: Westland.

KANÉ, Kavita (2021). *Saraswati’s Gift,* New Delhi: Westland.

KANJILAL, Sucheta (2017). *Modern Mythologies: The Epic Imagination in Contemporary Indian Literature* [Doctoral dissertation], University of South Florida.

KAPUR, Anuradha (1993). "Deity to Crusader: The Changing Iconography of Ram", In PANDEY Gyan (ed.). *Hindus and Others: The Question of Identity in India Today*, New York: Viking.

KARVE, Irawati (1969). *Yuganta: End of an Epoch*, Poona: Deshmukh Prakashan.

KASBEKAR, Asha (2006)- *Pop Culture India! Media, Arts and Lifestyle*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

KAVIRAJ, Sudipta (1994). “On the structure of nationalist discourse” in SATHYAMURTHY, T. V. (ed.). *State and Nation in the Context of Social Change*, Vol. I, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

KAVIRAJ, Sudipta (2010). *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas*, New York: Columbia University Press.

KELLER, Simon (2012). “Foreword: On Patriotism and Education”, in HEBERT, David G. & KERTZ-WELZEL, Alexandra (eds.). *Patriotism and Nationalism in Music Education*, London: Routledge.

KEPPENS, Marianne, and BLOCH, Esther (2010). “Introduction: rethinking religion in India” in BLOCH, Esther, KEPPENS, Marianne, and HEGDE, Rajaram (eds.). *Rethinking Religion in India: The colonial construction of Hinduism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

KHANNA, Raghav (2021). *Sita’s Kitchen*, New Delhi: Rupa Publications India.

KHAN, Saifullah (2014). “Sanitation and wastewater technologies in Harappa/Indus valley civilization (ca. 2600-1900 BC)” in ANGELAKIS, Andreas N. and ROSE, Joan B. (ed.). *Evolution of Sanitation and Wastewater Technologies through the Centuries*, London: IWA Publishing.

KHILNANI, Sunil (1997). *The Idea of India*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

KING, Richard (1999). *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and “The Mythic East”*, London: Routledge.

KINNVALL, Catarina (2006). *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India*: *The search for ontological security*, London: Routledge.

KINSLEY, David (1998). "Learning the Story of the Land: Reflections on the Liberating Power of Geography and Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition" in NELSON, Lance E. (ed.). *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, New York: State University of New York Press.

KISHWAR, Madhu (1997). "The continuing popularity of Sita in India" *Manushi*, Vol. 98, pp. 20–32.

KISHWAR, Madhu (2001). “Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Hold of Sita on Popular Imagination in India” in RICHMAN, Paula (ed.). *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

KRISHNAMURTI, Bhadriraju (2003). *The Dravidian Languages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

KUHN, Thomas (2012) [1962]. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

KUMAR, Krishna (2014). *Politics of Education in Colonial India*, Oxford: Routledge.

KUMAR, Priya (2008). *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

KURIEN, Prema A. (2007). *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

KWAK, Jun-Hyeok (2015). "Patriotism and Nationalism: 'Republican Patriotism' in the Northeast Asian Context", in KWAK, Jun-Hyeok & MATSUDA, Koichiro (eds.), *Patriotism in East Asia*. London: Routledge.

LAINE, James W. (2003). *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

LAL, Malashri and GOKHALE, Namita (eds.) (2009). *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*, New Delhi: Penguin Books.

LAL, Vinay (2023). *Insurgency and the Artist: The Art of the Freedom Struggle in India*, New Delhi: Roli Books.

LAMB, Ramdas (1991). "Personalizing the Ramayan: Ramnamis and Their Use of the Ramcaritmanas" in RICHMAN, Paula (ed.). *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia,* Berkeley: University of California Press.

LAU, Lisa (2005). 'Making the difference: The differing presentations and representations of South Asia in the contemporary fiction of home and diasporic South Asian women writers' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 249–269.

LAU, Lisa (2009). "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals" *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2, pp. 571-590.

LAU, Lisa, and DWIVEDI, Om Prakash (2014). *Re-Orientalism and Indian Writing in English*, New York: Palgrave Pivot.

LAU, Lisa, and MENDES, Ana Cristina (2011). "Introducing re-Orientalism: a new manifestation of Orientalism" in LAU, Lisa, and MENDES, Ana Cristina (eds.). *Re-orientalism and South Asian Identity politics*, New York: Routledge.

LAU, Lisa, and VARUGHESE, E. Dawson (2015). *Indian Writing in English and Issues of Visual Representation: Judging More Than a Book By Its Cover*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

LEFEBER, Rosalind (1994). “Introduction” in LEFEBER, Rosalind (trans.), and GOLDMAN, Robert P. (ed.). *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An Epic of Ancient India, Vol IV: Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

LEWIS, James R., and HAMMER, Olav (2007). “Introduction” in LEWIS, James R., and HAMMER, Olav (eds). *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

LIPPMANN, Walter (2004) [1922]. *Public Opinion*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc.

LODHIA, Sharmila (2015). "Deconstructing Sitas Blues: Questions of Mis/representation, Cultural Property, and Feminist Critique in Nina Paleys Ramayana" *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2, pp. 371-408.

LONG, Jeffery D. (2009), *Jainism: An Introduction*, Londres: I. B. Tauris.

LONGKUMER, Arkotong (2020). *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

LOPEZ Jr., Donald S. (2008). *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

LOPEZ Jr., Donald S. (2013). *From Stone to Flesh: A Short History of the Buddha*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

LOOMBA, Ania (2019). *Revolutionary Desires: Women, Communism and Feminism in India*, London: Routledge.

LUDDEN, David (1996). “Introduction: Ayodhya: A Window on the World” in LUDDEN, David (ed.). *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

LUTGENDORF, Philip (1991). *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

LUTGENDORF, Philip (1995). "Interpreting Ramraj: Reflections on the Ramayan, Bhakti, and Hindu Nationalism" in LORENZEN, David (ed.). *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

LUTGENDORF, Philip (1997). “Imagining Ayodhya: Utopia and its shadow in a Hindu landscape” *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 19-54.

LUTGENDORF, Philip (2004a). “Hanuman’s Adventures Underground: The Narrative Logic of a Ramayana ‘Interpolation’” in BOSE, Mandakranta (ed.). The *Rāmāyaṇa Revisited*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

LUTGENDORF, Philip (2004b). "(Too?) Many Ramayanas" *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 201–11.

LUTGENDORF, Philip (2007a). *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey*, New York: Oxford University Press.

LUTGENDORF, Philip (2007b). "Bending the Bhārata: Two uncommon cinematic adaptations", in PAUWELS, Heidi, R. M. (ed.). *Indian Literature and Popular Cinema*: Recasting classics, New York: Routledge

LUTHRA, Rashmi (2014). "Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretations of the Indian Epics" *Feminist Formations*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 135-161.

MACAULAY, Thomas Babington (1895). *Essays*, London: Longmans Green & Co.

MACAULAY, Thomas Babington (1965) [1835]. "Minute on Education" in SHARP, H. (ed.). *Bureau of Education. Selections from Educational Records, Part I (1781-1839),* New Delhi: National Archives of India.

MACFIE, John Mandeville (trans.) (1930). *The Ramayan of Tulsidas: Or, the Bible of Northern India,* Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

MACHIN, David and MAYR, Andrea (2023). *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction*, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

MALHERBE, A. J. (1986). *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

MALHOTRA, Rajiv (2011). *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism,* New Delhi: HarperCollins.

MALHOTRA, Rajiv (2016a). *Indra's Net: Defending Hinduism's Philosophical Unity*, New Delhi: HarperCollins.

MALHOTRA, Rajiv (2016b). *The Battle for Sanskrit: Is Sanskrit Political or Sacred?*, New Delhi: HarperCollins.

MALHOTRA, Rajiv (2016c). *Academic Hinduphobia: A Critique of Wendy Doniger's Erotic School of Indology*, New Delhi: Voices of India.

MALHOTRA, Rajiv, and DASA, Satyanarayana (2020). *Sanskrit Non-Translatables: The Importance of Sanskritizing English*, New Delhi: Amaryllis.

MALHOTRA, Rajiv, and REDDY, Divya (eds.) (2023). *Ten Heads of Ravana: A Critique of Hinduphobic Scholars*, Gurugram: Garuda Prakashan Pvt. Ltd.

MALHOTRA, Rajiv, and VISWANATHAN, Vijaya (eds.) (2023a). *The Battle for IITs: A Defense of Meritocracy*, Fort Wayne: Occam.

MALHOTRA, Rajiv, and VISWANATHAN, Vijaya (2023b). *Varna, Jati, Caste: A Primer on Indian Social Structures*, Fort Wayne: Occam.

MACKENZIE, John (2015). *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

MALINOWSKI, Bronislaw (1948) [1926]. "Myth in Primitive Psychology" in MALINOWSKI, Bronislaw. *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays by Bronislaw Malinowski*, Glencoe: The Free Press.

MANI, Chandra Mauli (2005). *The Evolution of Ideals of Womanhood in Indian Society*, New Delhi: Kalpaz Publications.

MANKEKAR, Purnima (1999). *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics. An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood and Nation in Postcolonial India*, Durham: Duke University Press.

MASUZAWA, Tomoko (2005). *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

MATHUR, Nita (2010). "Shopping Malls, Credit Cards and Global Brands: Consumer Culture and Lifestyle of India's New Middle Class" *South Asia Research*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 211-231.

MAUREEMOOTOO, Kama (2014). "The (Mis)reading of Colonial Masculinities in India" in DASGUPTA, Rohit K., and GOKULSING, K. Moti (eds.). *Masculinities and its Challenges in India: Essays on Changing Perceptions*, Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc.

MCDANIEL, June (2018). "From the underworld of Yama to the Island of Gems: concepts of afterlife in Hinduism" in CANN, Candi K. (ed.). *The Routledge Handbook of Death and the Afterlife*, Oxford: Routledge.

MCLAIN, Karline (2009). "Gods, kings and local Telugu guys: competing visions of the heroic in Indian comic books" in GOKULSING, K. Moti, and DISSANAYAKE, Wimal (eds.). *Popular Culture in a Globalised India*, New York: Routledge.

MEHROTRA, Arvind Krishna (2003). "Introduction" in MEHROTRA, Arvind Krishna (ed.). *A History of Indian Literature in English*, New York: Columbia University Press.

MENDES, Ana Cristina, and LAU, Lisa (2014). "India through a re-Orientalist Lenses" *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2014.984619 (accessed on 1/11/2020).

MICHAEL, S. M. (1999). “Introduction” in MICHAEL, S. M. (ed.). *Dalits in Modern India*: *Visions and Values*, Los Angeles: Sage.

MIGNOLO, Walter D. and WALSH, Catherine E. (2018). "Introduction" in MIGNOLO, Walter D. and WALSH, Catherine E. (eds.). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analysis*, Praxis, Durham: Duke University Press.

MILL, James (2010) [1818-1823]. *The History of British India*, 3 Vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MILLER, Barbara Stoler (1991). “Presidential Address: Contending Narratives - The Political Life of the Indian Epics” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 4, pp. 783-792.

MINES, Diane P. (2009). *Caste in India*, Ann Arbor: Associatin for Asian Studies, Inc.

MISHRA, B.B (1961). *The Indian Middle Classes. Their Growth in Modern Times*, London: Oxford University Press.

MISHRA, Pankaj (2006). “Introduction” in NARAYAN, R. K. *The Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*, London: Penguin Classics.

MITCHELL, Tony (2004). ‘Self Orientalism, Reverse Orientalism and Pan-Asian Pop Cultural Flows in Dick Lee’s Transit Lounge’, in IWABUCHI, K., MUECKE, S., and THOMAS, M. (eds.). *Rogue Flows: Trans-Asian Cultural Traffic*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

MOHANTY, Chandra Talpande (1984). “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” *Boundary 2*, Vol. 12, No. 3, Duke University Press, pp. 333-358.

MONDAL, Debabrate (2005). “Adikarnataka” in MEHTA, Prakash Chandra (ed.). *Marriages in Indian Society*, New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House.

MONIER-WILLIAMS, Monier (1863). *Indian epic poetry*, Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate.

MUKUL, Akshaya (2015). *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India*, Noida: HarperCollins.

MÜLLER, Max (1860). *Ancient Sanskrit Literature: The Primitive Religion of the Brahmāns*, London: Williams and Norgate.

MULLICK, Sunrit (1993). "Protap Chandra Majumdar and Swami Vivekananda at the Parliament of Religions: Two Interpretations of Hinduism and Universal Religion,"

in ZIOLKOWSKI, Eric (ed.). *A Museum of Faiths: Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions*, Atlanta: Scholars.

MUNIAPAN, Balakrishnan (2007). "Transformational leadership style demonstrated by Sri Rama in Valmiki Ramayana" *International Journal of Indian Culture and Business Management*, vol. 1., No. 1/2, pp. 104-115.

MURTI, Kamakshi P. (2001). *India: The Seductive and Seduced "Other" of German Orientalism*, Westport: Greenwood Press.

MYERS, Perry (2013). *German Visions of India, 1871:1918: Commandeering the Holy Ganges During the Kaiserreich*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

NABAR, Vrinda (2014). "Writing India Right: Indian Writing and the Global Market" in DWIVEDI, Om Prakash, and LAU, Lisa (eds.). *Indian Writing in English and the Global Literary Market*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

NADEAU, Randall L. (2014), *Asian Religions: A Cultural Perspective*, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.

NAGPAL, Saraswati (2011). *Sita: Daughter of the Earth: A Graphic Novel*, New Delhi: Campfire.

NAIK, M. N. (2009). *A History of Indian English Literature*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

NANDA, Meera (2003). *Prophets Facing Backwards: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

NANDAGAWALI, Sanjay M. (2017). "A Study of Anachronism, used in the novels of Amish Tripathi" *International Journal of Advances in Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, Nº. 2, pp. 61-64.

NANDY, Ashis (1983). *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

NANDY, Ashis (1998). "The twilight of certitudes: secularism, Hindu nationalism and other masks of deculturation" *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 283-298.

NANDY, Ashis (2003). *The Romance of the State and the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

NANDY, Ashis, TRIVEDY, Shikha, MAYARAM, Shail, and YAGNIK, Achyut (1995). *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

NARAYAN, Badri (2009). *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation*, New Delhi: SAGE publications.

NARAYANAN, Vasudha (1999). "Brimming with Bhakti, Embodiments of Shakti: Devotees, Deities, Performers, Reformers, and Other Women of Power in the Hindu Tradition" in SHARMA, Arvind, and YOUNG, Katherine K. (eds.). *Feminism and World Religions*, New York: SUNY Press.

NARLIKAR, Amrita, and NARLIKAR, Aruna (2014). *Bargaining with a Rising India: Lessons from the Mahabharata*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

NEELAKANTAN, Anand (2012). *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, Mumbai: Platinum Press.

NEELAKANTAN, Anand (2013). *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan, Book 1, Roll of the Dice, Duryodhana's Mahabharata*, Mumbai: Leadstart Publishing.

NEELAKANTAN, Anand (2015). *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan, Book 2, Rise of Kali, Duryodhana's Mahabharata*, Mumbai: Leadstart Publishing.

NEELAKANTAN, Anand (2018). *Vanara: The Legend of Bali, Sugreeva and Tara*, New Delhi: Penguin Random House.

NEELAKANTAN, Anand (2021). *Valmiki's Women: Five Tales from the Ramayana*, Chennai: Westland.

NEELAKANTAN, Anand (2023). *Nala Damayanti: An Eternal Tale from the Mahabharata*, New Delhi: Penguin eBury Press.

NEELAKANTAN, Anand (2024). *The Asura Way: The Contrarian Path to Success*, Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House.

NEHRU, Jawaharlal (1985) [1946]. *The Discovery of India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

NICHOLSON, Andrew J. (2010). *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History*, New York: Columbia University Press.

NORA, Pierre (1984-1992). *Les Lieux de Memoire*, Paris: Gallimard.

OAK, Nilesh Nilkanth (2014). *The Historic Rama: Indian civilization at the end of Pleistocene*, North Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

OBERLIES, Thomas (2024) [1998]. *The Religion of the Rig Veda*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'HANLON, Rosalind (1997). "Issues of Masculinity in North India History" *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 4, pp. 1–19.

ODDIE, Geoffrey A. (2006). *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism 1793-1900*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

O'HANLON, Rosalind (1988). "Recovering the subject: Subaltern Studies and histories of resistance in colonial South Asia" *Modern Asian Studies,* Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 189–224.

OPPERT, Gustav (1893). *On the Original Inhabitants of Bharatavarsa*, Westminster: A. Constable.

OZA, Rupal (2006). *The Making of Neoliberal India: Nationalism, Gender and the Paradoxes of Globalization*, London: Routledge.

PANDEY, A. (2004). "Culture, gender, and identity in cross-cultural personals and matrimonials" *World Englishes*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 403-427.

PANDEY, S. K., and WALI, O. P. (2010). "Management Lessons from Indian Epics in Contexts to Theory Z" *Journal of Human Values*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 57-70.

PANDIT, Lalita. (1995). "Patriarchy and Paranoia: Imaginary Infidelity in Uttaramacarita and The Winter's Tale" in HOGAN, Patrick Colm, and PANDIT Lalita (eds.). *Literary India: Comparative Studies in Aesthetics, Colonialism and Culture*, New York: State University of New York Press.

PARAMESWARAN, M. R. (2014). *Vālmīkī Rāmāyaṇa: Critical Essays*, Manipal: Manipal University Press.

PATIL, Anand Balwant (2013). "Comparative Literature in Indian Languages" in TÖTÖSY de ZEPETNEK, Steven and MUKHERJEE, Tutun (eds.). *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies*, Bangalore: Foundation Books.

PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2006). *Myth = Mithya: Decoding Hindu Mythology*, New Delhi: Penguin Books.

PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2013a). *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, New Delhi: Penguin Random House.

PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2013b). *Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.

PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2014). *Shikhandi and Other "Queer" Tales They Don't Tell You*, New Delhi: Penguin Random House.

PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2016). *The Girl Who Chose: A New Way of Narrating the Ramayana*, New Delhi: Penguin Books.

PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2018). *Ramayana versus Mahabharata: My Playful Comparison*, New Delhi: Penguin Random House.

PAUWELS, Heidi R. M. (2008). *The Goddess as Role Model: Sītā and Rādhā in Scripture and on Screen*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

PEREC, Diana (2008). *Romance: The History of a Genre*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

PERRETT, Roy W. (1999). "History, Time and Knowledge in Ancient India" *History and Theory*, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 307-321.

PINNEY, Christopher (2004). *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*, London: Reaktion Books.

PODUVAL, Satish (2016). "Not By Faith Alone: Religion, Gender and The Public Domain in India" in BHADURI, Saugata, and MUKHERJEE, Indrani (eds.). *Transcultural Negotiations of Gender: Studies in (Be)longing*, New Delhi: Springer.

POLLOCK, Sheldon (1986). "Introduction" in POLLOCK, Sheldon (trans.), and GOLDMAN, Robert P. (ed.). *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An Epic of Ancient India, Vol II: Ayodhyakāṇḍa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

POLLOCK, Sheldon (1991). "Introduction" in POLLOCK, Sheldon (trans.), and GOLDMAN, Robert P. (ed.). *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki: An Epic of Ancient India, Vol III: Araṇyakāṇḍa*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

POLLOCK, Sheldon (1993a). "Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj" in BRECKENRIDGE, Carol A., and VEER, Peter van der (eds). *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

POLLOCK, Sheldon (1993b). "Rāmāyana and Political Imagination in India" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 2, pp. 261-297.

POSSEHL, Gregory L. (2002). *The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective*, Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.

PRAKASH, Gyan (1990). "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 32, No. 2: pp. 383–408.

PRAKASH, Gyan (1999). *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

PURI, Jyoti (1999). *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality*, London: Routledge.

RAJAGOPAL, Arvind (2001). *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

RAJAGOPALACHARI, C. (1968). *Ramayana*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

RAJSHEKAR, V. T. (2009). *Dalit: The Black Untouchables of India*. Atlanta: Clarity Press.

RAMANUJAN, A. K. (1991). *Folktales from India*, Gurgaon: Penguin Books.

RAMANUJAN, A. K. (2004). *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks.

RAMANUJAN, A. K. (2007). "Repetition in the Mahābhārata" in SHARMA, Arvinda (ed.). *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

RAMASUBRAMANIAN, Srividya, and JAIN, Paul (2009). "Gender stereotypes and normative heterosexuality in matrimonial ads from globalizing India" *Asian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 253-269.

RAMASWAMY, Krishnan, NICOLAS, Antonio de, and BANERJEE, Aditi (eds.) (2007). *Invading the Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.

RAMASWAMY, Sumathi (2009). *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*, Durham: Duke University Press.

RAMASWAMY, Vijaya (2003). *Historical Dictionary of the Tamils*, Lanham: The Scarecrow Press.

RAO, Ajay K. (2015). *Re-figuring the Rāmāyana as Theology: A history of reception in premodern India*, New York: Routledge.

RAO, Anupama (2009). *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

RAO, Velcheru Narayana (1991). "A Ramayana of Their Own: Women's Oral Traditions in Telugu" in RICHMAN, Paula (ed.). *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

RAO, Velcheru Narayana (2004). "When Does Sita Cease to be Sita? Notes toward a Cultural Grammar of Indian Narratives" in BOSE, Mandakranta (ed.). *The Rāmāyaṇa Revisited*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

RATHI, Biraj Metha (2017). "Hindu Mythology in Contemporary Popular Writings: Revisionist or Revivalist?" *The Free Press Journal*, https://www.freepressjournal.in/book-reviews/hindu-mythology-in-contemporary-popular-writings-revisionist-or-revivalist-by-biraj-mehta-rathi (accessed on 13/3/2019).

RAY, Bharati (2005). “Introduction” in CHATTOPADHYAYA, D. P. (ed.). *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization, Volume IX, Part 3: Women of India, Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods*, New Delhi: PHISPC.

REDFIELD, Robert (1956). *Peasant Society and Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

REICH, D., THANGARAJ, K., PATTERSON, N., PRICE, A. L., and SINGH, L. (2009). "Reconstructing Indian population history" *Nature*, vol. 461, N. 7263, pp. 489–494.

RENAN, Ernest (1990) [1882]. “What is a Nation?” in BHABHA, Homi K. (ed). *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge.

RICHMAN, Paula (1991b). “Introduction: The Diversity of the Ramayana Tradition” in RICHMAN, Paula (ed.). *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

RICHMAN, Paula (1995). “Epic and State: Contesting Interpretations of the Ramayana” *Public Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 631-654.

RICHMAN, Paula (2008). *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

RICHMAN, Paula (ed.) (1991a). *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

RICHMAN, Paula (ed.) (2001). *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

RICHMAN, Paula, and BHARUCHA, Rustom (eds.) (2022). *Performing the Ramayana Tradition: Enactments, Interpretations and Arguments*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ROY, Arundhati (2002). *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, St Ives: Flamingo.

RUDNYCKYJ, Daromir (2014). “Religion and Asia’s middle classes” in TURNER, Bryan S., and SALEMNIK, Oscar (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, London: Routledge.

RUDRUM, David and STARVIS, Nicholas (2015). *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, London: Bloomsbury.

RUETHER, Rosemary Radford (1975). *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*, New York: Seabury.

RUPPEL, Antonia M. (2017). *The Cambridge Introduction to Sanskrit*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

RUSHDIE, Salman (1981). *Midnight's Children*, New York: Knopf.

RUSHDIE, Salman (1992). *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, London: Granta Books.

SAID, Edward (2003) [1978]. *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Classics.

SAJJANHAR, Anuradha (2024). *The New Experts: Populist Elites and Technocratic Promises in Modi's India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

SAKSENA, Baburam (1971). *Evolution of Awadhi: a Branch of Hindi*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

SARKAR, Sumit (1996). "Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva" in LUDDEN, David (ed.). *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, Piladelphia: University of Pensylvania Press.

SARKAR, Sumit (1997). *Writing Social History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

SATTAR, Arshia (2017). "The new gods of fiction" *India Today*, https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/books/story/20170417-mythological-literature-amish-tripathi-devdutt-pattanaik-986145-2017-04-11 (accessed on 13/3/2019).

SAVARKAR, V. D. (1969) [1923]. *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu*, Bombay: S. S. Savarkar

SEELY, Clinton (1991). "The Raja's New Clothes: Redressing Ravana in Meghanadavadha Kavya" in RICHMAN, Paula (ed.). *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

SEN, Amartya (2005). *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

SEN, Amartya (2006). *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

SEN, Makhan Lal (trans.) (1941). *The Ramayan: A Modernised Version in English Prose*, Calcutta: Oriental Publishing Co.

SETHI, Manisha (2002). "The Avenging Angel and the Nurturing Mother: Women and Hindu Nationalism" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No. 16, pp. 1545–1552.

SHABAN, Abdul (2018). "Introduction" in SHABAN, Abdul (ed.). *Lives of Muslims in India: Politics, Exclusion and Violence*, London: Routledge.

SHANDILYA, Krupa (2015). “Nirbhaya's Body: The Politics of Protest in the Aftermath of the 2012 Delhi Gang Rape” *Gender & History*, Vol. 2, pp. 465-486.

SHANKAR, Lavina Dhingra (2009). "Not Too Spicy: Exotic Mistresses of Cultural Translation in the fiction of Chitra Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri" in IYER, Nalini, and ZARE, Bonnie (eds.). *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.

SHANI, Giorgio and KIBE, Takashi (2019). “Introduction: Legacies and Possibilities” in SHANI, Giorgio and KIBE, Takashi (eds.). *Religion and Nationalism in Asia*, London: Routledge.

SHANMUGAM, Kavitha (2013). “More to myth than meets the eye” *The Telegraph India*, https://www.telegraphindia.com/7-days/more-to-myth-than-meets-the-eye/cid/1535797 (accessed on 13/3/2019).

SHARMA, Arvind (2007). “Preface” in RAMASWAMY, Krishnan, NICOLAS, Antonio de, and BANERJEE, Aditi (eds.). *Invading the Sacred: An Analysis of Hinduism Studies in America*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.

SHARMA, J. K. (2016). “Relevance of ancient Indian scriptures - business wisdom drawn from Ramayana, Gita and Thirukkural” *International Journal of Indian Culture and Business Management*, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 278-298.

SHARMA, Jyotirmaya (2003). *Hindutva: Exploring the idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Noida: Harpercollins Publishers.

SHERMA, Rita DasGupta (1998). "Sacred immanence: Reflections of ecofeminism in hindu tantra" in NELSON, Lance E. (ed.). *Purifying the Earthly Body of God: Religion and Ecology in Hindu India*, New York: State University of New York Press.

SHIVA, Vandana (1988). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, New Delhi: Kali For Women.

SHRIDARAN, E. (2004). “The Growth and Sectoral Composition of India’s Middle Class: Its Impact on the Politics of Economic Liberalization” *India Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 405-428.

SHRIVASTAVA, Sanjay (2015). "Modi-masculinity: media, manhood and 'traditions' in a time of consumerism’ *Television & New Media*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 331–338.

SHUVAL, J.T. (2000). "Diaspora Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and a Theoretical Paradigm" *International Migration*, Vol. 38, No. 5, pp. 41–56.

SINGH, Akansha (2019). “How India’s ancient myths are being rewritten” *BBC*, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190902-how-indias-ancient-myths-are-being-rewritten (accessed on 27/10/2021).

SINGH, Amritjit and FIELD, Robin E. Field (2022). "Introduction" in SINGH, Amritjit, FIELD, Robin E. and NAJMI, Samina (eds.). *Critical Perspectives on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni Feminism and Diaspora*, Lanham: Lexington Books

SINGH, Harleen (2014). *The Rani of Jhansi: Gender, History and Fable in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

SINGH, Harleen (2015). "Graphics of Freedom: Colonial Terrorists and Postcolonial Revolutionaries in Indian Comics" in MEHTA, Binita, and MUKHERJEE, Pia (eds.). *Postcolonial Comics: Texts, Events and Identities*, London: Routledge.

SINGH, Satendra R. (1989). "Towards a Concept of the Indian Novel: A Thematic Construct" in DEV, Amiya and DAS, Sisir Kumar (eds.). *Comparative Literature: Theory and Practice*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

SINGH, Varsha (2019). “Epics as cultural commodities: Comic books of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 57, Nº 1.

SINHA, Mrinalini (1995). *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the Effeminate Bengali” in Late Nineteenth Century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

SMITH, Anthony D. (1986). *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

SMITH, Anthony D. (1999). *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, New York: Oxford University Press.

SMITH, Wilfred Cantwell (1962). *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Chicago: Mentor Books.

SOGANI, Rajul (2002). *The Hindu Widow in Indian Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SPEAR, T. G. Percival (1958). *India, Pakistan and the West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorti (1993). “The Burden of English” in BRECKENRIDGE, Carol A., and VEER, Peter van der (eds). *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty (1988). "Can the Subaltern Speak?*"* in NELSON, Cary, and GROSSBERG, Lawrence (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

SREEKANTAN, B. V., and ROY, Sisir (2020). *Understanding Space, Time and Causality: Modern Physics and Ancient Indian Traditions,* London: Routledge.

SREENIVAS, Deepa (2010). *Sculpting a Middle Class: History, Masculinity and the Amar Chitra Katha in India*, New Delhi: Routledge.

SRIKRISHNA B. N. (2008). "Whither Ramarajya?" *India International Centre Quarterly,* Vol. 35, Nº. 2, pp. 136-151.

SRINIVAS, M. N. (2001) [1956]. "A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization" *Far Eastern Quarterly,* Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 481–496.

SRIVASTAVA, Neelam (2008). *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel*, New York: Routledge.

STUTLEY, Margaret (2019). *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography*, New York: Routledge.

SUBRAMANIAM, Banu (2019). *Holy Science: The Biopolitics of Hindu Nationalism,* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

SUNDARAM, P. S. (2002). "Introduction" in SUNDARAM, P. S. (trans.). *The Kamba Ramayana,* London: Penguin Books.

SUTHERLAND, Sally J. (1989). "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role-models in the Sanskrit Epics" *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 109, No. 1, pp. 63-79.

SWAMY, Subramanian (2008). *Rama Setu: Symbol of National Unity*, New Delhi: Har Anand Publications.

SWEETMAN, William (2001). "Unity and Plurality: Hinduism and the Religions of India in Early European Scholarship" *Religion,* Vol. 31, pp. 209-224.

TAN, Patricia (2001). "Complementary and alternative medicines" in BLACKETT, Tom and ROBINS, Rebecca (eds.). *Brand Medicine: The Role of Branding in the Pharmaceutical Industry*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

TELTUMBDE, Anand (ed.) (2020). *Hindutva and Dalits: Perspectives for Understanding Communal Praxis,* Los Angeles: SAGE.

THAKUR, Ramesh (1993). "Ayodhya and the Politics of India's Secularism: A Double-Standards Discourse" *Asian Survey,* Vol. 33, No. 7, pp. 645-664.

THAPAN, Meenakshi (2004). “Embodiment and Identity in contemporary society: Femina and the ‘new’ Indian woman” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 411-444.

THAPAR, Romila (1989). “Epic and History: Tradition, Dissent and Politics in India” *Past & Present*, No. 125, pp. 3-26.

THAPAR, Romila (1996). “The Tyranny of Labels” *Social Scientist*, Vol. 24, No. 9/10, pp. 3-23.

THAPAR, Romila (2005). “Cyclic and Linear Time in Early India” *Museum International*, Vol. 57, No. 3, pp. 19-31.

THAPAR, Romila (2014). *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.

THAPAR, Romila (2019). “Afterword” in THAPAR, Romila, WITZEL, Michael, MENON, Jaya, FRIESE, Kai, and KHAN, Razib. *Which of Us Are Aryans? Rethinking the Concept of Our Origins*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.

THAROOR, Shashi (2007). *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cellphone: Reflections on India in the Twenty-first Century*, New Delhi: Viking.

THAROOR, Shashi (2018). *Why I am a Hindu*, Victoria: Scribe Publications.

THAROOR, Shashi (2020). *The Battle of Belonging: On Nationalism, Patriotism, and What it Means to be Indian*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.

THAROOR, Shashi (ed.) (2013). *India: The Future is Now*, New Delhi: Wisdom Tree.

TRUSCHKE, Audrey (2021). *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Indo-Muslim Rule*, New York: Columbia University Press.

TORRI, Michelguglielmo (2010). "The Myth of a 'Westernized Middle-class" in JOSHI, Sanjay (ed). *Themes in India History: The Middle Class in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

TRAUTMANN, Thomas R. (1997). *Aryans and British India*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

TRIPATHI, Amish (2010). *The Immortals of Meluha*, Chennai: Westland.

TRIPATHI, Amish (2013). *Oath of the Vayuputras*, Chennai: Westland.

TRIPATHI, Amish (2015). *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*, New Delhi: Westland.

TRIPATHI, Amish (2017a). *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*, New Delhi: Westland.

TRIPATHI, Amish (2017b). *Immortal India: Young Country, Timeless Civilisation - Articles and Speeches by Amish*, New Delhi: Westland.

TRIPATHI, Amish (2019). *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*, New Delhi: Westland.

TRIPATHI, Amish (2020). *Legend of Suheldev*: *The King Who Saved India*, Westland.

TRIPATHI, Amish (2022). *War of Lanka*, New Delhi: Westland.

TRIPATHI, Amish, and ROY, Bhavna (2020). *Dharma: Decoding the Epics for a Meaningful Life*, New Delhi: Westland.

TRIPATHI, Amish and ROY, Bhavna (2023). *Idols: Unearthing the Power of Murti Puja*, New Delhi: Westland.

UDAYAKUMAR, S. P. (1996). "Betraying a futurist: The misappropriation of Gandhi's Ramarajya" *Futures*, vol. 28, No. 10, pp. 971-985.

UDAYAKUMAR, S. P. (2005). *"Presenting" the Past*: *Anxious History and Ancient Future in Hindutva India*, Westport: Greenwood Publishers.

VANITA, Ruth, and KIDWAI, Saleem (eds.) (2000). *Same-sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

VARTAK, P. V. (1999). *The Scientific Dating of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Vedas*, Pune: Veda Vidnyana Mandala.

VARUGHESE, E. Dawson (2014). "Celebrate at home: post-millenial Indian fiction in English and the reception of 'Bharati Fiction' in global and domestic literary markets" *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 350-361.

VARUGHESE, E. Dawson (2017). "Post-millenial 'Indian Fantasy' fiction in English and the question of mythology: Writing beyond the 'usual suspects'" *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 54, No. 3, pp. 460-474.

VARUGHESE, E. Dawson (2018). *Visuality and Identity in Post-Millennial Indian Graphic Narratives*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

VARUGHESE, E. Dawson (2020). "'Drawing thoughts together': Indian artists' reflections on the post-millennial Indian graphic narratives scene" *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2019.1688174 (accessed on 2/12/2020).

VASHUM, R. (2000). *Naga's Right to Self-Determination: An Anthropological-Historical Perspective*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications.

VATSYAYAN, Kapila (2004). “The Ramayana Theme in the Visual Arts of South and Southeast Asia” in BOSE, Mandakranta (ed.). The *Rāmāyaṇa Revisited*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Van der VEER, Peter (1993). “The Foreign Hand: Orientalist Discourse in Sociology and Communalism” in BRECKENRIDGE, Carol A., and VEER, Peter van der (eds). *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Van der VEER, Peter (1994). *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Van der VEER, Peter (2001). *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Van der VEER, Peter (2014). *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Van der VEER, Peter (2019). “The Secular in India and China” in DEAN, Kenneth, and VEER, Peter van der (eds). *The Secular in South, East and Southeast Asia*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Van DIJK, Teun A. (2004). “Racist discourse” in CASHMERE, E. (ed.). *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Race and Ethnic Studies*, London: Routledge.

VERSUIS, Arthur (1993). *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*, New York: Oxford University Press.

VIJAYAN, Prem Kumar (2020). *Gender and Hindu Nationalism: Understanding Masculine Hegemony*, London: Routledge.

VISWANATHAN, Gauri (1998). *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

WALLACE, Paul (ed.) (2020). *India’s 2019 Elections*: *The Hindutva Wave and Hindu Nationalism*, Los Angeles: SAGE.

WILHITE, Harold (2014). "Gender Roles in Kerala" in NIELSEN, Kenneth Bo, and WALDROP, Anne (eds). *Women, Gender and Everyday Social Transformation in India*, London: Anthem Press.

WILLIAMS, Robert A. (2012). *Savage Anxieties: The Invention of Western Civilization*, New York: St. Martin's Publishing Group.

WILSON, Rob, and DISSANAYAKE, Wimal (eds.) (1996). *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, Durham: Duke University Press.

WRIGHT, Rita P. (2009). *The Ancient Indus: Urbanism, Economy, and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

WYATT, Andrew (2007). "Building the temples of postmodern India: economic constructions of national identity" *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 465-480.

XAXA, Virginius (2019). "Tribes and Indian National Identity: Location of Exclusion and Marginality" in BODHI, S. R., and JOJO, Bipin (ed.). *The Problematics of Tribal Integration: Voices from India's Alternative Centers*, Hyderabad: The Shared Mirror.

YENG, Sotkhan (2020). *Buddhist Feminism: Transforming Anger against Patriarchy*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

YOUNG, Robert J. C. (2001). *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

YOUNG, Serenity (2018). "South Asian Masculinities: Hegemonic and Fluid" in GERSTER, Daniel and KRÜGGELER, Michael (eds.). *God's Own Gender? Masculinities in World Religions*, Baden-Baden: Ergon Verlag.

ZARE, Bonnie, and IYER, Nalini (2009). "Introduction: Problematizing Indian Literary Canons" in IYER, Nalini, ZARE, Bonnie (eds.) (2009) *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.

ZELIZER, Barbie (1995). "Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Vol. 12, No. 2., pp. 214-239.

ZIMMER, Heinrich (1951). *The Philosophies of India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Filmography

AGNIHOTRI, Vivek (Director) (2022). *The Kashmir Files* [Film], Zee Studios.

BENEGAL, Shyam (Creator) (1988). *Bharat Ek Khoj* [The Discovery of India] [TV Series], Doordarshan.

CHATURVEDI, Pranav P. and SHARMA, Nitish (Directors) (2024). *Ram Janmabhoomi – Return of a Splendid Sun* [Film], Immortal Studios.

CHOPRA, B. R., and CHOPRA, Ravi (Directors) (1988). *Mahabharat* [TV Series], Doodarshan.

CHOPRA, Vidhu Vinod (Director). *The 12th Fail* [Film], Zee Studios.

DWIVEDI, Chandraprakash (Director) (1991). *Chanakya* [TV Series], Doordarshan.

GANDHI, *Vikram* (Director) (2011). Kumaré [Film], Kino Lorber.

KHAN, Mehboob (Director) (1957). *Mother India* [Film], Mehboob Productions

KULSHRESHTHA, Sujata, and TEWARI, Abhimanyu (Directors) (2022). *Legends of the Ramayana with Amish* [TV Series], Discovery Plus.

KURUP, Stalin (Director) (2007). *India Untouched: Stories of a People Apart* [Film], Drishti Media, Arts and Human Rights.

METHA, Deepa (Director) (1996). *Fire* [Film], Kaleidoscope Entertainment.

MISHRA, Sanoj (Director) (2019). *Ram ki Janmbhoomi* [Film], Cine Craft Productions.

PAHUJA, Nisha (Director) (2012). *The World Before Her* [Film], Storyline Entertainment.

PALEY, Nina (Director) (2008). *Sita Sings the Blues* [Film], GKIDS.

PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2010). *Business Sutra* [TV Series], CNBC-TV18.

PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2015). *Devlok with Devdutt Pattanaik* [TV Series], EPIC.

PATWARDHAN, Anand (Director) (1992). *Ram ke Naam* [Film], Film South Asia.

PATWARDHAN, Anand (Director) (1995). *Pitra, Putra, aur Dharmayuddha* [Film], Anand Patwardhan.

RAI, Nitesh (Director). *Ramrajya* [Film], Li Helio Films.

SAGAR, Ramanand (Director) (1987). *Ramayan* [TV Series], Doordarshan.

SEN, Sudipto (Director) (2023). *The Kerala Story* [Film], Sunshine Pictures.

SHARMA, Abhishek (Director) (2022). *Ram Setu* [Film], Zee Studios.

SHETTY, Rohit (Director) (2013). *Chennai Express* [Film], UTV Motion Pictures.

UDWIN, Leslie (Director) (2015). *India's Daughter* [Film], Berta film.

Appendix I

Summary of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (2010-2020)

This is a complete overview of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is a summary of its key events as they feature in the novels of the *corpus* of this dissertation and not a summary of the tradition itself, which, due to its seemingly endless diversity, would likely be impossible. It is meant to help the reader get acquainted with the story and navigate through the last four chapters of this dissertation. It is also not a summary of any particular version but of the events which are usually present in every retelling. The degree of innovation of the retellings varies greatly. In *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013a) claims to have invented nothing. Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* and Anand Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* are more innovative, as they refer to characters and events that did not exist in previous versions. In any case, no retelling is a translation of any single previous version. Different retellings draw from several previous sources and mix them.

The critical edition of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, usually considered to be the canonical version (see chapter 1), has been translated into English and annotated (Goldman, 1986; Pollock, 1986, 1991; Lefeber, 1994; Goldman and Goldman, 1996, 2017; Goldman, Goldman and Nooten, 2009). The names of most of the characters have an entry in Appendix II. The only exceptions are Mārīca and Sumitrā, who are never mentioned in the main body of this dissertation. Underlined words are non-anthroponymic Sanskrit concepts which have an entry on Appendix III.

Daśaratha, king of Ayodhyā, has four sons from three different wives: Rāma, son of Kauśalyā; Bharata, son of Kaikeyī; and Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna, sons of Sumitrā. While still children, the four brothers go to the forest hermitage (*āśrama*) of sage Vasiṣṭha to receive their education in philosophy and martial arts. As they have become teenagers, sage Viśvāmitra, who also resides in a hermitage, comes to Daśaratha's court in order to seek help in destroying the creatures (*rākṣasas*) who are interfering with the sacred rituals performed by sages. One of these creatures is called Tāṛakā. Daśaratha assigns Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa with the task of destroying Tāraka and her companions.

Janaka, king of Mithilā, finds a baby in a furrow. He names her Sītā and decides to take care of her as if she was his own daughter. In some versions, Sītā is the daughter of Rāvaṇa and Mandodarī and has been abandoned because it has been foretold by

astrologers that she shall be the cause of the death of her father. When Sītā comes of age, Janaka organises a marriage contest (*svayamvara*) in which suitors have to compete for her hand. The competition involves trying to lift a sacred heavy bow consecrated by the god Śiva which, until that moment, only Sītā has managed to lift. Many strong and prestigious kings try to lift it and fail. One of these include Rāvaṇa, king of Laṅkā, who gets frustrated at his failure.

Kubera, leader of a kind of the *yakṣas*, has built a great city called Laṅkā. After gaining near-invincibility from the god Brahmā, Rāvaṇa, son of sage (*ṛṣi*) Viśravas and *rākṣasī* Kaikasī, conquers the city and becomes its ruler. Rāvaṇa's sister Śūrpaṇakhā marries Vidyujjihva, one of Rāvaṇa's enemies. One day, Rāvaṇa kills Vidyujjihva in battle. Another of Rāvaṇa's enemies, Kārtavīryārjuna, a king of another powerful kingdom, manages to capture Rāvaṇa and later releases him. Besides engaging in fights with others, Rāvaṇa is a philandering man. One day, while in the forest, he tries to rape Vedavatī, a female ascetic, but she thwarts his intentions by jumping into a fire and killing herself.

Rāma also participates in Sītā's wedding contest. On his way to Laṅkā with sage Viśvāmitra, he hears from the sage the story of a hermitage they pass by. Ahalyā, the wife of sage Gautama, has mistakenly had sex with the god Indra, who was disguised as Gautama. Gautama curses her into turning into stone. When Rāma touches the stone, Ahalyā turns back into a woman again.

In Sītā's wedding contest, Rāma lifts the bow with ease and breaks it when trying to string it. Sītā marries Rāma and Sītā's younger sister Ūrmilā marries Lakṣmaṇa. After the marriages, Daśaratha wishes to turn Rāma, his favourite son, into his heir-apparent. Mantharā, the hunchbacked servant of queen Kaikeyī, reminds her master that king Daśaratha owes Kaikeyī two boons from a time when she helped him during a crucial war. Kaikeyī proceeds to the anger room, a room where she goes to vent her anger. When Daśaratha asks her what the matter is, Kaikeyī asks for her two boons. She demands that Rāma be exiled to the Daṇḍaka forest for fourteen years and that her son Bharata becomes the heir-apparent of Ayodhyā instead. Daśaratha feels heartbroken. However, having promised the two boons earlier and in a manner befitting of a king, does not take his words back. Rāma, an obedient son, does not argue against the decision. [385] His wife Sītā, brother Lakṣmaṇa and sister-in-law Ūrmilā express their

[385] In Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*, Rāvaṇa and his troops fiercely attack Mithilā after Rāvaṇa notices he is not to be the first one to compete in the wedding contest. In order to stop him, Rāma has to use a

wish to accompany him to the forest. After an argument, Rāma accepts that the first two accompany him. Ūrmilā stays behind and does not see her husband for the following fourteen years.

As Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa go to the forest, king Daśaratha dies of grief. Bharata, who is devoted to his brother Rāma, regrets his mother's decision. He visits Rāma in the forest and promises him that he will place Rāma's footwear on the throne for fourteen years and that he will reign temporarily through a hut in the outskirts of Ayodhyā and then give the kingdom back to Rāma.

During their exile, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa kill several wild creatures. One day, unaware, Lakṣmaṇa kills Śūrpaṇakhā's son. In their last year of exile, Rāma and his companions come across Śūrpaṇakhā in the forest. She feels attracted to Rāma, but he refuses her, as he is devoted to his wife Sītā. Lakṣmaṇa maims her. Śūrpaṇakhā goes back to Laṅkā and tells her story to her brother Rāvaṇa, who decides to avenge her. In some versions, he realises that Sītā is her daughter and, understanding that Rāma mistreats women, wishes to free her from his hands. He sends his servant Mārīca disguised as a golden deer to the forest. When Sītā sees the deer, she wishes it for herself. Rāma leaves their hut in order to try to find the animal. Later, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa hear Rāma crying for help. However, those are fake cries created by Rāvaṇa. Before leaving the hut in order to help his brother, Lakṣmaṇa draws a line on the ground (*Lakṣmaṇa Rekhā*) and orders Sītā to stay protected inside it. When Sītā is alone, Rāvaṇa comes to her disguised as a hermit and asks for her hospitality. Sītā steps outside the line. Rāvaṇa abducts her and takes her to Laṅkā in his flying chariot (*Puṣpakavimāna*).[386] In the beginning of the flight, Jaṭāyu, the king of the vultures and friend of Rāma and his family, tries to fight Rāvaṇa, but ultimately fails and is killed. When Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa come to the forest and find out that Sītā is absent, they start searching for her.

While in Laṅkā, Sītā is left in Rāvaṇa's garden and taken care of by several rākṣasīs. Rāvaṇa tries to approach and seduce her. However, she refuses him and never looks at him in the eye. Vibhīṣaṇa, Rāvaṇa's brother, who is against the abduction of Sītā, leaves Laṅkā and becomes Rāma's ally.

sacred destructive weapon (*astra*). Rāma then decides to punish himself by forcing the fourteen-year forest exile on himself.

[386] Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* ends at this point of the story.

During their search, Rāma and his brother go to Śabarī's hut. Śabarī is a poor tribal woman. She receives them hospitably and gives them wild berries. However, she bites the ones for Rāma before giving them to him. Lakṣmaṇa feels upset with her carelessness and rebukes her, but Rāma states that Śabarī is being hospitable by biting the berries first in order to see whether they taste bad or are poisonous.

Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa reach Kiṣkindhā, a kingdom created and controlled by ape-like creatures (*vānara*). The kingdom is under turmoil due to a dispute between Sugrīva and Bāli, who are brothers and pretenders to the throne. Sugrīva had once been king, but Bāli has usurped the throne. Rāma helps Sugrīva gain the throne back and Sugrīva then helps him search for Sītā. Rāma learns that she has been taken to Laṅkā. During his stay in Kiṣkindhā, Rāma befriends Hanumān, a powerful *vānara* who becomes Rāma's greatest follower and helper. Using his magical powers, Hanumān visits Sītā in Laṅkā and tells her that her husband is searching for her. He offers to carry Sītā back to Kiṣkindhā. However, she states that she prefers that Rāma comes and saves her himself. Hanumān allows himself to be captured and taken to Rāvaṇa. His tail is set on fire, but he manages to escape and, with the help of his tail, sets fire to the city.

When they learn what has happened, Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and an army of *vānaras* set out to Laṅkā. The *vānara* build a bridge made of stones (*Rāma setu*) so that they can reach the island. During the battle, Rāma and his companions manage to kill Rāvaṇa's strongest warriors, including his brother Kumbhakarṇa and his son Meghanāda. In the end, Rāma kills Rāvaṇa, sits Vibhīṣaṇa on the throne of Laṅkā and rescues Sītā. Nevertheless, when Rāma sees his wife, he does not receive her passionately, as he fears that she may have been unfaithful to him during her stay in Laṅkā. In order to prove her innocence, Sītā undergoes a fire trial (*agniparīkṣā*). It is determined that, if she burns, she has been unfaithful, otherwise she has remained caste. Sītā successfully proves her innocence. Rāma and Sītā go back to Ayodhyā and initiate a Golden Age (*Rāmarājya*). One day, Śambūka, a low-caste boy, starts learning the knowledge of the priestly high caste, the Brahmins (*brāhmaṇa*). The priests complain to Rāma that he is not upholding the social rules. Accordingly, Rāma kills Śambūka.

One day, Rāma learns about rumours spreading in the city. The commoners start fearing that, just like Sītā has done, wives may begin leaving their husbands in order to stay with other men. In other versions, the gossip begins when Śūrpaṇakhā disguises herself as a palace servant and asks Sītā to draw a picture of Rāvaṇa, which she manages to do, even though she has only seen his shadow. In some versions, Rāma immediately

banishes Sītā from the kingdom. In others, wishing to maintain his unblemished reputation, he asks her to undergo a new fire trial. Sītā refuses to do so and is banished. Rāma substitutes his real wife for a life-sized golden statue. Sītā goes to Vālmīki's hermitage in the forest and gives birth to Lava and Kuśa, who are Rāma's sons. One day, the two brothers go to Ayodhyā and, acting like bards, sing the tale of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in court. Rāma recognises them, calls Sītā back and asks her to undergo a new fire trial. She refuses again and asks for the earth to swallow her instead. The earth opens and Sītā disappears below the ground.

Appendix II

List of Characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

This list features the characters to whom I refer in this dissertation. For a complete index of characters and other proper names which appear in Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, MANI, Vettam (1975). *Purāṇic Encyclopaedia*, New Delhi: Motilal Banasidass; RAY, Manmatha Natha (1984). *An Index to the Proper Names Occuring in Vālmiki's Rāmāyana*, Varanasi: Ratna Printing Works.

Underlined words point to other entries into this appendix and non-underlined Sanskrit and Hindi words are explained in the glossary (Appendix III).

Agastya - Sage who lives in a hermitage in the forest and who imparts knowledge to Rāma and his brothers. PAI, Anant (1974). *Agastya*, Mumbai: Amar Chitra Katha.

Ahalyā - Minor character in the *Rāmāyaṇa* who is cursed into turning into stone for having sex with the Vedic god Indra and is therefore accused of being unfaithful to her husband Gautama. She is turned back into a human by Rāma. Richman (2008). She is the main character in Kavita Kané's (2019) *Ahalya's Awakening*.

Anaraṇya - King of Ayodhyā prior to Daśaratha. He is killed by Rāvaṇa.

Aruja - Daughter of Śukrācārya. She is raped by king Daṇḍa. Her story is told in Kavita Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess*.

Atikāya - Rāvaṇa's son killed by Lakṣmaṇa.

Bāli - King of Kiṣkindhā, elder brother of Sugrīva and husband of Rumā and then Tāra. He is killed by Rāma, as a consequence of which Bāli's brother Sugrīva obtains the throne of Kiṣkindhā. His name is also spelled *Vālin*. He is one of the main characters in Anand Neelakantan's (2018) *Vanara: The Legend of Bali, Sugreeva and Tara.*

Bhadra - One of the narrators and main characters of Anand Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. He is described as a low-caste, low-class and powerless *asura*. As a noun, the Sanskrit term *bhadra* means "prosperity, welfare" and, as an adjective, it means "prosperous, fortunate, good, beautiful", all of which are qualities which hardly apply to the character. He is not a major character in any other rendition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, even though there are several minor characters in the Hindu lore who bear this name. He is probably a character of Neelankantan's creation.

Bharata - Son of Daśaratha and Kaikeyī and brother of Rāma. He takes the throne of Ayodhyā while Rāma is on exile and always remains faithful to his brother.

Bhūmija - Another name for Sītā, wife of Rāma. In Sanskrit, this epithet means "born (*ja*) from the earth (*bhūmi*)". It is the name of one of the short stories in Anand Neelakantan's (2021) *Valmiki's Women: Five Tales from the Ramayana*.

Daṇḍa - King who rapes Aruja, daughter of Śukrācārya. The Sanskrit term means "stick". It may also refer to the king's "sceptre" and, by metonymy, to "administration" and "punishment". His story is told in Kavita Kané´s (2016) *Lanka's Princess*.

Daśaratha - Father of Rāma and king of Ayodhyā.

Dhenuka - In Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*, a village dweller and minor who becomes notorious for raping Rośnī. There is a *rākṣasa* with this name in the *Mahābhārata* and other tales. However, here he is probably a character of Tripathi's creation. Depending on the existing versions, he is killed either by Kṛṣṇa or by Kṛṣṇa's brother Balarāma.

Gautama - Sage and husband of Ahalyā. He is one of the main characters in Kavita Kané's (2019) *Ahalya's Awakening*.

Hanumān - *Vānara* helper of Rāma and nowadays a major Hindu god. Lutgendorf (2007a); PAI, Anant (2008). *Hanuman*, Mumbai: Amar Chitra Katha; PAI, Anant (2009). *Hanuman to the Rescue: Hanuman Brings the Sanjeevani*, Mumbai: Amar Chitra Katha; PAI, Anant (2011). *Bheema and Hanuman*, Mumbai: Amar Chitra Katha.

Janaka - King of Mithilā and father of Sītā.

Jaṭāyu - Friend of Daśaratha and semi-divine king of the vultures. He tries to rescue Sītā when she is abducted by Rāvaṇa. However, he fails and is killed when battling Rāvaṇa.

Kaikasī - Mother of Rāvaṇa and Śūrpaṇakhā and wife of Viśravas.

Kaikeyī - One of the wives of Daśaratha and mother of Bharata. Following a boon which Daśaratha has bestowed upon her for helping him during a war, she asks two favours from him: to exile Rāma to the forest and to turn her son Bharata into the heir to Ayodhyā's throne.

Kārtavīryārjuna - A powerful king who fights and takes Rāvaṇa as prisoner and latter releases him.

Kauśalyā - Wife of Daśaratha and mother of Rāma.

Kubera - Ruler of Laṅkā until he is overthrown by his half-brother Rāvaṇa. In modern Hinduism and Buddhism, he is considered to be the god of wealth.

Kubja - Hunchback woman, usually said to be a reincarnation of Śūrpaṇakhā, turned into a beautiful woman by Kṛṣṇa. This character and episode are part of the

Bhāgavata Purāṇa. However, they feature in the frame story to Kavita Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess*.

Kumbhakarṇa - Brother of Rāvaṇa and son of Kaikasī and Viśravas. PAI, Anant (2011). *Kumbhakarna,* Mumbai: Amar Chitra Katha.

Kuśa - Twin brother of Lava and son of Rāma and Sītā. PAI, Anant (1977). *The Sons of Rama*, Mumbai: Amar Chitra Katha.

Lakṣmaṇa - Son of Daśaratha and closest brother of Rāma. He accompanies Rāma during his forest exile.

Lava - Twin brother of Kuśa and son of Rāma and Sītā. PAI, Anant (1977). *The Sons of Rama*, Mumbai: Amar Chitra Katha.

Mahābalī - Ancient emperor of the *asuras*. In Anand Neelakantan's (2012), he represents the past glory of the *asura* empire and, for this reason, becomes Rāvaṇa's main guide to rejuvenate the empire.

Maithilī - Toponymic of Sītā, who originally comes from the kingdom of Mithilā.

Mantharā - Kaikeyī's maid. She persuades Kaikeyī to order Daśaratha to send Rāma into exile in the forest and to turn Bharata into Daśaratha's heir-apparent. Her name means "bent, curved, crooked, humpback". She is often represented as a hunchback in popular culture. In Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* she is a successful businesswoman. She is also the main character in one of the five short stories in Anand Neelakantan's (2021) *Valmiki's Women: Five Tales from the Ramayana*.

Maryādā Puruṣottama - One of Rāma's epithets. In Sanskrit, *maryādā* means "boundary, limit, restriction". *Puruṣottama* is a compound formed by *puruṣa*, "man", and *uttama*, "main, chief, principal, best". The epithet might therefore be translated into English as "the highest man (who follows) the boundaries".

Mandodarī - Wife of Rāvaṇa, daughter of Maya and mother of Atikāya and Meghanāda.

Matsya - Tribal boy with whom Rāma spars during his formative years in Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*. He is a character of Tripathi's creation. The term means "fish" in Sanskrit.

Maya - Father of Mandodarī and great architect of the *asuras*. He is described in different texts as someone who constructed beautiful and sublime cities.

Meghanāda - Son of Rāvaṇa and Mandodarī. In Sanskrit, his name means "the sound (*nāda*) of the clouds (*megha*)". He is also often called *Indrajit*, as he was the

defeater (the Sanskrit root √*ji* means "to win, to conquer") of the Vedic god Indra. He is the main character in Michael Madhusudan Dutt's (1824-1873) Bengali poem *Meghnad Badh Kavya*, Bengali for "The Slaying of Meghanād", written in 1861 (see Chapter 1). For a translation of the poem into English, see DATTA, Michael Madhusudan (auth.), and SEELY, Clinton B. (trans.) (2004). *The Slaying of Meghanad: A Ramayana from Colonial Bengal*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Patita-Pāvana - One of Rāma's epithets. The Sanskrit phrase means "saviour of the polluted". *Patita*, "fallen", comes from the Sanskrit root √*pat*. The root has several and contradictory meanings. In this case, it means "to fall". It can have both a literal physical meaning, but also a more metaphoric one and therefore mean, just as in English, "to lose one's social status". *Pāvana* means "purifying, freeing from sin, sanctifying", from the root √*pū*, "to purify".

Rāma - Son of Daśaratha and Kauśalyā and husband of Sītā. He is the main hero of most of the versions of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, which is named after him. Nowadays, he is also a major Hindu deity, as he is regarded as an avatar (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu and as an ideal man who always follows the established rules of society. He is the main character of Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*.

Rāvaṇa - Husband of Mandodarī, father of Meghanāda and Atikāya, brother of Śūrpaṇakhā and *rākṣasa* king of Laṅkā. He is usually the main antagonist of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. One of his most common epithets is *daśamukha*, meaning "he who has ten (*daśa*) faces (*mukha*)", a trait he often possesses in visual representations, such as in the cover to the first edition of Anand Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (Figure 13). He is usually depicted as nearly invincible (given that he possesses only one weak spot), as a great scholar and as a pious devotee of the god Śiva. While he is seen as a villain in mainstream Hindu circles, mainly in northern India, he is revered in more subaltern versions of Hinduism, mainly in the south. Apart from Bhadra, Rāvaṇa is the main character and narrator of Anand Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*. He is also the main character in Amish Tripathi's (2019) *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*.

Rośnī - Friend of Rāma and his brothers and daughter of Mantharā in Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*. She is raped by Dhenuka. She is a character of Tripathi's creation, as her name is not even Sanskrit but Persian. Her name constitutes an anachronism, as this word did not exist in the Indian subcontinent during the time which the epic is supposed to represent (3400 BCE). In Persian, *roušani* means

"brilliant", from *roušan*, "light". The name Roxana is a corruption of the same Persian word. In the modern English-speaking world, it is most commonly spelled and pronounced as *Roxanne*.

Rumā - Wife of Sugrīva and then of Bāli.

Śabarī - Tribal woman whom Rāma comes across in the forest during his exile. Śabarī bites berries before she hands them to Rāma in order to know whether they taste well. As a result of this, she becomes a symbol of devotion to Rāma.

Śambūka - Low-caste boy who starts singing the *Vedas*, which belong to the Brahmin caste, and who is later killed by Rāma so that the existing social hierarchy may be upheld. Richman (2008).

Samīcī - Police and protocol chief of Mithilā in Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*. She is a character of Tripathi's creation.

Śāntā - Sister of Rāma. In most of the retellings, she rarely plays an important role and sometimes is not even mentioned. One of the stories in Anand Neelakantan's (2021) *Valmiki's Women: Five Tales from the Ramayana* is about her.

Śatānanda - Son of Gautama and Ahalyā and religious advisor to king Janaka.

Śatrughna - Brother of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Bharata.

Sītā - Rāma's wife, Ūrmilā's sister and adoptive daughter of king Janaka of Mithilā. She is also an important goddess in modern Hinduism. She is often regarded as a *pativratā*, a wife who is totally "devoted (*vrata*) to her husband (*pati*)", in the Hindu world. She is also called Maithilī, due to her place of origin, and Bhūmija, "born (*ja*) from the earth (*bhūmi*)", more commonly translated as "daughter of the earth", given that, when she is a baby, she is found in furrow that Janaka is ploughing. In some versions of the tale, Sītā is Rāvaṇa's and Mandodarī's biological daughter. She is the narrator and main character in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's (2019) *The Forest of Enchantments,* the main character in Amish Tripathi's (2017) *Sita: Warrior of Mithila,* and is supposed to be the main focus of Devdutt Pattanaik's (2013) *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, even though this is debatable. Sutherland (1989); HESS, Linda (1999). "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 67, No. 1, pp. 1-32; PAUWELS, Heidi (2004). "'Only You': The Wedding of Rama and Sita, Past and Present" In BOSE, Mandakranta (ed.). The *Rāmāyaṇa Revisited*, Oxford University Press; Pauwels (2008).

Sugrīva - King of Kiṣkindhā, younger brother of Bāli and husband of Rumā and afterwards Tāra. He becomes the definitive king of Kiṣkindhā once Rāma kills his brother Bāli. He is one of the main characters in Anand Neelakantan's (2018) *Vanara: The Legend of Bali, Sugreeva and Tara.*

Śukrācārya - *Guru* of the *asuras* and father of Aruja. In Amish Tripathi's (2015) *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*, he is called the leader of the *asuras* and is originally from Egypt.

Śūrpaṇakhā - Sister of Rāvaṇa and daugther of Viśravas and Kaikasī. When she meets Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in the forest, Lakṣmaṇa cuts off her nose, ears and, in some versions, her breasts. This action drives Rāvaṇa to kidnap Sītā and instil the main war of the epic. Her name means "she whose nails (*nakha*) are like winnowing baskets (*śūrpa*)", which means that her nails look like animal claws. Śūrpaṇakhā is also called Mīnākṣī. She is the main character in Kavita Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess* and in one of the stories in Anand Neelakantan's (2021) *Valmiki's Women: Five Tales from the Ramayana.* Erndl (1991); AUSTIN, Sara (2014). "Sita, Surpanakha and Kaikeyi as political bodies: representations of female sexuality in idealised culture" *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 125-136; CLERCQ, Eva de (2016). "Śūrpaṇakhā in the Jain Rāmāyaṇa" in BROCKINGTON, John, BROCKINGTON, Mary, and BOSE, Mandakranta (eds.). *The Other Rāmāyana Women: regional rejection and response*, New York: Routledge.

Tāra - Wife of Bāli and then Sugrīva. She is one of the main characters in Anand Neelakantan's (2018) *Vanara: The Legend of Bali, Sugreeva and Tara.*

Tāraka - *Rākṣasī* who disturbs the rituals of the sages who live in the forest. She is killed by Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. She is a relevant character in Kavita Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess*, in which she plays the role of Śūrpaṇakhā's grandmother. She is also the main character in one of the short stories in Anand Neelakantan's (2021) *Valmiki's Women: Five Tales from the Ramayana*.

Trijaṭā - *Rākṣasī* from Laṅkā who guards Sītā during her forced stay there. Her name means "the one who has three (*tri*) braids (*jaṭā*) on her hair". Most *rākṣasīs* who keep company to Sītā have names which point to their beastly nature.

Ūrmilā - Wife of Lakṣmaṇa and sister of Sītā. Although she expresses her wish to accompany Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma and Sītā during their forest exile, Lakṣmaṇa does not allow it. Consequently, Ūrmilā sleeps during the whole exile. She is the main character in Kavita Kané's (2015) *Sita's Sister*.

Vālīn - Same as Bālī.

Vālmīki - Mythic author of the *Rāmāyaṇa* who also partakes in the plot, receiving Sītā in his *āśrama* when she is banished from Ayodhyā. He inspired the name of a real lower caste whose members trace their ancestry back to him. LESLIE, Julie (2003). *Authority and Meaning in Indian Religions: Hinduism and the Case of Vālmīki*, London: Routledge; RAJPRAMUKH, K. E., and PALKUMAR, P. D. S. (2005). "Livelihood Challenges and Strategies: The Valmikis of Eastern Ghats" *The Anthropologist*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp 153-160.

Vasiṣṭha - Sage who, together with his rival Viśvāmitra, becomes one of the teachers for Rāma and his brothers during their childhood. LOMMEL, Herman (1965/1966). "Vasiṣṭha und Viśvāmitra" *Oriens*, Vol. 18/19, pp. 200-227.

Vedavatī - Ascetic woman who lives in the forest and is raped by Rāvaṇa, after which she immolates herself. Her name means "one who knows the *Vedas*".

Vibhīṣaṇa - Brother of Rāvaṇa and Śūrpaṇakhā. Contrary to his siblings, he is devoted to Rāma, and, led by this spirit, joins his army in the battle to rescue Sītā. When Rāvaṇa is killed, he becomes king of Laṅkā.

Vidyujjihva - Husband of Śūrpaṇakhā. He is killed by Śūrpaṇakhā's brother Rāvaṇa, which makes her feel resentful toward him.

Viśravas - Husband of Kaikasī and father of Rāvaṇa, Śūrpaṇakhā, Vibhīṣaṇa and Kumbhakarṇa. In Kavita Kané's (2016) *Lanka's Princess,* he is described as a *ṛṣi* and is starkly opposed to his *rākṣasa* wife and children, except for Vibhīṣaṇa, who is said to be half-*ṛṣi* and half-*rākṣasa*.

Viśvāmitra - **S**age who, together with his rival Vasiṣṭha, becomes one of the teachers of Rāma and his brothers during their childhood. LOMMEL, Herman (1965/1966). "Vasiṣṭha und Viśvāmitra" *Oriens*, Vol. 18/19, pp. 200-227; SATHAYE, Adheesh A. (2015). *Crossing the Lines of Caste: Viśvāmitra and the Construction of Brahmin Power in Hindu Mythology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. For an *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book (see Chapter 1) about him, see PAI, Anant (2006). *Vishwamitra*, Mumbai: Amar Chitra Katha.

Appendix III
Glossary of Indic Terms

Besides resorting to my knowledge of Indian languages and the mentioned books, I have used Wisdom Library,[387] an online database containing dictionaries of several Indian languages and encyclopaedias related to Indian history and culture.

Adbhutarāmāyaṇa - Version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* attributed to Vālmīki (see entry in Appendix II). GRIERSON, George A. (1926). "On the Adbhuta-Ramayana" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London*, Vol. 4, Nº. 1, pp. 11-27.

Ādi Draviḍa - Positive epithet which has been attributed to the *Parayar* caste (see Pariah). From the Sanskrit term *ādi*, "first, original, primitive", and Draviḍa, "Dravidian", therefore "original Dravidians".

Ādi Purāṇa - The name may refer to a Jain text telling the story of the first *tīrthaṃkara* (literally "ford-maker", see *tīrtha*), the name given in Jainism to the 24 beings who achieved spiritual enlightenment and have propagated the creed. It means "first *purāṇa*" and can therefore also refer to the Hindu *Brahma Purāṇa*, the first of the 18 recognised major *Purāṇas*.

Ādikāvya - In Sanskrit, "first (*ādi*) poem (*kāvya*)", epithet which refers to Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. Similarly, *ādikavi*, "the first poet", refers to Vālmīki (*see* Appendix II).

Ādivāsī - Tribal people of India. From the Sanskrit term *ādi*, "beginning, source, origin, first, primitive", and *vāsī*, "dweller, inhabitant", from the root √*vas*, "to live, to dwell". Therefore, "original inhabitants". RYCROFT, Daniel J., and DASGUPTA Sangeeta (eds.) (2011). *The Politics of Belonging in India: Becoming Adivasi*, London: Routledge; SEN, Asoka Kumar (2018). *Indigeneity, Landscape and History: Adivasi Self-fashioning in India*, London: Routledge; RAO, V. Srinivasa (ed.) (2019). *Adivasi Rights and Exclusion in India*, London: Routledge.

Advaita Vedānta - Name of a monistic philosophic school, that is, one which considers that everything derives from an ultimate unitary substance. In Sanskrit, *Advaita Vedānta* can be parsed as *a-*, a negative prefix, and *dvaita*, "dual", from the numeral *dvi*, etymologically related to the English *two* and also to *dual*. *Vedānta*

[387] https://www.wisdomlib.org/ (accessed on 31/10/2021).

literally means "the end (*anta*) of the Vedas (*veda*)", which refers to the Upaniṣads. The phrase could be translated into English as “the non-dualistic school of the end of the Vedas”. DEUTSCH, Eliot, and DALVI, Rohit (eds.) (2004). *The Essential Vedanta: A New Source Book of Advaita Vedānta: A New Source Book of Advaita Vedānta*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, Inc.

Agni - Name of the Vedic god of fire, who was closely associated with the Vedic rituals and sacrifices. It is an Indo-European cognate of Latin *ignis*, which is the etymon for the English verb *to ignite*. STAAL, Frits (ed.) (1983). *Agni: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, 2. Vols., Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press. BHATTACHARYA, Dipak (1984). *Mythological and Ritual Symbolism: A Study With Reference to the Vedic and Tantric Agni*, Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar; SMITH, Frederick M. (1985). “Names of Agni in the Vedic Ritual” *Annals of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Vol. 66, No. 1/4, pp. 219-226.

Agniparīkṣā - Fire trial, used in order to test a person’s (most commonly a woman’s) chastity. In this contest, several suitors competed for a maiden. The first element of the term comes from agni, “fire”. The second element comes from *parīkṣā*, “test, exam, trial”, formed by the pre-verb, *pari-*, “around”, and the root *√īkṣ*, “to see”. The word literally means “to see around”.

Aham - Sanskrit for “I” in the nominative case. Possibly due to influence from the English term *ego*, which is a cognate of *aham*, the neo-Aryan term *aham* has acquired the more philosophically/psychoanalytically charged and pejorative meaning of “one’s self-importance”.

Ahiṃsā - Ideal of non-violence. In contemporary times, the concept was popularised by Gandhi. In Sanskrit, it is formed by the negative prefix *a-* and *hiṃsā*, “violence”. Even though the term is more relevant in the Buddhist and especially in the Jainist traditions, as its importance in Gandhi’s thought was paramount, the term has become integrated into the popular representation of modern Hinduism. MERTON, Thomas (ed.) (1964). *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Mohandas K. Gandhi’s Non-Violence in Peace and War*, New York: New Directions; PAREKH, Bhikhu (1988). “Gandhi’s Concept of Ahimsa” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 13, pp. 195-217; CHAKRABORTY, S. K. (2002). “Ahimsa (Non-violence) in the Indian Ethos” *Journal of Human Values*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 17-25; STEGER, Manfred B. (2006). “Searching for *Satya* through *Ahimsa*: Gandhi’s Challenge to Western Discourses of Power” *Constellations*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 332-353; HAKSAR, Vinit

(2017). *Gandhi and Liberalism: Satyagraha and the Conquest of Evil*, London: Routledge.

Akbar (1542-1605) - Mughal ruler famous for his interest in different religions. Amartya Sen (2005) has often referred to Akbar as a good example of the "argumentative Indian", that is, the Indian who does not choose a single and biased vision of the world. The name is the comparative and superlative of the Arabic adjective *kabīr*, "big", thus "biggest, greatest". RICHARDS, John F. (1995). *The New Cambridge History of India, Vol. 1, Part 5: The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Amar Chitra Katha - Publishing house of comic books founded by Anant Pai in 1969. It has been publishing tales from Indian folklore, mythology and history. The title is composed of the terms *amar*, "immortal", from the root √*mṛ*, "to die"; *citra*, "picture, image", from the root √*citr*, "to paint"; and *kathā*, "tale, story", from the root √*kath,* "to tell, to narrate". The phrase could be translated as "Immortal picture tales". These popular comics have been criticised by academics for supporting Hindu nationalism and for making negative representations of Indian subaltern groups. Sreenivas' (2010) *Sculpting a Middle Class: History, Masculinity and the Amar Chitra Katha in India* is the most in-depth study of the publishing house, whose official website is https://www.amarchitrakatha.com/ (accessed on 18/11/2021).

Annapūrṇā - One of the many epithets to refer to ideal Indian housewives. Formed by the Sanskrit terms *anna*, "food", from the root √*ad*, "to eat", and *pūrṇā,* "full of, filled with". The expression therefore means "full of food" or, more idiomatically, "provider of abundant food". It is a common epithet for the goddess Durgā.

Apsarā - In Hindu mythology, class of female beings who live in water bodies. In Sanskrit, the term is composed of *ap*, "water", and the root √*sṛ*, "to go, to flow". The term is often translated as "water nymphs". BORSANI, Giuseppina (1936). "Apsaras e Yaksinī" *Aevum*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 177-184.

Araṇya - Sanskrit for the concept of "forest" in its wildest and dangerous form. The term is usually translated as "wilderness" and is often opposed to the concepts of *grāma* and *kṣetra*, which can be translated as "village, settlement".

Ārya - Indo-European linguistic group who populated India from the north of the subcontinent. As most of what is known about the origins of the group comes from linguistic clues, there is not much consensus as to whether this group invaded and displaced the previous inhabitants (Dravidians) or whether they peacefully

intermingled with them. From the Sanskrit *ārya*, "noble". In ancient Hindu texts, the northern part of India is often called Āryāvarta. The word is also the ultimate etymon for the toponym *Iran*. The concept is particularly notorious nowadays due to its appropriation by the German Romantics and later by the Nazi party. Pollock (1993a); Trautmann (1997); Figueira (2002); Arvindson (2006); THAPAR, Romila, WITZEL, Michael, MENON, Jaya, FRIESE, Kai, and KHAN, Razib (2019). *Which of Us Are Aryans? Rethinking the Concept of Our Origins*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.

Aryan - See *ārya*.

Āryaputra - The term *āryaputra* is composed of *ārya,* "noble, best, excellent", and *putra*, "son child". "Gentleman" would be a possible translation, even though the term *āryaputra* is not as common in Sanskrit as *gentleman* is in English.

Āryaputri - Female version of *āryaputra*.

Āryāvarta - One of the many names often attributed to North India. It is composed by the term *ārya*, "Aryan, noble" and has been described as the place limited by the Himālaya to the north and the Vindhyas to the south. The title of Amish Tripathi's (2019) third instalment of his *Rāmāyaṇa* series is *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta,* which could be regarded as meaning "Rāvaṇa: Enemy of North India".

Āsana - See *padmāsana***.**

Aśoka (3rd century BCE) - Emperor of the Maurya dynasty who converted to Buddhism. Sen (2005) has often referred to Aśoka as an example of the "argumentative Indian", that is, the Indian who does not choose a single and biased vision of the world. LAHIRI, Nayanjot (2015). *Ashoka in Ancient India*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Ashok Banker (see Chapter 1) has written two novels based on his life. BANKER, Ashok (2016). *Ashoka: Lion of Maurya*, New Delhi: Westland; BANKER, Ashok (2017). *Ashoka: Satrap of Taxila*, New Delhi: Westland. There is also a popular Bollywood blockbuster depicting Aśoka's life, even though the film focuses more on romance and sensationalism than on history. SIVAN, Santosh (Director) (2001). *Aśoka* [Film], Red Chillies Entertainment.

Āśrama - In Sanskrit, *āśrama* describes 1) a hermitage where ascetics dwell and meditate and 2) the four stages of life of a Brahmin (see *brāhmaṇa*), of which the fourth corresponds to leaving society to the forest and becoming an ascetic. From the Sanskrit root √*śram*, "to perform austerities, to be tired". WIJESINGHE, Gita (1987). "Indian Philosophy as a Means for Understanding Modern Ashram Schools" *Comparative Education*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 237-243; OLIVELLE, Patrick (1993). *The Āśrama*

System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution, New York: Oxford University Press; SHARPLEY, Richard, and SUNDARAM, Priya (2005). "Tourism: a Sacred Journey? The Case of Ashram Tourism, India" *International Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 7, pp. 161-171.

Astra - In Sanskrit, *astra* may mean any weapon in general, even though, in different texts, it may have more specific meanings, such as "sword" or "bow". It comes from the root √*as*, "to throw", so that it has often been translated into English as "missile" or "projectile". In the Sanskrit epics, *astras* are often created or blessed by specific deities and are therefore imbued with their destructive powers.

Asura - Category of supernatural beings in Hindu mythology. In Indian traditions, they are regarded as evil and as opponents to the benevolent devas. In the Persian Zoroastrian tradition, which is linguistically and culturally similar to the Vedic one, *daeva*s are considered evil and *ahuras*, etymologically related to the Sanskrit *asura*, are good, so much so that the benevolent god of the Zoroastrian pantheon is called Ahura Mazda, whose first term is possibly related to *asura*. This difference in the roles of similar beings has led scholars to posit the hypothesis of a conflict between early Indian and Iranian religions. Hale (1999); BOYCE, Mary (1979). *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 9-11. In modern Turkish, the word *dev* means "giant", just like the word *raksasa* in modern Indonesian (see *rākṣasa*).

Avatāra - Physical rebirth of a Hindu god. From the Sanskrit *avatāra*, composed by the pre-verb *ava-*, "downwards", and the root √*tṝ*, "to cross", therefore "to cross down". The concept refers mainly to Vaiṣṇavism, the worship of Viṣnu, of whom Rāma is an *avatāra*. SHETH, Noel (2002). "Hindu Avatara and Christian Encarnation: A Comparison" *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 98-125; CLOONEY, Francis X., and STEWART, Tony K. (2004). "Vaiṣṇava" In MITTAL, Sushil, and THURSBY, Gene R. (eds.). *The Hindu World*, New York: Routledge.

Ayodhyā – 1) Name of Rāma's mythic city and kingdom; 2) modern town in Uttar Pradesh, India. The latter is revered by Hindus and is considered to be the original city of the epic and the birthplace of the hero (see *Rāmjanmabhūmi*). It is possible that such a name was given to the town to connect it to the myth. The modern town is particular infamous for being the main bone of contention in the communalist struggle between Hindus and Muslims when it comes to the Babri Masjid controversy. The Babri Masjid was a mosque reportedly built by Babur (1483-1530), the founder of the Mughal

dynasty, over the original birthplace of Rāma. The mosque was destroyed by Hindus in 1992. Nandy, Trivedy, Mayaram, and Yagnik (1995), Brosius (2005). For a documentary film with footage of the event and interviews with several citizens and some of the major characters involved in it, see PATWARDHAN, Anand (Director) (1992), *Ram ke Naam* [Film], Film South Asia. Besides being a town in modern India, it was for a long time the capital and the name of the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya (1350-1767). After the fall of the kingdom and the rise of the Chakri dynasty, the kings adopted the name Rama. The current king of Thailand is Rama X (r. 2016-). The "Yogya" name of the royal Javanese city of Yogyakarta is also thought to be derived from this narrative.

Āyurveda - Traditional Indian medical system. *Āyurveda* is a Sanskrit term composed of *āyu*, "age, life", and *veda*, "knowledge", from the root √*vid*, "to know". The term may be translated as "knowledge of age" or as "knowledge of life". KHARE, C. P., and KATIYAR, Chandra Kant (2012). *The Modern Ayurveda: Milestones Beyond the Classical Age*, Boca Raton: CRC Press; MUKHARJI, Projit Bihari (2016). *Doctoring Traditions: Ayurveda, Small Technologies and Braided Sciences*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; KHARE, C. P. (ed.) (2020). *Evidence-Based Ayurveda: Defining a New Scientific Path*, London: Routledge.

Babri Masjid - *See* Ayodhyā.

Babur (1483-1530) - Founder and first emperor of the Mughal Empire. See Ayodhyā.

Banyan tree - *Ficus bhengalensis*, a sacred tree in Hinduism and one which is often used as a metaphor for the religion's unity and diversity (see Chapter 2), as the tree has only one root which gets divided into many individual branches. The English word comes from Portuguese *baniano*, which in turn comes from Sanskrit *vāṇija*, "merchant, trader". The tree was firstly called like this due to a specimen that existed in Bandar Abbas, Iran, and which came to be associated with the local merchants. The most common name in Sanskrit to define this species is *vaṭa*.

Bhagavad Gītā - Sacred Hindu text which consists of a philosophical and theological conversation between Arjuna and his charioteer Kṛṣṇa. Even though it is a section of the much larger epic *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Sanskrit for "song (*gītā*) of god (*bhagavad*)", is important for *Kṛṣṇaism*, the devotional movement (see *bhakti*) of Kṛṣṇa, traditionally considered to be one of the avatars (see *avatāra*) of Viṣṇu. It also important for the contemporary Indian and Hindu imaginary in general. For that

reason, it is often printed and referred to as an independent work. See HERLING, Bradley L. (1992). *e German Gita: The Reception of Hindu Religious Texts Within German Romanticism (1790-1830)* [PhD dissertation], Boston University; SARGEANT, Winthrop (Trans.) (2009). *The Bhagavad Gita*, Albany: State University of New York Press; DAVIS, Richard H. (2015). *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bhāgavata Purāṇa - *Purāṇa* which mainly deals with the life of the God Kṛṣṇa, considered to be one of the avatars (see *avatāra*) of Viṣṇu. BRYANT, Edwin F. (trans.) (2004). *Krishna: the Beautiful Legend of God: (Srimad Bhagavata Purana Book X)*, London: Penguin Books; DEBROY, Bibek (2019). *The Bhagavata Purana*, 3 Vols., Gurgaon: Penguin. The Sanskrit title could be translated into English as "The old chronicle of the follower of *Viṣṇu"*. The first word comes from *bhagavat*, "dispenser, provider" and, more idiomatically, "god". It is influenced by the title of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The term ultimately derives from the Sanskrit root √*bhaj*, "to divide, to distribute". *Purāṇa* means "old" and still retains this same meaning in modern Hindi. As a religious and literary term, *purāṇa* refers to a body of works which were written after the Indian epics and mainly tell legends of the Hindu gods. MATCHETT, Freda (2003). "The Purāṇas" in FLOOD, Gavin (ed.). *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing; RAO, Velcheru Narayana (2004). "Purāṇa" in MITTAL, Sushil, and THURSBY, Gene R. (eds.). *The Hindu World*, New York: Routledge.

Bhakti - Religious movement which originated in South India and later spread into the North. From the Sanskrit root √*bhaj*, "to distribute, to worship". Contrary to more ancient Vedic religious concepts, *bhakti* consisted on individual worship to a personal god or goddess, regardless of caste, gender or other kinds of social divisions. LELE, Jayant (1980). "The Bhakti Movement in India: A Critical Introduction" *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1-2, pp. 1-15; FRAZIER, Jessica (2013). "Bhakti in Hindu Cultures" *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 6, pp. 101-113; Hawley (2015). Besides writing a lot about the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Indian classical literature in general, renowned folklorist A. K. Ramanujan (2004) also wrote a lot on folklore and the relationship of *bhakti* and modern poetry. See the section "Essays on Bhakti and Modern Poetry" in his collected essays.

Bhallūka - Kind of being in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The word means "bear" in Sanskrit.

Bhārata - Hindi name for India. The term is derived from a mythological emperor mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, not to be confused with Rāma's brother. According to

the 1950 Indian Constitution (article 1), this is the official name of the country. India, derived from the Sanskrit word *Sindhu*, "river", is the name the Persians gave to the place when they first got there and by which it is best known nowadays throughout the world. *Bhāratavarṣa*, from *Bhārata*, "India", and *varṣa*, "region", is another of the common ancient Sanskrit names sometimes given to the modern nation-state.

Bhārata Mātā - "Mother India", common epithet for the modern nation-state. It is the title of one the most famous classics of Bollywood, *Mother India* (1957), which tells the story of a poor single woman who struggles to raise her children in poverty. KHAN, Mehboob (Director) (1957). *Mother India* [Film], Mehboob Productions.

Bhārata udaya - Marketing motto launched by the BJP in 2004. Bhārata is the name for the nation-state of India. *Udaya*, "rising", comes from the Sanskrit pre-verb *ud-*, "up, upwards", and the root √*ay*, "to go", therefore, "to go up, to rise". In English, "India Shining". Ana Cristina Mendes, one of the scholars who often studies questions of re-Orientalism, has played with this concept in an essay about the opposite representation of India in contemporary popular culture for Western audiences. MENDES, Ana Cristina (2010). "Showcasing India Unshining: Film Tourism in Danny Boyle's Slumdog Millionaire" *Third Text*, http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/10.1080/09528822.2010.491379 (accessed on 2/12/2020). See also PINNEY, Christopher (2005). "The Political Economy of Gloss" *Bidoun*, https://www.bidoun.org/articles/the-political-economy-of-gloss (accessed on 19/9/2022); KAUR, Ravinda (2016). "'I am India Shining': The Investor-Citizen and the Indelible Icon of Good Times" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 75, Nº. 3, pp. 621-648.

Bhū-devī – Sanskrit for "Earth-goddess", similar to the English Mother Earth.

Bhūputrī - Sanskrit for "daughter of the earth", one of Sītā's most common epithets. The first part of the term, *bhū*, refers to the "earth, soil, land", from the root √*bhū*, "to be, to become, to arise". The second part is the feminine of *putra*, "son child".

BJP (Bhāratīya Janatā Pārṭī) - Hindi for "Indian (*Bhāratīya*) People's (*Janatā*) Party (Pārṭī)", regarded as a right-wing party whose main ideology is Hindu nationalism (*see Hindutva*). Under the leadership of prime-minister Narendra Modi (1950-), it has been the party in power since 2014. HANSEN, Thomas Bloom, and JAFFRELOT, Christophe (eds.) (1998). *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press; WALLACE, Paul (ed.) (2015). *India's 2014 Elections: A Modi-led BJP Sweep*, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications; Chakrabarty and Jha (2020,

Part II, ch. 9); WALLACE, Paul (ed.) (2019). *India's 2019 Elections: The Hindutva Wave and Indian Nationalism*, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Brahmā - Hindu god, usually called the "creator of the universe". He is part of the *trimūrti*. From the Sanskrit root √*bṛh*, "to swell, to grow, to increase, to expand".

Brahman - According to early Vedic and Upanishadic philosophy, ultimate reality which pervades all that exists. From the Sanskrit root √*bṛh*, "to swell, to grow, to increase, to expand".

Brāhmaṇa - Brahmins, which, according to the traditional Hindu social system, constitute the priestly caste. From the Sanskrit root √*bṛh*, "to swell, to grow, to increase, to expand".

Brahmaputra - River which originates in the Himalayas and traverses China, India and Bangladesh. Sanskrit for "son (*putra*) of Brahmā".

Caraṇacinha - The footprints of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā during their forest exile. Nowadays, such footprints are much revered by pilgrims. PANDE, Vikrant, and KULKARNI, Neelesh (2021). *In The Footsteps of Rama: Travels With the Ramayana*, New Delhi: HarperCollins.

Carnatic (music) - One of the major divisions that ethnomusicologists establish in the Indian music tradition. *Hindustani*, from the Persian name for India, refers to the northern tradition, while *Carnatic*, related to the name of the southern Indian state *Karnataka*, to the southern one. MEER, Wim van der (1980). *Hindustanic Music in the 20th Century*, Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers; ROWELL, Lewis (1992). *Music and Musical Thought in Early India*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; VIJAYAKRISHNAN, K. G. (2007). *The Grammar of Carnatic Music*, Berlin: Mouton de Grutyer; MILLER, Terry E. (2017). *World Music: A Global Journey*, New York: Routledge.

Cārvāka - Atheistic, empiricist and materialist Hindu school which disappeared and whose ideas are mostly known through critiques made by other more orthodox traditions. Also called *Lokāyata*. CHATTOPADHYAYA, Debiprasad (1959). *Lokāyata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House; BHATTACHARYA, Ramkrishna (2005). *Studies on the Cārvāka/Lokāyata*, London: Anthem Press; GOKHALE, Pradeep P. (2015). *Lokāyata/Cārvāka: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Caste - Endogamic groups of traditional Hinduism. The term caste is derived from the Portuguese one *casta*, "kind, variety, usually referring to animal or vegetal species".

It was used by early Portuguese chroniclers such as Tomé Pires and Duarte Barbosa, who were active during the beginning of the 16th century. CORTESÃO, Armando (ed.) (2005) [1944]. *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to China, Written in Malacca and India in 1512-1515*, 2 Vols., New Delhi: Asian Educational Services; DAMES, Mansel Longworth (ed.) (2016) [1918]. *The Book of Duarte Barbosa, An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean*, 2 Vols., Oxford: Ashgate Publishing. The term caste usually translates two different Sanskrit concepts: *varṇa*, which literally means "colour"; and *jāti*, from the root √*jan*, "to be born", etymologically related to the English verb *to generate*. The four *varṇa* of traditional Hinduism are the *brāhmaṇa* (priests), the *kṣatrya* (warrior, rulers), the *vaiśya* (farmers, merchants) and the *śūdra* (laborers). Jātis, usually related to profession or geographical area, are more numerous than *varṇas* and are much more relevant in contemporary Indian society. Zimmer (1951: 151-169).

Caturmukha - Epithet of Brahmā. The term literally means *catur*, "four", from the same Indo-European root as the English numeral, and *mukha*, "face", therefore "having four faces".

Chakra - See *Kuṇḍalinī yoga*.

Dalit - One of the many terms to define the outcastes, that is, the groups which are outside the traditional categories of Indian society (see caste). From the Sanskrit term *dalita*, "broken", from the root √*dal*, "to break". For the many names by which this social group has been called, see Doniger (2009: 37-40).

Daṇḍaka, Daṇḍakāraṇya - Forest to which Rāma is exiled. Sometimes, it is called *Daṇḍakāraṇya*, “the jungle Daṇḍakā” (see *āraṇya*). Daṇḍakā possibly comes from *daṇḍa*, “stick, staff, rod” and, by extension, “punishment”. The term may therefore be interpreted as “the wild place of punishments”. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Daṇḍakā is said to be the forest region between the Narmadā and Godāvarī rivers. Nowadays, it is the name of a forest in the Indian state of Chhattisgarh.

Darśana – Literally, “vision, eyesight”, from the Sanskrit root √*dṛś*, "to see". This concept is important in a religious context, in which it has the more specific meaning of "gaining merit from the glimpse of something sacred". ECK, Diana L. (2007). *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. E. Dawson Varughese, a scholar who has usually written about contemporary Indian mythological-fiction, has often studied visuality and the way this religious concept of *darśan* is used in contemporary Indian pop culture. VARUGHESE, Dawson (2018). “Seeing Shiva,

Seeing Ram: Visual representations of deities in the genre of mythology-inspired fiction, an analysis of the book covers of Amish Tripathi's novels" *South Asian Popular Culture*, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2018.1510632 (accessed on 1/11/2020).

Dāsa - In the Rgveda, the name by which the Aryans call the original inhabitants of North India. In Sanskrit, there also exists the term *dasyu*, "barbarian", which is etymologically related to *dāsa.* DESHPANDE, Madhav M., and HOOK, Peter E. (eds.) (1979). *Aryan and Non-Aryan in India*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; PARPOLA, Asko (1988). "The Coming of the Aryans to Iran and India and the Cultural and Ethnic Identity of the *Dāsas*" *Studia Orientali,* Vol. 64, pp. 195-302.

Dasaratha jātaka - Buddhist version of the *Rāmāyaṇa.* The Sanskrit term *Jātaka*, from the root √*jan*, "to be born", is the name given to the Buddhist collection of stories which tell the previous lives of the historical Buddha. Daśaratha (see Appendix II) is the name of Rāma's father and king of Ayodhyā. A translation of this story is available online at https://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/j4/j4025.htm (accessed on 14/04/2021). GOMBRICH, Richard (1985). "The Vessantara Jātaka, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Dasaratha Jātaka" *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 105, No. 3, pp. 427-437.

Deva - In Vedic mythology, *deva* refers to benevolent deities. *Deva* is an Indo-European cognate of ancient Greek *Ζεύς* and Latin *deus*, "god", which also figures in English words such as *divine* or *divinity*. In the Persian Zoroastrian religion, *daeva* refers to malevolent beings. AHMADI, Amir (2015). *The Daēva Cult in the Gāthās: An ideological archaeology of Zoroastrianism*, London: Routledge. In most of the retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the term refers more often to the human race than to benevolent deities.

Devanāgarī – *Abugida* script used for both Sanskrit and Hindi. *Abugida* is a term derived from *ʾäbugida,* the Ge'ez (ancient liturgical language of Ethiopia) term composed of the first letters of the same writing system. In *abugida* scripts, there are symbols for consonants and vowels. However, consonants come with predefined vowel attached. If that vowel changes, a modified version of that vowel is added to the consonant. *Devanāgarī* comes from the Sanskrit term *deva*, "deity, divine", and an augmented version of *nagara*, "town, city". COULMAS, Florian (1989). *The Writing Systems of the World*, Oxford: Blackwell; COULMAS, Florian (1996). *The Balckwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems,* Malden: Blackwell.

Dharma - Complex concept which has changed through time and space. It is often translated as “moral conduct” or, in the modern Hindi sense, as “religion”. From the Sanskrit root √*dhṛ*, "to hold, to support, to maintain". Halbfass (1990 [1988]: 310-348); Brockington (2004); the appendix in Das (2009); Hiltebeitel (2011a).

Dīn-i-Ilāhī - Syncretic religion devised by Akbar. Persian-Arabic for “religion of god”. From the Arabic term *dīn*, "judgement, decree", which has cognates in other Semitic languages. The religious meaning of "religion" was later introduced into Arabic through Persian influence, possibly through an Indo-European word related to the Sanskrit *dhyāna*, "meditation, thought", which was then adopted by the Chinese 禅 *chán* and the nowadays famous Japanese concept 禅 *zen*. *Din* is still the most common word to define “religion” in modern Arabic, Persian and Turkish. It can also be used in this sense in Urdu, even though the most common term is *dharma*, and in Malay/Indonesian, even though *agama*, from the Sanskrit term *āgama*, “doctrine”, is more common. The second element *-i-* is an *ezāfe*, which literally means "addition", a Persian grammatical particle which connects nouns, usually in a possessive relationship. The last element is the Arabic *ʾilāh*, "god", which has cognates in other Semitic languages, most relevantly the Hebrew *el*, nowadays used in several Biblical names, such as Gabriel, Rafael, Samuel, among others. ROYCHOUDHURY, Makhanlal (1941). *The Din-i-Ilahi or the Religion of Akbar*, Calcutta: Calcutta University Press; NIZAMI, Khaliq Ahmad (1989). *Akbar & Religion*, New Delhi: Jayyed Press.

Dravidian - Name given to the alleged original inhabitants of India before the coming of the Aryans. In Sanskrit, *drāviḍa*, which probably comes from a Dravidian root, refers to the area and to the people of South India. As the theory of the division between Indo-European and Dravidian civilisations has mainly been sustained by linguistic clues, it is also the name given to the linguistic branch of Dravidian languages, which includes Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, and other minor languages.

Durgā - Hindu warrior goddess usually depicted mounting a lion or tiger. Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik has often depicted her as an intermediate form of the more general goddess, standing in between Gaurī and Kālī. PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2000). *The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the Eternal Divine*, New Delhi: Inner Traditions, which is devoted to this subject. See also BHATTACHARYYA, N. N. (1971). *Indian Mother Goddess*, Calcutta: R. K. Maitra; HAWLEY, John Stratton, and

WULFF, Donna Marie (eds.) (1996). *Devi: Goddesses of India*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dvāpara - The third age according to Indian cyclical time. See *yuga*.

Dvārakā - Mythical city related to the Hindu god Kṛṣṇa and nowadays identified with Dwarka, Gujarat. According to Amish Tripathi, it is an ancient Indian civilisation which became submerged. See *Sangamtamil*.

Ekam – Name of the single god of the *asuras* in Amish Tripathi's (2015) novel. Nominative form of the Sanskrit term *eka*, "one", which, like every number, is etymologically related to the other numbers in most Indo-European languages.

Gandharva - Class of mythological beings who are often said to be the musicians and singers of the gods. In Nepal, there is a caste of professional musicians called *gandarbha*. SHAHU, Man Bahadur (2013). "Gandharva, Music and Globalization" Democrat Professors' *Association, Nepal: Journal of Academia*, Vol. 2, Nº. 2, pp. 73-79; STERKEN, Arjan (2016). "The role of the Gandharvas in Vedic literature" *Acta Comparanda*, Vol. 27, pp. 69-108.

Gāṇeśa - Hindu god with the face of an elephant. BROWN, Robert L. (ed.) (1991). *Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Ganga - The most sacred river in Hinduism. It originates in the Himalayas and traverses India and Bangladesh. In English, usually transcribed as *Ganges*. There is no consensus around the origin of the name. Monier-Williams considered it to be a frequentative form derived from the Sanskrit root √*gam*, "to go", therefore "that which goes continually". MONIER-WILLIAMS, Monier (1899). *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged Cognate Indo-European Languages*, London: Oxford University Press. Available online at https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/2020/web/ (accessed on 6/04/2021).

Gaurī - Epithet of the Hindu goddess Pārvatī, wife of Śiva. Devdutt Pattanaik has often depicted her as the benign form of the more general Hindu goddess, who has many individual manifestations. PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2000). *The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the Eternal Divine*, New Delhi: Inner Traditions, which is devoted to this subject. See also BHATTACHARYYA, N. N. (1971). *Indian Mother Goddess*, Calcutta: R. K. Maitra; HAWLEY, John Stratton, and WULFF, Donna Marie (eds.) (1996). *Devi: Goddesses of India*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ghat - This term figures in Western Ghats and Eastern Ghats, which are two mountain ranges that go roughly parallel to the western and eastern coasts of India, respectively. From the Sanskrit term *ghaṭṭa*, "landing place", a place where land and water meet, from the root √*ghaṭṭ*, "to shake".

Gopī - Milkmaid and, more specifically, Krsna's playmates in Vṛndāvana. Female form of *gopa*, "cowherder", from the the Sanskrit term *go*, "cow, ox". The main *gopī* in Kṛṣṇaism is Rādhā.

Grāma - Sanskrit term for "village/settlement", a concept which is usually opposed to *vana* or *araṇya*, which mean "forest".

Grāmadevatā - Tutelary goddess of an Indian village. The term is composed of *grāma*, "village, settlement", and *devatā*, "divinity", related to the term *deva*. PADMA, Sree (2013). *Vicissitudes of the Goddess: Reconstructions of the Gramadevata in India's Religious Traditions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Guru - Teacher, spiritual mentor. In Sanskrit, the term also means, "heavy, weighty". Clarke, 2006b: s.v. "Guru", 247-249; COPERMAN, Jacob, and IKEGAME, Aya (eds.) (2012). *The Guru in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, London: Routledge.

Hijṛā - "Third gender" of the Indian subcontinent. The social boundaries of this category are not as well defined as those of "men" or "women", as this group has been called by several names in Indian languages and English. It often refers to men who cross-dress as women. The group has been associated with religion, as the community is usually Hindu and has a specific pantheon of deities and rituals NANDA, Serena (1999). *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company; REDDY, Gayatri (2005). *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, Chicago: Chicago University Press; HINCHY, Jessica (2019). *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India*: *The Hijra, c. 1850-1900, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press*; SARIA, Vaibhav (2021). *Hijras, Lovers, Brothers: Surviving Sex and Poverty in Rural India*, New York: Fordham University Press.

Himālaya - Mountain range created by the collision between the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates. In Sanskrit, the term *Himālaya* is composed of *hima*, "snow", and *alaya*, "abode, dwelling", from the root √*lī*, "to adhere to, to rest on". Therefore, "the abode of snow".

Hindustani (music) - *See* Carnatic (music).

Hindutva - Hindu right-wing ideology, often called “Hindu nationalism”, “Hindu extremism”, or “Hindu radicalism”. The BJP, the main *Hindutva* party, won the general elections in 2014. From the Hindi term *hindu*, to which is added the Sanskrit suffix -*tva*, which forms general nouns. The term could therefore be translated “Hinduness”. The word was popularised by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1969 [1923]). Sharma (2003); Jaffrelot (2007); Chakrabarty and Jha (2020).

Congress (Indian National Congress) - Indian centre to centre-left secularist party. It was founded in 1885, when India was still a British colony. GUHA, Ramachandra (2007). *India After Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy*, New York: Macmillan.

Indra - Major *deva* of the ancient Vedic pantheon. Even though Indra is not worshipped as a god in contemporary Hinduism, he is the deity most commonly referred to in the *Rgveda*, the most ancient of the Indian religious texts. PERRY, Edward Delavan (1885). "Indra in the Rig-Veda" *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 11, pp. 117-208; CHAKRAVARTY, Uma (1995). "On the Etymology of the word Indra" *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Vol. 76, No. 1/4, pp. 27-33; Doniger (2005). Indra's net is a common metaphor in Hinduism (and Buddhism) for the interdependence of all existence, as all threads of the net are connected to one another. LOY, David (1993). "Indra's Postmodern Net" *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 481-510. Indra is an important character in the story of Ahalyā and Gautama (see Appendix II) and therefore plays a crucial role in Kavita Kané’s (2019) *Ahalya’s Awakening*.

Itihāsa - Sanskrit and Hindi term for “history” and “myth”. In Sanskrit, the word can be broken up into three elements: *iti*, the direct discourse marker, comparable to English quotation marks; *ha*, an emphatic word, which may be translated as "indeed", "truly"; and *āsa*, the 3rd singular perfective of the root √*as*, "to be". Therefore, the word may be translated as “indeed, it was thus” or “indeed, it happened like this”. The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* are considered to belong to this category. Ghosh (2007).

Jainism - Indian religion which, according to the most commonly accepted theory, emerged as a response to the Vedic tradition. From the Sanskrit term *jaina*, derivative of *jina*, from the root √*ji*, “to conquer”, which refers to one who has conquered one’s passions and has attained spiritual freedom. Long (2009).

Jambudvīpa - Ancient name for India. The term is composed of *jambu*, the Sanskrit name for the rose-apple (*Syzygum cumini*), and *dvīpa,* "island", a term which also has the general meaning of "land, continent". Therefore, "island of the rose apples". The Sanskrit term is also the origin of the second element in other well-known toponyms, such as *Maldives*, *Laccadives* or *Serendib,* one of the many ancient names for the island and modern nation-state of Sri Lanka.

Jaṭāmukuṭa - Epithet of Brahmā. The term is composed of *jaṭā*, "matted hair", and *mukuṭa*, "crest, diadem, tiara", and therefore means "he whose diadem is matted hair", that is, in the style of an ascetic.

Jāti - See caste.

Kālī - Hindu goddess usually depicted partially naked and only adorned with a skirt and a necklace made of human arms and skulls. She holds a bloody sword, a decapitated head and treads on a human corpse. Devdutt Pattanaik has often depicted her as the most violent form of the more general Hindu goddess, which has many individual manifestations. PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2000). *The Goddess in India: The Five Faces of the Eternal Divine*, New Delhi: Inner Traditions, which is devoted to this subject. See also BHATTACHARYYA, N. N. (1971). *Indian Mother Goddess*, Calcutta: R. K. Maitra; HAWLEY, John Stratton, and WULFF, Donna Marie (eds.) (1996). *Devi: Goddesses of India*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kali - The fourth and most degenerate age according to Indian cyclical time. See *yuga*.

Kāṇḍa - The name which is usually given to the seven chapters of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. From the Sanskrit root √*kaṇḍ*, "to divide". Originally, *kāṇḍa* refers to the joints in a cane of bamboo, but in literary terms it may be translated as "chapter".

Kanya kumārī - Sanskrit for "maiden princess". Besides being the name of a goddess and of a character in Amish Tripathi's *Ram Chandra* series, it is the name of the southernmost point of the Indian subcontinent. In English, it is better known by the name Cape Comorin, an Anglicised version of the Sanskrit name.

Karma - The idea that one's actions will influence a future rebirth to the extent that such actions agree or disagree with one's dharma. In Sanskrit, *karma*, "action", from the root √*kṛ*, "to do, to perform". TULL, Herman Wayne (1989). *The Vedic Origins of Karma: Cosmos As Man in Ancient Indian Myth and Ritual*, New York: State University of New York Press; NEUFELDT, Ronald W. (ed.) (1995). *Karma & Rebirth,*

Post Classical Developments, New Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications; BRONKHORST, Johannes (2011). *Karma*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Karṇa - Character of the *Mahābhārata*. MCGRATH, Kevin (2004). *The Sanskrit Hero: Karṇa in the Epic Mahābhārata*, Leiden: Brill.

Kartā - "Doer". From the Sanskrit term *kartṛ*, root √*kṛ*, "to make", which is also the root of the term *karma*.

Kāryakartā - "Worker". From the Sanskrit term *kārya,* "work, task", and *kartā*, which is also the root of the term *karma*.

Kiṃnara - Class of mythological beings who are often said to be celestial musicians. The name comes from the Sanskrit term *kim*, a question marker used for yes/no questions, and *nara*, "man", which means that the name translates as "is this a man?". Compare with *vānara*.

Kiṣkindhā - Kingdom of the Vānara, usually identified with the Vijayānagara empire (1336-1646), whose ruins are located in the small village of Hampi, Karnataka. STEIN, Burton (1990). *The New Cambridge History of India: Vijayanagara*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; SINOPOLI, Carla M., and MORRISON, Kahtleen D. (2007). *The Vijaynagara Metropolitan Survey*, Vol. 1, Ann Arbor: Museum of Anthropology of the University of Michigan.

Kṛṣṇa - One of the main gods of contemporary Hinduism. He is regarded as an avatar (see *avatāra*) of Visnu. HILTEBEITEL, Alf (1990). *The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahabharata*, New York: State University of New York Press; BECK, Guy L. (ed.) (2005). *Alternative Krishnas: Regional and Vernacular Variations of a Hindu Deity*, Albany: State University of New York Press; BRYANT, Edwin Francis (ed.) (2007). *Krishna: A Sourcebook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. See also Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

Kṛta - First and most prosperous age according to Hindu cyclical time. It is also called *satya*. See *yuga*.

Kṛttikā - Six nymphs who become nurses to Kārttikeya, the Hindu god of war. In Hindu mythology, the *kṛttikās* correspond to the Pleiades star cluster. Their name comes from the root √*kṛt*, "to cut", as in India the asterism has often been depicted as a dagger or knife. SENGUPTA, Saswati (2021). *Mutating Goddesses: Bengal's Laukika Hinduism and Gender Rights,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kṣatriya - One of the four castes of traditional Hindu society, in this case the one composed of the warriors/rulers. The word derives from the Sanskrit *kṣatra*, "rule,

dominion", which is related to kṣetra, “land, cultivated soil”. The *Mahābhārata* war, for instance, takes place in *Kurukṣetra*, literally, “the field of the Kurus”, one the two main groups of cousins of the story. *Kurukṣetra* is also the name of a modern city in the state of Haryana. Therefore, the *kṣatriya* is “one who possesses a land and rules over it”. The term is more famous to English speakers in its Persian cognate, *šāh*, as in the phrase “the Shah of Persia”, as well as *šahr*, which in the past meant "land, country", but nowadays means "city". This term for *city* retains its meaning in Persian and Hindi.

Kṣetra - “Village” or “settlement” in Sanskrit. Usually opposed to the concept of *vana*, “forest”. See also *kṣatriya*.

Kuṇḍalinī yoga - Tantric (see *tantra*) yogic (see *yoga*) practice. *Kuṇḍalinī* refers to a kind of spiritual energy which is considered to lie dormant in one’s spine. As in Sanskrit *kuṇḍalinī* means “coiled”, this energy has been imagined and pictured as a serpent. Through the practice of yoga, one can activate the “serpent” and make it progress through seven different and progressively higher spiritual centres (called *cakra*, which literally means “wheel”) in the human body.

Lakṣmaṇa Rekhā - Line that Lakṣmaṇa draws on the ground in order to protect Sītā when he has to abandon her momentarily and save Rāma. The expression derives from the name of the character and the Sanskrit term *rekhā*, “line”, from *lekha*, “writing, document”, which in turn comes from the root √*likh, “*to write”. This episode has been included in most modern retellings, even though it features neither in Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* nor in Tulsīdās’ *Rāmcaritmānas*, the most authoritative versions of the epic. NAIR, Rukmini Bhaya (2020). “Lakshman Rekha” in NAIR, Rukmini Bhaya, and DESOUZA, Peter Ronald (eds.). *Keywords for India: A Conceptual Lexicon for the 21st Century*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 215-216.

Lakṣmī - Consort of Viṣṇu and Hindu goddess of wealth. In Sanskrit, her name means “mark, sign, token”. It may also mean “wealth, riches”, in the sense of “good sign, good omen”. The term comes from the root √*lakṣ*, “to mark” (Lakṣmaṇa’s name comes from the same root). DHAL, Upendra Nath (1978). *Goddess Lakshmi: Origin and Development*, New Delhi: Oriental Publishers; RHODES, Constantina (2010). *Invoking Lakshmi: The Goddess of Wealth in Song and Ceremony*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Laṅkā - Rāvaṇa’s kingdom, often identified with the modern island and nation-state of Sri Lanka (see Chapter 6), though there is no proof for such an association. As Sanskritist Robert P. Goldman (1986) has stated, the geography of India in Vālmīki’s

Rāmāyaṇa becomes increasingly vague as the characters move south, so it is probable that the mythic Laṅkā refers to either another place or is entirely fictitious (28) and that the placename was later associated with modern Sri Lanka. Thapar (1989); OBEYESEKERE, Donald (1999); *Outlines of Ceylon History*, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, especially pp 1-4; Henry (2022).

Lokāyata - See *cārvāka*.

Lok Sabha - Lower house of the Indian parliament. In Hindi, *lokasbhā*. *Lok*, which means "people, folk" in Hindi, comes from the Sanskrit term *lok*, "world, realm". *Sabhā* means "assembly, council". Its etymology is disputed, but the first element seems to be the Sanskrit pre-verb -*sah*, "with, together". The upper house is called *rājyasabhā*, from the Sanskrit term *rājya*, "kingdom, royalty", an Indo-European word which is etymologically related to the Latin one *rex*, "king" and therefore to English terms such as *royalty*. O'NEIL, Patrick H. (2017). *Cases in Comparative Politics*, New York: W. W. Norton, pp. 450-505.

Mahābhārata – One of the two Indian epics. From the Sanskrit term *mahat*, "great". Bhārata refers to a mythological king and is also the modern Hindi name for India. HILTEBEITEL, Alf (auth.), ADLURI, Vishwa, and BAGCHEE, Joydeep (eds.) (2001). *Reading the Fifth Veda: Studies on the Mahabharata - Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel*, Vol. 1, Leiden: Brill; HILTEBEITEL, Alf (auth.), ADLURI, Vishwa, and BAGCHEE, Joydeep (eds.) (2011). *When the Goddess Was a Woman: Mahabharata Ethnographies - Essays by Alf Hiltebeitel*, Vol. 2, Leiden: Brill; GOMBRICH, Richard, and POLLOCK, Sheldon (eds.) (2009). *The Clay Sanskrit Library: Mahabharata*, 15 Vols., Suffolk: New York University Press & JJC Foundation; DEBROY, Bibek (2015). *The Mahabharata*, 10 Vols, Gurgaon: Penguin; Ahmed and Das (2017)

Maharşi - Great sage. In Sanskrit, the term *maharṣi* is composed of the irregular adjective *mahat*, "great", and *ṛṣi*, which is often translated "sage", even though originally the term had the meaning of "one who first heard the *Vedas*".

Mahīśvara - Sanskrit for "great (*mahat*) Lord (*īśvara*)", one of Śiva's epithets.

Mandal Commission - Commission established in 1979 and headed by Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal (1918-1982). Its goal was to identify the backward classes and castes of India and allot them places in education and public jobs. Such actions have led to protests by the Congress (see Congress) and the BJP. AGRAWAL, S. P., and AGGARWAL J. C. (1991). *Educational and Social Uplift of Backward Classes: At What Cost and How? Mandal Commission and After*, New Delhi: Concept

Publishing Company; JENKINS, Laura Dudley (2003). *Identity and Identification In India: Defining the Disadvantaged*, London: Routledge.

Manu - Legendary author of the *Manusmṛti*, often translated into English as *The Laws of Manu*. *The Laws of Manu* is a text on *dharma* and prescribes rules and punishments for different groups of Indian society. *Manu* is a general term given to the first human being as described in the *Matsya Purāṇa*, which tells the story of Viṣṇu incarnation (*avatāra*) as a fish (Matsya, see Appendix II). The term Manu means "man" in Sanskrit. The *Laws of Manu* was one of the first Indian texts to be translated into English. It was used by the British imperialists as a guide to interpret and shape Indian law and society. Doniger (1991).

Manusmṛti - See Manu.

Mithilā - City of king Janaka, father of Sītā. Nowadays, name for a region in North India and in South Nepal.

Mleccha - Most common Sanskrit term for "barbarian", that is, non-Aryan or non-Sanskrit speakers. Thapar (1971).

Muziris - Ancient unidentified port on the Malabar Coast. It is described in Indian and Western sources, most prominently in the *Peryplus of the Erythraean Sea.* HUNTINGFORD, G. W. B. (ed.) (1980). *The Peryplus of the Erythraean Sea, By an Unknown Author*, London: The Hakluyt Society. In Anand Neelakantan's (2012) *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, he calls it *Muzuris*. MATTHEW, K. S. (ed.). *Imperial Rome, Indian Ocean Regions and Muziris*, London: Routledge; VARGHESE, Rachel A. (2017). "What constitutes Muziris? Past and the production of heritage destinations in the south Indian state of Kerala" *Journal of Tourism History*, Vol. 9, Nº. 2-3, pp. 178-192; KUNNAPPILLY, Anitta G. (2018). "The trade of the port of Muziris in ancient times" *The International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 30, Nº. 3, pp. 519-525.

Nāga - In Sanskrit, *nāga* means "snake". It is also the name of a mythical kingdom and its respective people. As such, the *nāga* play an important role in the *Mahābhārata*, even though they also appear in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In Amish Tripathi's universe, the *nāga* are said to be a group of people who are born with bodily deformities.

Narmadā - River which flows through the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, in Central India. From the Sanskrit term *narman*, "pleasure, enjoyment", and the root √*dā,* "to give". Therefore, "giver of pleasure".

Nirguṇa - See *saguṇa*.

Niṣāda - Lower caste composed of tribal groups or forest-dwellers. Doniger (2009: 38).

Padmāsana - Epithet of Brahmā. Sanskrit *bahuvrīhi* term composed of *padma*, "lotus flower" (*Nelumbo nucifera*), and *āsana*, "seat, chair", from the root √*ās*, "to sit". Therefore, "he whose seat is a lotus flower".

Pancāyat - Traditional social system in Indian villages in which five leaders take decisions. *Pancāyat* is a Hindi term derived from the Sanskrit *pañc*, "five", and *āyat*, "subject to", from the root √*yat*, "to strive after, to abide by". CHATTERJEE, Biswajit, and GHOSH, Dilip Kumar (2003). "Globalisation and Decentralise-Governance: Reflections on Panchayats in India" *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 129-146; MULLEN, Rani D. (2016). "Panchayat Raj Institutions" in KOHLI, Atul, and SINGH, Prema (eds). *Routledge Handbook of Indian Politics*, London: Routledge.

Pariah - Outcaste. *Pariah* is derived from the caste name *Parayar*, who work as drummers (in Tamil and Malayalam, the term for "drum" is *parai*). They also exist in Sri Lanka. MCGILVRAY, Dennis B. (1983). "Parayiar Drummers of Sri Lanka: consensus and constraint in an untouchable caste" *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 10, Nº. 1, pp. 97-115.

Pativratā - Sanskrit phrase which refers to a wife who is totally "devoted (*vrata*) to her husband (*pati*)", the highest female ideal in the traditional Hindu world. Sītā, the main female character of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is often considered to be its best representative.

Prajāpati Brahma – Creator god. In Sanskrit, *praja* means "creature, living being". The term is formed by the pre-verb *pra-*, "forward", and the root √*jan*, "to be born". *Praja* therefore means "to come forward". *Pati* means "lord, master, husband". The last element refers to the Hindu god Brahmā, who is often called the "creator of the universe" (see *trimūrti*). The expression could therefore be translated as "Brahmā, lord of all the creatures".

Prakṛti - In Sāṃkhya philosophy, term which means both "nature" and "woman":

Pralaya - Apocalypse at the end of *kali yuga*. In Sanskrit, *pralaya* means "destruction", from the root √*lī*, "to melt, to dissolve".

Pūjā – Hindu ritual in which the devotee prostrates himself before an altar and gives offerings and prays to a personal deity. This kind of devotion is related to the concept of *bhakti* and is therefore different from *yajña*, the sacrifice described in the *Vedas*. The word *pūjā* means "worship, veneration", from the root √*pūj*, "to worship, to

honour". It probably derives from a Dravidian root. In Tamil, *pū* means “flower”, which is often one of the offerings involved in the ritual. This would make the connection with *bhakti*, which originated in South India, more evident. JHALA, Jayasinhji (2000). "Pūjā, pūjāri and Prabhu: Religious worship in the Hindu home" *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 103-128; ELLIS, Thomas B. (2015). "Evoked Pūjā: The Behavioral Ecology of an Equatorial Ritual" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 83. No. 4, pp. 1108-1156.

Purāṇa - See *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

Purdah - Indian system of sexual segregation. *Purdah* comes from the Persian term *parde*, “curtain, veil, screen”. JEFFERY, Patricia (2000). *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah*, New Delhi: Manohar.

Puruṣa - In Sāṃkhya philosophy, term which means both “soul” and “man”.

Puruṣapuṃgava, puruṣaśārdūla, puruṣasiṃha, puruṣavyāghra - Compounds formed by *puruṣa*, "man", and *vyāghra/śārdūla*, "tiger", *siṃha*, "lion", or *puṃgava*, "bull", therefore meaning "a man who is like a tiger/lion/bull", "a tiger/lion/bull among men", which constitute ideals of strength in Sanskrit literature.

Pūrvapakṣa - In logics, the first proposition of an argument in need of assent or refutation. Hindu activist Rajiv Malhotra (2015) has used the term in *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism* to refer to an Indic approach of adopting the view of the opponent in order to realise its shortcomings and later refute it.

Puṣpakavimāna - Rāvaṇa’s flying chariot, with which he abducts Sītā. In Sanskrit, *puṣpaka* (diminutive of *puṣpa*) means "flower" and comes from the root √*puṣ*, "to thrive, to grow, to bloom". In architecture, *vimāna* either means a "palace", "tower above a Hindu temple" or "flying chariot", possibly because of the similar shape of these objects. The term seems to be derived from the pre-verb *vi-*, "before", and the root √*mā*, "to measure, to cross", possibly because high palaces, temples and fast chariots were considered to "cross" the skies. In several modern Indian languages, the word may mean “aircraft, aeroplane”. The term *puṣpakavimāna* could therefore be translated as “flying chariot which looks like a flower”, which possibly alludes to its shape or decoration.

Rādhā - *Gopī* of Vṛndāvana and, according to Kṛṣṇaite devotional literature, Kṛṣṇa’s main lover. SINHA, Lalita (2008). *Unveiling the Garden of Love: Mystical Symbolism in Layla Majnun & Gita Govinda*, Bloomington: World Wisdom; JAYADEVA (2009). *Gita Govinda: Love Songs of Radha and Krishna*, Suffolk: New York University Press & JJC Foundation; Pauwels (2008).

Raghukula - Mythical Indian solar dynasty (see *Sūryavaṃśa*). From the Sanskrit term Raghu, name of a mythical solar king, and *kula*, "tribe/clan".

Rājyasabhā - See *Lok Sabha*.

Rākhī – Hindi term for thread which is tied around a brother's hand by his sister so that he will remember that he should protect her. From the Sanskrit term *rakṣikā*, "amulet, charm", from the root √*rakṣ*, "protect, to guard". JONES, Constance A. (2011). "Raksha Bandhan" in MELTON, J. Gordon (ed.). *Religious Celebrations: An Encyclopedia of Holidays, Festivals, Solemn Observances, And Spiritual Commemorations*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, p. 733-734.

Rākṣasa - Species of creatures in Indian mythology, usually depicted as beastly. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in which they are the main villains, they are depicted as human-like and even sophisticated, their main mistake consisting on their lack of self-control and permanent desire to satisfy their carnal pleasures. Pollock (1991: 68-84).

Rākṣasī - Female form of *rākṣasa*.

Rāma Rājya Pariṣad - See *Rāmarājya*.

Rāma Ratha Yātrā – Political journey promoted by *Hindutva* politician L. K. Advani (1927-), who dressed up and equipped himself with apparatuses imitating the *Rāmāyaṇa* and travelled through several key religious sites in North India in a van adorned like an ancient epic chariot. The Hindi expression and means " journey (*yātrā*) of Rāma's chariot (*ratha*)". *Yātrā* may have a religious connotation and therefore mean "pilgrimage". Davis (1996); Rajagopal (2001); Jaffrelot (2009).

Rāma Setu - Stretch of limestone shoals connecting South India to the island of Sri Lanka. It is associated with the bridge that the *vānara* built in order to reach the island in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The third chapter in Subramaniam's (2019) study on Hindu biopolitics deals with the controversy around the *Rāma setu*. See also GRANOFF, Philip (1998). "Rāma's Bridge: Some Notes on Place in Medieval India, Real and Envisioned" *East and West*, Vol. 48, Nº. 1-2, pp. 93-115.

Rāmānandīn - *Bhakti* sect devoted to Rāma. BURGHART, Richard (1978). "The Founding of the Ramanandi Sect" *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 121-139; BURGHART, Richard (1983). "Wandering Ascetics of the Rāmānandī Sect" *History of Religions*, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 361-380; VEER, Peter van der (1989). "The Power of Detachment: Disciplines of Body and Mind in the Ramanandi Order" *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 458-470; LAMB, Ramdas (2002). *Rapt in the name:*

the Ramnamis, Ramnam, and untouchable religion in Central India, New York: State University of New York Press.

Rāmarājya - Sanskrit term for "kingdom (*rājya*) of Rāma". It specifically refers to the perfect and utopic kingdom the epic character established in Ayodhyā. It has often been regarded as a political ideal in modern nationalistic discourses. *Rāma Rājya Pariṣad,* literally "Assembly of Rāma's Kingdom" was a political party founded in 1948 and dissolved in 1971, when it merged into the bigger political organisation from which the BJP emerged. Udayakumar (1996).

Ramavataram - Tamil retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* written by Kampar in the 13th century. SUNDARAM, P. S. (trans.) (2002). *The Kamba Ramayana,* London: Penguin Books.

Rāmcaritmānas - 16th century devotional version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* written in Avadhi, a local dialect of the Hindi language, by Tulsīdās. The title of the poem translates as "The holy lake (*mānasa*) of the deeds (*carita*) of Rāma". *Mānasa*, "mind", comes from the Sanskrit root √*man,* "to think". It refers to a specific lake, nowadays called *Mānasarovar,* located in the Himalayas, in what is now the Chinese Autonomous Region of Tibet. *Sarovar* is the modern Hindi word for lake. The most complete study of Tulsīdās' *Rāmcaritmānas* in English is Lutgendorf's (1991) *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas*. Lutgendorf has also translated the *Rāmcaritmānas* into English. LUTGENDORF, Philip (trans.) (2016-). *The Epic of Ram,* 7 Vols., Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Rāmjanmabhūmi - Hindi for "the place (*bhūmi*) of the birth (*janma*) of Rāma". It refers to the place where the Babri Masjid was located in Ayodhyā and to the controversy surrounding the communalist conflicts between Hindus and Muslims regarding the site.

Rāmopākhyāna - Name given to a short summary (704 verses) of the *Rāmāyaṇa* which features in the canonical *Mahābhārata.* When the Pāṇḍava brother Yudhiṣṭhira loses his wife Draupadi and is exiled to the forest, he asks whether there has ever been anybody as unfortunate as he is and is then told Rāma's story. SCHARF, Peter (2003). *Rāmopākhyāna - The Story of Rāma in the Mahābhārata: A Sanskrit Independent-Study Reader*, London: Routledge.

Ṛgveda - Most ancient and sacred of the *Vedas*. It consists mostly of hymns to Indo-European deities, most prominently Indra. From the Sanskrit root √*ṛc*, "to praise", and *veda*, "knowledge", from the root √*vid,* "to know". Doniger (2005).

Ṛta - "Order, law, rule, truth", in Sanskrit, a term usually compared to the latter and nowadays more common *dharma*. HECKAMAN JR., Curtis R. (1980). *Towards a Comprehensive Understanding of Ṛta in the Ṛg veda* [M.A thesis], McMaster University.

Ṛṣi - Rishi, in Sanskrit *ṛṣi*, is the name given to the sages who originally heard the *Vedas*, which are considered to be divinely inspired texts. In modern India, the term may mean “sage”. In the retellings, it may mean “human being” (see Chapter 4).

RSS (Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevaka Saṅgha) - Hindu nationalist paramilitary organisation. The name stands for *Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevaka Saṅgha*, a Sanskrit expression which can be translated as "National (*rāṣṭrīya*) Volunteer (*svayamsevaka*) Organisation (*saṅgha*)". BANERJEE, Partha (1998). *In The Belly of the Beast: The Hindu Supremacist RSS and BJP of India, An Insider's Story*, New Delhi: Ajanta Books International; KANUNGO, Pralay (2002). *RSS' Tryst with Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan*, New Delhi: Manohar; KELKAR, Sanjeev (2011). *Lost Years of the RSS*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications; ANDERSEN, Walter, and DAMLE, Shridhar D. (2019). *Messengers of Hindu Nationalism: How the RSS Shaped India*, London: Hurst & Company.

Saguṇa - God with a physical form. In Sanskrit, *saguṇa*, “with form”, is opposed to *nirguṇa*, “without form", which refers to an abstract or transcendent representation of god. *Guṇa* means "quality, property, virtue". The concept usually features in Indian philosophy as a way to categorise the different properties of reality. This word is preceded by the prefixes *sa-*, "with" and *nis*, "without". Zimmer (1951: 295-297).

Saṃhitā - Most ancient category of *Vedic* texts. It traditionally includes the Rgveda, the *Yajurveda*, the *Sāmaveda* and the *Atharvaveda*. The term is composed of Sanskrit *sam-*, a pre-verb which means "together", and *hita*, the past participle of the root *✓dhā*, "to hold, to sustain", from which the term *dharma* comes. The term could be translated as "that which is held together".

Sahyas - Range of mountains which separate North and South India.

Śakti - In Sanskrit, *śakti,* “strength, power, ability”, comes from the root √*śak*, “to be able to”. This power has been conflated with femininity. The most important goddess in modern Hinduism is also called Śakti and one of the most important subdivisions of Hinduism is called *Śaivism* (the others are *Vaiṣṇavism* and *Śivaism*, which revere Visnu and Śiva). In Sanskrit and modern Hindi, most common nouns related to concepts of

power and authority are feminine. Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik has written a book devoted to the topic. PATTANAIK, Devdutt (2016). *Shakti: a female power*, New Delhi: Penguin Books. See also CRADDOCK, Elaine (2005). "Shakti" in TAYLOR, Bron R. (ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum.

Sāṃkhya - Indian dualistic philosophical system. In Sanskrit, *sāṃkhya,* from the root √*khyā,* "to tell, to narrate", literally means "to count", as the main goal of this philosophy is to count the many principles of reality and to liberate the most important one, *puruṣa*, the "soul", from the others, which represent material existence. LARSON, Gerald James (1969). *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; LARSON, Gerald James, and BHATTACHARYA, Ram Shankar (eds.) (1987). *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies: Sāṃkhya*, Vol. 4, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; BURLEY, Mikey (2007). *Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga: An Indian metaphysics of experience*, London: Routledge.

Sanātana dharma - Universal *dharma*, that is, social rules equally applicable to every social stratum. *Sanātana* means "eternal, perpetual" and comes from *sana*, "old, ancient", and the root √*at*, "to go, to wander". Therefore, "going perpetually". In traditional Hinduism, each caste has a different *dharma* and different consequences when *dharma* is contradicted. Modern Hinduism focuses on this strand of "eternal *dharma*", which does not make distinctions based on caste or any other social category but is appropriate for all Hindus. ZAVOS, John (2001). "Defending Hindu Tradition: Sanatana Dharma as a Symbol of Orthodoxy in Colonial India" *Religion*, Vol. 31, pp. 109-123; DIMITROVA, Diana (2007). "The Development of Sanātana Dharma in the Twentieth Century: A Rādhāsoam Guru's Perspective" *International Journal of Hinduism Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 89-98. PARANJAPE, Makarand (2009). "Sanatana Dharma and (Post)modernity" *South Asian Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 18-35.

Sangamtamil - *Tamil* refers to the Dravidian language of South India, mostly from Tamil Nadu (in Tamil, *nāḍu* means "country", so the placename means "land of the Tamil") and Sri Lanka. MANOGARAN, Chelvadurai, and PFAFFENBERGER, Bryan (eds.) (1994). *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*, London: Routledge; Ramaswamy (2003). *Sangam* refers to a Golden Age period of Tamil history and literature from the first centuries BCE and CE. The period takes its name from pseudohistorical academies which were instituted in the region of Tamil Nadu during

that time. The term can be traced to the Sanskrit one *saṅgha,* "community, assembly, crow", formed by the pre-verb *sam*-, "together, with" and the root √*han*, "to go", therefore "those who go together". ZVELEBIL, Kamil Veith (1974). *A History of Indian Literature: Tamil Literature*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz; RAJESH, V. (2014). *Manuscripts, Memory and History: Classical Tamil Literature in Colonial India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. The term *saṅgha* is nowadays better known in English for its more specific meaning of "monastic Buddhist community". In Amish Tripathi's (2015) universe, *Sangamtamil* is an ancient Indian civilisation which became submerged (see Chapter 6). See Dvārakā.

Sapta sindhu - One of the names given to North India. Sanskrit expression for "seven rivers", which are often mentioned in the *Rgveda*.

Sarasvatī - Hindu goddess of knowledge, speech and the arts and Brahmā's consort. LUDVIK, Catherine (2007). *Sarasvatī, Riverine Goddess of Knowledge: From the Manuscript-carrying Vīṇā-player to the Weapon-wielding Defender of the Dharma*, Leiden: Brill. She is the main character in Kavita Kané's (2021) *Saraswati's Gift*. It is also the name of an important river in the *Rgveda*, as *saras* means "pond, lake" in Sanskrit. Its location/existence is debated among scholars and Hindu nationalists. Its existence is culturally important for the latter. PRASAD, R. U. S. (2017). *River and Goddess Worship in India: Changing Perceptions and Manifestations of Sarasvati*, London: Routledge; VALDIYA, K. S. (2017). *Prehistoric River Saraswati, Western India: Geological Appraisal and Social Aspects*, Cham: Springer.

Satī - Hindu widow who willingly immolates herself during her husband's cremation. *Suttee* is the transliteration that has become normative in English. The original Sanskrit term, *satī,* "virtuous wife", is the female form of *sat*, "true, good, right, faithful". In this sense, the term refers to the Hindu widow who remains faithful to her deceased husband by jumping into his funeral pyre, knowing beforehand that, if she does not do so, she will suffer from heavy social stigma. SHARMA, Arvind, RAY, Ajit, HEJIB, Alaka, and YOUNG, Katherine K. (1988). *Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays*, New Delhi: Motilal Barnarsidass; Datta (1988); HAWLEY, John Stratton (ed.) (1994). *Sati The Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India*, New York: Oxford University Press. MANI, Lata (1998). *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,* Berkeley: University of California Press; MAJOR Andrea (ed.) (2007). *Sati: A Historical Anthology*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press;

JAIN, Meenakshi (2016). *Sati: Evangelicals, Baptist Missionaries, and the Changing Colonial Discourse*, New Delhi: Aryan Books International.

Satya - First and most prosperous age according to Hindu cyclical time. It is also called *kṛta*. See *yuga*.

Satyāgraha - Persistence on truth. The term, which was popularised by Gandhi, can be decomposed into its Sanskrit parts *satya*, "truth", and *āgraha*, "insistence, persistence", from the root √*grah*, "to take, to hold on to". See bibliography in the entry for *ahimsā*.

Śikhaṇḍī - Character from the *Mahābhārata* who is born as a girl and later becomes a man. His/her tale is often considered one of the most representative queer tales from ancient India. Goldman (1993); Vanita and Kidwai (2000).

Sikhism - Religious tradition which Guru Nanak (1469-1539) developed in Punjab (in North-western India and South-eastern Pakistan) during the 16th century. Sikhism mixes elements from Islam and Hinduism, even though it is often regarded independent from both. Its name is derived from the Sanskrit term *śikṣā*, "learning", from the root √*śikṣ*, "to learn", which reveals the importance of the *guru*/student relationship for this tradition. Sikhism is also related to a nationalistic movement for an independent state in Punjab. The prospective state is often called *Khalistan*, from the Punjabi term *xālsā*, the name of the Sikh community. The Punjabi term comes from the Arabic triliteral root *ḵ-l-ṣ*, usually related to the concept of "purity". The second element is related to the Sanskrit *sthāna*, "standing position". In Persian, *stān*, "place", is a common suffix in the creation of place names, such as the names of the majority of the countries in Central Asia and Pakistan. Therefore, Khalistan could be translated as "the place of the Sikh community". JAKOBSH, Doris R. (2012). *Sikhism*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Sindhu - See Bhārata.

Sinhala - See Laṅkā.

Śiva - Major Hindu god. He is often depicted as an ascetic. The Hindu sect which regards him as the supreme god is called *Śaivism*. KRAMRISCH, Stella (1981). *The Presence of Śiva*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; GONDA, Jan (1996). *Viṣṇuism and Śivaism: a comparison*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal; FLOOD, Gavin (2018). "The Śaiva Traditions" In FLOOD, Gavin D. (ed.). *An Introduction to Hinduism*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Smṛti - Category of divinely inspired Hindu texts considered to have been devised by humans. The term is the passive participle of the Sanskrit root √*smṛ*, "to remember", therefore meaning "(that which is) remembered". FLOOD, Gavin D. (2018). *An Introduction to Hinduism*, New York: Cambridge University Press. See also *śruti*.

Soma - Divine drink described in the *Vedas* and in Zoroastrian texts, in which it is called *haoma*. The name possibly comes from the Sanskrit root √*su,* "to distil, to brew". In modern Hindi, the plant *Cynanchum acidum* is still called *soma.* Some species of *Ephedra* possess hallucinogenic properties and, in Iran, are also called *haoma*. WASSON, R. Gordon (1971). "The Soma of the Rig Veda: What Was It"? *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 91, No. 2, pp. 169-187; FLATTERY, David Stophlet, and SCHWARTZ, Martin (1989). *Haoma and Harmaline: The Botanical Identity of the Indo-Iranian Sacred Hallucinogen "Soma" and its Legacy in Religion, Language and Middle Eastern Folklore*, Berkeley: University of California Press; WOHLBERG, Joseph (1990). "Haoma-Soma in the World of Ancient Greece" *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 333-342; HOUBEN, J. E. M. (2003). "The Soma-Haoma problem: Introductory overview and observations on the discussion" *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1.

Śruti - Category of sacred Hindu texts which are considered to be divine and therefore uncreated. The term is the passive participle of the Sanskrit root √*śru*, "to hear", therefore meaning "(that which is) heard". FLOOD, Gavin D. (2018). *An Introduction to Hinduism*, New York: Cambridge University Press. See also *smṛti*.

Śūdra - Caste of labourers.

Sūryavaṃśa - Mythic Indian dynasty to which Rāma belonged. In Sanskrit, *sūryavaṃśa* is formed by *sūrya*, "sun", and *vaṃśa*, which originally meant the "joints in a reed", but which later came to mean "race, lineage, clan", as every generation is metaphorically compared such joints. Therefore, "clan of the sun".

Suśrutasaṃhitā - Ancient Sanskrit medical treatise of uncertain date. It is famous for describing cosmetic surgeries. BHISHAGRATNA, Kaviraj (1907). *An English translation of the Sushruta Samhita based on original Sanskrit text*, 3 Vols., Calcutta: Kaviraj Bishagratna; SORTA-BILAJAC, Iva, and MUZUR, Amir (2007). "The Nose Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Sushruta's Legacy" *Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery*, Vol. 137, pp. 707-710; CHAMPANERIA, Manish C., WORKMAN, Adrienne D., and GUPTA, Subhas C. (2014). "Sushruta: Father of Plastic Surgery" *Annals of Plastic Surgery*, Vol. 73, No. 1, pp. 2-7.

Sūtra - Sacred scripture, mainly in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. From the Sanskrit term *sūtra*, "thread, yarn, string", from the root √siv, "to sew".

Svayaṃvara - Wedding contest which was held in ancient India and in which suitors could win a maiden's hand through some kind of competition. From the Sanskrit term *sva*, "self", *aham*, the first-person singular pronoun, and *vara*, "choice", from the root √*vṛ*, "to choose". The term could therefore be translated as "self-choice", which implies that the maiden could freely choose her husband. Sītā's and Draupadi's *svayaṃvara* are key narrative events in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, respectively. In the former, the suitors have to lift a divine bow. In the latter, they have to hit the eye of a suspended fish with an arrow merely by looking at its reflection in a pot of water on the ground. Amish Tripathi (2015) has described Sītā's *svayaṃvara* with the rules of Draupadi's. Mani (2005: c. 7).

Tantra - Kind of esoteric Hinduism and Buddhism which focus in the senses as a means to overcome them. In Sanskrit, *tantra* means "loom, warp", from the root √*tan*, "to stretch, to extend". Metaphorically, it refers to a collection of esoteric texts. Semantically, the metaphor is similar to that of *sūtra*. Clarke (2006b: s.v. "Tantra", 614-615); GRAY, David B. (2016). "Tantra and the Tantric Traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism" In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.59 (accessed on 22/05/2021); PADOUX, André (2017). *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Thālī - Traditional Indian plate and, by metonymy, the food contained in it. In Hindi, *thālī*, comes from the Sanskrit term *sthālī́*, "an earthen-pot or pan", which is derived from *sthala*, "dry land, ground, soil". In North India, a *thālī* is a large metal plate which usually mixes usually very different dishes, most commonly white rice (*cāval*), lentils (*dāl*), vegetables (*sabzī*), some kind of bread (most commonly *nān*), and sometimes sweets with spices (*miṭhāī*). Contrarily to Europeans, Indians often eat the different dishes at the same time, freely mixing strong and contrasting flavours. Shashi Tharoor (2017b) has used the concept of *thālī* as a metaphor for the intrinsic plurality and unity of India (62).

Tholu bommalata - Shadow puppet theatre tradition from the state of Andhra Pradesh. The name comes from Telugu *tōlu*, "leather", *bommalu*, plural of *bomma*, "puppet, doll", and *āṭa*, "play, game, dance, performance", that is "performance of leather puppets". There are other shadow puppet traditions in India, mainly in the South,

with sometimes slight but noticeable iconographic differences. These include: *Togalu gombeyāṭa*, from Karnataka, and *Tēālpāvakūttu* or *Tōlpāvaikkūttu*, from Kerala and Tamil Nadu. All the names mean "performance of leather puppets" in the languages of the respective states: Telugu (Andhra Pradesh), Kannada (Karnataka), Malayalam (Kerala) and Tamil (Tamil Nadu), the four major Dravidian languages. SORENSEN, Niels Roed (1974). "Shadow Theatre in Andhra Pradesh: Tolu Bommalu Kattu" *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 10, Nº. 2/4, pp. 1-19; SARMA, M. Nagabhushana (1985). *Tolu Bommalata: The Shadow Puppet Theatre of Andhra Pradesh*, New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi; GHOSH, Sampa, and BANERJEE, Utpal K. (2006). *Indian Puppets*, New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.

Tīrtha - Indian sacred pilgrimage places. In Sanskrit, *tīrtha* means "passage, ford, channel", from the root √*tṛ, "*to swim, to cross over", and is therefore related to the Latin term *trāns* and English *through*. *Tīrtha* are therefore related with water bodies. In Indonesian and Balinese, *tirta* means "ritually pure water".

Tretā - Third age according to Indian cyclical time. See *yuga*.

Trimūrti - Triad of Hindu gods (Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, usually said to be the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe, respectively). In Sanskrit, the term is composed of *tri*, "three", and *murti*, "shape, physical object, religious icon". Therefore, "the tree icons". This concept gained importance mainly when the Portuguese and later the English arrived in India and started interpreting Hindu tradition through an Orientalist lens, that is, through the assimilation of Hindu and Christian traditions. The first Western descriptions of this *Trimūrti* were made by Portuguese chroniclers who used the concept to imagine Hinduism as a kind of degenerate Christianity. Around 1515, Tomé Pires wrote that every Malabar Indian believed, as the Portuguese did, in the trinity of the Father, the Son and The Holy Ghost, three people in just one true God (126v). In a later passage, he also wrote that the Brahmins (see *brāhmaṇa*) of Cambay (Khambhat, Gujarat) believed in the Virgin (*śakti*) and in the Trinity, which means they were Christians whose faith had been deformed by the Muslims (130v). CORTESÃO, Armando (ed.) (2005) [1944]. *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: an account of the east, from the Red Sea to Japan, written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515/The Book of Francisco Rodrigues rutter of a voyage in the Red Sea, nautical rules, almanack and maps, written and drawn in the east before 1515*, London: The Hakluyt Society. In 1517, Duarte Barbosa (§ 87) wrote that the Hindus called such trinity *Bermabesma Maçeru*, a corruption of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Mahīśvara, Sanskrit for "great (*mahat*)

Lord (*īśvara*)", which is an epithet of Śiva. DAMES, Mansel Longworth (trans.) (2016) [1918]. *The Book of Duarte Barbosa: an account of the countries bordering on the Indian Ocean and their inhabitants*, 2 Vols., London: The Hakluyt Society. In 1552, marking a contrast between the Hindu/Christian and Muslim traditions, João de Barros (I, iv, 9) wrote that the Hindu Brahmins and the Christians had three people in their Trinity, contrary to the Muslims, who contradicted this idea and said that God was one and indivisible. BARROS, João de (1618). *Década Primeira da Ásia de Ioão de Barros dos Feitos que os Portugueses fezerão no Descobrimento & Conquista dos Mares & Terras do Oriente*, Lisboa: Jorge Rodriguez. See also GONDA, J. (1968/1969). "The Hindu Trinity" *Anthropos*, Vol. 63/64, Nº. 1/2, pp. 212-226; BAILEY, G. M. (1979). "Trifunctional Elements in the Mythology of the Hindu Trimūrti" *Numen*, Vol. 26, Nº. 2, pp. 152-163. D'COSTA, Gavin (1999). "The Trinity and Other Religions: Genesis 18, Judaism and Hinduism in two works of art" *Gregorianum*, Vol. 80, Nº. 1, pp. 5-31.

Triśūla - Trident, a common symbol of the god Śiva. In Sanskrit, the term is formed by *tri*, which is an Indo-European cognate of the English numeral, and *śūla*, a term which may refer to any sharp tool, from the root √*śūl*, "to hurt".

Upaniṣad - Class of late-Vedic śruti texts mostly concerned with abstract philosophy. From the Sankrit pre-verbs *upa-*, "near", *-ni*, "down", and the root √*sad*, "to sit". Therefore, "to sit down nearby". The expression probably refers to the fact that students sat down near their ***guru*** to listen to him and obtain his knowledge. COHEN, Signe (ed.) (2018). *The Upaniṣad: A Complete Guide***,** London: Routledge.

Vaiśya - Merchant caste.

Vana - In Sanskrit, the term *vana* refers to the benign and domesticated "forest". It is often opposed to the concept of ***grāma***, "village", or ***kṣetra***, "settlement".

Vanaprastha āśrama - The third of the four stages (*āśrama*) of life which the higher castes, mostly the Brahmins (see ***brāhmaṇa***), are supposed to follow. In Sanskrit, the expression is composed of the terms ***vana***, "forest", the pre-verb *pra-*, "forward, onward", and the root √*sthā*, "to stand". Therefore, "living in the forest". One should not confuse this concept with the homonymous one which refers to a place where holy men live a life of asceticism (see ***āśrama***). OLIVELLE, Patrick (1993). *The Āśrama System: The History and Heremeneutics of a Religious Institution*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Vānara - Monkey-like creatures which Rāma finds in Kiṣkindha. The name is often regarded to derive from the Sanskrit terms *vana*, “forest”, and *nara*, “man”. Lutgendorf (2007a).

Varṇa - See caste.

Varuna - Important Vedic deity usually associated with the sky, the rain, the order of the universe, and the underworld. In the studies on Indo-European mythologies by Georges Dumézil (1898-1986), a linguist and professor of Religious Studies, Varuna was regarded as a representative of the royal class, who in turn represented political sovereignty. DUMÉZIL, George (1948). *Mitra-Varuna*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard; ALSDORF, Ludwig (1951). *Varuṇa: Varuṇa und die Wasser*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; ALSDORF, Ludwig (1959). *Varuṇa: Varuṇa und das Ṛta*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Vedas - The most ancient Indian religious texts. The Sanskrit term means "knowledge", from the root √*vid*, "to know". The most ancient and important Veda is the *Rgveda*.

Vijayānagara - See Kiṣkindhā.

Vindhya - Range of mountains which separate the North and South India.

Viṣṇu - Major Hindu god. Rāma is considered to be one of his avatars (see *avatāra*). The tradition who considers him as the supreme god is called *Vaiṣṇavism*. GONDA, Jan (1996). *Viṣṇuism and Śivaism: a comparison*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal; COLAS, Gérard (2018). “History of Vaiṣṇava Traditions: An Esquisse” In FLOOD, Gavin D. (ed.). *An Introduction to Hinduism*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Yajamāna - "One he who performs *yajña*". The Sanskrit term is composed of *yajña* and the nominalising suffix *-māna*. In Sanskrit, *yajña* was the name given to the Vedic (see *Vedas*) ritual.

Yajñá – Vedic (see *Vedas*) ritual. The Sanskrit term comes from the root √*yaj*, "to worship, to sacrifice".

Yakṣa - Mostly benevolent species of Indian mythological beings usually associated with nature. The term is often translated as “ghosts” or “demigods”. BORSANI, Giuseppina (1936). “Apsaras e Yaksinī” *Aevum*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 177-184; SUTHERLAND, Gail Hinich (1991). *The Disguises of the Demon: The Development of the Yaksa in Hinduism and Buddhism*, New York: State University of New York Press.

Yakṣiṇī - Female form of Yakṣa.

Yoga - Psychosomatic activity with a long and diverse history inside and outside India. Although its goals have greatly varied, they have consisted of mental, spiritual and/or physical benefits. From the Sanskrit term *yoga*, "union", from the root √ *yuj*, "to unite". FEUERSTEIN, Georg (1998). *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*, Prescott: Hohm Press; MICHELIS, Elizabeth de (2004). *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*; London: Continuum; PHILLIPS, Stephen H. (2009). *Yoga, Karma and Rebirth: A Brief History and Philosophy*, New York: Columbia University Press; Madsen, Børge (2013). *Why Yoga? A Cultural History of Yoga*, London: MadZen Press; SHEARER, Alistair (2020). *The Story of Yoga: From Ancient India to the Modern West*, London: Hurst & Company; SIMPSON, Daniel (2021). *The Truth of Yoga: A Comprehensive Guide to Yoga's History, Texts, Philosophy, and Practices*, New York: North Point Press; FOXEN, Anya, and KUBERRY, Christa (2021). *Is This Yoga?: Concepts, Histories, and the Complexities of Modern Practice*, London: Routledge.

Yuga - Four ages (*krta* or *satya*, *tretā*, *dvāpara* and *kali*) of the world according to Indian cosmology. They occur in an endless cycle, beginning idealistically and eventually collapsing. In Sanskrit, *yuga*, from the root √*yuj,* "to bind", may mean "generation, eon". √*Yuj* is also the root for the Sanskrit word *yoga*. ZIMMER, Heinrich (1946). *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, London: Pantheon Books, p. 13-19; JAHN, Karl (1957). "The Yugas of the Indians in Islamic Historiography" *Der Islam*, Vol 33, pp, 127-134; GONZÁLEZ-REIMANN, Luis (2014). "The Yugas: Their Importance in India and their Use by Western Intellectuals and Esoteric and New Age Writers" *Religion Compass*, Vol. 8, Nº. 12, pp. 357-370.