

# Between Myth and Reality: A Nation Called India

[Epic in India]  
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## Introducing the Issues:

Few can deny that India is split right through, not necessarily along the median, over the question of whether the Ramayana and Mahabharata are really history or just myths. In this essay we shall deal mainly with the Ramayan as this epic actually led to more violence, riots and political power than ever in our living memory. There is hardly any middle ground on this myth-reality issue, as left-liberals and rationalists are uncompromising in their stand that the Ramayana is just a bundle of myths and legends, while most Hindus, including those who swear by the preachings of the Sangh family, insist that it is, indeed, the real and only history that we must accept. Over the past three decades, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its mentor, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its associates have positioned Rama right at the centre of India's political debate and life. The last decade has witnessed the unabashed 'Hinduisation' of India, de-secularising the composite nation that Gandhi and Nehru cherished with remarkable success.

Critical to this rise of a hitherto-unseen Hindu assertiveness is the Ramayana, one of the major epics of India, that led to the explosive events at Ayodhya, a small town in Uttar Pradesh, in the late 1980s and the early years of the next decade. It was a direct war between those (perhaps, the majority of Hindus) who insist that it is the birthplace of Rama and those (Muslims, as well as a large section of secular Hindus) who were keen to protect the *Babri Masjid* erected at the site<sup>1</sup>. There is little doubt that liberal and secular India lost the battle quite decisively and we need to understand why copybook responses of left-liberal groups actually reveal their growing disconnect with the 'real India'. We may also re-examine whether

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1 For diametrically opposite versions of the dispute, see Sharma, Ram Sharan, ed. (1999). Communal History and Rama's Ayodhya and Lal, B. B. (2008). Rāma, His Historicity, Mandir, and Setu: Evidence of Literature, Archaeology, and Other Sciences.

the 'secular' distancing from religion has worked in the Indian context, because it is quite clear that a 'Hindu India' was surely lying beneath the surface all the time and was being nurtured within the secular cradle. We need to confront the question whether it was the stubbornness of the liberals, the secular and the left — their stout refusal to acknowledge any special status to the epics — that jettisoned them away from the vast majority of god-fearing Hindus. The latter were, thereafter, utilised to the full by Hindu hardliners and communal forces.

To understand how a 'myth' like the Ramayan could shake up India so strenuously, we shall examine the issue from six distinct angles. These may be encapsulated as:

- 1 They are not Epics, but the 'bible' for Indic Religions
- 2 Many Ramayanas and Numerous Votaries
- 3 They were Platforms for Discussion, Contestation, Accommodation
4. Epics Linked India, Spatially and Emotionally
5. The Televised Epics and What Followed
6. The Problem with Secularism in India

## **1. They are not Epics, but the 'bible' for Indic Religions**

If we try to grasp how and why the Indian epics make such a veritable impact on the common people and in everyday life of India, we have to first stop viewing them as 'epics' at all. True, the form that they use is of epic poetry<sup>2</sup>, but yet they stand on a completely different plane vis a vis other epical or mythical narratives, on several counts. The Indian epics are not just literature or ancient heroic ballads, laced invariably with large doses of the heroic and the supernatural, they are divine texts for the masses. No other epic anywhere has acted as the custodian of the values of a people for at least two millennia. The history of the Indic people and their attitudes to religion are interwoven with the two epics, the Ramayana more so, and every character in them is an inseparable part of the life of the Hindus.

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<sup>2</sup> see *Structures of Epic Poetry* by Reitz and Finkmann, Simone. (2019).

Let us compare the Indian epics with the oldest epic in the world, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* of Mesopotamia<sup>3</sup>. This was 'lost' in history for a very long period and re-discovered in the nineteenth 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 little need for mythical characters like Gilgamesh or Enkidu any more. Likewise, modern-day Greeks and much of the Western world may be treasuring the two Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, but later 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. More importantly, they are not powerful enough to (say) lead to a major national crisis or cause riots over whether their hero was born at a particular spot or not.

After all, Hinduism is a religion that grew rather spontaneously and organically and one that got its act together even as it evolved and adjusted with the times. The subcontinent was home to hundreds of ethnic and linguistic groups with their own belief systems and hierarchies of deities and divine forces that, through patient handling, came together under one broad-band flexible religion that was later identified as Hinduism. Since adjustment was the very soul of the processual journey of Hinduism, it did not root for any single holy book to act as the central load-bearing pillar of the religion — like the Bible, the Koran or the Zend Avesta. In modern times, several of its religious reformers and leaders have preferred or even proposed the Vedas or the Upanishads or the Bhagavad Gita to be considered as the central religious text or texts of the Hindus or as the 'Hindu Bible'. But, frankly, the Hindu masses have hardly ever read these texts, while everyone is familiar with the two epics and the stories and lessons they propagate. No sacred text can really match them in terms of popularity where the vast majority of Hindus and those believing in Indic religions are concerned. The two epics are, therefore, surely the best

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<sup>3</sup> Epic of Gilgamesh, Ancient History Encyclopaedia <https://www.ancient.eu/gilgamesh/>

known and most accepted 'holy texts' of the Hindus, that provide their foundation of values. More importantly, they are vibrantly alive for over two millennia and what VS Sukthankar had said about the Mahabharata applies equally to the Ramayana. "What is remarkable is that this epic is still living and throbbing in the lives of the Indian people" (1957: 29). We need, therefore, to distinguish the Indian epics from the rest and avoid lumping them with other 'myths'.

## 2. The Many, Many Ramayanas

The second point that distinguishes the Hindu epics is the incredible variety and the numerous languages and forms they come in. There is a general agreement that Valmiki's Sanskrit text is the central reference book and that it collated a lot of floating legends and materials that were around for several centuries preceding its finalisation in the second or third century AD. Scholars are unanimous that there is no 'urtext' or original version of either of the epics and what we see now are full of later modifications and interpolations. Referring to the texts offered the much-needed legitimacy that society and its rulers or leaders were constantly looking for, and hence, the need for insertions to suit the needs. Incidentally, Valmiki's Ramayana is not the only Sanskrit text on the subject and as GS Ghurye says, there were "many Sanskrit poets.....who have handled the Ramayana either whole or in parts." (1979: 183). The most famous Sanskrit Ramayana after Valmiki's is the *Adhyatma Ramayana* or the 'spiritual Ramayana' that forms part of the *Brahmananda Purana* and that claims Vyasa as its author. While Valmiki treats Ram as an ideal man, this Ramayan sees divine qualities in Rama — aspects that would bloom more vividly later in Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* in Awadhi. Then, the *Yoga Vasistha* which revolves around a dialogue between Vasistha and Rama on the basic principles of the Advaita Vedanta is another. We have another Sanskrit Ramayana that is also attributed to Valmiki called the *Ananda Ramayana*, which narrates Rama's last days. There is also *Agastya Ramayana* that has a tale about an elder brother of Ravana called Mahiravana who had a thousand heads.

We may also note that among the Sanskrit Puranas, the *Bhagavata Purana* recounts the Ramayana story, along with a large part of the Mahabharata, while the *Vishnu* and *Agni Puranas* have shorter versions. Commenting on the other epic, Wendy Doniger noted that “just as the oral tradition of the Rig Veda is frozen, the so-called manuscript tradition of the Mahabharata is hopelessly fluid” (2013: 53). The ‘other Sanskrit Ramayanas’ and Sanskrit compositions on the theme of the Ramayana were, however, usually not as comprehensive as ‘Valmiki’ and highlight only some specific aspects of the epic.

Let us now turn to the numerous regional translations, that were actually trans-creations of Valmiki’s original. VVS Aiyar is clear that the composers “abstained from translating the Sanskrit classics, but instead have re-written them in their own way for their countrymen” (1965: 3). Incidentally, first ‘regional’ translation from Sanskrit was the 12<sup>th</sup> century Tamil *Kamban*. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the heterodox Jains of Karnataka brought out their Ramayana called the *Kumudendu* for engaging with Brahmanism, in a meaningful debate<sup>4</sup>. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, we get the Telugu version, *Sri Ranganatha Ramayanam*, the Assamese *Kotha Ramayana* and the Odia *Dandi Ramayana*. The Bengali *Krittivasi Ramayan* was written in the next century, introducing the concept of Rama worshipping the goddess, Durga, in autumn, thus highlighting how both the battles run parallel during Navaratri. The 16<sup>th</sup> century saw a profusion of regional Ramayans, the Konkani *Ramayanum*, two Malayalam creations, i.e, the *Kannassa Ramayanam* and the *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilipattu*, the Marathi *Bhavartha Ramayana Torave*, the *Ramayana* in Kannada, the *Raghunatha Vilasa* in Odia and, of course, Tulsidas’s *Ramcharitamanas* in Awadhi<sup>5</sup>. Though the Bible has been translated into many more languages, it has hardly ever been subjected to such an immense diversification.

### **3. As Platforms for Discussion, Contestation, Accommodation**

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4 For a fuller description, please see Raghavan (1980) especially pp 226-241 for VM Kulkarni’s *Jain Ramayanas and their Sources*. Raghavan (1980: 5) sums it up well by saying “Jainism also used the Ramayanas, but with drastic changes in the story, incidents and character. Starting with the *Paumacarya* of Vimalasuri (3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century AD) several works give us accounts of the Jain version of the Rama story”.

5 KK Chakravarty (2008) also covers a rather wide range of variations.

Linguist DC 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 (Sen, 5). This truth applies not only to the numerous texts, but also to their oral or performative traditions. Both literature and the performing arts actually provided the much-needed forums and public platforms on which conflicting world-views could be debated, throughout India’s long history. They assisted society absorb new and often-contrarian ideas and issues raised by specific groups or communities. The countless variations of the epics, thus, provided the basic black-board on which contesting assertions and multiple interpretations could be outlined, argued, fought out, accommodated, modified, overwritten and adjusted until the final agreed version emerged for a specific society, community or local region. James Hegarty underlines the essential ‘plurality’ of the epics and their derived texts or performances, underlining “how (they) thus offered forums for resolution of disputes.” (2013: 153). After all, the civilisation that arose in the Indian subcontinent over centuries and millennia never had any central authority to guide or chastise, and therefore, ‘understandings’ arrived at locally formed the bedrock of the normative legislation, accepted by all.

Sita, for instance, has long been a ground of contestation<sup>6</sup> and her portrayal as the quintessentially devoted and obedient wife has been severely challenged, over the ages. Her portrayal in Valmiki’s original has often been compared with Tulsidas’s Awadhi *Ramcharitmanas* or other regional compositions and issues like womanhood, the role of the wife and her autonomy have been examined threadbare in the context of medieval, patriarchal values<sup>7</sup>. Among the earliest such dissertations in modern India was Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar’s treatise in Bengali as *Sita’s Exile* published in 1860. BR Ambedkar was quite unforgiving, when he declared that “the life of Sita simply did not count. What counted was his (Rama’s) personal name

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, history, anthropology, gender studies and other disciplines have also analysed all women characters in the Ramayana and Mahabharata from different angles. Dhira Mishra’s less known book *Political Role of Women in The Ramcharitmanas* (1986, Delhi, Neha Prakashan) is a good example

<sup>7</sup> Arshia Sattar’s *Uttara* (2016) is one of the more balanced works. Basically, a fresh translation of the seventh *Kanda* of the Valmiki Ramayana, it contains essays as well, two of which deal directly with Sita’s banishment and Rama’s conduct in the whole affair.

and fame.” He castigated Rama’s conduct in letting down his faithful wife by succumbing to gossip. (Ambedkar 1988: 17). Feminists and rationalists like Nabaneeta Dev Sen have also picked on Sita as the embodiment of the “essential orphan, the girl child” while others have taken up Sita’s trial by fire<sup>8</sup>. Uma Chakravarti examines a whole gamut of issues in her booklet *Brahminical Patriarchy*, where she declares that “the Ramayana associated most women with being weak and sinful”<sup>9</sup>.

Numerous books and tracts have been written in all languages in all ages on just Sita and her roles and traumas. Paula Richman’s *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition* (2001) lays bare many issues and Madhu Kishwar’s article in it “Yes to Sita, No to Ram” describes “the continuing hold of Sita on popular imagination in India.” She is not treated as a legendary person and her case is taken up with all the seriousness of a living national celebrity. This is evident in Volga’s Telugu retelling<sup>10</sup> of Sita’s “liberation and self realisation”. Her story has been interpreted by popular modern day interlocutors like Devdutt Patnaik in his *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013) and Amish Tripathi in *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017), as the epics continue to be of interest to millennials as well.

In Tamil Nadu, EV Ramasamy ‘Periyar’ indicted the Ramayana as a metaphor for Sanskrit or Aryan hegemony over Dravidian Deccan. The English edition of his *The Ramayana — A True Reading* (1972) accuses Rama of being “wicked in thought and deed, an embodiment of lies, treachery, artifice and cunningness, hard-heartedness, greediness, murder, drunkenness, wicked associations, unmanliness and what not” (Veeramani 2005: 606). On the other hand, Periyar quotes from Valmiki to describe Ravana as “a great scholar, a benefactor of his subjects and relatives, a brave soldier, very strong and robust, very chivalrous, a recipient of God’s grace....” (Veeramani 2005: 650). It is apparent that Hinduism has historically been less regimented than other religions, even during the Ancient and Middle Ages. This is when terms like blasphemy and sacri-

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8 Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale: *In Search of Sita; Revisiting Mythology* (2009).

9 p 14, of Critical Quest’s 2013 publication.

10 *The Liberation of Sita*, 2018, translated by C. Vijayasree and T. Vijay Kumar, Harper Collins.

lege were liberally used by other faiths to burn alive, impale or stone to death those they considered as heretics. Such liberties are often quite unimaginable in many other religions and where their 'holy books' are concerned. At the same time, it is essential to understand that flexibility was more of a necessity than a virtue as it is often made out to be. Accommodation was essential for a decentralised federal religion to survive and hold together varying and often conflicting views, mores and requirements of diverse ethnic, linguistic, social groups and strata — spread over different geographies.

#### **4. Epics Linked India, Spatially and Emotionally**

The Indian epics not only brought together very diverse ideas and cultures, but also emotionally united different 'nations' that inhabited this sub-continent throughout history and sewed them together. Few religious texts can ever claim to have linked so many scattered geographies by identifying them directly with the balladic epics. Both the epics contained long periods when the respective protagonists were compelled to wander around large parts of the lesser-known India. In the Ramayana, it is the *AranyaKanda* of fourteen years, when Rama and his two companions stayed in forests in far away lands, while in the Mahabharata, the five Pandavas were also exiled for a total of thirteen year — their *Vanvas* and *Agyatvas*. These provided far-flung corners of this vast country to be identified with the remote places mentioned in the epics and several outlier tribals and marginal castes were given a place under the sun. There are, literally, countless Rampurs and so many places named after Sita. There are many other sites like Manali<sup>11</sup> or Manipur<sup>12</sup> that flaunt the names of the epic-heroes and claim strong associations with the epics. Local tourism also

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11 Hidimbi Devi Temple, locally known as Dhungiri Temple, is located in Manāli, a hill station in the State of Himāchal Pradesh in north India. It is an ancient cave temple dedicated to Hidimbi Devi, wife of Bhima, a figure in the Indian epic Mahābhārata and is the biggest tourist attraction.

12 Arjuna visited ancient Manipur, an almost mystic kingdom renowned for its natural beauty, during his term of exile. There, he met princess Chitrangada who he married on the condition that neither she nor her children would leave the kingdom. The point is that many 'Manipurs' in India claim the honour of being that Manipur mentioned in the Mahabharata — and the State of Manipur is among the foremost. Odisha is not too far away and claims that an area in Kendrapara district is the real one mentioned in the epic and the distributary of the Brahmini river near it also carries that very name, Manipur.



publicises where exactly the heroes or central characters were born or visited and caves, temples, ruins, groves and water-bodies are shown as evidence.

The important sites linked to Rama's early life<sup>13</sup> are obviously Ayodhya, where the epic says he was born; Janakpur in southern Nepal where Sita came from and Allahabad or Prayagraj where Rama, Sita and Lakshman visited the *ashrama* of the sage, Bhardwaj, before crossing the waters. The epic narrates that they went westwards to Chitrakoot in the present-day Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh-Madhya Pradesh; then south-east to the forests of Dandakaranya, the large area that covers adjoining parts of three states, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Odisha. Their journey continued westwards to Panchavati near today's Nashik in Maharashtra that actually boasts of a 'cave of Sita' and a temple of Kapaleshwar. From there, they travelled south to the land of the apes, i.e, Kishkinda which is identified with the region of Hampi in northern Karnataka. They moved to Anjaneya Parvat, the location of which is in dispute. Among the numerous other hallowed sites are Lepakshi in today's Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh and Ram Setu or Adam's Bridge, 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 contestants. According to one theory, Hanuman was born on 'Anjaneya Hill' in Hampi, Karnataka and a temple marks the spot. Contesting this claim is another site in far-off Jharkhand in Gumla district and tourists and pilgrims are taken to a cave called Aanjani Gufa where his mother, 'goddess' Anjani, actually lived in it. Maharashtra insists that the Anjaneri mountain near Trimbakeshwar in Nasik district is actually the birthplace of Hanuman, while Rajasthan declares that Hanuman was actually born at Anjan Dham, on Lakshka Hill near Sujangarh in Churu district. Honours and economic benefits from pilgrim traffic are thus shared by multiple sites and all of them are emotionally bound to the epic.

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13 There are innumerable books and exercises in identifying the sites mentioned in the two epics with places in present-day India. Hari and Hari (2010) is an easy primer where the sites mentioned in the Ramayana are concerned, while Sankalia (1973) is certainly a more erudite work by a well-known archeologist.

There are several episodes in the Ramayana like Hanuman's flying visits that demonstrate an outstanding grasp of geography. In the *Kishkinda Kanda*<sup>14</sup>, Sugriva, the monkey king of Kishkinda, directs his 'search parties' to scour all lands to locate where Ravana may have abducted Sita. Every river, important hill and 'kingdom' of the Deccan that find mention get linked to the main epic, though Rama never visited them. We soon realise that almost every major state in present-day India that lies south of Uttar Pradesh could thus establish a direct bonding with the epic through some important 'site' mentioned in the Ramayana and many dedicated 'researchers and experts' claim to have catalogued these links<sup>15</sup>.

## 5. The Televised Epics and What Followed

To understand how a religious lore was weaponised, let us now move to 1988, when the BJP, that was just eight years old, foisted Rama at core of its action-plan. From January 1987, a beleaguered 'secular Congress' government<sup>16</sup> had been televising a wildly popular serial, *Ramayana*<sup>17</sup> that skyrocketed the epic's popularity, but violated own Nehruvian secular ethics. Much of the India's eternal spirit of accommodation

14 *Sarga 40, Shloka 37.*

15 *Jahan Jahan Ram-Charan Chali Jahni* is, for instance, a Hindi publication of Sri-Ram Sanskritik Shodh Sansthan (published by Mathribhumi, New Delhi) that actually lists 214 sites connected to Rama, with full details and photographs. Encouraged by the response to this 1995 publication, this organisation brought out a larger bilingual volume, *Jahan Jahan Charan Pare Raghuvir Ke, In the Footsteps of Shri Ram*, in 2010, covering 249 sites with complete details — including nearest railway station and bus stop.

16 One may recall that during this period (1986-1989) the ruling Congress government under Rajiv Gandhi was being pummelled in parliament on the Bofors scandal and all energies of the ministers were concentrated in saving it. The 'inside version' and 'corporate memory' within Doordarshan, especially by those who were involved in telecasting the serial is that Rajiv Gandhi's young minister in charge of Information & broadcasting, Ghulam Nabi Azad was neck deep in 1986-87 in his mission to save the image of his party. It was then that Surinder Singh Gill, the powerful Secretary of his ministry negotiated with the producers and decided to telecast the two epics on State run television, Doordarshan, practically on his own accord. Azad, as Muslim, could hardly object. Others view it as the "result of a political decision made by the leaders of an insecure Congress Party, during a moment in which it had uncontested control over a powerful new medium" in Farmer (1996: 115)

17 Soon after the Ramayan ended its serial in July 1988, Doordarshan telecast the next epic, Mahabharat, from October 1988 to July 1990. "The he most pervasive invasion by myth took place through television, where the Indian masses.....found the epic characters peopling their homes, with interpretations as widely varies as those of Shyam Benegal, Ramanand Sagar, Sanjay Khan and BR Chopra" — Pradip Bhat-tacharya in Chakravarty (2009, 246).

was lost in transit as the epics were reduced to 'lowest common cultural denominators', to play to the gallery. James Hegarty notes that "the Doordarshan adaption.....was a profoundly linear 'epic' in the European sense (that) provided a universalised account of the Indian national past". (2003: 180). The beginning of a homogenised poly-packed Hinduism can be traced to the televised epics that really offered "no room for 'the other' (view) at all.... and explicitly excluded all those who do not subscribe to its historical vision" (2013: 179).

While one is not arguing that Doordarshan's serials were the cause of the Hindu unrest that followed in 1989 and thereafter, they were undeniably powerful catalysts. **In 1991, even before the Babri Masjid was destroyed**, Barbara Stoler Miller could see the writing on the wall. At her presidential address to the Association of Asian Studies in America, she observed how the televised serial "politicized communal feelings, that has made the Ayodhya situation so compelling... (and) 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"(Miller, 1991: 790). Except a small group of prominent Left historians, Indian analysts did not spell out the full import of these serials on Indian politics, **until Babri was razed**. Sheldon Pollock wrote an interesting article on "Ramayana and Political Imagination in India"(1993)<sup>18</sup>, observing how a technological product of the present, the television, actually rekindled a 'past' with tinsel-town sensationalism. Arvind Rajagopal's *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (2001) is one of the few serious works<sup>19</sup>.

**By 1989, the VHP and the BJP estimated that the TV *Ramayana* had made Rama much more real and demanded that the 'site of his birth' be rescued from the Babri Masjid that occupied it in Ayodhya and a temple be built there. This *Ram-Janambhoomi* temple controversy had, in fact, been simmering for over one and half centuries<sup>20</sup>, with agitations, quarrels,**

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18 *Journal of Asian Studies* 52: 261-97. 1993.

19 Among the others are Mitra, Ananda. 1993. *Television & Popular Culture in India - Study of Mahabharat*.

20 Trouble started in 1853, when a group of armed Hindu ascetics of the Nirmohi Akhara occupied the Babri Masjid site, and claimed ownership of the structure, pro-

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 in the mosque, which Hindus claimed was a miracle. Government sealed off the entire area as unmanageable crowds of Hindu devotees started thronging the place, but the unprecedented popularity of the Ramayana serial surely led to the sudden outburst of piety and passion in 1989. The VHP then began its very ingenious and unique *Ram Shila Pujan* programme to galvanise millions of Hindus from almost every corner of India. They ‘participated’ by ‘sponsoring’ individual bricks, specially inscribed with the name of ‘Shri Rama’.

Most liberals watched helplessly as a ‘myth’ was transformed into an explosive reality and they could hardly imagine then that this would actually mark the beginning of the end of the ‘plural-secular’ ethos of the preceding four decades. 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). 1989 was also the year of elections to India’s parliament and this extraordinary campaign led to terrible costs. Christophe Jaffrelot estimated that 706 incidents of riots took place in 1989, in which 1174 people died (2010: 359)<sup>21</sup>. 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. This is when Arun Shourie (1990) and right-wing chroniclers claimed to list all temples<sup>22</sup> all over India that had been demolished by the Muslims. Left historians took up the challenge and instead of

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moting the civil administration to step in. In 1855, the District Magistrate divided the mosque premises into two parts for the two religions but in 1883, the Hindus launched a movement to construct a temple there and went to the court as the administration did not permit it. Litigation continues, since then, on an off and currently, it is the Supreme Court that is to decide. .

21 “Violence was particularly fierce in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar..... ..In Bhagalpur which, by far the most violent, saw about 1000 people dead, of which 900 were Muslims”. Jaffrelot quotes from the *Economic & Political Weekly* as well as *Frontline*, both of which are viewed to be left-leaning publications.

22 This is a detailed survey published in April 1990 by Arun Shourie, et al, entitled *Hindu Temples- What Happened to Them*, articulating the anguish of the Hindus over the reported destruction or conversion of their temples by Muslims over 600 years.

appealing to the masses in their idiom, they brought out learned tracts<sup>23</sup> to disprove the historicity of the Ramayana. Advani's *Ratha* led to violence and the police firing in Uttar Pradesh on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October of 1990 killed 20 right-wing agitators. This, in turn, "provoked anti-Muslim riots.....(which) in five days, caused 66 deaths in Karnataka, 63 in Gujarat, 50 in Uttar Pradesh" and so on, wrote Jaffrelot (2010: 363). The next two years unleashed a very powerful tsunami of religious hatred that the more 'secular-liberal' governments of U.P. and Bihar found difficult to tackle. Events finally led to the destruction of the Babri Masjid on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992<sup>24</sup> that triggered the worst series of riots that India has witnessed since its Partition<sup>25</sup>. 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 dextrously retrieved by Narendra Modi in November 1999, with the help of a controversial order from the Supreme Court, and Rama is in full form having vanquished all who opposed his temple.

## 6. The Problem with Secularism in India

Secularism lends itself to two interpretations, the 'western model of clinical secularism' that Nehru believed in which keeps an antiseptic distance from religion per se and the other (that we may term as Gandhian) that was comfortable with all religions and rituals but completely neutral. The Nehruvian model is difficult in India where religion is integral to human and social life. We must remember that the west had to undergo several centuries of religious conflict and bloodshed,

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23 To. The next month, i.e., in May 1990, RS Sharma published his pamphlet *Communal Harmony & Rama's Ayodhya*, through the People's Publishing House, New Delhi. Exactly a year later, in May 1991, the same publisher brought out *Ram Janambhoomi - Baburi Masjid — A Historian's Report to the Nation* by RS Sharma, S Athar Ali, DN Jha and Suraj Bhan.

24 On this day, BJP, VHP and RSS leaders gathered at the site to ostensibly to offer prayers but within hours, 'volunteers' had demolished the mosque, as police watched on helplessly. When administration finally acted, dozens were shot dead, but soon, Hindu Muslim riots broke out all over India resulting in 2,000 deaths. Mumbai continued its own localised riots for the next six weeks in which another thousand died but what is more significant is that Muslim *jihadist* groups have continued to target Mumbai in a revenge that has not ended. Riots then spread to Pakistan and Bangladesh where numerous Hindus were killed.

25 Jaffrelot gives detailed accounts of that extremely difficult phase in India's history, between 1989 and 1993 (1996: 416-27)

before it could break free from a terribly dominating Church that stifled rationality, science and progress. India has not gone through this experience and most liberal-secular Indians who swear by the western model of secularism need to factor this in, as do the Left atheists and agnostics. Marxist historian, KN Panikkar, admitted these are “rooted in European epistemological tradition and are to a large extent alien to our mental make up”<sup>26</sup>. This explains, perhaps, why the Left is almost wiped off the face of India while aggressive Hindutva prospers, by digging its roots deeper into the Indian soil. Even the indigenous rationalist movements like virulently anti-Brahman Dravidian one<sup>27</sup> in Tamil Nadu and Lohia’s socialist followers in north India remain relevant and strongly secular as they understood the reality of India.

Nehru was quite uncomfortable with what he considered was the over-religiosity of most Indians and he remarked that: “the spectacle of what is called religion not only in India and elsewhere, has filled me with horror”<sup>28</sup>. Nehru continued to express his undisguised distaste for religion as “narrow and intolerant of other opinions and ideas; it is self-centred and egoistic”<sup>29</sup>. While Nehru steered clear of religion altogether, his mentor, Gandhi was perfectly at ease with religion and religiosity, even as he remained completely secular. Gandhi was adept in using the Hindu idiom in politics<sup>30</sup> and his frequent use of terms like *Ram Rajya* are known to all. But not even his strongest critics would ever accuse him of playing ‘Hindutva’ politics. As Olga V Mezentseva, observed, “he proceeded from the tasks of the anti-colonial movement by enlarging 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 empathised with them and believed that one could believe strongly in the Ramayana

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26 People’s Publishing House, 1990. *Culture and Consciousness in Modern India*.

27 A prolific pamphleteer, Periyar has countless booklets in Tamil to his credit and their English translations are available in present-day compilations, like *Collected Works of Periyar E.V.R.*, by K Veeramani (2005) and *The Five Pronged Battle of Periyar for an Egalitarian Society* by P Venugopal (2005)

28 *An Autobiography*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers, p 373

29 *Ibid*, p. 377.

30 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 Gita and Ramayan. — his Hindu idiom.

or the Koran, without being communal at all. Nehru, on the other hand, patronised left intellectuals and also 'liberal democrats', many of whom nurtured an anti-religious 'secularism' that distanced them from the devout believers, both Hindu and Muslim.

## **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 are 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' are 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 the fact that god-fearing Hindu masses believe in the two epics with all sincerity does not make most of them communal. We submit that Indian secularism has to give up its distance and join the discourse, by adopting their idiom. In other words, contestations with those who distort the essentially accommodative spirit of the epics would have to be

in their language and form. The world over, rationalists, liberals and the Left are known to be endowed with better learning and higher creativity than Right extremists. They possess the genius to respond and reach their message to the largest segment of Indians, through their literature and the performing arts, but by remaining within the discourse of, say, the epics. But, to do so, they need to embrace reality and take up the challenge, instead of bemoaning how myths are being misused to wreak havoc.