# Epic as an Ideology of the Nation Empire: Dominance, Hegemony, and the Imperialist Repertoires of the Ramayana Traditions in India

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**Abstract**: *From a bardic composition to sacred literature, from a story legitimizing a monarchy to a story epitomizing the morals of a postcolonial nation, the Ramayana narrative does not belong to any specific moment in history. Riding the waves of cultural nationalism, it has emerged from being the epic of the nation to the vision of an empire. This paper examines the imperialist repertoire and hegemonic presence of the narrative in relation to the body-politic of the Indian nation state. This is important because 'Empire is a cultural artefact as well as a geopolitical entity; it belongs to a geography of the mind as well as a geography of power' (Hinderaker, 1996). Against the popular liberal readings of this narrative, this essay argues that the Ramayana narrative has emerged as the dominant ideological apparatus when it comes to Hinduization of the public sphere, the legitimization of the nation's annexation policy ("Greater India" rhetoric), the othering of Muslims as foreign subjects, and subordination of women and subaltern communities at large. What Aeneid was to the Roman Empire and Paradise Lost to the British Empire, the Ramayana is to the Indian national empire. The secular liberal understanding of Ramayana and its appropriations in relation to secularism and fundamentalism are too narrow. The paper offers a critique of the liberals' readings of "my Rama vs. your Rama" binarism and argues that such "reformist" readings are inside the grids of Brahminical- nationalist cultural hegemony.*

**Keywords:** Ramayana, Epic, empire, hegemony, ideology, imperialism, culture

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*I place the Ramayana critics in two groups: the insider critics (such as A.K. Ramanujan, Paula Richman, and Arshia Sattar) who critically analyse the epic in a way to support and sustain the epic and its ideals, and the outsider critics (Ambedkar, Periyar, Phule) who would see the Hindu Ramayana as part of a hegemonic tradition. The outsider critics argue for an ontological and epistemological exit and a "disengagement" with such epics for an emancipatory discourse of our time, i.e., Dalit-Bahujan, feminist, indigenous and decolonial discourses at large. Thus, the criticism here is not against one Ramayana or the other but against the fundamental core of the narrative and its relation to the Indian nation state.*

## Introduction

> "How many Ramayanas? Three hundred? Three thousand? At the end of some Ramayanas, a question is sometimes asked: How many Ramayanas have there been? And there are stories that answer the question."
>
> (A.K. Ramanujan, 1991) [1]

> "In Tamil, we have Kamb Ramayana while in Telugu we have Raghunath and Ranganath Ramayana. We have Ruipad-Katerpadi Ramayan in Odiya, while there is Kumudendu Ramayana in Kannada. In Kashmir, you will find Ramavatar Charit while Ramacharitam in Malayalam. In Bangla, we have Krittibas Ramayana while Guru Gobind Singh has himself written Gobind Ramayana."
>
> (Narendra Modi, 2020)[2]

Scholars have long argued that Hindutva ideologues adhere to the ideology of one language, one culture, and one form of worship. After Prime Minister Modi's speech at Ayodhya in 2020, can we make the same assertion that the Hindu right-wing does not talk about many Ramayanas? What does he really mean when he said that Rama is in the faith of India, Rama is in the ideals of India, Rama is in India's divinity, is a constitutional entity and so on?[3] What is this connection between the ideology of the epic narrative and the ideology of the nation? Why did the Sangh Parivar choose the same date, 5th August for the Ram Mandir *Bhoomi-poojan* (ground-breaking ceremony) and the same date to supersede the special status of Jammu and Kashmir?[4] While critics and most of the opposition parties have called out the Hindutva politics of the BJP, they have always shown their love and commitment towards the ideals of Rama and the epic *Ramayana*. They not only hailed the controversial judgment of the Supreme Court but also celebrated the foundation of the temple in Ayodhya. Opposition Congress Party leader Priyanka Gandhi described it as the event of a celebration of national unity, fraternity and cultural affinity.[5] In popular parlance, any criticism

of Rama is viewed as an attack on the nation. In most cases, the questions of caste, gender, ethnicity and equality are ignored when it comes to matters of faith. While there have been attempts to bring politics of caste in the interpretations of epic (Richman and Bharucha, 2021), they have always been in the form of an insider critique, without challenging the supremacy at the core of the Ramayana narrative. As per the Richman and Bharucha volume, can we really read Om Prakash Valmiki's valiantly oppositional poem *Shambhuk's Severed Head* as one of the multiple interpretations of the Ramayana narrative?

The demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992 is the focal point of great historical change and multidisciplinary scholarly attention in South Asia. However, the focus has been on the secularism-communalism binary and the increasing divide between the "traditions" of Hinduism and the politics of Hindutva (Nandy, 1988; Pandey, 1993). Thomas Blom Hansen has argued that 'Hindu Nationalism and the politics of xenophobia should not be understood as anomalies inflicted by dark forces or structures of peripheral capitalism, but rather as possibilities always folded into India's unique experience of modernity and democracy' (Hansen, 2018: 9). He underlines that the ostensibly clear distinction drawn today between "secular forces" and "communal forces" is more spurious than many of us would like to believe. Hinduism and Hindutva get conflated when it comes to mobilization based on cultural nationalism and on the question of the supremacy of the Ramayana narrative.

While scholars have recognized the popular presence of the epic in the socio-cultural life of the Hindus (Pollock, 1993; Thapar, 1989; Mehta, 2020; Ramanujan, 1990), they have interpreted the right-wing project lionising Rama as an aberration of *Ramayana's* originally intended narrative ideology. In their view, Hindutva politics tries to misinterpret and homogenize the original inclusive and diverse traditions of the epic— by making it exclusionary, aggressive and communal. It has also been observed that television serials based on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* changed the cultural landscape of India. It gave rise to cultural homogeneity and fundamentalism, that was later appropriated by the RSS and the BJP (Mankekar, 1999; Rajagopal, 2001; van der Veer, 1994). They have tried to show how the Hindutva ideology is appropriating the religious beliefs for instrumental political ends. Of late, there has been an attempt to make a fine distinction between Hinduism and the Hindutva on the lines of the politics of tolerance and intolerance, and inclusiveness and exclusiveness. Liberal critics like Arshia Sattar, Pratap Bhanu Mehta and others would see it as the colonization of Hinduism by the Hindutva forces. Mehta (2020) termed the 5th August event as "the real colonization of Hinduism" by the ruling party—"a brute majoritarianism subordinating others".[6] From the viewpoint of the diverse traditions of Ramayana , there have been significant scholarly works (Richman, 1991; Brockington, 1998; 2000; Pollock, 1993; Richman and Bharucha, 2021). While these scholars refer to Jaina *Ramayana*, Muslim *Ramayana*, Buddhist *Ramayana* and folk *Ramayana*, paradoxically, they still tend to see them under the aegis of Hinduism. This ideological position is not very different from that of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak

Sangh (RSS) i.e. religions from Sikhism to Jainism are all apparently variations and parts of greater Hinduism, rather than being heterodox challenges to it.

Romila Thapar (1989) has tried to trace the narrative developments of the figure of Rama: Rama as a hero, Rama as an ideal king, Rama as a devotional lord, and so on. Similarly, the works of Thapar (1989) and Lutgendorf (2002) draw our attention to the changing nature and function of the epic amidst larger socio-political changes. Some scholars have also traced the hypermasculine reconstruction of Rama along with the rise of Hindutva (Kapur, 1990). While these studies are significant in their own rights, there has been a peculiar silence on the epic's relationship with the question of caste and the imperial aspirations of the Indian nation. Going way beyond the secular -communal binary, the epic is an embodiment of cultural hegemony — deeply implicated in the ideology of Brahmanism and imperialism. While liberal Hindu scholars have been vocal about the aggressive appropriations of *Ramayana* by the Hindutva forces, they are silent about the cultural appropriation and homogenization carried out by the epic traditions of *Ramayana* and Hinduism at large. They take a position against communalism but maintain silence against the cultural appropriation in the name of Hinduism. I argue that their "counter-narratives" ultimately strengthen the cultural hegemony of Hinduism and Hindu nationalism. One is not surprised to see the appropriation of Rajagopalachari's *Ramayana* and Gandhi's *Ramarajya* in Hindutva politics. Arguably, Gandhi cannot be blamed for this hegemonic appropriation, however, Gandhi's legitimization and popularization of the *Ramarajya* cannot be ignored; neither can be Rajagopalachari's readings.

I argue that the epic of Rama and the Indian nationalist imperialism cannot be seen in separation. The role that Virgil's *Aeneid* played in the foundation of the Roman Empire, is similar to what the *Ramayana* has been playing in the shaping of the Indian nation and its imperial aspirations. It is not only important to see how the epic has been reworked or reorganized, but also why the epic becomes the epic narrative of the nation, unlike, say, the *Mahabharata*. Hiltebeitel observes that the *Ramayana* becomes a blueprint for an imperial *Ramarajya*. While the *Mahabharata* shows 'the fissures of empire while filling out an imperial geography', the *Ramayana*, in essence, shows the consolidation of an empire (1998:410). This shows the "structures of feeling" encoded in the epic.

Drawing on the works of Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams and David Quint, and informed by the works of anti-caste intellectuals of India such as Periyar, Ambedkar and Phule, I argue that the epic of *Ramayana* offers a prototype of imperialist narrative steeped in Hindu-nationalist agenda. I analyse the epic both for its formalist characteristics as well as for its hegemonic cultural appropriations. The narrative best exemplifies how India as a nation and the empire gets constructed through the cultural ideology built in the myths and epics. Therefore, the criticisms

against *Ramayana* are not about the problem of the epic, or the epic hero,, but the criticisms are against the very "ideals" of the epic. What has been peculiarly missing from liberal scholars so far is criticism against *Ramayana* as bearing the ideology of the empire in a postcolonial context. But viewed from the discourse of nationalism and citizenship, this reading of *Ramayana* provides a context in which the event in Ayodhya, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the annexation of Kashmir are linked. It is not surprising that the slogan of "*Jai Shri Ram*" and "*Bharat Mata ki Jai*" go together. The *Ramayana* is invoked to bring about territorial, cultural and ethnic unification. Most importantly, the re-birth of the *Ramayana* after the 1990s has resulted in successive displays of triumph and genocidal violence. Any interpretation of the epic cannot be bereft of our memory and time. We cannot have an ahistorical reading of the *Ramayana, simply* romanticizing our past.

It is a truism to say that there are countless tellings of the *Ramayana,* and that each of them richly significant and equal to others in their own ways. Any cultural theorist would know that this is not the ideally relativistic way in which culture operates. Rather, it all depends on how the dominant ideology shapes this cultural field and how these alternative traditions work — as what I would like to term them — "para-hegemonic", rather than "counter-hegemonic" fields. Commenting on the controversy around Ramanujan's essay '*Three Hundred Ramayanas*' being part of undergraduate history syllabus at Delhi University, historian Kumkum Roy argued that, 'The issue that he [Ramanujan here] wishes to address then is different: not how many, but how are they related to one another' (2011:14). The current Ramayana project of the right-wing Hindutva precisely lies in establishing this relationship, for example, how the Bhil *Ramayana* is related to the Valmiki *Ramayana* and to the Jaina *Ramayana* without breaking the hegemonic presence of the Valmiki *Ramayana* the master narrative.

We need to also recognise that the many claims of multiple traditions of *Ramayana* are based on their pre-modern and pre-nation cultural exchanges that contain all the south-east Asian *Ramayana* traditions. Many critics and scholars tend to read *Ramayana* in the past; any attempt to read the *Ramayana* in the present must confront the unpleasant spectre of the *Ramayana* being a part of the ideology of the Hindu nation. Roy commented that 'Ramanujan provides us with tools to read the familiar with an eye for differences rather than sameness' (15). This is exactly the way Modi is asking us to read when he says that how Guru Nanak too wrote a different kind of Ramayana. I am not trying to equate Modi's intent with that of A.K. Ramanujan's, but unfortunately the epistemic politics of both approaches converge. The contrarianism of the sameness and the differences are rather contextual. No doubt that the diverse traditions of Ramayana exist, but in terms of intent, they are not so diverse. We cannot ignore the hierarchies and inequalities in the name of diversity when the state and upper castes wield and perpetuate an epic to consolidate their ideologies. If the *Ramayana* has to be read politically, it has to be read in terms of its relationship

with the Indian nation and the social hierarchy of caste, gender and ethnicity.

**Narratives of the Nation**

Scholars have discussed how the Indian nation project was imagined through the historical narratives during the colonial period (Aloysius, 1997; Liu and Khan, 2014). They have discussed how Gandhi, Nehru, Savarkar, Golwalkar and others' views on the nation instrumentalized mythical narratives to shape the postcolonial nation. The distinction between mythical narrative (myth) and fictional narrative (history) often disappears when it comes to belief systems and cultural practices. The best example is the site of the Ram Janmabhoomi in Ayodhya where myth has acquired the value of history and the fictional narrative undergirds the myth. This conflation of the mythical and the historical narrative are not only part of the right-wing Hindutva appreciation of the figure of Rama, but has been equally part of the liberal reading of Rama — and often in-built in Indian popular culture. Myth, history and narratives are not sealed compartments in case of public culture and popular discourses. Their response also needs to be seen in relation to the hegemony of British colonialism and Christian missionaries at that historical juncture. Scholars have also discussed how the timeless, living nature of ritual enactments from the *Ramayana* has been used in political campaigning by the Hindu nationalist movement (Jaffrelot, 1999).

Along with the Vedas, the *Ramayana* was one of the key narratives that emerged as a master narrative for the independent nation for various reasons. In the figure of Lord Rama, Gandhi envisioned the "righteous reign" of independent India. In this section, I discuss the approaches of Gandhi, Rajagopalachari, Savarkar, Periyar and Ambedkar to lay out the problems of the epic that remains in the core of the vision and ideology of the nation. Their views on the Ramayana are fundamentally views on the question of nation and nationalism. It is a way of arguing whether the locus of the nation should be subcontinental or regional, and whether the moral economy predominating in India should be brahminical or non-brahminical, and even nonreligious (Richman, 1995: 633). While Ambedkar and Periyar remained critical of the story of Rama; Gandhi, Savarkar and Rajagopalachari espoused it as an unparalleled text epitomizing Indian culture and civilization.

Some of the contradictions are obvious in their approaches. First, while the upper-caste nationalist leaders largely stood for Ramayana, the Dalit-Bahujan intellectuals of the time stood against the *Ramayana* terming it to be a text of cultural hegemony. If we reflect on those debates, we find that there was not much of a difference between the views of Rajagopalachari and Savarkar, except that one was politically close to the Congress Party and the other to the Hindu Mahasabha. Though Gandhi's *Ramrajya* approach treads the middle path, one can still say that his views remain closer to Rajagopalachari. Second, Periyar and Ambedkar, including Phule, were highly critical of the

Ramayana narrative. Periyar tried to reduce the power of the *Ramayana* to the "comical level", devaluing the "aura" of the epic. Ambedkar was not even interested in engaging with the epic. He simply denounced it.

Gandhi's *Ramrajya* was a utopian vision based on tenets of Bhakti and Vaishnavism. For him, *Ramrajya* was a 'moral government based upon truth and non-violence'. Lord Rama's "righteous reign" in Ayodhya was the model of Gandhi's Swaraj (Lutgendorf, 1995: 253). Gandhi tried to redefine *Ramrajya* to a radical extent — a Rama who is not even in the Ramayana narrative. While it is an epic of monarchy, Gandhi saw in it a model of ideal democracy. Whereas the narrative is imbued with the caste-varna and ethnic hierarchy, Gandhi saw it to be built upon the notion of equality and justice. When asked about whether *Ramarajya* is about the Hindus only, writing in *Young India* (September 19, 1929) he declared,

> "By Ramarajya, I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by Ramarajya, Divine Raj, the kingdom of god…Whether Rama of my imagination ever lived or not on this earth, the ancient ideal of Ramarajya is one of true democracy in which a meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure."

Gandhi's vision eludes the common-sense vision of the democracy that is antithetical to the divine monarchy. But the Gandhian archetype of king here is of a "political sanyasi", what Agehananda Bharti (1970) defines as, 'modern man who wears monastic robes' (278). While Bharti finds the model in Swami Vivekananda, one can also see a model already existing in the Ramayana epic. Rama is on *sanyas* (renunciation) but he is also participating in the political act. It invoked the idea of the Yogi and Sanyasi as the ruler, while obfuscating political agency and muddling caste-varna duties (both those of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya). His vision still resonates with the Hindu liberals' visions of leadership, that, in a way, also undermines the structure of democracy and the role of leadership in a democracy. Liberal scholars and Hindutva proponents alike constantly evoke this vision of leadership. A famous one was the former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's "warning" to Modi during the communal riots in Gujarat, to follow *Rajdharma* (kingly duty). But whose *Rajadharma*? The duty enshrined in the Indian constitution? The duty followed by Rama in *Ramrajya*? In this way, *Rajdharma* becomes the duty of the Kshatriya, i.e. the Varna duty.

Gandhi's *Ramrajya* was based on spiritual democracy and utopian vision, a state where 'the poor will be fully protected, everything will be done with justice and the voice of the people will always be respected.' It can be argued that he has interpreted *Ramrajya* to suit his own ever-shifting, rhetorical vision — more Gandhi and less Rama, hardly scriptural. However, the rhetorical assertion not only legitimises the *Ramayana*, but also gives a new lease of life to the epic narrative

at the height of communalism and the politics of representation. Although Gandhi innovated Rama beyond religious boundaries—as a name of God who can be Rahim or Allah, it can't but be Hindu. Even if we accept that Gandhi was critical of the right-wing position of the Hindutva, the criticism was highly reformist in its zeal. It can be read as an insiders' reformist critique of Hinduism "a critique from within". While Gandhi never associated himself with the violence of the epic, yet by legitimizing it he stood for the cultural hegemony encoded in the narrative. Hindutva ideologues Golwalkar and V.D. Savarkar tried to establish *Ramrajya* in a more concrete sense, on the body and map of the nation. Savarkar hailed *Ramayana* as an epic of the ancient Hindu race and tried to see it in relation to the sacred geography. For him, the *Ramayana* becomes a text of racial, ethnic and cultural unity. Savarkar wrote that 'the story of Ramayan and Mahabharat alone would bring us together and weld us into a race even if we be scattered to all the four winds like a handful of sand.' Time and again, Savarkar focused on the cultural and territorial integrity of the nation. He wrote:

> "The day when the Horse of Victory returned to Ayodhya unchallenged and unchallengeable, the great white Umbrella of Sovereignty was unfurled over that Imperial throne of Ramchandra the brave, Ramchandra the good, and a loving allegiance to him was sworn, not only by the Princes of Aryan blood but Hanuman, Sugriva, Bibhishana from the south - that day was the real birth-day of our Hindu people"— (1923: 43)

We see a culmination of Savarkar's vision with the demolition of Babri mosque and the founding of Rama temple in Ayodhya. But this is not the end of the vision as far as it is modelled on the imperialist juggernaut of conquest - unimpeded by obstacles of culture and geography.

One of the main leaders who led the Ramayana campaign from the front was none other than C. Rajagopalachari, a Tamil Brahmin, who was later a minister in the Congress cabinet. Paula Richman (1995) offers an insightful analysis of the debates on Rama between Rajagopalachari and the Dravidian leader Periyar. They had radically opposing views on the *Ramayana*, the idea of the nation and the meaning of citizenship. Rajagopalachari regarded the *Ramayana* as a national epic, a repository of the heritage of the Indian people and source of ideals for proper social and political behaviour. For him, 'the epic exemplified the principle that the ruler should be both a model of moral conduct and guardian of his subjects' well-being and culture (1995:635). Richman rightly points out how the two models were based on the "imagined communities" of two different kinds of visions, one based on the Brahminical ideology, others on the egalitarian vision of the Dravida Nadu. Rajagopalachari tried to interweave the idea of epic and nation together, often asserting the epic and often asserting the ideology of the national empire. He can be credited with building up the *Ramayana* into an ideological cultural project. In the case of Tamil Nadu, Richman provides a detailed account of how the cultural project with the active support of state institutions was consolidated under his leadership. The model was later replicated across regions.

Rajagopalachari foregrounded Ramayana as an act of religious service to the nation. For him the epic embodies the national character in all its aspects. 'Its origins lay in national memory' (Richman, 644). He argued how the epic brought people together as one people, despite caste, space and language that seemingly divide them. In his grand view of the *Ramayana*, the epic became the representative of "Indian-ness". Rajagopalachari used "nation" and "national" time and again to explain why he valued the epic.' (644). He advocated that the *Ramayana* should become the proper ideal for the behaviour of both rulers and citizens. He went on to perfect the epic hero and make him beyond crimes and sins. As Rama was the model of the nation, idealizing Rama can be read as absolving the nation of all its sins. For example, in his interpretation, Rajagopalachari deliberately omitted Sita's banishment and Bali's killing — an early prototype of the recent readings where violent acts are deliberately erased or ignored. His position implicates both the Congress and BJP's approach towards the nation. Rajagopalachari chastised Periyar in a high Brahminical tone for misunderstanding epic as history, 'arguing that the epic was not a historical narrative, but a work of art and moral teaching'**.** Since the epic entangles myth, history, faith and popular culture - one can conveniently switch modes of narrative and deflect criticisms, while the master narrative remains in place and does its work. So when one criticizes the ideal hero for mistreating his wife Sita, one can always give an example of some Adivasi and vernacular narratives in which Rama was criticized for this attitude. When one questions the historicity of Ayodhya, one can always argue it as being mythical. Continuing the Rajagopalachari tradition, the Dalit-Bahujan intellectual critiques of the epic are considered minor disputations, nitpickings or, worst of all, fundamental misunderstandings by Liberals.

Jyotirao Phule was perhaps the first modern Indian intellectual to question the ideals of Rama. He saw the epic figure as a symbol of oppression coming from the Aryan conquest (Omvedt, 2006: 62). Periyar and Ambedkar also scathingly 60riticized the narrative. Like Phule, Periyar saw Ramayana as an epic of Aryan cultural imperialism that glorifies Rama's heroism, Sita's suffering, and reinforces Brahminical male domination and subjugation of the female and a social model based on hierarchies. Pandian shows how Periyar engaged with Hinduism as a unified field of false beliefs (Pandian, 2007: 197). Manoharan (2019) also points out how Periyar saw religion as an institution of social power that privileges the Brahmins as an elite caste group to the detriment of equality and liberty of women and lower castes in the Hindu hierarchy. […] He believed that Hinduism was incapable of self-reform and that only its removal could once and for all eradicate casteism (Manoharan, 2019: 6). Ambedkar and Periyar's criticisms have been often ridiculed as fundamentalist, as overtly rationalist and scientific and for failing to understand the imaginative, literary and epic values of the *Ramayana*. However, their criticisms were not against any specific genres but against the embedded ideals. Characters in the epic are ideal archetypes of husband, wife, king, ruler and their actions have to be followed as mythical structure (as Rama did, so will Modi). From the aesthetic structure of the epics, *Ramayana* cannot hold its narrative together

unless Rama is not an ideal hero or king based on divine kingship. It would be like T.K. Tangarasu's *Ramayanam* in which he presented Rama as a drunkard and weakling, while Sita as a wanton woman and Surpanakha as a pitiful victim. Epics indeed provide ample avenues to reinterpret, provided the core archetypes and narrative backbone remain in place – else popular Hinduism will reject it. For example, Sita might bitterly berate her state but she has to ultimately accept her fate. Many newspapers of that time did not find it appropriate to review the *Ramayanam* of Tangarasu. Periyar's writings often ridicule Rama and stand with Ravana, to destroy the aura of the epic narrative. He argued that Ramraj was a pernicious Brahminic fiction designed to keep non-brahmins from challenging the status quo (Richman, 1995: 633).

Ambedkar did not find Rama's epic story worth engaging with. Like other Hindu texts, he saw it as a trap. Once one engages with it, one also validates its archetypal vision. His criticisms, unlike Gandhi's and Rajagopalachari's, came from the outside. He questioned the terms of deification of Rama. Questioning Gandhi's advice that we need to learn to love the way Rama loved Sita, Ambedkar pointed out that Sita preferred to die rather than return to Rama. For him, the ideals of Rama were created to defend the logic of *Chaturvarnya*. Ambedkar argued,

> "Some people seem to blame Rama because he… without reason killed Shambuka. But to blame Rama for killing Shambuka is to misunderstand the whole situation. Ram Raj was… based on Chaturvarnya. As a king, Rama was bound to maintain Chaturvarnya. It was his duty therefore to kill Shambuka, the Shudra, who had transgressed his class and wanted to be a Brahmin. (...) Not only penal sanction is necessary, but the penalty of death is necessary. That is why Rama did not inflict on Shambuka a lesser punishment."[7]

In several other instances, he emphasized how the Hindu religion propagates the wrong ideals and has a social life of the wrong kind. He stated that his quarrel is [not with the epic] but with its ideals. He referred to Buddhist and Jaina Ramayana and tried to show the contradictions. He criticizes the ideals and the archetypal imagination inscribed in the epic. He advocated for an ontological and epistemological exit from the Hindu cosmic order and Ramayana worldview. In the later phase, Periyar was almost moving in the same direction. Richman investigated why Periyar's early works engaged with the *Ramayana* and its concepts in such depth. He aimed to demythologize and discredit the epic and to break its moral and social influences (Richman, 1995: 634; Manoharan, 2019: 7). The criticisms offered by these Dalit-Bahujan intellectuals cannot be subsumed under the alternative interpretations of *Ramayana*. They rather advocated against the *Ramayana* narrative. It would be insensitive and unethical to place their views as simply being other interpretations of the *Ramayana*. They stood against the very ethos of the *Ramayana*.

**The hegemony of a narrative tradition**

A standard reading of the *Ramayana* offers the following three core themes: apotheosis of the nation ruled by an ideal king, Rama's personality and conduct as an example for its citizen-subjects and a utopian ideal of the perfect society as depicted by the end of the story (Richman, 2000: 6). How do we read a narrative tradition in a hegemonic cultural context of caste, gender, religion and ethnicity? A notion of tradition presupposes a given conception of the world but as scholars have shown the signification and interpretations of Ramayana have changed considerably over the years. Scholars have often uncritically assumed the acceptance of Ramayana among the subaltern communities as "universal" acceptance of the epic across caste, class, ethnicity, language and region. The epic is presented as a "secular" text without its hegemonic presence in a multi-cultural, multi-religious society. How can one ignore the fact that the popularity of the epic has a lot to do with the Ramayana project facilitated by the state institutions and political-cultural organizations and many other players including, but not limited to the RSS? Perhaps no other epic narrative has received the kind of support and attention as the *Ramayana* in post-independent India right from the Nehruvian era. One can take examples of the initiatives and the major projects taken by the cultural institutions like the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and other zonal centres even before the BJP came to power.[8] From state-sponsored festival to radio broadcast of Ramkatha, culminating in Ramanand Sagar's television serials. While Mehta writes about the appropriation of Hinduism by Hindutva, he does not talk about these. The power of the epic has displaced local deities and narratives and subsumed them under the one god and one narrative schema. Mehta also assumes the popularity of Rama as a uniform tradition cutting across caste, class and ethnicity. But historical context is crucial, 'for it is this history which shows how thought has been elaborated over the centuries and what a collective effort has gone into the creation of our present method of thought which has subsumed and absorbed all this past history, including all its follies and mistakes' (Gramsci, 1977: 329). While scholars have given enough attention to make the *Ramayana* as part of common cultural heritage, they have paid less attention to the cultural ideological implication of the epic narrative in relation to the contemporary emancipatory discourse of the marginalized communities. On the contrary, contemporary Dalit-Bahujan scholars often explain the power of Brahminical epic traditions as instruments for willful self-deception for subaltern communities (Ilaiah, 2004). They tend to simply dismiss other reasons for the increasing popularity of the epic among them. But as Gramsci has underlined that self-deception can be an adequate explanation for a few individuals, or groups of a certain size, but it is not adequate when the contrast occurs in the life of great masses (328). It means the communities have adopted a conception, which may not be their own from their own socio-historical position, yet it is more than self-deception, it is self-conception.

Drawing on Gramsci, Williams makes a distinction between ideology and hegemony. Ideology for him is a relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values and beliefs, of a kind that can be abstracted as a "worldview" or a "class outlook." On the other side, hegemony includes

culture and ideology. It is not only the articulate upper level of "ideology", nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as "manipulation" or "indoctrination". It is rather 'a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world' (Williams, 1977: 108-109). It can be argued that the Ramayana tradition includes both hegemony and ideology and brings culture and class interest together, and therefore it makes a perfect case of cultural hegemony. It is a culture that 'has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of the particular classes' (110). In a way, it bridges the gaps between philosophy and common sense. In other words, the Ramayana worldview becomes the representation of Indian culture. Some of the prominent ways include naming and changing the landscape of the region. Williams argued that,

> "There are two immediate advantages in this concept of hegemony. First, its forms of domination and subordination correspond much more closely to the normal processes of social organization and control in developed societies than the more familiar projections from the idea of a ruling class, which are usually based on much earlier and simpler historical phases." (1977: 110)

In the context of the MGR Phenomenon in Tamil Nadu, Pandian shows how dominant ideologies succeed in producing consent among the subaltern classes. I explicate the cultural hegemonies of *Ramayana* in various contexts, which get ignored in the name of its popularity, or passed off as commoners' "love" for Rama. In many Adivasi regions, the Sangh has altered the very conception of the Adivasi worldview after implanting it with the *Ramayana*. Shubh Mathur (2008) has shown how many RSS *pracharaks* (full-time cadre) had lived among the tribals for a long time, spoke several local languages, were great authorities on tribal customs, and had a rapport with them that she, as an anthropologist, could only envy. A *pracharak* spoke of the Adivasi with great sympathy: "*Hum ne toh unko vanvasi Ram ke roop mein dekha hai "* (We see them in the image of Rama exiled in the forest)" (132). Through relentless charitable development work by the pracharaks, and dissemination of Ramayana narrative through popular digital media (Whatsapp) and print media (calendars), these subaltern communities are deracinated from their own cultural practices and are taught to accept, and bask in, this great "Indian tradition".

Conservatives and progressive scholars alike assume universal acceptance of Rama as a personal god across caste-communities. But the caste-communities who actually claim Rama across regions are largely Kshatriyas and Brahmins — Maithili Brahmins of Bihar, Brahmins and Rajputs in Uttar Pradesh, Telugu Brahmins, and often, urban upper-caste and middle-class. In this context, certain aspects of upper-caste and middleclass cultures assume a universal category. Elsewhere, I have discussed how 'the grouping of Indian upper castes into the middle class during the colonial and

the nationalist period necessitated an urge for a national cultural identity from the upper caste perspective' (Prakash, 2019: 131).

Under the influence of the Arya Samaj and other reformist movements, some communities might have adopted certain naming, gestures and behaviour that may suggest their links with the Ramayana narrative. But in the actual socio-cultural practices of the communities, this epic's ideology does not have that kind of presence. So, while Valmiki communities might have taken their names from the Ramayana tradition to make certain kinds of claims, in their actual everyday lives neither Rama nor the ideology are that prevalent. The presence of routine ritual greetings like *Ram Ram ji* is not a guarantee that the communities worship Rama and believe in his ideals – it might be just cultural ossification. Yet, those naming and gestures become an entry point for the mobilization of these cultural spheres.

The encounter of the subaltern communities with Ramayana led to the subordination of their deities and culture in the service of Hinduism. The powerful women deities become a consort of some male Hindu deity or a *dasi*. Scholars like Blackburn (1986) and Sanjukta Gupta (2003) have shown how subaltern, ferocious deities get domesticated under the Hindu fold. Subaltern male deities usually end up becoming a younger brother or a devoted subordinate who will help Rama in his mission. In one of the Adivasi versions in Kerala, Hanuman insists to be seated at Rama's feet. Gond community members identify themselves with Lakshmana. It is Lakshmana who has to pass the *Agni-pariksha* again in front of Rama. We need to understand that the ancestral deities or village deities are not just a dispensable set of deities, they carry the agency and interior cosmos of the communities. Once a deity is subdued, the associated communities can be easily subdued in the national narrative. Many a times, the *Ramayana* does not completely replace other epics and narratives, it superimposing its ideals on them. Once this task is accomplished the communities may start enjoying their cultural enslavement. Subaltern communities also adopt practices and behaviour of the dominant communities to get some recognition in a society. The politics of recognition has also led to the new forms of incorporation and cultural hegemony. The success of the ideology lies in the fact that it appears to have explanatory value, and dominant religious legitimacy. At the same time, it offers political clout and street power to those who feel themselves alienated and deprived.

Scholars have often criticized right-wing organizations for conflating the figure of Rama with nationalism but they ignore the historicity that the modern phenomenon of Ramayana is an artefact of nationalism. The re-emergence of Ramayana as part of the nationalist movement has shaped it in new ways, in which Rama became the *Maryada Purushottam* (Righteousness Personified Supermale) for the nation. The Rama cult indeed has a long history and some of the communities still carry those old figurations of the Ramayana, however, even they do not remain immune to such modern cultural encounters. Both the epic and the nationalism have shaped and strengthened

each other, often drawing on each other's ideologies and cultural reservoirs. One of the most recent upsurges of the figure and the epic took place during the Mandal movement and neoliberal reconfiguration of the state. Mandal politics has challenged the social imageries of the nation and communities. It has challenged the unity based on religion and the nation. Social classes emerged as a new mode of differentiation and they changed the north Indian political configuration. Both the Congress and the BJP relied heavily on the "Mandir Politics" (Temple Politics) to break these new political configurations. More than anything else, the figure of Rama arrived as a saviour. The *Ramayana* was not only able to contain social anger, it successfully mobilized it for communal polarization.[9]

The social universe of the *Ramayana* narrative is based on hierarchies. Even a cursory reading of the text reveals inherent hierarchies and legitimization of the same. According to a dominant narrative, society in Ayodhya is based and ordered on the rules of caste. Rama killed Shambooka because he was performing ascetic acts which Vedic tradition reserves only to the twice-born castes. It was not surprising that Periyar asked, 'If there were kings like Rama now, what would be the fate of those people called Shudras?' Caste practices and subjugation are built into the very concept of dharma. What Ramayana preaches and reinforces is caste and gender hierarchies.

Married women in Bihar and especially in Maithili region (because of the Brahminical cultural domination) will often venerate Sita for ill fate and sufferings, and identify with her. Radhika Bordia recounts a song refrain which says 'May your husband not be like Lord Rama'. But this does not discredit Rama, it happens only to reinforce his power. A woman who will get a husband like Rama can be a sufferer but she also receives in return the moral credit to become Sita. Nabaneeta Dev Sen sees it as a problem of a man telling the story, therefore, she argued that when women retell the Ramayana, Rama comes across as a 'harsh, uncaring, and weak-willed husband.'[10] It is true that in women's retelling, women bring injustices, suffering, loneliness and sorrow, but not at the expense of tarnishing Rama's image. They rather take it as a matter of fate. Most of the "alternative narratives" reproduce the meek character of Sita who eulogizes motherhood and the larger patriarchal structure. One of the "alternative versions" I have heard in the Magahi language in Bihar states that if Rama can leave Sita, then who am I? But it does not mean that I should stop loving Rama. There has been a lot of scholarly romanticization of the regional and vernacular alternative interpretations. In most cases, women's songs and interpretations work as a trope to justify the everyday harshness faced by the women in their household. Rama's attitude for the greater cause is still celebrated. Of course, Rama should care for his imperial vision and not for his wife or children. Sita's desire always leads to tragedy and she should suffer it without complaining about it. In most of the cases, using Sita's stories, women justify their own subjugation and patriarchy, and promote fatalism.

The narrative has created a model of cultural appropriation. In his speech during the *Bhoomi poojan* ceremony in Ayodhya, Modi referred to the works done by Kevat, Shabari and Vanvasi brothers to bring about *Ramrajya*. The Sangh Parivar has used the story of Nishadraj to mobilize the Nishads – a consolidation of several sub-castes like the Bhind, Kevat, Mallah and Manjhi, all communities who have traditionally lived and earned their livelihoods from the rivers in Uttar Pradesh. According to some sources, the party was planning to build a hundred-foot statue depicting the *Milap* (union) of Nishad Raj and Ram at Shringerpur in Uttar Pradesh. Likewise, the Sangh has used Shabari story among the Adivasis, especially in the Dangs region of Gujarat, the policy later manifested in the participation of the Adivasi communities in Gujarat riots of 2002. By constructing a Shabari temple, they were able to bring the region under the Ramayana landscape.[11] Some of the interpretations that have been celebrated as part of the diversity of traditions has easily slipped into the cultural politics of the BJP. Once such cultural association is established, the region becomes a potential site for the BJP. I would not be surprised to see that what is now celebrated as Wayanada Ramayanam by the progressive and liberal scholars in Kerala can become the source for future mobilisations by the Sangh. To an extent, I will argue that the Sangh Parivar in future might very well use Ramanujan's and Richman's work to claim the popularity and diversity of *Ramayana*. This is an impending danger that liberal scholars are not yet ready to accept, but the patterns are visible in many regions of Jharkhand, Odisha, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. It is not just the liberal scholars but the Sangh, too, that is looking for many Ramayanas. The Sangh is constantly searching for the equivalence of Nishad Raj, Shabari and Hanuman to reach out to other communities to widen and consolidate its hold over them. The danger is that such interpretations always arrive with inherent hierarchies that suit the Sangh's political agenda. In the background of the Ramayanization of Indian society, one can bring Hedgewar's vision of the nation and culture. He said,

> "The merger of the Sangh and Indian society as a whole would be as complete as the mixing of sugar in milk and just as the milk when stirred displays the characteristic of sugar, Indian society as a whole would start exhibiting the traits of the Sangh." (Ambedkar, 2019: 1)

What I am indicating is not that far into the future. Modi, in a recent speech, has referred to the Ramayana traditions of Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Williams writes, 'any hegemonic process must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition which question or threaten its dominance. The reality of cultural process must then always include the efforts and contributions of those who are in one way or another outside or at the edge of the terms of the specific hegemony' (1977: 113). In the background of the Dalit, Adivasi and Mandal politics, *Ramayana* has played an important role in strengthening that cultural process with the specific hegemony. What is fanning right-wing beliefs is not only the manifest Hindutva ideology but also the moral ideologies of the epic: the ideology of ideal son, ideal servants, ideal wife, ideal family

and the ideal nation, along with the idealized and aestheticized notion of violence. While these appropriations and homogenizations can be seen as "internal colonization", the epic also produces a driving ideology of this imperialist vision. It can be argued that both these processes were never altogether separate.

## The Epic and its Imperialist Repertoire

*How to Read Donald Duck* (1975) is a book-length essay by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattlelart that criticizes Disney comics for their imperialist repertoire.[12] Written by exiled authors, this book shows how imperialist ideology operates in the most "innocent" and "lovely" ways. Focusing on the mice and duck of Disney, the book exposed how these characters establish hegemonic ideas about imperialism, race, gender, family and foreign others. Ramayana's presence in popular mediatized culture can be in seen in parallel with the works of Disney cartoons. It is said about Alexander that when he invaded India he used to carry with him a copy of the *Iliad*, the Greek epic written by Homer. He used to keep it under his pillow along with his dagger. Epic and dagger went hand in hand in his march for the empire. According to David Quint (1993), the event marks the case when the epic provided the imagination for the empire. In our present times, the love for Rama cannot be separated from the love for the nation and empire. Therefore, it is not surprising that the intellectuals and activists who were against the ideology of the nation also stood against the idealization of the epic. Their attacks on the epic can be seen as an attack on the ideology of the nation inscribed in the Brahminical body-politic. Quint (1993) points out that the epic grandly illustrates the axiom that history belongs to the winners. It is constituted in the imperialist conquest of geographical space—the imposition of single identical order upon different regions and peoples—to become cogs in the process of history-making. In the so-called alternative interpretations, are there stories where Ravana defeated Rama? I have not come across any such radical upendings of the narrative. *Ramayana* becomes and remains the founding myth of the Indian nation and its imperial vision. In case of *Aeneid*, Quint argues that how the victors in the epic 'project their power prophetically into the future and trace its legitimating origin back into the past' (1993: 45). Like Virgil, various interpretations of Ramayanas produce a powerful narrative of the nation and empire, producing and reproducing the political demands of the hyper-nationalist project.

Hiltebeitel (1998) suggests that scholars of India's epic should ask how and why Indian epics deploy tropes of empire and resistance to them. What is the relationship between empires, invasion and the production of Indian epics? He also asks us to consider the role of epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in the construction of Hinduism. He gives an example of the performance of *Rajasuya* sacrifice for empire expansion. We find ample references of *samrat* (emperor) and *samrajya* (empire) in the *Mahabharata*. What Hiltebeitel argues that the 'issues of empire and invasion thus run through the epic themselves' (1998: 390). For many scholars and critics, the *Ramayana* is an innocent pastoral narrative and therefore it can only be analyzed for its poetic and

literary values. The attack on Sri Lanka, burning of king Ravana's palace and killing of Surpanakha become spectacular, righteous acts or collateral damages to a just, imperial project. The figure of Rama and the significance of the epic have been discussed widely, however, the focus has been rarely on the ideology of the colonization embedded in the narrative. While Hindutva scholars approve the expansionist ideology of the narrative, the liberal Hindu scholars still try to present it as an idealist narrative which should not be politicized. They do not see problems in the ideology of the epic. Their problems lie in the interpretations of Rama and Hanuman as aggressive deities. As far as Rama and Hanuman perform the killing and sacrifice in "innocent" and "benevolent" ways, it seems they do not find any problems with the epic. They do not see the problems in the ideology of the epic itself that reproduced the cultural hegemony and the ideology of the empire. Some of the visible constructions in the *Ramayana* are the ideology of dominance, invasion, control and subordination. The epic already offers an archetype of the nation-empire. It justifies its acts through the series of invasions and controls. This structure of the feelings embedded in the epic could be one of the reasons that unlike the *Mahabharata* or other epics, it has become part of the nationalist project.

A basic formalist analysis of some of the dominant interpretations of the Ramayana reveals the inherent imperialist tendencies embedded in it. Out of the seven *kands* (episodes), the narratives of six are largely about encounters with the "foreign" others and dominance over them. Most of the time, Rama is outside of his territory. His juggernaut is everywhere, from Sri Lanka to Kailasha. In other words, except *Ayodhyakand* (Episode 2, set in Ayodhya), all other episodes narrate Rama's conquest and domination of "foreign" others, more often in a very geographic and territorial sense. It begins with the *Balkand* (Episode 1: Childhood) in which Rama and Lakshmana assist his Guru Viswamitra in killing Taraka and Subahu, two *rakshasas* (demons) who were creating obstacles in their Vedic sacrifice. The narrative venerates the consecration of the forest land by conquest and domination. In this regard, Sanjay Palshikar (2014) has argued that 'the figures of the *asuras* and *rakshasas* were not new. What was new was the way these figures were used in modern India. If earlier they were understood to be mythological figures, they were now seen to have a presence in our midst – in the past as well as in the present.'[13]

Valmiki's *Ramayana* makes it clear that while the Rama kingdom was organised based on *varna-dharma* order, the *rakshasa* territory, by contrast, had no boundaries. They would lack the authority of a state, hierarchy of status and its society is not ordered according to caste (Thapar, 1989). By bringing the *rakshasas'* land under dominance, Rama established *varna-dharma* system of hierarchies in that specific territory. It seems that Rama's journey is about establishing the rule of Hindu *dharma* based on Brahminical tenets. The epic advocates the authority of the imperial state and its divine rights to rule. In a cultural archetypal configuration, one can read the forest land as a territory of *rakshasas*, the land of Taraka. But the epic not only celebrates the killing of

Taraka, but also the "righteousness" of Rama to bring order in the forest. *Ramayana,* when part of the nationalistic ideology, can justify such attacks on the ethnic communities to maintain nationalistic order. It builds up a narrative in which others can be sacrificed for the sacred purpose. In the popular imagination of the Hindus of north India, Bastar remains Dandakaranya, a forest land that has to be controlled. That imagination has played an important role in the attacks on Adivasi communities in the Bastar region to the present day. Adivasis were blamed for creating an obstacle in the development which has assumed a notion of sacredness. We are not analysing the epic for its historical facts but for the values it sets and how it provides an archetype of both physical and epistemological violence. National and imperial epics open into a global civilizing mission. (Hiltebeitel, 1998: 407). The epic is hardly about an innocent hero's adventure in another land. It is about ethnic cleansing, about political sanitizing, and about assimilating them not as equals but as subordinates.

*Aranyakand* (Episode 3: The Forest) describes the killing of Bali of Kishkindha by Rama, followed by the crowning of Sugriva who will assist Rama in his war with his armies. *Sundarkand* (Episode 5: Hanuman the Beauteous) depicts golden Lanka and Hanuman's adventure in it. How would one have read this narrative if it would have come from the colonial context? *Yuddhakand / Lankakand* (Episode 6: War at Lanka) does not need any further explanation to indicate that it is about war and conquest. Ramayana recognizes Sri Lanka as *Rakshasa* country, but Rama enlists Vibhishana by appealing to the latter's sense of religious duty. It is akin to the imperialism of the US which thinks it has the right to attack other nations and territories and establish puppet governments there. The killing of Ravana and the burning of golden Lanka is celebrated. Likewise, *Uttarkanda* (Episode 7: The Aftermath) is replete with the prototypes of annexation. It is about *Ramrajya* in which *varnadharma* was followed and *Ashvamedh* and *Rajsuya Yagna* were conducted, with the rightful successor appointed.

Jawhar Sircar writes that 'no other epic or religious text in the world has played such an indubitably assimilative role and linked so many scattered geographies by pegging them to its episodes.' He sees this assimilating politics as part of the "unity in diversity" of *Ramayana*. But one can see it as part of the problem. The unifying role of Ramayana has reached to such a perilous level that it has acquired the ideology of nationalism. When Sircar discusses the historic unifying roles of an epic then he, like many other scholars, tends to undermine the hegemonic presence and accommodating ideology of the epic. When Alexander was facing the challenge to unite the independent cities of ancient Greece, he first tried to bring them in the part of his empire through martial campaigns. But later he realised that he needed a more effective way. He associated 'his public persona with that of godlike Achilles', the central hero of Homer's Iliad and he managed to garner the consent to rule those independent cities (Carchedi, 2013: 2). There has not been a proper analysis of how

much the *Ramayana* has helped in forging the spirit of the Indian nation. In this section, I would like to explicate the ideology and culture embedded in the epic.

The Ramayana has been one of the major sources of xenophobia against for Adivasis and Muslim communities. These communities become "others". [14] One can read the conceptual deployment of "others" in orientalist construction as wild beasts, sexually perverse and full of uncontrolled energy. This has been one of the major prototypes of the "other" figures in Ramayana. Surpanakha was full of uncontrolled sexual energy. It reminds us about the murder of Adivasi girls in the "Operation Green Hunt" in which their lifeless bodies were carried like beasts'. The epic propels the popular cultural psychology of violence. It does not make any sense to debate whether *rakshasas* in Ramayana were Dravidians or Adivasi or merely epic figures, the archetypal imagination is what endures and reproduces itself. It fuels and legitimises the popular imagination that Adivasis are still *jangali* (wild and beastly). The *Ramayana* broadly presents two kinds of encounters with the others: of subordinates and the enemy. Others have to be either subordinated, controlled or killed. While I have discussed the subordination of others, we can discuss here the control of others who usually remain outside of family and kinship ties. The epic presents the family as the nation or the nation as an extension of the family. Blood relationship and kinship have remained strong in the imagination of *Ramayana*. Besides family members in Ayodhya, sages are the only figures with whom Ram has "equal" and "respectable" relationships. Interestingly, the epic brings nation and Brahminism together since the defense of Hindu dharma is what defines the nation and the defence of the nation is about the duty of the Hindus. *Ramayana* builds the logic of caste, empire and kinship at the centre. In a way, it is the universe of the feudal family world which has extended its reach to the nation. Though the folk epics humanise Rama, however, the contradictions are so strong that it often seems that they only work towards consolidating the emotive landscape of the nation and empire.

At the height of imperialism in 1804, the British cartographer named the bridge between Sri Lanka and India as "Adam's bridge". He explained that the bridge was described in the Bible. During the nationalist period, the Indian nationalists started calling it as *Ramsetu* (bridge of Rama). They connected the actual physical and geographical feature to the episode of *Ramayana* in which Rama's armies raided Sri Lanka, after constructing a bridge of stones to it, and burnt down Ravana's kingdom. The Sanskrit epics are thus translated to serve not only the national aspirations of Indians, but also to serve those of the British empire in understanding those aspirations (Hiltebeitel). The example shows the shifting power of the empire and its significance on the landscape. *Ramayana* gives a concrete shape of the nation in its physical unity and geographical imagination. The geography becomes the site of an aspirational empire. The "country" is said to spread out between the Himalayas and the sea. Its core is made of Aryavarta, the land of the Aryas, enclosing in itself the section of the territory that is found between the Himalayas and Vindhya

mountains. The Aryas are the twice-born, that is to say, the members of three superior social orders: Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. Hence the caste system in a way defines the territory (Jaffrelot, 2004: 207). There has been an attempt to find real geography and spaces of domination. The attempt is to tie Ramayana to a specific national history, to the idea of world domination, to a monarchical system and to a particular dynasty. In a way, *Ramayana* becomes the history of the nation. The recent showcasing of Rama at the Times Square in New York and seeing the epic in close association with the current regime can be read in this direction.[15] Similarly, there has been an attempt to create a "Ramayana garden". Like Quint (1993) has shown in the context of *Aeneid*, this attempt is to tie the *Ramayana* to a specific national history, to the idea of world domination, to a monarchical system, and to a particular dynasty can be easily traced. This process happens in two ways: Firstly, the epic is tied to a specific history, communities and geographies. Secondly, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* themselves provide the landscape on which history makes its movements. Scholars from other south Asian regions have argued at length about the case of India being an empire and its colonial practices in south Asia. Yubraj Aryal (2017) has argued that how the *Bharatiya* ideology remains at the heart of the repressive empire. What India is doing in Kashmir cannot be seen outside of Ramayana ideology of the nation and empire. Rama travels from Sri Lanka in the south to the Himalayas in the north. He kills, he burns, he enacts the rule of the "law", he uproots and replaces kings. It is in this context, Savarkar sees in Ramayana the aspiring vision of the empire. He argued,

> "At last, the great mission which the Sindhus had undertaken of founding a nation and a country, found and reached its geographical limit when the valorous Prince of Ayodhya made a triumphant entry in Ceylon and brought the whole land from the Himalayas to the Seas under one sovereign sway." (1923: 69).

*Ramayana* presents a case of divine imperialism; Rama has a divine right to rule the other territory. He can attack the other territory to establish the rule of law. On these principles, the epic canonizes certain kinds of ideals such as sheer aestheticization of killing and warfare. It is as Quint would say, 'the spectacle of concentrated power produces the heroic awe'. The affective awe comes after the act of burning Sri Lanka, the killing of Ravana and the act of humiliation of Surpanakha. The episode of *Ramayana* can be read as an imperial invasion in relation to our contemporary politics. It provides a blueprint for a nation empire to attack if there is a sense of misgovernance. Though *Ramayana* is not a very popular tradition in Sri Lanka, some of the Sinhalese ancient texts refer to Ravana as a great king. We are not sure if such a battle between Rama and Ravana had happened in history, however, by showing Ravana defeated in popular representation, cultural imperialism fulfils its aim of showing itself in a superior light The *Ramayana's* pressure is so intense that there has been an attempt to revive Ravana as a grand narrative even in Sri Lanka. This also shows how the South Asian tradition of the epic puts Sri Lanka in a negative light and extols the virtues of

Indian imperialism. It is not surprising that the ultra-nationalistic movement in Sri Lanka has been trying to oppose this epic imagination and sees Rama as an invader.[16]

The epic maintains racial division and rarely allows for any crossovers. While many low-caste communities claim descent from the *Ramayana*, it is rarely from the supposedly superior ethnicity of Rama, but rather from Lakshman, Hanuman and Bharat. In one of the interpretations, Rama killed Sugriva saying that *dharma* did not apply to beasts. This again reinforces the same ethnic ideology. The epic, to an extent, propagates ethnic cleansing. *Ramayana* creates a perpetual crisis based on the foreign ethnic body. It is the foreign enemy that holds the attention of the epic. This is also one of the prototypes in which the epic goes along with the ideology of nation and empire. This has been imagined as the Muslim otherness triggered by the Babri Mosque matter. As per this imagination, Muslims are foreign invaders compromising the sacred integrity of the "pure" and ancient Indian nation. Jaffrelot has underlined how in the ethnicization of the nation, there has been a shift from Indian territory to *Hindu Bhoomi*, from linguistic provinces to the uniform nation. Unlike *Mahabharata*, Rama was always invading in the forest and other territories, and not the other way round. It can be argued that there is a structure of feeling encoded in colonialism and imperialism that works here, making the epic fit for the imperialist vision.

**Conclusion**

Epic as a genre brings together politics and ideology in more obvious ways than do other artistic genres. Epic works as a bearer of a strong sense of morality and recognition. Epic being related to nationalism is not unique to Indian history and culture. In this essay, my focus has been on the dominant interpretations of the epic and its larger canvas in relation to cultural hegemony and cultural imperialism. In dominant scholarly interpretations, the epic is presented as a matter of people's faith. But it has be to be underlined that we are not discussing the figure of Rama or *Ramayana* in the medieval period or in the pre-modern period. I have tried to examine the meaning of its narrative in our present political context – about the "past in the present", against the backdrop of triumphant Hindutva politics and nationalism.

The foundation stone laying ceremony of the Ram temple in Ayodhya has been pointed out by many as the culmination of Hedgewar and Savarkar's vision of the Hindu nation. There has been an attempt to make a distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva. While the Liberal Hindu scholars remain critical of the right-wing appropriation of Ramayana, their love for Rama remains intact, in other words, an insider critique. As Paula Richman states the manner of questioning Rama's story has played a generative role in sustaining the Ramayana traditions over centuries, across regions and among different communities.

This article recognizes the complexities of the epic and the aesthetics of its literary composition, but it remains critical of refusing to read it as a text of cultural hegemony. My attempt here is to show how the creative energies and imaginative practices of the epic can be mobilized for achieving political aims at the popular level. One is not suggesting that cultural exchange and cross-cultural fertilization should not happen between the grand epic and the epic traditions of subaltern communities. However, this is not an innocent cultural process that one should take for granted. The grand epic tends to colonize, accommodate and negotiate with local cultures on its terms. Many of the Ramayanas have been cultural appropriations of the local epics and stories in recent times. Many times, under the pressure of the popular epic, local communities have tried to identify themselves with it. In this case, we need to see the position of the community vis-à-vis the main protagonist. The flexible nature of the epics can incorporate various regional narratives, sometimes through assimilation, sometimes through collaboration, and sometimes by subordinating the power of local heroes and deities. The figure of Rama becomes the figure of the authority who negotiate with others, from his own powerful position. In certain versions, he can ask Sita to face an ordeal by fire, in another version, he can ask Lakshman to face it. His divinity might be momentarily challenged, but is soon re-established. *Ramayana* is about the naming and encoding of specific values in a cosmos and on the landscape; it is about the conception of the world in which the ideals of Rama reign supreme. Once Rama is established, other deities become subservient. With the deploying of these narrative energies, there is a greater chance that people may be made amenable to participate in communal riots. We can take an example of the much-hyped *Wayanad Ramayana* of the Adiya communities, considered to be the *Ramayana* of Adivasis. The local account says that until the 1950s, temples and other sacred spaces where *Ramayana* recitations took place, were closed to all but the high upper castes. Adiyas would hear the recitation of Ramayana at a distance from the homes of the upper caste landlords. While Rama, Sita or Hanuman is not yet the head of the divine hierarchy for the Adiyas, and the local deities remain significant for them, but as it has happened with many other communities, Rama and the narrative may eventually take over their entire landscape.

**Endnotes**

1. Ramanujan, Attipate Krishnaswami. "2. Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation." In *Many Rāmāyaṇas*, pp. 22-49. University of California Press, 1991.
2. https://www.narendramodi.in/ram-belongs-to-everyone-says-prime-minister-narendra-modi-550818, accessed on December 1, 2021
3. In 1993, the Allahabad High Court delivered a detailed judgement on allowing prayers and

*darshan* at the makeshift temple of Lord Rama in AyodhyaThe High Court (Lucknow bench) judges, Mr. N. H. Tilhari and Mr. A. N. Gupta, opined that "an image or an illustration is as valid a source of meaning and interpretation as a text. They drew strength from the fact that the original constitution also includes the sketches of such Hindu Gods as Rama, Shiva and Krishna, drawn by the well-known artist Nandalal Bose. They noted that portraits of Akbar, Shivaji, Gobind Singh and Gandhi are also to be found in the original constitution adopted by the Constituent Assembly on November 26, 1949. By virtue of the sketch of Lord Rama in the original Constitution, adopted about 43 years previously, the learned judges argued that Rama became a "constitutional entity and admittedly, a reality of our national culture and not a myth..."Sharma, Arvind (ed.), Hinduism and Secularism: After Ayodhya, Hampshire, New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 129–30.

4. On the 5th August 2019, the nation superseded the special constitutional status provided to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. On the 5th August 2020, it consecrated a national temple dedicated to Lord Rama, the epic hero of the *Ramayana*.
5. https://thewire.in/politics/congress-ram-temple-priyanka-gandhi-vadra, accessed on October 29, 2021.
6. Mehta, Pratap Bhanu, "Ayodhya's Ram temple is first real colonisation of Hinduism by political power." Indian Express. 5 August 2020.
7. https://theprint.in/opinion/ram-rajya-ayodhya-bhoomi-pujan-temple-gandhi-modi-ambedkar/475024/, accessed on January 5, 2022
8. Ramakatha project, Living Traditions of Ramayana and Mahabharata and various other projects have been facilitated by the state cultural institutions. Check for the details here: https://ignca.gov.in/divisionss/janapada-sampada/loka-parampara/living-traditions-of-ramayana-and-mahabharata/, accessed on September 2, 2021
9. The calendars of Rama and the episodes of Ramayana were widely circulated. The production of Ramayana literature has seen a sudden rise after 1980's and 90's in the backdrop of the Mandal movement. It has increased exponentially with the rise of right-wing nationalism, via graphic novels, "feminist" works, poetry and novels.
10. Sen, Nabaneeta Dev (1998). Lady Sings the Blues when Women Retell the Ramayana. Urdhva Mula, 7.
11. One can argue that these incorporations could so easily be part of the ideological project if the narrative of the epic was not so amenable to it. There are extensive studies to show that to become part of the mainstream ideology, marginalized communities often participate in such acts.
12. Published in 1971 in Spanish, the book was censored and condemned in many parts of the world.

13. Palshikar, Sanjay, “Modesty and Humility in the Times of Crisis.” Seminar 662, October 2014.
14. Wilhelm Halbfass (1990) has traced the traditional Indian xenology in which these communities were marked as ascribed with different names.
15. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/lord-rams-image-displayed-at-times-square-to-celebrate-ram-temple-bhoomi-poojan-in-ayodhya/article32283319.ece, accessed November 5, 2021

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