

CAUGHT BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY

A Nation Called India

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INTRODUCTION

Few can deny that India is seared right through, over several vexing issues, among which is whether the two sacred epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are actually history or just myths. There is hardly any middle ground, as rationalists and left-liberals are absolutely certain that the epics are only myths, while a large section of Hindus refuse to believe they are not historical. The debate would have been simply academic, had not the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), its political arm, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and their associates, like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) positioned Ram right at the centre of India's political debate, thereby de-stabilising rather severely the very composite nation that Gandhi and Nehru had nurtured.

Whether Ram of the Ramayana was born in Ayodhya in the present state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) or not was transformed into an incendiary question that led to a series of violent events from 1988 onwards. Liberal and secular elements did rise to contest the campaign of the Hindu Right that the Babri Masjid was erected exactly at the very site¹ where Ram was born, but there is little doubt that they lost the first round quite decisively. Neither they nor the Indian state could maintain status quo over the disputed land, none could prevent the series of riots that followed its demolition in 1992. The long, lazy tenures of 'secular' governments that ruled India over the next two decades hardly improved the position as an overtly communal force grew from strength to strength until it was in complete control. These indulgent central regimes looked

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the other way as those involved in terrible post-Ayodhya riots from 1992 in UP to 2002 in Gujarat had a field day, using every trick in the book to obtain acquittals and behaved as if everything was under control as the genie of hate politics grew bigger every day. Religion was a messy, 'backward' subject to a professedly plural state and both classical Nehruvian secularism and left-liberals of different shades treated it as an unfortunate opiate addiction of the masses. In this article, we shall try to understand whether they were correct in distancing themselves from religion, as this alienated them from the god-fearing masses who were freely channelised by communal forces.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE TERM 'SECULARISM' IN INDIA

In India, the term 'secularism' lends itself to two distinct meanings. The first is the 'Western interpretation' that emphasises 'clinical secularism' which Nehru espoused. It keeps a sanitised distance from religion per se. The other, that we may call 'Gandhian secularism', was comfortable with all religions and rituals, but remained completely neutral. The Nehruvian model was strange to India where religion is integral to human and social life. Conquests and certain instances of forced conversion notwithstanding, India never went through several centuries of religious conflict and bloodshed. There was no necessity of finally breaking free from a terribly dominating Church that had stifled rationality, science and progress. Marxist historian K. N. Panikkar admitted that these religious wars are 'rooted in European epistemological tradition and are to a large extent alien to our mental make up' (1990: 5). While classical atheism or Western-inspired 'antiseptic secularism' could never grip the imagination of the masses, indigenous rationalist movements like the virulently anti-Brahman Dravidian one² in Tamil Nadu and Lohia's socialist followers in north India did. They remain relevant and strongly secular, perhaps because they had a better grasp of the reality of India.

Nehru had remarked: 'The spectacle of what is called religion not only in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror' (1962: 373), and that it is 'narrow and intolerant of other opinions and ideas; it is self-centred and egoistic' (ibid.: 377). But Nehru's mentor, Gandhi, was perfectly at ease with religion and religiosity, even as he remained completely secular. Gandhi was adept at using

the Hindu idiom like *Ram Rajya* in politics³ but not even his strongest critics would ever accuse him of playing ‘*Hindutva*’ politics. As Olga V. Mezentseva observed, ‘his anti-colonial movement enlarge(d) the system of traditional Hindu maxims and by adding such norms which had actually never been within religion’ (1988: 25). Gandhi connected more easily with the masses because he believed that one could profess complete faith in the Ramayana or the Koran and yet, never be communal at all. Nehru’s followers, the left intellectuals and ‘liberal democrats’, nurtured an anti-religious ‘secularism’ that distanced them from devout believers, both Hindu and Muslim.

FIVE ISSUES

To understand how ‘antiseptic secularism’ was unable to understand that the story of the Ramayana could shake up the very roots of India so dramatically and alter the landscape beyond recognition, we need to ponder over a few issues. So, let us proceed further on the assumption that the basic story and its *dramatis personae* of this epic as well as the other great epic, the Mahabharata, are known. We now need to take an overview and examine the major issues surrounding the two to get a better grasp of this ‘myth versus reality’ syndrome in India. It may be appropriate to approach this problem by understanding five postulates on both the epics, with special reference to the Ramayana.

These may be summed up as:

1. The epics actually serve as the ‘Bible’ for Indic religions.
2. There are many Ramayanas and numerous flexible recessions.
3. Epics were platforms for discussion, contestation, accommodation.
4. Epics helped link India, both spatially and emotionally.
5. Televised versions of the epics gripped popular imagination and destabilised the nation.

THEY ARE NOT EPICS, BUT THE ‘BIBLE’ OF INDIC RELIGIONS

To get into the soul of the argument, one has to try, even for a brief while, to stop viewing them as ‘epics’ at all. True, the form that they use is epic poetry (Reitz and Finkmann, 2020), but Indian epics stand on a completely different plane vis à vis other epical

or mythical narratives. They are not primarily literature or ancient heroic ballads, laced invariably with large doses of the heroic and the supernatural, as they are accepted by (maybe) almost a billion as divine texts. No other epic has acted as the custodian of the values of a people for at least two millennia, and the history of the Indic people and their religion is interwoven with the two epics with every character alive in the existence of Hindus.

The oldest epic in the world, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* of Mesopotamia⁴ was 'lost' in history for millennia and re-discovered in the 19th century, but the Indian epics have an unbroken continuity and were never ever lost or forgotten. The present Iraqi nation is far removed from the Sumerian culture that this epic represents and today's Muslim Iraqis have no blood connect with it. Likewise, modern-day Greeks and much of the Western world treasure Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, but their Christian civilisation has no space for such pagan tales. Similarly, epical literature like Virgil's *The Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Firdausi's *Shahnameh*, the early English classic *Beowulf*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* are all valued and studied as masterpieces, but they certainly do not impact the life of their people today. They do not cause riots.

As a religion, Hinduism grew rather spontaneously and organically on this subcontinent, binding together hundreds of ethnic and linguistic groups along with their own belief systems and hierarchies of deities. Adjustment-oriented Hinduism could not afford to select one single holy book to be the central load-bearing pillar of the religion, like, say, the Koran. In modern times, several religious reformers have proposed that the Rig Veda or the Upanishads or the Bhagavad Gita be considered as the central religious text or texts of the Hindus. But, frankly, the Hindu masses have hardly ever read these learned treatises, while everyone is familiar with the Ramayana and Mahabharata and the stories and lessons they propagate. What V. S. Sukthankar said about the Mahabharata applies equally to the Ramayana—that what 'is remarkable is that this epic is still living and throbbing in the lives of the Indian people' (1957: 29).

THE MANY, MANY RAMAYANAS

The second point that distinguishes the Hindu epics is the incredible variety and the numerous languages and forms in which they come. There is a general agreement that Valmiki's Sanskrit text of the 2nd

or 3rd century AD is the central reference book of the Ramayana and that it collates several floating legends and materials that were around for several preceding centuries. Scholars are unanimous that there is no 'ur' or original version of this epic or the other, and every version is quite full of later modifications and interpolations. Quoting these scriptures, however, conferred the much-needed legitimacy for rulers and challengers.

Incidentally, Valmiki's Ramayana is not the only Sanskrit Ramayana and, G. S. Ghurye explains, there were 'many other Sanskrit poets (of)...the Ramayana either whole or in parts' (1979: 183). The noted *Adhyatma Ramayana* is a part of the *Brahmananda Purana*, but unlike Valmiki who treats Ram as a man, an ideal man, this Ramayana sees divine qualities in Rama. The *Yoga Vasistha* offers the Ramayana as a dialogue, whereas the *Ananda Ramayana* narrates Ram's last days. We have an *Agastya Ramayana*, and among the Sanskrit Puranas, the *Bhagavata Purana* recounts the Ramayana story, while the *Vishnu* and *Agni Puranas* contain shorter versions. 'Hopelessly fluid' is what Wendy Doniger describes the epic tradition (1991: 39).

Describing the numerous regional versions of Valmiki's original, V. V. S. Aiyar commented that composers 'abstained from translating the Sanskrit classics, but instead have re-written them in their own way for their countrymen' (1965: 3). The Tamil *Kamban* of the 12th century is the first 'regional' form, while in the next century the heterodox Jains of Karnataka engaged with Brahmanism in a meaningful debate⁵ via their *Kumudendu Ramayana*. A century later, we get the Telugu version, *Sri Ranganatha Ramayanam*, the Assamese *Kotha Ramayana* and the Odia *Dandi Ramayana*. The Bengali *Krittivasi Ramayana* was written in the next century, while the 16th century saw a profusion of regional Ramayanas, in Konkani, two in Malayalam and others in Marathi, Kannada and Odia. Tulsidas' *Ramcharitamanas* in Awadhi⁶ remains the core text of the Hindi belt. True, the Bible has numerous translations across the globe to propagate its story, but it hardly went through such infinite varieties and adaptations in so many languages, with local legends and cultures grafted in, on such a massive scale.

AS PLATFORMS FOR DISCUSSION, CONTESTATION, ACCOMMODATION

The two epics were always elastic and the concept of 'blasphemy' just did not exist in Indic religions—though it is undeniable that

'sacrilege' is rearing its head now, all of a sudden, aided and abetted by very agreeable judges and magistrates. This flexibility offered platforms for debate and criticism, using an episode of the epics as the trigger. India's multiplicity of beliefs assisted the process of serious social argumentation and contemplation with 'sacrilege' coming in between. Linguist Dinesh Chandra Sen points to the 'evidence of the existence of traditions and ballads which may be traced to a period even earlier than that of Valmiki' in regional Ramayanas (1920: 5). This truth applies to their oral or performative traditions as well. Throughout India's long history, text and the arts actually provided the much-needed public forums for debating conflicting world-views and absorbing often contrarian ideas raised. James Hegarty underlines the essential 'plurality' of texts and performances and 'how (they) thus offered forums for resolution of disputes (2013: 153). Over millennia, the subcontinent never had any central authority to guide or chastise, and therefore, such arrangements and understandings often centred around episodes on the epics.

Sita's portrayal in Valmiki's original has often been compared with Tulsidas' Awadhi *Ramcharitamanas* and other regional compositions to thrash out issues like womanhood, the role of the wife and her autonomy in a patriarchal society.⁷ Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's treatise in Bengali as *Sita's Exile* published in 1860 spoke of Sita's rights and powers, while B. R. Ambedkar declared that 'the life of Sita simply did not count. What counted was his (Rama's) personal name and fame' (1987: 7). Others, like feminist Nabaneeta Dev Sen, declare that Sita is the 'essential orphan, the girl child', while fiery debates centre on Sita's trial by fire (Lal and Gokhale, 2009), and Uma Chakravarti's *Brahminical Patriarchy* berates the epic's view of 'women being weak and sinful' (2013: 14). We also have Paula Richman's *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* (2001) that lays bare many gender issues. Sita is still alive where Telugu writer Volga is concerned (2016), while Devdutt Patnaik and Amish Tripathi bring her across to the more modern-day readers through their many writings.

In Tamil Nadu, E. V. Ramasamy 'Periyar' constructed his Dravidian movement by thrashing the Ramayana and accusing Ram of being 'wicked in thought and deed, an embodiment of lies, treachery, artifice and cunningness' (Veeramani, 2005: 606). On the other hand, Periyar valorised Ravan as 'a great scholar, a benefactor,

a brave soldier, very strong and very chivalrous...' (ibid.: 650). Hinduism has, obviously, been historically less regimented than other religions and its intrinsic stretchability and accommodative nature proved to be useful in setting at rest contradictions and divergences. Those who project 'religious hurt' as a copycat reaction to Islam and emphasise on 'blasphemy' now do not realise that standardisation and monolithisation are the death knell of Hinduism.

EPICS LINKED INDIA, SPATIALLY AND EMOTIONALLY

Few religious texts can ever claim to have linked so many scattered geographies by identifying them directly with the epics by using the very convenient long periods of 'travels' of the protagonists into unknown territories within the subcontinent. In the Ramayana, it is the *Aranya Kanda* of 14 years, when Rama and his two companions were banished to deep forests—their *Vanavas*. The Pandavas of the Mahabharata were also exiled for a total of 13 years to live on their own, without trappings of royalty, to faraway lands, which included a year being incognito—their *Agyatvas*. These extensive wanderings in parts of lesser-known India, beyond the settings of the Indo-Gangetic plains, provided excellent opportunities to composers to describe far-flung corners of this vast country, the names of which proved immensely helpful in later centuries. Several sites claimed that they were, indeed, those places mentioned in the epics, which conferred on them an immediate 'hallowed' status. Places that were 'back of the beyond' were thus linked within the geography of classical India. There are, literally, countless places named after Ram and Sita, and dozens of sites like Manali⁸ or Manipur⁹ flaunt their association with the heroes of the epics. Local tourism thrives on them and guides 'display the exact spots' associated with the central characters.

Besides, the important sites linked to Rama's early life,¹⁰ like Ayodhya, Janakpur in southern Nepal, Allahabad or Prayagraj and Chitrakoot in the Bundelkhand region, his travels through the forests of Dandakaranya proved links to several spots in three states—Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Odisha. As Ram moved westwards, we get Panchavati near today's Nashik and then he turned south to the land of the apes, i.e., Kishkinda, which is identified with the Hampi region in northern Karnataka. Among the numerous other hallowed sites are Anjaneya Parvat, Lepakshi in today's Anantapur of Andhra Pradesh, Rameshwaram and Ram Setu, a chain of limestone

shoals connecting south-eastern Tamil Nadu to Mannar Island of Sri Lanka. All identification is not free from controversy and the site of Hanuman's birth has several claimants—from Hampi in Karnataka and Trimbakeshwar near Nasik in Maharashtra to Gumla in Jharkhand to Lakshka Hill in Churu, Rajasthan. While these ensure pilgrim traffic, all of them are emotionally bound to the epic.

There are several episodes in the Ramayana like Hanuman's flying visits that demonstrate an outstanding grasp of geography. The search for Sita in the *Kishkinda Kanda* links numerous rivers and important hills of the Deccan to the main epic, though Ram never visited them at all. Almost every major state in present-day India can, thus, establish a direct bonding with the epic. Detailed catalogues have later been published highlighting these 'historic links'.¹¹ The wanderings of the protagonists beyond the Ganga-Yamuna belt helped to link far corners of India with the 'heartland' which is a task that no other epic had to perform.

THE TELEVISED EPICS AND THEIR EFFECT

To understand how religious lore was weaponised, let us now move to 1988, when the BJP, then just eight years old, brought Ram in to harvest the unprecedented success of the extremely popular serial, *Ramayan*.¹² Ironically, it was a beleaguered 'secular Congress' government that had been televising it from January 1987 to July 1988. During 1986–1989, Rajiv Gandhi was neck deep in the Bofors scandal and it was widely believed that telecasting the *Ramayan* was the result of a political decision made by the leaders of an insecure Congress that had no qualms in utilising its uncontested control over a powerful new medium. To fit an epic into a TV serial, it was reduced to 'lowest common cultural denominators'. James Hegarty bemoaned how 'the Doordarshan adaptation...was a profoundly linear "epic"...(that) provided a universalised account of the Indian national past' (2013: 180). The *Mahabharat*, televised thereafter, followed this narrow path but both serials were immensely popular. As Pradip Bhattacharya observed, 'the most pervasive invasion by myth took place through television, where the Indian masses... found the epic characters peopling their homes, with interpretations as widely varied as those of Shyam Benegal, Ramanand Sagar, Sanjay Khan and B. R. Chopra' (Chakravarty, 2009: 246). One could decipher the early attempts at homogenisation as well as the

convenient poly-packing of Hinduism. It really offered ‘no room for “the other” (view) at all... and explicitly excluded all those who do not subscribe to its historical vision’ (Hegarty, 2013: 179).

The *Mahabharata* followed and although Doordarshan’s serials may not have directly caused the Hindu unrest that followed from 1989, they were undeniably powerful catalysts. The VHP and the BJP demanded that the ‘site of Ram’s birth’ be rescued from the Babri Masjid that occupied it in Ayodhya and insisted that a temple be built there. This *Ram Janambhoomi* temple controversy had, in fact, been simmering for over one and half centuries,¹³ with agitations, quarrels, court cases and petitions to the British rulers ‘for justice’. In December 1949, the situation took a serious turn when idols of Rama and Sita were found inside the mosque, which Hindus claimed was a miracle. As unmanageable crowds appeared, the government sealed off the entire area but the unprecedented popularity of the *Ramayana* serial 40 years later rekindled the sudden outburst of piety and passion. The VHP’s strategy of involving millions by seeking sponsorship for ‘special’ bricks inscribed with the name of ‘Shri Ram’ turned out to be hugely successful.

POLITICS AND ELECTIONS OVER RAM

The year 1989 was also the year of elections to India’s parliament and this extraordinary campaign led to violence. Christophe Jaffrelot estimated that 706 incidents of riots took place in 1989, in which 1,174 people died (2010: 359).¹⁴ This *pujan* programme of the VHP was followed the next year by BJP supremo Lal Krishna Advani’s *Rama Ratha Yatra* campaign that surely captured the imagination of millions and whipped up mass hysteria, and Arun Shourie, et al. (1990) claimed to list all temples all over India that had been demolished by the Muslims. Left historians brought out learned tracts¹⁵ to disprove the historicity of the *Ramayana* and established their disconnect with the Hindu masses. Advani’s *Ratha* led to violence and the police firing in Uttar Pradesh on 30 October 1990 that killed 20 right-wing agitators and ‘provoked anti-Muslim riots (which) in five days, caused 66 deaths in Karnataka, 63 in Gujarat, 50 in Uttar Pradesh’, and so on (Jaffrelot 2010: 363). In 1991, even before the Babri Masjid was destroyed, Barbara Stoler Miller spoke of how the televised serial ‘politicized communal feelings’ and how ‘militant Hindus have... bent the epic universe to their definition of

Indian national identity—a striking example of how vulnerable the past is to the passions of the moment' (1992: 790). She died before the Babri Masjid was destroyed.

The tsunami of religious hatred was, indeed, too tumultuous for even the firmly 'secular/liberal' governments of UP and Bihar to tackle. Riots engineered by those who intended to gain from them finally led to the destruction of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992. This was, again, followed by one of the worst series of riots that India has witnessed since Partition.¹⁶

Much of India woke up to the reality only when the Babri Masjid was razed on 6 December 1992. A few months later, Sheldon Pollock observed 'how a technological product of the present, the television, actually rekindled a "past" with tinsel-town sensationalism' (1993: 261-97). Among the few serious works¹⁷ that followed is Arvind Rajagopal's (2011). Most Indian liberals watched helplessly as a 'myth' was transformed into an explosive reality and the end of the 'plural-secular' ethos of the preceding four decades started disappearing. As Koenraad Elst says, 'At the height of the Ayodhya controversy, many secularists set themselves up as teachers of Hinduism, the "real Hinduism" as opposed to the distorted Hinduism of Hindu Nationalists' (2002: 63).

Rama's revival helped bring Atal Bihari Vajpayee to power within a few years, but the issue of building the *Rama Janambhoomi temple* at Ayodhya was, however, sent on a loop. It was retrieved by leaders like Narendra Modi and played upon with varying decibels. It was linked inextricably with Hindu *maryada* (self-respect) and were among the rockets that propelled Modi from Ahmedabad to Delhi in 2014. His regime remained patient until the right bench of the Supreme Court was available to drive the very controversial order conferring the sole right over the disputed Babri Masjid plot to the Hindu side in November 2019. The temple is nearing completion and will surely be open before the elections in 2024.

REITERATING OUR SUBMISSION

We have traversed a lot of territory and we may now wrap up our discussions, submitting that:

- (a) the Indian epics are really not 'epics' in the sense of being just long, balladic tales in poetic verse about heroes and

- their crises, but represent, in reality, the ‘bible’ or the central text of the Hindu existence;
- (b) it was/is, therefore, erroneous to bundle them with the large family of fossilised myths, because they are living, thriving and continue to guide people in a manner that no other epical literature can;
 - (c) their influence on present-day lives is much too powerful to be either ignored or viewed with the sheer exasperation that left-liberals did, and thus lost out, wondering how ‘man-made tales’ were being manipulated;
 - (d) they have offered themselves to composers and performers to serve as platforms for presenting different points of view on human issues or norms, and therefore facilitated debates on them, leading hopefully to workable solutions;
 - (e) the languages, varieties and forms in which they or their stories appear to fulfil (d) above are, indeed, infinitely more than other epics;
 - (f) they helped to link places and localities all over the subcontinent with their stories and thereby helped unite a vast country, both spatially and emotionally.

The core of our submission is that, to survive and retrieve lost ground, secular forces may have to stop shunning religion altogether and join the discourse in India by adopting the idiom of the masses. The simple god-fearing masses are not inherently communal and can still be persuaded. Rationalists and liberals have been proven, time and again, to be endowed with more learning and creativity than Right extremists. This is the time for their genius to respond and reach the multitudes—instead of bemoaning how myths are wreaking havoc.



NOTES

1. Sharma (1999) and B. B. Lal (2008) present opposite views.
2. A prolific pamphleteer, Periyar has countless booklets in Tamil to his credit and their English translations are available in present-day compilations. See Veeramani (2005) and Venugopal (2005).

3. Rajmohan Gandhi (2000) mentions several critics like Jinnah, Ainslee Embree and William Shirer who pointed to Gandhi's overtly 'Hinduism-based' appeal to the Indian masses through his dress, Vaishnava prayers, songs and bhajans, use of the Gita and Ramayan—his Hindu idiom.
4. *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Ancient History Encyclopaedia.
5. For details, see Raghavan (1980), especially pp. 226–41 for V. M. Kulkarni's *Jain Ramayanas and their Sources* on how 'Jainism also used the Ramayanas, but with drastic changes in the story'.
6. K. K. Chakravarty (2009) also covers a rather wide range of variations.
7. Arshia Sattar's is a very balanced work (2016).
8. Hidimba or Hidimbi Devi Temple, locally known as Dhungiri temple, is dedicated to a wife of Bhima who was described as an ogress.
9. Arjuna visited 'Manipur' and while the northeastern state of India claims to be this city, many 'Manipurs' in other parts also claim that it was their place the hero had visited.
10. Hari and Hari (2010) is an easy primer while Sankalia (1973) is certainly a more erudite work.
11. Local publications in Hindi or regional languages abound, like *Jahan Jahan Ram-Charan Chali Jahni* that lists 214 Ram sites, while *Jahan Jahan Charan Pare Raghuvir Ke* (In the Footsteps of Shri Ram), in 2010, covers 249 sites.
12. As soon as the serial ended, Doordarshan telecast *Mahabharat*, from October 1988 to July 1990.
13. Trouble started in 1853, when a group of armed Hindu ascetics of the Nirmohi Akhara occupied the Babri Masjid site, and in 1855, the District Magistrate divided the mosque premises into two. But in 1883, Hindus launched a movement to construct a temple there and went to court. Litigation has been on and off for a century.
14. 'Violence was particularly fierce in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar...In Bhagalpur which, by far the most violent, saw about 1,000 people dead, of which 900 were Muslims'. Jaffrelet's quotes from the *Economic & Political Weekly* as well as *Frontline*.
15. See Sharma (1990) and Sharma, et al. (1991).
16. Jaffrelet gives detailed accounts of that extremely difficult phase in India's history, between 1989 and 1993 (1996: 416–27)
17. Among the others are Mitra (1993).

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