

APPROPRIATING THE RAMAYANA: A CRITICAL READING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY POLITICAL DISCOURSES

*Thesis submitted to the University of Calicut
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Doctor of Philosophy in English Language and Literature

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DECLARATION

I, **Sajeev. P.**, hereby declare that this thesis titled, “**Appropriating the Ramayana: A Critical Reading of the Twentieth Century Political Discourses,**” is an authentic record of the research work carried out by me under the supervision of Dr. Rajani B., Associate Professor and Principal, The Zamorin’s Guruvayurappan College, Kozhikode, and it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Appropriating the Ramayana: A Critical Reading of the Twentieth Century Political Discourses,**” submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Language & Literature, is a bona fide record of the studies and research carried out by **Sajeev. P.** under my supervision and this research work has not previously formed the basis of an award for any degree, diploma, fellowship, or any other similar titles or recognition.

Place : Kozhikode
Date : 12-12-2024

Dr. Rajani B.

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Abstract

The Ramayana has significantly influenced Indian politics in the twentieth century. Going beyond the level of a mythical story, the Ramayana became an influential force in reshaping the country's culture and politics. This Ph.D thesis titled “**Appropriating the Ramayana: A Critical Reading of the Twentieth Century Political Discourses**” explores how the Ramayana was politically appropriated in twentieth-century India. The Ramayana, originally evolved from a myth and was spread by travelling bards, was transformed into a revered text and eventually used as a tool for political influence.

Contrary to the idea that Valmiki's *Ramayana* is the only valid version, this research advocates recognising the legitimacy of different renditions found across India. The main goal is to uncover how the Ramayana was used politically in the twentieth century. The study examines the roles of renowned political leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Periyar E.V. Ramasami and organisations of hindutva ideology in shaping this political discourse.

Gandhi used the Ramayana to mobilise Hindus for India's freedom, while Periyar criticised the Ramayana as it reinforced caste hierarchies. Hindutva ideology's political use led to communal tensions, the Ayodhya dispute and efforts to make India a *Hindurashtra*. This research uses a comprehensive approach, analysing speeches, interviews and documents to understand the Ramayana's political journey. It combines perspectives from history and sociology to offer a complete picture. In conclusion, the study finds that hindutva forces strategically used nationalism by appropriating the Ramayana.

Unlike inclusive nationalism during the nation's independence, hindutva framed it as Hindu consciousness. Through the strategic use of the Ramayana to promote exclusive Hindu nationalism, hindutva groups accomplished political objectives such as the construction of a new Rama Temple in Ayodhya. Portraying Rama as a national hero, they endorse hindutva's vision for the nation establishing influence among the majority Hindu population. Hindutva utilises the nation's culture as a backdrop to wield nationalism as a weapon, creating cultural nationalism, which divides people along ethnic lines and threatens national harmony.

This Hindu nationalism proclaimed in hindutva's fundamental texts, poses a significant danger. Mere secular and democratic principles are insufficient to combat this peril. Given hindutva's fascist nature and its manipulation of culture, resistance must also engage with cultural narratives. Political discourse should shift from mere nationalism to encompass culture, acknowledging ancient India's inclusive and diverse cultural heritage. Thus, when nationalism becomes a menace, resolution involves utilising the cultural foundation of the nation.

പ്രബന്ധ സംഗ്രഹം

ഇരുപതാം നൂറ്റാണ്ടിൽ രാമായണം ഇന്ത്യൻ രാഷ്ട്രീയത്തെ വളരെയധികം സ്വാധീനിച്ചിട്ടുണ്ട്. ഒരു പുരാണ കഥയുടെ തലത്തിനപ്പുറം സഞ്ചരിച്ച് രാജ്യത്തിന്റെ സംസ്കാരത്തെയും രാഷ്ട്രീയത്തെയും പുനർനിർമ്മിക്കുന്നതിൽ സ്വാധീന ശക്തിയായി രാമായണം മാറി. **"രാമായണത്തെ അധീനപ്പെടുത്തൽ: ഇരുപതാം നൂറ്റാണ്ടിലെ രാഷ്ട്രീയ വ്യവഹാരങ്ങളുടെ ഒരു വിമർശനാത്മക വായന"** എന്ന ഈ പിഎച്ച്.ഡി. പ്രബന്ധം ഇരുപതാം നൂറ്റാണ്ടിൽ ഇന്ത്യയിൽ രാമായണം എങ്ങനെ രാഷ്ട്രീയപരമായി അധീനമാക്കപ്പെട്ടുവെന്ന് പര്യവേക്ഷണം ചെയ്യുന്നു. യഥാർത്ഥത്തിൽ, നാടോടി കവികളാൽ പ്രചരിപ്പിക്കപ്പെട്ട രാമകഥ കാലക്രമേണ ഒരു ആരാധന ഗ്രന്ഥമായി രൂപാന്തരപ്പെടുകയും ഒടുവിൽ രാഷ്ട്രീയ സ്വാധീനത്തിനുള്ള ഉപകരണമായി ഉപയോഗിക്കപ്പെടുകയും ചെയ്തു.

വാൽമീകിയുടെ രാമായണം മാത്രമാണ് സാധുതയുള്ള പതിപ്പ് എന്ന ആശയത്തിന് വിരുദ്ധമായി ഈ ഗവേഷണം ഇന്ത്യയിലുടനീളം കാണപ്പെടുന്ന വ്യത്യസ്ത രാമായണാവ്യായങ്ങളുടെ നിയമസാധുതയെ അംഗീകരിക്കുന്നു. ഇരുപതാം നൂറ്റാണ്ടിൽ രാമായണത്തെ എങ്ങനെ രാഷ്ട്രീയമായി ഉപയോഗിച്ചുവെന്ന് കണ്ടെത്തുകയാണ് പ്രധാന ലക്ഷ്യം. ഈ രാഷ്ട്രീയ വ്യവഹാരം രൂപപ്പെടുത്തുന്നതിൽ മഹാത്മാഗാന്ധി, പെരിയാർ ഇ.വി. രാമസാമി തുടങ്ങിയ വിഖ്യാത രാഷ്ട്രീയ നേതാക്കളുടെയും കൂടാതെ ഹിന്ദുത്വ പ്രത്യയശാസ്ത്ര സംഘടനകളുടെയും പങ്ക് ഈ പഠനം പരിശോധിക്കുന്നു.

ഇന്ത്യയുടെ സ്വാതന്ത്ര്യത്തിനായി ഹിന്ദുക്കളെ അണിനിരത്താൻ ഗാന്ധി രാമായണത്തെ ഉപയോഗിച്ചു. അതേസമയം രാമായണം ജാതി ശ്രേണിയെ ശക്തിപ്പെടുത്തുന്നതായി പെരിയാർ വിമർശിച്ചു. ഹിന്ദുത്വ പ്രത്യയശാസ്ത്രത്തിന്റെ രാമായണ വിനിയോഗം വർഗ്ഗീയ സംഘർഷങ്ങളിലേക്കും അയോധ്യ തർക്കത്തിലേക്കും ഇന്ത്യയെ ഒരു ഹിന്ദു രാഷ്ട്രമാക്കാനുള്ള ശ്രമങ്ങളിലേക്കും നയിച്ചു. രാമായണത്തിന്റെ രാഷ്ട്രീയ യാത്ര മനസ്സിലാക്കാൻ വ്യവഹാരങ്ങളും പ്രസംഗങ്ങളും അഭിമുഖങ്ങളും രേഖകളും വിശകലനം ചെയ്ത് സമഗ്രമായ സമീപനമാണ് ഈ ഗവേഷണം ഉപയോഗിക്കുന്നത്. ചരിത്രം, സാമൂഹ്യശാസ്ത്രം എന്നീ പഠനമേഖലകളിലെ വിവിധ വീക്ഷണങ്ങളെ സമന്വയിപ്പിച്ച് ഈ പഠനം പൂർണ്ണമായ ഒരു ചിത്രം നൽകുന്നു.

ഉപസംഹാരമായി, രാമായണം കൈക്കലാക്കി ഹിന്ദുത്വ ശക്തികൾ ദേശീയതയെ തന്ത്രപരമായി ഉപയോഗിച്ചുവെന്ന് പഠനം കണ്ടെത്തി. രാജ്യത്തിന്റെ സ്വാതന്ത്ര്യസമര കാലത്ത് ഉണ്ടായിരുന്ന എല്ലാവരെയും ഉൾക്കൊള്ളുന്ന ദേശീയതയിൽ നിന്ന് വ്യത്യസ്തമായി ഹിന്ദുത്വ ശക്തികൾ ഇന്ത്യൻ ദേശീയതയെ ഹിന്ദു ബോധമായി രൂപപ്പെടുത്തി. ഹിന്ദു ദേശീയതയെ പ്രോത്സാഹിപ്പിക്കുന്നതിന് രാമായണത്തിന്റെ തന്ത്രപരമായ കയ്യടക്കലുകളിലൂടെ ഹിന്ദുത്വ സംഘങ്ങൾ അയോധ്യയിൽ ഒരു പുതിയ രാമക്ഷേത്രം നിർമ്മിക്കുന്നത് പോലുള്ള രാഷ്ട്രീയ ലക്ഷ്യങ്ങൾ പൂർത്തിയാക്കി. ഇവർ രാമനെ ഒരു ദേശീയ നായകനായി ചിത്രീകരിച്ച്, ഭൂരിപക്ഷ ഹിന്ദു ജനവിഭാഗങ്ങൾക്കിടയിൽ സ്വാധീനം ഉണ്ടാക്കി ഒരു ഹിന്ദു രാഷ്ട്രത്തിനായുള്ള നീക്കം നടത്തുന്നു. ദേശീയതയെ ആയുധമായി ഉപയോഗിക്കുന്നതിനുള്ള പശ്ചാത്തലമായി സാംസ്കാരിക ദേശീയത എന്ന പേരിൽ ഹിന്ദുത്വ ദേശീയ സംസ്കാരത്തെ ഉപയോഗപ്പെടുത്തുന്നു. ഇത് ജനങ്ങളെ വംശീയമായി വിഭജിക്കുകയും ദേശീയ സൗഹാർദ്ദത്തിന് ഭീഷണിയാകുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നു.

ഹിന്ദുത്വത്തിന്റെ മൗലിക ഗ്രന്ഥങ്ങളിൽ പ്രഖ്യാപിക്കപ്പെട്ട ഈ ഹിന്ദു ദേശീയത ഒരു വലിയ അപകടമാണ് ഉയർത്തുന്നത്. ഈ വിപത്തിനെ ചെറുക്കാൻ മതേതര, ജനാധിപത്യ തത്വങ്ങൾ മാത്രം പോര. ഹിന്ദുത്വത്തിന്റെ ഫാസിസ്റ്റ് സ്വഭാവവും സംസ്കാരത്തിലെ കൃത്രിമത്വവും കണക്കിലെടുക്കുമ്പോൾ, പ്രതിരോധം സാംസ്കാരിക വിവരണങ്ങളുമായി കൂടിച്ചേരേണ്ടതുണ്ട്. രാഷ്ട്രീയ വ്യവഹാരങ്ങൾ കേവലം ദേശീയതയിൽ നിന്ന് മാറണം. പുരാതന ഇന്ത്യയുടെ സമഗ്രവും വൈവിധ്യപൂർണ്ണവുമായ സാംസ്കാരിക പൈതൃകത്തെ തിരിച്ചറിഞ്ഞുകൊണ്ട് സംസ്കാരത്തെ ഉൾക്കൊള്ളണം. അങ്ങനെ, ദേശീയത ഒരു വിപത്തായി മാറുമ്പോൾ, രാജ്യത്തിന്റെ സാംസ്കാരിക അടിത്തറ ഉപയോഗപ്പെടുത്തി അതിന് പരിഹാരം കാണണം.

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Introduction

The Ramayana has been an object of discussions and debates for decades, as the text is widely acclaimed for its contemporary relevance. Being a poem that recounts the tale of a benevolent king, Rama, who later was worshipped as a Hindu deity, the Ramayana has attained the status of a sacred text. Both as a deity and a valorous king, Rama is familiar to all. The tale of Rama has touched people from all walks of life since time immemorial.

Primarily, the stories of Rama were ballads of mythical origin. These Rama-ballads, propagated by the travelling bards of the time, were later elevated to the status of an epic poem in the genre of a folk epic. Children are acquainted with this story either from their grandparents or through children's books, whereas others know it either through religious tradition or literature. The poem is generally called the Ramayana since an ancient poet named Valmiki compiled Rama stories under the title the *Ramayana*. Nevertheless, the story has continued to charm us in diverse forms and in numerous titles for millennia. A sacred text and a text of literature, the Ramayana and its protagonist Rama have been involved in the Indian political scenario since the very outset of the twentieth century.

Even though the term 'Ramayana' is generally used to refer to the story of Rama, there are many Ramayanas with various titles, forms and contents that have spread across the country and beyond. Except for Valmiki's *Ramayana*, there are hundreds of Ramayana narratives such as *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas, Kamban's Tamil *Iramavataram*, Ezhuthachan's Malayalam *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu*, the Buddhist *Dasaratha Jataka*, the Jain *Paumacariya* and the television series

Ramayan by Ramanand Sagar. Among these tellings, *Ramcharitmanas* is the most popular and revered Ramayana, and Sagar's Ramayana is the most familiar and the first visual media presentation of the Ramayana. Despite this, there is a widespread belief that the Ramayana is the sole title for Rama's tale because *Valmiki Ramayana* is traditionally believed to be the original telling. The term 'Ramayana' used in this thesis in general also stands for Ramakatha or Rama's tale. In her article "Questioning and Multiplicity," Paula Richman remarks:

Hundreds of tellings of Rama's story exist in India. They range over time from the *Ramayana* attributed to Valmiki, the oldest full literary telling of the story (as manifested in several regional recensions), to the most familiar telling at this moment, the production by Ramanand Sagar for Indian national television. How can one best articulate the relationships among the many tellings of Rama's story? (3)

The Ramayana was spread not only on the Indian subcontinent but in not less than half a dozen countries in Southeast Asia. According to Jan Fontein, the Ramayana not only became an integral aspect of the cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent but also extended its influence to every corner of the Indian-influenced realms of Southeast Asia. Fontein writes, "For the Ramayana not only became part of the cultural heritage of many of the peoples living in the Indian subcontinent, it also spread to all corners of the Indianized world of Southeast Asia, where its influence is omnipresent even today" (21).

There has been a speculation that *Valmiki Ramayana* represents the sole authentic narrative, and all other tellings are adaptations. Scholars from earlier

generations maintained that this telling was the original and definitive account of the Rama story, from which other renditions emerged. They argued that Valmiki's poem constituted the earliest portrayal of the Rama story. However, A.K. Ramanujan denounces this idea of the Ramayana tradition. He posits a novel Many-Ramayana view instead of the existing claim of *Valmiki Ramayana* as the only authentic telling. Ramanujan states:

Obviously, these hundreds of tellings differ from one another. I have come to prefer the word *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur* -text—usually Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramayana* , the earliest and most prestigious of them all. But as we shall see, it is not always Valmiki's narrative that is carried from one language to another. (24)

Ramanujan's approach suggested an alternative to the view that *Valmiki Ramayana* was the only original telling. Contrary to the belief that there is one original telling and its variants, there are many Ramayanas of equal importance, both in oral and written traditions. Richman elucidates on the significance of “Many Ramayanas” (“Questioning” 5) approach, quoting Ramanujan, “in this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling” (“Questioning” 4–5). In Richman's opinion, Ramanujan's perspective pushes us to view each text as a telling rather than a variant, since the term ‘variant’ implies divergence from the 'real' one. This view could be called the “Many Ramayanas” approach. According to this approach, each telling of Rama's story is valid in its own right.

The Ramayana has prevailed across India and beyond in diverse forms since ancient times. Therefore, instead of existing as a single stream of stories, the Ramayana showed differences in its form and content. There is a common belief that the Ramayana is a story from Hindu tradition. However, studies prove that the story existed in diverse religious cultures and traditions, including Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist and Jain culture. William Gould states that the story-telling of the Ramayana is not homogenised but diverse in nature. Gould argues:

Story-telling from the Ramayana has had a long and diverse lineage across India, and it was in no sense homogenised, appearing in different regional variations. The style of its representation has also been diverse - puppet theatre, debate, song-cycles and iconography. Neither were these representations of the Ramayana necessarily always 'Hindu' - Jain and Buddhist poets were also prominent. (*Hindu Nationalism* 52)

This research examines the role the Ramayana has played in the political scenario of twentieth-century India. A paradigm shift had taken place in the course of Indian politics during this century, where the Ramayana also had a significant part. The century witnessed numerous notable events in the nation's politics, including myriads of freedom movements and the ensuing declaration of independence, socio-cultural issues, changes in parliamentary politics, the Ayodhya dispute, the demolition of the Babri Masjid and subsequent communal riots and the ongoing conflict between secularism and communalism. The Ramayana is directly or indirectly linked to most of these events. It became an indispensable element of Indian politics throughout the twentieth century and the contemporary period rather than remaining merely as a sacred text of a particular religion. Hence, this study

investigates the impact of the Ramayana on twentieth-century Indian politics and the subsequent significant transformation within the country's political landscape, driven by the discourses surrounding it.

The inscribed texts of history are unable to locate the exact setting, both time and place, of the Ramayana. However, the scholars who have delved into the study of the Ramayana substantiate that the story of Rama predates the fifth century BCE or emerged between the seventh and the fourth centuries BCE. The Ramayana flourished in diverse forms during this time and after as tales told in verse by travelling bards according to the needs of their audience. As claimed by Camille Bulcke, these Rama-ballads had achieved popularity by the fourth century BCE. Bulcke observes:

The time of the first appearance of the Rama-ballads will always be a conjecture. Nevertheless, the allusions to the Rama story in the oldest portions of the Mahabharata and in the *gathas* of the Buddhist Tipitaka prove that by the fourth century B.C., these Rama-ballads had achieved wide-spread popularity. (*Other Essays* 34)

The Rama-ballads were later compiled into an epic titled the *Ramayana* by poet Valmiki somewhere during a period between the second century BCE and the second century CE. As the story is set in a prehistoric era, Ramakatha is primarily viewed as a creation of legend and mythical literature, depicting Rama as its hero. A narrative steeped in mythological elements of love and valour typical of epic literature, the Ramayana played a crucial role in the dynamic political landscape of twentieth-century India, influencing both moderate and tumultuous political

environments. The Ramayana's influence extends beyond the political realms of twentieth-century and twenty-first-century India. Due to this, studies of the political discourses pertaining to the Ramayana have become more relevant these days.

The coming of Rama and the Ramayana into the nation's public politics has occurred mostly since the outset of the twentieth century. Prior to this, the Ramayana had undergone various stages of evolution in diverse cultures. By birth, the Ramayana was literature, ballads praising Rama's heroic deeds. Valmiki later compiled these ballads into an epic similar to that of the *Mahabharata* and Western ancient epics such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer. Similarly, hundreds of other Ramayanas were also composed, depicting Rama as a deity and in various other roles. Eventually, Rama was exposed as a political icon in twentieth-century India. The term 'Ramayana' means Rama's *ayana*, that is, Rama's journey. Rama set out on his journey and travelled through various stages of literature and religion, taking many centuries to reach twentieth-century Indian politics.

During the first stage of literature, the Ramayana flourished in diverse forms such as anonymous Rama-ballads, the epic of Valmiki and various other tellings. Later, especially after the tenth century CE, the Ramayana began to evolve as a religious text. Rama, similar to Krishna, another Hindu deity, elevated to the status of an *avatara* of Lord Vishnu due to the popularity and propagation of the Ramayana. Bulcke enquires into the evolution of Rama as an *avatara* of God. He argues that the portrayal of Rama as a godly figure led to the inclusion of supernatural elements in the later tellings of the Ramayana. The growth of Rama-*bhakti*, especially after the tenth century CE, completely changed the focus of Rama stories. From then on, the Ramayanas primarily became religious texts where Rama

was not just Vishnu's *avatara* but also seen as the all-merciful, supreme God who comes to Earth to show compassion and save humanity (*Other Essays* 41).

Hindu religious groups purposefully worked to incorporate the Ramayana, a timeless tale esteemed for its enduring popularity, into the religious canon of Hinduism. Once the Ramayana acquired the sanctity of a sacred scripture, Rama was revered as an incarnation of God, eventually ascending to a divine status. Over time, Rama emerged as a significant political figure, particularly notable for his involvement in twentieth-century Indian politics. Debates surrounding Rama arose under the auspices of prominent political figures and organisations effecting the Ramayana's appropriation. Thus, the Ramayana was appropriated for various political and social reasons. These political discourses had a great role in the paradigm shift that occurred in twentieth-century India. Hence, a critical reading of the discourses on the Ramayana's political appropriation during this period has great relevance.

This study, with the title "Appropriating the Ramayana: A Critical Reading of the Twentieth Century Political Discourses," analyses the research problem of how the Ramayana was appropriated by the political discourses led by leaders and organisations in twentieth-century India. Mahatma Gandhi was one of the noted statesmen who initiated the discourses. He led a moderate way of appropriating the Ramayana through his idea of Ramarajya in order to mobilise the public to the forefront of India's freedom movement. Gandhi's involvement in these discourses profoundly influenced the transformation of the Indian political scenario during the pre-independence era.

Periyar Ramasami, one of the influential social reformers of the twentieth century, also intervened in the political discourses surrounding the Ramayana. While Gandhi's involvement was in line with the words and deeds of the Hindu deity Rama, Periyar's involvement was quite radical. His political appropriation was through scathing attacks exposing the Ramayana as an Aryan product. For Periyar, the Ramayana was a disguised historical account of the Aryans' dominance over the Dravidians. Periyar denounced that the Ramayana had thwarted social changes through its lineage to the caste system.

Gandhi strived for a nation's independence, and Periyar acted as a road to social change by struggling to eradicate the deeply rooted caste system in the nation. Apart from this, hindutva forces also raised political campaigns assimilating the Ramayana. While Gandhi and Periyar's appropriations yielded positive results, hindutva's appropriation had far-reaching consequences. Due to these discourses initiated by hindutva groups, the nation witnessed a series of unprecedented events. They include disputes over Ayodhya as the supposed birthplace of Rama and the following communal polarisation, the Ram Janmabhoomi movements and a number of communal riots thereafter, the demolition of the centuries-old Babri Masjid and construction of a new Rama Temple, attempts to transform secular India into *Hindurashtra*. Therefore, the Ramayana was influential in the political scenario of the twentieth century. Contemporary India is also witnessing the consequences of hindutva's political appropriation. Romila Thapar reminds us about the political role of the Ramayana in contemporary India. In her view, apart from the *bhakti* tradition, the Ramayana has begun to interfere in the politics of contemporary India. Thapar observes, "In contemporary India, the *katha* of Rama, quite apart from its enduring

symbolism in the Vaishnava and in some *bhakti* tradition, has taken on a political role” (Foreword viii).

As a literary creation, the Ramayana has been invariably acclaimed as one of the epics of the East as well as a classic in world literature. Therefore, primarily, the reason for this study was a basic inquisitiveness to understand the crucial role that the Ramayana played in twentieth-century Indian politics. As this study enquires into the relevance of the Ramayana during this period, it is perceived that the text has been an integral element of the political and cultural domains of the nation. Being a unique era in the history of the nation, this term witnessed numerous epoch-making events, such as the nation’s freedom movements and declaration of independence during the first half and the growth, development and evolution of India as a nation during the second half. The political landscape of the nation underwent significant transformations throughout the twentieth century. Various incidents and changes during this period led to a shift in Indian politics. Notably, the political discourses surrounding the Ramayana played a crucial role in shaping these developments. Renowned political figures Gandhi and Periyar actively engaged in discussing the Ramayana in politics. Additionally, exploring how hindutva ideology uses the Ramayana for political purposes is essential for this research. Thus, this study is relevant for understanding the Ramayana's significance in the political landscape of twentieth-century India.

Nationalism in India played a significant role in the changing political scenario of the nation. This idea mainly emerged under the auspices of the Indian National Congress (INC) as part of the centuries-old relentless freedom movements against colonial invasion. Gandhi, together with other Congress leaders, steadfastly

stood for nationalism during the pre-independence era. Hindutva also resorted to the idea of nationalism throughout the twentieth century. Gandhi attempted to mobilise Hindu masses for the freedom struggle, utilising the possibility of their national consciousness, whereas hindutva groups manipulated nationalism into a narrow Hindu nationalism. Rama and the Ramayana were conveniently appropriated by hindutva organisations executing their agenda of communal polarisation. When nationalism was disguised as Hindu nationalism, Rama also emerged as a national icon. There is a need to inquire about how the Ramayana became instrumental in using nationalism as a weapon by hindutva in the twentieth century and after.

Contemporary India has been witnessing the intervention of its ancient past in the present due to the emergence of the hindutva movement as a dominant political power. There have been political discourses on how the ancient past of the nation is still interfering in the contemporary period. All these demand that there be significance for the political reading of the Ramayana today. Amartya Sen details the intervention of the past in present-day India. He affirms that in today's India, political arguments often revolve around its ancient history. The use of the past to shape present decisions has intensified, especially with the rise of the hindutva movement as a powerful political influence in the past decades ("Our Past" 4877).

Being a folk epic of ancient Indian origin, the Ramayana also plays a prominent role in the interventions of the ancient past in the present. Hindutva's use of nationalism and the ancient past in the twentieth century and contemporary India was based on Rama and the Ramayana. Hence, a critical reading of the political discourses on the Ramayana is necessary to understand the interplay of the

Ramayana, nationalism and the intervention of the ancient past in the twentieth century and contemporary India.

For centuries, the Ramayana has been a subject of study, with numerous readings, interpretations and adaptations both within India and internationally. This ancient epic continues to captivate readers and scholars, leading to extensive research on its themes and narratives. While Hindus revere the Ramayana as a sacred text, its contributions to world literature have also been widely acknowledged. Consequently, scholars worldwide have shown keen interest in exploring its various aspects. A lot of scholars, such as Camille Bulcke, A.K. Ramanujan, Paula Richman, Devdatt Pattanaik and other scholars have engaged in profound studies on Ramayana narratives. Apart from the study of scholars, noted figures in the field of politics, such as Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, B. R. Ambedkar, Periyar Ramasami and Ram Manohar Lohia have also engaged in the Ramayana's reading.

The Belgian Catholic Priest Dr. Father Camille Bulcke S.J., a noted indologist and a distinguished scholar of Sanskrit and Hindi, is perhaps the greatest international authority on the Ramayana to date. Bulcke can be considered the first and foremost author to have done authentic research on the Ramayana tradition. Even though there were a number of other readings on the Ramayana prior to Bulcke, his Ph.D thesis, *Rāmakatha: Utpatti Aur Vikās*, has been widely acclaimed as an encyclopaedic work. This study provides comprehensive knowledge of the origin and development of the Ramayana which symbolises the diverse culture of India. This study substantiates that India is not the only country that can demand the authority of the Rama story, as the tale has already travelled across the world with

different forms and content. This book vividly examines the myth and history behind the Ramayana. There has not been such a comprehensive book pertaining to the story of Rama so far. Even though the term 'Ramayana' has been used generally by all to indicate the story of Rama, Bulcke has specifically used the term 'Ramakatha' instead of 'Ramayana.' This seminal work has been acclaimed as the first reference text for those who engage in research and inquiry into the Ramayana tradition. The book was primarily published in Hindi in 1950 and later translated into Malayalam in 1978 by Abhayadev.

Bulcke's other monumental work, *Ramakatha and Other Essays*, has also contributed much to the academia pursuing the Ramayana tradition. This book elucidates the history and genesis of the Ramayana. Through various essays, the book provides a detailed analysis of the original *Valmiki Ramayana* and the prevailing *Valmiki Ramayana* as well. The book has also made a detailed analysis of Hinduism, the concept of *avataravada*, and so on.

Ramanujan's "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" has been a pathbreaking essay among the existing studies on the Ramayana. The essay was published in the book *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, edited by Richman. The essay explores a number of Ramayana tellings in India as well as various other parts of Asia and substantiates that the Ramayana is not a single text. Ramanujan affirms through his essay that for every Rama, there is a Ramayana. Through this article, in Richman's perspective, the author tries to posit a new approach called the "Many Ramayanas" approach, which has been widely accepted by the contemporary academic community. He despised the concept of Valmiki's telling as the original

and authoritative and other tellings diverged from it. Thus, the “Many Ramayanas” model assumes that each Ramayana narrative is valid in its own right.

Ramanujan’s article was part of the B.A. History (Hon.) undergraduate syllabus at Delhi University (DU). However, the exclusion of the essay from the course plan, citing hindutva discontent, ignited controversies. Anna Jacob writes on how the “Three Hundred Ramayanas” faced a grudge from the hindutva groups including teachers and students, and the ensuing removal of it from the DU curriculum. This incident invited historians' protests nationwide over the elimination of this essay from the curriculum of such a prestigious higher education institution (“Proposed Ban,” par. 3). This essay, though various politically congested controversies brought blemishes to the academic field, triggered a major shift in the traditional way of reading the Ramayana in contemporary society.

Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia, edited by Richman and published in 1991, is a collection of essays analysing the diversity of the Ramayana tradition. A number of essays in the book dissect the Ramayana in various ways as they represent diverse cultures across India. The essays vividly portray how the Ramayana had an impact on the cultural and political domains of India. Here, Richman's essay on the Ramasami’s reading of the Ramayana elucidates how Periyar criticised the worship of Rama, as the Ramayana tells the story of the dominance of the Aryans over South India. The essay details Periyar’s relentless struggle against brahmanical Hinduism through the political reading of the Ramayana. Richman unveils various crucial moments in the course of Periyar’s struggle, including the burning of Rama's image on the shores of Marina Beach. The book has been one of the best choices of the readers and researchers, as

it played a prominent role in the discourses connected to the multiplicity of the Ramayana tradition.

Another edited work by Richman titled *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, published in 2000, has become one of the notable works that contributed much to the study of Ramayana narratives. This volume highlights the process of questioning the Ramayana and presents a multiplicity of tellings from various perspectives included in the Ramayana tradition. Through her essay titled “Questioning and Multiplicity Within the Ramayana Tradition,” Richman posits an idea that despises the idea of *Valmiki Ramayana* as an authoritative telling and stands with the “Many Ramayanas.” Through this notable work, she states that the questioning and multiple tellings of the Ramayana have been the major forms of practice within the Ramayana tradition. The various essays in this collection discuss how the Ramayana plays a significant role in Indian politics, historicising the Rama myth.

Devdutt Pattanaik, a mythologist and illustrator, retells the Ramayana in his renowned work *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, published in 2013. The author presents the tale from the perspective of Sita. In addition to the storytelling, the facts and historical elements connected to the Ramayana have also been attached to each chapter. Hence, the book has contributed much to the academic knowledge related to the Ramayana. The book sheds light on various untold stories in the Ramayana tradition. The book has been acclaimed not only as a Ramayana telling projecting Sita’s perspective but also as a critical analysis of the story, providing ample opportunities for researchers.

In addition, numerous studies have come out related to Ramayana narratives. They include discourses of Rama stories in diverse cultures, translations, adaptations, dance-drama traditions and television series. As the Ramayana began to be involved in the political scenario of India, especially in the twentieth century, readings and studies on this also commenced extensively. Though it is an epic poem of ancient origin, the Ramayana still intervenes in the cultural and political domain of the nation. This has invited the attention of researchers to the Ramayana studies again.

A study of the above-mentioned works reveals that there is a need for further research and inquiry. All these works have greatly contributed to this study. With this previous knowledge, the unconquered realms of this monumental literary creation, the Ramayana and its tradition, can be explored. Such studies have scope in the contemporary period when a text, which is fundamentally a literary creation, is intervening in the political domain of India. During the twentieth century, India witnessed numerous political discourses appropriating the Ramayana. How these political discourses have affected India and what changes have occurred in the course of the twentieth-century politics due to those discourses are to be pursued with meticulous attention. Hence, this study will definitely fill some areas of lacuna left unfilled by the earlier studies.

The first and foremost objective of this study is to solve the research problem of how the Ramayana was appropriated through political discourses in the twentieth century. The Ramayana significantly influenced the trajectory of Indian politics throughout this period. Noted political figures and organisations utilised the Ramayana in their political discourses to shape national consciousness in their own

way. Therefore, analysing how the idea of nationalism was used as a weapon through the political appropriation of the Ramayana in the twentieth century is also an objective of this study. Despite being millennia-old ancient epic literary creation, the Ramayana was actively involved in the twentieth century and continues to be involved in the contemporary Indian political domain. For this reason, understanding how the Ramayana still plays a prominent role in contemporary politics is to be taken into account. In short, through different chapters, appropriations of the Ramayana in general, multiple narratives of the Ramayana, and the political discourses led by Gandhi, Periyar and hindutva groups are to be traced out in this study.

The methodology applied chiefly for this study is the close reading of various texts connected to the area of this research. Even though the thesis is titled “Appropriating the Ramayana: A Critical Reading of the Twentieth Century Political Discourses,” a particular Ramayana narrative is not needed for this study as a primary text. Instead, this study examines various discourses appropriating the Ramayana in twentieth-century Indian politics. This research is necessarily an interdisciplinary one as it links literature, history and culture. As this study also focuses on the cultural history of the Indian past, the realms of history and other social science disciplines are also pursued.

Close reading of the materials, such as various texts on critical reading of the Ramayana, was the primary endeavour. For clarity and comparative study, articles and other texts on Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism are also analysed. In order to get comprehensive ideas about political discourses related to the Ramayana led by Gandhi and Periyar, the speeches they delivered, the letters they drafted, their

interviews, discussions and other talks have also provided valuable resources. The website *mkgandhi.org* has been used to delve into the thoughts of Gandhi through his journals such as *Harijan* and *Young India*. Various articles, journals and newspaper reports of reputed publications have contributed much to this study. Articles and news reports published online, including the *BBC* article on the impact of Sagar's television series *Ramayan* have also added to this methodology. Additionally, official documents such as the Liberhan Commission report on the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the following communal riots and the verdicts of both the Supreme Court and the Allahabad High Court on the disputed land in Ayodhya are also used as references.

The term 'Ramayana' used in this study refers to the Ramayana narratives in general rather than a specific written work. Therefore, the term is not italicised in this thesis. However, specific texts such as Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*, the Buddhist *Dasaratha Jataka*, the Jain *Paumacariya*, Kamban's *Iramavataram* and Ezhuthachan's *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu* are italicised throughout.

Chapter 1

Multiple Ramayana Narratives

The Ramayana is an ancient epic deeply rooted in folk tradition. This long narrative poem, roughly spotted around two and a half millennia ago, embodies the classic traits of epic storytelling since its composition by Valmiki. The tale has traversed through diverse regions and cultures over the ages, existing as fragments before Valmiki compiled it into a coherent literary masterpiece. Being deeply entrenched in folklore, the story has been gradually transmitted orally from one generation to the next by travelling bards.

Generally, an epic constitutes a lengthy narrative poem written in elevated language celebrating the feats of a deity, demigod, legend or a traditional hero. All the attributes of *Valmiki Ramayana* indicate that the poem truly embodies an epic form. As a folk epic of the East, it also has a dignified style of ancient epics of the West, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, with a righteous warrior hero, Rama, and other major noble characters. These European epics, which have served as models for later epics, have also emerged in the folk tradition. Birjadish Prasad observes:

The classic examples of the Epic in European literature are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by the ancient Greek poet Homer, which have served as models to all later Epic poets. Each of these great works is a long tale in verse, with famous heroes for its principal characters, and it weaves together into an artistic form the many legends of their exploits which were handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth in song and story. The story

of the *Iliad*, for instance, existed as folklore before Homer collected its scattered fragments together to form a splendid whole. (23)

There is no conclusive evidence for the direct influence of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* on the Eastern epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The Eastern epics have been composed after the fifth century BCE, whereas the Western epics are said to have originated in the eighth century BCE. Despite geographical disparity, these epics show common traits of folk epic tradition. They possess an exalted style of language coupled with the abundant use of supernatural elements. Prasad asserts:

Their actions are often subject to the personal intervention of the gods, who preside over their destinies and form a separate group of characters, with their own lovers and rivalries, in almost every classical Epic. The supernatural and magical element is always prominent. The language of the poem is, of course, noble and exalted as to befit the words and deeds of gods and heroes. (24)

Bulcke delves into the original *Valmiki Ramayana* and states, “A dispassionate examination of the text clearly supports the view that, according to Valmiki, Rama was a noble king and a great warrior, but definitely a mere human being” (*Other Essays* 26). Nevertheless, through numerous interpolations, Rama and a few other noted characters have been evolved with supernatural powers. Rama has grown from a warrior king to a Hindu deity and warrior god due to the tremendous impact of incarnation theories and *bhakti* movements in the later development of Rama's story. In addition, Sita, Hanuman, Lakshmana and Ravana show supernatural powers. Many preternatural incidents in the *Ramayana*, including

Hanuman crossing the ocean via air to reach Lanka, Ravana's aerial chariot, Rama's diverse deeds with supernatural powers and the golden deer episode, have transformed the original epic into its current status.

There is a prevalent belief that the Ramayana was initially a poem before taking shape as a prose narrative of Rama. This is due to the conviction that Valmiki is the poet who has composed the poem as an original creation. However, an inquiry into the origin and growth of the Rama story proves that the Ramayana is not a *katha* or prose narrative that emerged from a *kavya* or poetic composition but rather a *kavya* evolved out of many fragments of stories orally transmitted as *gathas*. Dinesh Sakalani states, "The *Rāmāyana* had existed in oral tradition for a long time before it was recorded in writing Vālmiki, the author of the present *Rāmāyana*, composed his work on the basis of the ancient stories current in the society" (54).

Being the first poet who managed to collect scattered fragments of the Ramayana narratives, the role of Valmiki was indispensable. Therefore, there is no wonder in Valmiki's reputation as *Aadikavi*. Though the Valmiki epic presently appears in seven *kandas*, the first and the last *kandas* were said to have been interpolated later. Researchers proved that the original *Valmiki Ramayana* comprised only five *kandas*. S. N. Tadpatrikar observes, "The first and last *kāṇḍas* of the *Rāmāyana* seem to be comparatively later additions, as has been proved by Prof. Jacobi and others" (66).

Though *Valmiki Ramayana* was compiled approximately twenty centuries ago by the sage poet Valmiki, the authenticity of its authorship has been a subject of discussions and debates. While the later Ramayana renditions and some other

sources attribute the authorship of the epic to Valmiki, the authentic Valmiki telling does not offer such a direct and unambiguous reference of its author. The epic had an obscurity in its origin and evolution, belonging to the ballad tradition of literature from a couple of millennia ago. Therefore, the poet's background remained enigmatic. Only the name Valmiki was heard with a title of reputation as the *Aadikavi*. Undisputed in the later developments of the Ramayana tradition, Valmiki's name was gradually established as the *Aadikavi*, marking him as the venerable author of the epic.

Inscriptions of history did not supply any concrete evidence that Valmiki was the author of the epic. Available notes on the genuine books of the epic also did not contain any reference to Valmiki. However, the name Valmiki was mentioned in later sources such as *Ramopakhyana*, the story of Rama in the *Mahabharata*. Though there was no such solid evidence for Valmiki's authorship, the lack of challenges against that name affirmed Valmiki as the *Aadikavi*. Bulcke affirms:

To begin with, the genuine books of the Ramayana contain no direct reference to Valmiki, and from them we can learn nothing about the life of India's *Aadikavi*. He is mentioned by name in the spurious books of the Ramayana, however, and these, together with the Mahabharata and the later sources, are unanimous in proclaiming him to be the author of the Ramayana. There is no reason for us to challenge the unanimous voice of tradition, there is no other poet whom we may set-up as the possible rival to Valmiki in his right to be called the author of the Ramayana. (*Other Essays* 13)

A search for the authorship leads us from a forest dweller named Valmiki to a Valmiki of Vishnu's incarnation. In the developments of the Rama story, there is the presence of a grammarian Valmiki, a sage Valmiki and Valmikis in many other roles. Among these half-dozen or more Valmikis, the forest-dwelling robber Valmiki has got much wider acclaim. This is due to the fact that the popular stories surrounding this Valmiki appear in *Adhyatma Ramayana* tradition. Being one of the reputed narratives, *Ramcharitmanas* tells about the birth of Valmiki. The story that Valmiki has been a robber took shape gradually. There are two elements in the story: his shady past and his long penance, as a result of which an anthill formed around his body (Bulcke, *Other Essays* 36).

In *Ayodhyakanda* of *Adhyatma Ramayana*, when Rama, Sita and Lakshmana reach Chitrakuta for their exile, they meet sage Valmiki in the forest. Having uttered the praise of Rama, Valmiki relates his past life to Rama. Valmiki says though he is a Brahmin by birth, his action is that of a Shudra. Before being an ascetic, he led a life among the forest-dwelling thieves, wearing bows and arrows and robbing those who had travelled through the forest. Once, while robbing a group of seven *munis*, the ascetics, Valmiki is questioned by them about his sin in doing so. Suggested by the *munis*, Valmiki goes to meet his wife and children and seeks whether they are ready to shoulder him in sharing his sins for robbing others. Their negative response makes him sad. Though he is robbing money and other things for his family, they, though living happily with what he robs, are not ready to share his sins.

The sad news from his beloved family discourages him, and he rushes to the *munis*. He repents before the ascetics about his wrongdoings. The ascetics console

him and offer some suggestions. Following the direction, Valmiki manages to pronounce the reciprocated form of the word Rama, that is, *Mara*, and begins his austerity in the deep forest. As he continues his *tapas* for a long period, he is covered by an anthill. After a period of a thousand *yugas*, the *munis* come back. They awake the forest-dwelling thief from his *tapas* and name him Valmiki. Bulcke quotes what the ascetics' told Valmiki from the *Ramcharitmanas*, "Hey great ascetic! You are Valmiki. Now you have come out of the valmika, the ant hill. Thus, this is your second birth." (*Ramakatha* 59)

Not only *Ramcharitmanas*, but many other Ramayana renditions also present Valmiki as a forest-dwelling thief. According to Bulcke, narratives like *Ananda Ramayana*, *Krittivasa Ramayana*, *Thorave Ramayana* also consider Valmiki corresponding to this. In some tellings, Valmiki has the past life of a robber from the previous birth, whereas others depict his past life of robbery from the same birth. These interpolations have taken place in the depiction of Valmiki's life. Thus, as is the story of Rama, so is the story of Valmiki—both have evolved in diverse forms over the ages. In some tellings, Valmiki is a Brahmin by birth but a Shudra in action, whereas in others he is a Shudra both by birth and in action. However, in most of the tellings, this forest-dwelling robber renovates himself as a sage through his millennia-long *tapas*, influenced by ascetics.

The idea of previous birth and the concepts of Brahmin and Shudra may be the influence of the Vedic age, where people are divided into four sects such as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra. Brahmins enjoy the higher positions of the social ladder, assigning the role of priests; Kshatriyas play a vital role in wars and

physical exercises; Vaisyas represent the class of merchants; and Shudras suffer the life of the lowest positions of the social ladder, serving all others. This has later grown into the basis for the centuries-old caste systems and class differences that still continue across the country, directly or indirectly. Thus, according to this principle, Valmiki, once a Shudra forest-dwelling robber, undergoes himself through millennia-long *tapas* and becomes a Brahmin ascetic. Thus, these narratives affirm that before becoming the *Aadikavi*, Valmiki had the past life of a forest dwelling-robber.

Many Valmikis, such as grammarian Valmiki, Suparna Valmiki and a few Maharshi Valmikis, are seen in the various *parvas* or cantos of the *Mahabharata* apart from the forest-dwelling thief. Additionally, another ascetic named Bhargava Chyavana is also attributed to Valmiki. Bulcke states that by the first century BCE there is a general belief that both Maharshi Valmiki and the *Aadikavi* Valmiki are one. For *Balakanda*, poet Valmiki is a contemporary of the events in the epic. During the composition of *Uttarakanda*, Valmiki's close relationship with Ayodhya and King Dasarata is also established (*Ramakatha* 63). Nevertheless, the conviction that Valmiki was a forest dwelling robber eventually surpassed all other arguments as it took a new shape gradually. Bulcke remarks, "in any case the story that Valmiki was a robber eventually received universal acceptance. It is found in its first form in the Skandapurana. Later it is narrated in *Adhyatma Ramayana* and the *Ananda Ramayana* and in the majority of subsequent Rama-stories" (*Other Essays* 37).

When we delve into the available hypotheses and resources surrounding Valmiki, the experience is almost the same as that of the Ramayana itself, as both the poet and the poem provide an enigmatic experience. Therefore, it is difficult to explain the complete background of both Valmiki and his epic. There is no solid evidence that Valmiki is the name of the poet who compiled the Rama stories. Likewise, we have no reason to believe that Valmiki is not the *Aadikavi*. The conviction of a considerable number of people and critics is in consonance with the above opinion that none but Valmiki himself is the *Aadikavi*. Hence, traditionally, Valmiki is called the *Aadikavi* and the Ramayana, the *Aadikavya*. This does not mean that no single person before Valmiki wrote any poems or that there was no poetry before this epic. The unique feature of the Valmiki epic was that the epic surpassed all the other previous literary creations, becoming a popular epic.

Bulcke shares with us a significant insight on the interrelation between the two monumental epics of the East, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. According to him, the Ramayana does not incorporate the narrative of the *Mahabharata*, whereas the *Mahabharata* consists of not only the story of Rama but also references to *Valmiki Ramayana*. From this reference, it is apparent that the *Mahabharata* has achieved its current independent form only after the composition of the original Valmiki epic. However, it is possible that *Bharata*, the ancient form of the *Mahabharata*, could have existed even before the Ramayana. Scholars are of the opinion that the time of the Valmiki epic's composition is somewhere in between *Bharata* and the *Mahabharata*. Some ancient texts, such as Panini, mention the presence of *Bharata* but not of the Ramayana. Therefore, it is concluded that the composition of *Bharata* took place even before the Ramayana. While *Bharata*

pertains to the Western side of the country, the *Ramayana* belongs to the East. Therefore, both of these ancient Eastern epics evolved quite independently. Eventually, after the contact of both epics, *Bharata* was formulated into the *Mahabharata* of today (*Ramakatha* 65).

The *Mahabharata* has mentioned Valmiki's name on many occasions. From this reference, it is obvious that the writer of the *Mahabharata* has a good knowledge of *Valmiki Ramayana*. However, the very ancient *parvas* of the *Mahabharata* nowhere account for Valmiki and his epic. Instead, these cantos suggest the Rama story and its notable characters. The poet of *Bharata* seems to be familiar with the Rama story. It is only later that the author of the *Mahabharata* becomes so close to Valmiki's telling. Bulcke writes, the story of Rama has been depicted on four occasions in the *Mahabharata*, of which *Ramopakhyana* is the most acclaimed. In addition to these four stories, around fifty or more *Ramayana* narratives appear in the *Mahabharata* (*Ramakatha* 66).

Bulcke reiterates that there are various opinions regarding the origin of *Ramopakhyana*. A few experts suggest *Ramopakhyana* is an independent form of story derived not from the *Ramayana* but from one ancient form of Rama story. Considerable changes are visible between the *Ramayana* and *Ramopakhyana*. Dr. Yakobi and a few other experts opine that the compiler of *Ramopakhyana* might not have depended upon any written text of the *Ramayana*. However, the writer could have studied a prevalent Rama-story by heart. They also elucidate that *Ramopakhyana* is only one old, independent, abridged summary of *Valmiki Ramayana*. As the *Mahabharata* has mentioned both the *Ramayana* epic and its

poet, *Ramopakhyana* could be obviously considered as a basis for the Ramayana. (*Ramakatha* 69-70).

The entire Ramayana has been generally divided into seven chapters or *kandas*, such as *Balakanda*, *Ayodhyakanda*, *Aranyakanda*, *Kishkindhakanda*, *Sundarakanda*, *Yudhakanda* and *Uttarakanda*. Studies prove that the original *Valmiki Ramayana*, which is no more in existence as it is, comprises only five *kandas*, whereas the vulgate *Valmiki Ramayana* contains seven *kandas*. The first and last *kandas* are seemingly the later interpolations. As the original text of Valmiki is not available, the story is summarised and analysed depending on the prevailing texts. Hence, here is the chapterwise story of the currently available *Valmiki Ramayana*.

The first chapter, *Balakanda*, depicts Rama's childhood. King Dasaratha has four sons in three queens. They are Rama, the eldest son born to the first queen, Kausalya, Bharata to Kaikeyi, the second queen, Lakshmana and Shathrughna to the third queen, Sumithra. These four sons are born through *putreshti yajna*, a special prayer for the sake of bearing children. As they grow up, both Rama and Lakshmana are directed to accompany priest Viswamithra in order to rescue him from *Rakshasas*, the demons, while offering *yagas*, the holy sacrifices. Then, they set out for Mithila, where King Janaka welcomes them warmly. In Sita Swayamvara, Rama wins Sita, princess of Mithila. After marriage, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana come back to Ayodhya.

The second chapter, *Ayodhyakanda*, recounts the story of Rama's decision for exile following the unfortunate incidents in the court. After reigning for decades,

King Dasaratha decides to make Rama his successor. During the preparations of the coronation, Queen Kaikeyi demands Dasaratha send Rama into exile for a period of fourteen years and to proclaim her son Bharata as the king's heir. Though hesitant, the king yields before her. Rama resolves to leave for exile without any defence, accompanied by Sita and Lakshmana. Sumanthrar, the charioteer of Dasaratha, takes them off to Chitrakuta Forest. Dasaratha dies, and Bharata goes in search of Rama and solicits him to be the king's successor. Being stubborn enough to lead an exiled life of fourteen years as suggested by his father, Rama turns down his righteous younger brother's request. However, Rama assures him that he is ready to be the king after his exile. Eventually, Bharata agrees to be a regent, keeping Rama's sandals on the throne.

In *Aranyakanda*, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana enter Dandakaranya Forest. They spend years with *munis*, rescuing them from the assaults of demons. They move to Panchavadi, where Lakshmana builds a hermitage named Parnashala. Shurpanakha, Ravana's sister, comes near them and falls in love with Rama at first sight. Rama turns down her love. When she moves towards Sita, Lakshmana mutilates her. Shurpanakha meets Ravana in Lanka and describes the beauty of Sita. Enthrilled by Sita's beauty, Ravana decides to abduct her. When Rama and Lakshmana are away, Ravana appears near Sita and abducts her. When they are back, Rama and Lakshmana realise Sita is missing.

Kishkindhakanda relates the story of Rama's search for Sita. While Rama and Lakshmana begin to search for Sita, they come across *Vanaras*, the monkey tribes. Hanuman, the most trusted associate of Sugriva, takes them to Sugriva, who

is in exile in fear of his elder brother Bali. Rama promises to kill Bali, who rules Kishkindha, and in return, Sugriva will extend support to find Sita. Hiding behind a tree and thus breaking the warrior code, Rama manages to kill Bali. Now Sugriva is the king and Angada, the heir. After the rainy season, the *Vanara* army began searching for Sita everywhere. Rama entrusts his signet ring with Hanuman to be shown to Sita if he finds her. Finally, they reach the seashore, and Sambathi, one of the birds, gives a clue about Sita's abduction by Ravana. In the end, Hanuman resolves to cross the ocean.

The next chapter, *Sundarakanda*, outlines Hanuman's rendezvous with Sita in Lanka. Having reached Ravana's Lanka, Hanuman locates Sita in the Ashokavana. Ravana persuades and warns Sita to yield before him. When Sita turns his demand down, Ravana goes back. Sita laments. Hanuman appears when she is sitting alone and shows Sita Rama's signet ring. On the way back, Hanuman destroys a few houses in Lanka. Indrajith, one of Ravana's sons, ties him up. Though they set Hanuman's tail on fire, Hanuman escapes by burning parts of Lanka. Hanuman then returns safely. Everybody is happy to know that Sita is alive. Rama is also glad to hear the happy news from Hanuman.

The penultimate chapter, *Yuddhakanda*, portrays the Rama-Ravana war. Rama and the *Vanara* army proceed to Lanka. They reach the seashore and think of ways to cross the ocean. In Lanka, Ravana turns down his brother Vibhishana's advice to make a compromise by giving Sita back. Eventually, Vibhishana quits the court and seeks refuge on Rama's side. Rama is glad to receive him. With the assistance of Nala, the *Vanara* army managed to build a bridge and cross the sea.

Soon a fierce battle begins. Rama encounters and kills Ravana. After the battle, Vibhishana's coronation occurs. Sita has to face an ordeal in order to prove her chastity. She wins the ordeal by overcoming the fire bed built by Lakshmana. When they are back in Ayodhya, they receive a warm welcome. Bharata hands over power to Rama, the real heir of Ayodhya. Rama's reign begins.

The last chapter, *Uttarakanda*, begins with Ravanacharita. Visravas has four children in Kaikasi. They are Dasagriva (Ravana), Kumbhakarna, Shurpanakha and Vibhishana. Ravana weds Mandodari and begins his journey of victory. Having received many boons, Ravana defeated numerous kings and warriors. After Ravanacharita, the births of Hanuman, Bali and Sugriva are also depicted in this chapter. In Ayodhya, Rama is fed up with the gossiping of the townspeople about Sita's chastity. Lakshmana carries out Rama's orders of leaving Sita in the forest. Valmiki gives her refuge with a fatherly affection. Sita gives birth to twin sons named Lava and Kusa. Later, when they recite the Ramayana before him, Rama realises them as his children. Rama calls Sita back. However, when she is again directed for ordeals, she abandons her life in this world and goes to the lap of Earth. Eventually, Rama also ascends to heaven.

The story related above is not a comprehensive one but a synopsis of the currently existing *Valmiki Ramayana*. There are hundreds of Ramayana narratives and each story has its significance according to the "Many-Ramayana" approach. *Valmiki Ramayana* is one of the oldest and the most popular Ramayana narratives. Moreover, scholastic enquiries are usually taking place surrounding this narrative. Richman establishes the role of *Valmiki Ramayana* in modern research as:

I have therefore chosen to present a synopsis of the story of Rama based on Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Most scholars would agree that Valmiki's *Ramayana*, the most extensive early literary treatment of the life of Rama, has wielded enormous influence in India, Southeast Asia, and beyond. Many later *Ramayana* authors explicitly refer to it either as an authoritative source or as a telling with which they disagree. For centuries, it has been regarded as the most prestigious *Ramayana* text in many Indian circles. It has also drawn the most attention from Western scholars. ("Introduction" 5)

The reason behind using Valmiki's *Ramayana* for the synopsis is not its so-called authenticity but the astounding popularity the text has received, especially among the academics. People are acquainted with the Ramayana from any one of the hundreds of narratives. The story has touched the minds of people since their childhood. Oliva Roy observes that Ramayana is the most popular and most-read epic not only in India but in the whole of Southeast Asia. The legend of Rama has influenced every Indian. The enchanting story of the Ramayana has become a part of the collective unconsciousness of the people of India (86). Nevertheless, a vast number of readers are still unaware of at least one version of the story. The synopsis of this Valmiki telling will contribute to those who are not familiar or only partially familiar with the Rama story.

Ramanujan opens his path-breaking essay with a folk story that gives an answer to the question, 'How many Ramayanas have there been?' In the story, while sitting on his throne, Rama's ring falls on the floor and disappears into a hole. Hanuman takes on a tiny form and goes down the hole. He goes down and down in

search of the ring and finally falls into the netherworld. The women of the netherworld catch and place Hanuman on a platter (*thali*) for the dinner of the King of Spirits. The king shows Hanuman another platter containing thousands of such rings. When the king asks Hanuman to show the ring he has been looking for, Hanuman also gets confused. Ramanujan's story is concluded as:

They were all exactly the same. "I don't know which one it is," said Hanuman, shaking his head. The King of Spirits said, "There have been as many Ramas as there are rings on this platter. When you return to earth, you will not find Rama. This incarnation of Rama is now over. Whenever an incarnation of Rama is about to be over, his ring falls down. I collect them and keep them. Now you can go." So Hanuman left (22).

As elucidated above, there are multiple Ramayana narratives. They have likeness and contrast in their titles, plots and characters. These hundreds of Ramayanas have traversed across India and some other countries in Southeast Asia. They comprise China, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam. The dissemination of this narrative across such a diverse linguistic landscape over two and a half millennia is quite interesting and astonishing. As this vast area contains diverse languages, the story has also been transmitted in all these languages. Even within India, the tale has been spread in all the southern and northern languages. There are multiple tellings in some languages and dialects. According to the antiquity of these tellings, they appear in either oral or written form. As the story has been spread over a period of twenty to twenty-five centuries, the earliest narratives

were mostly in oral form. Furthermore, the story has also spread in other art forms such as dance drama traditions. Sitakant Mahapatra writes:

As example, we may take the Ramayana. We have *Dandi Ramayana* and *Jagmohan Ramayana* in Odia; *Rangana Ramayana* in Telugu; *Krittivasa Ramayana* in Bengali; *Madhab Kanda Ramayana* in Assamese, *Adhyatma Ramayana* in Malayalam, *Tulsidas Ramacharita Manasa* in Hindi, Eknath's *Bhavartha Ramayan* in Marathi and *Kamba Ramayana* in Tamil. (27-28)

Therefore, when we delve into the history of the Ramayana narratives, we will obviously be bewildered that, as Ramanuja says, “for every such Rama there is a *Ramayana*” (24). This query throws light on the fact that, unlike the belief in only one real Ramayana composed by Valmiki, there are hundreds of other tellings. *Valmiki Ramayana* is the only one telling of this tradition. Almost all the languages in India, from Kerala to Kashmir, comprise at least one narrative in that language. This phenomenon is not unique to India alone. Wherever the figure of Rama is seen, a Ramayana narrative emerges. Out of these hundreds of narratives, a few are titled with the term ‘Ramayana’ such as, *Dandi Ramayana* in Odia, *Ranganatha Ramayana* in Telugu, *Krittivasa Ramayana* in Bengali and *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu* in Malayalam. Others include *Ramcharitmanas*, *Iramavataram*, *Dasaratha Jataka*, *Anamakam Jataka*, *Paumacairya*, and so on.

People other than the academic community are hardly aware of the Ramayana tradition and the existence of hundreds of narratives. For them, *Valmiki Ramayana* is the only real story, and all the other renditions have descended out of

it. However, for those who are familiar with the multiple Ramayana tradition, hundreds of Ramayanas are equally important. Richman affirms:

While Valmiki's importance is undeniable, we learn more about the diversity of the *Ramayana* tradition when we abandon the notion of Valmiki as the *Ur-text* from which all the other *Ramayanas* descended. We need, instead, to consider the "many *Ramayanas*," of which Valmiki's is one, Tulsi's another, Kampan's another, the Buddhist *Jataka* yet another, and so forth. Like other authors, Valmiki is rooted in a particular social and ideological context. His text represents an intriguing telling, but it is one among many.

("Introduction" 9)

The Ramayana narratives have the history of an evolution of approximately two thousand and five hundred years or more. As time passed, the story began to evolve through various stages and spread as diverse branches. Thus, being a tale that traversed for millenia through miscellaneous paths and took shapes in innumerable forms, presently there are hundreds of tellings of the Rama story. By birth, the Ramayana is the story of a warrior prince, transmitted orally by the travelling bards. As it grew older, the idea of giving a religious colouring to the protagonist and to the story crept in, and the warrior prince hero was gradually modified as a Hindu deity. Therefore, after centuries' evolution, the Ramayana has been venerated as the most chanted Hindu sacred text in different names across India. In the same way, the story has been evolved through many religions other than Hinduism. Additionally, the story has been subjected to evolution in diverse forms and locations. The evolution

took place according to the need and interest of the audience and readers of the story. And this course of evolution can be roughly divided into six phases.

In the beginning phase of evolution, the Ramayana appeared as Rama-ballads. It was a period that lasted around three hundred years between the fifth century and the third century BCE, where the story of Rama was transmitted orally by the travelling bards. There is no solid evidence for the concrete form of stories, which were told as ballads or folk songs during these periods. These *gathas* or verse tales in fragments had not achieved a final shape as there was no structured compilation of these tales. The balladeers travelled from place to place, especially to the then royal courts, reciting *gathas* about the warrior prince Rama. These bards, having sung for years, were experts in manipulating the incidents in the story from court to court according to the needs, tastes and demands of the courtiers. Later, the popular fragments of these ballads were compiled by Valmiki into an epic form. Bulcke explains:

Ballads about the story of Rama and Sita were sung long before Valmiki, and the Rama story was already well known in North India (especially in eastern U.P.) by 400 B.C. Around 300 B.C., Valmiki wrote his *Ramayana*, which contained books II–VI of the poem as it is now printed.

Bards learned it by heart and earned a living by touring the country and giving recitations. Soon, additions were made by enlarging the most popular passages and by adding new incidents; in that way, the first and last books were added. There are now three recensions of the *Ramayana*; the common verses in all three do not constitute one-third of the total. (*Other Essays* 170)

The early references to the *Mahabharata* literature and the Buddhist literature show that Rama-ballads had gained astounding popularity by the fourth century BCE. *Ramopakhyana*, the narrative within the *Mahabharata*, provides a glimpse into Rama's story even before the original Valmiki epic. Similarly, the *gathas* of the Buddhist *Tipitaka* also contain elements of the Ramayana. These references, which are even far before the compilation of the original *Valmiki Ramayana*, prove that Rama-ballads were prevalent during the time of the Buddhist period or even before. Hence, these ballads can be considered as the kernel Ramayana narrative despite Valmiki epic's reputation as the kernel story of Rama.

The time before the Buddhist period was largely the Vedic age, which existed roughly from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE, between the end of the Indus Valley Civilisation and a second urbanisation that began in the central Indo-Gangetic Plain in 600 BCE. The elements of the Rama story are seen nowhere in the Vedic period and its literature. When we try to locate the Rama-ballads in ancient periods, we may tend to believe that the story is a product of the Vedic literature, considering the later religious colouring and the veneration attributed to the Ramayana. However, though there is a profound impact of brahmanical Hinduism of the Vedic age on the Ramayana tradition in India in the later periods, Rama-ballads were not a product of the Vedic age. Bulcke shares a valuable insight:

The existence of the Rama-ballads, as distinct from the Ramayana, is proved by the fact that the *gathas* of the Buddhist Tipidika, written down in the third century B.C., contain several allusions to the Rama-story but none to the Ramayana or to Valmiki. These Rama-ballads, which are explicitly referred

to in the Harivamsa, cannot claim a very great age. Vedic literature not infrequently mentions the existence of narasamsi *gathas*, ballads in praise of men, but nowhere do we find the slightest allusion to the Rama story. The older portions of the Mahabharata, dating from the fourth century B.C., show their acquaintance with the Rama story but not with the Ramayana. The time of the first appearance of the Rama-ballads will always be a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless, the allusions to the Rama story in the oldest portions of the Mahabharata and in the *gathas* of the Buddhist Tipidika prove that by the fourth century B.C., these Rama-ballads had achieved wide-spread popularity. (*Other Essays* 33)

There has been a tendency to attribute the Rama story and its characters as the product of the Vedic literature. However, from a very careful analysis, it is apparent that the Vedic age has never given birth to such a story. Historical evidence says that these ballads came just after the Vedic period. Bulcke observes that the names of a few major characters in the Ramayana, such as Janaka, Dasaratha, Rama and Sita, are seen on one or more occasions in the Rig Veda and other Vedic literature. Nevertheless, there has never been any indication of a mutual relationship between these characters. Though the names Janaka and Sita have been mentioned some more times, the relationship between the two can never be seen anywhere. Though there has been speculation in modern Ramayana literature that Janaka of the Vedic period and in the Ramayana are one, there is no such solid evidence to establish that argument. It is not inscribed anywhere in the Vedic literature that Sita is the daughter of Janaka or Rama is Janaka's son-in-law. (*Ramakatha* 46)

There are indications of mainly two Sitas in the Vedic literature, of which one is the goddess of agriculture and the other, Sita Savithri, daughter of the sun. Apart from these two Sitas, the word 'sita,' which means furrow, has been used numerous times. However, this term has no affinity with any human being. Similarly, the three names Rama, son of Dasaratha, Parashurama and Balarama are mentioned in the Ramayana and in the *Mahabharata*. However, there are many characters in the name Rama, of whom in some *Thaithiriya Upanishads* the word 'rama' indicates a 'son,' and in the Rig Veda and elsewhere the word 'rama' is used with the meaning of a 'king' together with many persons of high rank. From all these Ramas, it is evident that the name Rama has been prevailing since the ancient Vedic period. In the Vedic literature, in spite of the names of characters similar to those in the Ramayana, there is no indication of any mutual relationship among them. Therefore, it is obvious that nowhere in the Vedic literature do we have clear signs of the composition of the Ramayana or the presence of Rama-ballads. Bulcke elucidates:

This is most unlikely since the whole Vedic literature does not contain a single reference to the Rama story. Some names do occur that are the same as those of the characters in the Rama story, but the fact that they are never connected with one another constitutes additional proof that the Rama story was unknown to the compilers of Vedic literature. Janaka, for instance, is never mentioned in connection with Sita, although his name occurs frequently. This is not surprising since Sita in Vedic literature has no affinity whatsoever with any human being; she is an agricultural goddess, a personification of the furrow. The Sita of the genuine *Ramayana* has no

connection with that goddess; it is only in later times that Sita was said to have been born miraculously from the furrow. The *Mahabharata* and the *Harivamsa* know nothing of this preternatural birth and hold her to be the daughter of Janaka. (*Other Essays* 38)

Before being formulated into an organic whole through the compilation by Valmiki, the Ramayana had been in its ballad form, scattered in various fragments. The bards who sang these *gathas* were well experienced in learning Rama-ballads by heart. Balladeers recited these songs, giving particular attention to the audience of the courts. The portions of the ballad that intrigued the courtiers were sung repeatedly with proper exaggeration of the heroic deeds of the characters in it. As these bards earned their living reciting these ballads, the story evolved with gradual transformations, adding new incidents and enlarging popular passages to the kernel in order to fascinate the audience.

In the second phase, the Ramayana takes a new shape as Valmiki compiles the scattered fragments of ballads in the form of an epic. Inscribed history never gives the exact year of the original *Valmiki Ramayana*. However, it is a general agreement formed from the studies that Valmiki's original epic was a creation that emerged in a period somewhere between the second century BCE and the second century CE. Nobody knows whether Valmiki composed his Ramayana or rather compiled the existing fragments of ballads. However, as the Ramayana narratives already existed in ballads, it is obvious that Valmiki is not the creator but a compiler of the prevailing popular ballads. Additionally, there is an ambiguity about whether Valmiki's rendition is an oral telling or a written compilation. Nevertheless, the role

of Valmiki is indispensable and unique, as he was the first poet to compile the scattered tales into a unified epic with all its traits.

The evolution of the Valmiki epic can be distinguished into two phases, namely the authentic *Valmiki Ramayana* and the vulgate *Valmiki Ramayana*. The present-day Valmiki narrative is not Valmiki's authentic telling but an interpolated version of it. The original telling does not exist today and only its vulgate form is available. The former is the only purely authentic narrative by Valmiki, whereas the latter is one with numerous interpolations. Inscribed historical documents have never provided evidence so far to locate the years in which both versions have come out. Therefore, to locate the exact time of their creation is difficult. The time frame in which both the authentic Valmiki epic and its vulgate form have come out is a period between the third century BCE and 200 CE.

In order to locate the time of authentic telling's composition, some internal evidence within the text or other resources is necessary. Pali *Tipitaka*, one of the earliest and the most complete collections of early Buddhist literature, does not supply any information. We are also unable to find references in the writings of Panini, who is believed to have lived in the fourth century BCE or just before that. If the authentic telling had been out during the fourth century BCE or before, there definitely would have been some references, either in the Buddhist *Tipitaka* or in the writings of Panini. Hence, it is concluded that the authentic *Valmiki Ramayana* did not come out until the third century BCE. Although the Rama-ballads were prevalent in the fourth century BCE, Valmiki's authentic narrative had not appeared before the third century BCE. Bulcke details:

At what period, then, did Valmiki conceive of the ambitious project of gathering all the Rama-ballads into one poem, to which he would give the name of the Ramayana? The most probable answer to this question seems to be that he did so towards the end of the fourth century B.C., or possibly, but less probably, in the third century B.C. A masterpiece such as the Ramayana must have achieved popularity very soon after its composition. So, if it had existed earlier than the fourth century B.C., references to it would be found in the Buddhist *Tipitaka* and also in Panini. (*Other Essays* 34)

The only available internal evidence that supplies knowledge of the authentic Valmiki epic is the existence of the three recensions of the vulgate *Valmiki Ramayana*. They are the Southern recension, the Bengal recension and the North-Western recension. A comparative study of these recensions tells us of an original Valmiki epic. The most widespread Southern recension was often printed in Bombay and in the South; the second Bengal recension was edited by G. Gorresio and published in Paris between the years 1843 and 1867 and also by the Calcutta Sanskrit series between the years 1935 and 1942, and the third North-Western recension was published by D.A.V. College Lahore between the years 1923 and 1947. Despite the lack of evidence of the exact copy of original *Valmiki Ramayana*, these recensions of the vulgate Valmiki telling remain even today as solid evidence of the original epic. These three recensions, though showing considerable similarity and differences among them, establish the differences between the original and the interpolated vulgate Valmiki narrative. The recensions were written down independently and on the basis of a text that had been transmitted orally over the course of several centuries. Bulcke writes:

Due to the absence of early and reliable references both to the *Ramayana* and to its author Valmiki, the history of the epic is based ultimately on internal evidence. So, the study begins with a comparison of the three recensions of the vulgate Valmiki *Ramayana* as we have them today. This comparison will bring home to the reader the fact that we do not possess the poem as composed by Valmiki. Then we shall consider the problem of interpolation and from this we shall be able to describe the transformation of the original epic into the vulgate *Ramayana*. (*Other Essays* 21)

Today's Valmiki narrative comprises seven *kandas*, whereas the original Valmiki epic had only five. Scholarly enquiries prove that *kandas* one and seven were not part of the original Valmiki epic but later additions. The original telling begins with *Ayodhyakanda* and ends in *Yudhakanda*. Here, Prince Rama undergoes a series of events, including the preparation for his coronation ceremony and the ensuing issues that compelled him to go into exile for a period of fourteen years. His consort Sita and brother Lakshmana accompany him. In the final battle, Rama wins over Ravana and comes back to Ayodhya. Rama is crowned as king of Ayodhya after a period of fourteen years of his exile.

The events in the first and the last *kandas* are not seen in the original epic. Therefore, the scenes such as the *putreshti yajna* and Sita Swayamvara in *Balakanada*, Sita's repudiation and final return to the lap of her supposed mother, Earth, are not seen in the original Valmiki epic. Bulcke states: "It is probable that Valmiki wrote his immortal epic around 300 B.C. or, at the latest, during the third century B.C. It is generally admitted that it contained the matter corresponding to

the actual *Kandas* II-VI only, the *Balakanda* and the *Uttarakanda* being latter additions” (*Other Essays* 70).

Out of the seven *kandas*, *Balakanda* and *Uttarakanda* show considerable contrast from the other five chapters. Numerous stories and events depicted in these two *kandas* often have no connections with the other sessions. Stories and parables similar to Puranic tales are seen in *Balakanda* and *Uttarakanda*, but not in the other five *kandas*. Bulcke states:

The style and composition of both the *Balakanda* and the *Uttarakanda* stand in sharp contrast to the other books of the *Ramayana*. Both are sadly lacking in unity and development of plot. Both contain much material that has no direct bearing on the Rama-story. The Puranic stories, especially occupy a very large portion of both *kandas*, whereas there is not a single one of them in the other books. (*Other Essays* 24)

The vulgate text shows internal evidence of the contradictions within the text. Some events in *Balakanda* and *Uttarakanada* are contradicted by the events in other *kandas*. Bulcke depicts the ambiguity regarding Lakshmana’s marriage in two *kandas*. He critically examines:

In addition, there are some contradictions between the *Balakanda* and the following books; for instance, the marriage of Laksmana and Urmila is clearly mentioned in the *Balakanda*, but we find no mention of Urmila in the rest of the poem, not even in the lengthy farewells of the three exiles; indeed, it is contradicted in the *Aranyakanda* where we read that Laksmana is unmarried. (*Other Essays* 25)

Bulcke elucidates the internal contradictions that occurred in *Uttarakanda* also. The events in *Yuddhakanda*, the sixth chapter, such as *phalasruti*, indicate the story comes to a conclusion soon. Hence, *Uttarakanda*, the seventh chapter, seems to be a later addition. Additionally, *Ramopakhyana* and the original Valmiki epic do not show any clues of the later life of Rama as depicted in *Uttarakanda*. While the original epic ends with the coronation of Rama, *Uttarakanda* of the vulgate telling narrates interpolated incidents resembling the repudiation of Sita and Ravanacharita.

The disparity between the original and the vulgate epic also lies in the representation of the story's protagonist. According to the original epic, Rama is a mere human being. As the original epic evolves as a vulgate text, Rama is also transformed as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu through the influence of *avataravada* and *bhakti* movements. Valmiki originally presents Rama as a noble warrior king and human being without any religious colouring. Later, Rama is evolved as an *avatara*, resulting in a tremendous change in the epic.

Apart from the first and the last chapters, interpolations occurred in the five other books of the epic also. Bulcke shares a detailed account of the changes in these genuine books. He states that the events such as the burning of Lanka by Hanuman, the golden deer episode, the flight of Hanuman to the Himalayas, the return of Rama and his crew from Lanka to Ayodhya by the aerial chariot, and the like, are also later added episodes in the vulgate epic (*Other Essays* 27). All these interpolations have transformed the original epic into *Valmiki Ramayana* as we have it today. The genuine epic is possible only when all the interpolations are extracted from the vulgate epic.

The reason for the exclusive interpolations after the composition of authentic telling is the oral transmission of the story by the itinerant singers. Similar to the Rama-ballads transmitted during the early stages of the Ramayana's evolution, these bards propagated the epic soon after its compilation by Valmiki. They kept reciting it from place to place according to the needs, tastes and demands of the courtiers. These travelling bards were already proved as experts in generating instant tales by adding new and exaggerated elements to the episodes. Therefore, some episodes received popularity according to the acceptance and interest among the audience. In order to fascinate their audience, new preternatural elements were also added to the genuine epic. As the idea of incarnation was in progress, the itinerant singers incorporated more and more mystical and supernatural elements in their recitations. According to Bulcke, the interpolations in the genuine books are mostly duplications of events and additions of preternatural happenings such as the episode of the golden deer, Hanuman's burning tail, and so on. (*Other Essays* 27)

The third phase encompasses numerous Ramayana narratives within Hindu tradition that emerged through *bhakti* movements that began in the twelfth century and lasted through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The development of Rama-*bhakti* gradually resulted in the formation of many Ramayanas in Hindu tradition, such as *Adhyatma Ramayana*, *Ananda Ramayana* and *Adbhuta Ramayana*. The intention of *Adhyatma Ramayana*, composed around the fourteenth or fifteenth century CE, was to present *Valmiki Ramayana* modifying it according to the famous Vedanta concept of Shri Shankara. The details of its authorship still remain unseen. Thereafter, this text became the basis for *Ramcharitmanas*, *Iramavataram*, *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu* and some other narratives in the *bhakti* tradition.

These narratives evolved through *bhakti* movements, especially *Ramcharitmanas* and played a vital role in the divinisation of Rama and other noted characters in the epic.

Besides *bhakti* movements, the divinisation of Rama as an *avatara* also gave rise to the later interpolations of the original Valmiki epic. The inscribed historical accounts suggest that *avataravada* must have happened around the beginning of the Christian era. This concept was prevalent since Krishna had been considered an *avatara* of Lord Vishnu. Later, the astounding popularity of Ramakatha attributed Rama also as an *avatara* of Vishnu, surpassing the significance of Krishna. However, the religious significance of Rama and the Ramayana narrative developed only centuries later. Roderick Hindery states that Rama and other noted characters are divinised in the Ramayana narratives composed following *bhakti* movements. Even though Valmiki's original epic depicts Rama as a warrior prince and human being, the Ramayana narratives of the *bhakti* tradition composed centuries after Valmiki presented Rama as a divine figure (290).

Bulcke elucidates that the religious significance of Rama emerged centuries after. Though he was considered as an incarnation similar to Krishna, Rama evolved as a Hindu deity later, following the *bhakti* tradition. Bulcke's words are as follows:

However strange it may seem, it is a historical fact that the religion of Rama developed only centuries later. The Alvars, in their hymns, addressed Rama along with Krishna, as an incarnation of Vishnu, but no Rama-cult can be traced before the twelfth century. Ramanujan vindicated *bhakti* to Vishnu and mentioned his avatars especially Krishna and Rama. Later on in his sect,

some devotees worshipped Rama alone. Handbooks of Rama were written.

Henceforth Rama is the incarnation of the Supreme. (*Other Essays* 171)

With the emergence of *bhakti* movements, the Ramayana narratives became more popular. The Ramayana tellings prior to this were chiefly in Sanskrit. Not less than a half dozen Ramayanas came out as part of these movements that spread in different languages. All these tellings were quite independent and different, despite the partial similarity in the kernel story of the plot. Valmiki telling was away from the common folk for centuries, as they had no access to Sanskrit, the elite class language. *Bhakti* movements set the Ramayana narratives free from the Sanskrit-loving elite class. Later, numerous tellings, including the regional varieties, emerged in this *bhakti* tradition.

Ramcharitmanas, composed around the fifteenth and the sixteenth century in the Awadhi language, has spread in Northern India as one of the most venerated sacred texts of Hindu tradition. Tulsidas wanted the story of Rama to be accessible to the common folk. For North Indian Hindus, this rendition is the only authentic Ramayana, as the text was composed in the Rama-*bhakti* tradition. The telling has played a significant role in establishing the moral standards of people who pursued this culture. Bulcke writes:

The Rama story, as depicted by Valmiki appealed to his hearers and readers, because of his high ethical standard. Tulsidas made it the foundation of his Rama-*bhakti* and his *Ramcharitmanas* became the moral backbone of the people of Northern India. The moral code taught by Tulsidas is exceptionally

high and worthy of the noble and pure *bhakti* he exposes in his immortal work. (*Other Essays* 194)

For North Indians, the Ramayana means *Ramcharitmanas*, whereas the Ramayana of Tamil Nadu is *Iramavataram*, written in the backdrop of the Tamil *bhakti* movements. *Ramcharitmanas*, Valmiki and other narratives are not popular in Tamil Nadu. Similar to Tulsidas, Kamban also follows the outline of Valmiki's epic. However, the entire story is told in the Tamil *bhakti* tradition, with considerable deviations from Valmiki, Tulsidas and others. Ezhuthachan's *Ramayanam Kilippattu* and other narratives in the country also evolved as Hindu Ramayanas in the *bhakti* tradition. The distinction among these narratives that emerged through *bhakti* movements testifies to the diversity of the Ramayana tradition. Richman writes:

For example, although in many cases Valmiki and Kamban adhere to the same basic outline of events, Kamban's rendition of particular incidents is shaped by the Tamil *bhakti* tradition, which gives radically different religious nuances to those events. Kamban's *Ramayana* is not a divergence from Valmiki; the two are different tellings. Their differences intrigue us because they testify to the diversity of Indian culture, indicating that throughout history multiple voices were heard within the *Ramayana* tradition. ("Introduction" 9)

The fourth phase comprises the evolution of the Ramayana through the religions other than Hinduism. Besides Hindu culture, the narratives are seen in

Buddhist, Jain and Islamic traditions. The multiple Ramayanas emerging from these diverse traditions affirm the plurality of cultures in the Ramayana tradition.

Though Hindu Ramayanas are the most popular among these narratives, the earliest of these evolutions can be attributed to Buddhism and Jainism. The popularity of Rama-ballads led all religions to assimilate Rama's story into their own tradition. Both Buddhism and Jainism were active during the oral transmission of these ballads prior to Valmiki's original epic. The Ramayana evolved through these two religions in diverse narratives during a period from the fourth to the third century BCE. While Buddhist narratives evolved through the moral teachings of the *Jatakas* by Mahatma Buddha, Jains gave prominence to logic through their telling. In order to juxtapose Rama's story to their religious tradition, they incorporated necessary changes in the names of characters and events in the story. Buddhist evolution comprised three or more narratives, such as *Dasaratha Jataka*, *Anamakam Jataka* and *Dasaratha Katanan*, whereas for Jainism, there were mainly two versions: Vimalasuri's *Paumacariya* and Gunabhadra's *Uttarapurana*.

Rama-ballads were popular during the Buddhist period. These *gathas* evolved and propagated through this religious tradition. In *Dasaratha Jataka*, Mahatma Buddha tells the story of Ramapandita to a man in order to alleviate his grief caused by his father's death. Here, Ramapandita and Sita Devi are the children of Dasaratha, king of Varanasi and not Ayodhya. In fear of the conspiracy by one of the queens, Ramapandita, accompanied by his sister Sita Devi and brother Lakshmana, flees the country for the Himalayas for a period of twelve years. Even though he knows about the death of his father, Ramapandita does not cry or even

show grief. After a period of twelve years, Ramapandita returns to Varanasi and becomes king, marrying his own sister, Sita Devi. Bulcke notes:

Buddhists have assimilated Rama story into their *Jataka* Sahitya since ancient times. *Jatakas* tell the story of Mahatma Buddha, who, through his innumerable births, has played many roles both as human and animal. Through the course of these stories, Buddhists have appropriated all the prevalent popular stories, including Rama stories. There are mainly three *Jatakas* in ancient Buddhist literature narrating the Rama story. Among three *Jatakas* noted, *Dasaratha Jataka* was the most popular. (*Ramakatha* 74)

Though not as developed as *Dasaratha Jataka*, both *Anamakam Jataka* and *Dasaratha Katanam* share many common episodes in the Rama story. The *Anamakam Jataka*, though it does not say the names of any characters, shares many events in the Rama story, such as the period of exile, the abduction of Sita, the Bali-Sugriva battle and the ordeal of Sita. Here, instead of the king's request, the protagonist Bodhisatva himself leaves the country for exile as he knows about the preparation of his relative to attack the country. Bodhisatva thinks of saving the lives of numerous people by avoiding a battle. *Dasaratha Katanam* also shares many common incidents in the Rama story.

Though the likeness in the plot of the kernel Rama story, all narratives show considerable changes. These differences show that the Rama story has evolved according to the Buddhist tradition. For *Dasaratha Jataka*, Ramapandita, Lakshmana and Sita Devi are siblings, and Ramapandita marries Sita Devi in the end. The period of exile is not fourteen years but twelve. In *Anamakam Jataka*,

Bodhisatva leaves for exile, avoiding a chance of battle against one of his relatives. As the evolution takes place through the Buddhist culture, these narratives were shaped according to this tradition. The conscious effort of avoiding a chance of battle and the protagonist's endurance of abstaining from grief caused by his father's death are the characteristics attributed to the Buddhist tradition. The marriage between siblings seems to be the influence of existing customs in the communities.

The Jain narratives mainly comprise Vimalasuri's *Paumacariya*. As Jains consider themselves as rationalists, they dismiss the idea of the miraculous births of Rama and his brothers, Sita's birth from furrows, monkeys' victory over a powerful warrior like Ravana. They even rationalise the concept of Ravana's ten heads. Ravana's mother puts a necklace around his neck just after his birth and his face is reflected in the necklace of nine gems. This is the reason why Ravana receives the name Dasamukha, the ten-faced one. For Vimalasuri, *Vanaras* in the Ramayana are not monkeys but *Vidyadharas*, a clan of celestials, using the emblems of monkeys. For Jains, Ravana is not a flesh eater or cannibal. Unlike other Ramayanas, Jain telling exposes Ravana as a tragic hero, meeting his end through Sita. "It is such a Ravana who falls in love with Sita's beauty, abducts her, tries to win her favours in vain, watches himself fall, and finally dies on the battlefield. In these tellings, he is a great man undone by a passion that he has vowed against but that he cannot resist" (Ramanujan 34).

Most of the Ramayanas begin with the genealogy of Rama, whereas the Jain telling opens with Ravana. While almost all of the narratives present Ravana as a cruel *Rakshasa* and cannibal, for Vimalasuri, Ravana is a noble and learnt man, who

earns his weapons and power through *tapas* or austerities. He even takes a vow that he will never touch an unwilling woman. Rama is unable to kill Ravana who is an evolved soul according to the Jain belief. Instead, Lakshmana kills Ravana. Yet, Jain Gunabhadra's *Uttarapurana* portrays Sita as the biological daughter of Ravana (Dasagriva). Having been told by the soothsayer that his daughter Sita would be a cause for the death of her father, Dasagriva orders her to be abandoned somewhere far away. Maricha, a henchman of Dasagriva, encloses Sita in a box and abandons it in Mithila. Consequently, Sita is found in a furrow. For Jains, the preternatural story that Sita is the daughter of the Earth is irrational and hence unacceptable.

Apart from Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions, the Ramayana has been exclusively evolved through Islamic cultures across the country and beyond. This fourth phase mainly comprises the developments of narratives during the Mughal Empire, the *Mappila Ramayana* of Northern Kerala, Indonesian Ramayana narratives, and the like. All these renditions are instances of the evolution of the Ramayana through diverse religious traditions.

The Mughal Empire was established in India in 1526 CE by Babur and lasted until the last emperor, Bahadur Shah II, in 1857 CE. The dynasty was noted for its significant influence in the Indian subcontinent through a reign of more than three centuries. The Mughal imperial structure was established by Akbar, the most prominent among the Mughal Emperors, during the closing decades of the sixteenth century, and the dynasty reached its zenith during Shah Jahan and Aurengzeb. The Mughals were well known for their interest in arts, literature, culture, architecture, and so on. This Muslim dynasty played a pivotal role in shaping the Indo-Islamic

civilisation in the country. They did not hesitate to assimilate and accommodate the Indian literary creations such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to their language and culture.

Emperor Akbar was renowned for the translation of the *Ramayana* during his reign in the sixteenth century CE. Despite being a Muslim ruler, Akbar paid meticulous attention to fostering the arts and literary writings of Hindu culture of his time. Besides, various translations of the *Ramayana* also arose during the reign of Jahangir and Shah Jahan. It is plausible that the compositions and translations of the *Ramayana* during the Mughals were mainly surrounding *Valmiki Ramayana*. Still, these creations have been evolved through a Muslim tradition composed in the Parsi language. Bulcke provides valuable insight into the evolution of the narratives during the Mughal Empire. He states that Al Badayuni for Akbar and Giridharadasa for Jahangir translated *Valmiki Ramayana* in verse. A poem by the name *Ramayana Maseehi* was also composed during Jahangir by a poet named Mullamaseeha. *Ramayana Faijee* was another prose translation during Shah Jahan. (*Ramakatha* 256-57)

It seems that the Mughals did not hinder the developments of the narratives in Christian tradition also during their reign. Poet Mullamaseeha incorporated the names of Biblical characters also in his *Ramayana Maseehi*. Bulcke notes:

Mullamaseeha was a native of a village nearest to Mujafar City (Uttarapradesh). He might be a Christian because the names of Biblical characters such as Jesus and Mariyam, were stated in many ways in *Ramayana Maseehi*. The work has comprehensively presented the Rama

story from Dasaratha's *yajna* to Sita's departure to the lap of the earth.

(*Ramakatha* 257)

The Ramayana has evolved significantly through Islamic cultures in Kerala through *Mappila Ramayana*. This is a well-organised Ramayana narrative in *Mappilapattu*, a form of Muslim folk song in Malabar, Northern Kerala. The term '*Mappila*' denotes the regional name of Muslims in Kerala. *Mappila Ramayana* is composed in a conversational style resembling the tone of *Mappilapattu*. This oral tradition gained popularity when T.H. Kunhiraman Nambiar, a noted folklorist in Kerala, memorised verses (in 1976) of a folk song he had heard from one Hassankutty. The origin of these lines remains unknown to Kunhiraman Nambiar and perhaps even to Hassankutty. Azeez Tharuvana observes:

Before Kunhiraman Nambiar sang the *Mappila Ramayana*, there is no recorded evidence of this song having been sung among the Mappila communities. However, John Richardson Freeman, who translated these songs into English, writes that a young boy had memorized the songs sung by a person referred to as Hassankutty. (160)

Tharuvana illustrates the *Ishal Ramayana* of poet Ottamaliyekkal Muthukoya Thangal, who is also known as O.M. Karuvarakund. He composed the story of *Valmiki Ramayana* in the form of *Mappilapattu*. The aim of this Ramayana rendition in the form of a *Mappila* song is to foster the fraternity and companionship between Hindu and Muslim communities in Malabar, a northern region of Kerala. The songs from *Ishal Ramayana* are transmitted frequently in various social gatherings with their charm (169-172).

The Indonesian *Hikayat Seri Rama* tells a Rama story in Islamic culture from the seventeenth century CE onwards. Corresponding to Jain renditions, this story narrates events in the Rama story from the genealogy of Ravana through the abduction of Sita and the joining of Rama and Sita. It seems that this narrative has been significantly influenced by a few tellings in Indian context, such as Jain, Bengali, Oriya and Kamba Ramayana. According to Bulcke, after his father banished him, Ravana arrives at the island of Sinhala for an exiled life following the direction of Prophet Nabi and Adam. There, he offers prayers to Allah seeking a boon for the dominion over the four realms. Subsequently, Ravana marries a princess from each of these four worlds, gaining kingship for his numerous sons. (*Ramakatha* 265)

The fifth phase depicts the Ramayana's development outside India. The Ramayana has spread beyond India, especially through a number of regions and countries in Southeast Asia including China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thai, Burma, Tibet and Khotan. Each of these narratives is linked to one or more narratives that exist in India. The exchange of literature and culture also occurred due to the movement of people across different regions since ancient times. Even though the narratives in these regions are profoundly influenced by Indian Ramayanas, they have evolved as independent stories unique to their respective regional culture.

In Bulcke's view, the Ramayana has travelled to some countries north of India since ancient times, resulting in the dissemination of the story in regions of Tibet and Khotan. Another tributary has travelled in the direction of Indonesia,

China and Burma. Buddhist narratives have been translated into Chinese even in the third and the fifth centuries. Consequently, the Ramayana began to spread in the Tibetan languages by the eighth and the ninth centuries. These tellings include episodes of Ravanacharita and the repudiation of Sita. All these are seen in the manuscripts of the Tibetan Ramayana. Here, Lord Vishnu swears that he will take birth as Rama, son of Dasaratha. Besides this, Lakshmana is also portrayed as the son of Vishnu. While almost all other narratives present three queens of King Dasaratha, the Tibetan narrative has only two. Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, is born to the younger queen rather than the elder, and Lakshmana, to the elder, three days after Rama's birth. Thus, the Tibetan Ramayana has evolved, portraying both Rama and Lakshmana as the incarnations of Lord Vishnu. (*Ramakatha* 258)

The translations of the Buddhist Ramayanas to Chinese languages have played a vital role in the spreading of Rama stories to the northern sides, including Tibet. Having been influenced by the Buddhist tradition, the Tibetan Ramayana renditions show a considerable sameness to the Buddhist tellings in their plot, characters and other elements. Besides this, the Jain *Uttarapurana* has also influenced the development of the Ramayana narratives in Tibet. Here, Sita (Leelavati) is Ravana's (Dasagriva) daughter. She is thrown into the sea as she may be a cause for the destruction of her biological father Dasagriva, according to her horoscope. Some farmers, who have found the girl washed ashore, look after naming her Leelavati. In Gunabhadra telling, the child is abandoned in the agricultural field of Mithila in a box, whereas the Tibetan story has been evolved with the throwing of the child into the sea. Bulcke shares a meaningful input on the Tibetan Ramayana:

The reason for Rama's exile in the Tibetan Ramayana is also astonishing compared to the other tellings. King Dasaratha is puzzled in deciding his heir, as both Rama and Lakshmana are able heirs. Rama, having foreseen the agony of his father, has decided to leave the country in order to offer himself for the *tapas* in a forest. The farmers approach him with the intention of making a marriage proposal with Leelavati (Sita). Rama marries Sita and becomes the king abandoning his *tapas*. The episodes of Sita's abduction, alliance with *Vanara* army, search for Sita and the ensuing war with Ravana also have a similarity with *Uttarapurana*. (*Ramakatha* 259)

It is evident that both Buddhist and Jain traditions have tremendously influenced the Ramayanas developed outside India. The episode of Dasaratha's two queens and their two sons in the Tibetan Ramayana, instead of three queens and their four children in numerous narratives, is rare. Despite its similarity in plot and characters, the Tibetan narrative shows its considerable differences. Though Leelavati's (Sita) birth as the biological daughter of Ravana is similar to that of *Uttarapurana*, the later development in the life of that child has changed from Jain narratives. The Tibetan telling has evolved through Leelavati's connection with the sea. She is looked after by farmers and not Janaka. The reason for Rama's exile is not a conspiracy inside the court but his sacrifice to make Lakshmana Dasaratha's heir. Rama is leaving for a neighbouring forest for his *tapas* accompanied by none. Leelavati's life among farmers, her marriage with Rama, Rama's *tapas* and the name Leelavati—all these episodes are seen only in this Tibetan rendition. The role of Lakshmana as the heir of Dasaratha is hardly seen in other narratives.

Khotan is the name of an ancient Buddhist Saka kingdom established around 300 BCE in the city of Khotan, a place in present-day China. According to Bulcke's *Ramakatha*, the Khotani Ramayana shows both similarities and differences with the Tibetan Ramayana. Uttararamacharita of the Tibetan Ramayanana is not seen in the Khotani telling and the Khotani narrative contains numerous episodes that do not exist in the Tibetan version. The Khotani telling shows similarity to the Tibetan version of Sita's birth as the biological daughter of Ravana, her marriage during the exile life and the lack of Dasaratha's two sons, Bharata and Sathrugna. Despite these similarities, there are differences, such as the role of Sita as the wife to both Rama and Lakshmana. The author of the Khotani story has purposefully manipulated the most common husband-wife relationship between Rama and Sita by applying the polyandry system. The reason for this evolution in the Ramayana narrative is the tremendous influence of the then-polyandry system of the existing Khotani community. They followed a system of having two husbands for one wife among them. The Khotani Ramayana narratives evolved according to the customs and conventions of the Khotani community. (259-60)

The Khotani Ramayana evolved in the ninth century CE amidst the rich Buddhist heritage of the city of Khotan. As the Buddhist culture is deeply rooted in the city, the Ramayana that spread in that region also has evolved, integrating Buddhist elements into it. Buddhist and Jain Ramayana narratives were already prevalent in the various regions across India, shaping the story of Rama that reached Tibet and Khotan. The propagators of the Ramayana in Khotan began to view the history of Buddhism and the Ramayana as interconnected. Therefore, the Khotani Ramayana narrative assimilated the major characters Rama and Lakshmana into

Buddhist tradition. Buddha was equated with Rama and Maitreya, the Bodhisatva, who would appear on the Earth in the future in order to achieve complete enlightenment and teach the pure *dharma*, represented Lakshmana. Bulcke outlines that the Khotani rendition abstained from propagating the episode of Rama as the incarnation of Vishnu. In order to establish the relationship between the Ramayana and Buddhism, the propagation of religion by Shakhyamuni was also clearly stated in the Khotani Ramayana narrative. (*Ramakatha* 260)

Indonesia witnessed a significant evolution of the Ramayana narratives in numerous languages. Malini Saran asserts that, the stories of Rama and Sita have been told and retold in Indonesia for over a thousand years. They were prominently spread on the islands of Java and Bali in the major languages of Old Javanese, Old Sundanese and Malay. As the time progressed, the story was spread to numerous other languages also. The Ramayana was read, recited, sung or chanted from the ninth century onwards, in the era of Hindu-Buddhist kings, spreading the subjects of love and loss, loyalty and valour. (67)

As stated by Bulcke, the ancient Javanese Ramayana accounts were engraved in the temples in Indonesia. The story did not contain the elements of *Rama-bhakti*. Bulcke writes:

The evidence for the spread of the Ramayana since ancient times is visible in the engravings of a ninth century Shiva Temple in Indonesia. Subsequently, Ramayana literature emerged in Java and Malaya in two different versions. The earlier accounts from Java show resemblance to *Valmiki Ramayana* whereas the modern Ramayana in Indonesia has considerable changes from

Valmiki telling. Despite these deviations, both these renditions are devoid of Rama-*bhakti*. The ancient Javanese Ramayana is composed by one who worships Lord Shiva because the two temples containing Ramayana engravings are Shiva Temples. (*Ramakatha* 261)

The earliest Ramayana literature in Indonesia is the tenth-century work *Kakawin Ramayana*. Even though this rendition is an anonymous one, there is a significant influence of Indian *Bhattikavya* on it. The work comprises the Ramayana tale up to *Yuddhakanda*. The term ‘Kakawin’ is a Javanese word that means *kavya*, a poem modelled on traditional Sanskrit meters. The *Kakawin Ramayana* is believed to have been composed in Central Java, the present area of modern Indonesia, around the ninth or the tenth century CE. The story, though showing considerable differences, can be mainly traced back to that of *Valmiki Ramayana*.

Apart from *Kakawin Ramayana*, there have been a number of other Ramayanas in Indonesia whose sources are yet to be found. These diverse narratives comprise *Hikayat Seri Ram*, *Paathaani Ramayana*, *Serath Kanda* of Java, and the like. The *Seri Ram* story is profoundly influenced by *Kakawin Ramayana* and the Islamic culture of the country. This telling, which is more developed as an Islamised telling in Malaysia, is also influenced by various tellings such as the Jain Ramayana, *Ananda Ramayana* and the Bengali Rama-stories. The story of *Serath Kanda* is not different from that of *Seri Ram*, which comprises Nabi and Adam. Two other narratives of the ancient Rama story are also available in Java. They are *Uttarakanda* and *Charitaramayanam* or *Kavi Janaki*.

Hikayat Seri Ram or the story of Sri Rama, is the name of the Ramayana in Malaysia. This narrative has evolved with a close connection to the Islamic culture of the country and hence the Arabic term '*hikayat*,' which means story, comes in its title. Here, Ravana, inspired by the words of Nabi and Adam, offers *tapas* and attains power to take control over four realms. He establishes his kingdom named Lankapuri and assigns various military services to his brothers Kumbakarna, Vibhishana and Shurpanakha.

Malaysia is a country with the influence of both Hindu and Buddhist tradition since the ancient past due to its centuries'-old close contact with the Indian subcontinent. The gradual process of Islamisation in the country begins with the coming of Islam in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. However, the conversion of religion in the country did not affect its culture. Hence, *Hikayat Seri Ram*, the Rama story in a mixture of both Hindu and Islamic culture, came into being. Here, the script is Arabic. Allah replaced the Hindu God and the prophet was named Nabi, who, together with Adam, later blessed Ravana, satisfied in his long austerities. Despite its inclination toward *Valmiki Ramayana*, the story of *Hikayat Seri Ram* can also be traced back to the non-Valmiki telling, where contradictions are conspicuous.

The astonishing thing in this narrative is that Dasaratha's consort is not Kousalya but Mandudari, who gives birth to Rama and Lakshmana. Dasaratha's two other sons, Bardan (Bharata) and Chatardan (Shatrughna), are born from Balidari (Kaikeyi), a concubine. Mandudari, daughter of Maha Bisnu, suggests to Dasaratha to make Bardan the heir instead of Rama, who is naughty, and hence Dasaratha

follows her words. On the one hand, Rama descends from Maha Bisnu and on the other, he descends from Nabi Adam. Here, Sita is not only Rama's wife but also the daughter of Dasaratha, as we have read in the Buddhist narrative.

The only Ramayana narrative in Thailand (Siam) is named as *Ramakein* (Rama's story) or *Ramakirti* (the glory of Rama). Rama's story has profoundly influenced the lives of Thai people for centuries. The presence of the Ramayana can be seen across the country. Everything, such as the paintings on the walls of Thai Buddhist temples, the plays enacted in towns and villages and Thai ballets depict Rama's story exclusively. Names of some places in Thailand, such as Ayuthia, Khidkin and so on have counterparts as Ayodhya and Kishkindha respectively in the Ramayana. Ramanujan comments:

Thai *Ramakirti* or *Ramakien* opens with an account of the origins of three kinds of characters in the story such as the human, the demonic and the simian. The second part describes the brothers Rama and Lakshmana's first encounters with the demons, Rama's marriage and banishment, the abduction of Sita and Rama's meeting with the monkey clan. It also describes the preparations for war, Hanuman's visit to Lanka and his burning of Lanka's some areas, the building of the bridge, the siege of Lanka, the fall of Ravana and Rama's reunion with Sita. The third part describes an insurrection in Lanka which Rama deposes his two youngest brothers to quell. This part also describes the banishment of Sita, birth of her sons, their war with Rama, Sita's descent into the earth, and the appearance of the gods to reunite Rama

and Sita. Though many incidents look the same as they do in Valmiki, many things look different as well. (37)

As noted by Bulcke, compared to most of the other tellings, the Ramayana in Burma (Myanmar) is relatively very new. One of the Burmese kings, in 1767 CE, conquers Ayuthiya, the kingdom of Siam (Thailand). The prisoners of the war taken to Burma later begin to act out the Rama drama of Siam in Burma. Later, *Ramayagana*, the most celebrated Ramayana narrative in Burma, is written based on the Siam Ramayana. The telling, though written based on the Siamese Ramayana, shows some diversity in depicting various incidents. Here, instead of Maricha, Shurpanakha, who is known here by the name Gambi, disguised as a deer, takes Rama away, and she appears in her real shape when Rama injures her with his arrow. (*Ramakatha* 275)

Bulcke delineates that the people engaged in various trades within the Indian subcontinent have had close contact with China since the first century BCE. These interactions resulted in the widespread exchange of cultures and consequently the dissemination of the Rama story across the Indo-China region. It is conspicuous from the inscriptions on stone that *Valmiki Ramayana* has spread considerably in those regions. A statue of Valmiki was also recovered from one of the Valmiki temples dating back to the seventh century CE from this region. (*Ramakatha* 268)

Bulcke argues that warriors from India have established their kingdom among the Khmer castes of Southern Cambodia during the first century BCE. This might have resulted in the spread of Indian stories to these regions. Bulcke illustrates that the most celebrated artistic work in Khmer literature is *Ramakirti*, a work of

anonymous authorship. Though the ancient manuscripts of this telling have been identified as seventeenth-century products, they are incomplete. The incidents of the *yagna* of Viswamithra, the repudiation of Sita, and the Lava-Kusha battle are depicted in the book. (*Ramakatha* 268-69)

Ramakirti bears significant traces of Buddhism as well as *Seri Ram* from the Malay Ramayana. Furthermore, *Ramakirti* has shown a leaning towards Valmiki. Rama has also been named as Bodhisatva. This serves as evidence of the narrator's influence from the Buddhist tradition. The narrator's attempt to incorporate elements from the *Seri Ram* and *Valmiki Ramayana* shows that the Khmer Ramayana literature has evolved through these diverse influences.

Apart from the aforementioned five phases of evolution, the Ramayana is deeply rooted in the diverse traditions of dance, drama, television serials and cinema in India and other areas in Southeast Asia. This tradition has emerged since the second century CE, with Bhasa's Sanskrit play *Pratima-nataka* and Kalidasa's fifth-century CE Sanskrit poem *Raghuvamsa*, and so on. The Ramayana story has evolved gradually through other artistic and literary creations, such as Ezhuthachan's *Ramayanam Kilippattu*. The Malayalam drama *Kanjana Sita* of C.N. Srikantan Nair and its film version by the same name by G. Aravindan, adapting characters from the Ramayana, are instances of the evolution of the Rama story in diverse traditions. Amar Chitra Kathas for children have played vital roles in the spread of a network of tales in connection with the Ramayana. Additionally, Sagar's Hindi television series titled *Ramayan* has played a significant role in the evolution

of the Ramayana. These diverse artistic and literary forms have contributed much to the evolutionary phases of the Ramayana.

Both the East and the West are rich in the collection of ancient monumental epic literary creations. However, they are received and interpreted differently in these two regions. The Western epics, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, have been recognised as pure literary achievements worldwide. They are celebrated for their artistic excellence rather than being intervened with the contemporary socio-political scenario of their place of origin, Greece. They are read, discussed and interpreted in the seminars and symposiums of literature in their country and beyond. In contrast, the Eastern epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, have been revered primarily as religious texts rather than significant literary works. Though the Rama story has evolved through not less than a half dozen Eastern countries, in India, the Ramayana continues to interfere in the nation's political domain. The twentieth century India also witnessed the political appropriation of the Ramayana by noted figures and organisations in the nation.

Chapter 2

Appropriation of the Ramayana

The concept of appropriation remains highly relevant today, playing a significant role in shaping contemporary interpretations and discussions within literature and other disciplines. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines the literal meaning of the term 'appropriation' as 'the act of taking something that belongs to somebody else, especially without permission.' Thus, appropriation is the process of taking others' thoughts, ideas, products or contents of literary creations without their prior permission. Any such creations of persons or organisations can be appropriated for somebody's own use. The dishonest way of appropriating some properties or products may even lead to legal disputes when it turns out to be a theft or other criminal offenses. Apart from appropriating products and properties, diverse texts, theories, thoughts, and ideas spanning religion, history, philosophy, science, arts and literature are frequently subjected to appropriation. Appropriating a text may be perceived as less unethical, particularly in terms of readings and interpretations, when contrasted with appropriating other thoughts and ideas, given that once a writer publishes his work, the control over its use is relinquished.

As pointed out above, the process of appropriation may take place in various fields, including literature, religion and science. Compared to all other domains, the appropriation of literature needs to be looked at from a broader perspective. While other fields impose various restrictions on appropriation due to their reliance on evidence or purported facts, literary texts are generally open to appropriation regardless of their genre, as they are not bound by such constraints. A literary

creation need not have to rely on any theory or fact, as it is generally born out of imagination or fictitious matters. Even literary creations based on historical events and other real incidents can be represented with the colour of imagination. In that sense, the appropriation of literature can initiate a wide range of discussions and debates. No writer has control over their work of literature soon after its publication, as it gives rise to the scope of varying levels of reading and interpretation. Thus, readers and interpreters of literary texts need not concern themselves with allegations of deliberate appropriation. Therefore, usually there are no constraints on appropriating literary texts. Appropriation of literature can take place in numerous forms, encompassing cultural, religious, historical, scientific, political and social dimensions in a broader context.

The latest studies prove that the Ramayana is considered one of the most appropriated literary texts. Although the Ramayana is believed to have been written even before the inscribed histories of literature, it continues to play a crucial role in the contemporary socio-political scenario of the nation. The Ramayana's significance is not limited to the platforms of seminars and symposiums in the academic process, as the studies on this creation are becoming more relevant today. Thus, these studies reveal that the Ramayana has undergone multiple instances of appropriation.

The Ramayana is basically a story of Rama transmitted orally by travelling bards in the form of ballads since a period around 500 BCE. Later, Valmiki compiled these prevailing Rama-ballads into a poem in epic structure during a period approximately around 200 or 300 BCE. It was since the compilation of these

ballads in Sanskrit that the story has begun to be known as *Valmiki Ramayana*. Even though studies remarked that there were compositions of Rama-ballads in some other names and forms prior to this, *Valmiki Ramayana* received a general consensus as *Aadikavya*, the first poem and hence Valmiki, the *Aadikavi* or the first poet. While backing the “Many Ramayanas” approach in “Questioning,” Richman remarks that the Buddhist *Dasaratha Jataka* and *Ramopakhyana*, the kernel-like story of Rama within the *Mahabharata* might predate Valmiki’s telling. Hence, *Valmiki Ramayana* cannot be considered the first and the authentic Ramayana telling (4).

Scholars who have attempted the study of the Ramayana have come to the following conclusion about the origin of the Ramayana, Rama-ballads, *Valmiki Ramayana*, and the like. Sakalani details the views of Arthur Macdonell and Berriedale Keith as:

Macdonell is, however, of the opinion that the Rāmāyana was composed during the middle of the fourth century B.C. and that it attained its present form (including the *Bālakanda* and the *Uttarakānda* which are considered to be later additions) by the end of the second century B.C. Keith also places the original portions of the Rāmāyana in the fourth century BC however, pushes down the date of the composition by some centuries. In his opinion, the original Rāmāyana of Vālmiki, on the basis of ancient ballads and probably in its present form, came into existence towards the close of the second century A.D. (54)

By delving into the possible historical elements, Keith comes to the logical conclusion that the Ramayana was a fourth century BCE story, that is, during a period in between Panini and Ashoka. He remarks:

The most reasonable way to say that such an epic as the *Ramayana* was probably composed a century before than a century after the period of Asoka, in the literary language of the Ksatriya class. With this date, the fourth century B.C., accords adequately the fact that Panini does not happen to cite the name of a personage of the *Ramayana*, as he would very possibly have done the great work of Valmiki existed. It must be remembered that several of the personages of the *Mahabharata* appear in Panini. (320)

Macdonell also shared some valuable and logical points that surround the origin of the Rama story. He remarked that Prakrit was the language of the people where the Ramayana was composed (310).

Before being formulated into an epic form, the story of Rama had been told and retold in various forms and in different social locations by travelling bards. The epic is still preserved with respect in society due to its cultural heritage. According to A. Ganagatharam and A. Ganagatharan, the Ramayana owes a great respect in society for its cultural heritage and the epic has also been retold in diverse forms. “The Epic commands great respect in society for its cultural heritage and sanctity. The *Ramayana*, the great epic of India, has been retold in various forms and in different social locations” (877).

Pattanaik opines that all poets and other writers began to refer to Valmiki as the fountainhead of the Rama story. He says that Valmiki’s work was transmitted

orally by travelling bards. It was put down in writing much later. As a result of this, there are two major collections of this original work- Northern and Southern Origins- with about half the verses in common. The general agreement is that, of the seven *Kandas* or chapters, the first, *Balakanda*, which is Rama's childhood, and the last, *Uttarakanda*, Rama's rejection of Sita, are much later interpolations (9).

Studies prove that there are many Ramayanas instead of a single Ramayana text. Ramanujan posits a unique knowledge of the existence of hundreds of Ramayanas both in India and Southeast Asia. According to his Many-Ramayana approach, no telling of the Ramayana is superior or inferior to other tellings. Instead of using the term 'version,' he used 'telling' as it considers all the tellings to be of equal importance. He elucidates:

Obviously, these hundreds of tellings differ from one another. I have come to prefer the word *tellings* to the usual terms *versions* or *variants* because the latter terms can and typically do imply that there is an invariant, an original or *Ur-text*-usually Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramayana* , the earliest and most prestigious of them all. But as we shall see, it is not always Valmiki's narrative that is carried from one language to another. (24-25)

Ramanujan has enlisted some astonishing Rama stories in diverse forms and locations, mentioning the idea of three hundred Ramayanas introduced by Bulcke. Ramanujan writes:

The number of *Ramayanas* and the range of their influence in South and South-East Asia over the past twenty-five hundred years or more are astonishing. Just a list of languages in which the Rama story is found makes

one gasp: Annamese, Balinese, Bengali, Chinese, Cambodian, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Laotian, Malayalam, Malaysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, and Tibetan—to say nothing of Western languages. Through the centuries, some of these languages have hosted more than one telling of the Rama story. Sanskrit alone contains some twenty-five or more tellings belonging to various narrative genres (epics, *kavyas*, ornate poetic compositions, *puranas*, or old mythological stories, and so forth). If we add plays, dance-dramas, and other performances in both the classical and folk traditions, the number of *Ramayanas* grows even larger. To these must be added sculpture and bas-reliefs, mask plays, puppet plays, and shadow plays, in all the many South and Southeast Asian cultures. Camille Bulcke, a student of the *Ramayana*, counted three hundred telling. Obviously, these hundreds of tellings differ from one another. (24)

By detailing a number of diverse Ramayana tellings across India, Mahapatra elucidates the local variations and regional colourings of each telling. He opines that almost all narrations are structured around the theme of *Valmiki Ramayana*, showing similarities in the mainstream story. However, each telling shows a considerable difference (28).

Each Ramayana narrative is unique as it shows differences in the plot, structure or even in characters from other tellings. Some tellings even stand as the opposite version of the established stories but are still acceptable. Thus, according to the changes in various locations and periods, the Ramayana tellings also show

considerable variations. These multiple tellings of the Ramayana are known by various names inside and outside the country. Among these, a few tellings, such as *Valmiki Ramayana*, *Ramcharitmanas* and Sagar's *Ramayan*, are more widely acclaimed than other tellings. Valmiki's telling is reputed as it has been often seen as the earliest telling; the *Ramcharitmanas* has been famous due to its veneration as a Hindu sacred text across North India and the Sagar Ramayana has achieved unprecedented fame due to the impact of visual media.

Despite being told in various ways under different titles, the story of Rama is generally known as the Ramayana. This is likely because of the impact of Valmiki's title *Ramayana*. However, not all the other tellings have the same title. The title itself varies as, *Valmiki Ramayana*, *Ramcharitmanas*, *Dasaratha Jataka*, *Paumacariya*, *Iramavataram*, *Adhyatma Ramayana*, and so on. Originally passed down as ballads in oral tradition, the Ramayana has its origins in folk culture. With its lengthy narrative and focus on heroic deeds, it is often categorised as a folk epic.

The Ramayana, a poem raised in a tradition and time without clear geographical boundaries, cannot be solely attributed to Valmiki, despite his important role. Instead, this is a poem born and brought into a tradition that was culturally plural. The Ramayana is actually a series of tales in verse transmitted orally by travelling bards, narrating the life and deeds of Rama. According to these tales, Rama, an ancient prince, is proclaimed the successor of his father, King Dasaratha of the Ikshvaku dynasty. However, prior to his coronation in the kingdom of Ayodhya, Rama is compelled to leave for an exile in the forest for fourteen years due to the conspiracies that arose against him inside the court. His consort Sita and

brother Lakshman also accompany Rama in his exile. During their exile, Sita is abducted by a demon king, Ravana, who later is killed by Rama in the war. Rama is crowned as king upon his return to Ayodhya following the war, covering a period of fourteen years of exile. Valmiki's task was to assemble the fragmented story into the epic known as the Ramayana. It is still unclear whether he composed the text or compiled it. As stated by K. Satchidanandan, the Ramayana is not merely a text but a vast tradition. It transcends any single country or religion, spreading throughout South and Southeast Asia, where it has thrived and evolved over the past 2500 years (6).

In the “Many Ramayanas” approach, all the diverse narratives hold equal importance. This is because they all stem from a tradition that has evolved alongside the story of Rama, resulting in a cultural landscape where the Ramayana tradition is characterised by diversity rather than singularity. The Ramayana, thus, has been evolving ever since the emergence of the oral telling of it by bards in prehistoric times. Even after the long period of more than two millennia, the evolution still continues through hundreds of Ramayanas. A journey through these multiple Ramayanas shows that each telling is an appropriation of the kernel Rama story according to the context in which the story has evolved. Each rendition of the Ramayana, whether it is oral or written, has evolved out of that particular social setting. The tellings of Buddhist, Jain and *bhakti* traditions and all the other available Ramayanas are appropriations according to the particular traditions. In a nutshell, every Ramayana story is, in one sense or another, an appropriation of the kernel Rama story.

In her critique of the television production of Sagar's *Ramayan* series, Thapar calls attention to the plurality of Ramayanas in Indian history:

The Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places, even within its own history in the Indian subcontinent. The Indian epics were never frozen as were the compositions of Homer when they changed from an oral to a literate form. ("Ramayana Syndrome," par. 6)

Among the hundreds of Ramayanas, each telling differs from the other. Hence, it is not incorrect to say that each telling is an appropriation of the kernel Rama story. Obviously, almost all tellings have similarities, but not two tellings are alike. Even though Rama is typically depicted as the central character in most of the stories, there are still renditions where Ravana, the story's so-called antagonist in general, is portrayed as the central figure. Some Jain tellings present Ravana as a tragic hero who encounters hamartia, the tragic flaw, because of his basic passion for Sita. Again, some narratives project Sita as the protagonist. Hence, various tellings of the Ramayana, under different titles, result in each storyteller or group adapting the Rama story to suit their own narrative.

Appropriation of the Ramayana began in the first phase of its development when travelling bards orally transmitted the story. It was a period before Valmiki's compilation of the Ramayana. The travelling bards used to tell the stories of the moral principles and heroic deeds of the benevolent king Rama from place to place. These Rama-ballads do not exist today in their original form. However, these ballads

serve as the foundation for most subsequent retellings of the Ramayana, including Valmiki's rendition. Sarvepalli Gopal and others argue:

The events of the story of Rama, originally told in the Rama-Katha which is no longer available to us, were rewritten in the form of a long epic poem, the Ramayana, by Valmiki. Since this is a poem and much of it could have been fictional, including characters and places, historians cannot accept the personalities, events, or locations as historically authentic unless there is other supporting evidence from sources regarded as more reliable by historians. Very often, historical evidence contradicts popular beliefs. (76)

The Rama-ballads were transmitted primarily in the courts of the then rulers. The balladeers could easily make possible alterations to the kernel story of the ballads according to the needs and interests of the courtiers in some particular episodes. Hence, the Ramayana has been appropriated since its earliest appearance as ballads. In spite of the sameness in the basic plot and events in the Rama story, there was heterogeneity in the course of this oral telling due to its appropriations. The tastes and interests of the courtiers and courts where these oral transmissions took place varied from time to time and place to place. Some courts and courtiers demanded the verses about particular characters such as Rama and Sita or events such as Rama's exile, Ravana's deeds, and so on. The bards, aiming to please the court and courtiers and receive rewards from kings, embellished tales with exaggerated heroism, including those of the protagonist and others. Subsequently, these itinerant singers started to adapt Rama's story for their audience. These actions indicate that the appropriation of the Ramayana began as early as its inception. Bulcke writes:

The Ramayana at first became the property of itinerant professional singers, who knew the poem by heart and transmitted it orally to their successors. Through inadvertence, perhaps they occasionally changed the original sequence of the verses, and also they duplicated some of the more popular passages and even, at times, added new incidents. (*Other Essays* 23)

As the itinerant singers succeeded in adopting the story, numerous other tellings, including the popular *Valmiki Ramayana*, also managed to appropriate the Rama story in later times. Hence, hundreds of Ramayanas spread in diverse cultures since their composition until today are a form of appropriation as well. Through these manifold appropriations, the Ramayana was brought up in its diversities and cultural pluralities. Through the adaptations of various tellings, the protagonist Rama also began to be appropriated with the colourings of *maryada purushottam* or a righteous hero, incarnation of God, and son on.

Valmiki, being the first poet to synthesise Rama-ballads into an epic, might have shaped the narrative according to his social context. The general assumption that *Valmiki Ramayana* was the only authentic telling and all others were derivations of it lacks validity. As these ballads were manipulated by the folk singers themselves according to their needs, it is plausible that Valmiki also engaged in a similar process. As all available Ramayanas themselves are appropriations of the kernel story, Valmiki's rendition itself can be seen as an adaptation in its own right. It was believed that Valmiki was the poet who authored the original Ramayana. However, the role of Valmiki was to compile and consolidate the prevalent orally transmitted ballads of his time.

While the Valmiki telling is not typically regarded as the authoritative rendition among the various narratives, there existed an original rendition of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. However, today's accessible *Valmiki Ramayana* is not the original creation by Valmiki, but rather an interpolated one. Certainly, the genuine text authored by Valmiki is no longer extant. Nevertheless, scholarly investigations indicate the existence of an authentic rendition of Valmiki's narrative, distinct from the presently available text. Even though the earliest form of Valmiki telling is unavailable today, the three noted recensions of the present-day Valmiki rendition affirm the original Valmiki text. Bulcke remarks that a comparison of the three recensions of the vulgate *Valmiki Ramayana*, that is, the commonly accepted Valmiki telling of today, will bring the facts to the readers that they do not possess the poem as composed by Valmiki. An analysis of the interpolation of the existing Valmiki telling will describe the transformation of the original epic into the vulgate *Ramayana* (*Other Essays* 21).

Presently, three recensions are in use. They are the Southern recension, the Bengal recension and a third one, the North-Western recension. Each recension, though showing sameness in its kernel story, has many stanzas that are not seen in the other. The reason for this difference is that *Valmiki Ramayana*, transmitted orally in ancient times, was shaped into a written text over centuries. Bulcke records in detail regarding the three recensions as:

The *Ramayana* of Valmiki has come down to us in three different recensions. The most widespread of these is known as the Southern recension and has often been printed at Bombay and in the South. Then there

is the Bengal recension which was edited by G. Gorresio and published at Paris between the years 1843 and 1867 and also by Calcutta Sanskrit series between the years 1935 and 1942. The third recension, the North Western recension, was published by the D.A.V. College, Lahore between the years 1923 and 1947. (*Other Essays* 21-22)

Bulcke adds that each of these recensions has a considerable number of verses, including long passages and entire cantos that are absent from one or both of the other recensions. It seems plausible that all three recensions were written down independently and on the basis of a text that had been transmitted orally over the course of several centuries. He asserts that even though there are more additional passages in the Southern recension than the other two recensions, this recension seems to be closer to the original (*Other Essays* 22-24).

From the above exposition, it is clear that these three recensions are on the basis of an original Valmiki telling transmitted either orally or in the written mode. The presently available *Valmiki Ramayana* is a telling that has evolved through the interpolations of the original telling. Through the process of adding new episodes, the epic has been transformed into the Ramayana as we know it today.

Bulcke claims that out of the seven *kandas* or chapters, the first *Balakanda* and the last *Uttarakanda* are proved to be later additions. For Valmiki, Rama is purely a human and the concept of incarnation came later after the transformation of the original Valmiki telling. The preternatural elements and the religious colourings of the presently existing Valmiki rendition came as part of the interpolations. Scholarly enquiries state that the events such as the golden deer episode, the burning

of Lanka by Hanuman, the flight of Hanuman to the Himalayas, the fire ordeal of Sita and the return to Ayodhya in the aerial chariot are later interpolations (*Other Essays* 26–27).

The way in which the bards transmitted ballads prior to Valmiki's compilation, *Valmiki Ramayana* was also recited by the itinerant singers from court to court. Valmiki himself had depended on the prevailing popular Rama-ballads while compiling his telling. The itinerant singers started propagating the heroic trajectory of Rama soon after Valmiki shaped the story into an epic form. In order to impress the audience, they used their expertise to exaggerate the events and deeds of noted characters in the story. Hence, the original *Valmiki Ramayana* evolved into a new Ramayana, incorporating numerous preternatural events and episodes. Bulcke asserts:

The most gifted among the itinerant singers who earned their living by reciting Valmiki's masterpiece and who knew thousands of *ślokas* by heart had no difficulty in enlarging those portions which were most popular and in adding new items to satisfy the curiosity of their listeners. The interpolations in the genuine books are mostly duplications of events, repetitions of pathetic passages and, especially, additions of marvellous and preternatural happenings such as the episode of the golden deer, of Hanuman's burning tail, of his flight to the Himalayas, and of the fire-ordeal of Sita. (*Other Essays* 27)

The new additions of episodes and modifications to the existing events in the original Valmiki rendition served as the basis for the appropriation of the currently

existing *Valmiki Ramayana*. The itinerant singers of the original Valmiki telling appropriated the story of Rama through numerous interpolations. Hence, *Valmiki Ramayana*, similar to all other tellings, is an appropriated version of the kernel Rama story. Bulcke delineates that Valmiki's original telling was a story without the depiction of preternatural events and later interpolations, unlike what we see in today's Valmiki rendition. He sums up the original Valmiki story:

Once upon a time, there was a prince of Ayodhya and his name was Rama. Due to the cunning of his step-mother, he was banished for a time to the forests. He went into exile and his wife, Sita, and his brother, Laksmana, gladly went with him. While they were living in the forest, an aboriginal chieftain kidnapped Sita. Rama rescued his faithful Sita, but only after many adventures and with the help of friendly aboriginal tribes. Then the time came for his exile to end for him to return to his kingdom. He returned to Ayodhya, was crowned and reigned for many years. (*Other Essays* 40–41)

As mentioned earlier, Valmiki's original narrative, stripped of interpolations and adaptations, seems to be an assimilation of the prevalent popular Rama-ballads during Valmiki's era. The present Valmiki telling has also evolved from its original form through interpolations. Likewise, every existing Ramayana narrative is an adaptation of a kernel Rama story or any other telling to suit distinct social milieus. These adaptations and appropriations comprise various realms such as religion, culture, history, science and politics.

Religious Appropriation

Since their inception, the Ramayana narratives have been adapted by various religions. Various religious groups including, Buddhists, Jains, Hindus and others, have been involved in assimilating prevalent Rama stories into their respective religious faiths. They have appropriated the Ramayana in accordance with their religious customs and traditions.

Buddhism is a religion founded by Siddhartha Gautama (also known by the names Gautama Buddha or Mahatma Buddha), who lived in South Asia during the sixth or the fifth century BCE. Buddha, the wandering ascetic and spiritual teacher of Buddhism, was born in Lumbini, present-day Nepal, according to Buddhist legends. The Buddhist narrative is possibly the earliest religious appropriation of the Ramayana. Buddhists posited more than one rendition of the Ramayana. The ideals of Buddhism were disseminated in ancient India and some areas of Southeast Asia, along with Jainism, during the closing centuries of BCE. Though Valmiki is hailed as *Aadikavi*, the Ramayanas of Buddhists and Jains can be juxtaposed or traced back to it. Suvira Jaiswal writes:

The ancient Indian tradition has preserved at least three main versions of the Ram story, the brahmanical, the Buddhist and the Jaina. Although the beautiful poem of Valmiki, who is known as the *Aadikavi*, 'the first author of ornate poetry', played a role in stereotyping the framework of the Ram narrative, traces of earlier divergent versions may be found in non-brahmanical, that is, Buddhist and Jain sources. (89)

Since the ancient period onwards, Buddhists have paid attention to the orally transmitted Rama stories and attempted to assimilate them into their religious traditions thereafter. They did not hesitate to appropriate the Ramayana according to their social milieu. Gradually, the Rama story embedded in their cultural heritage also became an essential element of the Buddhists' *Jataka* tales of the past lives of Gautama Buddha.

There are diverse adaptations such as *Dasaratha Jataka*, *Anamakam Jataka* and *Dasaratha Katanam*. Each telling emerged in consonance with the tradition in which that storytelling existed. Buddhists manipulated the Rama story as part of their *Jatakas*, which contained a series of stories about Mahatma Buddha, the leading Buddhist monk. Mahatma Buddha played a vital role in the *Jatakas*, appearing in incarnations as both humans and animals. Those who were instrumental in spreading the ideals of Buddhism had deliberately claimed the possession of these ancient folk tales, appropriating them to attract adherents of their faith.

In Bulcke's view, Buddhists and, much later, Jains adapted the Rama story to their religious beliefs. In several *Jatakas*, Rama came to be considered a Bodhisatva. Jains, for their part, created a vast Rama literature wherein Rama is one of the sixty-three Mahapurusas (*Other Essays* 28). *Dasaratha Jataka*, one of the prominent Ramayana narratives in Buddhist tradition, presents the story told by Mahatma Buddha in order to console a man who has lost his father. Buddha reminds him that learnt people in ancient times did not shed tears over the demise of their parents, citing Rama as an instance. Rama bravely faced the situation caused by the death of his father. In this *Jataka*, the narrator concentrates on Rama's valour to overcome a

miserable juncture. Bulcke observes that Buddhists have adapted and placed Rama stories in their *Jatakas* since ancient times. Buddhists are skilled at assimilating popular stories in Rama-ballads. There are three *Jatakas* in Buddhist literature and *Dasaratha Jataka* is the most popular and reputed among these. Scholarly enquiries have remarked that *Dasaratha Jataka* contains the kernel Rama story (*Ramakatha* 74).

This *Jataka* presents Rama as Ramapandita, Sita, Sita Devi and Lakshmana in the same name. Their father, Dasaratha, king of Varanasi, is compelled to hear the demand of his new wife that her son Bharatakumara be the heir instead of Rama, Dasaratha's choice. In accordance with Dasaratha's boon to his new queen, Bharatakumara is crowned, sending Ramapandita into exile for twelve years. The king had already suggested Ramapandita and Lakshmana leave either for any forest or a country in order to get rid of the conspiracy from within the court. Sita Devi also accompanies them while they set out for the Himalayas. Despite the death of King Dasaratha, after nine years of their departure, Ramapandita refuses to come back to court owing to his father's demand of twelve years of exile. Ramapandita sends Sita Devi and Lakshmana with Bharatakumara, who comes in search of him, as his return will be hailed as the breach of a promise given to his father. Bharatakumara gets Ramapandita's sandals, in his absence, as a backing for his reign as new king. Rama also returns soon after his exile and rules Varanasi for thousands of years, marrying his own sister, Sita Devi. Richard Gombrich states:

Bharata then asks Rama why he is not grieving and Rama gives him the verse homily. After that he says his exile has three years to run, but gives

Bharata his straw sandals to rule in his stead. Bharata returns with Lakkhana and Sita. The sandals are put on the throne when the ministers give judgment, and if the judgment is wrong they clap together, if it is right they stay quiet. After three years Rama comes home; he marries Sita (sic) and rules for sixteen thousand years. (434)

This is the Ramayana related in *Dasaratha Jataka*. The fundamental disparity seen here from the other Ramayanas is that Ramapandita, Lakshmana and Sita Devi are siblings, and Ramapandita and Sita Devi marry each other by the story's end. Even though the duration of exile is generally hailed as fourteen years, for *Dasaratha Jataka* it is twelve. Here, Buddhists assimilate the story through the advice of Buddha to console a man lamenting his father's death. The diversity is seen in the marriage between Ramapandita and his sister. In the 1993 Ramayana exhibition held in Delhi, this episode invited an aggressive protest from hindutva activists for representing Sita as Rama's consort. Richman writes regarding this incident:

On August 12, 1993 about fifteen members of the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad), along with its youth affiliate organisation, destroyed the exhibit to protest against references to this Buddhist telling. Later, members of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) filed charges of criminal conspiracy against the organizers of the cultural festival because it depicted Rama and Sita as brother and sister. ("Questioning" 2)

Anamakam Jataka is another Ramayana in Buddhist tradition. Bulcke writes that this *Jataka* was translated into Chinese in the third century BC, and the Indian kernel story of this narrative remains unavailable. This rendition, though the

characters are unnamed, portrays numerous events in the Ramayana, including Rama's exile, the abduction of Sita and subsequent trials and the battle between Bali and Sugriva. Here, Rama or Bodhisatva leaves his kingdom, expecting an attack from his uncle. In the forest, Bodhisattva's queen is abducted by one Naga who resides in the ocean. Rama comes back and begins to search for her with the help of the *Vanara* army. They rescue the queen with the assistance of Lord Indra, and then Rama and Sita come back to their kingdom. Later, townsfolk suspect and gossip about the purity of Sita as she has been away from her husband. As the king questions the queen, she goes inside the earth through a trench formed after her words (*Ramakatha* 76–77).

Here, Buddhists alter Rama as Bodhisatva, one of the Buddhist monks. The episode of the Bali-Bodhisatva battle has been skilfully appropriated in order to suit the Buddhist tradition. Bali is not killed by Bodhisatva; instead, he flees on witnessing Bodhisattva's preparation with arrows. It is conceivable that Buddhists cannot even imagine a Buddhist monk involving himself in such a grave crime.

Again, another Buddhist narrative *Dasaratha Katanam* tells the least developed Rama story in this tradition. The story's plot in general is in consonance with the other Ramayana narrations. However, the striking dissimilarity seen here is the lack of a leading figure, Sita. Bulcke describes the story of this rendition in *Ramakatha*. Rama, Lomana alias Lakshmana, Bharata and Sathrughna are the sons of King Dasaratha. The King ruled Jambu Island during an ancient time when humans' lifespans were around ten thousand years. Rama and Lomana are compelled

to leave for exile for a prescribed period of time. After his exile, Rama keeps his promise to Bharatakumara by assuming the role of king (78–79).

The Buddhist religious tradition has these three Rama stories, which show dissimilarities in the basic plot, characters and other events in the story despite their common thread and context. As we all know, Buddhism, along with Jainism, was spread and propagated in ancient India and much of Asia during a period between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. During the early stages of the Ramayana's evolution, Buddhists intentionally manipulated and appropriated the orally transmitted Rama-ballads.

The Jain telling is one of the most developed forms of Ramayana narratives. There are mainly two Jain renditions, which are believed to have come out during a period between the first and sixth centuries CE. In this sense, these stories seem to have been profoundly influenced by the original *Valmiki Ramayana* in addition to other orally transmitted tellings. Unlike Hindu and Buddhist Ramayanas, the Jain narrative is considerably logical. Jains managed to rationalise all the preternatural narrations of the existing Rama story. Corresponding to Buddhists, Jains also tried to incorporate the prevailing Rama stories and their noted characters into their tradition. Major characters of the Ramayana, such as Rama, Ravana and Lakshmana, are represented as Mahapurushas, the great men. They are also hailed as Tirthankaras, the moral advisers and supreme preachers in the Jain tradition. The two prominent Jain tellings are Vimalasuri's *Paumacariya* (Prakrit for the Sanskrit *Padmacarita*) and Gunabhadra's *Uttarapurana*.

Vimalasuri attempts to appropriate Rama's story according to the ideals of Jainism. *Paumacariya* means 'the life of Padma.' He presents Rama by the names Rama, Pauma, Padma, Ramadeva and Raghava. The story is narrated by Sage Gautama, one of the disciples of Mahavira, the founder and the last Tirthankara of Jainism, while he is asked by King Srenika to tell the original version of the Rama story. Instead of beginning with the narration of Rama and his clan, Vimalasuri opens by illustrating the tale of Ravana. Despite the similarities to the *Uttarakanda* of Valmiki, the story of Ravana details considerable changes from it. Savita Chhikara argues:

The earliest of the Jaina Ramayana took final shape in the composition of the Prakrit Epic Paumacaryam of Vimala Suri. The title *Paumacariya* means "The life of Padma," i.e., Rama. According to the testimony of the author himself, *Paumacariya* was written 530 years after the emancipation of Lord Mahavira, i.e., the first century A.D (179).

In hundreds of diverse Rama stories, it is seen that Ravana is a born villain. However, Vimalasuri begins *Paumacariya* narrating the birth and growth of Ravana and his clan. For him, Ravana no longer carries Hindu values but Jain ideals. Ravana (also Dasamukha) had two brothers, Bhanukarnna (Kumbhakarnna) and Vibheeshana and a sister, Chandranakha (Shurpanakha). Though he defeats Kubera, Indra and Varuna, Ravana is not an aggressive demon as presented in all other narratives. Ramanujan delineates:

When we enter the world of Jains tellings, the Rama story no longer carries Hindu values. Indeed, the Jaina texts express the feeling that the Hindus,

especially the Brahmins, have maligned Ravana, made him into a villain." In response to King Srenika's query, Gautama, the sage who narrates the original Rama story, says to him, "I'll tell you what Jaina wise men say. Ravana is not a demon; he is not a cannibal or a flesh eater. Wrong-thinking poetasters and fools tell these lies. (34)

Paumacariya presents a unique story appropriating the core characters, especially Ravana. Unlike the aggressive and brave *Rakshasa* king in other tellings, Ravana is a coward Jain figure who intends to renovate the decayed Jain temples. He hinders those who are conducting *yagnas* or offerings in which animals are sacrificed. According to Ramanujan, *Paumacariya* opens not with Rama's genealogy and greatness but with Ravana. Vimalasuri presents Ravana as a noble and learnt man who earns all his magical powers and weapons through *tapas* or austerities, as he is a devotee of Jain masters. To please one of them, he even takes a vow that he will not touch any unwilling woman. Thus, Ravana is appropriated as a Jain figure with noble qualities. Ramanujan elaborates:

Furthermore, since the Jains consider themselves rationalists—unlike the Hindus, who, according to them, are given to exorbitant and often bloodthirsty fancies and rituals—they systematically avoid episodes involving miraculous births (Rama and his brothers are born in the normal way), blood sacrifices, and the like (35).

As Jains themselves follow rational thoughts in life, they do not agree with preternatural accounts in connection with the characters and other events in the telling. Ravana is a person with ten heads in most of the tellings, especially in Hindu

Ramayanas. A Jain with essential logic, Vimalasuri does not believe in such an irrational account and thus adapts that event logically to suit the Jain belief. Robert P. Goldman observes:

Certainly, early Sanskrit literature reveals a notable inclination towards rationalism, as evidenced by various Jain scholars' criticisms of certain Hindu doctrines and their reinterpretation of epics through a rationalist lens. For instance, Vimalasuri, the author of the Prakrit Ramayana called the *Paumacariya*, presents a perspective devoid of talking monkeys, portraying them instead as tribal factions utilising the monkey as their emblem. Similarly, the attribution of ten heads to Ravana is explained not as a literal description but rather as stemming from his wearing a necklace adorned with nine dazzling gems that reflected the image of his single head. (85)

Jains rationalise the ten-headed demon conception of Ravana. The name Dasamukha is attributed to him by his father, Ratnasravav, in connection with a garland. When Ravana is born, his mother puts a necklace of nine gems around his neck. Ravana's father sees his face reflected in them ninefold and hence calls him Dasamukha or the ten-faced one. Thus, the most celebrated characteristic of Ravana's gigantic figure is logically appropriated in *Paumacariya*. Similarly, *Vanaras* in the Ramayana are also not monkeys but a clan of celestials who are hailed as *Vidyadharas* according to Jains. In fact, they are actually related to Ravana and his family through their great-grandfathers. They have monkeys as emblems on their flags and hence the name *Vanara*.

The supernatural colouring surrounding the birth of Sita is also shunned from *Paumacariya*. In most of the other Ramayanas, Sita is the adopted daughter of Janaka, king of Mithila, whereas she is the biological daughter of Janaka in *Paumacariya*. Other Rama stories celebrate Sita as the daughter of Earth. She is found from the field of Mithila by farmers. Janaka, who is living a life of anguish for the lack of a child, adopts Sita. However, Jain *Paumacariya* rationalises the story by presenting Sita as the biological daughter of Janaka. Jains manipulate the preternatural elements surrounding Sita's birth according to the Jain tradition. For Jains, these stories seemed illogical and hence unacceptable.

The slaying of Shambuka, an untouchable, by Rama is one of the most infamous episodes in many tellings. *Paumacariya* treats this episode differently. While most of the Ramayana narratives tell the story that the slaying of Shambuka is committed by Rama, in *Paumacariya* Lakshmana kills Shambuka. This telling projects the killing of Shambuka as the root cause of Sita's abduction. Shambuka, son of Chandranakha, secures a sword called Surya Khadgam. Lakshmana beheads Shambuka. Chandranakha is aware of the catastrophe that has happened to her son. She encounters Rama and Lakshmana, hoping to become the wife of either of them. However, the attempt is a futile one. This causes the active involvement of Ravana and Kharadoosha, Chandranakha's husband, in a war. Seeing Sita, Ravana is really enthralled by her beauty and manages to abduct Sita.

The battle between Rama and Ravana is also skilfully appropriated in *Paumacariya*. While the battle is in progress, Ravana sends a messenger towards the *Vanara* army in order to make a compromise sending Sita back. Later, Ravana tries

to threaten Sita by gaining strength through his *tapas*. Again, Sita's seamless love toward her husband Rama leads Ravana to repent, and thus he decides to return Sita after he defeats Rama and the *Vanara* army. However, before the battle is over, Ravana is killed by Lakshmana, not Rama. While most of the Rama stories present the killing of Ravana by Rama, this Jain telling attributes the event to Lakshmana. After the victory, Rama finds Sita in Lanka, and there is no mention of ordeals. According to *Paumacariya*, Lakshmana has 16,000 wives and Rama, 8,000.

As Jains follow the path of rationalism, their Ramayana is also rationalistic in nature. Hence, *Paumacariya* has been considered one of the logical versions of the Rama story. Bulcke argues that resembling Buddhists, Jains have also assimilated the Ramayana. Compared to the Buddhist telling, the Jain rendition is broad and established due to its distinguished representation of Ravana's genealogy. For Buddhists, Rama is an incarnation, whereas Ravana is a key figure in the Jain tradition. (*Ramakatha* 80–82).

Uttarapurana is quite different from *Paumacariya*, where Sita has been depicted as Ravana and Mandodari's legitimate daughter. This has been one of the most astonishing Ramayana tellings, as it presents a radical view of Sita's birth. Only this telling conveys logically how Sita is born biologically and later appeared in the burrow of Mithila's field. Although most of the stories state that Sita is Janaka's adopted daughter, very few stories reveal how Sita reaches the burrows. However, this Gunabhadra narrative logically predicts how Sita is born in Mandodari's womb. The Tibetan Ramayana and a few other tellings also opine that Sita is the legitimate daughter of Ravana.

As observed by Bulcke, Gunabhadra presents Ravana as Dasanana, son of Pulasthya, in the clan of *Vidyadhara*. Dasanana is enthralled by the beauty of Manimathi, daughter of Amitavega, and disturbs her while she is offering *tapas*. Having been disturbed, she curses Dasanana that she will kill him after taking birth as his daughter. She then dies soon and finds a place in Mandodari's womb. One astrologer predicts that the new child will cause the destruction of its father. In order to obey the orders of Dasasana, Maricha, one of Dasanana's men, puts the child in a box and leaves it in a dig in Mithila's agricultural field. Janaka adopts her as his own daughter, naming her Sita. Later, Sita gets married to Rama, the prince of Varanasi. Rama also marries seven women and Lakshmana, sixteen. Later, they reside in Dasaratha's Varanasi (*Ramakatha* 91–92).

Uttarapurana transcends almost all other Rama stories in its religious appropriation. Unlike most of the other tellings, it logically illustrates Sita's birth and life before she is found in the burrow and thus succeeds in describing the oft-repeated queries in connection with Sita's birth. Jainism, being a religion encouraging a rationalistic way of life, cannot present Sita as the mere adopted daughter by hiding her past. This telling is quite different from both Valmiki and Vimalasuri as it posits a radical episode regarding Sita's birth, Ravana and Bali's killing by Lakshmana and Ravana's disguise as Rama during the abduction of Sita. Sita's birth as the legitimate daughter of Ravana has been the most astonishing event of this appropriation. Regarding Ravana's killing by Lakshmana, Ramanujan explains:

Here, Rama does not even kill Ravana, as he does in the Hindu Ramayanas.

For Rama is an evolved Jaina soul who has conquered his passions; this is his last birth, so he is loath to kill anything. It is left to Laksmana to kill enemies, and according to inexorable Jaina logic it is Laksmana who goes to hell while Rama finds release. (35)

Ramanujan delineates that Jains kept appropriating the Ramayana by connecting it to their ancient *puranas*. Jainism posits a myth named *pratipurana*, where the term *prati* means anti or counter. According to Jain myth, *Prativasudeva*, the anti-hero, is destined to be killed by *Vasudeva*, the hero. Thus, as Lakshmana and Ravana are the hero and the anti-hero, respectively, it is not Rama but Lakshmana who is assigned to kill Ravana. Unlike Hindu Ramayanas and other stories, Rama does not kill Ravana here. Rama is an evolved soul who has conquered his passions. Rama cannot kill anyone, as it is his last birth. Hence, the task of killing Ravana goes to Lakshmana, who has to go to hell while Rama finds release. (34)

Hinduism's is the most comprehensive among all the religious appropriations of the Ramayana. This centuries'-old assimilation occurred chiefly through *bhakti* movements in India. *Adhyatma Ramayana* emerged in the twelfth century CE and extended through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, representing numerous Ramayana tellings in this tradition. Besides, the concept of *avataravada* has also significantly influenced the evolution of the Ramayana narrative within Hindu tradition. *Iramavataram*, *Ramcharitmanas*, *Adhyatma Ramayanam* *Kilippattu*, and some other tellings in this tradition have also flourished in the course

of *bhakti* movements. These purposeful adaptations strengthened the growth of Hinduism in India later. The concepts of Rama-*bhakti*, the devotion to Rama and Rama-*puja*, the worship of Rama through the ceremonial offering, emerged long after the formation of *Ramavatara*. Bulcke details:

It is plausible that there are statements about *Ramavatara* in the critique of ancient Ramakatha literature, the interpolations of *Valmiki Ramayana*, and various parts of the *Mahabharata*. In one of the additions to *Yuddhakanda*, Sita is also considered the incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi. However, the review of Rama-*bhakti* is not present in the ancient Ramakatha literature. Harivamsha and the ancient Puranas do not state anything regarding Rama-*bhakti*. Hence, it is apparent that Rama-*bhakti* and Rama-*puja* came only after *Ramavatara*. Sir Ramagopala Bhandarkar states that, though Rama has been considered the incarnation of Lord Vishnu since the very outset of the Christian year, this idea took particular shape in the eleventh century.

(*Ramakatha* 161–162)

Rama's incarnation was a later appropriation by Hindu Ramayanas as part of their propagation of religion. The dispassionate perspective of the ancient *Valmiki Ramayana* shows that Rama is not an incarnation of Vishnu or any other god but a mere human being. Obviously, the concept of incarnation is a product of the later interpolations. This concept was later appropriated by the Ramayanas in Hindu tradition. Bulcke asserts:

Even in the spurious *Balakanda*, the first book of the Ramayana, the incarnation of Vishnu as Rama is referred to only in two occasions, that is, in

the *putreshtiyajna*, a holy sacrifice for the birth of children and in the encounter with Parasurama. Elsewhere Rama is always described as human. In the first *sarga*, the first chapter, for instance, Narada relates at length the excellence of Rama and compares him to Vishnu in valour, but clearly states that after his reign on earth, Rama will go to Brahmaloka. If the author of this eulogy had been aware that Rama was an incarnation of Vishnu, surely he would have mentioned the fact among his qualities and would not have placed him in Brahmaloka after his death. This reasoning is borne out by the fact that the northern recensions have changed Brahmaloka into Vishnuloka. (*Other Essays* 26)

Avataravada modified the worship of Rama by the coming of *bhakti* movements in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries CE. Bulcke states that the idea of Rama-*bhakti*, together with the worship of Krishna, was believed to have taken its birth in South Indian tradition, in the works of Aalvars. They had offered their extreme worship to Krishna and other *avatars* of Vishnu in the eighth century CE. Despite their prime importance to Krishna, they often mentioned Rama in their verses. The greatest form of Rama worship appeared in the ninth-century literary works of Kulashekhara Aalvars. In some areas of his works, he expressed his worship of Rama at length (*Ramakatha* 162).

The Ramayana telling from various perspectives, including the *avataravada*, began either at the dawn of the Christian era or a few centuries after the compilation of Valmiki's original *Ramayana*. There were interpolations based on the *avataravada* and other factors after that. The later developments of the Rama story

gradually began in consonance with the *avataravata* and the ensuing divinisation of Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu. This divinisation and the *avataravada* gave rise to the coming of preternatural elements in the later interpolations of the Rama story. Bulcke shares a valuable insight:

The divinization of Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu was responsible to the great extent for the preternatural element in the later interpolation of the Ramayana. In a similar way, the rise of Rama-bhakti and its growth and development after the tenth century CE was responsible for a complete change of atmosphere in the later Rama-stories. From this time on, the Ramayanas are first and foremost religious books; Rama is no longer as avatara of Vishnu; he is the all-merciful, supreme God, who becomes manifest on earth to bestow mercy and saving grace on mankind. (*Other Essays* 41)

Since the spreading of the ideas of *Ramavatara*, common people tended to believe in them. Later, Tulsidas, in his poem *Ramcharitmanas*, shaped the concept of the worship of Rama. As Rama-bhakti grew, it was the need of the hour to mould the existing Ramayanas in the background of the worship of Rama. Among these, the notable Ramayana renditions are *Adhyatma Ramayana*, *Ananda Ramayana*, *Atbhuta Ramayana*, and the like. *Adhyatma Ramayana* interpreted Valmiki *Ramayana* in the light of Rama-bhakti based on the Vedanta philosophy. This Ramayana served as a seminal reference for *Ramcharitmanas*. Gradually, Hindu Ramayanas gained acceptance through *bhakti* movements and *avataravada*.

The continuous and comprehensive interpolations resulted in the various appropriations of the Rama story, especially as Hindu religious stories. The original Valmiki telling does not contain a reference to Rama as an incarnation. Later interpolations in *Balakanda* and other chapters of the Ramayana have gradually turned the original Valmiki telling into a religious narrative. In order to gain wider acceptance, several mythical stories were incorporated into *Balakanda*. These Puranic stories were influenced by the then Brahminical Hinduism in India, as *Valmiki Ramayana* was written in Sanskrit. From the above exposition, it is evident that in the course of the evolution of the Ramayana as a religious text in Hindu tradition, *avataravadas* and *bhakti* movements have played a vital role.

Balakanda mentions the *avatara* of Rama only on two occasions, namely, in the *putreshtiyajna* and in the meeting of Rama with Parasurama. However, as the evidence suggests, during *Balakanda*'s composition, Rama was not treated as an incarnation. Rama had rather been compared to Vishnu than presented as a godly figure. Rama returns to Brahmaloka instead of Vishnuloka after his mission on earth. Rama is presented as an incarnation in the interpolated *slokas* of *Ayodhyakanda* also. There are no other instances of *avataravada* in this chapter. *Aranyakanda* and *Kishkindakanda* never indicate any signs of *avataravada* in them. *Sundarakanda* likens Rama to Vishnu but does not call Rama an incarnation. However, *Yuddhakanda* contains a greater number of interpolations of *avataravada*. Three recensions of the Ramayana on *Yuddhakanda* approve of the story of Rama as an incarnation of Vishnu. Some later additions to this chapter supply instances for the *avataravada*. Through various recensions, it is proven that Narada and others remind Rama of his duty as an incarnation. *Uttarakanda* has a profusion of elements

of incarnation. Here, Sita is also considered as an incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi.

From the above, it is obvious that a peripheral perusal of the three recensions does not provide any common evidence for the idea of *avataravada*. The contexts that provide elements of *avataravada* are the interpolated portions. Most of the characters in the Ramayana are not aware of Rama as the incarnation of Vishnu. Even Sita is unable to respond to Ravana while he presents Rama as an ordinary man. Bulcke comments, “When Ravana compels Sita to abandon Rama, the mere ordinary huma, Sita abstains from replying that Rama is not an ordinary human. During the time of war, Sita also did not believe that Rama was an immortal being.” (*Ramakatha* 143)

The original *Valmiki Ramayana* does not offer examples of the episodes of *avataravada*. Hence, it is clear that the idea of *avataravada* is not an early one but emerged in the course of the evolution of Rama's story. An inquiry into the internal conflicts and plot of the Ramayana suggests Rama is often compared to Vishnu several times. The idea of comparison, unlike the idea of incarnation, shows that both Rama and Vishnu are two. Not only the characters, but the author of the telling himself tries to compare Rama with Vishnu.

According to Bulcke, in the Valmiki narrative, Indra is more dominant than Vishnu. Rama is more compared to Indra than to Vishnu. Rama is compared to Vishnu eighteen times and Indra seventy-seven times. From this, it is apparent that Indra enjoys a greater position. According to Vedic literature, Indra is a mighty deity. This concept of Indra as a god might have influenced Valmiki while

compiling the original telling. (*Ramakatha* 144) Thus, the idea of *avataravada* is not a part of the original *Valmiki Ramayana* but a result of a later interpolation. The comparison of Rama to Indra is a later addition. These comparisons were purposefully appropriated later as the *avatara* and divinisation of Rama by the coming of *bhakti* movements.

Avataravada and the divinisation of Rama during the early centuries of the Christian era and the subsequent rise of Rama-*bhakti* after the tenth century facilitated the establishment of the *Ramayana* as a religious text in Hindu tradition. Gradually, Rama evolved from an incarnation of Vishnu to the supreme God. Bulcke opines that this course of action led to the advent of *Adhyatma Ramayana* and some other narratives such as *Atbhuta Ramayana* and *Ananda Ramayana*. The concept of *avataravada* originated long before the advent of Hinduism. Later, the *Ramayana* was manipulated according to the need and propagation of that religion. Gradually, an epic creation was purposefully appropriated into a religious text (*Ramakatha* 165).

Bhakti movements in India linked *avataravada* to the Rama story. Hinduism gradually appropriated the episodes of the story into its tradition under the tremendous influence of *bhakti* movements. Eventually, it led to the composition of *Adhyatma Ramayana*, *Ananda Ramayana*, *Atbhuta Ramayana*, *Ramcharitmanas*, *Iramavataram*, *Adhyatma Ramayanam Kilippattu*, and so on.

Adhyatma Ramayana, one of the canonical *Ramayana* narratives, is believed to be the first *Ramayana* text written in a spiritual and devotional background. Bulcke notes that, the entire text has been written within the framework of Advaita

Vedanta, the spiritual idea of Shankaracharya (*Ramakatha* 165). *Adhyatma Ramayana* is a work that is believed to have been written either in the fourteenth or the fifteenth century CE as a later portion of the Brahmanda Purana, a mythical story. The authorship of the work has been attributed to Ramamanada, one of the leading lights of the *bhakti* movement. The text, written in a dialogue form between Shiva and Parvati, contains the ideal traits and righteous conduct of Rama and matters related to devotion and morality. The text had a tremendous impact on the Rama stories that followed (*Ramakatha* 177–78).

Adhyatma Ramayana presents the Rama story in a spiritual context and Rama as a supreme Brahmin in the tradition of Vaishnavism, a Hindu religious sect. Through this telling, the Ramayana literature emerged as a story in a pure spiritual context. Gradually, the book was accepted as a religious text, and its story as a divine allegory. The text later tremendously influenced many Ramayanas in a spiritual scenario, including *Ramcharitmanas*. The story presents Rama as an *avatara* descended to Earth as a human in order to eliminate *Rakshasas* (demons) such as Ravana, the so-called antagonist of most of the Ramayanas.

Adhyatma Ramayana has been instrumental in the later developments of Rama stories in Hindu tradition. This has been the most important Ramayana among traditional Ramayanas. *Atbhuta Ramayana* and *Ananda Ramayana* are deeply rooted in the background of *Adhyatma Ramayana* tradition. *Ramcharitmanas* has also emerged from its influence. All the Ramayanas evolved through *Adhyatma Ramayana* tradition and *bhakti* movements have a significant role in establishing Valmiki's epic as a Hindu text.

Adhyatma Ramayana purposefully appropriated the religious importance of the Rama story. Thus, Rama, a mere human being in Valmiki's epic, has been manipulated as a religious icon by establishing him as an *avatara*, following the spiritual background of *Adhyatma Ramayana*. The story is narrated by God Siva and his consort Parvati in a dialogue form. This is the best instance of a religious appropriation of the Ramayana in Hindu tradition. Rai Bahadur Lala Baij Nath states:

The *Adhyatma Ramayana* forms part of the *Brahmanada Purana*. Here, the story of Rama is narrated by God Mahadeva to his consort Parvati in the form of a dialogue so that its message could be propagated as effectively as that of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the so-called sacred text of Hindus. The passage of many centuries has not succeeded in abating either the freshness of its appeal or the veneration in which it is held. It is this that provided the impetus to Tulsidas for his *Ramcharitmanas*. (i)

Lala Baij Nath affirms that Valmiki's *Ramayana* is an epic poem where Rama is portrayed as intensely human. He is in pursuit of those lofty ideals which everyone, from the dawn of creation, has aspired to. The *Adhyatma Ramayana* is a didactic poem in which Rama is depicted as a personification of supreme spirit, so that he could be used as a vehicle for the exposition of the Vedic doctrine of *anadi avidya* (beginningless error), the *bhakti marga* (path of devotion), and the *jnana marga* (path of knowledge). (i)

From the above exposition, it is evident that the original *Valmiki Ramayana* is exclusively a literary creation without religious significance, whereas *Adhyatma*

Ramayana is a didactic poem teaching and guiding Hindus in spiritual and moral principles. Though major episodes in *Adhyatma Ramayana* correspond to those in *Valmiki Ramayana* with the similarities in the plot, the tone is different. The differences can also be discerned in the formulation of characters, including the protagonist and some other incidents. The language and tone used in *Adhyatma Ramayana* is obviously devotional.

The *Ramayana* was released from the influence of brahmanical Hinduism with the emergence of this movement. Before the *bhakti* movement, which earned a popular identity for the *Ramayana*, the *Ramayana* was exclusively reserved for the elite class. Numerous *Ramayanas* arose in diverse languages, including regional varieties, when Sanskrit was reserved only for a set of elite-class communities in those days. Vedic literature and epics were restricted to this particular group. However, *bhakti* movements liberated the *Ramayana* from the dominance of these privileged groups. These narratives in the regional languages popularised the *Ramayana* among the marginalised.

Unlike the original *Valmiki Ramayana*, *Adhyatma Ramayana* was pursuing *bhakti marga* or the path of devotion. *Adhyatma Ramayana* was considered a parental text of narratives in the *bhakti* tradition, including *Ramcharitmanas*. The story gained widespread acclaim from Hindus as it was established as a sacred text. The relevance and popularity of *Adhyatma Ramayana* diminished the significance of the original *Valmiki Ramayana*. *Adhyatma Ramayana* was elevated to the status of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Thus, the work has become a paragon of religious appropriation. Bulcke establishes, “this text has a great importance in the development of Rama-

bhakti, but in the development of Rama-story it has a lesser importance. The supreme aim of this text is to present Rama-*bhakti* on the basis of Vedanta ideals.”

(*Ramakatha* 178)

Ramcharitmanas has a unique place among the Ramayana narratives in Hindu tradition. This telling has been instrumental in catalysing the momentum of Rama-*bhakti*, especially in Northern India. Unlike any other Ramayana rendition, *Ramcharitmanas* has uniquely contributed to Rama-*bhakti*. Tulsidas’s telling originated in *Adhyatma Ramayana* tradition and grew by adapting various elements from both *Valmiki Ramayana* and *Adhyatma Ramayana*. The plot of *Ramcharitmanas* is in consonance with *Valmiki Ramayana*, whereas the background is completely devotional. Unlike *Valmiki Ramayana*, some new characters related to Hindu tradition, assimilating the kernel Rama story, appear in *Ramcharitmanas*. Bulcke notes:

Almost all the works of Goswami Tulsidas are in relation to Rama, his favourite god. Among these works, his *Ramcharitmanas* has received much acclaim and popularity. The stream of Rama-*bhakti* has been spread in the Hindi regions and still continues to flow even today through this single work. Hence, the importance of *Ramcharitmanas* in the development of Rama-*bhakti* is quite unique. (*Ramakatha* 247)

While *Ramcharitmanas* remains faithful to Valmiki for its plot construction, it is deeply rooted in the tradition of *Adhyatma Ramayana*. Both *Adhyatma Ramayana* and *Ramcharitmanas* show sameness in depicting God Shiva and Parvati. A dialogue between Shiva and Parvati appears in both Ramayana narratives. Bulcke

observes in *Ramakatha* that *Adhyatma Ramayana* has significantly influenced *Ramcharitmanas* not only in its spiritual thought but in its plot construction as well. Even though there are some notable modifications, Tulsi's narrative incorporates Shiva-Parvati dialogue, devotional elements, and the like from *Adhyatma Ramayana* (248). This is the way the Ramayana has been appropriated religiously in Hindu traditions. Valmiki's Rama was a prince, a warrior and a common man without any supernatural powers. However, *avataravadas*, *bhakti* movements, Rama-*bhakti* and Rama-*pūja*, adapted and appropriated the kernel Rama story according to Hindu tradition.

Ramakatha has also been appropriated by Islamic tradition in several areas including, the seventeenth-century modern Malaysian narrative *Hikayat Seri Rama*. This work is primarily a Malay literary adaptation of the Ramayana in the form of a hikayat, an Arabic word that literally means story. *Hikayat Seri Rama* translates to "Chronicle of the Great Rama." According to Ramanujan, this Malaysian rendition owes many details to Kamban's poem *Iramavataram* (33). The telling was appropriated to the Islamic tradition of the location where Malays inhabited.

In Bulcke's opinion, this Ramayana recounts the story from Ravanacharita to the union of Rama and Sita, Ravana is banished due to his misconduct and arrives at Sinhala Island. As Bulcke details in *Ramakatha*, Ravana begins his *tapas* and subsequently achieves divine powers across the four realms through the blessings of Allah, the Islamic concept of God. His *tapas* is influenced by Nabi, the prophet, and Adam, the first human created by God on earth. Ravana then returns to earth,

attaining formidable strength, and establishes the kingdom of Lankapuri along with his siblings Kumbakarna, Vibhishana, and Shurpanakha (265).

This Malaysian narrative is an instance of religious assimilation of the Ramayana through the Islamic culture of that country. Unlike all other Ramayana renditions, Ravana, having been exiled by his father, reaches the island of Sinhala. The two major figures from Islamic lineage and myth, such as Prophet Nabi and Adam, appear here in order to accommodate the tale according to the Islamic tradition. He then achieves a boon from Allah and dominates the four worlds. Ravana then weds a princess from each of these domains and becomes the father of numerous sons who go on to reign as kings. Arshia Sattar explains:

Like the many Indian *Ramayanas* that come after the so-called original Sanskrit version, the *Hikayat Seri Rama* too is not a translation of Valmiki's text. It is its own full-blooded narrative. It builds upon the Indian story, of course, but it confidently exploits the Thai, Cambodian and Javanese tellings. And although the Southeast Asian versions undoubtedly have their roots in the period between the 7th and 13th centuries when Hinduism had a strong influence in the Malacca Straits, the Malay version of the *Hikayat* that has most fully survived was finalised well after Islam was firmly established in the region, most specifically in Indonesia and Malaysia. ("Rama of Adam's Family")

Historical Appropriation

Historical appropriation of the Ramayana has been taking place ever since the Ramayana began to be adapted according to the agenda of a particular religious

group with a political agenda. Hindutva groups such as the RSS and the Sangh Parivar purportedly propagated the speculation that Ayodhya is the birthplace of Rama. Historical appropriation surrounds Rama and Ayodhya, the so-called setting of the story, by propounding the idea of a historical basis for both. These arguments show that the Ramayana is not merely a literary piece of writing but an account of the number of anecdotes surrounding the Hindu deity and king, Rama, and his kingdom of Ayodhya. The geographical settings portrayed in the story are deliberately presented as places of historical importance in the ancient period, despite their lack of solid evidence. Hence, Ayodhya, a major setting in the Ramayana literature where Rama ruled, was hailed as Ramjanmabhumi, the birthplace of Rama.

Most of the Ramayana narratives present Rama as the central figure and Ayodhya as the geographical setting. Rama was born and brought up as a prince together with his siblings in this kingdom. The emergence of *Adhyatma Ramayanas* gradually transformed Rama as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and later God Himself. Hence, Rama was proclaimed as a divine figure and the Ramayana as a sacred religious text. This divinisation had already paved the way for the development of Rama, both as a historical figure and a Hindu deity. Hence, Ayodhya, the birthplace of Rama in the story, was also attributed historical importance in Hindu tradition in general. The common belief among Hindus that Rama is a God and Ayodhya, a sacred place for Hindus, was established. This context was appropriated by a hindutva group calling Ayodhya Ramjanmabhumi with their political intentions.

The Ramayana gained a reputation as a sacred text for Hindus with the emergence of various Hindu narratives, including *Ramcharitmanas* within the *Adhyatma Ramayana* tradition. Subsequently, hindutva could establish the argument that Ayodhya is a place of historical importance for manipulating the Ramayana to implement their political agenda. They intentionally posited a movement named the Ramjanmabhumi, which means the birthplace of Rama, in order to construct a Rama temple in Ayodhya, demolishing the existing Babri Masjid. While the existence of the mosque, which was built in the year 1528 CE by the Mughal Emperor Babur, was a living reality and thus a part of history, there was no such archaeological or historical evidence claiming the Rama temple. S.P. Udayakumar asserts:

The exact location of Ayodhya is yet another controversy. Archaeological excavations at Ayodhya which is on the right bank of the Saryu river in the Faizabad district of Uttar Pradesh reveal that "the earliest settlement at Ayodhya did not go back prior to the early stage of the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) Culture" which could be assigned to circa 700 BCE. Thus if the Ramayana episode was historical, it could not have taken place earlier. Based on Valmiki's Ramayana and a few other sources, Sher Singh contends that if Valmiki's description of Ayodhya is correct, it must be some 13 to 14 miles south of the river Saryu in Nepal. The traditional lack of interest in cartography in India is not helpful to solve this riddle in any way.

(12)

The available history of the Ramayana literature and Ayodhya suggests that there is hardly a chance for Ayodhya, especially the spot of the Babri Masjid, to be

the exact birthplace of Rama. For Valmiki and other ancient Ramayana narratives, Rama was a literary figure of human status. The religious identity of Rama and the Ramayana arose only later with *Adhyatma Ramayana* tradition. Moreover, as the Ramayana is fundamentally a literary text, it is illogical to establish Ayodhya as Ramjanmabhumi. Still, hindutva could thrive in the historical assimilation of the Ramayana, projecting Rama as a historical figure and Ayodhya as his birthplace. The narrative resorted to the process of historicising the myths surrounding the Ramayana in this historical appropriation.

Being a folk epic emerged from ballads, the Ramayana's narrative is mythical in nature. In a context-sensitive country like India, there has been a persistent inclination to blend history with myth. The epic Ramayana, though a literary work that is mostly mythical in nature, is considered today more as a sacred text blended in history than a literary text. Under the auspices of some fundamentalist groups, such as hindutva organisations, the process of a deliberate attempt to historicise myth is growing intentionally for political gain. Hence, the attempt to give a historic basis is quite a deliberate manipulation and purposeful appropriation of Rama's story.

Scientific Appropriation

The Ramayana contains an episode of *Pushpaka Vimana*, the aerial chariot, where Ravana travels in it in the sky to Lanka, abducting Sita from her exile. This *Vimana* was, in fact, owned by Kubera, Ravana's relative. The *Pushpaka Vimana* episode is in fact an imagination of the Ramayana poet evolved after the interpolations of preternatural elements in the story. However, even in this modern

time, a mass audience believes that Ravana's *Pushpaka Vimana* was a real travelling vehicle used to fly in the sky during ancient times. An imaginary episode of preternatural elements in the Ramayana narrative was thus appropriated with a scientific colouring in the later periods.

The reality of flying in the sky by means of an aircraft arose only after the advent of science in recent centuries. The first original aircraft, named the 'Bright Flyer,' was invented by the American brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright in 1903. Dismissing the truth of this scientific invention and establishing *Pushpaka Vimana* in the Ramayana as a reality is a sort of scientific assimilation of the story. On the one hand, people who consider the Ramayana as a sacred text in Hinduism are the voices of this argument and on the other, hindutva organisations intentionally lead this scientific appropriation of the Ramayana. Susantha Goonatilake shares a valuable piece of information on how an Indian Hindu fundamentalist article spread the scientific importance of Ravana's *Pushpaka Vimana*. Goonatilake observes:

Taking a cue from our tourist authorities, an Indian Hindu fundamentalist article asserted that unlike Indian academics, the Sri Lankan government had declared "Rāmāyaṇa no more a myth" and had "recognized and authenticated Rāvaṇa's existence" and considered "Rāvaṇa, a part of Sri Lanka history".

For good measure, they informed that Rāvaṇa's coffin was available as was "his "airplane" Pushpak Viman together with "five airports used by Rāvan."

(12)

History is a record of what has happened in the past. Science is what is objectively proven through scientific experiments conducted in various stages. Both

of the branches of knowledge stand in sharp contrast with literature, as it never demands the elements of objectivity. It is fairly clear that both history and science are in consonance with facts and realities, whereas a literary creation is usually born out of the imagination of the author of that book. As literature is primarily an object of pleasure, poems, stories and fictions that narrate the historic account of incidents or living characters also cannot help being imaginative.

Cultural Appropriation

Innumerable Ramayana narratives have been composed since time immemorial. As the Rama story is a product of diverse cultures and traditions, each telling has differences in names, characters, events and even in the basic plot. Hence, the story of Rama has been appropriated according to diverse cultures and traditions. In other words, each rendition itself is an adaptation of the Ramayana itself. In her critique of one noted television production, Thapar calls attention to the plurality of Ramayanas in Indian history. She elaborates:

The Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history, for it has its own history, which lies embedded in the many versions that were woven around the theme at different times and places. Not only do diverse *Ramayanas* exist, each *Ramayana* text reflects the social location and ideology of those who appropriate it. The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations that changed the conceptualization of character, event, and meaning. (Foreword 4)

The plural culture of this epic is synonymous with India's diverse culture. The Ramayana was born in a period where countries did not share specific boundaries as they do today. Later, the story undergoes various stages of evolution through religions, regions, languages and so on. Hundreds of stories emerged over the ages. Not only Hinduism but all other religions, such as Buddhism, Jainism and Islam, have also popularised and purposefully appropriated Rama stories. Additionally, the story has a presence in the various regional and linguistic cultures across India and Southeast Asia. Every telling in these diverse cultures is a type of adaptation according to that particular culture. However, some Hindu fundamentalist organisations in India are trying to juxtapose the Ramayana with a monolithic culture hiding its diversity. A few tellings, such as Sagar's television series *Ramayan*, also promoted a homogenisation of the Ramayana narrative. Richman reminds us of Thapar's warning against the homogenisation of the Ramayana culture, as it may lead to cultural loss. Richman writes:

....traditionally, local references and topical remarks play crucial roles in many performances of the *Ramayana*. Were the television *Ramayana* and the broadly distributed video cassette tapes of it to achieve widespread acceptance as the version of the epic, Thapar warns of possible negative effects for Indian culture. The homogenization of any narrative tradition results in cultural loss; other tellings of the *Ramayana* story might be irretrievably submerged or marginalised. ("Introduction" 4)

Political appropriation

In the twentieth century, during both the pre-independence and the post-independence periods, India witnessed various political appropriations of the

Ramayana. There were discourses postulated by noted figures in Indian politics such as Gandhi, Nehru, Periyar Ramasami, Ambedkar, Lohia. They all engaged in manifold discussions and debates encompassing the role of the Ramayana in politics. Their political reading, approving or disapproving of the Ramayana, contributed valuable insights on the changes that occurred in the political scenario of twentieth-century India. Besides these leaders, extreme right-wing Hindu fundamentalist organisations are also actively involved in the discourses positing the Ramayana as a political tool. Owing to all these appropriations, the political domain of the nation witnessed a paradigm shift in the twentieth century.

Gandhi and Lohia adapted the Ramayana moderately, whereas the discourses of Periyar and Ambedkar were radical in nature. Gandhi appropriated Rama through the idea of Ramarajya in order to mobilise the public, especially Hindu masses, into the forefront of the Indian national movement. Lohia played a vital role in propagating the diversity of the Ramayana literature by organising the *Ramayana Melas*, where multiple versions of the great epic could be celebrated. The radical views of both Periyar and Ambedkar against the Ramayana addressed the crucial issue of caste systems across India for centuries. For Nehru, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* dealt with the days of Indo-Aryans, their conquests, and their civil wars (*Discovery* 75–76). These moderate and radical streams of political readings, either approving or criticising the Ramayana, yielded positive results for the nation. However, hindutva appropriated the Ramayana in an aggressive way, projecting Rama as an icon of Hindu nationalism and aiming for the political power of the nation.

Chapter 3

Appropriation of the Ramayana: Gandhi and Periyar

Hundreds of Ramayana narratives have emerged in diverse cultures across India and beyond and the process is still going on. The various Ramayanas are composed according to the interpretations and perspectives of their authors. The telling, interpretation and appropriation of the Ramayana can be traced back to several centuries whereas the history of the political appropriation of the Ramayana began in the nineteenth century onwards. The Ramayana was subject to political discussions, debates and appropriations exclusively in twentieth-century India. The discourses on the Ramayana by reputed personalities in the country had a tremendous impact on the history of our nation. Gandhi, Periyar Ramasami, Ambedkar and Ram Manohar Lohia were a few among them. They utilised the Ramayana according to the views and the ideologies they followed. While Gandhi and Lohia preferred a moderate political reading of the Ramayana, Periyar and Ambedkar posited a radical reading of it. In order to delve into the two kinds of political appropriations, one from each stream -the moderate and the radical readings- are taken. They are the political discourses of Gandhi, father of our nation and Periyar, one of the most influential social reformers from South India, respectively.

Both Gandhi and Periyar appropriated the Ramayana politically during the twentieth century. Gandhi assimilated the Ramayana moderately in order to mobilise the majority of people, especially from Hinduism, towards the Indian freedom struggle by convincing them that Rama and the Ramayana represented Indian

nationalism. For Periyar, the reason for the radical political discourses was his war against the centuries-old brahmanical hegemony in India.

Gandhi

India became an independent nation in 1947 by putting an end to all its connections with British colonial rule. The nation and its people could witness the dawn of independence after centuries of struggle against the foreign invasion. Though there were various other foreign powers such as the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the French, Britain was prominent among them. The freedom struggles in India have to tell the story of diverse and daring fights and momentous movements by the multitudes of known and unknown warriors. These kinds of regional freedom movements gathered momentum over decades and turned into an organised form gradually. Together with these movements, the notion of a national consciousness also began to take shape in the country. As Nalini Taneja quotes Prof. Bipan Chandra, the Indian National Movement was an “all-people’s movement” (136).

The movements that began in the eighteenth century became more organised in the nineteenth century, accompanied by the first nationwide agitation against the British in 1857. The movement was later hailed and inscribed in history as the First War of Independence. Numerous organised freedom movements strengthened the national consciousness, the driving force in accomplishing India’s freedom. Though the first war of independence was brutally suppressed by colonial rule, the struggle for freedom continued during the nineteenth and the twentieth century. When Gandhi arrived at the forefront by the outset of the twentieth century, the movement took a new turn. The idea of nationalism played a prominent role in unifying the

myriads of regional agitations. People from all walks of life joined the struggle. Consequently, nationalism also began to spread along with the freedom movements.

Gandhi played a pivotal role in empowering the independence movement that began a few centuries ago. The political scenario had undergone considerable transformation since the beginning of the twentieth century by Gandhi's arrival. The commoners, irrespective of their gender, religion and caste, began to show special attention and interest towards the freedom struggle under this new leadership. Gandhi pursued a path without violence and bloodshed. However, another group propagated extremist views refusing the plan of Gandhi and other moderates.

Nationalism was the driving force in order to unite people across the country against British imperialism. Religious customs and conventions of the time had a tremendous influence on the common public. The idea of secularism was not powerful as it is today. People could be easily gathered under the banner of their religion rather than the idea of secularism. The idea of democracy and secularism had not spread considerably in order to unite the common public. These ideas were contained only among a limited group in the society including the educated communities. Therefore, these groups had a role in propagating the values of democracy and secularism by bringing together the diverse religious multitudes for a common purpose.

Gandhi strived to unify people from various religions to mobilise them to the course of the freedom movement utilising the idea of nationalism. As the movement progressed the relevance of nationalism also grew nationwide. The rising middle class among the Muslim community and others were also turning nationalistic,

together with the majority of Hindus. Though the split in the Congress into two sections, such as the extremists and the moderates, and the restrictions of the First World War affected the course of the freedom movement, the rise of a national consciousness among the people intensified the movement. Nehru states:

World War I came. Politics were at a low ebb, chiefly because of the split in the Congress between the two sections, the so-called extremists and the moderates, and because of the war-time restrictions and regulations. Yet one tendency was marked: the rising middle class among the Moslems was growing more nationally minded and was pushing the Moslem League towards the Congress. They even joined hands. (*Discovery* 356)

Gandhi became a part of the Indian National movement in the first decade of the twentieth century. However, he had already raised his voice for Indians and other indigent people against the imperial power from South Africa. Being a lawyer who supported the working class, Gandhi was tortured by the British. In the meantime, life in India, especially during and after World War I, was growing more and more pathetic. Nehru vividly portrays the condition of Indian life soon after the war as:

World War I ended at last, and the peace, instead of bringing us relief and progress, brought us repressive legislation and the martial law in the Punjab. A bitter sense of humiliation and passionate anger filled our people. All the unending talk of constitutional reform and Indianization of the services were a mockery and an insult when the manhood of our country was being crushed and the inexorable and continuous process of exploitation was

deepening our poverty and sapping our vitality. We had become a derelict nation. (*Discovery* 357)

It was at this time that Gandhi came to the forefront of the movements causing a significant transformation in the course of the struggle. Gandhi spoke for the peasants and the poverty-stricken multitudes who had been exploited for centuries. Gandhi called for a country and people without fear, proclaiming the necessity of truth. Nehru asserts, “The essence of his teaching was fearlessness and truth, and action allied to these, always keeping the welfare of the masses in view. The greatest gift for an individual or a nation, as we had been told in our ancient books, was *abhaya* (fearlessness) not merely bodily courage but the absence of fear from the mind.” (*Discovery* 358)

Gandhi was a man of principle with truth and non-violence as weapons to fight for freedom. He was fundamentally an orthodox Hindu whose morality was nurtured through the ideals of that religion itself. Though he is a religious man born in a pious Hindu family, he stood as a sentinel of secularism. His idea of secularism was formulated through his constant contact with the moral values through religion. He loved and respected all religions together with Hinduism. Malabika Pande notes:

Gandhi was deeply influenced by Hindu philosophical traditions especially of the Vedanta, the Gita and the Upanishads, like Vivekananda and Aurobindo before him. Hence he too believed in the essential spiritual unity of all mankind and regarded the various religions as manifestations of the one reality, i.e., God. His Hinduism, in his own words, was "all inclusive. It is not anti-Musalman, anti-Christian or anti-any other religion. (1124)

Gandhi was significantly influenced by the ancient Hindu texts such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Gandhi's knowledge and interest in these epics have influenced in formulating his moral principles. He utilised the moral teachings and stories from these ancient texts effectively in the course of his long walks to an independent India. Nehru portrays Gandhi and his religious faith comprehensively in his *Discovery*:

Gandhi was essentially a man of religion, a Hindu to the innermost depths of his being, and yet his conception of religion had nothing to do with any dogma or custom or ritual. It was basically concerned with his firm belief in the moral law, which he calls the law of truth or love. Gandhi told the federation of International Fellowship in January, 1928, that 'After long study and experience, I have come to these conclusions that: (1) all religions are true; (2) all religions have some errors in them; and (3) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism. My veneration of other faiths is the same as for my own faith. (362)

It was the foundation on which Gandhi approached all religions, including Hinduism. His commitment towards Hinduism was significant as he was an ardent follower of that religion. Nevertheless, Gandhi did not hesitate to see all other religions with tolerance. He was an orthodox who later turned into politics. As Dr. Radhakrishnan once spoke, Gandhiji was "one who is by nature a man of religion but who strayed into politics by necessity" (Ghosal 295).

Gandhi aimed at Hindu masses as they represented the majority of the Indian population. He could convince them utilising his steadfast belief in that religion and

worship in God. As it was a time where the values of democracy and socialism had not spread at the grass-roots level, it was not easy to unite people with the spirit of independence alone. Hence, Gandhi wanted to urge people using their religious fervour. He was not only urging Hindus for a special cause but also trying hard to bring reformation among them, uprooting the superstitious beliefs in that religion. Gandhi talked to the leaders of all religions who could bring the masses under the fervour of religion to fight against the enemy. Even when some leaders from Hinduism and Islam refused to obey Gandhi's views, Gandhi could organise mass movements uniting people for national cause. "He also asked the people to join the coming movement not as Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians and Jews but as "Indians first and Indians last"" (20), quotes Chandra.

The role of Gandhi was vital in the twentieth century political discourses on the appropriation of the Ramayana. He utilised Rama and the Ramayana to intensify the freedom movement, dreaming of a model government that would treat rich and poor equally. Unlike the political discourses initiated by Periyar and hindutva organisations, Gandhi's style was notably moderate. Periyar engaged in the discourses both before and after the independence whereas hindutva organisations were involved in the debates during the post independent period. Gandhi's involvement was chiefly during the pre-independent period. As the Ramayana was one of Gandhi's chief sources of morality, he exclusively executed the moral teachings and stories he acquired from it throughout his political life.

The moral lessons Gandhi learnt from the Ramayana had contributed enough to his leadership and to addressing the issues in front of him. He had realised the

depth and significance of the Ramayana among Indians, especially Hindus. The Ramayana was deeply rooted in the minds of Hindus as a sacred text. He thought of mobilising Hindus into the freedom movement by using the moral teachings of the Ramayana. The majority of Hindus could be attracted by connecting them to the national consciousness through the Ramayana. This endeavour was widely accepted by masses from Hinduism. Being a sentinel of secularism, Gandhi was already recognised by religions other than Hinduism. Through these tactics of a politician, Gandhi was able to lead the Indian National Congress and its anti-colonial national movement. Consequently, people across the country were mobilised to the freedom movements irrespective of their religion and caste. In his introduction to *Hindu Nationalism*, Gould notes how the idea of anti-colonial nationalism was able to form a synergy in India during its freedom struggle:

The Indian National Congress was the most prominent and successful movement of anti-colonial nationalism in the twentieth century. It claimed to represent the Indian nation, irrespective of social, occupational, class, religious or caste differences. This position was in contrast to colonial discourses that often saw India's religious differences as irreconcilable. In claiming to transcend religious difference, the Congress represented itself as the only truly 'national' political movement and appeared to espouse secular nationalism. (1)

In order to bring people from various religions together under a nationalistic movement, Gandhi aimed for collective support from each community. Gandhi realised fairly well that the majority of the Indian population represented Hinduism,

the religion he himself believed in. Being a pious Hindu worshipping Lord Rama, he decided to assimilate the Ramayana's political significance to connect it with the Hindu community. K.E. Radhakrishna writes how Gandhi has absorbed the truth of power as part of his appropriation of the Ramayana in order to address the Hindu population. He observes: "While the political stalwarts of the pre-Independence era were seized with the immediate truth of being under foreign yoke, in Rama, Gandhi discovered the truth of power and how different it is from the power of truth" (4).

Gandhi understood the political potential of the Ramayana in order to mobilise myriads of people from Hinduism for the independence movements. For Gandhi, the Ramayana was not only a religious text but also an apt political tool. Therefore, he took the utmost care to mobilise Hindu masses, appropriating it politically and thus connecting the idea of nationalism with Hindus' religious fervour. Though people were mainly motivated by the power of spirituality, Gandhi's goal was an independent nation. Despite being an orthodox Hindu, he was able to follow the track of secularism in a higher sense. The values of democracy and secularism were unassailable in him. Therefore, his use of the Ramayana was not in any sense an obstacle in building a secular India. Chandra remarks:

Even when couched in the language of religion in the 1920s, Gandhi's social, economic and political appeal was to modern, secular, economic, political, moral and social principles and was never based on religious grounds. Not once did he say that the fight for freedom was a religious duty. He did not use religion in the ideological definition of nationalism or its programme.

(13)

The concept of Ramarajya posited by Gandhi played a significant role in his involvement in the political discourses surrounding the Ramayana. For him, the term 'Ramarajya' means the kingdom of God on earth. He put forth this idea to the forefront of the movement in order to define his vision of independence. Being a luminary of the Indian National Congress, Gandhi had a vision for the independent nation. Hence, he posited the concept of Ramarajya, which represented his dream of true independence. Gandhi's political appropriation of the Ramayana embodied this concept. In his weekly magazine Gandhi stated his ideal of Ramarajya as:

Friends have repeatedly challenged me to define independence. At the risk of repetition, I must say that independence of my dream means Ramarajya i.e., the Kingdom of God on earth. I do not know it will be like in Heaven. I have no desire to know the distant scene. If the present is attractive enough, the future cannot be very unlike. (*Harijan* 5-5-1946, 116)

First and foremost, for Gandhi, the term 'Ramarajya' symbolised the Kingdom of God on earth. On the one hand, this might have been perceived by people as a utopian concept because a state where everything is perfect is not possible on earth. They believed that the establishment of an ideal state would be a mere imagination. Perhaps Gandhi also might have understood this as well. However, on the other hand, in Gandhi's view, Ramarajya was a free state of an ideal kingdom with a divine perfection. For Gandhi, the God he worshipped was Lord Rama. A devotee of Rama, Gandhi likely named his vision of independence 'Ramarajya.' 'Perfectness' in Ramarajya means the availability of everything in that state. According to Gandhi, Ramarajya would be a perfect example of democracy and freedom for the

country and its people. There would be no distinction between the rich and the poor in Ramarajya. Gandhi proclaimed his views: “Ramarajya of my dream ensures equal rights alike of prince and pauper.” (*ABP* 2-8-1934)

Gandhi’s idea that a perfect democracy was the only solution for a better government and an ideal state was visible in Ramarajya. Gandhi knew fairly well that poverty and hunger were the fundamental problems of human beings and all other living creatures. This was the significance of the idea of the abolition of the distinction between prince and pauper. Gandhi writes, “There can be no Ramarajya in the present state of iniquitous inequalities in which a few roll in riches and the masses do not get even enough to eat... my opposition to the Socialists and other consists in attacking violence as a means of effecting any lasting reform” (*Harijan* 1-6-1947, 172).

Independence primarily meant the political independence of the country from its centuries’ - long foreign invasion. As a world-renowned political leader, Gandhi had critically analysed the political changes happening worldwide. The countries with an established democratic form of government had always invited his attention. Even though he admired these nations, Gandhi’s dream was different. He explicitly stated that the government in independent India should be Ramarajya, a quite different form of rule suited to ours. He wrote:

By political independence I do not mean an imitation to the British House of commons, or the Soviet rule of Russia or the Fascist rule of Italy or the Nazi rule of Germany. They have systems suited to their genius. We must have ours suited to ours. What that can be is more than I can tell. I have described

it as Ramarajya i.e., sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority.

(*Harijan* 2-1-1937, 374)

For Gandhi, Ramarajya was not merely a replacement of the existing imperialist power from our country but the establishment of an idealistic democratic government. To some extent, Gandhi even compared the concept of Ramarajya to *nirvana* or the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Gandhi explicitly stated that the mere withdrawal of British rule could never be hailed as Ramarajya. He remarked, “I compare nirvana to Ramarajya or the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.... The withdrawal of British power does not mean Ramarajya. How can it happen when we have all along been nursing violence in our hearts under the garb of non-violence” (*Harijan* 3-8-1947, 262)?

Gandhi was inspired by the Ramayana from his early childhood onwards. Born into a *Vaishnava* faith, the chanting of the name Rama gradually leaned him towards Tulsidas’s *Ramcharitmanas*, the most revered Ramayana narrative in the nation. He began chanting *Ramanama* as a remedy to drive away the fear of ghosts and spirits as suggested by Rambha, an old servant in his family. In reality, the young Gandhi had more faith in Rambha rather than in her ‘remedy.’ Gandhi remarked in his autobiography:

But what I failed to get there I obtained from my nurse, an old servant of the family, whose affection for me I still recall. I have said before that there was in me a fear of ghosts and spirits. Rambha, for that was her name, suggested, as a remedy for this fear, the repetition of *Ramanama*. I had more faith in her than in her remedy, and so at a tender age I began repeating *Ramanama* to

cure my fear of ghosts and spirits. This was of course short lived, but the good seed sown in childhood was not sown in vain. I think it is due to the seed sown by that good woman Rambha that today *Ramanama* is an infallible remedy for me. (*The Story* 30)

As he grew older, Gandhi began to recite the verses from the *Ramayana* with his brother. Later, one great devotee of Rama named Ladha Maharaj of Bileshvar also came to Gandhi's house in order to recite the *Ramayana* for his father, who was ill. This event also influenced young Gandhi to be an ardent follower of Rama and the *Ramayana*. Gandhi loved that man's melodious voice very much during his recitation. He elucidates this experience in his adolescent age as, "I must have been thirteen at that time, but I quite remember being enraptured by his reading. That laid the foundation of my deep devotion to the *Ramayana*. Today, I regard the *Ramayana* of Tulsidas as the greatest book in all devotional literature" (*The Story* 31).

Gandhi's veneration of Rama intensified as he grew up. This is why he had explicitly stated in his autobiography that *Ramcharitmanas* had a significant role in his life as a book of devotional literature. The passionate belief in Rama and this sacred text might have resulted in Gandhi's idea of Ramarajya. For Gandhi, God means Rama. He was very keen while positing the idea of Ramarajya, as it might create confusion among the public. This was the reason why Gandhi had elucidated that by the term 'Ramarajya' he did not mean Hinduraj but a Divine Raj. Being a leader who firmly stood for secular values, Gandhi was aware of the way others, especially Muslims, looked at Ramarajya. Therefore he proclaimed that both Ram

and Rahim were one for him. Gandhi makes it intelligible: “BY RAMARAJYA I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by Ramarajya Divine Raj, the Kingdom of God. For me Rama and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of truth and righteousness”(Young India 19-9-1929, 305).

Gandhi's use of the Ramarajya emerged from his involvement in the political discourses on the Ramayana. He resorted to this term as he travelled through the path of spirituality with a firm belief and hope in God. The term 'Ramarajya' can literally be translated as the *rajya* or country of Rama. Here Rama is the king of Ayodhya in the Ramayana. When Gandhi translated Ramarajya as the kingdom of God, the God in his mind was Lord Rama. His Rama was not the Rama of Valmiki or any other Ramayana literature but the Rama of Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*. Therefore, initially his choice of the term 'Ramarajya' for his vision of independent India was his devotion to Rama. Despite Gandhi's argument that Ramarajya is truth and righteousness or the independence of his dream, the fundamental reason for his selecting the term was his devotion towards Rama.

An adherent of *Vaishnava* faith, Gandhi's religious fervour was instrumental in coining the term 'Ramarajya.' However, as Gandhi was one of the greatest statesmen in world politics, he had foreseen the effect of his move in the future. His experience and practical wisdom as a politician made him think of mobilising people according to their religious fervour. Gandhi's endeavour through this psychological move yielded a positive result in mustering Hindus as a mass for the national movement. He had proclaimed that religion should be introduced into politics. Chandra quotes Gandhi:

I certainly do introduce religion into politics. It is my humble view that not a single activity in the world should be independent of religion. There could be no politics without religion.” In April 1924, Gandhi asserted: "for me there are no politics devoid of religion. They subserve religion. Politics bereft of religion are a death-trap because they kill the soul. (8)

Gandhi's Ramarajya, though invited public attention from Hindus, faced criticism and controversy from other communities, particularly Muslims. Gandhi, a watchman of the nation's secularism, began to be questioned for his Ramarajya, which is seemingly partial to one community. Some groups of Muslims were evidently dubious about Gandhi's ideals for an independent nation. They turned down the idea of Ramarajya, believing the independent India would be a Hindu Raj through this. Therefore, Gandhi had to strive to defend his part. He wrote:

My Rama, the Rama of our prayers, is not the historical Rama, the son of Dasaratha — the King of Ayodhya. He is the eternal, the unborn, the one without a second. Him alone I worship, His aid alone I seek, and so should you. He belongs equally to all. I, therefore, see no reason why a Mussalman or anybody should object to taking his name. But he is in no way bound to recognize God as Rama. He may utter to himself Allah or Khuda so as not to mar the harmony of the sound. (*Harijan* 28-4-1946)

Though Gandhi kept justifying his side by substantiating the idea of Ramarajya as secular and not religious, the dispute persisted. However, Gandhi's words were not taken into account by the Muslims. He reiterated that his Ramarajya did not mean

Hindu Raj, and he even warned the Muslim leaders who were misunderstood following the discord:

I warn my Musalman friends against misunderstanding me in my use of the word 'Ramarajya'. By 'Ramarajya' I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by 'Ramarajya' Divine Raj, the Kingdom of God. For me Rama and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of Truth and righteousness. (*Young India* 19-9-1929, 305)

In essence, *Ramcharitmanas* had a lasting impact as a devotional Ramayana narrative since Gandhi's childhood. Fundamentally a man who followed the path of spirituality, Gandhi's morality developed through the moral tales from the Ramayana. Consequently, this morality also evolved as he grew older. While on the warfront of the freedom struggle, Gandhi utilised his skill in executing various strategies. He managed to link the idea of spirituality with politics, intentionally foreseeing the political potential of the Ramayana. This appropriation of the Ramayana by Gandhi was quite instrumental in mobilising the common folk from Hindu backgrounds towards the Indian national movement. His appropriation manifested in a moderate way during the whole first half of twentieth-century India. Experiencing the course of struggle, he realised that there is political significance for religions in India. People belonging to all religions are rather motivated by their spirituality than politics. For that reason, common people should be necessarily brought to the movement not only through politics but also religions. It was at this juncture that Gandhi appropriated the Ramayana, involving himself in the political discourses surrounding it.

Besides Hindus, Gandhi was able to muster Muslims also to the warfront of the movement, utilising the occasion of the Khilafat Movement. When this movement created a spark among Muslim masses in India, Gandhi could link it with the Indian national movement. Consequently, the Muslim masses actively participated in the movement along with the Congress. As it was a time prior to the independence of the country, the common public, irrespective of their religions, lacked proper political awareness. Instead their passion and love for religion were rather strong. Gandhi could effectively exploit this religious spirit of the masses for a better cause.

When Gandhi attempted to define Ramarajya primarily, the very first explanation Gandhi provided was the kingdom of God on earth. Afterward, he had to explain his side at least a half dozen times. Ramarajya was justified as his concept of a state where the prince and pauper are alike. Gandhi even dared to expound Ramarajya as truth and righteousness, dismissing the dispute that Ramarajya may tend to a Hinduraj. Nevertheless, it was possible that the term 'Ramarajya' was formulated by Gandhi due to his worship towards Rama. Therefore, Gandhi's interpretations yielded no results. He was unable to convince some Muslim groups even after his incessant clarification on Ramarajya. These religious groups were indoctrinated by Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the All India Muslim League leader, and others who had extremist and communal perspectives.

Gandhi's lineage towards Muslims and his mobilising them for the cause of Indian freedom invited the grudge from some hindutva groups also. The Hindu Mahasabha and other Hindutva groups were not ready to accept Gandhi's

arguments. They were of the opinion that Gandhi had a special consideration towards Muslim groups. In reality, Gandhi had to face the pressures from both sides. The more he tried to convince the leaders of both communal groups, the more they became powerful enough to influence their communities. T.V. Sathyamurthy notes:

The particular reading that Gandhi gave to religion as a whole and to his own religious identity as a Hindu was not sufficient to convince a large section of the Muslim population which eventually gave its following to Jinnah who carried forward Saiyyid Ahmed Khan's legacy during the two decades leading up to partition. Nor did Gandhi's ideas carry much weight with the Hindu Mahasabha, the leadership of which overlapped with the leadership of the INC. The Hindu Mahasabha gave Tilak's thought a distinctly political form by developing the thesis that Hindu nationalism and Indian nationalism were interchangeable. Ironically, Savarkar, the chief architect of Hindu nationalism, was himself a Hindu atheist. (718)

Ramarajya literally means the rule of Rama. However, nowhere do we see Gandhi's explanation for Ramarajya as the rule of Rama. Instead he posits many interpretations for the term in order to clarify his part. Still the controversies persisted. According to various Ramayana narratives, Rama is the king of Ayodhya and an *avatara* of God. Devotional Ramayana narratives present Rama as a Hindu king and God, whereas Rama is a mere human and a king for other narratives. Gandhi's Rama was Lord Rama of *Ramcharitmanas*, the most revered devotional Ramayana narrative in India. Additionally, Gandhi knows fairly well that Rama is a venerable king popular for his ideal rule in Ayodhya according to Ramayana

narratives. All these elements have a significant impact on Gandhi's concept of Ramarajya. Gandhi does not say that his Ramarajya is similar to the rule of Hindu king Rama in Ayodhya. However, while establishing the *swaraj* of British-free India, Gandhi dreamt of a state with the base of spirituality. Therefore, despite Gandhi and others justifying that Ramarajya never equals the rule of the Hindu king Rama, the motive behind this endeavour would possibly be Rama. Otherwise, Gandhi was not supposed to call his concept Ramarajya. Stuart Gray and Thomas Hughes have observed that the scholars who have focussed on Gandhi's *swaraj* overlooked an essential devotional component of his political thought:

Swarāj is achieved when the ātman and higher parts of the soul rule over the lower parts. This then leads toward Ramarajya, which is the highest form of ruling and Gandhi's ultimate goal. Faith and devotion are the sole means of achieving this state of affairs, and we suggest that swaraj is ultimately subservient to and aims toward Ramarajya. Given the importance of Rāma as an object of Gandhi's devotion, it makes sense that his political ideal would exhibit such devotion. Scholars who have focused solely on swarāj without relating it to the religiously loaded concept of Ramarajya have thus overlooked an essential devotional component of his political thought. (338)

Prem Anand Mishra notes, "Gandhi's concept of swaraj elucidates the connection between the individual and society. Thus, in Gandhi's scheme, swaraj starts from the individual, then moves outward to the village level, and then to the national level; the basic principle is the moral autonomy of the individual which is above all other considerations" (455). Gandhi equates the term '*swaraj*' with

Ramarajya. As Rudrangshu Mukherjee remarks, for Gandhi “Swaraj and Ramarajya are one and the same thing” (36).

As quoted by Chandra before, Gandhi, while addressing the issue of communal problems, had undergone considerable transformation from his earlier stands. He primarily had a view that religion should be kept close to politics, as the separation of both may reduce the level of morality in politics. Despite that, he later changed his perspective fundamentally. The reason for the transition in his stand in the beginning was the rise of communal issues as a menace to Indian politics and the national movement from both Hindu and Muslim fundamental groups. After his changed view, Gandhi explicitly stated that religion and politics should be kept separate. He later proclaimed that if he had expressed different opinions on the same matter, the opinion that came last would be considered his final word on the topic. Chandra quotes Gandhi again, "If I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate. I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The State has nothing to do with it." Gandhi repeats firmly as "Religion is a personal affair of each individual, it must not be mixed up with politics or national affairs" (11).

The controversy Gandhi faced over Ramarajya was almost in square with that of the dispute over fusing religion with politics. As the term primarily excluded Muslims and other minority religions, Gandhi was liable to give clarifications on his Ramarajya. In spite of Gandhi's prolonged explanations, it remained a mysterious terminology before them due to the name Rama that represented Hindus alone. As people from other communities were dubious about whether Gandhi would be

intentional in using the term 'Ramarajya,' the controversies sustained for long. Nevertheless, Gandhi's exercise of Ramarajya was the instance of his political appropriation of the Ramayana. As Gray and Hughes remarked, Ramarajya entails "sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority" and God or Rāma ultimately ruled over the whole. They write:

We have suggested that Ramarajya should be understood, first and foremost, as a more abstract moral state of being as opposed to a particular external state of affairs and form of political organisation. This appears to rub against Gandhi's statement that Ramarajya is a "kingdom of God." The phrase "kingdom of God" reminds us of Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is within You*, which is clearly not a reference to a social and political organisation, but a way of organizing one's soul. Gandhi explains that Ramarajya entails "sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority." It is a mistake to think that the first part of this statement concerns popular political sovereignty, as the second part stressing moral authority is of greater significance for Gandhi. By "pure moral authority," Gandhi is referring to the hierarchical type of ruling we have discussed above, whereby the higher parts of the self-rule over the lower parts and God or Rāma ultimately rules over the whole. This form of authority and ruling are "pure" because only God is pure, untainted by karma and sin. Therefore, the rule of God would be "pure moral authority. (388)

Gandhi's political reading of the Ramayana was purely in a moderate sense, whereby he could go ahead with both his spirituality and politics alike. He was

profoundly influenced by *Ramcharitmanas*. His discourses on the Ramayana, utilising its political potential, played a significant role in the twentieth-century Indian political scenario.

Apart from Gandhi, a few other leaders, such as Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, also appropriated the Ramayana politically. Lohia was involved in the discourses surrounding the Ramayana by taking the initiative to organise the *Ramayana Mela* in Chitrakoot. The event was a festival of various Ramayana tellings where scholars, political thinkers and so on, could share their views. Even though Gandhi was in sync with Lohia in assimilating the Ramayana politically in a moderate sense, Gandhi's perspective was much acclaimed as it had an important role in the course of the Indian national movement. The epoch-making interventions accommodating the Ramayana by Gandhi brought a paradigm shift during the first half of the twentieth century in Indian politics. During this crucial period, Gandhi could play a prominent role in mobilising masses towards the Indian independence movement.

Periyar

Periyar Ramasami, one of the influential social reformers in the nation, played a prominent role in the political discourses on the Ramayana in the twentieth century. Periyar acted vehemently to eradicate the centuries-old caste system in the nation, raising his voice against *puranas* and *ithihasas* in Hinduism. Unlike Gandhi's moderate approach, Periyar advocated a distinct perspective, addressing the Ramayana politically. His reading was absolutely radical, establishing the Ramayana as an account of the North Indian Aryan invasion of the Dravidian community in Southern India. In addition to this, Periyar propagated the principles

of rationalism, self-respect and women's rights. He fought against the exploitation of Brahmins against the marginalised non-Brahmin Dravidian people of South India. A.P.S. Chouhan and Niraj Kumar Jha observe Periyar as a versatile activist who fought for what he professed:

Periyar was a firebrand champion of human dignity. He was a relentless fighter for what he professed. Throughout his life he spread the messages of rationalism, atheism, abolition of casteism, gender justice and self-respect for the so-called Sudras and fought for these causes, with the people and among the people. He never wavered from his chosen path and remained active till his end. (667)

Like Gandhi, Periyar's contribution to societal change was also significant, though their approaches were different. While Gandhi employs political strategies, rallying people for India's independence, Periyar strives to tackle the entrenched caste system. Gandhi appeals to faith, whereas Periyar advocates for atheistic principles. Both aimed for a social change, but through different means and ideologies. V. Geetha differentiates both the leaders as follows:

Where Gandhi communicated through complex metaphors drawn from the language of faith and devotion, appealing to the meditative self, Periyar spoke as a pedagogue, a teacher, who sought to expound ideas and encourage discussion, debate and dialogue. Periyar was given to concluding his addresses with an entreaty: his listeners were to think through whatever they had heard at the meeting and decide for themselves if there were reason and justice in the things which had been told them. (10)

Attracted by the Indian National Congress and *sathyagrahas* of Gandhi, Periyar began his social work as a congressman and became one of the noted leaders of the Congress Party in Tamil Nadu. Despite his reverence towards Gandhi in the early stages, Periyar realised that Gandhi was also a follower of the *varnashrama dharma*, similar to many other elite-class Congress leaders from Tamil Nadu. This led Periyar to quit the path of Congress and Gandhi. Ganeshwar points out the split between Gandhi and Periyar:

Periyar later revealed that he met Gandhi in Mysore to discuss his ideas regarding the necessity to abolish Brahmin hegemony and that Gandhi not only refused to consider the arguments valid, but also made it clear that he indeed believed in *varnadharma*, in principle and form (Ibid). This led to the complete fallout, and Periyar decided not to meet Gandhi again. Periyar became convinced that Gandhi wasn't an exception in the Congress but a crucial player in the construction and deployment of Congress-Brahmin hegemony. (92)

Being a social activist who spoke against the issue of the caste system during the outset of twentieth-century India, where discrimination based on caste was at its extreme level, Periyar's intervention was relevant. While his real name remains as Periyar Erode Venkata Ramasami, he was also known by the names Periyar Ramasmi Naykar, Thanthai Periyar, E.V.R., and so on. Though born into a wealthy Naykar family in Erode, varied incidents of racial discrimination and injustices he witnessed at a tender age changed his thoughts on religion and caste as he grew older. The incidents made him think of receiving the mere identity of a human being

instead of being part of one's own caste. His life thus became a saga of lifelong struggles for the justice of common people. In the course of his legendary journey, he founded the Self-Respect movement and the Dravida Kazhakam, which had a great impact on South Indian life, notably in Tamil Nadu. His movement against gender discrimination was also noteworthy. M.S.S. Pandian comments, "His political career then onwards was more or less an unwavering journey through the Self-Respect Movement (founded in 1926) and the Dravidar Kazhagam (founded in 1944) in search of substantive, as opposed to formal, citizenship for the subordinate groups" (2282).

From his childhood onwards, Periyar began to look with reason at the illusions and contradictions in the fables of Hinduism and its deities spread by Brahmins, the apex group of *varnashrama dharma*. Periyar equated the Brahmin community with the Aryan race. For Periyar, Brahmins were subjugating the other castes of Hinduism in the name of mere casteism by highlighting the so-called elite class rules written in *Manusmriti* and other *puranic* texts. According to Periyar, the Ramayana played a prominent role in the formation of the caste system among Hindus. This was the motive behind Periyar's epoch-making battle against the injustice he encountered in the society he lived in. The role he played in this endeavour since his childhood throughout his life was divergent. N. Ram writes regarding Periyar's involvements in the social issues:

E.V. Ramasami (1879-1973), the founder of the Self-Respect movement, reveals a great deal of the history of the Dravidian movement. As a boy from a well- to-do merchant family boldly violating caste-based rules of social

behaviour; as a young man who sought and failed to find the personal and social answers he was looking for in sanyasihood and religious mysticism; as an ardent Congressman who campaigned wholeheartedly for freedom and social reform and spent a small personal fortune as part of his commitment to the movements. (385)

The contradictory stories in the epics and fables, including the Ramayana, gradually made Periyar a man of rationalism and atheism. With his rational view, he started a hair-splitting analysis of the Ramayana. One notorious incident from Kaasi (Varanasi) in the life of Periyar established him as a pure atheist and rationalist. While travelling across India, he had to spend a few days in Kaasi, one of the most sacred destinations of Hindu pilgrimage. Though hungry, the authorities of the choultries fed Brahmins excessively, whereas other Hindus, including Periyar, were denied food. Disguising himself as a Brahmin, he approached for food due to days of starvation. However, he was identified and kicked away to the street by 'real Brahmins.' He had to compete with the dogs for the remnants of the food Brahmins had before. Later he realised that the choultry was built for Brahmins by one of the wealthy merchants from the Dravidian community from Tamil Nadu.

Periyar's primary intention was to eradicate the caste system by enabling them to absorb the social values in society. The mass should be taught the necessity of being rational instead of blindly following the belief in God. According to Periyar, people are afraid of God because of their false belief in God's existence. Brahmins are enjoying a happy and contented life with all luxuries, whereas others are undergoing a pathetic life similar to that of slaves. It was during this critical

juncture that Periyar entered the scene. He even thought that British rule would be desirable compared to an independent India of caste hierarchy. As Matthew H. Baxter writes, EVR and others who identified with the Non-Brahmin masses saw Brahmin rule as no more desirable than British rule (339).

Apart from his hatred towards God, religion and Brahmanism, Periyar found contradictions in the attitude of the Congress and Gandhi towards this caste system. As V.C. Kulandaiswamy opined, his experiences made Periyar believe the Congress leadership was not sufficiently determined to eradicate the caste system; to end caste-based privileges; to take effective steps to ensure social justice and bring about equalisation of opportunities (3).

Being the leading organisation for the nation's freedom, the Indian National Congress was supposed to initiate struggles to wipe out the caste system also. However, the INC and its leaders were not free from the brahmanical influence in the society. Gandhi, though he spoke against the practice of untouchability, also followed the worst form of *varnashrama dharma* suggested by Vedic teachings and other *puranic* texts. This led Periyar to reprimand Gandhi. He rejected Gandhi and the INC for not being true to the emancipation of the majority of the common people from the plight they undergo. In his speech "Untouchability: History of Vaikom Agitation" Periyar remarks how Gandhi insisted on the continuance of certain rights exclusively for the highest caste. He speaks:

As a matter of fact, Gandhi's plans were different. He was not for allowing all the Shudras and the Untouchables to bale out water from wells and tanks, along with high caste Brahmins. He was not for permitting the Untouchables

to enter the temples along with the high caste people. Originally, he only insisted on the continuance of certain rights exclusively for the highest caste. He upheld the Manu code. He was for separate temples, tanks, wells and dwellings for the highest caste Brahmins and the low-caste Shudras. That was the original plan of Gandhi. I know it. Let anyone deny. Today, false propaganda is carried on about Gandhi. Much is said about Gandhian way and Gandhian path. (*Viduthalai* 1959)

In addition to the Self-Respect movement, Periyar led many other campaigns, organisations and journals to break the wall of the caste system. Renouncing his belief in God, he proclaimed a war against the priesthood and Brahmins in Hinduism. This resulted in the following socio-political movements and agitations. Periyar roared at brahmanical Hinduism and demanded an egalitarian society where equality for women also should persist. G. Palanithurai notes in detail regarding the political parties and movements Periyar has established:

To disseminate the ideas of the movements E.V. Ramasami started journals namely Kudi Arasu, Revolt, Puratchi, Pagutharivu, Viduthalai and Unmai. He published 185 books dealing with various aspects of the society. By starting these movements, he thought that social change could be achieved in two ways, namely, these movements may pressurize the government (to take political initiatives to evolve measures for social transformation) and make the people, accept the new concepts in their life. (556)

Having dreamt of an egalitarian society by eradicating the centuries old caste system through various agitations, Periyar's role was versatile. He stood steadfastly to

oppose the deliberate imperialism of Hindi towards South India. As Prashant Kumar observed, Periyar was a freedom fighter, a convinced atheist, a socialist propagandist, a prohibitionist and a social reformer who fought fiercely against untouchability, zamindari system, moneylending, degradation of women, Hindi imperialism, Congress nationalism and Gandhian Brahmanism. He was a towering figure of the Dravidian and the rationalist movements in the south (3415).

The prime reason for Periyar's critical reading of the Ramayana and other *puranic* texts was his strong detest towards the Aryan race and their invasion into South India. Periyar led a scathing attack against the Ramayana because it was a text that promoted the caste system and *varnashrama dharma* according to him. It was a time when even the Indian nationalist historians abstained from critiquing the Aryan race theory that Periyar initiated his discourses addressing the Ramayana politically. As Thapar elucidates, the Indian nationalist historians, despite their questioning of colonial ideas, didn't challenge the Aryan race theory. Most of these historians, coming from the upper castes and the middle class, found the theory appealing because it supported their belief in social superiority (*Cultural Pasts* 10).

Researchers had already opined that some stories and events in both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* indicate the non egalitarian nature of Hindu society during the earlier times. Periyar initiated a campaign against episodes in the Ramayana that indicate the elements of *varnashrama dharma*. Anil Kumar Dhawan clarifies this argument that the stories of Shambuka in the *Ramayana* and of Ekalavya in the *Mahabharata* are classic testimonies of the non-egalitarian nature of Hindu society in ancient India (1273).

Periyar explicitly stated that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were deliberately composed to belittle the status of the Dravidian people. While the events in the story, their protagonists such as Rama and Krishna, and all other noted characters represented the Aryan race and Brahmanic Hinduism, the antagonists and other minor characters in them had been depicted as the South Indian Dravidians. Periyar chiefly addressed the *Ramayana* in order to unveil the contradictions and injustices that appeared in the text. For him, the *Ramayana* was of no use to people despite its popularity as the most venerated text. Instead, the text supplied stories of deceit, hatred and casteism. As Ambrose Pinto quoted Periyar in his work, Rama was not a Tamilian. He was a northerner (1484).

Periyar's radical reading of the *Ramayana* began to shake the majority of Hindus who considered the *Ramayana* as a sacred text. The brahmanical Hindus were disturbed by the unexpected shock received from Periyar's political reading of the *Ramayana*. For him the *Ramayana* was merely a fable and not divine text. In order to intensify the truth and opinions he raised in the public domain, Periyar wrote many books on the *Ramayana*. *The Ramayana: A True Reading*, *Ramayana Pathirangal*, *Ramayana Kurippukal*, *Ramayana: A Fable* and *Notes on the Ramayana* are a few among the many. Periyar, in *True Reading*, argues:

A careful and analytical study of the original legends would reveal that the happenings and the events alleged to have taken place are most uncivilised and barbarous. It is also noticeable that there is nothing useful for the people, especially for the Tamils to learn and act up to. It is devoid of morals or laudable philosophy. Evidently these myths are deceitfully written so that

Brahmins may look great in the eyes of others, that the women folk be subdued and subordinate, that their Brahmins' dogmas and the code of Manu, that are derogatory to the Tamil enforced into usage and their existence-unwanted existence-eternized.'(1)

During Periyar's time, the impact of the Ramayana across India, including Tamil Nadu, was tremendous. Each single child born into a Hindu family, irrespective of its caste, was grown by hearing the story of the Ramayana. It was during this background Periyar proclaimed his crusade against it. Though a sacred text of Hindus, Periyar dared to challenge it with his rational thoughts. Periyar proclaimed that the Ramayana was not based on any historical truth. It was fiction. According to it, Rama was not a Tamilian nor did he belong to Tamil Nadu. He was a Northerner (Preface).

Periyar was born into a pious Hindu family worshipping Rama and the Ramayana. For his family, the Ramayana was a divine and the most venerated sacred text, whereas for Periyar, it was only one of the imaginary epics of ancient origin. To Periyar it was a pure literature of enjoyment with no moral values (*True Reading* 3). The Ramayana was widely acknowledged for its moral lessons for the peaceful lives of the people. Moreover, the chants of the text were recited on so many occasions in the houses of Hindus. Even though Periyar was supposed to be a part of these customs and conventions, he began to abstain from these from his tender age.

The Ramayana is merely a literary text manipulated by Aryans in order to deceive the Dravidian people. With this powerful tool of literature covered in myths,

the Aryan race could suppress Dravidians completely. The Ramayana was entirely written in the background of *varnashrama dharama*, which differentiated the various castes in the name of untouchability, establishing Brahmins at the apex. Through this imaginary epic poem was manipulated by them, Brahmins could practice all their customs dominating others. Consequently, brahmanical Hinduism considered the Dravidians as the low-caste people who are supposed to obey the rules suggested by Brahmins. Periyar writes:

The Aryans, when they invaded the ancient land of the Dravidas, maltreated and dishonoured the latter and had written a false and coloured history wholly fallacious. It is this they call Ramayana wherein Rama and his accomplices are styled as Aryas, Ravana as Rakshasa and Hanuman, Sugriva, Vali and others as monkeys. This is the conclusion which the great research scholars have come to. (*True Reading* 3)

Periyar points out that Aryans are from the background of superstitions and the rules of *varnashrama dharma* suggested by much outdated Vedic texts whereas Dravidians were influenced by rational thoughts. Unlike Aryans' idea of caste system, Dravidian people had a sense of self-respect with which they dreamt of forming an egalitarian society. However, the lack of proper education made Dravidians believe in the false teachings of Brahmins which promoted mere superstitions and the worst form of caste hierarchy. Those who refused to do the practices suggested by elite class Brahmins had to undergo severe punishments. Periyar notes:

Ramayana and Baradham are the foremost imaginary epics of the manifold romances manipulated by the Aryans. They are designed to lure the Dravidas into their snare, to wipe off their sense of self-respect, to blunt their discretionary faculties, and to destroy their humanity.

The respective heroes of these two stories are Rama and Krishna belonging to the Aryas and who were after all, men of a very ordinary type.

These stories again were foisted that the heroes, their relations and their helpers should be regarded as Gods and superhuman beings and venerated by the people as worthy of being worshipped. (*True Reading 1*)

The Vedic teachings of the Aryan race were chiefly documented in Sanskrit. As Brahmins gained more prominence, they became intellectuals receiving formal education. Meanwhile, other sects of Hindus were denied proper education making the majority of their population illiterate. The education of Brahmins focussed predominantly on the Vedas which taught moral values and certain divine dogmas suggesting how people should live. The Vedic teachings were mostly restricted to the elite class of Hindus. Others in the lowest ladder of the *varnashrama dharma* were compelled to believe and follow the dictates of Brahmins. Periyar elucidates:

The originals of these stories are written in Sanskrit. This enables those Aryans to put their interpretations really imaginary differently at different times to suit the occasions and according to the intellectual capacity of the people in the midst of whom they preached. They call these stories Vedas and the marvels of the Saviours that descended from heavens to redeem the world; they are divine dharma shastras (righteous dogmas) that inculcate

how people should live. They call these stories the essence of Vedas, the 5th Veda and so on and so forth. By such white lies they are augmenting the self-styled importance they do not really possess. Not stopping there, they thrust them into religion and call them the pillars on which religion rests. Not only the masses but also the so-called educated are deceived. The stories have been widely diffused as very valuable and sacred ones and imbued with the blood of the people from their very school career. (*True Reading 2*)

Even though the kernel Rama story prevailed far before the Vedic period, there was a speculation that the Ramayana originated during this age. In fact, the Ramayana had been interpolated as an intertext according to the need and interest of Brahmin elites during and after the Vedic period. This Ramayana telling had later become popular in Kambar and Tulasidas's, and other numerous tellings as well. Through interpolations, Brahmins were imposing their dominance over anti-Brahmins utilising the Ramayana and other popular texts. Periyar had already figured out this reality. Hence, he began to address the Ramayana as a text of political domination by North Indians over the South Indian Dravidas.

Periyar, for want of self-respect and the space of an egalitarian society for Dravidians, proclaimed his war against the merciless Brahmin domination through his exegesis of the Ramayana. He strongly intended that, being a community that had a historical and egalitarian past, with the rational thoughts already sustained in them, Dravidian people would be ready to fight against the manipulated history of the nation through the Ramayana. His movement gathered momentum as Dravidians

could realise the intention of his struggle. Unlike a conventional reading, Periyar could initiate discourses by reading the Ramayana politically in a unique way.

Periyar's radical reading had a significant impact on society, where a considerable number of anti-Brahmin Hindus took Periyar's words into account. It was unprecedented in the history of the reading of the Ramayana that the text was being subjected to a series of virulent attacks by a mass from Hinduism itself. Brahmin elites were stunned to see this organised protest against the Ramayana, a sacred text which had been providing them with the most venerated position in society. Periyar continued his exegesis culminating in the symbolic burning of Rama's image. Richman notes Periyar's burning as the centerpiece of his campaign against brahmanical Hinduism. Her words:

On the first day of August in 1956, E.V. Ramasami set out for the Madras marina to lead his followers in burning pictures of Lord Rama, hero of the Ramayana. This symbolic action would represent a reversal of the culmination of North Indian performances of the Ramayana, in which images of the epic's villain, Ravana, are put to the flames as spectators watch in delight. Rejecting Rama as hypocritical and weak, worthy only of scorn, E.V.R. saw Ravana as the true hero of the tale. E.V.R.'s iconoclastic reading comprised more than just another exegesis of a religious text, however. It was the centerpiece of his campaign against brahmanical Hinduism, conducted in the context of his assertion of Dravidian, that is, South Indian, identity. ("Ramasami's Reading" 175)

The controversies surrounding the Rama image burning campaign led the authorities to arrest Periyar in anticipation. Not only Brahmin elites but the other conventional Hindus and even the leaders of the Indian national movement also expressed their concern over this unprecedented event. Those who disagreed with this move considered this event controversial whereas, for Periyar, this was purely political. He had decided to make it happen even though there would be a move from the authorities. Hence, he could conduct the campaign through his hundreds of men at the same venue where the campaign was fixed even when police arrested him in advance. Through this campaign, Periyar was expressing the dissent of the Southern Dravidians to the North Indian Aryans. In the north, Ravana's image is burned each year while the audience express their delight during the climax of the Ramayana festivals. For Periyar, the symbolic burning of the Ravana image showed the Aryans' strong detestation against the Dravidians. Hence, contrary to this, he dared to conduct a Rama image burning.

Periyar's move to set the Rama image on fire was not an isolated protest. Instead, it was merely a part of his decades' long political discourses on the Ramayana. He disseminated his ideas through a series of short pamphlets so that even the illiterate could understand what he intended. While a large number of conventional anti-Brahmins still followed the Brahmins' construct of Rama as a divine hero, Periyar vividly proclaimed Ravana, and not Rama, as the true hero of the Ramayana illustrating with examples. Richman elucidates on the Rama image burning campaign of Periyar as one manifestation of his decades' long agitation. Interpreting the Ramayana as a text of political domination, Periyar intended to

awaken South Indians to their true identity as Dravidians' fight against their oppression of North Indians ("Ramasami's Reading" 176).

Periyar's critique of the Ramayana was absolutely an iconoclastic one disregarding all the existing veneration and popularity achieved by the text. He had taken meticulous attention while positing his arguments in criticising the Aryan manipulation of the Rama story. He speculated that the Ramayana was created intentionally as a North Indian construct of the South. His direct agitations and propagation of ideas through pamphlets and journals were enough to unveil the subjugation of Dravidians by the Aryan race. Critiquing the characters from the Ramayana in his seminal work titled *Iramayanappatirankal* (Characters in the Ramayana) he illustrated how he came to believe that the Ramayana was a disguised historical account of the Aryans' political domination over Dravidians.

Most of the conventional Ramayana narratives present Rama as the hero and Ravana, the villain. Tamil *Iramavataram* also had the same hero-villain concept. Periyar argued that this concept was due to the centuries' old political dominance and subjugation of South India by North Indians. Periyar turned the existing protagonist-antagonist status down. For Periyar, the true hero of the Ramayana was the South Indian ruler Ravana, and not Rama. Even though the Jain Ramayana presented Ravana as the protagonist already, it was Periyar who initiated such a discourse in the political domain. For Periyar, Rama was a ruler who dominated over others due to his greed for power, whereas Ravana was the true ruler of the time. Apart from the two central characters, Ravana and Rama, Periyar meticulously critiqued other major and minor characters also from the Ramayana. Thus, he

expressed his disillusionment with Hinduism through political reading of the Ramayana. Periyar eulogises Ravana by establishing ten merits composed by Valmiki himself:

Ravana hated Devas and Rishis. Why? They in the name of Yagam, i.e. offering sacrifices to the sacred fire, committed the most heinous crime of killing the poor dumb animals in a tortuous manner. For no other reasons he hated them. Valmiki himself said, Ravana was a good man. He was magnanimous and handsome. But he (Ravana) chastised Brahmins whenever he saw them performing Yagams and drinking Soma juice. (*True Reading* 36)

In order to figure out the political dominance of Aryans over Dravidians, Periyar politicised the Ramayana. According to Periyar, South India had the past of an egalitarian period that they would restore in the future, whereas North Indians were the caste-ridden people who did not even think of an egalitarian society. Richman observed how Periyar had reminded the Dravidian folk about the northern cultural domination. She observes:

The motivating force behind E.V.R.'s exegesis of the Ramayana remains the desire to see in it a struggle between North and South India. For Periyar, "northern" means brahmanical, caste-ridden, and Sanskritic, while "southern" means non-brahmanical, egalitarian, and Tamil value judgments that are embedded in his interpretation. In *Characters in the Ramayana*, E.V.R. vehemently attacks the respect with which Tamilians have traditionally viewed the Ramayana, arguing that the story is both an account

of and a continuing vehicle for northern cultural domination. Reversing the conventional understandings of villain and hero, he also calls upon readers to abandon their "superstitious" beliefs and embrace a desacralized view of the world. ("Ramasami's Reading" 18)

Gandhi saw Rama as a *maryada purushottam*, whereas Periyar's Rama was a North Indian Aryan ruler who invaded the South in order to subjugate Dravidians. As Periyar detests brahmanical privilege, the political appropriation of the Ramayana was an illustration and supporting document for that. All major characters in the Ramayana were critiqued by Periyar. He reminded the readers about the necessity of not being superstitious. By shedding the superstitious belief promoted by the North Indian Brahmins, the anti-Brahmins should uphold a desacralised view of the world.

While critiquing, Periyar convinced Dravidians that the representation of Rama as the protagonist is a deliberate attempt of Aryans. Subjugating Dravidians, Aryans deluded South Indians that Rama was an ideal and divine figure. By the account of Periyar, Tamil people tended to believe the false notions and superstitions posited by North Indians. Being illiterate and mostly innocent, the Dravidians were easily deceived by the shrewd brahmanical Hinduism. According to Richman, Periyar wants to "demythologize" Rama for Tamilians. Moreover, he wants to establish that Rama was an ordinary mortal and not a particularly admirable one ("Ramasami's Reading" 181).

Periyar analysed not less than a half dozen characters from the Ramayana to support his argument. He deteriorated the venerated status of Rama, citing scores of

allegations and criticisms against his position as an ideal divine ruler. Not only Rama but also Lakshmana, Sita and Hanuman were also denounced by him. For Periyar, Rama was merely an embodiment of the Aryans' political dominance over the Dravidian people. Despite his identity as an ideal ruler, he lacked an egalitarian concept and was deprived of even the minimum level of justice in his actions. Rama beheaded a '*Shudra*' named Shambuka, obeying the order of Brahmins, who blamed the untouchable Shambuka's performance of asceticism as the reason behind the untimely death of a Brahmin child. Periyar virulently attacked Rama by denoting what would have been the condition of the Dravidians' lives if Rama had ruled them for a long time. Richman remarks:

E.V.R. reserves his greatest outrage, however, for Rama's treatment of Shudras, the lowest group in the four-part brahmanical caste ranking and one of the major audiences of his pamphlet. He notes that Rama killed a Shudra named Shambuka because he was performing asceticism, which Vedic tradition prohibits for those not twice-born. ("Ramasami's Reading" 185)

Periyar vehemently reprimanded Rama's stealthy killing of Bali also. Bali, while combating with his younger brother Sugriva, never expected such an ambush from the so-called ideal ruler, Rama. Instead of killing one's opponent in a face-to-face fight, Rama killed Bali from the back using his arrows. His intention was to kill Bali through deception in order to make Sugriva the king. Bali would never have been defeated if Rama had not killed him in a stealthy way. As Richman illustrated, "E.V.R. emphasises not only the stealthy killing but the fact that Brahmins praise

such a man. That they do so is evidence of their attempt to foist an unheroic Rama upon South India as an exemplar of proper behaviour” (“Ramasami's Reading” 184).

Periyar enumerated many instances, such as Rama's greed to become the king, his dubious attitude towards his consort Sita, and the like. Periyar argued that Rama was not as virtuous as we heard. He was summoned to become the upcoming king of Ayodhya not because of his so-called qualities and moral values alone. He was not a successor with the greatness of a responsible king. Instead, Rama was a prince with a sufficient desire for the power, planning a conspiracy to grab the throne. Rama's politeness and obedience were mere pretensions in order to assume the role of Ayodhya's king. He, together with his father King Dasaratha, planned a conspiracy for the hasty decision of becoming king even before the arrival of his brother Bharata, who had been staying at his mother's house. Richman says, “One of E.V.R.'s most elaborately mounted attacks concerns Rama's supposed coveting of the throne of Ayodhya, which E.V.R. interprets as a sign of Rama's desire for domination” (“Ramasami's Reading” 184).

Even though Sita was venerated as a goddess in the Ramayana narratives, Periyar expressed his objections against her. However, being a Dravidian with an egalitarian attitude and a sense of equality towards women, Periyar intensely unveils the patriarchal attitude in the Ramayana towards Sita. He asserted with numerous instances that Rama treated Sita unfairly, especially after she came back from Ravana's Lanka. Rama erred in treating his own wife. This proved Rama's allegiance to his North Indian predecessors, who had hostility towards women. Sita had to undergo the fire ordeal to prove her chastity as told by the public, obeying the

commands of Rama. In spite of Sita's victory, Rama refused to accept her back as he was still dubious about her chastity, which might have been lost in the presence of Ravana.

Exposing him as the true hero of the Ramayana, Periyar wiped out Ravana's North Indian vilified identity, positing a new construct, the righteous king of Dravidians. He dealt at length with the character of Ravana, portraying his nearly half a dozen or more attributes, which were deliberately hidden by the Brahmin literati from the Ramayana readers. Besides being a brave warrior and great scholar, Ravana was also an ascetic with profound knowledge in *shastras* and Vedas. He was a responsible ruler and protector of his subjects, kiths and kins and also a pious worshipper who had achieved many boons from God through his asceticism. Despising Ravana's North Indian construct as an *Asura* or *Rakshasa* who enjoyed killing the 'venerated' Brahmins, Periyar portrayed him as an ideal ruler and compassionate human being who represented the egalitarian life of the Dravidian community.

Sita's abduction by Ravana was not merely because of Ravana's infatuation towards her, in Periyar's perspective. Instead, Ravana kidnapped Sita as revenge for Lakshmana's disfigurement of his sister Shurpanakha when she approached Rama, requesting to make her his consort. Although Shurpanakha was a lady, Lakshmana did not give her any consideration for that. Periyar vigorously criticised this incident in the Ramayana to expose North Indian cruelty towards women. Dravidians never did such vicious acts towards women. Ravana behaved politely toward Sita, though she was kept as a captive in his country. While Lakshmana mutilated Shurpanakha's

nose, breast and ears, Ravana never vandalised Sita in revenge. Moreover, Ravana even abstained from touching Sita without her consent, as he used to do in his life. In ancient days, kings enjoyed the presence of numerous women as part of their luxurious life. Ravana also enjoyed the love of many women. However, he would never touch any woman without her consent. Richman observes:

Periyar argues that Ravana takes Sita to Lanka as an honorable act of retaliation against Rama's insult and Laksmana's disfigurement of Ravana's sister, Shurpanakha. Shurpanakha had fallen in love with Rama, openly offering herself to him in marriage; by way of punishment, Laksmana cut off her nose and ears ("Ramasami's Reading" 186).

The Ramayana narratives generally presented Ravana as a cruel despot who committed many crimes, such as vandalising Brahmin ascetics. However, Periyar undoubtedly said Ravana was not an autocrat but a diplomatic king. He never failed to discuss his royal matters with ministers and others. The influence would be the ancient egalitarian thought of the Dravidian culture that treated everyone equally. The reason for Ravana's hatred towards the Brahmin ascetics was the killing of animals as part of their offerings. Periyar asserted that the so-called elite class Brahmins ate meat and drank *soma* (liquor), whereas Ravana remained a vegetarian. Richman delineates how Ravana hated Brahmin priests as they performed sacrificial rituals and drank intoxicating liquor:

Ravana's sense of propriety also manifests itself in his unwillingness to kill animals, which E.V.R. takes as evidence of his compassionate Dravidian nature. He notes that Ravana hated devas (gods), rsis (sages) and Brahmin

priests because they performed sacrificial rituals and drank intoxicating liquor (soma). Ravana refused to participate in such rituals because they involved the torture of poor helpless animals. By portraying Ravana as rejected the killing of animals, E.V.R. plays on the vegetarian inclinations of many of his followers, arousing their sympathy for Ravana.' ("Ramasami's Reading" 186-187)

Periyar was not the only scholar and social reformer who was involved in the political discourses surrounding the Ramayana by portraying Ravana as the Dravidian king resisting the Aryan invasion towards South India. There were numerous predecessors, in the Dravidian culture and beyond, who posited the construct of Ravana as the Dravidian king and the protagonist of the Ramayana. Even in the fifth or the sixth century BCE Jain Ramayana narrative, Ravana was treated with compassion by presenting him as a tragic hero. While almost all the mainstream Ramayana narratives celebrated the fall of Ravana in his combat with Rama, the Jains' *Paumacariya* denied this. Ravana's fall filled the eyes of Jains with tears. Periyar's view was also juxtaposed with this idea.

Those who see the Ramayana as the most venerated text believe that Rama was supposed to destroy all the evils in the society. However, there are numerous other Ramayana narratives with Ravana or others as protagonists. The Ramayana, being the most popular Hindu religious text that directly or indirectly transacted the rules of *varnashrama dharma*, establishing Brahmins as the dominant group, had many subversive and counter-narratives also. These narratives gave veneration to Ravana, despising the stereotypic telling, projecting Rama as the hero. Great

scholars, archaeologists and other learnt men had provided evidence and valuable comments criticising the plot and characterisation of the Ramayana. They opined that the Ramayana's plot resembled the political invasion and subjugation of Aryans over the Dravidian people. Periyar argues that the Ramayana was a disguised account of the Aryan invasion of South India, appending the remarks of those academics at the end of his works.

The narratives that posited Ravana as the protagonist comprised literary writings, reputed political discourses and the products of the popular culture. The *Adbhuta Ramayana* of Kashmir told the story of Ravana's victory over Rama and Ravana's ensuing defeat by Sita. Karthick Ram Manoharan, has enlisted a number of literary creations and popular culture depicting Ravana as hero. One among them is *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012), a work of popular fiction by Anand Neelakantan, written in English. This work narrates the Ramayana from the perspective of Ravana viewing him as a tragic hero like that of Jains. Another is Mani Ratnam's film *Raavan* (2010) where the protagonist Veeraiya (played by Vikram), a tribal leader who fights for the rights of his people, acted the role of Ravana. Yet another film directed by Ranjith titled *Kaala* (2018), portrayed an inversion of the Ramayana where Kaala (played by Rajnikanth) presented the role of Ravana (70).

A number of subaltern groups and tribes, such as the Gond and Umraav, had claimed that they had their genesis from Ravana. The name 'Umraav' was thus believed to have emerged from the name Ravana. These castes and others who believed in the same way were closely connected to Ravana, who, according to the

elite class Brahmins, was an untouchable. Periyar also continued to argue that Aryans suppressed the Ravana-led South Indians in the name of the caste system.

Bulcke asserts:

the name Ravana also felt like the Sanskrit transformation of a non-Aryan name. The Gond castes who reside in the Rayapuram district believed themselves as part of the race of Ravana. People of the Umraav caste also believed that their genesis was from Ravana and thus they got the name Umraav. All these prove that the tribals had connections with the Rama story.” (*Ramakatha* 133)

Ravana and his men, although portrayed as *Rakshasas*, are people from the subaltern communities in real life. It was Aryans who considered the low-class people as *Rakshasas* or *Rakshas*, as these terms indicated ghosts and other souls in their Adharva Veda. As Aryans considered these souls as the enemies of people, many chants were given in the Adharva Veda in order to control and drive away these powers. These *Rakshasas* became the symbols of ill omens and violence. Therefore, Ravana and his followers began to be named as *Rakshasas* by brahmanical Hinduism. Arguments of the learnt men had already proved that the concept of *Rakhasa* was attributed to Ravana and his men by Aryans. Periyar also raised the argument that the Ramayana was a disguised historic account of the Aryan dominance over Dravidians. As Aryans were the Vedic people who believed in the superstitions of the spirits similar to *Rakshas*, *Rakhasa*, and other ghosts, they also believed falsely in their power of magic to drive away the spirits. This was the reason in which Aryans attempted to liken the subaltern people to the spirits.

For Periyar, the representation of Rama and Ravana as protagonist and antagonist, respectively, was a manipulated account of the North Indian invasion of South India. What he had done through his epoch-making movement was his epoch-making struggle for the eradication of the centuries'- old caste system in India. His political appropriation of the Ramayana was powerful enough to shake the brahmanical Hinduism in the nation. The struggle against such a powerful brahmanical upper class was not as simple as it is today. Even when the powerful organisations resembling the Indian National Congress failed to fight against the serious threat of the caste system due to the slavish attitude of their leaders towards *varnashrama dharma*, Periyar was a relentless fighter. His radical reading of the Ramayana addressed the politics of Brahmin hegemony.

The role Periyar played in the historic battle against the brahmanical hegemony and the caste system was unique. However, due to the lack of proper political movements and legislation following Periyar, the influence of casteism still remains in the country. The state itself was unable to establish his arguments adequately due to the limitations of practical politics. This might have been the reason for the censoring of the Rama image-burning scene from the Tamil Nadu state-sponsored film titled *Periyar* in 2007. The joint venture of Kerala and Tamil Nadu to commemorate Periyar and celebrate the centenary of the 1924 Kerala Vaikom Satyagraha, advocating for the rights of the backward class to walk along the road in front of the Vaikom temple, has reignited hope for the present generation to read Periyar again.

Chapter 4

Hindutva Appropriation of the Ramayana

The previous chapters have explored how individual figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Periyar E.V. Ramasami engaged with the Ramayana, interpreting and appropriating it in ways that aligned with their respective political and ethical worldviews. Chapter IV now marks a transition from these personal and ideological readings to a more collective and institutionalised appropriation carried out by hindutva forces. This shift is not a break in the argument but rather an extension that reflects a broader historical development—where the Ramayana moved from being a source of moral or philosophical reflection to becoming a strategic political symbol. In particular, hindutva discourse reimagined the epic and its characters, especially Rama, as markers of religious identity and national belonging. The chapter focuses on how the Ramayana was used to construct cultural narratives that supported claims like the designation of the Babri Masjid site as Rama’s birthplace. In doing so, it illustrates the transformation of the Ramayana from a diverse literary tradition into a central element in the ideological construction of Hindu nationalism.

This trajectory—from individual political interpretations to collective ideological mobilisation—continued as hindutva organisations began to appropriate the Ramayana for their own political objectives. While figures like Gandhi invoked the epic to inspire moral and national unity during the freedom struggle, and Periyar critiqued it to challenge caste-based hierarchies and Brahmanical dominance,

hindutva forces reinterpreted the Ramayana to foster a sense of Hindu cultural resurgence. Unlike the earlier reformist or emancipatory appropriations, the Hindutva discourse strategically positioned Rama as a symbol of Hindu nationalism, using the epic to assert religious identity and territorial claims. This shift in appropriation played a crucial role in reshaping political narratives in twentieth-century India, with long-lasting implications for the country's secular and constitutional fabric.

Hindutva is an extreme right-wing political ideology formulated by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a notorious freedom fighter and noted leader of the Hindu Mahasabha. This doctrine originated in India during the early decades of the twentieth century and was propagated by the Sangh Parivar, a group of extreme right-wing political and cultural organisations. The main aim of this ideology is to attain the political power of the nation and establish a form of *Hindurashtra*, a nation chiefly for Hindus, excluding all other religions and ethnicities. Even though the term 'hindutva' literally means Hindu-ness, which is the state of being Hindu or the quality of being Hindu, it has had a wider realm of meanings since the formation of that concept itself. Though the term seems to be naturally linked to Hinduism, it is intentionally communal, rather than natural.

Hindutva is a communal and politicised form of Hinduism, which, on the contrary, is a religion that is not communal or political in nature. Before being formulated into a religion, Sindhu, or Hindu, as the Persians named it, as they used the letter 'H' instead of 'S,' was the name of a culture that existed near the River

Sindhu and spread across some areas of the Indian subcontinent in the early millennia of B.C. Nehru asserts:

The word 'Hindu' does not occur at all in our ancient literature. The first reference to it in an Indian book is, I am told, in a Tantrik work of the eighth century A.C., where 'Hindu' means a people and not the followers of a particular religion. But it is clear that the word is a very old one, as it occurs in the Avesta and in old Persian. It was used then and for a thousand years or more later by the peoples of western and central Asia for India, or rather for the people living on the other side of the Indus River. The word is clearly derived from Sindhu, the old, as well as the present, Indian name for the Indus. From this Sindhu came the words Hindu and Hindustan, as well as Indus and India (*Discovery* 74).

Nehru continues:

The famous Chinese pilgrim I-tsing, who came to India in the seventh century A.C., writes in his record of travels that the 'northern tribes', that is, the people of Central Asia, called India 'Hindu' (Hsin-tu), but he adds, 'this is not at all a common name...and the most suitable name for India is the Noble Land (Aryadesha).' The use of the word 'Hindu' in connection with a particular religion is of very late occurrence (*Discovery* 74).

Hinduism as a religion evolved out of this cultural way of life, though without any written documents as its sacred texts. This religion covered a long period of not less than a dozen centuries, pursuing the pagan style of worship of multitudes of idols and other beliefs. Later, by the outset of the twentieth century, Hindu right-wing

groups realised the importance and the impact of Hinduism in politics, as it represented the majority of the population. It was thus an idea formed politically in the name of cultural nationalism in order to reach political power under the auspices of hindutva organisations named the Sangh Parivar, which comprises not less than a dozen groups such as the Rashtreeya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP). While quite a number of organisations among this group abstain from the direct politics of the nation, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which translates roughly as the Indian People's Party, acts as the parliamentary political manifestation of this network of organisations.

V. D. Savarkar, the first and foremost intellectual brain of hindutva ideology, defines the term 'Hindu' as a culture that is at least 40 centuries old. He agrees that the term 'Hindu' was attributed to a culture that existed on the banks of the Sindhu, or Indus River, by the erstwhile Persians. For him, Hinduism was merely an 'ism' or dogma, which he did not consider even as a principle. Instead, he posited the term 'hindutva,' which means Hindu-ness. Both the terms 'Hinduism' and 'hindutva' had their bases in the term 'Hindu.' Savarkar asserts:

Here it is enough to point out that hindutva is not identical with what is vaguely identified by the term Hinduism. By an 'ism' it generally means a theory or a code more or less based on spiritual or religious dogma or system. But when we attempt to investigate the essential significance of hindutva, we do not primarily—and certainly not mainly—concern ourselves with any particular theocratic or religious dogma or creed. Had not linguistic usage stood in our way, then 'Hinduness' would have certainly been a better

word than Hinduism as a near parallel to hindutva. Hindutva embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole being of our Hindu race.

Therefore, to understand the significance of the term hindutva, we must first understand the essential meaning of the word Hindu itself and realise how it came to exercise such imperial sway over the hearts of millions of mankind and win a loving allegiance from the bravest and the best of them. But before we can do that, it is imperative to point out that we are by no means attempting a definition or even a description of the more limited, less satisfactory and essentially sectarian term Hinduism. How far we succeed or are justified in doing that would appear as we proceed. (4)

Though Savarkar renounced Hinduism and solely embraced Hindu culture, it is undeniable that Hinduism, as a widely practiced religion, has significantly influenced the hindutva ideology. The term 'Hindu' has been inclusive of all the diverse cultures in the Indian subcontinent since ancient times, whereas hindutva, which arose only in the twentieth century, excluded many and surrounded Hinduism even when Savarkar abstained from that 'ism' or religious dogma, as he said.

Hinduism had already been established as a religion of the majority of people on the Indian subcontinent for many centuries. When Savarkar posited hindutva in the beginning of the twentieth century, people had embraced it due to the influence of Hinduism and not Hindu culture. It was due to the fact that the idea of Hindu culture had already evolved as a religion over centuries. People who welcomed hindutva tended to believe that both Hinduism and the hindutva ideology were synonymous. The majority of those who followed hindutva were largely unaware that it represented a politicised form of Hinduism. Hinduism is a broad concept as people

pursue it as a religion and belief, whereas the term ‘hindutva’ is a narrow agenda manipulated for the political aim. Even though hindutva and the organisations surrounding it cannot exist without Hinduism, people who believe in Hinduism as a religion need not necessarily be the followers of the hindutva agenda. Thapar explains:

The term Hindutva was invented in this sense by V.D. Savarkar in 1923 and was adopted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as its ideology in 1989. Therefore, not all Hindus are or need be supporters of Hindutva despite the assumption of the latter that they are. As a belief system, Hinduism accommodates a range of beliefs and sometimes there could even be ambivalence about non- belief. The sect, in contrast, has always had a particular definition that its followers observe, as with Hindutva. So far, those identified with Hindutva have tended to be viewed as a minority group within the majority community of the religion, Hinduism. (“Reflections” 36)

The hindutva ideology was executed through the RSS, founded by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a doctor and another noted ideologue of hindutva. Though he participated in the freedom movements through Balgangatara Tilak’s Home Rule movement, Hedgewar was more interested in the activities of hindutva. Therefore, meeting with Savarkar led him to form the RSS. This vigilante, political, cultural and paramilitary organisation was formed in Nagpur in 1925. Christophe Jaffrelot remarks:

While Savarkar provided Hindu nationalism with an ideology, he did not outline a plan of action by which Hindus ought to react to the Muslim threat

or reform and organize themselves. This task was taken up by another Maharashtrian, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889–1940), who paid a visit to Savarkar in the mid-1920s and then founded the RSS in his hometown, Nagpur. This organisation—which quickly developed into the largest Hindu nationalist movement—was intended not only to propagate the Hindutva ideology but also to infuse new physical strength into the majority community. (“Ethnic Nationalism” 16)

Hedgewar and the RSS opposed Gandhi’s perspective, which unified people from all walks of life irrespective of their religion, caste, and so on. Instead, the RSS posited an idea of freedom for the nation based on Hindu culture and tradition. Gandhi’s attempt to mobilise the Muslim community by intervening in the Khilafat movement, which broke out in Malabar, Northern Kerala, and the strengthening of the non-cooperation movement resulted in hindutva’s enmity. As a matter of fact, hindutva itself was formed as a reaction against the Khilafat movements in the nation. While Gandhi was stubborn on the necessity of Hindu-Muslim unity, the RSS vehemently opposed it, demanding a Hindu nation. Jaffrelot details:

Hindu nationalism as we know it today was born in Maharashtra in the 1920s, in the context of reaction to the Khilafat movement. Its ideology was codified by Savarkar much before he joined the Hindu Mahasabha. A former anti-British revolutionary, Savarkar wrote the book “Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?” in the early 1920s while still a prisoner of the British at Ratnagiri in Maharashtra. His book was the first attempt at endowing what he called the *Hindurashtra* (the Hindu nation) with a clear-cut identity: namely Hindutva, a

word coined by Savarkar and which, according to him, does not coincide with Hinduism. (“Ethnic Nationalism” 14)

Gandhi, Nehru and other national leaders led the movement through a concerted effort, fusing all the known and unknown freedom fighters. Therefore, the communal agenda of the Sangh Parivar did not thrive until India became independent. The idea of Indian nationalism surpassed Hindu nationalism propagated by the Sangh Parivar. This might have been the reason behind Gandhi’s assassination by an RSS activist named Nathuram Vinayak Godse soon after India’s independence. The nationalism posited by the leaders of the Indian national movement was an inclusive one that helped to form an independent India of pluralistic culture in the years ahead. Irfan Habib states:

To comprehend the ongoing ballistic nationalism it may be worthwhile to delve into the origins of nationalism as it was originally perceived by those who fought for the formation of the country. It was an inclusive nationalism that was consciously adopted all through our freedom struggle and carried forward to build a new pluralistic independent India.” (Introduction 1)

The RSS participated in the freedom movements during the initial stages of their activities only. Savarkar was imprisoned in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for his involvement in the movement. However, later, history proved him to be a notorious patriot, as he wrote many letters of apology to British authorities seeking release. Savarkar’s apology from the jail states, “Therefore if the government in their manifold beneficence and mercy release me, I for one cannot but be the

staunchest advocate of constitutional progress and loyalty to the English government which is the foremost condition of that progress” (“Bhagat Singh and Savarkar”).

The RSS has always claimed that it is fundamentally a Hindu nationalist and cultural organisation and not a political one. However, it is evident that the RSS and the Sangh Parivar have been working to attain the nation’s political power through the BJP. In fact, the BJP was born as a child of the RSS. Badri Narayan quotes Jaffrelot:

The RSS, claimed to be a non-political Hindu nationalist organisation but which is known for its politics of communalism based on Hindu identity, was founded in 1925 in order to fashion India as a Hindu nation. One of the important functions of RSS, also known as Sangh parivar, is to build up a cadre base for the BJP, which is the political wing of RSS.” (4695-96)

During the early years of the post-independence period, the special attention of Nehru and the Congress government towards Muslim minorities urged the Sangh Parivar to interfere in direct politics. Therefore, a political party named the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, popularly known as Jana Sangh, was founded by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee as the political manifestation of the Sangh Parivar in 1951. Despite their application of the hard-line hindutva ideology, the Sangh Parivar could hardly thrive in parliamentary politics in the first three decades of the post-independence period. Indians, especially Hindus, identified that there was no substance in the arguments posited by the Jana Sangh in the name of the nation’s cultural past. Therefore, they could not come to power by defeating the ruling party.

Due to the presence of able leaders such as Nehru, people in general were comfortable with the erstwhile governments. However, later, following Indira Gandhi's emergency period, the Janata Party, unifying the Jana Sangh and a few other parties, came to power for a period of three years. A split arose in the Janata Party government, and the Jana Sangh was deprived of political power in the 1980 election. This was the context in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as its first president, was formed as the new parliamentary political organ of the RSS.

The Ram Janmabhoomi movement is a political campaign organised by the Sangh Parivar through the VHP in the 1980s, aiming at the establishment of a new Rama Temple in the disputed land of Ayodhya. This movement was instrumental in the demolition of the centuries'-old Babri Masjid in 1992. The campaign played a prominent role in the abrupt surge of hindutva into parliamentary politics marking a significant political appropriation of the Ramayana in the twentieth century. Being an organisation among the Sangh Parivar group, the VHP initiated the movement propagating the hindutva ideology. The BJP seemingly abstained from the front line at the outset. However, they actively intervened in the critical context, securing a sufficient number of parliament seats to form a government in co-alliance, defeating the Indian National Congress in 1989. Gail Omvedt remarks, "On November 9, 1989 there was a brick-laying ceremony (*shilanyas*) at the disputed site hundreds of thousands of consecrated bricks were brought from villages throughout India-supposedly one from each village" (723).

Hindutva executed their agenda in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, their move did not yield results in Indian parliamentary politics until they started the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. During pre-independence, their plan of Hindu nationalism did not thrive, surpassing the idea of Indian nationalism. Post-independence India provided them neither sufficient space nor remarkable progress in parliamentary politics.

In a few years after India got freedom, the Sangh Parivar resumed the Ram Janmabhoomi issue, which was a sealed story by the previous century, through litigation. In 1949, some 'anonymous persons' trespassed into the compound of the Babri Masjid at night and kept the idols of Rama and Sita inside the mosque. The idols created a stir among some Hindus, especially when somebody deliberately proclaimed it as a miraculous incident. However, the consequences of the incident did not become more perilous because of PM Nehru's timely intervention. Jaffrelot asserts:

The issue resurfaced after sixty years of peaceful coexistence in the tragic context of post-Partition India. On the night of 22-23 December 1949 someone broke into the mosque and there installed the idols of Rama and Sita. The following day thousands of local Hindus assembled and proclaimed this event a miracle. The Chief Minister of the United Provinces (today's Uttar Pradesh), G.B. Pant, asked the District Magistrate to remove the idols but the man refused to obey- his wife was elected MP from Gonda on a Hindu Mashasabha ticket two years later, and it seems plausible the ploy had been masterminded by activists of this party. But Nehru prevented the

Mahasabha from exploiting the issue by ordering preventive arrests and getting the gates of the mosque sealed in 1950. (“Ayodhya” 279-280)

The actual claim for the disputed land as the birthplace of Rama began in British India during the nineteenth century. There had been a consensus since the eighteenth century among Hindus that a raised platform known by the name *chabootra* near the Babri Masjid was Rama’s birthplace. This claim grew more concrete around 1853, when a group of Hindu ascetics demanded the whole land of the mosque itself as Ram Janmabhoomi. Reports said that there were not less than a dozen or more Rama temples in Ayodhya. As far as the *pujari*, one who does the offerings in each temple, of each Rama temple was concerned, his temple was the Ram Janmabhoomi. However, the claim that the Babri Masjid was built in the exact birthplace of Rama seemed mysterious and intentional. By 1883, the clamour had grown vociferous when a local *pandit*, who claimed to be the *mahant*, the chief priest of the temple, filed a suit for a Rama temple to be built where the *chabootra* existed. However, the demand was dismissed by British courts, as the move to build such a temple in the proximity of a mosque may invite risks and man-made disasters. Jaffrelot illustrates:

Ayodhya is the name of a small town of Uttar Pradesh in Faizabad district. It is known in the Ramayana as the capital of Lord Rama, the place from where he ruled as an ideal Hindu king. In the eighteenth century, the common belief was that the birthplace of Rama was marked by a small platform near the Babri Masjid. However, in 1853 Hindu ascetics from the Bairagi order claimed that the mosque was built on Rama’s birthplace itself. However, a

compromise was found whereby Hindu devotees were to worship Rama on the platform (*chabootra*) near the mosque. It was here that, in 1883, a local pandit asked for a temple to be built—a demand that the British rejected because of its proximity to the mosque. (“Ayodhya” 279)

The dismissal of the suit by the sub-judge of Faizabad never brought an end to the legal battle as the *mahant* went ahead to submit an appeal in the year 1886 before the higher courts more than once. However, the appeal was also dismissed persistently due to the risk of building a temple in the precinct of a mosque. Even though the court was in agreement with the arguments of the plaintiff that the *chabootra* was sacred to Hindus according to their legend, the judges refused to sanction the building of a new temple next to the mosque. As the mosque had been a part of history for a period of more than three and a half centuries, they came to the conclusion that any change to the *status quo* would result in further conflicts. Hence, the authorities steadily dismissed the claim for building a Rama temple on the disputed land. Hence, the litigation surrounding this issue came to an end by 1886.

The dispute over the masjid-mandir issue lay dormant until the idols of Rama and Sita were installed in 1949 in the Babri Masjid. In truth, the matter should have been resolved by the 1880s, as the *mahant* and some Hindus accepted the court's observations and judgements to maintain the *status quo*. This likely explains the absence of demands for a Rama Temple on the disputed land for about 60 years. During the first phase of the dispute in the late nineteenth century, it was essentially non-political. At that time, a group of Hindus sought to construct a Rama Temple near the mosque, driven by their reverence and worship of Rama. However, the

subsequent disputes and controversies that unfolded in the twentieth century were distinctly political in nature. The issues included the 1949 idol installation incident, the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the demolition of the five-hundred-years-old Babri Masjid in 1992, and the eventual building of the new Rama Temple in 2024. The aim of politicising the Ayodhya dispute was a surreptitious political move planned and executed by the Sangh Parivar.

The Babri Masjid had been part of history since 1528, whereas the belief that the disputed land was the Ram Janmabhoomi was a legend without a historical basis. The claim for Ram Janmabhoomi and the Rama Temple was only based on a popular belief that arose in the nineteenth century. History has never given any solid evidence for the existence of such a temple anywhere in Ayodhya, nor has archaeology, to date. The claim, which began in the nineteenth century, was not based on any historical evidence. While the demand until the close of that century was purely rooted in a belief in legend, the issues that have come up since 1949 have been political. S. C. Nanda and Malti Nagar share valuable insights:

One more strong argument can be adduced in support of Sankalia's theory. During last few years B. B. Lal, another distinguished archaeologist, has been engaged in excavating several sites - Ayodhya, Bharadwaj Ashram, Shringverpur and Nandigram - which figure prominently in the Ramayana story. His excavations have shown that none of these places were in existence before eighth century B. C. If, therefore, these are the places where various events associated with Rama's life took place, then the Ramayana story cannot be earlier than 800 B.C. (72)

A.G. Noorani illustrates on the excavations conducted in the cities mentioned in the Ramayana, including Ayodhya:

The Archaeological Survey of India embarked on a project "Archaeology of the Ramayan Sites" in 1975. Its former director B.B. Lal initiated it. Experts worked in five cities mentioned in Valmiki's Ramayan. Ayodhya was one of them. An 11 metre trench was dug right behind the Babri Masjid. The first volume is ready for publication. The second and concluding volume is being written. The reports of two well informed correspondents, Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay (*Sunday Mail*, November 20, 1988) and Pankaj Pachauri (*India Today*, January 15, 1989) tally-The ASI's findings knock the bottom out of the VHP case that the site in question is the birthplace of Shri Ram. The VHP says that Babur's governor at Avadh, Mir Baqi, built the mosque in 1528 by demolishing a temple 'renovated' by Vikramaditya of the Guptas in the fourth century AD. The ASI found that there was no habitation in the area during the Gupta period. The first human settlement there took place as late as in the seventh century BC while there were no human settlements in and around Ayodhya between the 3rd and 11th centuries AD. This debunks the Gupta construction as also the theory of Ayodhya being the seat of Shri Ram. Mukhopadhyay reported, "a senior former ASI officer said that there was no question of deviating from the original findings which underline that modern Ayodhya was not a seat of Rama (if he existed) and that a temple to mark his birth place was not built on the site of the Babri Masjid. Pachauri reports that "in the 14 sites excavated in Ayodhya no figurines of Ram were found." The result of the excavation at the site is already available in the

ASI's Journal of Indian Archaeology, 1976-77." ("Ram Janmabhoomi Question" 2463)

The identity of Ayodhya as Ram Janmabhoomi has come to the fore due to the fact that Ayodhya is the setting of the Ramayana. The place was the capital of the kingdom ruled by Dasaratha and later Rama. Rama was a model ruler noted for his generosity towards his subjects and righteousness in his action despite culpabilities from his side. The evolution of the Ramayana as the most venerated text among Hindus made Rama a deity. Gradually, the city got an acknowledgement as the birthplace of Rama. Literally, history or archaeology never provided evidence for the existence of Rama. The identity that Rama is a deity cannot be considered history but just part of stories in *puranas* and *ithihasas*. King Rama may or may not have lived long before he gained reverence as a deity. Nevertheless, in the absence of historical evidence verifying his existence, he remains a figure of myth and literature. Consequently, the assertion that a specific location is the birthplace of the deity Rama could be wholly dismissed. Noorani quotes Srivastava:

The belief that the Ram Janmabhoomi Temple was located at the site of the Babri Masjid appears to be based largely on local myth and folklore. In fact, there is no concrete historical evidence to show that a temple associated with Rama existed at the spot. Nor is there any mention of any such temple in the Hindu scriptures. The main basis for the belief appears to be the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, which mentions Ayodhya as the city where Rama was born. "He also holds that there is no evidence that Babur "destroyed any temple in Ayodhya. ("Ram Janmabhoomi Question" 2464)

Ramcharitmanas was composed during the sixteenth century, a period when the mosque was constructed by Babur. Being a devotee of Rama, Tulsidas must have been aware of such a particular place in Ayodhya attributed to Ram Janmabhoomi if the claim had been true. He has never mentioned or documented anywhere the location of the Babri Masjid as Ram Janmabhoomi. Noorani notes:

The Ram Charit Manas of Saint Tulsidas does not mention either the destruction of a temple or the construction of a mosque on its site. He was over 30 in 1528 when the mosque was built. He lived and wrote his great work in Ayodhya. It is simply unthinkable that the devotee of Shri Ram would have ignored the outrage, if it had been committed. ("Ram Janmabhoomi Question" 2463)

If Babur had demolished a Rama Temple to construct the Babri Masjid, either he or someone else would have documented it somewhere during his rule. There would have been no rationale or apprehension to deter him from such an action. Being an emperor, Babur neither needed any hesitancy nor was he afraid to proclaim such an action publicly, as he had no challenges from Hindus or any other sides during his reign. Still, the records during his rule, such as *Tuzk-i-Babri*, the memoirs of Babur, and other sources have never given any such hints. Once, having felt it was obscene, he ordered the mutilation of some nude Jain idols in Gwalior. He never refrained from proudly recounting such occurrences, as he detailed in his writings. Had he ordered the demolition of the temple, it would have been accounted for during his time. Asghar Ali Engineer states:

In fact, Babur had no reason to fear anyone for mentioning the demolition of Ramjanmasthan temple. If he had ordered it for religious merit he should have felt proud to mention that as he did not hesitate to mention that he did order mutilation of nude Jain idols in Urwah Valley, near Gwalior, since he considered them to be obscene. Of course his order did not extend to those idols which were not nude. When he could boast of mutilating these nude Jain idols why should he have not mentioned demolition of Rama Janamsthan temple? Secondly, even Babur's contemporary sources do not mention anything about it. (4)

These are all indications that the demand for Ram Janmabhoomi had no historical basis. Consequently, the claim, since the eighteenth century, that Babur had built the mosque by demolishing an existing Rama *mandir* was an argument formed through misconception. In fact, the demand for Ram Janmabhoomi came to an end by the close of the nineteenth century with the British court's verdict to sustain the existing status. The court's ruling determined that a centre of worship existing for approximately five centuries couldn't be demolished to erect another centre of worship belonging to a different religion. Additionally, it was deemed inappropriate to allocate space on the premises of the existing mosque for this purpose.

Till the nineteenth century, the demand for Ram Janmabhoomi had no consequences since it was not politically motivated. The disputed land came to the forefront of the political discourse by the mid-twentieth century following the idol installation issue. The issue became more complicated when the VHP initiated the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in the 1980s. Archaeological and historical evidence

contradicted the belief in a pre-existing Rama Temple before the mosque's construction in the sixteenth century. Excavations near the mosque found no evidence of the temple, aligning with historical records. Despite this, the VHP led the campaign, driven by political ambitions. Noorani reiterates that there was no such evidence for the demolition of an ancient Rama Temple for building the Babri Masjid:

It is an odd way to correct an ancient and imaginary wrong to inflict by force and fraud a monstrous wrong calculated to play havoc with people's lives and emotions. There is no evidence, historical or archaeological, that the mosque was built on the site of Shri Ramachandraji's site of birth or that a temple built in his honour was demolished to build the mosque. Indeed, the claim to the mosque is also recent. Originally only the *chabutra* was claimed. ("Ram Janmabhoomi Question" 2463)

The argument raised by hindutva through the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was not rooted in religious sentiment but was intentionally political. In order to back up the claim that the Masjid was built, demolishing an ancient Rama Temple, the VHP and the Sangh Parivar resorted to communal politics. Their hypothesis aimed to expose Babur, a Muslim ruler, as having a religious grudge towards Hindus. However, it was proved that Babur was not intolerant of Hindus; rather, he respected Hindu cultures and values. Inscriptions in Babur's memoirs tell us he had even advised his son Humayun to be tolerant towards Hindu beliefs. Additionally, hindutva could leverage the 'evidence' documented by the British rule regarding the demolition of a former Rama Temple. When we delve into the history of the origin of the masjid-

mandir dispute, it is plausible that the British rule in India had a subtle but significant role in initiating communal controversies. The British assumed that Babur might have demolished the supposed Rama Temple in Ayodhya and subsequently constructed the mosque. This idea was just a comment posited by Mrs. A.F. Beveridge while translating the *Memoirs* of Babur. Beveridge hypothesised that Babur must have displaced the temple in order to erect the Babri Masjid. Engineer remarks:

The translator of Babur's *Memoirs* Mrs. A.F. Beveridge in a footnote suggests that Babur being a Muslim, and "impressed by the dignity and sanctity of the ancient Hindu shrine" would have displaced "at least in part" the temple to erect the mosque. She bases her inference on the fact that Babur being Muslim must have been intolerant of other faiths and thus demolished the temple which was supposedly in existence there. It is, at best, very generalised inference and forgetting the fact that Babur, in his memoirs advises his son Humayun to be tolerant to Hindus and not to eat beef if he wants to rule over India. (5)

Mrs. Beveridge's inference had a harmful impact as it was intentionally used by Hindu nationalist groups. The British Raj in India was already notorious for their policy of divide and rule, which later led to recurrent communal riots. Though Beveridge's work came out in the first decades of the twentieth century, the direct and indirect involvement of the British was apparent in the conflict between Hindus and Muslims. When the initial communal clashes broke out over the mosque in the second half of the nineteenth century, *Bairagis*, Hindu priests of Vaishnava temples,

received assistance from the colonialists for fighting Muslims. The British, in turn, used *Bairagis* to intensify the tension between the two communities. Engineer clarifies how the colonial regime succeeded in creating a wedge between the two communities. He states, “thus, it appears to be the first systematic confrontation between Hindus and Muslims in Ayodhya, which seems to have taken place at the instance of British rulers. They succeeded in driving a wedge between Muslims and Hindus. It did not end there” (6).

The claim for the Ram Janmabhoomi by Hindu priests actually began by the mid-nineteenth century. A few communal riots surrounding the Babri Masjid and a few other mosques in Ayodhya and the legal battles claiming the disputed land arose thereafter. The involvement of the British reign supporting Hindu groups often worsened the situation. Nevertheless, the primary confrontation between the two groups claiming the possession of the disputed land came to a close by the end of the nineteenth century. Even though the then British court rejected the demand for erecting a new temple adjacent to the existing Masjid, the court’s inference was seemingly dubious. Despite the absence of historical or archaeological evidence, the court had taken Hindus’ claim into account that the disputed land was the birthplace of their deity. Such a hypothesis of the judicial system without proper evidence was later utilised by hindutva.

The issue of the disputed land still did not give a political edge to hindutva during the decades following India’s independence. Therefore, they vehemently initiated a campaign, naming it as the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in the 1980s through the VHP, which was intentionally and exclusively formed for this move in

1964. In order to achieve political sovereignty over the nation through the BJP in the upcoming election, the Sangh Parivar effectively utilised the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. The VHP spearheaded the campaign intending to erect a new Rama Temple in the disputed land. It was this campaign that culminated in the demolition of the mosque in 1992 and the communal riots thereafter.

The TV broadcast series *Ramayan*, directed by Ramanand Sagar, began on the state-supported TV channel Doordarshan in 1987. The series significantly shaped the development of Hindu consciousness, which later provided ample space for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Sagar's adaptation of the Ramayana for modern readers was based on *Ramcharitmanas*, chiefly because of its popularity as the most venerated text. Hence, the release of the Sagar Ramayana in an innovative television broadcast, the first visual media presentation of the Ramayana, aroused curiosity among Hindus in India and beyond. G.P. Deshpande observes:

With all the trick scenes thrown in, the episodes seem to hold everybody's interest. We have yet to meet an individual who has, out of boredom, given up watching the Ramayana on the telly. There has not been a greater story of success in the history of entertainment in modern-day India. In Bombay they organised an exhibition of the costumes which the Ramayana characters used in the serial. The exhibition was inaugurated by Deepika and became quite a crowd puller. This is one small indication of what the TV Ramayana has come to mean for people at large. It has been an experience of a lifetime for most of them. A poorly acted, still more poorly produced, lurid dramatisation of the epic is what the Sagar Ramayana is. (2215)

The Sagar Ramayana, though it became one of the popular programmes for Hindus in general, had an adverse effect on the decades-old Indian national consciousness and the centuries-old secular heritage of the nation. The scenario began to change with the occurrence of the TV series. The episodes gradually bewitched the Hindus as Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman conquered the minds of many. This Ramayana narrative, using modern technology, thus acted as a catalyst for sparking a Hindu awakening across the country. Hindu nationalism, which was unable to find a space in the social and political scenario of the nation until then, began to grow and strengthen due to its impact. Hence, the political scenario of the nation was subjected to an unprecedented change. In a BBC article Rahul Verma elaborates:

The TV show is credited as the catalyst in sparking a Hindu awakening across India, and bringing Hindu nationalism to the forefront of public and political spheres. Until the Ramayan was broadcast, religious TV programming was limited because India is a secular state, with all religions treated equally, as Rajagopal explains. “The broadcast of the Ramayana was the first major rupture of the secular consensus, it catered to the devout and ritualistic. The popular response was devotional, but the activity of political parties was necessary to translate that into something political” (“TV Show,” par. 11).

The popular response to the television broadcast was devotional, for Hindus in general saw the Ramayan series not only as an epic tale but also as a part of their devotion as well. However, some of the leading political parties in the nation realised it was a powerful two-sided weapon and the right set of circumstances to

arrive at the narrow corridors of power was to form a government through the consolidation of the Hindu majority's votes. It was a time when the Indian National Congress was foreseeing its gradual deterioration from its unassailable single-party status in Indian politics due to its setback in some of the previous Lok Sabha elections. Hence, a strategy was developed by some of its leaders to satisfy the majority of Hindus supporting the plan of hindutva groups to build a new Rama Temple in Ayodhya. It was in this context that the demand to broadcast the *Ramayan* series on the Doordarshan channel arose. Expecting a favourable response from Hindus in the coming elections, the Congress-led Central Government gave a nod to broadcast such a religious series on the state-sponsored TV channel, which was unprecedented in the history of the nation. Arvind Rajagopal remarked in his interview with Darryl D'Monte for India's Frontline magazine in 2000:

In January 1987, the Indian government began broadcasting the *Ramayan* to nationwide audiences, this violated a decades-old taboo on religious partisanship, and Hindu nationalists made the most of the opportunity. What resulted was perhaps the largest campaign in post-independence times, irrevocably changing the complexion of Indian politics. The telecast of a religious epic to popular acclaim created the sense of a nation coming together, seeming to confirm the idea of Hindu awakening. ("Hindutva at Play," par. 5)

The consequence of the Sagar Ramayana was not as the Congress Party expected. What they had dreamed of was taken away by the BJP. In the 1989 Lok Sabha election, the BJP found remarkable progress in the parliamentary politics and

secured a number of seats utilising Hindu consciousness that emerged in the nation. This Hindu consciousness was instrumental in the years ahead for the later developments of the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign. With this immediate advancement, the BJP and hindutva could represent the Janata Dal-led and the leftist-supported central government. Hence, as Rahul Verma states, though “the Congress government of the time that sought to capture Hindu votes by broadcasting the Ramayan on state TV channel Doordarshan, it is the Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), that has reaped the benefits” (“TV Show,” par. 13).

The *Ramayan*’s broadcast, thus, brought a tremendous change to the existing social and political scenario of the nation, apparently triggering a Hindu awakening that was not active in the public sphere till then. Sagar’s Ramayana provided a canvas for hindutva with which the Ram Janmabhoomi movement gathered momentum ultimately resulting in the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

Lloyd I Rudolph is of the opinion that classic epics, when serialised especially in India, creates some particular social and political impacts and not the effects of entertainment only. They go beyond the experience of mere entertaining spectacle. He elucidates the consequences in his article, “Doordarshan's mega-series, the year-long (52 one-hour episodes) serialisations of India's 'classic' epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, in the form of docudramas that entertain, encompass 'intellectual activity' in Pocock's sense.” (1490).

Rudolph asserts his views again that the TV productions as historically contextualised events have important social and political consequences as they go beyond the transitory experience of 'mere' entertaining spectacles. They do more

than add circuses to bread; they do more than pacify, depoliticise or anaesthetise the masses (1490).

The *Ramayan* broadcast began in 1987 and lasted for more than one year, in 78 episodes conquering the minds of millions. According to Verma around 80 million to 100 million people or eight of the total population of India had watched the *Ramayan* series. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement became more violent and the Sangh Parivar called for a nationwide campaign to collect bricks from across the country and reach Ayodhya. A senior BJP leader Lal Krishna Advani led a *rath yathra*, the procession of a chariot, demanding to erect a new Rama Temple. Throughout these campaigns, a large number of activists of these organisations wore clothes resembling the attire of Rama and Lakshmana in *Ramayan*. The *rath yathra* was stopped in 1990 by the police as directed by the erstwhile Prime Minister V.P. Singh and his government, to which the BJP was also an ally. However, the Sangh Parivar committed the crime of demolishing the centuries-old Babri Masjid in 1992 as the first step of their plan to erect the Rama Temple. Verma details:

In December 1992, a rally organized by Hindu groups drew 1,50,000 people—some dressed as characters from the TV show—to march on the 16th-Century mosque in Ayodhya, and violence erupted with mobs tearing down the mosque. Communal violence flared across the country, and the issue remains live, with India's Supreme Court expected to hand down a ruling in the coming weeks on whether a mosque or temple, or both, should stand on the site. ("TV Show," par. 17)

Utilising the communal polarisation following the Babri incident, hindutva enabled a favourable environment to gain the nation's political power during the closing years of the twentieth century. Later, after a decade, the BJP came to power during three consecutive periods with a comfortable majority in 2014, 2019 and 2024. In the meanwhile, they managed to erect the proposed Rama Temple in 2024 in a place where the Babri Masjid existed. Studies prove that the Sagar Ramayana played a prominent role in bringing about this form of a paradigm shift in the political scenario of India. Reassessing the impact of the TV series Manik Sharma writes:

Sagar's Ramayana played in the backdrop of a *Hindutva* [Hindu nationalist] shift in Indian politics, under the aegis of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its political outfit, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). While the media and cultural commentators struggled to consider Sagar's epic one way or the other, there were some who saw it as a catalyst, even if unintended, to the turmoil that the movement resulted in." ("30 years," par. 4)

The Ramayana, being a text with multiple narratives, inherently embodies diversity in its culture. However, *Ramayan* propagated only a homogenised narrative, providing ample space for hindutva to penetrate the corridors of parliamentary politics. Moreover, the consent of a secular government, led by the Indian National Congress, to broadcast this narrative on a state-sponsored TV channel had a detrimental impact on society. Aswathi MP details the valuable insights of Thapar regarding the dangers of making of a single story of the Ramayana through the televised version of Sagar:

Romila Thapar sees it as a part of the new culture of the country to propagate the visuals of the Ramayana in a homogenized fashion, eliminating the diversity of the Ramayana. She views it as a state sponsored attempt to monopolize culture. The critique goes to the extent of stating that homogenizing narratives is the best strategy adopted by power structures to control the people. She notes that this tendency of the state is a validation of a certain chosen cultures over the others by the making of a particular Ramayana version as the mainstream one. (40)

In Thapar's view, the Ramayana narratives do not belong to a particular moment in history as they have their own history and affirm that each Ramayana reflects the social location of those who have appropriated it. Thapar asserts:

the appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations that changed the conceptualisation of character, event, and meaning ("Ramayana Syndrome," par. 5).

Unlike Gandhi's moderate approach, hindutva appropriated Rama and the Ramayana in an aggressive way. Generally, Rama was popular both as a Hindu deity and as a benevolent king. However, the approach of hindutva groups was contrary to this existing notion. In order to propagate the idea of a Hindu consciousness, they exposed Rama as a militaristic and manly warrior who always wore bows and arrows. Additionally, Lord Rama was also represented as a real historical figure despite his mythical origin. He did get acceptance from Hindus as

they tended to believe Rama was a historic figure due to their worship. Hence, presenting myth as history acted as the cornerstone for the political appropriation of the Ramayana by hindutva forces. Udayakumar argues:

Hindutva forces prefer militaristic, manly Ram to nonviolent baby Ram. The lone warrior Jayaram standing out in the field with bows and arrows is liked better than the benevolent King Rajaram sitting in his court with Sita and others. While the physical materiality of Ram is highlighted, the pervasive spirit of Ram-ness is deliberately downplayed. Seen from the Hindutva angle, Ram is more of a historical hero than a mythical god. Presenting a fantastic linear account of the past that had no Muslims, no privileges for the weaker sections of society, and no politicization, Ram becomes, to borrow Savarkar's phrase, "history in full." Homogenizing the Hindu samaj with one god, one temple, and one book, Ram is also 'religion in full.' Bringing the Akhand Bharat (Greater India) that was overrun by invaders down to a specific location (Ayodhya) where the invaders' 'descendants' and their intrusive mosque could be pushed aside, Ram becomes 'geography in full.' When all these sentiments are combined and consolidated under the Sangh Parivar's leadership, the unholy secular India turns into sanctified Ramasthan, and the Ram temple becomes the manifestation of true and sincere patriotism. If you are not part of this self-construction, you are part of the Other-destruction. (23)

Hindutva represented Rama as a national icon and symbol of Hindu nationalism in the public domain. This Hindu consciousness, with the influence of

Ramayan gradually surpassed the decades-old Indian nationalism. Rama began to evolve as a valorous hero of the nation's past instead of his status as a benevolent king and a mythical god. Udayakumar asserts:

Having translated mythical lore into modern mobilizing metaphors and ideologies, Hindu communalists transform the resultant frenzy into retaliatory corrective measures, in the process of which they emerge powerful with added strength to the accentuated status quo. The Hindutva forces' interpretation of Hinduism and history and their understanding of 'great-ness' and 'regeneration' are all deceitful and opportunistic. In sheer desperation, they misappropriate Indian heritage, misrepresent Indian legends, and manipulate the people. With these careful selections and calculated slips, the brahmanical orthodoxy plays up the symbolic terrains of contest. The communal drama unfolds. Both Hindu and Muslim communalists play their roles religiously, the rest of the political entities participate as helpless side-actors, and the civil society functions mostly as silent spectators. There is one collective villain and no hero in this drama.

(23)

It is a truth that myths and legends are tales that have no historical basis. However, only a small group of people with historical sense and scientific temper recognise this truth. This educated elite, together with those who have better political understanding, can distinguish between history and myth. Most of the people, especially those who follow religious worship, are generally proud of believing in rituals related to myth and legend. Moreover, India is already steeped in

legends, especially from Hindu mythology. The country has a rich and varied heritage of mythological lore and legends. Since Rama is worshipped as a Hindu deity, the legends of Rama and the other noted characters of the Ramayana have also been revered as divine. People born in India, particularly from Hindu backgrounds, have become acquainted with the Ramayana as its tales have found a place in their minds since childhood. These Rama stories came to them from within the house, related by the elders or outside the house from the illustrated series of children's stories.

Through the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, accompanied by Hindu consciousness spread from *Ramayan*, hindutva groups could create a general understanding among the public that a Rama Temple must be built in Ayodhya. The significance of Ayodhya as a destination of pilgrimage due to Rama's supposed birth also enabled this move. By first attaining political power of the nation through a coalition with other parties, the BJP prepared a suitable political background for demolishing the Babri Masjid, the only impediment before hindutva in building a Rama Temple in the disputed land. Sheldon Pollock delineates:

Now that the major impediment, the Babri Masjid, has been demolished and that a major political headway, the BJP's capturing power both in the state of UP and at the centre, has been accomplished, it is only a matter of time to install the temple and inscribe the glorious 'Hindu' history. The Sangh Parivar laid the foundation for the temple by digging around the Babri Masjid and filling the area with 10-feet-thick layer of reinforced cement and concrete in July 1992. Even as Kalyan Singh's BJP government called it a

"platform" for performing bhajans, the VHP declared that it was the foundation for the future Ram temple. The blueprint of the temple that would stand 128 feet tall, occupy an area of 37,520 sq. ft., and last for 1,000 years had been prepared almost a decade ago and was widely advertised during the Ayodhya campaign. The VHP expedited the temple work, which was on a sluggish pace, as soon as the United Front government fell in November 1997 and the political equation seemed to favour the BJP. (22)

Aggressive volunteers of the Sangh Parivar gathered around the mosque and demolished it in a few hours. A country with a powerful constitution and the values of secularism and democracy silently witnessed this unprecedented crime. The intelligence system, police force and army, of the nation remained silent because of the passive attitude of the then-ruling party in the centre. While UP, the state where the Babri Masjid existed, was under the BJP rule, the central government was headed by Narasimha Rao, the Congress PM. A secular party that always claimed the legacy of the nation's independence and democracy, the Congress government's silence until the destruction of the mosque astonished the public. This unprecedented man-made catastrophe marked a blot not only in the minds of Muslims but also among all who believed in secularism. According to Shraddha Navalli, around two lakhs of Hindu fundamentalists gathered at the site to demolish the mosque (17).

The consequences of the demolition of the mosque were very critical. The situation seemed similar to the incidents that took place during the partition of 1947. The politics of democracy, secularism and Indian nationalism gave way to the narrow paths of communal politics. It is a generally agreed-upon truth that if

communal polarisation occurs in a country where more than one religion exists, the advantage will always be for the religion of the majority. The same happened in India too. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power in 1996, and Vajpayee was sworn in as their first PM. Even though the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) with Manmohan Singh as the PM came to power during 2004–2014, two consecutive periods defeating the BJP, the situation changed again in favour of hindutva. Narendra Modi became the PM with a single majority to the NDA in the Indian Parliament in 2014, and still it is going on with the victory of three successive elections.

The BJP initiated their direct political campaign for the Rama Temple during the 1980s, before the 1989 general election. They, together with the whole Sangh Parivar group, consolidated the VHP's Ram Janmabhoomi movement that began in the early 1980s. During the election campaign, the BJP promised a new Rama Temple in order to muster up the majority of Hindu votes. The then PM Rajiv Gandhi and the Congress Party realised the existing condition was critical as it might adversely affect their prospect of winning the general election. Therefore, through a collusive and cryptic move, Rajiv allowed the VHP to consecrate the *shilanyas*, for the new Rama Temple in Ayodhya. Rajiv and his party hoped to come back to power again satisfying the Hindu majority. However, shattering their assumptions, the BJP secured 88 seats from their two seats in the previous election. With this leap in parliamentary politics, the BJP, for the first time, could be a part of the central government led by Janata Dal's V.P. Singh. Pollock asserts:

The Sangh Parivar's "National Thinkers Conferences" organized in various places across the country in 1987, and the BJP's Palampur Resolution of June 1989 consolidated the Ayodhya movement. The most critical stage of the conflict, however, was the build-up to the 1989 elections which witnessed the preparation and mobilization to demolish the mosque and build a Ram temple with consecrated bricks brought from all over India and other countries. As N. Ram points out, just a few days before the 1989 general elections, the desperate Rajiv Gandhi regime allowed the VHP to perform *shilanyas* (laying foundation stone) for the Ram temple on November 9, 1989 on disputed land which was temporarily declared to be undisputed. This action boosted the VHP-BJP-RSS combine to advance its Ram Janmabhoomi campaign through changes of regime. (14)

Based on the *shilanyas* conducted during the previous government following the nod of Rajiv, the BJP moved ahead under the leadership of L.K. Advani for a new Rama temple in the disputed land. Being an ally of power, the BJP hastily began an attempt to execute their plan, hoping for a favourable signal from the central government. However, the PM V.P. Singh, a staunch socialist and sentinel of communal harmony of the nation, cleverly hindered the BJP leaders' move ceasing the *rath yatra* of Advani. Consequently, the BJP withdrew from their alliance, putting an end to the V.P. Singh government. Pollock explains how the Singh regime was keen in dealing the Ayodhya issue:

The November 22-24, 1989 general elections witnessed the worst ever communal violence in the independent India's electoral history and took a

massive toll of 800 lives in the Hindi belt. V. P. Singh became the Prime Minister with the support of the BJP who had 88 seats in the new Parliament. The V. P. Singh regime ushered in the judicial process by establishing a Special Bench on January 8, 1990 and pleading for a ban on construction till the title to the disputed site could be decided and the site-plan approved. The Special Court called upon the UP government to clarify the status of the site. A Hindu priest filed a writ petition seeking relief to permit construction of the temple on the spot of *shilanyas* performed on November 9, 1989. Having been directed to file a counter-affidavit by the Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court, the central government maintained that no construction could be allowed unless all the civil suits pending before the special bench of the High Court were decided. (14)

The decades-old litigation pertaining to the ownership of the disputed land and the controversies following the demolition thwarted the Sangh Parivar plan of constructing the Rama Temple. Later, the Liberhan committee report in 2009 came out with the serious note that a number of prominent BJP leaders including Vajpayee, the former PM, Advani, the former deputy PM, Kalyan Singh, the CM of UP during the incident, M.M. Joshi, Uma Bharati, and so on, played prominent roles in the conspiracies surrounding the mosque's fall. In the conclusion of his report, Justice Liberhan states:

While dealing with the roles of the administration in detail in my report, I have dilated on the role of specific members of the *de jure* and the *de facto* government of Uttar Pradesh at the time. The parallel government run by the

RSS has also been exposed and analysed in my report. There is no manner of doubt admissible in the culpability and responsibility of the Chief Minister, his ministers and his cohorts who were handpicked to occupy selected posts.....and others named in my report formed this complete cartel led by Kayan Singh and supported by the icons of the movement like L.K.

Advani, M.M. Joshi, A.B. Vajpayee. (922- 923)

The Liberhan Commission report brought about hot debates and disputes in the Indian Parliament, where the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government was in power. These conflicts hindered hindutva's attempt to construct the Rama Temple. However, the BJP kept on pursuing the hindutva agenda of transforming secular India into the *Hindurashtra* they dreamed of. The direct action for erecting the Rama Temple began soon after the Supreme Court verdict of 2019, as it was favourable to the Sangh Parivar's demand. According to the verdict, the land was entrusted with a trust controlled by the central government in order to build a Rama Temple and separate land was allotted for the Muslim organisations for a new mosque instead of the demolished one. As the BJP has been in power since 2014, the plan for the new temple gathered momentum. Eventually, the temple was consecrated on 22 January 2024. The 2019 Supreme Court verdict on Ayodhya dispute states:

The oral evidence as noticed above of the witnesses examined on behalf of plaintiffs of Suit No.5, plaintiffs of Suit No.3 and even witness examined on behalf of plaintiffs of Suit No.4 clearly proves faith and belief of Hindus that Janmasthan of Lord Ram is the place where Babri Mosque has been

constructed. Three-dome structure was treated as Birthplace of Lord Ram.

(113)

Nivedita Menon observes the serious critiques emerged on the judgment:

Since the Allahabad High Court judgment was delivered on 30 September 2010, a substantial body of reflection upon it has emerged. Historians, political commentators, legal scholars and lawyers have all produced serious and engaged critiques of the judgment, pointing out flaws in reasoning and flaws in law. In an engagement with the debate so far, particularly with the critical voices, of which I am one, I hope here to develop a composite picture of the problems with the judgment. (81)

Hindutva's involvement in the political discourses surrounding the Ramayana was chiefly led by the RSS, although the entire Sangh Parivar played significant roles. Formed in the 1920s, the RSS demanded a Hindu nation, propagating Hindu nationalism during the pre-independence period. Following India's independence, the RSS's direct engagement with the Ramayana began installing idols in the Masjid's compound. In post-independent India, hindutva politics extensively utilised Rama and the Ramayana. The VHP and the RSS actively participated in the Ram Janmabhoomi political campaign. The BJP was also inextricably linked to the campaign, establishing hindutva ideals in the nation's parliamentary politics. In order to attain their aim, the RSS historicised the Rama myth by leveraging the devotion of the Hindu multitudes who worshipped Rama as a deity. Sadanand Menon reminds us about the words of Sen that how the Sangh

Parivar was propagating hindutva ideology misinterpreting history and historicising myth:

There is on par with what Amartya Sen has claimed in *The Argumentative Indian* about how the BJP has been consistently working towards popularizing the Hindutva theory through misrepresenting historic facts, fabricating evidence, inventing origin stories from popular mythologies and using violence and force on moderate Hindus as well as other minorities. To project India as a Hindu country and reclaim it exclusively for Hindus, it has rewritten Indian history as an essential history of Hindu civilization, and sees it as an essential prerequisite for establishing a grand Hindu vision of India.

(115)

The appropriation of the Ramayana by hindutva forces has undoubtedly reshaped India's political and cultural landscape in the twentieth century. Yet, the full implications of this appropriation remain insufficiently explored. While visible outcomes like the Ayodhya dispute and the rise of Hindu nationalism are documented, the more subtle, long-term effects on collective memory, secular values, and pluralistic traditions demand further scholarly attention. The Ramayana's transformation from a literary and devotional text into a tool of ideological assertion raises complex questions about identity, history, and power. Therefore, the deeper cultural consequences of this politicisation are yet to be fully studied and understood.

Conclusion

The twentieth century was a period where a paradigm shift occurred in the political scenario of India. During the first half of this century, India was struggling for its independence, and the second half saw growth and development as a newly independent nation. Throughout this period, the nation witnessed numerous political discourses surrounding the Ramayana led by noted political leaders and groups such as Gandhi, Periyar and a few organisations under hindutva ideology. Consequently, the Ramayana became an integral part of Indian politics in the twentieth century.

Gandhi appropriated the Ramayana moderately in order to mobilise the Hindu masses to the freedom movement during the pre-independence period, whereas Periyar utilised the Ramayana both before and after independence, attacking the caste system in the country. Meanwhile, the Sangh Parivar or hindutva groups resorted to the Ramayana to execute their agenda of *Hindurashtra*. A detailed analysis of the political appropriation of the Ramayana in the twentieth century reveals that both Gandhi and Periyar's assimilation brought progressive changes in the society. In contrast, hindutva's use of the Ramayana thwarted India's progress as a secular nation, affecting the communal harmony of its people.

While analysing the research problem, this study has come to a conclusion that the RSS and the Sangh Parivar have extensively used the idea of nationalism as a political weapon appropriating the Ramayana, aiming at the transformation of a secular state into *Hindurashtra*. They succeeded in erecting a new Rama Temple by destroying the centuries' - old Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. To quote Sen:

They are also keen on summoning the *Ramayana*, the great epic, for many different purposes, from delineating Hindu beliefs and convictions to finding alleged justification for the forcible demolition of a mosque—the Babri masjid—that is situated at the very spot where the 'divine' Rama, it is claimed, was born” (Preface x).

For hindutva, nationalism signifies Hindu nationalism or Hindu consciousness. This narrow idea is distinct from India’s reputed Indian nationalism that led the country into independence from foreign invasion. Throughout the twentieth century, hindutva groups attempted to redefine the broad concept of Indian nationalism—with democracy, secularism and inclusiveness as its elements—into a narrow Hindu nationalism through a way of Hindu revivalism, utilising the possibility of the *Ramayana*. This Hindu nationalism was strategically employed as a weapon by hindutva in order to attain political power of the nation through the BJP. By constructing a new Rama Temple in place of the demolished Babri Masjid, hindutva aspires to transform India into a *Hindurashtra*. However, it is widely acknowledged that India, with its legacy of secularism, inclusiveness and the ability for dissent, can never be solely a religious state.

Rama has been worshipped as a deity by Hindus across India and beyond, underscoring his religious significance. As the *Ramayana* was a venerated text for Hindus, Rama also was acclaimed as a popular deity. Being the protagonist of this esteemed epic, Rama has been embedded in the cultural consciousness of the nation for centuries. However, his political significance emerged after India’s independence with hindutva’s claim of the Babri Masjid site as Ram Janmabhoomi.

By realising the relevance of Rama in Indian politics, hindutva associated him with Ayodhya, his purported birthplace. In order to construct a new Rama Temple in the disputed land, the Sangh Parivar initiated the Ram Janmabhoomi movement proclaiming Ayodhya as the nation's centre and Rama as a national hero. This was the way by which hindutva utilised Hindu nationalism as a sharp weapon, dreaming of *Hindurashtra*. Udayakumar remarks how the Hindu fundamentalists began to expose Rama as a national hero:

No matter how contentious the historicity of Ayodhya is, it is nonetheless one of the seven holy places of 'Hindus' because of its association with Ram. Of the 6,000 Hindu shrines in Ayodhya, more than 4,000 are connected to Ram. This religious importance, coupled with contemporary political significance, leads the Hindu communalists to conclude: Ayodhya is the center of our Hindu nationhood, and Lord Rama is our national leader. Without Ayodhya, this nation cannot be a nation in the fullest sense of the word, just as there can be no Christendom, which is what Europe is, without the Vatican. (12)

Hindutva's use of Hindu nationalism appropriating the Ramayana was predominantly applied through the tactics of historicising the Rama myth. An epic poem based on the Rama-ballads, the Ramayana is fundamentally a literary creation. This text has nothing to do with history, as the inscribed historical texts or archaeological evidence contribute no logical conclusions about the connection between the settings and characters of the text and history. Therefore, Rama primarily is not a deity and national hero but a hero of mythical literature in a folk

epic tradition that has been prevailing as a literary classic. According to Udayakumar, the controversy is more mythological than historical. The Ram Janmabhoomi issue was intentionally built up by the hindutva groups in order to appropriate Rama and the Ramayana for contemporary politics. He states:

For most of the pre-independence era, the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya did not simply exist for the majority of Indians. The mosque emerged as the most bitterly contested terrain ever since the partition of the country primarily because the issue was built up carefully by the Hindutva forces with an eye on appropriating it for contemporary politics. The controversy is more mythological than historical, and hence it is a matter more of faith than fact. Since the issue stands on popular culture and not on recorded history, it becomes even more prone to manipulation and politicization. The Hindutva groups have turned the disadvantages of unspecificities and ambiguities of the legendary problem into clear advantages. The conflict cannot be considered more concrete even from 1528 when the Babri Masjid was actually constructed because the Hindutva groups claim that the mosque replaced an existing Ram temple for which there has never been any tangible evidence. (11)

By utilising the religious significance of the Ramayana, hindutva tried to historicise the myth, presenting Rama as a national hero. Through this attempt, the Sangh Parivar intentionally used nationalism as a weapon to execute their hindutva agenda. Therefore, they could invite the attention of Hindus who represent the majority of the Indian population.

The idea of nationalism is very significant in the history of India. Indian nationalism played a prominent role in attaining the nation's independence from foreign invasion by unifying people irrespective of their diverse religions and cultures. During the freedom movement, nationalism served as a powerful weapon in the battle for the nation's independence. However, in contemporary India, this idea is not as significant as it was during the pre-independence period. Still, this force plays a role in accommodating the people of a nation with its cultural diversity. In this sense, nationalism, when it does not hinder the idea of humanity, is a broad concept. Compared to this, the idea of Hindu nationalism posited by the hindutva groups is a narrow concept. This is an idea manipulated through a type of Hindu revivalism for the political agenda of extreme right-wing Hindu organisations. Noorani quotes B.R. Purohit to explain how Hindu nationalism differs from the idea of Indian nationalism as:

The two nationalisms—the Hindu and the Indian—were fundamentally in opposition to each other with respect to their ideals. The former was exclusive, narrowly based, mixed with religion, and partial; it considered the Hindus the only nationals of Hindustan and did not include other communities living in India within its scope; it had grown even more militant and aggressive towards other religions. The latter believed in a composite culture of India and viewed India as a nation composed of all the communities living therein. It was broad-based, pacifist, secular, democratic, and liberal in temperament. One exalted a community over other communities, while the other emphasized unity in the diversity of various communities. The one had great belief in centralized leadership and in

militancy; the other was wedded to liberal and democratic traditions.

(“Contemporary Discontents” 103)

This has been a time where even the idea of nationalism has become a threat to the existence of India and to the peaceful life of its people. The ideal of Indian nationalism was significant during India’s freedom movements. However, nationalism is deliberately disguised as Hindu nationalism by hindutva groups. Being a country with a majority of Hindu population, hindutva’s propagation of Hindu nationalism makes people tend to believe that India is primarily a country exclusively for Hindus. Hindutva’s campaign to establish the ancient Indian past as Hindu past also created misunderstandings among the public. Here, Rabindranath Tagore’s words on nationalism have been relevant. Tagore once warned us that “nationalism is a great menace” (125).

Despite being an ardent follower of spirituality, Tagore’s worship of humanity was more than his reverence for God and idolatry of the nation. As a child of the nation that was colonised, Tagore was taught that one’s respect of one’s nation should be more than a reverence for God. However, as he grew older, Tagore, through his education and social sense, understood the fact that the ideal of humanity surpasses one’s ideal of nationalism. He unambiguously substantiates his stand on nationalism:

India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against

the education that teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity. (123)

Though Gandhi and Nehru were revered nationalists during the national movements, they were also critical of the adverse effects of nationalism. There was no room for hatred in Gandhi's concept of nationalism. His words are appropriate when the nation and its people are misguided in the name of nationalism. Gandhi declared, "My love, therefore, of nationalism, or my idea of nationalism, is that my country may become free—free that, if need be, the whole of the country may die—so that the human race may live. There is no room here for race hatred. Let that be our nationalism" ("Is Hatred essential" 164).

Gandhi used patriotism, a relatively inclusive and broad idea, also with meticulous care. According to him, patriotism need not be narrow. He remarks, "My patriotism was not narrow and that it included not merely the welfare of India but the whole world" ("Internationalism" 164).

Nehru warns us against the spreading of nationalism in an aggressive way. He reminds us that even though nationalism is the symbol of growth for a people, it also thwarts its growth in the mind. Nehru explicitly states his view:

Nationalism, of course, is a curious phenomenon that, at a certain stage in a country's history, gives life, growth, strength and unity but, at the same time, has a tendency to limit one because one thinks of one's country as something different from the rest of the world. The perspective changes and one is continuously thinking of one's own struggles, virtues, and failings to the exclusion of other thoughts. The result is that the same nationalism, which is

the symbol of growth for a people, becomes a symbol of the cessation of that growth in the mind. Nationalism, when it becomes successful, sometimes goes on spreading in an aggressive way and becomes a danger internationally. (“Culture” 180)

Even amid the Indian national movements, Nehru realised the significance of internationalism over nationalism. He warned us of the dangers inherent in the narrow concept of nationalism. Nehru emphasised that unless the idea of nationalism is broad, it will have a negative impact. He says, “Nationalism, when unconnected with some wider concept, is a narrow creed, and hence internationalism is essential in the world” (“Nationalism and Internationalism” 175).

When India is ruled by a government with a hindutva ideology and often lacks tolerance for other minority religions, the peaceful life in this country often becomes a mirage. Due to this intolerance, the government often reminds us of the notorious fascism in Europe, where people were not allowed to dissent with the government. A country that reveres all its diversities, India was invariably hailed as a nation with unity amidst diversity. However, when a nation is under intolerance, even the so-called unity amidst the diversity of it is also at stake. Even though India is a country with Hinduism as the religion of the majority of its people, the nation is not a Hindustan but a home for not less than half a dozen other religions too. Sen writes:

Even though more than 80 percent of Indians may be Hindu, the country has a very large Muslim population (the third largest among all the countries in the world—larger than the entire British and French populations put

together) and a great many followers of other faiths: Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Parsees, and others (Preface x).

The idea of nationalism is a threat unless it comprises the values of secularism and inclusiveness. India's greatest national leaders, such as Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru, saw the idea of nationalism critically even when they steadfastly stood for the nation's independence. For them, the ideals of humanity and internationalism surpass nationalism. However, Hindu consciousness emerged in post-independent India under the auspices of hindutva transforming twentieth-century Indian politics and exposing nationalism as a political weapon. Through the political discourses surrounding the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, hindutva appropriated the Ramayana, representing Rama as a national hero. Thus, a type of narrow Hindu nationalism, disguised as Indian nationalism, emerged as a menace to the nation's politics.

In order to establish Indian nationalism as Hindu nationalism, hindutva harked back to ancient India, calling it 'Hindu India'. With the aim of propagating Hindu consciousness, they claimed that the period prior to the Mughal Empire in India was ruled by Hindu kings. This narrow view of Hindu nationalism was powerful enough to conquer the minds of the majority of Hindus. As ancient India was acclaimed as a 'Hindu India', folk epics such as the Ramayana, with the status of sacred texts, were represented as historical accounts of the ancient past. Consequently, Rama was portrayed as a national hero and a historical figure of ancient 'Hindu India.' Sen states that the urge for ancient India has come from the hindutva movement. His words:

Consider the politically charged issue of the role of so-called 'ancient India' in understanding the India of today. In contemporary politics, the enthusiasm for ancient India has often come from the Hindutva movement - the promoters of a narrowly Hindu view of Indian civilization - who have tried to separate out the period preceding the Muslim conquest of India (from the third millennium BCE to the beginning of the second millennium CE).

(Preface ix-x)

The Ramayana is primarily a product of mythical literature evolved out of a folk epic tradition. The stories of Rama prevailed in the form of ballads even before they were composed as literary creations by Valmiki or by others in many traditions. These Rama-ballads have no connection with Hindu tradition, and also the plot of these tales is not based on any historical incidents. However, hindutva exposed Rama as a national hero, a real historical figure, for want of political advancement. Even though venerated as a deity for Hindus, Rama is primarily the protagonist of a literary creation.

Amartya Sen elucidates about how Rama is primarily treated as a great 'epic hero' with his many good qualities and some weaknesses. Sen remarks:

The adherents of Hindu politics - especially those who are given to vandalizing places of worship of other religions - may take Rama to be divine, but in much of the Ramayana, Rama is treated primarily as a hero - a great 'epic hero' - with many good qualities and some weaknesses, including a tendency to harbour suspicions about his wife Sita's faithfulness (Preface xi).

As Sen reminds us, these old books and narratives, such as the Vedas and the Ramayana have had an enormous influence on Indian literature and thought. They have tremendously influenced literary and philosophical writings and folk traditions in the country. The difficulty does not lie in the importance of these works but in understanding their role in Indian culture. (Preface x)

By appropriating the Ramayana politically and claiming ancient India as 'Hindu India,' the hindutva movement is trying to capture India as their home ground. Through this endeavour, despite their non-cooperation during the Indian freedom movement, they have achieved the political sovereignty of the nation by the close of the twentieth century. With this political supremacy, hindutva groups managed to erect the new Rama Temple, demolishing the Babri Masjid. Through these notorious events, they are claiming that they have partially achieved their agenda of transforming secular India into a *Hindurashtra*. However, India, having a strong secular constitution and the legacy of heterodoxy, cannot be transformed into a narrow religious state.

Ancient India was not a Hindu India as hindutva claimed but a secular one with a diverse culture. The term 'Hinduism' had a much later origin. Even before that, there were religions such as Buddhism and Jainism in the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, hindutva's claim for ancient India as 'Hindu India' must be resisted as it is intentional and politically motivated. In order to resist the hindutva agenda, it is necessary to raise the discourse of heterodoxy in India. Sen elaborates on the significance of heterodoxy in contemporary India as:

It is indeed important to understand the long tradition of accepted heterodoxy in India. In resisting the attempts by the Hindutva activists to capture ancient India as their home ground (and to see it as the unique cradle of Indian civilization), it is not enough to point out that India has many other sources of culture as well. It is necessary also to see how much heterodoxy there has been in Indian thoughts and beliefs from very early days. Not only did Buddhists, Jains, agnostics and atheists compete with each other and with adherents of what we now call Hinduism (a much later term) in the India of the first millennium BCE, but also the dominant religion in India was Buddhism for nearly a thousand years. The Chinese in the first millennium CE standardly referred to India as 'the Buddhist kingdom'. Ancient India cannot be fitted into the narrow box where Hindutva activists want to incarcerate it. (Preface xii)

When the adherents of hindutva politics claim the Indian past as Hindu past, projecting a few Hindu kings who ruled before the Muslim conquest, they conveniently forget Emperor Ashoka's reign. It was only because Ashoka, the great, who ruled ancient India in the third century BCE, was not a Hindu but a Buddhist. The history of ancient India cannot be written without the name Ashoka. Therefore, the epithet 'the father of ancient India' is often conferred on Ashoka.

Sen reminds us of the unique role Ashoka has played in initiating the space for toleration, heterodoxy and dissent in ancient India. He argues:

It was indeed a Buddhist emperor of India, Ashoka, who, in the third century BCE, not only outlined the need for toleration and the richness of

heterodoxy, but also laid down what are perhaps the oldest rules for conducting debates and disputations, with the opponents being 'duly honoured in every way on all occasions' (Preface xii).

In order to use the idea of nationalism as a weapon, hindutva has been utilising the nation's culture as its background. That is why this cultural nationalism, as hindutva itself calls it, becomes a menace to the harmony of a nation by dividing people according to their ethnicity. Here, not only the idea of nationalism but the broad concept of culture itself plays a crucial role. This Hindu nationalism has roots deeply in the nation's culture, especially in the ancient 'Hindu culture' as hindutva proclaimed in their fundamental texts. Golwalker has asserted how hindutva's concept of Hindu Nation is essentially a cultural one:

OUR concept of Hindu Nation is not a mere bundle of political and economic rights. It is essentially a cultural one. Our ancient and sublime cultural values of life form its life-breath. And it is only an intense rejuvenation of the spirit of our culture that can give us a true vision of our national life, and a fruitful direction to all our efforts in solving the innumerable problems confronting our nation today. (22)

The political ideologies cannot defeat this danger of cultural nationalism with mere secular and democratic principles. When hindutva, which is fundamentally fascist in nature, makes use of culture in the form of cultural nationalism, the resistance should also be through culture itself. While hindutva attempts to capture the nation's ancient cultural past by hailing it as ancient Hindu past, it is necessary to raise political discourses against it positing the nation's

diverse culture. India's ancient culture had not been a 'Hindu culture' but an inclusive and heterodox one with all its diversities, same as the nation is today. Hence, it is concluded that when nationalism becomes a menace, it should be resolved using the cultural system of the nation.

Benedict Anderson points out, on the interplay between nationalism and culture, "What I am proposing is that nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which - as well as against which - it came into being." (12)

Recommendations

This study, titled “Appropriating the Ramayana: A Critical Reading of the Twentieth Century Political Discourses,” chiefly examines how the Ramayana was politically appropriated in twentieth-century India by noted political leaders and organisations. Gandhi and Periyar Ramasami were involved in the political discourses on the Ramayana extensively. Similarly, hindutva groups also utilised the Ramayana politically, hoping for a *Hindurashtra*. The detailed and comprehensive analysis of the research problem covers all the possible areas of knowledge and discourse in the four core chapters of the thesis. Nevertheless, there are still gaps in this research that require further investigation and exploration.

Noted leaders other than Gandhi and Periyar were also involved in the political discourses pertaining to the Ramayana. They are Ram Manohar Lohia, Ambedkar, and so on. These figures can also be included in the further queries. The impact of the twentieth-century political appropriation of the Ramayana in the twenty-first century and the ensuing changes in the parliamentary politics of India thereafter are the areas to be examined in the future studies.

Lohia, a staunch socialist and an uncompromising nonconformist, was sensitive to human distress by playing the role of an accusing prophet in an unjust society. He was inextricably linked with the Ramayana by conducting festivals in the name *Ramayana Mela*. He could see the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* epic literatures as pure literary creations. Apart from Gandhi’s political reading of the Ramayana, the role of Lohia was also significant. While Gandhi posited the idea of Ramarajya extracting ideas and ideals from the epic, Lohia saw the Ramayana in a

broader sense. A bird's-eye view of Lohia's approach towards the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* shows that he could look at these texts as universal products. He was of the opinion that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* did not belong to a single faith. Hence, his views were enough to defend the *Ramayana* as a literary creation. Painter M.F. Husain recalled once how Lohia inspired him to paint both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* epics. Lohia had told Husain that these epics are universal and hence do not belong to any particular faith (Yadav 47).

Ambedkar's critique of the *Ramayana* will definitely be a topic of inquiry as it provides ample space for discussions. In "Riddles in Hinduism," he criticised many of the characters and incidents in the *Ramayana*. As a statesman and an academic, Ambedkar was involved in the discourses surrounding the *Ramayana*. His approach towards the *Ramayana* can often be juxtaposed with Periyar's. A study is possible comparing and differentiating their political readings of the *Ramayana*.

The impact of the political appropriation of the *Ramayana* in contemporary India in diverse perspectives is yet another area of study. The complex interplay between the *Ramayana* and Indian politics in the twenty-first century, backgrounding the influence of media, can be an interesting subject of research. The contemporary academic studies on the *Ramayana* leave a lacuna for further enquiries in diverse ways, even though numerous researchers have pursued it so far.

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