

Appropriation of Puranic Narratives in Indian Socio-political Discourse

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Abstract

The research article entitled, “Appropriation of Puranic Narratives in Indian Socio-political Discourse” addresses the current issue of cultural homogenization in India through the use of our epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The fascinating legacy of our great epics are manipulated through mass media for political gain. The advent of the two serials, *Ramayana and Mahabharata* towards the end of the twentieth century bears testimony for this. These puranic narratives were effectively used as a tool for cultural homogenization in a pluralistic arena. This is a serious contamination of the cultural system for political manipulation and use. These serialized versions of the epics provides the ground for hegemonic representations which reduces the whole pluralistic cultural system into a hegemonic one. Through such hegemonic representations the political authority wins consent to its rule from those it subjugates. Thus, the television serials created a Hindu consciousness and the advocates of this cultural homogenization manipulated the consent of the people for democratic governance. A diverse multilayered, pluralistic India is misinterpreted into a Hindu nation through this cultural manipulation via hegemonic representations.

Keywords: Cultural Homogenization, Hegemony, Pluralistic Tradition, Mass Media, Contamination of Culture, Political Manipulation.

India had a fascinating literary heritage which stands apart and exceptional from other literary legacies anywhere in the world. The ancient Sanskrit epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are considered as the *Itihasa* or *Mahakavya*, a canon of Hindu scripture. The *Puranas*, a massive collection of verse-form histories of India’s many Hindu gods and goddesses, followed in this tradition. The great Indian epics *Mahabharata and Ramayana* are the manifestations of the multi-cultural and pluralistic tradition of India. They are the greatest treasures to the Indian literary canon. Indian identity and literature are highly indebted to these epics. They are

synonymous with art and culture of India and thereby an inevitable part of the tradition of the country.

However, there is a misuse of culture and tradition happening alongside. Precisely, it is a serious contamination of the cultural system for political manipulation and use. Both *Mahabharata and Ramayana*, the literary texts of the cultural heritage of India are being appropriated for the communalist agenda of the Right wing. There is a modern attempt for cultural homogenization by these Right wing agencies to establish a Hindu nation rejecting the heterogeneous tradition. Here, culture is being equated as well as converted to religion for this purpose. India, a cultural construct having no common religion, culture or ethnicity is being reduced to a single religion, Hinduism. This is made possible through the process called cultural homogenization by Hindutwa. It refers to the reduction in cultural diversity through the popularization and diffusion of a wide array of cultural symbols—not only physical objects but customs, ideas and values.

This is where Benedict Anderson's concept of 'Imagined Communities' came into being in Indian context. Anderson depicts a nation as a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. It is the media that creates imagined communities, through usually targeting a mass audience or generalizing and addressing citizens as the public. According to Anderson, Media can create imagined communities through the use of images. The media can perpetuate stereotypes through certain images and vernacular. By showing certain images, the audience will choose which image they relate to the most, furthering the relationship to that imagined community.

To be precise, the process of cultural homogenization in India became far more effective and successful with the advent of two serials in Indian television. They are the *Mahabharat* (1988 TV Series) aired between 1988 and 1990 and *Ramayan* (1987 TV Series) between 1987 and 1989 on DD National, the state-owned terrestrial television channel in India. The former was directed by Ravi Chopra having 94 episodes and entered the *Guinness Book of World Records* by registering 96 percentage world viewership and the latter was written and directed by Ramanand Sagar. The impacts of these serial shows were far reaching. Aravind Rajagopal, in his work *Politics after Television* quotes that "many people watched it out of devotion. They felt that God was giving them darshan" (5).

The Ramayan epic was serialized on national television in India from January 1987 to August 1989. During the broadcast, the Ram Janmabhumi (Birthplace of Ram) movement, which aimed to demolish a mosque, Babri Masjid (Babur's mosque) in Ayodhya and build a Ram temple in its place, grew in importance. The Ramayan serial overlapped with the most crucial phase of the Janmabhumi movement, when it changed from an ominous but still relatively obscure campaign into the dominant issue before the country, one that made and unmade prime ministers and ruling parties. The Ramayan achieved record viewership in virtually every part of the country (something no serial before it had done), and made Sunday mornings "belong" to it; any public event scheduled for that time

courted disaster. With such publicity given to its pre-eminent symbol, the god-king Ram, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party was emboldened to declare, by the middle of 1989, that the Ayodhya movement “had reached a state and status in Indian public life when it was no more possible to ignore its effect in politics, including electoral politics.” The issue was officially declared to be political, with the BJP making it their number one priority that “a grand temple to Lord Ram” would be built at the site of the mosque. In the launching of one procession from Delhi to Ayodhya, Ram’s birthplace, volunteers dresses to look like the television versions of Ram and his brother Lakshman. (5)

The concept of *Darshan* in Indian philosophy has come to occupy a central place in the studies of India’s visual culture. As a Sanskrit word, usually translated as ‘vision’ or ‘gaze’, it is most commonly used in three different contexts: in everyday religious discourses; in mass media and popular culture studies, explaining cultural differences in the popular usage of visual culture; and as a paradigm considered specific to an Indian or Hindu manner of seeing.

The term *Darshan* deals mostly with religious contexts of Indian culture and society where *Darshan* is the term used by the people themselves. As a non-western concept of vision, *Darshan* also appeals to scholars who explore non-ethnocentric theories, in particular through the study of mass media and popular culture. *Darshan* is often used to explain cultural differences in the way people looks at photographs or popular prints or watch cinema in India, giving the term new currency as a specific Indian or a Hindu manner of seeing. (Upadhyaya 87)

Although *Ramayan* was manipulated by the forces of Hindutva, the initial political mileage of this particular television serial was achieved by Indian National Congress, under Rajiv Gandhi. It was Arun Govil who acted as Lord Ram in *Ramayan* was appointed as the political brand ambassador for congress in Utter Pradesh election campaigns. When Indian National Congress used the actor who played Lord Ram, Bharatiya Janata Party used Lord Ram himself years later through L.K Advani. The Ram Rath Yatra of 1990 was a political manipulation of a cultural symbol. It was a political-religious march that lasted from September to October 1990, organized by the Bharatiya Janata Party and its Hindu-nationalist affiliates, and led by the then-BJP-president L. K. Advani. The purpose of the *yatra* was to support the agitation of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and its Sangh Parivar affiliates to erect a temple to the Hindu deity Rama on the site of the Babri Masjid.

While the 1990s saw the beginning of the confrontation between the Hindutva and the secular, pluralist forces in Indian polity and society, much of the ground was prepared by the creation of a 'Hindu consciousness' through religious serials on TV. During the 1990s, Indian society, polity, culture and economy experienced a break with the past 40 years of post-Independence India, because all secular, modern and moral principles underlying the pluralist and secular constitutional democracy were in pieces before the forces of Hindutva. The Sangh Parivar created a situation where it not only succeeded in destroying the Babri Mosque on December 6, 1992, but also threw a challenge before social formations which firmly believed in

upholding the cultural diversity of India in a cosmopolitan pluralist social milieu. This success of Hindutva in a pluralistic nation like India is directly linked to the powerful role played by television serials in making "Hindutva consciousness a reality" because it was for the first time that the powerful medium took the message of Hindutva into the drawing rooms of lower and middle class Hindus. Thus the broadcast of popular serials like *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan* inaugurated a new era not only in television but in politics as well. Television in the 1990s created in the minds of Hindus a Utopia of the Rama Rajya of the past and a glorious future for Hindus.

Rama Rajya was originally a system where the society is run by principles of Lord Rama. It is a term popularized by Mahatma Gandhi. It is a democratic system where the ruler rules with the pleasure of people where there are equal rights for everyone and justice accessible even by the poorest sections of the society. In the ideal concept of Rama Rajya, government should uphold truth in its own actions and also expect the same from others and it demands respect for all religions and faiths. In short, Rama Rajya stands for justice, respect and non-coercion. Such a utopia should have prosperity, dharma and happiness.

While Rama was ruling the kingdom, there were no widows to lament, nor there was any danger from wild animals, nor any fear born of disease.

Every creature felt pleased. Everyone was intent on virtue. Turning their eyes towards Rama alone, creatures did not kill one another.

While Rama was ruling the kingdom, people survived for thousands of years, with thousands of their progeny, all free of illness and grief.

While Rama ruled the kingdom, the talks of the people centred around Rama, Rama and Rama. The world became Rama's world.

The trees there were bearing flowers and fruits regularly, without any injury by pest and insects. The clouds were raining in time and the wind was delightful to the touch.

All the people were endowed with excellent characteristics. All were engaged in virtue. (Menon 238)

While the concept of Rama Rajya exemplifies a judicious ruler like Rama and his sacrificial nature along with a sense of equality, the forces of Hindutwa manipulate it for communal polarization for the sake of political gain and to establish authority. What happened in Ayodhya is a classical testimony for this. The inclusiveness and pluralistic nature of our cultural heritage is being misinterpreted into an inclusive one-dimensional culture. It is through this misuse and misinterpretation of heterogeneous culture that the Hindutwa consolidates consent and power to rule in post independent India.

The theory of cultural hegemony, associated particularly with Antonio Gramsci, is the idea that the ruling class can manipulate the value systems of a society, so that their view

becomes the world view. In Terry Eagleton's words, "Gramsci normally uses the word 'hegemony' to mean the ways in which a governing power wins consent to its rule from those it subjugates" (14). In contrast to authoritarian rule, cultural hegemony is hegemonic only if those affected by it also consent to and struggle over its common sense" Here, Television serials created a Hindu consciousness and the Indian State run by Hindutva manipulated the 'consent of the people' for democratic governance. This is where the culture is being manipulated for political use. The exponential increase in the vote share for the right-wing political parties in India can be interpreted through this cultural misuse. A diverse multilayered, pluralistic India is misinterpreted into a 'Hindu nation' through cultural manipulation. An inclusive, all encompassing culture is being strictly homogenized into a Hindu culture. The remarkable pieces of Indian literary heritage, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are well appropriated within the Hindutva ideology.

Modern India is said to represent the largest democracy in the world, along with a seamless picture of unity in diversity that is unparalleled anywhere else. The concept of plurality is the core idea of India as a nation. There will be conflicts whenever any agency tries to impose forms of religious, ethnic, cultural or linguistic hegemony in the name of unity. At the same time, people in India lived happily for centuries with the idea of plurality, which is part of the very essence of our democratic polity. Indian Constitution is the biggest safeguard of Indian plurality.

By all western definitions of a nation, India is an outlier- India does not have a single religion, language or race. It is a vast diversity that no other country embodies in itself. So plurality is the heart of the idea of India. Indian Constitution laid down ground rules for keeping India plural. The Constitution of India has many provisions regarding plurality in different spheres. The religious pluralism under the article 25 to 28 ensures the right to religion. According to article 29, minorities can protect their language, script and culture. Though myriad languages are spoken in India, 22 languages are scheduled as official languages in 8th schedule of constitution. India does not have a national language. The preamble of Indian Constitution contains many ideologies such as socialism, secularism, democracy, republic, justice, liberty, equality and fraternity are some among them. These are taken from various constitutions and ideological revolutions around the world. Thus a composite culture evolved from the notion of plurality.

This plurality, which is the soul of India, is threatened by religious and political movements to homogenize the country. Ironically, this is achieved by the use of our Puranic Narratives- the biggest manifestations of our plurality. The great literary heritage of the nation is misused for this purpose. Indian system does not offer easy or one dimensional solution for the challenges faced by the masses. It should retain scope for its diversity and the damaging influence of homogenization of hegemony is to be approached with an ethical perspective. It should be upholding the 'Sanatana Dharma' and also should contribute to the concept of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' that India has a role in establishing tranquility in the entire world.

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