

HINDU MYTHOLOGY IN INDIAN COMICS AND ANIMATIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE,  
2000-2015

By

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To my mother, brother and sister, and in the loving memory of my late father

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This dissertation analyzes post-millennial comics, graphic novels and animated films and TV series that retell the Indian epic *Ramayana* and reimagine popular Hindu gods Hanuman, Ganesh and Krishna. It explores how 21<sup>st</sup> century visual mythological narratives contribute to or resist the project of nation-building, and the notions of Indianness that they conceptualize. I argue that many mythological texts perpetuate a monolithic, homogenous idea of the nation rooted in Brahmanical, Vedic Hinduism. I demonstrate how several texts under discussion reaffirm the dominant national imaginary of India as a neoliberal, Hindu nation, while also upholding hegemonic ideas of gender and the middle class.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In the last fifteen years, Indian public culture has witnessed a resurgence of narratives drawn from or inspired by Hindu mythology, in a variety of media targeted at adults and children: Hindi TV shows and cinema, English language fiction,<sup>1</sup> English comics and graphic novels, multilingual picturebooks, and animation films and TV shows in different languages. Integral to the mythology boom is the rapid expansion of the Indian publishing industry,<sup>2</sup> including children's publishing—evident, for example, in the emergence of a distinct young adult segment.<sup>3</sup> This significant growth has been fueled by the government's allowance of 100% Foreign Direct Investment in the industry since 2000 ("Perspectives on Indian Publishing in India"). The 21<sup>st</sup> century has also seen a boom in the children's and youth entertainment sectors (including TV programming meant especially for children). The Indian comics and animation industries have made a strong comeback, aided by transnational collaborations and increased investments. The growing number of young people in attendance at Comic Con India events (established in 2011) is an important indicator of the growth of comics culture in metropolitan cities. Urban Indian children and youth are increasingly being seen as important consumers, and the focus on them is likely to remain strong in the near future.

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<sup>1</sup> Amish Tripathi has been the most successful author writing in the category of mythological English-language fiction. His Shiva trilogy was enormously successful and he was offered a \$1 million advance for his upcoming book series, which was reportedly the highest ever advance payment made to a South Asian author (Rana). Mythological English fiction and Hindi TV series are mainly targeted at adults.

<sup>2</sup> As of 2015, India is the third-largest English-language print book publisher in the world and the sixth biggest publishing market globally ("Perspectives on Publishing in India.")

<sup>3</sup> The category of 'young adult' is gaining currency rapidly in the publishing sector. The influence of British and American publishing trends is apparent in this phenomenon. The category usually refers to children aged 13-18.

While mythological comics and graphic novels being produced in post-millennial India are predominantly in English and cater to young adults<sup>4</sup> or adults, animated TV shows and films are more commonly in Hindi and occasionally in regional languages, and target younger children aged 4-13. The primary venues for the dissemination of these texts are Indian children's TV channels. This study analyzes select mythological animated films and TV series as well as comics and graphic novels issued for urban, middle class Indian children and youth in the country and diaspora. Specifically, it investigates comic book/graphic novel retellings of *Ramayana* as well as mythological animations about the popular Hindu gods Hanuman, Ganesha, and Krishna.

An array of animated films and TV shows inspired by Hindu mythology has been released in the past decade. *Hanuman* (2005) was India's first indigenously produced commercial Hindi animated feature film to enjoy an all-India theater release. The considerable success of *Hanuman* led to the production of a spate of mythological animation films and TV shows in subsequent years. Hindi and English animated films and TV series such as Green Gold's *Krishna* (2006), *Ghatotkach: Master of Magic* (2007), *Dashavtar* (2008), *Krishna aur Kans* (2012), *Lava Kusa: the Warrior Twins* (2010), *Sons of Ram* (2012), *Arjun the Warrior Prince* (2013), Green Gold's *Krishna Balram* series and Reliance Animation's *Little Krishna* series, showcase the martial exploits of popular mythological male heroes and gods, often in their childhood. A few films, such as *Pandavas the Five Warriors* (2000), *Ramayana the Epic* (2010) and *Mahabharat* (2013) narrate the Indian epics without giving any particular character

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<sup>4</sup> The category of 'young adult' has emerged very recently in the Indian children's publishing industry, and is gaining currency rapidly. The influence of British and American publishing trends is apparent in this phenomenon. The category usually refers to children aged 13-18.

precedence. Others, like the TV series *Chota Bheem* (2008-present), the *My Friend Ganesha* trilogy (2007-2010), *Return of Hanuman* (2007) and its spin-off TV series, transport mythological characters into modern-day India or alternate fantasy worlds, and create new adventures for them. My focus in this study is on the films and TV series which depict popular Hindu gods in contemporary Indian contexts, as this allows me to investigate how they are co-opted into participating in the dominant national imaginary of a neoliberal Hindu nation.

Retellings of the *Ramayana* are more prevalent in the medium of comics as compared to animation. Most comic book/graphic novel versions of the epic revolve around the experiences of key protagonists Rama, Sita, Hanuman and Ravana. A central organizing principle and focus of my study is the representation of gender. Thus my dissertation investigates comics and graphic novels that revolve around Sita, Rama and Hanuman, who embody dominant ideals of femininity and masculinity in tellings of *Ramayana* as well as in Hindu nationalist discourse.<sup>5</sup> I show how post-millennial epic tellings reorient these ideals for a modern audience, and how they negotiate with models of masculinity and femininity that have gained prevalence in the contemporary moment. My concern with gender extends to an exploration of boyhood in the animated films and TV series about Hindu boy gods.

21<sup>st</sup> century mythological comics aimed at children have a highly influential precedent. For many decades, *Amar Chitra Katha* (or *ACK*), a series that became synonymous with Indian comics since its inception in 1967, was the prime source of

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<sup>5</sup> The Ravana comics that are excluded from this study are: Vivek Goel and Vijayendra Mohanty's comic book series *Ravanayan* (2011-2014), published under Goel's banner Holy Cow Entertainment, as well as Abhimanyu Singh Sisodia and Sachin Nagar's graphic novel *Ravana* (2011), issued by Campfire.

Hindu mythology for children. *Amar Chitra Katha* issued many titles on mythology, including titles on *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, Krishna, Hanuman, Ganesh, and other mythological characters as well as gods and goddesses in English and Hindi. As Karlene McLain notes in *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings and Other Heroes*, their impact has been enormous:

For the past forty years, *Amar Chitra Katha* comics have been an important means by which millions of Hindus have encountered the sacred in their everyday lives and a medium that has helped Indians living in postcolonial India and throughout the world what it means to be Indian... They are not considered primarily an entertainment product by their creators or consumers; instead, they are regarded—often even revered—as foundational texts for the religious and national education for their young readers. (3-4)

Due to a series of commercial failures, *ACK* decided to stop the production of new titles in 1991, instead mainly repackaging bestsellers as box sets for Non Resident Hindu Indians (Chandra 218). Though *ACK* has made a comeback in recent years due to the ever-broadening base of global Indian readers and its strategy of “moving into new media like television, animation and the Internet” (McLain 199), it has not released any new comic book titles on mythology since the 1980s. The newly restructured *ACK Media* (formed in 2008) produced one animation film on the *Ramayana*, titled *Sons of Ram* (2012), but since then, has shifted its focus to creating animated content based on its historical titles for educational purposes, which has been aired on a children’s TV channel. Vijay Sampath, the CEO of *ACK Media*, told me that their plan is to release more pedagogically-based animated digital content in the near future.

Many of the recent mythological comics and graphic novels differ in significant ways from *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, including their visual style, aesthetics, format and narrative mode. They have a modernized look, “with technically impressive

computerised illustration, which imitates the Hollywood blockbuster look of slick Western comic-book output from Marvel and DC and appeals to their fan audience” (Gravett). This is especially true of mythological comics issued by Liquid/Graphic India, Vimanika and Holy Cow. Campfire, which has become a prominent publisher of graphic novels for children, relied on *ACK*-inspired calendar art realism for earlier titles but subsequent texts have since become slicker and more action-oriented in order to appeal to young urban youth in the country as well as a wider international readership. Also, unlike *ACK*, Campfire produces long-form comics, and a few (such as the graphic novels on Sita, Draupadi and Ravana) are narrated by the mythological protagonist, in an attempt at psychologization. Many contemporary mythological comics do share with *ACK* comics their conflation between the Hindu and the national, and the celebration of a hoary Hindu past (Chandra 2). However, other mythological graphic novels, aimed at older audiences, are far more self-reflexive and interrogative in tone, and resist the valorization of Hindu revivalism. These include Abhishek Singh’s *Krishna: a Journey Within* (2012), Amruta Patil’s *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012) and Vikram Balagopal’s *Simian* (2014).

Though three books have been written on *ACK* (Chandra 2008, McLain 2009, Srinivas 2010), mythological comics and graphic novels for contemporary youth are an understudied area. Some articles exist on Vivalok Comics (McLain 2009, 2011), Campfire (Roy 2012), Vimanika Comics (Khanduri 2010) and Liquid Comics/Graphic India (Austin 2014, Dave 2013, Mathur 2010, Scott 2008, Simmons 2013). Mythological animations have barely received any attention. Vamsee Juluri (2008) has published an article on the animated film *Hanuman* (2005) through the lens of audience reception

theory. However, there have been no book-length studies on contemporary mythological comics or animations for children and young people in India and the diaspora.

An important factor behind the resurgence of the mythological genre in Indian public culture and children's culture may be the entrenchment of Hindutva— “a neologism connoting Hindu-ness but more broadly, the notion that a monolithic and homogenous “Hindu culture” represents the defining feature of the Indian nation” (Lutgendorf 361). A host of scholars have written about the complex factors that have led to the successful mobilization of Hindu nationalism since the late 1980s (Basu, Datta, Sarkar et al. 1993, Jaffrelot 1998, Nussbaum 2007, Van der Veer 1994, Zavos 2000) and how emerging media in the nation have been central to this process (Brosius 2005, Rajagopal 2001). Religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism have been on the rise in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as is evident in the increasing communalization of news media (Puniyani 102) and intolerance towards cultural products which express views that depart from hegemonic narratives of the nation and Hinduism (105). Indeed, recent events such as the concerted attacks of right wing fundamentalist groups on “Westernized” festivals like Valentine's day, the Hindu right wing government's plans to give a ‘Hindu perspective’ to school curriculum, the vandalization of minority institutions and places of worship, forced conversions of Muslims and Christians by Hindu right-wing organizations, the censorship of scholarly books deemed “offensive” to majoritarian sentiments, the arrests and clampdown of anti-government protestors, and the mobbing of Muslim minorities demonstrate that the crisis of secularism in India is

now full-blown, and that the diverse, pluralistic, multi-ethnic, democratic fabric of Indian society is under grave threat.

Narratives from Hindu mythology, especially the epics, have been retold and reimagined for centuries and have been a critical tool for nation-building in the colonial and postcolonial era (Das 1991&1995; Chandra 2008, Lothspeich 2009, Pollock 1993). Thus a central line of enquiry in my dissertation is how contemporary visual mythological narratives contribute or move away from the project of nation-building, and the notion of “Indianness” that they conceptualize. I argue that many of the texts under discussion reaffirm the dominant national imaginary of India as a neoliberal Hindu nation. My particular focus on children/youth –oriented productions builds on the work done on *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, and contributes to this broader scholarly interest in nation-building through mythology. Below I trace some of the key frameworks within which my analysis is situated and to which it hopefully contributes.

### **The Ramayana Tradition**

The two main Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have had a decisive and wide-ranging influence on the art, architecture and literature of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia over many centuries. The epic tradition in India is characterized by a rich multiplicity and fluidity. Countless versions of the epics, especially the *Ramayana*, exist in a range of languages, idioms and media, and across countries and regions—in literature, folk songs, theatre, dance, puppet arts, recitations, music, visual arts, iconographic traditions, and more recently, electronic media. Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, a highly ornate Sanskrit epic poem (*kavya*) of some 50,000 lines, is recognized as the

oldest extant literary rendition of *Ramakatha* (Rama's story).<sup>6</sup> According to John Brockington,

Indian tradition is unanimous that the original version was composed by a sage called Valmiki and then transmitted orally, but the version now extant was undoubtedly composed over many centuries between perhaps 500 B.C. and A.D. 300, during which it was also committed to writing. It is now divided into seven kandas or books. (34)

While Valmiki's *Ramayana* is considered by some scholars to be the 'ur' or 'original' text, other scholars have observed that viewing any version as "authentic" ossifies a remarkably diverse tradition. The "Many Ramayanas" approach forwarded by A.K. Ramanujan "assumes that each telling of Rama's story is valid in its own right...[this] model emphasizes the many tellings of Rama's story—oral and written, read and performed, recited and depicted in visual forms" without creating a hierarchy between them and the Valmiki epic (Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas* 5). Nevertheless, the Valmiki epic is recognized as one of the authoritative versions of the epic. Paula Richman defines authoritative versions as those tellings of Rama's story which have "achieved a level of acceptance and legitimacy greater than most other tellings of Rama's story" (*Questioning Ramayanas* 8). She notes that authoritative tellings share "a link with normative ideologies or contents," and that "even though authoritative tellings do have space within them for contestation and questioning, they tend to affirm the values of the existing social order and undergird institutionalized power" (*Questioning Ramayanas* 9-10). Richman observes that apart from the Valmiki version, other Ramakathas that can be defined as authoritative include the medieval Hindu poet Tulsidas's devotional version *Ramcharitmanas* which has enjoyed enormous

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<sup>6</sup> I use the term *Ramakatha* (in alternation with *Ramayana*) to emphasize the oral component of the epic tradition.

popularity in North India, 12<sup>th</sup> century Tamil poet Kampan's *Iramavataram*, which has gained legitimacy in South India, and Ramanand Sagar's TV series *Ramayan* (1986-1988), which "gained its authoritative status largely in relation to its medium of presentation and the magnitude of audience response" (9).

Aired on national television, Sagar's *Ramayan* became a huge phenomenon—it was watched by millions of Indians, and enjoyed tremendous success. Scholars have argued that the TV show homogenized the immense diversity of the Ramayana tradition by imposing a hegemonic north Indian, upper-caste narrative on the audience, and have shown how the TV serial constructed notions of gender, nation and culture which reinforced Hindu nationalism (Mankekar 1999, Thapar 1989, Pauwels 2008). Arvind Rajagopal (2001) has demonstrated how the Hindu right-wing party, BJP, co-opted symbols of the televised *Ramayana* to facilitate the perpetuation of Hindutva in the 1990s. Sheldon Pollock has noted that *Ramayana* is fundamentally a text of "othering", and has a long history of being appropriated to demonize cultural 'others,' who have been made to represent various groups (such as Muslims, British, Dravidians etc.) at different points in time. The epic has thus lent itself to co-optation by forces of Hindu nationalism and appropriation (272-293). The political appropriation of *Ramayana* by Hindu nationalist forces forms an important context for my investigation. One of the central aspects of this study is to show how contemporary mythological narratives are negotiating with discourses of Hindu nationalism.

A brief recap of the Valmiki epic follows. At the beginning of Valmiki's poem, we learn that the ruler of Lanka, the *rakshasa*<sup>7</sup> Ravana, has been granted a boon by the

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<sup>7</sup> The word *rakshasa* is translated as 'demon,' and *rakshasi* as 'demoness', and signifies malevolent creatures of the night.

gods that he can't be destroyed by any divine or demonic creature. Human beings are the exception to this condition, but Ravana thinks they are too weak to be a threat. Meanwhile, in the city of Ayodhya, King Dasaratha performs a special sacrifice to acquire male heirs, which causes his three wives to conceive sons. Rama is the eldest, and earns renown as a brave, dutiful, virtuous and generous prince. Sita is the daughter of Earth who has been adopted by King Janaka and his wife. Rama wins Sita's hand in marriage by stringing an enormous divine bow and they live peacefully in Ayodhya for many years. When Dasaratha decides to hand over the kingdom to Rama, his youngest queen Kaikeyi contrives to have Rama sent into exile for fourteen years, and have her own son Bharata crowned as king instead. Sita insists on accompanying Rama to the forest, as does his devoted step-brother Lakshmana.

The three have an idyllic and adventurous sojourn in the forest. One day, a *rakshasi* named Surpanakha falls in love with Rama and proposes to him. When Rama refuses, she perceives Sita as the impediment in her plan and prepares to eat her. Rama asks Lakshmana to stop her, and the latter mutilates Surpanakha, prompting her to complain to her brother, Ravana. She also tells him about Sita's extraordinary beauty, which arouses in Ravana a passionate desire. Assisted by another demon who takes the form of a golden deer, he lures first Rama and then Lakshmana away from the hermitage. Then, he abducts Sita and imprisons her in his island kingdom of Lanka. Smitten by lust, Ravana continually attempts to persuade Sita to marry him, but she adamantly refuses, remaining steadfast in her devotion to Rama.

While searching for Sita, Rama and Lakshmana make an alliance with a dispossessed *vanara*<sup>8</sup> king, Sugriva, whose advisor Hanuman is sent to Lanka to discover the whereabouts of Sita. Rama, Lakshmana and their *vanara* allies build a bridge over the ocean, and fight a war with the *rakshasas*, in which Rama kills Ravana in a one-to-one combat. However, Rama refuses to take Sita back with him, accusing her of having become tainted by life under another man's roof. Sita chooses to undergo a trial by fire (*agnipariksha*) to prove her chastity, which the gods testify to. Rama then accepts her and they return to Ayodhya, where Rama reclaims the throne. Persistent rumors questioning his wife's chastity lead Rama to banish the now pregnant Sita from his kingdom. Sita finds refuge with the revered sage Valmiki. In the forest, Sita gives birth to twin sons, Lava and Kusa. When they have grown up, Valmiki arranges for Rama to meet them. Rama asks Sita to become his queen after she has performed another truth test so that the public may see for themselves how virtuous their queen is. In a counter-move, Sita asks her mother Earth to open up and take her back into her womb if she has been pure in thought and deed. The earth cracks open, and Sita descends into it. Heartbroken by the loss of his wife, and a little later, Lakshmana, Rama eventually ascends to heaven with a large gathering of followers.

*Ramayana* scholar Arshia Sattar observes that "Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman loom large in the cultural imagination as the perfect examples of their social roles" (xviii). In Valmiki's epic, Rama is glorified as the embodiment of compassion, justice, generosity, valor, and dutifulness. Rama's equanimity and grace in the face of

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<sup>8</sup> *Vanaras* are ape-like humanoids. *Vanaras* in Valmiki's epic possess the powers of speech and rational thinking much like humans, but are also defined by their *kapitva* (a Sanskrit word translated as 'monkeyhood').

all the terrible things that happen to him, and his commitment to *dharma*<sup>9</sup> have been celebrated. Yet, there are certain episodes in the *Ramayana* which have created a lot of discomfort among Hindus who worship Rama as an avatar of a main god Vishnu.<sup>10</sup> One is the episode in which Rama shoots Vali in the back while the latter is engaged in battle, which goes against the warrior code. Even more controversial has been Rama's cruel treatment of Sita. Rama's injustice to her has been a very troublesome aspect of the epic to Indians for centuries, and has generated much debate. Commentators have also highlighted the unethical treatment of Surpanakha by the brothers. Scholars suggest that the diversity and questioning which is inbuilt into the *Ramayana* tradition can be partly accounted by the countless attempts to resolve the moral ambiguities of this tale (Richman, *Many Ramayanas* 10-11; Sattar liii). Thus many retellings are oppositional or subversive, such as those that contest Rama's idealization as the upholder of *dharma* or portray Ravana as a sympathetic figure, or question the caste politics of authoritative versions. A range of retellings critique the authoritative versions' Brahmanical and patriarchal biases. Indeed, the *Ramayana* tradition is defined by "its multiplicity and its ability to accommodate questioning within its boundaries (Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas* 2).

My study demonstrates the influence of authoritative<sup>11</sup> and/or oppositional retellings on contemporary tellings. I argue that while some contemporary graphic

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of *dharma* is very important in Hindu philosophical and mythological texts. It translates as 'that which supports or upholds' and refers to one's righteous duty in the particular stage of life/circumstance one is in.

<sup>10</sup> Rama's divinity is revealed to him in the Valmiki epic; several subsequent retellings are devotional, and foreground his divinity. Sheldon Pollock (1993) points out that the divinization of the epic has a long history and was intimately tied up to the ideology of divine kingship in medieval India.

<sup>11</sup> In particular, the Valmiki epic and the TV *Ramayan*.

retellings of the epic perpetuate a Brahmanical, Vedic conception of Hindu culture upheld by authoritative versions—a vision that is central to Hindu nationalism— others resist such a narrative. Ramanujan notes that *Ramayana* tellings are “in consonance with religious affiliation, region, language, historical period, literary conventions, and the teller’s social location and experiences” (21). I explore how contemporary versions of the epic are reflective of ideologies as well as socio-historical and cultural trends prevalent in the current moment. Though the scholarship on retellings of the *Ramayana* in Indian literature, film and other media is vast,<sup>12</sup> no long studies exist on the epic’s adaptations for children and young people. I locate my textual analysis within a discussion of production contexts to demonstrate how textual and formal innovations in recent graphic retellings are shaped by the particular visions of the producers/editors/artists. I also pay attention to these texts’ networks of circulation and target audiences.

### **The Global/Local Nexus, the Place of the Nation and Media Imperialism**

The texts in this study are products of a globalized nation, and in some way or another, contend with cultural influences from the West (especially the US). Thus it is important to investigate them within the context of debates around the global/local and national in an era of globalization. Many scholars have argued that the tensions between the global and local, cultural homogenization and indigenization are central to the phenomenon of cultural globalization. Arjun Appadurai’s influential study of modernity in the global age emphasizes the disjunctures and differences of global cultural flows, arguing that globalization is an uneven and localizing process (32). Rob

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<sup>12</sup> A selective list comprises Mandrakanta Bose (2004), Sisir Kumar Das (1991, 1995, 2005), Diana Dimitrova (2010), Heidi Pauwels (2007, 2008) and Paula Richman (1991, 2000).

Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake argue that it is no longer adequate to map the globe into “binary zones of center and periphery as an eternally Manichean space of colonial victimization” (2). Wimal and Dissanayake contend that their use of the global/local assemblage is meant to refigure one-way models of domination, maximizing “fracture at the neo-capitalist” border (5), and emphasizing that local conjunctures reshape global processes. Arif Dirlik points out that multinational corporations have incorporated the radical ecological slogan, “Think globally, act locally” which does not “mean any serious recognition of the local but is intended to recognize the features of the local so as to incorporate localities into the imperatives of the global” (31-34). Ironically, however, “even as it seeks to homogenize populations globally, consuming their cultures, global capitalism enhances awareness of the local, pointing to it also as the site of resistance to capital” (35).

Where does the nation-state figure in the space of the transnational imaginary?

Mike Featherstone's concept of 'third cultures' is a useful conceptualization of such a space. He defines “third cultures” as

sets of practices, bodies of knowledge, conventions and lifestyles which have developed in ways which have become increasingly independent of nation-states. In effect, there are a number of transsocietal institutions, cultures and cultural producers who cannot be understood as merely agents and representatives of their nation-state. (60)

Wimal and Dissanayake note that the “nation-state...is being undone by this fast-imploding heteroglossic interface of the global with the local” (3). In this view, the linkages between the local and the global make the nation an increasingly less significant entity. Arif Dirlik remarks that “new pathways for the development of capital cut across national boundaries and intrude on national economic sovereignty, which...undermines national sovereignty from within by fragmenting the national

economy” (31). Arjun Appadurai argues that we are entering a post-national order, and that rather than mapping the globalized world through national boundaries, the need now is to “think ourselves beyond the nation” (158). Old territorial units such as the nation-state are no longer sufficient spatial mechanisms to demarcate the world, given the flows of capital, electronic signals, refugees and migrant labor that traverse the boundaries of the nation-state. According to Stuart Hall, the process of globalization has led to the weakening of the relationship between a national cultural identity and the nation-state (22).

However, other scholars have contested speculations on the diminishing role of the nation-state in the global era. Manu Goswami claims that:

While neoliberal global trends appear to have heightened the tenuousness of the coincidence of the nation and state, they have also spurred national, supranational and sub-national strategies (from heritage industries, to economic and institutional restructuring, to repressive immigration measures) that seek to refortify this inherited framework...Despite requiems of its imminent demise, the future of the nation form seems uncomfortably secure. The challenges that neo-liberal forms of global restructuring pose to nationalism and the nation-form demand that we pay attention to the on-going, dynamic reconstitution of the nation-form. (795)

Rupal Oza makes a similar argument about the importance of the nation-state. She asserts that “in the context of India’s intensified encounter with global capital, the concomitant loss of sovereignty has resulted in the displacement of control onto national culture and identity” (2) She further argues that “India’s attempts to control and establish sovereignty over national culture and identity have manifested themselves by fortifying rigid gender and sexual identities” (2). My study reinforces Goswami’s and Oza’s emphasis on the role of the nation-state in an era of globalization. I demonstrate that the nation still takes precedence over the global/local nexus (chapter 3).

Furthermore, I argue that some texts are invested in demonstrating the global outlook

of the Indian nation-state by modernizing the mythic universe (chapter 2 and chapter 3). Hindu mythology thus becomes a means of showcasing India as an emerging world power in the contemporary moment.

Many texts in the study demonstrate the influence of Western (particularly American) cultural tropes such as the superhero trope (chapter 2 and 3), as well as media/forms that originated in the West, specifically animations, comics and graphic novels. The impact of American animations is evident in the Disney-fied look of animated boy-gods (chapter 2), while the rise of the Indian graphic novel has been linked to the legitimacy the form has acquired in the US and UK (chapter 4). The visual aesthetics of American comics have been used to 'internationalize' Indian comics (chapter 3). Thus, these texts testify to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's argument that "despite the imbrication of "First" and "Third" worlds...the global distribution of power still tends to make the First World countries cultural "transmitters" and to reduce most Third World countries to the status as "receivers" (147). They argue that "discernible patterns of domination channel the "fluidities" even of a "multipolar" world; the same hegemony that unifies the world through global networks of circulating goods and information also distributes them according to hierarchical structures of power, even if those hegemonies are subtle and dispersed (149-150). However, Shohat and Stam simultaneously critique the media imperialism thesis, suggesting that global mass culture coexists with local culture rather than replacing it. Spectators actively engage with texts, and specific communities both incorporate and transform foreign influences (149).

Appadurai and Breckenridge have similarly advocated against theories of Americanization or homogenization (1). Particularly relevant for my work is their

formulation of South Asian public culture as a zone of cultural debate that is characterized by tensions between national, transnational, folk and mass culture (5). They clarify that “public culture” refers to the “space between domestic life and the projects of the nation-state—where different social groups [...] constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated forms in relation to the practices of everyday life (4-5). Other scholars have adopted the term ‘public culture’ in their analysis of Indian cultural texts (Dwyer and Pinney 2001; Ramaswamy 2003).

I use Appadurai’s conception of Indian public culture to contest a narrative of cultural imperialism and to demonstrate how transnational, national, mass and folk cultural forms contend with each other in mythological narratives, even though the national often takes center stage. For instance, in chapter 1, I discuss the negotiations between the graphic novel form, a centuries-old picture storytelling tradition and the images of Sita made popular by the TV *Ramayan*, which became synonymous with national culture (Mankekar 1999, Thapar 1989). In chapter 3, I argue that the reconfiguration of Rama as a “super warrior” in Graphic India comics is linked not only to the influence of American superhero narratives, but also the pervasiveness of Hindu-hegemonic masculinities in the Indian public sphere (Vijayan 2002; 2004). More broadly, the varied influences on which mythological comics and animations draw show Indian public culture to be an arena of cultural contestation in which modernity is “a diversely appropriated experience” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 5).

Appadurai and Breckenridge note that a critical feature of Indian public culture is “the interweaving of ocular experiences from one site to another” (12). They contend that “this interocular field is structured so that each site or setting for the socializing and

regulating of the public gaze is to some degree affected by the experiences of other sites” (12). The analytic of the interocular has been widely used in Indian visual studies (Jain 2007, Lutgendorf 2007; Ramaswamy 2003). In *Beyond Appearances? Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*, Sumathi Ramaswamy argues that “paying attention to the interocular is crucial to a hermeneutic of the visible in modern India” (xvii). According to Nicholas Mirzoeff, “the power— and authority— of the visual in the modern Indian public sphere emerges from the fact that it inhabits such an ‘interocular’ or ‘intervisual’ field” (qtd in Ramaswamy xvii). The analytic of the interocular foregrounds the intersecting, overlapping nature of images and different media in India, and recognizes that “no visual image is self-sufficient, bounded, insulated; instead it is open, porous, permeable, and ever available for appropriation” (Ramaswamy xiii).

The interocular forms an important analytic for my study, since most of the texts under discussion deploy images from other media and sites of production. Of particular importance for my work is the ubiquitous medium of calendar art, which emerged as a product of mechanical production in colonial India and continues to be found in a huge range of public and private spaces in the nation. God-posters form the most predominant category of calendar art, and the majority of these represent a variety of Hindu deities (Jain 7). I argue that in using or reorienting iconographic conventions associated with particular gods/mythological figures from other media such as calendar art, TV shows and sculptures, contemporary mythological texts are also co-opting or resisting the discursive constructions in which these older images participate. Thus in chapter 1, I demonstrate that the redeployment of calendar art images of *Sita in Sita: Daughter of Earth* has a loaded political valence since it harks back to Ravi Varma’s

project of constructing a pan-Indian womanhood that was Aryanizing in its thrust. In chapter 2, I note that similar factors underlie the phenomenon of baby gods in calendar art and animation films. I assert that the visual retellings of the *Ramayana* which are interrogative in tone, such as *Sita's Ramayana* and *Simian*, depart radically from dominant visual representations of the mythological figure in order to chart an oppositional narrative (chapter 1, chapter 4). Sumathi Ramaswamy notes that the 'visual' turn in modern Indian studies is "marked not just by the centrality accorded to visual practices for our understanding of the modern Indian life-world but also by the conviction that visibility...itself does not lie outside history, culture, politics" (xiv). In paying attention to the transmission and reconfiguration of the images of popular mythological figures and gods across media, I highlight the trends, practices and ideologies that account for the iconographic innovations.

### **The Neoliberal Hindu Nation and the Middle Class**

In *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India*, Arvind Rajagopal argues that neoliberal reforms were crucial for Hindu nationalist mobilization in India during the late 1980s and early 1990s: "Hindu nationalism represented an attempt to fashion a Hindu public within the nexus of market reforms and the expansion of communications, rather than religious reaction as such" (1). Noting that there was an opportunistic alliance between the Hindu Right and economic reforms, he claims that the Hindu Right utilized the new prominence of branding and marketing strategies to promote an identification of consumption, particularly of a few specific commodities like bricks, tridents and Ram stickers, with political participation and 'Hinduness.' Thus, "commodity images of Hindutva...became absorbed as part of the symbolic apparatus of liberalization, providing the semblance of a self-sufficient

indigenous modernity unruffled by the developmentalist state's retreat, and coming into its own, paradoxically, amidst globalization" (26).

Moreover, as Shankar Gopalakrishnan points out, the opportunistic alliance between neoliberalism and Hindutva in the 1990s, and which continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was predicated on shared political visions. Both hegemonic political projects pushed for the retreat of the state from the economic and social sphere (2806). Taking the example of the education sector, Gopalakrishnan suggests that the government's retreat from public education has led to the Hindu Right and the corporate sector expanding their influence in primary education and higher education respectively. In the economic sphere, Hindutva's traditional discomfort with 'uncontrolled' globalism gave way to rhetoric on the importance of establishing Indian companies and Indian brands in the world market. The symbiosis between neoliberalism and Bhartiya Janata Party, the Hindu Right Wing party that is currently in power, was also evident in the fact that BJP drew its support largely from elite and middle class voters and regional propertied classes (2807). Rajagopal shows that Hindu nationalism "promised a pro-business government combined with strong nationalist discipline" and was able to offer "the cultural and ideological accompaniment to liberalization for middle and upper classes" (34).

Various scholars writing on the contemporary Indian middle class agree that it has risen into prominence after India's liberalization in the 1990s. They argue that the middle class is a heterogenous, internally differentiated social formation that has become a powerful unifying idea (Baviskar and Ray 23, Fernandes xxix). The middle class is "the producer as well as consumer driving the engine of economic growth and

prosperity” (Baviskar and Ray 3). Hence, “the identity of the new middle class provides a kind of normative standard” to which those on the margins of this class can aspire (Fernandes xix). Idealized images of middle class consumption have become the most visible cultural coding of the impact of economic reforms on this group (Fernandes xxi-xxii). Indeed, “middleclassness relies heavily on imagery and on the production and consumption of spaces, sites and practices that are not necessarily ever realized” (Donner and de Neve 13).

Leela Fernandes demonstrates that the rise of the new middle class in the 1990s intersected with the rise of Hindu nationalism. However, she argues that while there are points of convergence between the new middle class and Hindu nationalism, “the politics of India’s new middle class cannot...simply be reduced to the politics of Hindutva, nor is it necessarily the case that Hindu nationalism will inevitably serve as a vehicle for new middle class interests” (171). She asserts that the making of middle class “identity is often pulled between its secular-modernist orientations and a growing identification with the Hindu nationalist movement” (xxvi). Furthermore, middle-class identity is marked by tensions between serving as a group that represents a new national model of development which has a global outlook, and its affiliations with inequalities based on class, gender, caste and religion (Fernandes xxxiii; Donner and De Neve 8).

The hegemonic role of the middle class and its predominantly Hindu composition (Fernandes 9) is evident in the preponderance of recently produced Indian animated TV shows and films that revolve around popular Hindu middle class deities Krishna, Ganesha and Hanuman, and in their portrayal as primarily middle class gods. In

chapter 2, I show how mythological animation films betray the anxieties faced by the middle class under the pressures of globalization. I especially focus on discourses on middle class childhood prevalent in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Nationalist discourse in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century emphasized the importance of middle class children, especially boys, to the project of nation-building (P. Bose 1995; Sen 2007). The focus on Indian middle class childhood continues in the current historical juncture but parents' increasing investment in children is tied to middle class aspirations for upward mobility (Kumar 2011). Thus a central area of enquiry in chapter 2 is how the construction of middle class boyhood in animated films reflects older and more current conceptions of childhood, and how the boys as well as boy-gods navigate the conflicted terrain of middle class identity.

### **Methodology**

My methodology grounds textual analysis within contexts of production and circulation. The textual critique pays special attention to dissonances between image and text. I have conducted interviews with publishers, producers and artists of contemporary mythological narratives located in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Chennai. These interviews have focused on the texts' production, marketing strategies, circulation, target audience, and art/design. I use these interviews to provide contextual information about the texts under discussion.

### **Chapter Outline**

In chapter 1, I examine the representation of Sita in two graphic novels primarily meant for a young adult audience— Saraswati Nagpal and Manikandan's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* (2011) and Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar's *Sita's Ramayana* (2011). I assert that *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* reaffirms the stereotypy of a

submissive Sita popularized by the TV *Ramayan* but finds innovative ways of endowing her with agency. I show how Sita's agency serves to uphold the dominant political order symbolized by *Ramrajya* (Rama's kingdom). I argue that the graphic novel reaffirms the ideal of Vedic womanhood that has been central to Hindu nationalist ideologies. *Sita's Ramayana* is a self-consciously oppositional narrative which attempts to create a contestatory, critical Sita. I demonstrate that the text's progressive outlook is predicated on the oral women's folk tradition and Patua folk tradition on which it draws, and that the tensions between image and text reveal differing visions of Sita.

In chapter 2, I argue that the refashioning of Krishna, Hanuman and Ganesh in animated films and TV series as 'hip' boy-gods partakes of the idealized imagery of consumption that has become associated with the middle class. I claim that their reconfiguration valorizes the consumerist ethos of the middle class. I also show how boyhood in the animated films becomes a site on which the pressures of globalization on the middle class are negotiated, arguing that the films deal with anxieties about changing gender roles by making the boys and boy-gods the preservers of normative gender identities. Noting the continuities and divergences between nationalist conceptions of childhood and contemporary discourse on middle class childhood, I claim that the films cast boys as citizen-subjects of a globalized, modern India who embody an idealized notion of middle class childhood which is "authentically" Indian and global at the same time.

In chapter 3, I examine the *Ramayan 3392 AD* comics, which recreate the epic as a sci-fi series set in a futuristic universe. Their primary audience comprises of teenagers and people in their 20s. I argue that despite the notable impact of American

comics, and the comics' transnational audience, the series attests to the strong link between Hindu mythology and the Indian nation-state. I show how Rama's representation in the series, while modeled on American superheroes, ultimately embodies ideals of Kshatriya masculinity that have been upheld in authoritative versions of the epic and in Hindu nationalism. I contend that Sita's portrayal reveals the anxieties surrounding the figure of the modern, liberated woman in a globalized India. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the militarization and modernization of the epic are based on (what is projected as) Vedic science, which allows the series to construct the vision of a virile postcolonial Hindu nation whose greatness and modernity emerge from Hindu antiquity.

In chapter 4, I analyze two graphic novels based on Hanuman: Campfire's *Tulsidas' Sunderkaand: Triumph of Hanuman* (2012), which is an adaptation of a section of a medieval retelling of *Ramayana*, and Vikram Balagopal's debut graphic novel *Simian* (2014), which retell the epic from Hanuman's point of view. While *Triumph of Hanuman* is meant for children, Balagopal's graphic novel has an older target audience. I argue that there is a fundamental dissonance between the graphic novel form and the Tulsidas retelling which Campfire adapts, since the devotional retelling doesn't present much scope for fleshing out the interiority of the protagonist. I assert that the use of the term graphic novel is misplaced for *Triumph of Hanuman* since the form has primarily been associated with narrative complexity. I demonstrate how *Simian* uses the graphic novel form to psychologize Hanuman, and contend that the success of the narrative depends on the visual representation of Hanuman as a baboon. I also argue that both texts pitch their own version of modernity through a

modern form—*Triumph of Hanuman* does so by displaying the image of a resurgent, strong, Hindu nation as symbolized by Hanuman's iconography, while *Simian* does so by secularizing Hanuman and contesting his association with aggressive masculinity.

Many of the retellings included in my study uphold a monolithic, homogenous idea of the nation rooted in Brahmanical Hinduism and/or neoliberalism, while also perpetuating hegemonic ideas of gender and the middle class. Considering that some visual retellings for children claim to possess pedagogical value, and are even distributed in the educational sector, it is important for us to investigate their construction of Indianness.

CHAPTER 2  
A NEW SITA FOR NEW TIMES? THE NEGOTIATION WITH TRADITION IN *SITA:  
DAUGHTER OF THE EARTH* AND *SITA'S RAMAYANA*

The long and varied tradition of oppositional retellings of the *Ramayana* includes a very important category that focuses on Sita. Sita's fate mirrors that of a huge number of Indian women who have been rejected and victimized in a deeply patriarchal society and hence creative re-presentations of Sita abound in different Indian languages, media and genres, in the pre-modern as well as modern periods. In some way or the other, these epic retellings grapple with the injustice faced by her. In rural India, a centuries-old women's oral tradition of retelling the *Ramakatha* focuses on Sita's suffering and rebukes Rama for his cruelty. Many revisions of the epic, especially those written in the modern period, are self-consciously and overtly feminist, often radically reconfiguring Sita's character.<sup>1</sup>

In picturebooks, comics and animation films for children, Sita has, for the most part, not been given a distinctive voice. The *Amar Chitra Katha* titles on *Ramayana* don't foreground Sita's experiences, and neither do the myriad contemporary picturebook retellings of the epic or the more recent *Ramayana* animation films. Most mythological comics produced in the last several years have been focused on male heroes. Nina Paley's animation film *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) is a decidedly feminist take on the epic and is narrated from Sita's point of view but is meant primarily for an

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<sup>1</sup> See Sutapa's Chaudhuri's "Revisiting Sita: the Subversive Myths of Womanhood in Contemporary South Asian Writers." *The Asian Conference on Literature and Librarianship 2013: "Exchanges and Encounters"*, April 4-7, 2013, Osaka, Japan. Nagoya, Japan: The International Academic Forum, 2013; Namita Gokhale and Malashri Lal eds. *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology* (Viking: 2009); Linda Hess's "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67.1 (1999): 1-32; Paula Richman ed. *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India* (IUP, Bloomington: 2008); Velcheru Narayana Rao's "When does Sita Cease to be Sita? Notes toward a Cultural Grammar of Indian Narratives" in *Ramayana Revisited*, Ed. Mandrakanta Bose.

adult audience. Devdutt Patnaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013) is also geared towards adults. Vivalok Comics' two-page comic, "Sita Banished," visualizes a folk tale popular in South India, and is an oppositional retelling.<sup>2</sup> Saraswati Nagpal and Manikandan's *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* (2011), published by Campfire Graphic Novels, and Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar's *Sita's Ramayana* (2011), published by Tara Books, are the only long-form comics which retell the epic from Sita's perspective. This chapter analyzes the discursive construction of Sita in both books. The graphic novels are primarily targeted at young adult audiences, and have been circulated within the country as well as abroad (primarily in the US, UK and Canada).

*Sita: Daughter of the Earth* is based on authoritative versions of the epic—Valmiki's and Tulsidas' versions and Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayan* (1987-1988). Additionally, it incorporates episodes from the TV *Ramayan*'s first remake, also called *Ramayan* (2008-2009), which was directed by Ramanand Sagar's son.<sup>3</sup> *Sita's Ramayana*, on the other hand, is based on folk retellings, and is a self-consciously oppositional retelling, which seeks to destabilize normative interpretations of the epic. I investigate both texts' negotiation with popular conceptions of Sita; Hindu nationalist conceptions of womanhood and nation; and older *Ramakathas*, especially those on which they draw. I conduct a close reading of both graphic novels sequentially, paying attention to the textual as well as interocular exchanges between these texts and older retellings, and highlighting the tensions and overlaps between them, in order to tease out how both texts reorient Sita's image for a young, contemporary, urban, middle

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<sup>2</sup> Karlina McLain has written about it in *Immortal Comic Books*, and a separate article, "Vivalok Comics: Celebrating All That is Small in India." *International Journal of Comic Art* 11.2 (2009): 26-43.

<sup>3</sup> Sagar Arts, the production company of the Sagar family, released a second remake in 2012, *Ramayana: Sabke Jeevan ka Adhaar* (*Ramayana: The Foundation of Everyone's Life*). The show ran till 2013.

class/elite audience. I argue that though both books give Sita a strong voice, *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* upholds older and contemporary Hindu nationalist conceptions of Indian womanhood, while *Sita's Ramayana* counters the appropriation of Sita in nationalist discourse by showing her forging a community with the subalterns of the epic.

The influence of Sita on the collective Indian psyche can hardly be overestimated. She has been upheld in Indian culture as the ideal wife *par excellence* for her unwavering loyalty and devotion to her husband Rama and her stoic suffering in the face of his rejection, as well as for her moral and sexual purity. She is the most popular mythological role model for millions of Indian women. She is also a very contested figure since there is a widespread belief (especially among urban, educated women) that Sita serves as a harmful role model. Scholars and feminists argue that the stereotype of Sita as a self-sacrificing, submissive, extremely dutiful wife (*pativrata*) imposes on Indian wives an ideal of unquestioning submissiveness. According to Uma Chakravarti,

...the legend of Sita represents chastity, purity, and a singular faithfulness which was not destroyed by Rama's slights or even his ultimate rejection... Valmiki's *Ramayana*...was a potent instrument for propagating the twin notions that women are the property of men and that sexual fidelity for women was life's major virtue. ("The Development of the Sita Myth" 70-71)

Velcheru Narayana Rao observes that the prominence of Sita as an idealized figure of Indian womanhood results partly because of the political dominance of the landed ideology, in which "women have to carry the seed of the family in its purity and therefore not only are they bound to be chaste, they also bear the responsibility to prove their chastity." Furthermore, "the Gandhian use of the *Ramayana* metaphors such as

*Ramrajya* for the ideal of independent Indian and the nationalist fervor of presenting Indian women as the symbol of purity and passive resistance...presented Sita as the supreme role model for all Indian womanhood (“When does Sita cease to be Sita?” 219-235). Sita’s embodiment of the *pativrata* ideal has led ordinary Indian women to protest the Sita model, as in a letter published in *Manushi*, an influential magazine for women, entitled ‘No More Sitas’: “Now we must refuse to be Sitas. By becoming a Sita and submitting to the fire ordeal, a woman loses her identity. The fire ordeal is imposed on women today in every city, every home” (qtd in Pauwels 9).

Madhu Kishwar has been instrumental in countering negative evaluations of Sita.

She writes:

My interviews indicate that Indian women are not endorsing female slavery when they mention Sita as their ideal. Sita is not perceived as being a mindless creature who meekly suffers maltreatment at the hands of her husband without complaining...She is seen as a person whose sense of *dharmā* is superior to and more awe inspiring than that of Ram—someone who puts even *maryadapurushottam*<sup>4</sup> Ram—the most perfect of men—to shame... She is a woman who even the gods revere, who refuses to accept her husband’s tyranny even while she remains steadfast in her love for him and loyalty to him to the very end. (22-23)

In this reading, Sita is an empowering role model for millions of women laboring under oppressive patriarchal systems because of her resistance to Rama’s unjust behavior.

As I shall discuss below, *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* and *Sita’s Ramayana* draw on this field of debate in their attempt to reorient Sita for a modern audience.

### **Sita: Daughter of the Earth**

Founded in 2008, Campfire Graphic Novels is the sole Indian publisher dedicated to the publication of graphic novels for children, and in just a few years, has established

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<sup>4</sup> Roughly translated as “ideal man of propriety.”

itself as a visible presence in the emerging Indian comics industry. Campfire has published more than 80 titles and projects itself as a global player, with markets in US, UK, Canada, Europe and SE Asia, apart from India (Campfire, About Us). Campfire was founded on the premise of transmitting Indian culture to the young generation, and 11 to 15 year-old children in India, US and Britain comprise the primary target audience— the latter two countries have a privileged position because of their large diasporas (Quinn). Campfire’s pedagogical intent is evident in its mission statement, which is “to entertain and educate young minds by creating unique illustrated books that recount stories of human values, arouse curiosity in the world around us, and inspire with tales of great deeds and unforgettable people” (Campfire, “About Us”). Its graphic novels fall under five main categories: Classics, Heroes/Biographies, Histories, Mythology and Originals. The company claims to make legends of mythological figures<sup>5</sup> relevant for “a demanding 21st Century audience” by being “at once ancient and contemporary, but always authentic” (Campfire, About Us). This claim to “authenticity” is bolstered by appendices which provide the child reader random facts about the epic/mythological figure on which the graphic novel is based. Campfire aims to make Hindu mythological characters appealing to a transnational audience by projecting them as “cool” (Jason Quinn, personal communication). This approach is evident in recent titles such as *The Kaurava Empire* that model the hi-tech, sci-fi imaginary of many American comics.

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<sup>5</sup> Campfire has also brought out titles on Ravana, Hanuman, Krishna, and Draupadi, as well as adaptations of the *Mahabharata*

The company has recently making strong efforts to expand into the educational sector.<sup>6</sup> According to Sahadi Sharma, International Marketing Manager at Campfire, the company has met with success in getting many titles taught as part of the English core curriculum in schools across Delhi. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), with which the vast majority of Indian public and private schools are affiliated, has included Campfire graphic novels, including *Triumph of Hanuman* and *Sita: Daughter of Earth*, in their Reading Promotion Program for middle graders and high school students.<sup>7</sup> Campfire's website provides a list of its titles that have been recommended by the CBSE and Kendriya Vidyalaya, a prominent public school with branches all over the country. While the majority of Campfire's graphic novels are in English, they have recently released a couple of Hindi translations.

Malini Roy points out that the publisher "works on an assembly line model reflecting the transnational operations of the global economy." The graphic texts are illustrated by in-house artists, and written in English by authors based in the country and the US (27). Roy observes that "the written word's primacy remains embedded in Campfire texts" since the author gives detailed instructions to the illustrator on each panel of the graphic novel (31). Consequently, the production values of the illustrations are notably poor. In *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* (and some other Campfire titles), the

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<sup>6</sup> A few of Campfire's mythological comics have been purchased in bulk by religious organizations in the US (Sharma).

<sup>7</sup> Marketing titles that portray Hindu culture to a young audience maybe a savvy move in the current political climate. The last time the right-wing party BJP was in power, it commissioned the rewriting of history textbooks to make them more nationalist, and all indications are that it plans to nationalize school curriculum this time around as well.<sup>7</sup> The current Human Resource Development Minister, Smriti Irani, has set into motion an initiative to bring a Hindu perspective to school curriculum (Mahajan, "HRD Minister...Wants Ancient Texts in Education). Interestingly, religiously oriented Campfire titles have also been popular in the diaspora.

panels are overcrowded with text. In a clear attempt to save costs, many panels are squeezed into one page, making the faces of characters indistinguishable at times. The illustrations of Sita change over the course of the text, and the artwork is often sketchy, especially in the small-sized panels. The low quality of the artwork may be explained (at least partially) by Roy's observation that "the illustrator's creative role as an artist begins in a position predetermined by the editors, who are generally socioeconomically more privileged than the former" (31). This hierarchy is borne out in the front matter of the graphic novel, which contains a note on the author, Saraswati Nagpal, while providing us no information about the illustrator, Manikandan.

The author's brief biographical note projects her as a cosmopolitan, elite, globe-trotting young woman author who is well-positioned to translate "timeless" tales (as suggested by the motif of a 'campfire,' around which stories are told) to a young, urban audience in a form associated with modernity. The attempt to make Sita a relatable figure relies on the use of the first person narrative mode to psychologize her. Yet, the modern format doesn't translate into a cosmopolitan outlook. Right from the outset, the text highlights the epic's status as religious scripture, collapsing cultural tradition with Hinduism. On the first page, Sita is depicted as a goddess. She resembles calendar-art images of goddess Laxmi, as indicated by the halo around her head, her serene, smiling expression, hand gestures and posture (Nagpal 5.1). Sita is considered to be an avatar of the goddess Lakshmi, but that is just one of the many iterations of this complex figure, and nor is the worship of Sita prevalent in most parts of India. Moreover, in a vast number of *Ramakathas* (including *Sita's Ramayana*), her divinity is incidental—it is her human suffering that is emphasized. *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* also ends with

the same image of Sita as a goddess, and the accompanying text implies that her decision to return to earth is part of a divine plan.

Campfire's Sita is fair-complexioned, curvaceous, sari-clad, and bedecked in golden ornaments, much like her visual representation in mass media retellings such as the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics on *Ramayana*, Ramanand Sagar's TV *Ramayan* and its recent remakes, *Ramayan* (2008-2009) and *Ramayana: Sabke Jeevan ka Adhaar* (*Ramayana: The Foundation of Everyone's Life*) (2012-2013), *Ramayana* picturebooks and the recent animated retelling, *Ramayana: The Epic* (2010). As Indian visual studies scholars have pointed out, these visual signifiers became associated with mythological heroines from the "golden age" and Hindu goddesses in the work of Indian painter Ravi Varma (1848-1906), and were later transposed on to Indian calendar art and other visual media (Uberoi 55). Varma was preoccupied with identifying an Indian female type in terms of costume, style and physiognomy (Kapur 62). He was instrumental in popularizing the image of a pan-Indian womanhood which was "Aryanizing in its ideological thrust, upper bourgeois in taste, and 'Orientalist' in its mode of appropriation of other classes and ethnic types..." (Kapur 62-63). Uberoi notes that Varma's focus on Indian femininity was "consistent with the goals of cultural nationalism," specifically its focus on the construction of the ideal Hindu woman, which as many scholars have argued, was necessary for the symbolic constitution of an Indian national identity (53-57).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Himani Bannerjee's *Inventing Subjects: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism* (Anthem Press, 2000); Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton University Press, 1995); Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid's *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Kali for Women, 1989); Tanika Sarkar's *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

It is worth revisiting at length Uma Chakravarti's highly influential essay, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" which discusses the prototype of Hindu womanhood that emerged in the colonial period. She observes that 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial writing by influential figures such as James Mill focused on demonstrating the backwardness of Hindu civilization and its barbaric practices towards women. Mill judged the level of civilization by the position it afforded to its women, and according to him, Hindu women had a highly abject status. The Indian intelligentsia reacted strongly to Mill's arguments, and building on the discourses of Orientalists, argued that Hindu women in the ancient past had access to Sanskrit learning and had produced many notable philosophers and debaters. The current degradation of Hindu women was contrasted with their high status and empowered roles in the past ("Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" 34-38).

Chakravarti argues that the Indian intelligentsia's response to the colonialists' denigration of Indian civilization led to the creation of a persuasive rhetoric...[focused on] the "myth of the Vedic woman as the highest symbol of womanhood," exemplified in figures such as Gargi and Maitreyi. Vedic women were portrayed to be learned, free, highly cultured, and deeply spiritual. Moreover, they were depicted as "intellectual companions" and affectionate helpers of their husbands. This ideal became an important component of a new cultural nationalism that emerged in the nineteenth century and became entrenched in the twentieth century ("Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" 27-51).<sup>9</sup> The Hindutva movement continues to perpetuate this discourse

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<sup>9</sup> Delhi University's Sanskrit department recently announced that it has decided to undertake a thorough study of history textbooks of various state and national boards to prepare a detailed report on the representation of Vedic Age and Aryan Culture, and suggest revisions to correct 'misrepresentations.'

by setting Aryan “golden-age womanhood” as a standard for contemporary Hindu women to aspire to (Kapur and Cossman 97). As Nandini Chandra (2008) and Karline McLain (2009) have shown in their work, the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics have had an instrumental role in establishing this myth in Indian cultural imagination.

In *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, this ideal is foregrounded through a textual innovation, in which Sita professes to be in awe of the Vedic philosopher Gargi, *yogini* Anasuya, and epic heroine Savitri; she is particularly inspired by Uma’s love and devotion for Shiva. Sita fashions herself as an erudite, spiritual and cultured woman, like her role models. At the very beginning of the text, Sita tells us about her fascination with books during her adolescence. While her sister sleeps, Sita reads by the lamplight, saying: “...I would spend my time reading and pondering. I loved the way history and philosophy challenged my mind, teaching me about law, tradition, logic and wisdom (Nagpal 11). Thus, even as Sita is essentialized as the embodiment of the mythic golden-age womanhood, the author encourages readers to see her as an active agent in the constitution of her own subjectivity.

Nagpal seems to be invested in portraying a powerful, assertive Sita who is imbued with divine, feminine power (*shakti*). She is shown to be lifting an extremely heavy divine bow, which Rama later breaks during the marriage contest. This episode is featured in some folk retellings, but Nagpal was probably influenced by its inclusion in the 2008 TV *Ramayan*. Sita and other characters often refer explicitly to her divine origin, and the earth-goddess has a visible, impactful presence in the text. Praying to a life-sized idol of *Bhudevi* (the earth-goddess), Sita says: “I often felt her statue come

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According to officials, this is because “Aryan Age and Vedic Culture is not being reflected in its true picture in textbooks of almost all boards.” (Source: Indian news reports).

alive and saw her smile at me like a benevolent mother. In those moments, I felt the vastness of her power. I knew she would always protect and guide me” (Nagpal 13). Various groups in India have highlighted the ‘feminist’ potential of Hindu goddess-worship (Rajan 318), and the graphic novel invites readers to see Sita’s connection with the earth-goddess as empowering. However, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan argues that the “recuperation of the/an Hindu goddess as feminist is problematic at the present historical juncture both for assumption of an undifferentiated ‘woman-power,’ as well as for its promotion of a certain radicalized Hinduism” (320). Sita’s constant prayers to *Bhudevi*, and *Bhudevi*’s ‘guidance’ to her reinforce Rajan’s claims about the instrumentality of goddess-worship in Hindu nationalist discourse.

This becomes evident in a subsequent textual innovation. Hearing that *rakshasas* have been attacking the “holy” Brahmin sages, Sita becomes angry and asks her father to let her take up arms against them, but is rebuffed by him. Sita rants: “I argued for a while, but later went to my chamber feeling] helpless. What use was it being born a *Kshatriya*?” (Nagpal 15) That night, *Bhudevi* appears in Sita’s dreams: “It is not your destiny to battle *rakshasas*, my daughter. The prince who will do this has already begun his quest” (*ibid.*). The prince, of course, is Rama. *Bhudevi*’s assurance to Sita cues the reader to read the epic as a battle fought by the Kshatriyan-Brahminical male against the demonic “others.” Sita’s token heroism harks back to the representation of Vedic women as courageous resisters to enemies in nationalist discourse (“Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?” 51), thus adding another dimension to the idealization of Aryan womanhood in the text. *Bhudevi*’s speech simultaneously reinscribes Sita within

the confines of the domestic sphere, since that is what lends her potency as a nationalist symbol.

Partha Chatterjee has famously argued that Bengali nationalist discourse of the nineteenth century constructed the Hindu woman and home as the space of national tradition through the ideological separation of material and spiritual spheres (120-121). Drawing on this formulation, Usha Zacharias observes that in nationalist rhetoric in colonial times, “Sita functioned both as a signifier for the colonization of the nation and as a trope for its decolonization” (33). She argues:

[Sita’s] abduction by Ravana and her captivity in his kingdom reflected the colonization of the woman-nation and the necessity to guard the outer, empire/nation boundaries of gender relations. Her ascetic resistance to Ravana’s seduction and enduring fidelity to her husband, Rama, rhetorically formed the “inner, uncolonizable domain” that alone made the anticolonial struggle worth the battle. (33)

*Sita: Daughter of the Earth* is informed by Hindu nationalist discourse’s emphasis on the need to safeguard the purity of the upper caste woman from demonized ‘others.’ Like many other mainstream mass media retellings, the graphic novel portrays the *rakhsasas* as dark-skinned and fierce-looking, in contrast to the fair, attractive Kshatriyas and Brahmins. The *rakshasas* are painted as animalistic, bloodthirsty creatures visually and through terms such as “savages,” “fiends,” “demons.”

This nationalist, patriarchal discourse of protectionism can be seen in the text’s visual and textual emphasis on the *lakshmanrekha*—the protective boundary that Lakshmana makes around the cottage in some retellings to protect Sita after she persuades him to leave her so that he can help Rama, who she believes is wounded (Nagpal 52). Two pages of the text are devoted to this plot detail, and Sita blames herself for crossing the *lakshmanrekha* when the Brahmin asking for alms (Ravana)

“turns into a horrifying demon” (Nagpal 54). Purnima Mankekar has demonstrated in her analysis of the original TV *Ramayan*<sup>10</sup> that the “essentialist polarization between masculinity and femininity” was an important characteristic of the show. The serial’s “racist, casteist, masculinist constructions of the Hindu/Indian past” relied on Ram as the embodiment of an ideal masculinist Kshatriya *dharma*, which entailed the “protection” of women, Brahmins, and other vulnerable social groups (206-207). Ideal femininity, on the other hand, was defined by the control of female sexuality. Significantly, in the original TV *Ramayan*, Sita describes the *lakshmanrekha* as the line of *maryada*<sup>11</sup> (Mankekar 208). The graphic novel doesn’t use the same vocabulary, but its representation of this episode reinforces to its girl readers the need to stay within the boundaries prescribed by the patriarchal family unit. Sita’s self-blame for having transgressed the prescribed code of conduct squarely thrusts the responsibility of her abduction onto her, and is reminiscent of the victim-blaming often associated with sexual crimes committed against women.

Given the text’s emphasis on the containment of female sexuality, how are we to read Sita’s orchestration of her own marriage to Rama, in what is a distinct departure from the TV versions and other authoritative retellings? In Tulsidas’ *Ramcharitmanas* and the TV *Ramayanas*, Sita is shown to have fallen in love with Rama before their marriage. However, Heidi Pauwels notes that in the Valmiki epic, Tulsidas version and Sagar’s TV *Ramayan*, Sita is hardly an agent in this episode:

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<sup>10</sup> All subsequent references to the TV *Ramayan* refer to the original series created by Ramanand Sagar, that ran between 1986 and 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Translated as ‘appropriate conduct.’

Sita's so-called *swyamvara*<sup>12</sup> is not really a self-choice, and certainly not a love marriage in the modern sense...In Tulsi's version, and even more so in Sagar's, she is present but her role is passive. Though she gets to formalize the decision by garlanding the hero, she does not get to choose her groom. She has no say in the nature of the contest. (112)

In contrast, Campfire's Sita asks her father to arrange a *swyamvara* for her after hearing of Rama's prowess, even stipulating what the contest should be. After the wedding, she persuades her father to get her sisters married to Rama's brothers. Sita's confident, assertive persona is very different from the coy, demure persona of the Sita in Valmiki, Tulsidas and all versions of the TV *Ramayanas* during this episode.

Pauwels observes that "in the modern media versions, the divine courtship functions within the competing ideologies of love marriage versus arranged marriage, often conceived of as a clash of modernity versus tradition, of Western liberal views versus indigenous conservative ideas" (50). Nagpal's valorization of love marriages over arranged marriages seems to be an attempt to appeal to the values of her young, contemporary, urban readers. I'd argue that the presentation of Sita's *swyamvara* as a love marriage, and of Sita as an active agent performs double ideological work: it reorients Sita's image for a contemporary young audience, while also privileging a constructed Hindu past and ideal of womanhood as modern. Given this agenda, the text's endorsement of contemporary ideals of marriage cannot be read as an unambiguous sign of the text's progressive values. This becomes even more apparent in the scene after the wedding ceremony, in which Sita's mother advises her that being "the perfect wife" involves subsuming one's identity in the service of her husband and his people: "And always remember that in Ayodhya, its king, its people and its laws are

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<sup>12</sup> A self-choice ceremony, in which women married the men who won a series of contests.

your priorities. Your duty towards them is more important than your own life” (Nagpal 25). Thus the expression of Sita’s sexuality and desire is permitted as long as it is sublimated in service of her husband and nation.

The graphic novel’s emphasis on the conjugal love between Rama and Sita is similarly undergirded by the discourse of cultural nationalism. Nagpal reinforces this ideal constantly, by showing Rama to be a devoted husband who deeply cherishes Sita. In a departure from the Valmiki, Tulsidas and TV versions, Rama portrays his decision to reject Sita after the war as a compulsion to “the laws of Ayodhya,” thus imputing to legal authority a decision which was motivated by his own suspicion in Valmiki’s version.<sup>13</sup> He is shown to be weeping in “deep pain” as Sita ascends the pyre (Nagpal 72). He even apologizes to Sita after she emerges from the fire ordeal and proclaims that he never doubted her (Nagpal 74). On their return to Ayodhya, he takes care of the pregnant Sita “like a mother” (Nagpal 77). The idealization of Rama is of course, necessary for the text’s perpetuation of the myth of *Ramrajya* (Rama’s reign), under which crops flourished, sickness vanished, and peace and virtue were firmly established” (Nagpal 77). But Rama’s devotion to Sita also serves as an impetus for her actions after they return to Ayodhya.

The text resolves Sita’s second banishment by mimicking the ending of the TV *Ramayana* (and its remake in 2008); it completely inverts the sequence of events by having Sita banish herself. Sita finds out that the people of Ayodhya have serious doubts about her chastity, and feels guilty for having “tarnished Rama’s name” (79),

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<sup>13</sup> Tulsidas invented the plot detail of an illusory Sita who had been imprisoned in Lanka. The *agnipariksha* is a way of bringing the real Sita back into the world. The TV *Ramayana* adaptations mimic this resolution.

leading her to take the decision of exile. Rama is depicted as the “wise husband” who knows that Sita’s actions are right: “But Rama did not stop me, for he, [sic] too, knew that it was the only way the slander spread by the citizens of Ayodhya would end” (80). Sita’s dialogues imply that the real blame for the couple’s separation lies with the masses, thus reinforcing the caste biases of the text. Her willing sublimation of herself in the service of her husband and god reinforces her status as a *pativrata* par excellence who is utterly committed to preserving her husband’s name. In creating this resolution, Ramanand Sagar departed from both the Valmiki epic (in which Rama has Sita banished), and Tulsidas’ *Ramacharitmanas*, which avoided showing Rama’s injustice by excluding “Uttarakhanda,” the last section of Valmiki’s epic (this section is widely considered to be of later composition, but is an integral part of the epic). A huge range of retellings, including the *ACK* comics, *Ramayana* animation films and many picturebook retellings mimic Tulsidas in this regard by ending with Rama and Sita ruling over Ayodhya for many years.<sup>14</sup> The question arises: why does the Campfire graphic novel not choose to incorporate this (far more common) resolution which also preserves the image of Rama as the ideal man?

I would suggest that Campfire’s decision to have Sita banish herself is governed by the impulse to highlight Sita as an agentive subject who is instrumental in preserving the unblemished image of *Ramrajya*. She reasons: “A queen’s first duty is to her citizens. My relationship with Rama comes second. Therefore, I must do what is necessary to uphold the law and keep the citizens’ faith in their king” (79). Kumkum Sangari has problematized women’s agency in both theory and practice, observing that

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<sup>14</sup> This list includes Sanjay Patel’s *The Divine Loophole* (2010), a picturebook by an Indian-American Pixar animator, which utilizes Pixar-style animation to retell the epic.

“women’s agential capacity within so-called ‘traditional’ societies and accompanying discursivities may actually be one of the ways by which consensual elements in patriarchies are often made” (868). Susie Tharu, Tejaswi Niranjana and Tanika Sarkar make similar claims about the participation of women in right wing movements. Tharu and Niranjana observe that Hindutva would seem to have enabled “its subjects to speak out and act, to become independent, agentic, citizen-individuals” (266). However, Tanika Sarkar notes that the limited public identity that has become available to these women is made conditional on their submission to new forms of patriarchy, and leads them to be complicit in an authoritarian order which silences issues of caste, class and gender (208-210).

In this episode, Sita’s exercise of agency is tantamount to the gendered citizen-subject’s self-effacement for the preservation of an authoritarian order that thrives on the rhetoric (and acts) of sacrifice, and which is predicated on the suppression of dissent by the marginalized. Nagpal attempts to counter the image of Sita as a long-suffering, victimized queen by depicting her as a strong, assertive woman who takes charge of her own fate. While hegemonic versions of the *Ramayana* identified Sita primarily as *sati* (devoted wife) (Mankekar 210), Campfire seeks to show Sita as an embodiment of *sati* and *shakti* (powerful woman), such that she becomes an even more potent symbol for nationalist discourse.

Nagpal’s image of an agential Sita who is nevertheless defined by her wifhood, speaks to Hindutva’s construction of a “new” Hindu woman who is strong and powerful, and is a bearer of rights, but who draws her power from her identity as wife and mother (Kapur and Cossman 105-106). Campfire’s treatment of Sita’s suicide further

demonstrates this ideological orientation. The ending of the Valmiki *Ramayana* is a powerful moment in which Sita rebuffs Rama's attempts at reconciliation. Scholars have noted that Sita's decision to commit suicide rather than live with Rama is the ultimate act of counter aggression against a social superior. According to Sally Sutherland,

Sita, twice rejected by her lord, and once abandoned, though pledging faithfulness to Rama, prefers death to life with him. The roles have been reversed, and it is Rama who must suffer the pain of abandonment. (78)

In the Campfire text, however, Sita responds to Rama's second demand for a truth-test by reaffirming her love for him. Her decision to end her life is motivated by her knowledge that she is of no more value to Rama: "*I was glad to have accomplished all I could for Rama. I finally followed my heart, and thus, made the choice I did*" (90; my emphasis). In depicting Sita's exile and suicide as a celebratory act of sacrifice for her husband, family and nation, *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* demonstrates that Sita continues to be a potent ideal of Hindu womanhood for nationalist discourse. The graphic novel conditionally reorients the stereotypical notion of a submissive Sita for a young, contemporary audience by portraying her as an agential subject, but, as I have attempted to show above, her agency serves the ends of a masculinist, casteist Hindu nationalist discourse.

### **Sita's Ramayana**

Written by Samhita Arni, a young, cosmopolitan, female Indian author, and illustrated by Moyna Chitrakar, a female folk artist from Bengal, *Sita's Ramayana* has been marketed and received as a feminist retelling of the *Ramayana*. It is unique for being of only three Indian graphic novels which incorporates folk art, specifically *patua*

art.<sup>15</sup> As editorial director V. Geetha notes in a blog about the making of the text, *Sita's Ramayana* is a significant text because it testifies to the diversity of the Ramayana tradition at a time when the Hindu Right is invested in ossifying hegemonic versions of the *Ramayana* and violently protesting oppositional versions or those that are deemed "sacrilegious"<sup>16</sup> ("*Sita's Ramayana: the Many Lives of a Text*"). *Sita's Ramayana* draws on several *Ramakathas*: the centuries old *patua Ramkatha* tradition rooted in Medinipur, West Bengal; the Valmiki epic; the *Krittibas Ramayan*, composed by 15th century Bengali poet Krittibas Ojha; and the female folk narrative tradition which has been prevalent among rural women in India since many centuries. V. Geetha's afterword places the text within the diversity of the epic tradition, focusing on female retellings.

Tara Books is a Chennai-based, award-winning, independent publishing house that releases primarily visual texts for children and adults. The founder, Gita Wolf, comes from an academic background (as does the editorial director) and is invested in creating books that are works of art (personal communication). Tara Books has earned a name for itself in India and abroad for its unique, visually stunning books, many of which have been produced in collaboration with folk artists from around the country. Tara Books' style of operation is very different from Campfire's editorially-driven assembly line production model. Each book is conceived of as a project that involves (at times, lengthy) collaborations between illustrators, designers and writers. For example,

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<sup>15</sup> The other two being *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, which is drawn by Gond folk artists, and Tara Books' *I See the Promised Land: a Life of Martin Luther King, Jr*, which also incorporates Patua art, both of which were published in 2010.

<sup>16</sup> In 2011, the violent protests of a Hindu Right youth wing party against famous folklorist A.K. Ramanujan's essay, "Three Hundred Ramayanas," led to its removal from the Delhi University M.A. History syllabus. The essay discusses the diversity of the Ramayana tradition. More recently, right wing Hindu organizations have succeeded in getting important scholarly books and articles banned since they were perceived as being offensive to Hindus.

the process of making *Sita's Ramayana* took two years (Wolf). Many books (including *Sita's Ramayana*) are published on handmade paper, often using handmade natural dyes. This contributes to the comparably high prices of Tara Books titles, limiting access to the upper middle class/elite. *Sita's Ramayana*, for example, was sold for Rs. 550 in India and \$25 in US and Canada, compared to *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, which sold for Rs. 250.

*Sita's Ramayana* is shaped by an openly feminist agenda to recast Sita in order to counter conservative representations of Sita (such as in the TV *Ramayan* and Campfire graphic novel), which have served the interests of Hindu nationalism and patriarchy. V. Geetha's interview makes this aim clear: "The *Ramayana* is an over-interpreted epic where Sita is usually a stereotype of a perfect Indian wife. Everyone has positioned her character in that manner. We asked ourselves if there was something else we can do with Sita's character" (qtd in Parthasarathy). Class seems also to be a factor in this refashioning, as is evident in the following excerpt from an interview with the author:

Many people I talked to shared some of the discomfort I felt with the treatment of Sita. I think my book expresses it and recasts Sita not as an ideal, suffering woman but as a woman who discovers great courage and strength, a woman who voices critical thoughts. *I think this Sita is one we can find more in common with*, and this changes our relationship with the *Ramayana*. ("We need to reclaim the various Sitas"; my emphases)

The editors' and author's goal is clearly to contemporize this role model such that she is a relatable figure for the urban, upper middle class and elite children and adults in the country and the diaspora—the 'we' to which Arni refers. What tensions emerge in the project of retelling for an urban, modern, cosmopolitan young audience an ancient epic which is based on folk traditions? I address this question by discussing the graphic

novel's negotiation with the folk traditions that it incorporates or is inspired by, with a special focus on the points of convergence and divergence between them, and the conceptions of Sita that emerge in this dialogic exchange.

Folklorist A.K. Ramanujan likens the Ramayana tradition to a pool of signifiers, arguing that each author or performer “dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context....In this sense, no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling” (21). Sita's dusky, earthy complexion counters the Aryanization of this figure made popular through Ravi Varma's paintings and subsequent visual iterations, as noted above. The graphic novel's female-centric perspective and its incorporation of *patua* art were probably important factors in the book's critical and commercial success in India as well as US and Canada.<sup>17</sup> *Sita's Ramayana's* use of *patua* art makes it a visually stunning work, strikingly different from most other illustrated adaptations of the epic for children, including the Campfire graphic novel.

The *patua* art of storytelling is part of an old picture storytelling tradition that has many regional variants in India (Chatterji 63). The *pata* (scroll) is displayed by the Chitrakar performer to the accompaniment of a song that serves as a commentary on the images painted in the scroll. The narrative is constructed from fragments of ‘information’ that circulate in the village, sourced from newspaper and television reports, along with other popular media. Contemporary Chitrakar artists have expanded their repertoire of stories from myths to current events, both local and global. (Chatterji 62-

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<sup>17</sup> It won recognition as an American Library Association 2012 Notable Children's Book and a USBBY Outstanding International Books Honor Book (2012), and was featured on the NYT bestseller list when it was first published.

63) Thus their tradition is a highly fluid one, constantly evolving with the trends and needs of the time. Scholars have pointed out that the *patua* tradition has survived, unlike many other similar performative traditions, because the paintings have acquired a status independent of the performative context (Chatterji 63), and have become exotic artefacts for sale for urban buyers in the country and abroad (Singh 66).

*Sita's Ramayana* originated at a workshop organized by Tara Books inviting five Chitrakar artists to experiment with the graphic novel format. Moyna Chitrakar was one of these artists (Chatterji 181). Folklore scholar Roma Chatterji, who was interpreter and consultant at this workshop, discusses the experiment in detail. The two women Chitrakar artists, Moyna and Swarna, chose to narrate the episode of *Sita Harana* (Sita's abduction) from the point of view of Sita (Chatterji 188). Chatterji notes that Gita Wolf re-worked Moyna's narrative to present Sita as both narrator and chief protagonist, and in doing so, caused the tone of the narrative to change: "After her intervention, Moyna's Sita, unlike the tragic figure that we saw in the previous narrative, comes across as a forceful character who tries her best to resist abduction" (228). Building on Wolf's approach, Arni was able to give depth to the character of Sita, and present her, as we shall see, as an oppositional figure. It's worth noting here that Arni wrote the text only after Moyna completed her artwork.

Chatterji points out that the *patua* tradition and the graphic novel share many common characteristics: both genres are sequential; both use the devices of multiple frames and inter-medium dialogue to break down a narrative into successive moments; and in both genres, the images are not merely illustrations of the story as it is told in a text (181). According to Gita Wolf, the shared features of both genres formed the basis

of the project. The venture was facilitated by Chitrakar artists' enthusiasm about embracing new modes of circulation for their work. Transforming their art into a graphic format was aided by their prolificity and flexibility (personal communication).

However, Chatterji observes that there are also striking differences between these genres: unlike graphic novels, "in the Chitrakar mode of storytelling... the action sequences are abbreviated with only the start and climax of the sequence being depicted, often in the same frame...[and] are distilled into elliptical images" (181). She also points out that while graphic novelists pay attention to the episodic structure, since the plot is unfamiliar to readers, the Chitrakar artist is "not constrained by the demands of a fixed episodic structure" since the *Ramayana* has "an initial legibility" (184). Thus, the artist "can select specific events for elaboration depending on her performance style and the emotions (*rasa*) she wants to convey to her audience...It is the figures that lend resonance to a performance" (184-185).

Clearly, both genres are characterized by divergent visual registers, discursive modes and objectives of narration, as well as relationships with audiences. The translation of *patua* art into a graphic novel thus entails a radical shift in worldviews. The question arises: in the translation of *patua* art into a graphic novel, what gets lost and what gets gained? Which discursive modes take precedence over others?

Tara editors recognize the modernity of this art form in their note on 'Patua Graphics' at the end of *Sita's Ramayana* but create an implicit hierarchy between the graphic novel and *Patua* art:

[The narrator's] repertoire ranges from traditional myths to current news stories. The *Patua* is a living tradition whose roots stretch back in time, *but these talented artists and storytellers are our contemporaries*. With energetic art and an intuitive grasp of narrative sequence, they are

constantly looking for ways to take their work forward. This was the basis of Tara's project: *to nudge their work into exciting, more contemporary contexts*. (Arni 152; my emphases)

In saying that Patua artists are *our* contemporaries, the editors implicitly treat the artists as others whose relevance to the contemporary is otherwise unclear; the concluding observation elides the contemporary contexts of which Patua artists' work is already a part, including performance tours and exhibitions abroad, while implicitly valorizing the form of the graphic novel over the other fora in which the artists' performances circulate. Tara Books seems interested in maintaining distinctions between the traditional and the modern, the local and the cosmopolitan, in order to emphasize its role in bridging these divides. The afterwords also fail to mention that Moyna wrote her songs at the back of each scroll that she painted (Chitrakar), thus giving precedence to the visual component over the narratorial/performative dimension. V. Geetha's blog mentions Moyna's songs, but leaves the role (if any) of Moyna's literary narrative in the final form of the text unexplored ("*Sita's Ramayana: the Many Lives of a Text*").

Marketed as a "gripping," "fast-paced" graphic novel, *Sita's Ramayana* maintains the generic conventions of the form. Thus, *Sita's Ramayana* delineates in detail Rama's rescue mission and the war—these events occupy half of the narrative. Strategies used by the *rakshasas* and Rama's allies are described at length, and some plot twists ensure a suspenseful read for those unfamiliar with the epic. The editor's afterword makes this orientation clear:

*Patua* artist Moyna Chitrakar, from Bengal in eastern India, adapted her scroll-version to the form of a fast-paced graphic narrative...before we know it, we are in the thick of an uncertain and intriguing tale of sorcery, abduction and kingly pride. (Arni 150)

This approach is in contrast to the *patua Ramakathas*, which focus on a few episodes to generate the play of emotions or moods (*rasa*) (Chatterji 185).

For a reader unfamiliar with the *patua* art form, the unchanging expressions of the characters may be an impediment to the suspense. The *patua* tradition relies on the audience's familiarity with the story. Hence, the static facial expressions characteristic of *patua* art do not detract from the performance. In the graphic novel though, the calm faces of Rama and Lakshmana as they are in the tight hold of massive snakes, or the placid expression of Sita as she chastises Rama can be disconcerting for especially those readers who are fans of Western comics or manga, in which dynamic, often exaggerated facial expressions play an important part. The boldface and capital font used in the graphic novel at crucial moments seems to overcompensate for the static expressions of characters, and the burden of creating dramatic tension rests on the text for the most part.

The text's emphasis on action also becomes a point of divergence with regard to the other folk tradition that the text draws on, the female oral epic tradition, which has been prevalent in India since centuries, in which rural women sing about Sita. The 16<sup>th</sup> century female Bengali poet Chandrabati collected many of these songs to write the epic from Sita's point of view in an anti-canonical way (Sen, "Rewriting the *Ramayana*" 175). In her afterword, V. Geetha notes that Arni "builds on the feminist possibilities of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* (Arni 151).

However, there are some pronounced differences between the female oral tradition and the graphic novel. Unlike the extended focus on the battle scenes in *Sita's Ramayana*, the war is completely elided in the women's oral tradition. Chandrabati

dismisses the epic battle in one line: “And then Rama killed Ravana in a single combat” (Sen, “Rewriting the *Ramayana*” 170). Nabaneeta Dev Sen observes that women’s retellings spurn the Great Tradition and epic values, replacing epic themes with female concerns (170). Women’s songs (often called *Sitayanas*) do not mention many of the familiar *Ramayana* events such as Dasaratha’s glory, Rama’s friendship with Sugriva, the killing of Valin, the search for Sita, etc., many of which are recounted in the graphic novel. On the other hand, events of interest to women receive detailed attention, such as childbirth, pregnancy, weddings (Rao, “*A Ramayana of Their Own*” 119). It is Sita who takes center stage in these songs—her experiences, emotions and hardships are foregrounded, and her sorrows sympathized with.

Sita’s detailed narration of Rama’s actions and the battles positions, then, *Sita’s Ramayana* as Rama’s story more than Sita’s. Since she is imprisoned and has no first-hand information of these events, her voice is mediated by other narrators. For example, when Hanuman comes to visit her in Lanka as an emissary of Rama, he tells her about Rama’s actions following her abduction. In some women’s folk songs, Hanuman’s visit becomes an opportunity for Sita to recount to him her idyllic life with Rama (Rao “*A Ramayana of Their Own*” 118). In the graphic novel, the focus is completely inverted.

The differing contexts and audiences of both cultural forms play an important role in the varying orientations. As a mass-mediated cultural form, *Sita’s Ramayana*’s aim is to present the epic in a way that has a broad-based appeal for its disparate audiences. In contrast, women’s folk songs have an intimate audience that is familiar with the epic. Nabaneeta Dev Sen notes that singing of Sita allows the women to forge a shared

sisterhood based on their common suffering, and to draw strength from each other. She writes: “all the songs complain about neglect and denial of their rights...The Sita songs are the songs through which we can hear the voice of the silent majority” (“When Women Retell the *Ramayana*” 20). In essence, the female oral tradition is cathartic for women who often don’t have the option to openly oppose patriarchal oppression in their daily lives.

Nevertheless, these differences do not negate the convergences between the graphic novel and the female folk tradition. Just as the songs in the oral tradition convey Sita’s feelings, in the graphic novel, Sita’s internal monologues articulate her despair, hopes and compassion, such that readers are allowed to get a glimpse into her subjectivity. Moreover, Sita’s suffering is foregrounded right from the title page of the text. In the opening pages, a tearful Sita enters the Dandaka forest where Lakshmana has abandoned her, and pleads with it to let her stay there (Arni 8). The forest urges her: “Tell us, sister, how you came here,” and the flowers shed tears as they hear her story (Arni 9). Sita’s sisterhood with the forest echoes the communion between Sita and nature which is intrinsic to the female oral tradition.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen notes that many of the women’s songs revolve around the “theme of Sita as an essential orphan” (“When Women Retell the *Ramayana*” 20). In the songs that Sen transcribes under this category, Sita sings her woes to the birds and trees, and articulates her sense of abandonment, likening herself to “moss in a stream” and an “edible fruit.” In one Marathi work song, she sings: “My soul has become an exile living in the wilderness” (20). Sita’s angst reflects the sense of abandonment and

loneliness that a vast number of Indian women struggle with when trapped in stifling marriages.

Sita's identity as daughter of nature is integral to the women's oral tradition. In recognition of this, perhaps, the graphic novel is imbued with an ecofeminist ethos. In women's songs, during Sita's childbirth, the forest takes care of Sita since she has no one else to turn to, and rejoices when she delivers ("When Women Retell the *Ramayana*" 25). In *Sita's Ramayana*, after Sita finishes narrating her retrospective tale to the forest, "her tale was passed from tree to tree, leaf to leaf," and the animals "swore to leave her in peace" (Arni 128). Behind these common traits lies an interesting history of convergences between folk traditions. According to Moyna, her female-centred approach was influenced by the female oral tradition of *Ramayana* retellings prevalent since generations in her village, which "speaks of Sita's oppression as a banished, humiliated queen, and of the quiet strength of a single mother" (qtd in Raj).<sup>18</sup> Moyna's art foregrounds the emotive sensibility that is at the heart of the female oral *Ramayana* tradition, as well as the *patua* Ramakatha tradition, and displays the inherent connections between women and nature in both folk forms.

Also like the female oral tradition, *Sita's Ramayana* critiques the martial values that govern authoritative versions. The register of the critique is different, however: while the folk tradition implicitly undermines a masculinist ethos by focusing on women's concerns, in the graphic novel, Sita articulates her criticism overtly. Sita's intervention in the narrative is critical of the morally questionable actions of Rama in different episodes.

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<sup>18</sup> Moyna also said that her approach was inspired by the endurance of her mother, and was very relevant for village women since they undergo a lot of suffering (Chitrakar).

When Rama kills Vali from the back, Sita's empathy towards his widow becomes constitutive of her critique. Arni highlights the grief of Tara, Vali's wife, as she watches her husband die, and her anger when his brother Sugriva proceeds to claim her (Arni 47). Tara's indignant response to Sugriva highlights the status of women as the property of their husbands, while Sita's guilty musings about whether she is responsible for Tara's fate<sup>19</sup> highlights the text's commitment to forging connections between the female characters of the epic, who are victims of the masculinist values that pervade their world. Sita's compassion for Tara constitutes a subtle critique of the rationale that Rama gives Vali when accused of being unjust—that humans are higher in the social order than *vanaras* (Valmiki, *Ramayana*, Book Four, 127). *Sita's Ramayana* foregrounds the power imbalances between Rama and his *vanara* allies, which authoritative texts elide.

The treatment of the Surpanakha episode displays a similar ideological impetus to humanize the subalterns. As mentioned earlier, the treatment of Surpanakha in authoritative versions has generated much discomfort among pre-modern as well as modern readers, and has engendered many creative attempts to justify Rama's behavior or oppose it. Kathleen Erndl notes that in many versions of the epic, Surpanakha is cast as the "loose" bad woman who serves as an antithesis to the "good" chaste woman, Sita: "Sita is good, pure, light, auspicious and subordinate, whereas Surpanakha is evil, impure, dark, inauspicious and insubordinate" (83). She argues that Surpanakha was mutilated because of her sexual assertiveness. In Indian legal texts, disfigurement of a woman is the most common punishment for crimes of a sexual

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<sup>19</sup> Since Rama killed Vali in exchange for his brother Sugriva's help in finding Sita.

nature, such as adultery, and Indian mythology and folklore abound with examples of the motif (82). Mass media versions of the epic, including TV renditions of the epic, many picturebook versions, and the *ACK* comics, reinforce Surpanakha's otherness visually, and show her threatening Sita, thus creating a justification for the violence against her.

However, in *Sita's Ramayana*, Surpanakha looks almost exactly like Sita even before she transforms into a beautiful woman, with the same dusky complexion, figure, attire and ornaments. She is also not shown to be menacing in behavior. By removing the apparent impetus for the mutilation, the text allows us to interpret Lakshmana's action as motivated by a male supremacist ethos that punishes the expression of carnal desire in "other" women. Sita protests against Lakshmana's actions, saying, "Violence breeds violence, and an unjust act only begets greater injustice. Rama should have stopped [Lakshmana]. Instead, he spurred him on....I can never forget that scream." (16). Surpanakha is thus cast as a victim of gendered violence rather than as a monstrous, dehumanized, ethnic other. This is in sharp contrast to the Campfire version where she is depicted as an animalistic, bloodthirsty, revengeful creature of the night. Even later on in *Sita's Ramayana*, the depiction of *rakshasis* departs from authoritative versions, where they are portrayed as ferocious, sexually promiscuous, and hedonistic. Though Moyna paints some *rakshasis* with claws and horns, they don't look fierce. Ravana and some of his fellow *rakshasas* also resemble Rama and Lakshmana in appearance.

As Sheldon Pollock observes, generations of Indian and European scholars have struggled with the question of who or what the *rakshasas* represent (283). He argues

that all “positivistic attempts at concrete identification [of the *rakhsasas*]—with this or that shamanic, tribal, Dravidian, Buddhist group, what have you—are irrelevant to our understanding of their function within the confines of the poem itself.” He suggests it would be more productive to view them from “a psychosexual perspective, as representing all that certain traditional Indians—within a Sanskrit cultural formation—might most desire and most fear, concretized both together in a single symbolic form” (283). Such an approach could allow us to see why *rakshasas* are demonized in authoritative *Ramakathas*, and humanized (and/or given a voice) in oppositional versions (such as *Sita’s Ramayana*) that consciously depart from the Brahmanical Sanskrit culture of the former. Moyna’s oppositional stance to hegemonic versions may stem from her position of alterity as a Muslim village woman (the Chitrakars have moved between Hinduism and Islam at different points in time).<sup>20</sup> According to Gita Wolf, Moyna didn’t have a sacred attitude to the epic, and was deeply resentful of the injustice that Sita faced (personal communication). Moyna’s interstitial status allows her to be critical of the divinization of the epic, and its caste politics. Her visual representation of subaltern figures in the text subverts the Brahmnical-Kshatriya supremacy that undergirds hegemonic versions. As we have seen above, Arni articulates this subaltern perspective through Sita’s voice.

The text’s inclusion of the “others” in its humanistic vision becomes even clearer in the episode after the war, when Rama refuses to take Sita back because he doubts her chastity. Rama says that “he had fought [the war] to redeem his honour” (117) (much like in the Valmiki version). Asserting that “his honour had exacted a bloody

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<sup>20</sup> See Chatterji, esp 100-10, and Binoy Bhattacharjee’s *Cultural Oscillations: A Study of Patua Culture*. Calcutta: Noya Prakash, 1980.

price,” Sita reminds him of the deceit used to win the war, and speaks of the grieving *rakhsasi* widows, stunning Rama into silence. Her pithy indictment of the masculinist values of war transcends the specificities of time and location: “War, in some ways, is merciful to men...But if you are a woman—you must live through defeat...you become the mother of dead sons, a widow, or an orphan; or worse, a prisoner” (120). In this panel too, the *rakshasi* widows are depicted as human women. As is apparent from Sita’s monologue, the editors and author are invested in constituting for her a political, feminist and socially interventionist subjectivity that we have glimpsed throughout the text.

This episode ends with the highly controversial *agnipariksha*, posing a representational dilemma for the Tara Books team. Sita’s trial by fire has been criticized by scholars, artists and even sections of the general public since it upholds the expectation of *satitva* or extreme chastity from women, and ties a woman’s right to exist to her husband’s faith in her purity. Moreover, many feminists also associate it with the practice of Sati, in which a widow immolates herself soon after her husband’s death. Madhu Kishwar, however, highlights Sita’s agency in this scene. She writes:

Sita’s offer of *agnipariksha* (trial by fire) and her coming out of it unscathed is by and large seen not as an act of supine surrender to the whims of an unreasonable husband but as an act of defiance that challenges her husband’s aspersions, as a means of showing him to be so flawed in his judgment that the gods have to come and pull him up for his foolishness. (306)

Moyna’s artwork seems to be informed by precisely such a view. Unlike many other panels, Moyna doesn’t show Sita crying as she steps into the flames (Arni 121). We see Sita praying to the gods for protection in the flames with a calm demeanor (much like many mainstream retellings), but Arni chooses not to articulate Sita’s prayer,

despite the clear visual cue. Sita's words highlight her helplessness and portray her decision as that of committing suicide, rather than as an act of defiance:

I thought the end of the war had meant freedom for me. I had hoped for love, I had hoped for justice...Instead of love, I found suspicion. Instead of justice, I met with false accusation and distrust. *Where could I go? What could I do?* I stepped into the flames of the tall pyre that Lakshmana had built. (Arni 121; my emphasis)

The image-text dissonance here is similar to an earlier panel in which Moyna portrays Sita praying for her rescue, but Arni avoids articulating the prayers, focusing on her anxieties instead (Arni 56.1). Clearly, for the author, the modernization of tradition entails its secularization. In this episode, the goal of contemporizing the figure of Sita for an urban, upper class audience paradoxically undermines the book's representation of her as a strong, critical agent.

Appadurai and Breckenridge point out that at the very heart of public modernity in India are the tensions and contradictions between national sites and transnational cultural processes, as well as the contestations between national, global, mass and folk culture (5). Such contestations are, Appadurai implies, inevitable byproducts of overlapping, disjunctive and polymorphous global flows of information, capital and cultural trends (44-46). *Sita's Ramayana* is a space where the folk, national and global, and the traditional and modern negotiate and contest with each other in complex ways, and in doing so, place into relief varying notions of tradition and modernity. In this instance, the rural folk artist's vision is more subversive than that of the cosmopolitan author's. More broadly, the radical subalternity of the women's oral tradition as well as the *patua* art form is instrumental in constituting the oppositional vision of *Sita's Ramayana*, highlighting for us the need to complicate the hierarchy that is often created

between contemporary art forms and traditional art forms with regard to the issue of modernity.

One of the most radical moments of the text occurs towards the end of the narrative, when Sita starts living in the forest with her sons. We learn: "In time, Sita found peace and happiness in the forest, loving her sons. She tried to forget the past, forget Rama and Ravana, Ayodhya and Lanka. She was no longer Sita, the queen. She was Sita, the simple forest woman" (Arni 135). Arni's reconfiguration of Sita's identity is predicated on the affinity between Sita and nature that we established earlier, and reinforces her lineage as daughter of the earth. Sita's casting away of her marital identity is a feature of the women's oral tradition and some other Sita-based retellings too. Sita's dissociation from Rama in this panel allows us to read her ritual suicide in subsequent panels as an act of defiance against Rama.

These graphic novels negotiate with tradition in oppositional ways. Whereas in *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*, a selective notion of Hindu tradition is appropriated to perpetuate the ends of Hindu nationalism, *Sita's Ramayana* testifies to the innovation and subversion inherent to the Ramayana epic tradition, and incorporates folk traditions to oppose the retrogressive ideologies of gender, nation and caste perpetuated in the former text. Both graphic novels attempt to reorient Sita's character and highlight Sita's agency. However, while *Sita: Daughter of the Earth* uses the trope-laden body of Sita as a symbol to reinscribe masculinist-nationalist ideology in an insidious manner, *Sita's Ramayana* allows us to view Sita as a complex woman with multiple identities, whose power derives not from her self-sacrificing nature, but from her critical agency and connections with nature.

### CHAPTER 3 CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE, HINDU MAJORITARIANISM AND BOYHOOD IN MYTHOLOGICAL ANIMATION FILMS AND TV SERIES

Indian animation has a long history. John Lent observes that animation started in India when, in 1915, D.B. Phalke, commonly known as the father of Indian cinema, produced three shorts. After his venture, a few other animations were released sporadically in the 1930s and 1940s. Continuous animation production began in 1956, with the opening of the Cartoon Film Unit of the Films Division of the Ministry of Information. Claire H. Weeks, an animator at Walt Disney Feature Animation, joined the unit to provide training, and worked together with veteran Indian animator G.K. Gokhale to produce *Banyan Tree* (1957). The Cartoon Film Unit trained many prominent Indian animators, and released two short films yearly until 1962, when that number doubled. Most of the works dealt with educational and social welfare themes, but some retold Hindu legends, such as *Radha and Krishna* (1958). During the 1970s and 1980s, some independent production houses and the National Institute of Design released a range of animated films, many of which dealt with social issues (101-14).

The 1990s saw a rapid liberalization-fueled expansion of the animation industry as new companies opened, mainly to serve overseas studios. A few factors behind this growth were the abundance of inexpensive, English-speaking labor and a competitive cost of living, and later, the accessibility of sophisticated computer software (Lent 105). Even in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, India is predominantly an outsourcing hub for global giants such as Walt Disney, Sony and Warner Bros. (“Animation India as the Outsourcing Hub”). However, in the last several years, Indian animation studios have been creating original content in an attempt to undercut the hegemony of Asian and American imported animations that have dominated children’s programming in the

last few decades. This move is perhaps a logical outcome to the break-neck speed of the industry's expansion, as signaled by the establishment of new animation companies, Bollywood film studios moving into animation, as well as the increase in co-productions and the number of animated films being produced every year (Lent 107). Many animation companies have partnered with American companies such as Disney and Turner International, hoping to profit from a growing entertainment market for children (Joshi, "Graphic Growth"). Thus, mythological animated films are the product of a tectonic shift in the animation industry from the mid-1990s till now. The turn towards indigenous content (or, as Turner International India's head Krishna Desai has termed it—'Desitoons') has played an important role in the reinvention of the mythological genre in the medium of animation.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to several animation films and series that retell the legends of gods and mythological heroes like Krishna, Ganesh, Arjuna, Lava and Kusa, and some which retell the epics, producers have also been inspired to create fictional storylines that feature mythological characters. In Green Gold Animation's *Chhota Bheem*, which has aired on POGO (a popular children's TV channel) since 2008, the eponymous boy protagonist is loosely modeled after Bheem, one of the Pandava brothers from *Mahabharata* (*Chhota* in Hindi means small). The Hindi animated series has enjoyed massive commercial success, and its huge fan base among young Indian children has led the producer, Rajiv Chilakia, to create a multilingual film franchise, spin off TV show and a range of merchandise, including *Chhota Bheem* English comic books, apparel,

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<sup>1</sup> Local content in Indian animation is not synonymous with mythology— several animated films and TV series deal with non-religious/mythological themes. However, many producers turned to mythology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, seeing it as a reliable bet (Shaikh).

school gear etc. In *Chhota Bheem aur Ganesh in the Amazing Odyssey*; *Chhota Bheem aur Hanuman*; *Chhota Bheem aur Krishna*, the eponymous character enlists the help of boy-gods to fight villains. In a similar vein, the popular Hindi animated TV series *Roll No. 21*, which has aired on Cartoon Network (a popular Indian children's TV channel) since 2010, depicts the widely-worshipped god Krishna as a school boy living in a boarding school run by his evil uncle Kans in an Indian city. Kris transforms into Krishna to defeat the array of demons, robots and mechanically engineered villains that the principal (his uncle Kans) sends to destroy him. A few animated films have also experimented with transporting boy-gods to modern-day India. For example, in the *My Friend Ganesha* trilogy (2007-2010) and *Main Krishna Hoon* (translated as *I am Krishna*, 2013), a lonely young Hindu boy prays to Ganesha/Krishna to become his friend, and proceeds to embark on adventures with the boy-god (who only he can see). The gods return to heaven after they have succeeded in resolving the difficulties the boy has been facing.

Mythological animated films and TV shows (especially those which focus on narrating the legendary adventures of mythic heroes) continue the long tradition of live-action mythological films in Indian cinema. Rachel Dwyer regards the mythological as “one of the most productive genres of [India's] early cinema” and defines it as “one which depicts tales of gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines mostly from the large repository of Hindu myths, which are largely found in the Sanskrit Puranas, and the Sanskrit epics” (15). The emergence of the genre of mythological animations has been accompanied by the flood of mythological TV series in primetime TV in the last few years.

In this chapter, I investigate select animated films and TV series depicting the adventures of boy-gods in contemporary India. The first section of the chapter analyzes *Hanuman's* sequel *Return of Hanuman* and *The New Adventures of Hanuman* TV series while the second half focuses on four composite films—the *My Friend Ganesha* film series and *Main Krishna Hoon*. One central question that this chapter addresses is, what are the factors behind the predominance of boy-gods in the medium of mythological animations? Drawing on the analytic of interocularity that has been widely used in Indian visual studies, and giving it a transnational dimension, I trace the national as well as transnational trends in visual culture which may account for the gods' reconfigured looks. I extend the concern with tracing cross-cultural influences further by showing how Hanuman's reconfiguration in the film and TV series draws on the archetype of the American superhero, but that, unlike American models, he is not secularized. Observing the ways in which the figure of Hanuman and the mythological universe are modernized for a globalized audience, I argue that the cosmopolitanism of the gods reflects the dominant national imaginary of a globalized nation. In the second section of the chapter, I further investigate the implications of reimagining Hanuman, Krishna and Ganesh as contemporized boy-gods. Noting the homological relationship between boy-gods and the boy protagonists of composite films, I argue that the boy-gods represent consumerist ideals of the middle class, which is widely recognized as the face of a liberalized, modern India.

Furthermore, focusing on the first two parts of the *My Friend Ganesha* trilogy, I discuss how boyhood in the composite films exemplifies crossovers and differences between traditional and colonial-era conceptions of childhood and contemporary middle

class constructs of childhood. The homological relationship between the boy-gods and the young protagonists (as well as the implied viewers) draws on the cultural ideal of the child as divinity. However, in exclusively privileging the boy-child as a reflection of the god, the films reinforce the widespread cultural valorization of male infants in India. This preferential treatment has historical roots in the patriarchal-Brahmanical bias of Hindu scriptures towards the boy child, as well as nationalist era conceptions of childhood, which emphasized the importance of boys to the project of nation-building. At the same time, I show how boyhood in these films is reflective of contemporary constructions of middle class childhood, including the discourse of failure surrounding the middle class child. I argue that boyhood exemplifies tensions informing middle class identity in the contemporary moment—it becomes a space for negotiating globalization-fueled anxieties about the loss of cultural values as well as for asserting the global, cosmopolitan outlook of the middle class. I also assert that the construction of boyhood in these films is masculinist, and reaffirms gender hierarchies.

Statements in the media by animation film producers reveal that they market mythological animations as edu-tainment, much like Anant Pai did with the famous *Amar Chitra Katha* comics (Chandra 2008; McLain 2009), in order to appeal to middle class Hindu parents. The chapter analyzes the pedagogical values of these films, and claims that they reinforce Hindu majoritarianism, conservative gender roles and traditional family values.

### **The Hanuman Franchise**

Hanuman is a central character of *Ramayana* in which he acts as an emissary for Rama. As the son of the wind-god, Vayu, Hanuman has supernatural abilities—he is immortal and has enormous strength, can fly faster than the wind and vary his shape

and size. Due to his exceptional abilities, Hanuman is essential to Rama's victory against Ravana. The monkey-god is enormously popular among Hindus in India and the diaspora, and numerous temples and shrines in India are dedicated to him. Rama's most famous devotee is actually a more popular deity than Rama and can be regarded as the "the pan-Indian 'middle-class' god par excellence" since devotees perceive him as a powerful, energetic resourceful god who repeatedly delivers the help needed in the face of difficult challenges (Lutgendorf 374). For centuries he has also been a highly popular subject of representation in South Asian and Southeast Asian art, sculpture, theatre, literature, oral narratives and dance. In his fascinating, wide-ranging book on the evolving representations of Hanuman across several media and historical time periods, Philip Lutgendorf notes that Hanuman is the center of "a growing body of narrative that selectively edits, suggestively encompasses, and ambitiously expands on the Rama story to become...an emerging "epic" in its own right" (28). The *Hanumayana*, as Lutgendorf calls it (122), is comprised of a huge variety of stories in oral and written form, in different languages, that deal with his birth, childhood, feats in the *Ramayana*, worship of Shiva, etc. (189). Of the visual narratives revolving around Hanuman, picture books are perhaps the most ubiquitous form.<sup>2</sup> The animated film *Hanuman* joins this storytelling tradition, and narrates the eponymous character's legendary adventures in

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<sup>2</sup> Mainstream picturebook publishers for children have been issuing standardized tales about Hanuman for many decades. However, in the last several years, picturebooks about Hanuman using different art styles and occasionally incorporating lesser-known legends about him have been issued by children's publishers, such as Tulika Books' *Hanuman's Ramayana* and Katha Books' *Hanuman's Adventures in the Nether World*. Recently, Indian diasporic writers have created Hanuman picturebooks, testifying to his continuing appeal outside of the borders of the country. A few examples include U.S.-based Shailaja Joshi's *Hanuman and the Orange Sun*, published by Shailaja Joshi's company Bharat Babies, and Singapore-based Bhakti Mathur's *Hanuman* trilogy in the "Amma, Tell Me" series on Hindu mythology. Hanuman has also inspired an illustrated book for adults, written by Devdutt Patnaik, who incorporates Hindu mythology in his books on business and leadership.

childhood, such as his attempt to seize the sun, and also highlights his role in the *Ramayana* as an adult.

*Hanuman* was a record-breaker on many counts. The 100 minute 2D film played across 200 screens in the country, and was very successful commercially, reviving the Indian mythological genre, which had largely become defunct. It also clocked the maximum VCD sales in the country that year, surpassing live-action hits. The company sold 20,000 Hanuman DVDs in the UK home video market because of the large diaspora there (Mahalingam, “May the Gods Be With You”). Yusuf Shaikh, Head of Distribution and IPR at Percept, told me that Hanuman DVDs were in constant demand in the US and Australia as well.

Most this success can be attributed to the aggressive marketing of the producers in relation to a single focal point—Baby Hanuman. Indian animator V.G. Samant’s concept of Baby Hanuman (as well as the trend of animated boy-gods that followed him) is inspired by the centuries-old cult of child Krishna. The infant Krishna is most widely adored under the guise of *Makhan Chor*, or the Butter Thief, and has been iconized in that form in visual arts, plastic arts, TV and film. In the story of Krishna, childhood is associated with the sport or *lila* of the transcendent form of the deity (White 162). Charles White observes that medieval writers of various Krishnite narratives take particular pleasure in revealing the miraculous strength hidden within the form of the child (164). The fascination with young Krishna’s divine feats has continued to the present day, and *Hanuman* sought to build on the pre-existing positive associations of Hindu viewers with the toddler avatar of Krishna by retelling the exploits of another beloved god. For Shailendra Singh, the Joint Managing Director of Percept Pictures,

there were two primary audiences for the film: children aged 3 to 15 years old, and adults who were “mythologically motivated.”

When I asked Singh about the choice of a deity for a commercial film, he said he became interested in producing indigenous animation that would reflect a “belief in our own culture” after thinking about why Indian children only consumed figures such as Spiderman and Superman rather than Krishna and Hanuman (Singh). Ironically enough, however, Hanuman was marketed in terms of Western cultural tropes. Hanuman was projected as the “original superhero,” and the director claimed that his (historical) origin preceded that of Superman, Spiderman and Batman by thousands of years (Lakshmi, “In India, Gods Rule the ‘Toon’ Universe”). According to Singh, Hanuman “qualified on all parameters to be a superhero” since he has extraordinary qualities and is a savior. The use of the word “qualified” suggests the power of the predetermined ‘superhero’ category which Hanuman fortuitously could be made to fit into. In a move influenced by the Hollywood business model and rather new to the Indian film industry, Percept launched a range of merchandise during the release of the film such as Baby Hanuman keychains, stickers, toys, mobile games, apparel, stationery, soft toys, and even ice creams as part of an aggressive 360-degree branding exercise (Biwalkar, Meghna. “Merchandise Sales Lift *Hanuman* to a New High;” Shukla, “Hanuman is also the God of Merchandising”).<sup>3</sup>

Percept also built the brand of *Bal Hanuman* through other productions, including a 2D Hindi animation film *Return of Hanuman* (2007) that depicted the modern-day

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<sup>3</sup> Percept claimed that “Hanuman is the first and biggest superhero franchise in India” (*P2M Newsletter*). This claim may be contestable because Spiderman India was also launched with merchandise (see Dave 2013). More recently, other Indian superheroes like Krrish have also entered the profitable arena of children’s merchandising.

adventures of a fictional child called Maruti, who was Hanuman's alter-ego on earth. (Maruti is one of Hanuman's popular patronyms.) This was followed by a spin-off 28-episode animated TV show, *The New Adventures of Hanuman*, that revolved around (a slightly older) Maruti, who repeatedly rescues his town and boarding school friends from aliens, demons and evil scientists. The show was telecast across five continents, including countries like the US, UK, Canada, Trinidad, Thailand, South Africa and Kenya—countries with sizeable Indian populations (Mahalingam, "May the Gods be with You"). *Hanuman 3* is currently in production and also revolves around the toddler avatar of Hanuman, testifying to Percept's investment in establishing a character-based brand. Percept's animation franchise has been followed by the production of texts in other media and genres that likewise revolve around a young Hanuman. Two live-action TV shows about the god are currently being shown on prime time Indian television. *Jai Jai Jai Bajrangbali* (translated as *Hail Bajrangbali*)<sup>4</sup> features a child Hanuman, and has been on air since 2011, with more than 1085 episodes aired to date. *Sankat Mochan Mahabali Hanuman* (loosely translated as "obstacle-remover, extremely powerful Hanuman") started airing on primetime TV in May 2015 and depicts Hanuman as a child and adult.

The analytic of the "interocular" provides a useful way of thinking about *Hanuman's* visual traditions and influences. Percept Pictures' Baby Hanuman, who is hairless, fair and looks like a toddler, except for his tail and simian jaw, doesn't resemble widely-seen god-posters of an adult Hanuman, but he shares with them the impetus towards humanizing Hanuman and making him furless (Lutgendorf 344).

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<sup>4</sup> Bajrangbali is one of Hanuman's popular epithets and signifies the deity as an embodiment of power and protection (Lutgendorf 32).

Hanuman's infantilization in the animation franchise, coupled with the fact that he is given an earthly manifestation, furthers this move towards humanization. Furthermore, the larger phenomenon of boy-gods in animation films is tied to the the preponderance of Hindu baby-gods that scholars have noticed in calendar art since the 1990s. Patricia Uberoi observes that while Bal-Krishna has widely been iconized in calendar art since many decades, the "god-baby boom" in calendar art—the unprecedented proliferation of the baby forms of different deities such as Shiva, Ram, Vishnu and Hanuman is a new phenomenon (99-100).

Uberoi suggests that the child's sacredness and proximity to divinity in the country is an important factor for understanding Indian baby iconography (97). According to her, these iconographic innovations could be "another example of the ongoing cutification of Indian childhood, spearheaded by the booming advertising industry and the cable TV and cartoon channels" (100). Knut Jacobsen also links the popularity of the child god posters to sociological changes in India, such as rapid urbanization, increasing economic prosperity, as well as the growth of the middle class and television culture. Observing that "a child god is a god one approaches with paternal love," he argues that child gods represent urban, middle class and family values (261). Uberoi and Jacobsen's astute observations about the factors behind the baby-god boom are applicable to animation films too. It is no surprise that several deity-centred mythological animation films and TV shows have chosen Hanuman, Ganesh and Krishna as their subjects, since these gods are highly popular among middle class Hindus.

The toddler Hanuman of the animation franchise is visually very different from his calendar art counterparts. Instead, he is modelled on Disney animations. His saucer blue eyes, round face, and pudgy body are traits that Disney characters like Mickey Mouse, Snow White and Bambi were endowed with in order to accentuate their cuteness or babyishness (Forgacs 365). The hybridity of Baby Hanuman has had a key role to play in the appeal of this icon—branded on a Disneyfied body are traditional iconographic details associated with Hanuman: the red loincloth, the gold ornaments, the golden mace, and the ‘tilaka’ on the forehead. Mythological animations released after *Hanuman* modeled the Disney-esque boy-gods look for Ganesha, Krishna, and Ghatothkach.

Forgacs argues that the move towards cutifying Disney products is closely linked to the “myth of family togetherness” which underlies Disney’s success as a provider of family entertainment. He writes:

To see something as cute means to feel a nurturant affection for it as one does for a baby... To develop cuteness therefore means to develop a set of affective relays between adult and baby or child and baby.... The secret of Disney’s current success lies largely in its skillful handling of these relays between past and present, adult, adolescent and child [which] depend primarily on the adult consumer as provider of revenue. (362-364)

Since Hanuman, Krishna and Ganesha are beloved deities, their cutified toddler forms increase their appeal to Hindu adults. Sudhir Kakar notes that the infantilization of Krishna allows Hindu women to perceive and experience him primarily as an ideal son—mischievous, irresponsible and intrusive in a delightful, almost thrilling way. Krishna, according to Kakar, “is the savior of women...as the son who is vital to the consolidation and confirmation of a Hindu woman’s identity around the core of motherliness” (153). The affective relays between the animated boy-gods and adults as

well as child audiences take on a religious, devotional edge. Significantly, all the texts under discussion foreground *darshan*, which refers to the act of seeing and being seen by the deity (Eck 5). As Diana Eck notes, for Hindus, “Beholding the image [of the divine] is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessing of the divine” (5).

The animated and composite films under discussion rely on a preexisting model of Hindu women’s maternal devotion for Krishna, and foreground the special relationship between boy-gods and their mothers. In *Hanuman* and *Return of Hanuman*, the director highlights the toddler god’s dutiful affection for his real mother and earthly mother respectively, as well as the mothers’ nurturing love for Hanuman. In my interviews with Shailendra Singh and Yusuf Shaikh, they repeatedly used the word “cute” to describe this figure. Shailendra Singh expressed his intention of representing Hanuman as a “cute, fun, brattish and entertaining character.” Shaikh said he knew this product would sell because of how “cute” Hanuman was. Shaikh capitalized on this “cuteness” to make merchandising a key part of the marketing strategy. Cuteness not only serves the purpose of evoking maternal feelings through its association with innocent babyhood, but also endears a young audience through its association with brattishness and mischievousness in the films.

Hanuman’s brattishness is most evident in *Return of Hanuman* and the TV series *The New Adventures of Hanuman*. Unlike the first movie, *Hanuman*, these animations have original storylines, and a playful, irreverent tone. *Return of Hanuman* starts with (the adult) Hanuman feeling bored in *swarg* (heaven), and observing a playground in an Indian village called Bajrangpur, named after him. He witnesses a 4- or 5-year old

schoolboy, Minku being bullied by older boys. Minku's mother prays for her son in front of the Hanuman idol and reassures her son (whose father is missing) that Hanuman will protect him. Back in heaven, Hanuman is resolved to intervene in a tangible way and requests Brahma (the god responsible for creation in the Hindu pantheon) to send him to Bajrangpur. Subsequently, he is born as a human baby to the wife of a priest who is the caretaker of the Hanuman temple in Bajrangpur, thus assuring his place in the Brahmin caste. Maruti soon joins the local school and uses his exceptional strength to protect Minku from school bullies and take care of his mother when his father is kidnapped. Towards the end of the film, Maruti transforms into *Bal* Hanuman in order to fight villains, rescue the kidnapped men and also save the planet from the doomsday effects of environmental pollution. Having revealed his true form to the community, he returns to heaven. The question arises: as what kind of a superhero is Hanuman cast? How are the tensions between the national and global negotiated through the figure of *Bal* Hanuman?

Coogan defines American superheroes as characters that have “a selfless pro-social mission, who possess superpowers, advanced technology, mystical abilities, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills,” a super-identity and an iconic costume (77). Maruti deviates from the archetype in several ways. In neither *Return of Hanuman* nor *The New Adventures of Hanuman* (henceforth *TNAOH*) does Maruti possess advanced technology or operate from the metropolis. He does, however, have a secret identity as Hanuman, an iconic (albeit traditional) costume, superpowers and a pro-social mission. In *Return of Hanuman*, Hanuman fights mythological villains, but in *TNAOH*, his chief antagonist is a prototypical megalomaniacal scientist who sends out

an array of monsters and demons to kill Hanuman and steal his locket which he uses to become Hanuman.

While Hanuman is the first Hindu god who has been refashioned as a superhero in contemporary popular culture, many Indian comic books (including the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics) have drawn on Hindu mythology to create uniquely Indian content that can compete with American comics. Indian comics adopted the superhero genre in the mid-'80s (Chandra 58). Suchitra Mathur notes that the “distinctly indigenous superhero tradition” of Indian comic books was forged both from and against the Anglo-American comic tradition (176). Nagraj, one of the first such superheroes, has a divine origin that accounts for his superhuman powers, but “at the same time, he is proudly proclaimed as the Indian Spiderman” (Chandra 69). Shaktiman, the first Indian television superhero, who appeared in 1997, had mythological associations, as did Liquid India’s comic book Spider-Man India (2004). As we shall see, In the *Ramayan 3392 AD* trilogy, Rama is cast in the superhero mold.

In both the film and TV series, Hanuman is presented as an indigenous superhero who is simultaneously a global, cosmopolitan superhero. In a playful song sequence at the beginning of *Return of Hanuman*, the god flies across the world, visiting the Statue of Liberty, Leaning Tower of Pisa, Eiffel Tower, Sidney Opera House and the Egyptian pyramids and other famous global landmarks. Presenting Hanuman as a savvy globetrotter was a deliberate choice. The general manager of marketing at Percept, Nadish Bhatia at the time of the film’s release asserted in a media statement: "If the Coca-Cola brand can come to India and connect with our sensibilities, why can't Hanuman go to New York?" (Lakshmi, “In India, Gods Rule the ‘Toon’ Universe”).

In an instance that displays a self-conscious, playful subversion of American cultural and political dominance, Hanuman captures and hands over to brown policemen a group of people that includes Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush, while the lyrics identify the men as thieves and dacoits (bandits). Hanuman also replaces the sculptures of the four American presidents on Mount Rushmore with those of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and himself, and transposes his own image onto the Statue of Liberty. In a meta-textual move that perhaps hints at the producers' fantasy of wish-fulfilment, Hanuman cuts Spiderman's web as he flies across the cityscape, causing the superhero to fall from a tall building. While these moves may lead us to wonder whether Hanuman is projected as a subaltern superhero of the global south who contests the hegemony of the white, male, American superheroes who uphold American values and world order, neither the film nor the TV series offer developed revisionary narratives that could warrant such a reading.

Both the film and TV show reinforce the dominant national imaginary of India as a globalized, liberalized nation. In *Return of Hanuman*, *swarg* (heaven) is contemporized-- the gods use touch screen technology, speak Hinglish (a mixture of Hindi and English) and obey traffic signals. Hanuman speaks in Hinglish, using phrases that mark his 'cool' affect, such as "Chill, dude" or "Have you lost it, dude?" Moreover, the language of capitalism permeates this mythological universe. Brahma, the god of creation, actively dissuades Hanuman from attempting to help humans by showing him bloodied and bandaged men who had been sent as emissaries to earth. One of these men requests the god to 'transfer' him to another planet, even if it is at a reduced salary, since he doesn't want to go to earth again. When Hanuman persists in going to

Bajrangpur, Brahma has him sign a lengthy contract and his powers are locked away to hold him to his end of the deal. There is an analogy here with what Nandini Chandra identifies in the earlier superhero comics: arguing that the battlefields are equivalent to “reconstructed corporate boardrooms,” she highlights the “coincidence of the superhero genre and the neoliberal state” since they share a “hyper-security consciousness” and everyone is a wage slave (70). Here too, the affinity of heaven to the neoliberal state is apparent—divine emissaries are mercenaries working in the business of rescuing humankind.

In this de-sacralized and commodified heaven, Brahma keeps his panoptical gaze on Maruti’s adventures not through his divine sight, but through the computer. The eagle Garuda, lord Vishnu’s mode of transport, has transformed into an airplane. Heavenly beings participate in a culture of consumption—Brahma enjoys cocktails on a sundeck brought to him by a curvaceous *apsara* (heavenly nymph) while his ‘secretary’ Chitrugupta is caught browsing the website of Menka, the famously beautiful *apsara*, who is overtly sexualized. What underlies the secularization and modernization of the mythic universe in the film?

In her reading of Indian advertisements as visual cultural texts, Leela Fernandes argues that the “aesthetic of the commodity does not merely serve as a passive reflector of wider social and cultural processes but instead becomes a central site in which the Indian nation is reimagined” (53). She observes that some advertisements employ religious imagery to suggest that the “the core of Indian tradition...can be retained even as the material context of that tradition is modernized and improved” (43). According to her, “the ability of multinational capital to combine the national and the

global within a singular narrative of commodity fetishism” appeals to a new middle class that has become the “embodiment of the liberalizing nation-state” in dominant public representations (32). *Return of Hanuman* goes a step further in modernizing the entire mythological universe to reinforce the values of consumerism. As we have noted, Hindu mythology, especially the epic *Ramayana*, has been crucial in establishing a nationalist imagination. By linking the mythic world with technological progress and material wealth, the film fetishizes hybridity between the traditional and the modern, the ancient and the contemporary, the sacred and the secular, the national and the global—a hybridity which serves the consumerist ethos. The secularization of the divine world entails making it more akin to the values of a consumer audience.

The celebration of consumption is given a different edge in the earthly realm. Maruti has an enormous appetite from the moment of his birth, and remains hungry even after drinking gallons of milk. His insatiable appetite mimics infant Krishna’s love for butter and is meant to evoke feelings of affection for the mischievous baby. But Maruti’s hunger is highly exaggerated—for example, he gets his mother thrown out of the village because he steals food from each house in the village. What could lie behind the near-obsessive focus on consumption? We may find a clue in the division created between the commodified, technologized mythological universe and the nondescript village. Writing about Indian comics of the 1970s and 1980s, Chandra argues that “the vision of development and a modern state is...vigorously invoked from inside a rural/provincial and communitarian setup” (62). Unlike those comics, the rural space in *Return of Hanuman* is not associated with modernity—in fact, Bajrangpur is an obviously poor village. Maruti’s unfulfilled appetite is representative of this paucity. The

film simultaneously evokes the tropes of deprivation and aspiration by associating the daily lives of its protagonists with deprivation, while materializing and commodifying the realm of tradition, which has long been regarded as the “essence” of Indianness (Chatterjee 261). This interplay between lack and desire serves the ethos of consumerism, while also paving the way for the religious hero-worship of Hanuman.

As noted earlier, Maruti’s divine heroism is inextricably tied to the needs and prayers of his devotees. The film reinforces Hanuman’s status as a deity who embodies power and protection. Despite Hanuman’s toddler persona, his role as protector is almost entirely cast within a masculinist paradigm of helping the ‘weak’ women and children. Maruti compensates for the loss of patriarchal authority not only in the lives of his friends, but also in that of his mother. After his father is abducted and the villagers force his mother to leave, he carries away a house for them to live in. The filmmakers associate Maruti’s amazing feats with his true identity as Hanuman through a visual cue which momentarily highlights the toddler’s simian jaw. The main soundtrack of the film is the popular devotional hymn *Hanuman Chalisa* and is used often during the film. In *TNAOH*, the *Hanuman Chalisa* soundtrack is played whenever Maruti transforms to *Bal Hanuman*. In both the film and TV show, Hanuman’s acts of bravery are met with refrains of *Jai Hanuman* (Hail Hanuman) from the community.

According to Shailendra Singh, Percept’s presentation of Hanuman is that of a superhero rather than a religious figure. Similarly, in a media report, a Percept Pictures executive mentioned: “*For all of us*, Hanuman is a remarkably special character and we have taken that into account. He will...[be] someone like Superman, and he fights for the triumph of good over evil. We are not presenting him in a context based on any

religion” (*The Hindu*, July 6, 2007; my emphasis). Yet the instances outlined above indicate that Hanuman is not in fact a secular superhero. *Return of Hanuman* as well as *TNOH* quite deliberately showcase Hanuman as a god in order to appeal to a Hindu audience, while including some tropes from the superhero genre to appeal to an urban, middle class child audience. The belief in Hanuman’s universal appeal in a multi-religious society betrays the dominant construction of India as a Hindu nation-state. The collapse between Indian and Hindu is evident in Singh’s statement that he was sure of the icon’s success since “every Indian home is aware of Hanuman” (Singh).

Lutgendorf notes that Hanuman was co-opted by right-wing Hindu fundamentalist groups during the 1992 Ayodhya “liberation” movement which set off massive communal riots in the country.<sup>5</sup> A youth wing of the movement was named Bajrang Dal, loosely translated as “army of Hanuman”; it invoked Hanuman’s folksy Hindi epithet of *Bajrangbali* or “iron-limbed hero” (367). Bajrang Dal’s role in the violence and riots that accompanied the Ayodhya movement was widely noted in the press. According to Lutgendorf, the association of Hanuman with militant Hinduism rested on Hanuman’s embodiment of some recurring tropes of Hindutva ideology:

its glorification of physical and military strength, its insistence that Hindu men “prove” their manliness through violent encounters with the demonized members of minority communities, and its implicit agenda for the subordination of lower classes and religious minorities to...a primordial and monolithic Hindu nation-state ruled largely by upper-caste leaders. (361)

Percept’s *Bal* Hanuman is not a martial, muscular god, but he reaffirms the emphasis of Hindutva discourse on physical strength, and on the “sons of the land” needing to

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<sup>5</sup> This movement was geared to reclaiming what Hindu nationalists believe was Rama’s birthplace in Ayodhya, on which a mosque had been built. Hindu nationalists succeeded in destroying the mosque. The resulting religious riots led to the loss of scores of lives, especially those of Muslims.

protect “an explicitly feminized familial and national body” (Bannerjee 125). At the end of *Return of Hanuman*, earth is not only feminized through the epithet “mother earth” but also Hinduized when she appears in the form of a sari-clad goddess and thanks Hanuman for saving her. Thus a potentially global, secular mission of saving the planet from the effects of pollution is laden with the symbolism of Hindu nationalism. The film and TV series also enact the erasure of religious minorities—Bajrangpur is almost entirely composed of Hindus. Moreover, Maruti’s high Brahmin caste is emphasized in the film on multiple occasions.

Discussing the trend of baby-gods in calendar art, Patricia Uberoi (100) wonders if we may read the “recent multiplication” of baby-gods as “a gesture of reconciliation in our communally polarized world, post Ayodhya” since, for example, “the sleeping baby-Ram is surely a benign image when compared to the militant adult Ram” [and] “the adorable baby Hanuman is a far cry from the aggressive, humanoid body-builder Hanuman iconography.” While *Bal Hanuman* does not evoke militant Hinduism in the same way, the perpetuation of Hindu nationalist ideologies in the franchise is insidious precisely because the “cute,” “adorable” boy-god has a disarming effect on both adult and child spectators.

In his interviews with parents about mythological animation films, Vamsee Juluri found in interviews with Hindu parents that they had expectations that these stories would reflect certain cultural and notionally moral values (67). In a similar vein, Lent observes that “Indian parents like these ‘mytho-cartoons’ because they introduce ancient tales to a generation they believe is losing touch with its 5000-year heritage, and because they supplant what existed before—U.S. animation and Japanese anime”

(110-11). Thus many mythological animations, including *Hanuman*, aim not only to inform children about the leonine deeds of mythological figures, but also attempt to impart values considered important for children to possess, such as bravery, honesty, and obedience to parents. Child-gods like Hanuman and Ganesh are especially amenable for co-optation in a didactic agenda—some animated films explicitly show them being lectured by their mothers when they ‘misbehave.’

The popularity of the Hanuman merchandise suggests that Hindu middle class parents may consume religious products uncritically, especially since producers claim to redress their children’s sense of alienation from their religious and cultural roots through these products. One parent in Juluri’s reception study had this to say about the Hanuman soft toy:

I think it is rather cute. No problem with this...children adore Hanuman and I’m sure he is better to have as a security blanket than a teddy bear. My daughters, in any case, have a small god picture under their pillows when they sleep. (67)

Efforts to merchandise Hanuman’s child persona as an iconic figure capitalize on the religious hero-worship that the animation franchise evokes. The dynamics of identification for adult viewers are grounded in the sentimentalized, emotional bond between mother and son or devotee and deity, while religious hero worship becomes central to the child audience’s identification with Hanuman. In *Return of Hanuman*, Maruti’s admiring friends transform into Bal Hanuman’s devotees when the toddler reveals his true form. *TNAOH* reinforces this religious hero worship, which seems to model the desired relationship between the god and child viewers.

Juluri suggests that

if, indeed, the new mythologies demand from viewers a discursive identification with definitions and labels (as Hindus, or as Hindu

superheroes, for example) then perhaps the political dangers are imminent. However, if these stories remain narrated in non-normative fashions, as ideals for values like “devotion” and “valor,” as participants believe, then their use may remain politically unmotivated, and perhaps culturally desirable. (67)

Nevertheless, these films actively encourage viewers’ religious identification with Hindu boy-gods, thus excluding the significant sub-set of the child population that is not Hindu, or does not identify as Hindu. Furthermore, the franchise perpetuates the ideology of Hindu majoritarianism, which has gained much strength in the political and cultural spheres of the nation.

### **The My Friend Ganesha series and Main Krishna Hoon**

If the Hanuman franchise marketed the eponymous god as a superhero who was albeit defined by his divinity, Rajiv S. Ruia’s *My Friend Ganesha* trilogy (2007-2010) and *Main Krishna Hoon* (2013; translated as *I am Krishna*) present Ganesha and Krishna as friendly boy-gods who not only rescue boys and their families from difficult situations, but also actively forge friendships with the protagonists. As I will demonstrate, the boy-gods reflect the consumerist values of the middle classes, while also demonstrating the need for a return to religiosity.

The composite films feature a mixture of live acting and animation. The sections in which the gods appear are animated and the boy-gods resemble Hanuman in their Disneyfied look. The religious orientation of these films is explicit. For instance, they contain *bhajans* (songs of devotion to deities) and scenes of ritualistic worship in front of Ganesha/Krishna idols. The *Ganesha* films take place in the context of Ganeshchaturthi,<sup>6</sup> an Indian festival dedicated to Ganesha that is celebrated with much

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<sup>6</sup> The festival was popularized in Maharashtra in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, an important figure in the independence movement, for the purpose of nationalist mobilization.

fervor in Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra, where the god is especially popular. The films end with the immersion of the Ganesha idol in the river on the last day of the festival, and the return of the animated god to heaven. Ram Puniyani notes that in recent years, Ganeshchaturthi has become major in other parts of the country as well, and links that to a larger trend of Hindu festivals becoming popularized as national festivals in an era marked by the rise of religious nationalism and homogenization (101).

The *Ganesha* series deals with middle class families in urban and rural settings, while *Main Krishna Hoon* revolves around an orphan's desire to belong to a middle class family where he will be loved. The middle class has come to embody India's transition to a liberalizing nation (Fernandes 32), and has become a class that speaks on behalf of all others (Baviskar and Ray 9). The cultural dominance of this class is evident in these films. In both *My Friend Ganesha* (2007) and *My Friend Ganesha 2* (2008; henceforth *MFG*), the boy protagonist lives in Mumbai with his affluent middle class parents. In the first film, Ashu feels neglected by his working parents while in the second film, the couple is having severe marital problems, which causes Vashu to slip into depression. The full-time maid servant<sup>7</sup> becomes a surrogate mother to the boy in both films. In *MFG 3*, Ganya is an orphan living in a small town with his aunt and uncle who mistreat him and try to get his substantial trust fund transferred in their name. Gangutai informally adopts Ganya as her own son when he escapes. Gangutai is a staunch Ganesha devotee, and urges the boys in each film to ask the god to become

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<sup>7</sup> An important sign of Indian middleclassness is the reliance on domestic servants. See Seemin Qayum and Raka Ray's essay in *Elite and Everyman: the Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, which examines middleclassness through changing dynamics with domestic labor.

their 'friend,' which the boys proceed to do. Subsequently, the animated Ganesha appears in front of the boys and succeeds in filling their loneliness.

*Main Hoon Krishna* (2013) is set in an orphanage. A young boy is found abandoned on the streets on a stormy night. The founder of the orphanage, a single woman named Kantaben, is reminded of the night Krishna was born and names the child after the god. When Krishna is continually rejected by adoptive parents because he has epilepsy, he starts giving up hope of finding a family and feels unwanted. He prays to the god who descends to earth and starts spending a lot of time with him. After defeating some criminals responsible for mass food poisoning and child trafficking (with the god's help), Krishna becomes famous. Towards the end of the film, a couple that had rejected him on the grounds of his ill-health wants to adopt him again. However, he realizes that he would rather live in the orphanage with Kantaben who loves him as if her were her own child. All four films are interspersed with sections showing the gods' battles against demons or evil kings.

A crucial deviation from earlier mythological films is that affective friendship seems to displace the traditionally deferential relationship between god and devotee. The relationship between the young protagonists and the gods is filled with repartee and good humored-teasing, establishing their relationship as 'friends.' However, the impetus towards de-sacralization doesn't entail a shift away from religiosity. The boys invoke Ganesha by chanting a *mantra* that pays homage to the god. In fact, in the *Ganesha* series, the child becomes the conduit (along with Gangutai, the maid-servant) for bringing religion back into the familial space. The boy's insistence to his parents in both films that the Ganesha idol be brought home becomes a turning point in the family's

fortunes. In *Main Krishna Hoon*, the god appears after the boy prays to a big Krishna idol at a temple near his house.

The Indian middle class is united by a discourse that posits the loss of existing practices supporting ‘traditional family values’ as a central concern for modern society (Wessel 113). Henrike Donner and Geert De Neeve note that the everyday performance of middle class identities is fraught with tensions and discrepancies:

For example, novel images of what an appropriately gendered middle-class person ought to be might lead men and women to present themselves as part of a crowd of daring consumers and global achievers seeking exposure, while they are simultaneously under pressure to embody ‘traditional’ attitudes informed by adherence to caste, gender, and generational and religious norms... Thus, public and private spheres are reformulated through the search for an adequate middle-class persona, as individuals struggle to create ‘suitably modern traditionally Indian ways of being in the world. (15)

Ruia’s films exemplify these tensions. At one level, they share an anxiety about the effect of globalization on the middle class, manifested predominantly in the perceived diminishing role of religion, increased vulnerability of children in a globalized environment and changing gender roles. At the same time, they are invested in creating distinctly modern middle class identities for their boy protagonists. I argue here that the representation of boyhood in these films is shaped by traditional and colonial-era as well as contemporary conceptions of middle class childhood. Furthermore, I show how the children in these films become crucial to the Hindu family’s navigation of the pressures exerted by globalization.

The emergence of childhood as a special category has been traced back to the new normative discourses on family in nineteenth and twentieth century India which focused on children’s character formation. Such discourses recurrently conceived of the “family” as an isolated private domain, separate not only from the kinship system but

also from a brutal outside world (Bose 118). The boy-child in particular was central to the formation of this discourse and “came to be regarded as a person with distinct attributes—impressionability, vulnerability, innocence—that required a correct, prolonged period of nurture” (Bose 118-119). Increasingly, the child was negatively valued as an inferior version of the adult—“as a sweet, endearing, tender, impulsive being who was at the same time dependent, vulnerable, unreliable and wilful, and thus a being who needed constant supervision, guidance care and surveillance” (120).

Pradip Bose argues that “the needs of the nation and the model of cultural improvement were projected on to the child...[he] became the source that could be used to satisfy the grandest national aspirations” (120). Such a conception resisted the equation of childhood with cultural and political immaturity which had gained currency ever since colonialists conceived of India as a young and primitive society being led towards adulthood by Britain (Nandy 57). Ashis Nandy notes that the “Indian middle-class child became, under the growing cultural impact of British rule, the arena on which the battle for the minds of men was fought between the East and the West, the old and the new, and the intrinsic and imposed.” Thus, childhood became an “area of adult experimentation in social change in mid-nineteenth century India” (66). Satadru Sen makes a similar argument:

confronted with the demands of modernity and British critiques of native degeneracy, elite parents, writers and educators in India sought to reconstruct the child...as the repository of imperilled, pre-modern and essential pasts that might be regenerated within the colonial present...Childhood became a window through which the native elite imagined the impact of colonialism upon the Indian self, derived their reformulations of the self, and engaged in a variation of the ‘passive revolution’ that Partha Chatterjee has ascribed to bourgeois nationalism in the colonized world. (6- 7)

The ideal child in the discourse of native elites was one whose body and mind were properly disciplined: “he should be accustomed to put his body under severe strain and engage his mind in more worthy pursuits than mere comforts, bodily pleasures and display...[his] life should be regulated by the ideal of the future glory of the nation (Bose 141). Since childhood became a site of national regeneration, mothers were accorded a crucial role as educators, nurturers and medical auxiliaries and were to be educated accordingly (Bose 125; Bagchi 2217). Thus, while the boy child became the embodiment of aspirations for the nation’s future, the girl-child’s training was limited to being a good future mother and wife. An elaborate code of socialization was devised for the girl-child to ensure that she fitted into the patrilineal, patrilocal structure of caste-Hindu society in India (Bagchi 2214).

Scholars have noted that the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen shifts in cultural models of parenting and child development, triggered by significant population-specific changes and socioeconomic conditions (Sharma 6). It is not within the scope of the chapter to discuss these shifts in detail—indeed, Uberoi aptly notes that “Indian ideals of childhood and patterns of socialization are—and are likely to remain—quite heterogeneous, mediated in complex ways by factors of caste, socio-economic class, occupation, and lifestyle aspirations” (94). Here I highlight a few continuities as well as divergences between contemporary and older notions of middle class childhood.

The increasing replacement of extended families by nuclear families across the country in the last few decades has reinforced the conception of the family as a private domain which is the repository of important values, which had been a feature of nationalist discourse. Despite a substantial increase in access of middle class girls to

education, they are still encouraged to prepare for their roles as good wives and mothers—this is the case even in those families where they are encouraged to be career-oriented (Verma and Saraswathi 108). Middle class parents' focus on their children has increased over time. Parental involvement in the contemporary moment is especially high in the area of academic achievement (N. Kumar 229; Verma and Saraswathi 109). However, in a significant difference from colonial-era conceptions of childhood, children are no longer trained to work for the glory of the nation. If boys were perceived as important future citizens of an imagined nation in the colonial era (Bose 120), contemporary middle class children bear the burden of parental expectations and aspirations for upward mobility (N. Kumar 222).

Furthermore, contemporary middle class childhood is marked by tensions between the national and the global even more so than in the colonial era. Ashis Nandy claims that

with greater and more intense cross-cultural contacts childhood now more frequently becomes a battleground of cultures. This is especially true of many third world societies where middle-class urban children are often handed over to the modern world to work out a compromise with cultures successfully encroaching upon the traditional life style. (65)

Nandy's paradigm of "battleground of cultures" is particularly useful in discussing the representation of boyhood in Ruia's films. The films draw on the ancient and widespread cultural ideal of the child as divinity among Hindus (Kakar 210). For example, the title of the film *Main Hoon Krishna* means *I am Krishna*, referring to the collapse of identity between boy and god. The correlation between the boys and gods is made explicit in all films. In *My Friend Ganesha 3*, for instance, Ganesha/Ganya runs away from his home to another town and hides himself behind a Ganesha idol in a temple. Coincidentally, Gangutai (who seems to have relocated from Mumbai), is

praying to the god for a son. On discovering Ganya behind the idol, she immediately believes him to be Ganesha's blessing personified in human form and embraces him like he is her own son. Furthermore, Krishna and Ganesha imbue the protagonists with divine powers (often illustrated through special effects) whenever the boys need to fight villains. In some scenes, the gods enter the boys' bodies such that they become invincible.

Since all the films center around a boy protagonist and exclusively privilege the boy-child as a reflection of god, they reinforce the widespread cultural valorization of male infants in India. Sudhir Kakar observes that:

the preference for a son when a child is born is as old as Indian society itself. Vedic verses pray that sons will be followed by more male offspring, never by females. A prayer in the Atharvaveda adds a touch of malice: 'The birth of a girl, grant it elsewhere, here grant a son.' (*The Inner World* 57)

In a similar vein, Vasanthi Raman observes that classical Hindu texts like *Manusmriti* had no place for either girls or children of the lower castes. Traditional brahmanical-sanskritic texts "referring to children or childhood had only the boychild as its reference point" (4060). Current studies show that gender discrimination is still very prevalent in India (Verma and Saraswathi 108). These films not only perpetuate the patriarchal-brahmanical bias of Hindu scriptures towards the high-caste boy child, but also enact the near erasure of the girl child from the familial space. In none of the films does the boy have a sibling. They also extend the colonial-era focus on boy children. However, as we will see, in these films, the boys don't satisfy national aspirations, but rather, the aspirations of their parents, specifically for upper class mobility.

The composite films reflect ideas of middle class childhood that have gained currency in the contemporary moment. Crucial to the construction of middle class

children are processes of consumerism which differentiate them from lower-class children, and produce self-consciousness among middle class children about their status (N. Kumar 223). Ashu and Vashu possess many products that reflect their higher socio-economic status, such as desktop Macs, DVD players, and large flat-screen TVs in their individual bedrooms. The films reinforce the portrayal of the middle class child as a consumer, which has become prevalent in advertising imagery (Uberoi 105). Moreover, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, middle class childhood is “scripted as a time of leisure, pleasure and play, these being the envied attributes of upper-class lifestyles” (Uberoi 104). The boy-gods are coopted into this space of leisure and fun. When in heaven, Ganesha is shown snow-boarding and riding sledges with a Santa hat on. When on earth, he has fun with his ‘friends.’ Ganesha single-handedly forms Vashu’s rock band so that the latter can practice for his dance competition. Ganesha creates his own duplicates to play the drums, guitar and other accompanying instruments. In *Main Krishna Hoon*, the boy-god Krishna is a huge ‘fan’<sup>8</sup> of Hrithik Roshan, a Bollywood star. He is absolutely insistent that his earthly namesake arrange a meeting with the star so that he (the god) can see him in person.

Friendship here is very specifically a middle class construct—the boy-gods and boys “hang out” together, watching films, dancing, eating and listening to music. In one scene, for instance, we see Ganesha lying down on the Vashu’s bed with big earphones on. Thus the homological relationship of the boy-gods and boys in Ruia’s films extends two ways—on one hand, the boys’ divinity is highlighted, and on the other hand, the gods are fashioned in the image of middle class boys, both literally (for example,

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<sup>8</sup> This is a word used repeatedly by the animated boy-god with reference to Hrithik Roshan once he has been taught its meaning by Krishna.

Ganesha wears modern clothes in the second film) and figuratively, by mirroring the child in his consumerist practices. We see in these films a continuity with the Hanuman franchise, which had modernized the technological universe. Ruia goes a step further; in his films gods explicitly become consumers and embody the idealized lifestyle that the new middle class symbolizes and aspires towards; the film posters reinforce this imagery. It is not just the middle class child in these films who is 'authentically' Indian and yet 'obsessed' by the global (N. Kumar 224)—it is also the gods.

One major category of identity within the non-homogenous middle class is the level of English-language fluency, since the availability of 'good' English-language and English-medium education differs radically from region to region in India (N. Kumar 233). Neoliberal economic processes mean that education is especially important for skilled, professional jobs in the new economy, both at home and abroad, and proficiency in English is crucial to educational success (Scrase and Ganguly-Scrase 120). Even conservative parents seek Western, English medium education for their children, "partly to fulfil their status ambitions and partly to create a manageable bicultural space or an interface with the modern world within the family" (Nandy 65). English is not only a marker of superior cultural status, but it also leads to active and passive kinds of social exclusion (Nayar and Bhide 333). It is thus significant that the boy protagonists of these films (and their parents) often switch easily between Hindi and English. The gods speak in Sanskritized Hindi, so the boys take it upon themselves to teach them a few English words. In all the films, the boys tease the gods for not understanding them when they speak in English.<sup>9</sup> While these scenes are meant to

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<sup>9</sup> This plot device is also used in all the films when the boys teach the maid-servants how to pronounce English words correctly.

reinforce the playful friendship that the protagonists are shown to be sharing with the boy-gods, they implicitly reinforce the superiority of English to other Indian languages in a globalized context and simultaneously affirm the boys' middle class status.

However, the films also expose the burden borne by contemporary middle class children. Nita Kumar argues that "middle-classness is defined and supported by the success of the child, and destroyed by the child's failure," and that parents spend enormous resources to ensure their children's academic success, even though statistics show that practical success is very rare (220-245). The first two films of the *Ganesha* trilogy illustrate these anxieties. Ashu and Vashu are both under-performing students, much to their parents' dismay. Vashu's father is a surgeon and wants his son to follow in his footsteps. However, Vashu's depression causes him to sleep through class and forget his homework, prompting the school principal to meet the parents for an intervention. Ashu and Vashu are also regularly bullied in school and are too diffident to fight back.

Nita Kumar suggests that the most important sites of production of middle-classness—the home and the school—emphasize to the child that s/he must conform and obey all the rules:

The middle-class child typically attends large crowded schools that emphasize conformity, where facelessness inside the school and entitlement outside the school walls...is of the essence. (223)

Furthermore, advertising imagery creates the "effect of specialness in anonymity" such that "the middle-class child experiences being simultaneously special and faceless many times over" (223). It is the facelessness that is emphasized in the representation of the child protagonists' lives in the first two parts of the *Ganesha* series. We see the boys' indistinct position among hundreds of school children in large schools.

Ganesha rescues the child not only from failure, but also anonymity. In the first film, Ashu shoots to fame when he rescues a school girl from a kidnapper after Ganesha imbues him with divine power; Ashu ends up winning an award for his bravery. In the second film, the boy-god helps Vashu win an inter-school dance competition, and saves him from getting humiliated during a scene in which the school inspector is testing his knowledge while the class bullies are playing pranks on him. Ganesha also scares off the bullies, and gives his 'friends' the strength to counter them on their own. It is worth noting that Ganesha's intervention in the child's scholastic activities includes the academic as well as extracurricular, since "the success of the middle-class child is premised on the acquisition of economic, social, and particularly cultural capital" (N. Kumar 221). Moreover, Ganesha teaches the child the values of hard work in academics as well as co-curricular activities. In *MFG 1*, he lectures Ashu for lying to Gangutai about having finished his homework, and makes Ashu promise that he will watch TV only after having completed his school work. In *MFG 2*, he chides Ashu for his over-confidence and talks to him about the importance of industriousness. The god's intervention in the boy's life ensures that he is saved from the specter of failure that haunts middle class families. The films suggest that the middle class child can escape his/her facelessness and distinguish himself/herself from millions through religiosity. It is crucial that in the *Ganesha* films the boy-gods appear only *after* a huge idol has been brought to their homes for the Ganesh Chaturthi festival. The boy-gods' manifestation in front of the children is thus very much tied to the ritualistic aspect of Hinduism.

Ruia's last two films shift the focus to orphans. The films convey an anxiety about unprotected children's helplessness and marginalization in a materialistic, brutal world in which children are routinely exploited. In *MFG 3*, Ganya is imprisoned inside the house by his aunt and uncle while they try and usurp his substantial property and money. *Main Krishna Hoon* goes a step further by drawing attention to the issue of child labor. Krishna Kumar claims that "in most developing societies, globalization has brought with it the withdrawal of the state from welfare, negatively affecting women and children...childhood as a category represents a cultural frontier where the project of modernization has come under threat from globalization" (4034). *Main Krishna Hoon* succeeds in showing the precariousness of childhood in an exploitative labor economy. There are moments in which Krishna's intervention may be read as an attempt to step in for the failed welfare state. He helps his namesake expose criminals responsible for adding toxic substances to the milk in the city, as well as the underworld ring holding child laborers captive.

However, the nation never looms large as an entity in any of the films. As we observed earlier, an important distinction between colonial-era discourses of childhood and contemporary ones is that in the current moment, children are not disciplined to bring glory to the nation; rather, their aspirations are mainly focused within the familial domain. The emphasis on family in the films is reflective of the major role it plays in the socialization of the child despite the fast pace of social change (Verma and Saraswathi 108). Drawing on her fieldwork among middle class youth in an Indian city, Margit van Wessel concludes that the family is a site on which young people locate important tensions and through which they shape their selfhood. She also notes that

conceptualizations of 'tradition' and 'modernity' are central to their understanding of cultural challenges they engage with (101).

In the composite films, tensions between traditional and modern gender identities within the family are a recurrent theme. In *My Friend Ganesha 1* and *2*, the boys' mothers (Aarti and Anita) are depicted as educated, independent and assertive working women. The conservative politics of the films disallows them from simultaneously being good mothers. For example, in the first film, Aarti asks her maid Gangutai to go to the parent-teacher meeting since she and her husband are busy. In the second film, Anita is shown to be too preoccupied with her marital troubles to pay attention to her child. She leaves her son's care to the maid in entirety, even when she is not traveling for work. Ashu's and Vashu's cries for friendship with Ganesha emerge out of their deep-seated loneliness. Gangutai is presented as a foil to the real mother in the first two films and to the aunt in the third film. She is nurturing, attentive and protective of the boy in ways that the mother is not—checking that he has eaten, putting him to bed, taking care of him when he is not well, etc. She also involves herself in his life outside of home. For instance, she helps Vashu win a dance competition by training him rigorously. Thus, Gangutai inhabits the real mother's supposed role by transmitting traditional values to the children. She tells the boys stories of Ganesha's conquest over demons, inculcating their interest in Hindu mythology and religion, and helping them cement their relationship with god.

In *Main Krishna Hoon*, Kantaben is motherly to all the children in the orphanage, but shows a distinct partiality to Krishna, feeding him herself and showering affection on him. Kantaben is not only the founder-director of the orphanage, but also the children's

teacher, cook and mother rolled into one. In her maternal role, she tells children bedtime stories about Krishna's miraculous feats. Gangutai's and Kantaben's relationship with the boys under their care is modelled on the legendary relationship between Yashoda and Krishna. Yashoda (Krishna's adoptive mother) has been immortalized in Hindu mythology for her boundless maternal love for her son. The symbolism is made explicit in *Main Krishna Hoon*, when Krishna refuses to go with an affluent middle class couple seeking to re-adopt him at the end of the film, saying that he can't forget that Kantaben raised him as Yashoda raised Krishna, and that she was his "Yashoda ma." The films reflect how important and special the mother-son tie continues to be in Hindu families in the contemporary moment (Kakar, "In Defence of the Inner World" 139). The idealized, mythical relationship between the surrogate mothers and their adoptive sons in the composite animated films seeks to reinforce the Hindu woman's core identity as mother, and offer a model of maternal devotion to sons that middle class mothers should emulate.

As we noted earlier, discourses on middle class childhood in the nationalist era emphasized the mother's role in shaping the child's future. This emphasis continues in present-day conceptions of middle-classness as well. As Nita Kumar observes, the prototypical mother in middle-class families bears "every discomfort in order to give support to the child...the discourse of the 'self-sacrificing mother' and the dutiful progeny is par excellence a middle-class, and not an upper- or lower-class discourse" (230). Women are "still expected to embody a reified 'tradition' and to transmit its values to the next generation" (Donner 13). Influenced by Gangutai and the institution of the Ganesha idol in their house, both films show Aarti and Anita play a more active part

in the domestic space by the end of the film. Gangutai, whose main purpose was to embody the self-sacrificing motherhood expected of the real mother, becomes a temporary, dispensable figure in the lives of the boys once the mothers re-inhabit their expected roles. *MFG 3* takes a different direction, with Gangutai adopting Ganesh/Ganya.

Ganesha and the boy protagonists similarly uphold traditional gender roles. In a particularly retrogressive section in the second film, Ashu tells Ganesha about his parents' marital troubles, and the boy-god concludes that Aarti's father is to blame for his interference in his daughter's married life. He appears to Vashu's grandfather in a dream, chiding him for his behavior. Telling him that a son-in-law's status is higher than that of a son's, Ganesha asserts that he is lucky to have found a son-in-law like Amit, and that he should apologize to him. Aarti's father does so, and urges Aarti to treat her husband well. Vashu, of course is grateful to Ganesha for 'solving' his parents' conflict. In *MFG 1*, one subplot of the film revolves around Aditi, who is Ashu's father Aditya's sister. She is depicted as a fashionable college student, and has a boyfriend who she spends a lot of time with. She is punished for her choices when her boyfriend threatens to release compromising videos of her publicly if she doesn't pressure her brother (who is a bank manager) to give him a loan. Ganesha saves the day by converting those videos to ones of him dancing, and gives Ashu the strength to defeat the boyfriend in a fist fight. Thus, even as women are circumscribed within the domestic space and traditional gender roles, boys are imbued with a divine-endowed warrior masculinity that serves patriarchal ideologies. As we noted earlier, the Hanuman franchise also reflects this masculinist conception of boyhood.

I have argued above that mythological animation films attempt to portray the gods and mythological universe as cosmopolitan, but that this move is accompanied by the entrenchment of conservative ideologies. The boy-gods may be cute but they are hardly harmless since they, along with the homologous boys with whom they forge friendships, uphold hegemonic ideas of the nation, family, gender relations and class for an impressionable child audience. I have demonstrated that the impetus for the middle class child to be “authentically Indian yet global” in the films (N. Kumar 233) is reflective of the larger struggle of the middle classes to reconcile traditional and modern attitudes and values. These tensions are evident in the construction of boys as pure and divine and as agents of the Hindu family’s (re)turn towards religiosity, while being savvy consumers who reinforce the image of the middle classes as the embodiment of a liberalized nation.

## CHAPTER 4 THE PRESCRIPTIVE FUTURITY OF THE HINDU PAST IN THE *RAMAYAN 3392 AD* COMICS

In 2006, the transnational company Virgin Comics was launched with the mission of bringing South Asian and Southeast narratives to America and beyond. The “chief visionaries” behind Virgin Comics were Non Resident Indian filmmaker Shekhar Kapur (famous for directing the film *Elizabeth* in 1998), entrepreneur Richard Branson and the Indian American “spiritual guru” Deepak Chopra (famous for new age self-help titles like *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*). In 2008, the company was liquidated and restructured as Liquid Comics, with Gotham Chopra (Deepak Chopra’s son), Sharad Devarajan and Suresh Seetharaman taking the helm. From the outset, the company styled itself as a nexus between “East” and “West” and had offices in New York and Bangalore. It “transcreated” Spider-Man for an Indian audience,<sup>1</sup> and marketed to audiences in India and the US various titles that riffed on Hindu and Buddhist mythology such as *Devi*, *Snake Woman*, *The Sadhu*, *India Authentic*, *Deepak Chopra’s Buddha*, *The Tall Tales of Vishnu Sharma* and *Project Kalki* (Scott 180). One of Virgin’s/Liquid’s flagship titles was *Ramayana 3392 AD*, which was originally published as a comic book series and subsequently as three trade paperbacks.<sup>2</sup> This chapter analyzes the series, which reimagines the Indian epic *Ramayana* in a futuristic, post-apocalyptic era and translates it into the vocabulary of dystopic, sci-fi American superhero comics.

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<sup>1</sup> See Suchitra Mathur’s “The Superhero Goes Native: ‘Translating’ Spiderman for an Indian Audience.”

<sup>2</sup> A trade paperback is a collection of stories originally published as comic books. Due to the change in companies, among other factors, there was a significant time lag between the publication of volume 1, which was published by Virgin Comics in 2006, and volume 3, issued in 2014 by Graphic India. Volume 2 was first printed in 2008 and re-issued by Graphic Indian in 2013.

Influenced by the success of Marvel and DC in creating blockbuster movie franchises based on comic books, Liquid uses the medium of comics publishing to develop intellectual properties for theatrical live-action films, animation and video games (“Liquid Comics, About Us”). It defines itself as a “transnational multimedia company” invested in developing original stories that are transferrable across every platform of entertainment (Seetharaman). Hence Liquid has created and is creating graphic novels with filmmakers and actors such as John Woo, Guy Ritchie, Dave Stewart, Jonathan Mostow, Edward Burns, Nicolas Cage, and others. According to Liquid’s website, it has various film and TV projects underway. *Ramayan 3392 AD* went into production with Mandalay Pictures and was set for a 2011 release, but the project didn’t take off.

Liquid actively seeks to become a dominant player in the booming Indian comics industry. In 2011, it formed Graphic India, a company that intends to be India’s premiere graphic novel digital platform and community, leveraging Liquid’s large library of titles, while also aggressively commissioning and showcasing original stories by upcoming Indian writers and artists (Bhushan, “Liquid Comics Launches Graphic India”). Graphic India’s website sells a few original Liquid titles that are inspired by Hindu mythology, such as Shekhar Kapur’s *Devi*, *The Sadhu* and *Ramayan 3392 AD* in the form of digital comics, while also introducing new titles that are set in India such as Stan Lee’s comic book series *Chakra: the Invincible* which was made into an animated film in 2013 for Cartoon Network, a popular children’s TV channel. Graphic India has made its foray not only into the fast-expanding market of Indian children’s entertainment, but also into the market of digital entertainment. The company launched Grant Morrison’s *18 Days* on YouTube in 2013. The digital animated shorts attempt to reimagine the *Mahabharata* on

an epic scale. According to Grant Morrison, *18 Days* is a genre mash of superhero action, mythology and epic fantasy (“Graphic India”). In 2015, *18 Days* was released in the form of digital comics in India and the US.

Graphic India seeks to tap into the growing market for youth entertainment in post-liberalization India. As noted on its website, “Graphic believes that India is home to some of the most creative talent in the world, with more than 500 million people under the age of 25<sup>3</sup> and more than 850 million mobile phone users in the country. The Company’s mission is to create enduring stories and heroes that foster the imaginations and fuel the inspirations of a new globalized generation of youth in both India and around the world” (“Graphic India, About Us”). In an interview, Sharad Devarajan, the CEO and co-founder of Liquid Comics and Graphic India claims that:

the next J.K. Rowling, Steven Spielberg, Stan Lee or Miyazaki is sitting somewhere in India and our responsibility as a country is to find these young talents, nurture them and give them the training, resources and belief in themselves to take their ideas to the world. After all—long before James Cameron created *Avatar*, India was the first country that gave the world a blue-skinned hero with a bow and arrow. (Petersen, “5 Minutes with Sharad Devarajan”)

Devarajan rather condescendingly assumes that as a developing nation, India is full of potential but not actual, self-evident genius. It would take a multinational company like Graphic India to find and nurture “creative talents” that could hope (someday) to equal the stars of the West, and also to set the standards to which the Indian cultural industry must aspire. The Indian American CEO of the company conveniently claims the shared responsibility for the nation, which his privileged status allows him to do.

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<sup>3</sup> India has the largest youth population in the world. According to a 2014 UN report, it has 356 million 10-24 year-old people. (“India Has World’s Largest Youth Population: UN Report.”)

At the same time, Devarajan's quip about Rama reveals the fundamental strategy of the company: to mine India's ancient past for stories that can be translated for a transnational audience in the contemporary moment on the model of already-successful cultural productions such as *Avatar*. For Graphic India, Hindu mythology is essential to creating products that would remain distinct from but rival American comic book mythologies. Devarajan's statement echoes an older one made by Shekhar Kapur (the co-founder of Virgin Comics), to the effect that Hindu mythology would lend India its competitive advantage in the global narrative marketplace (Scott 185). Liquid Comics/Graphic India claims to be invested in making India a transmitter rather than receiver of goods, and to reconfigure the global flows of entertainment products. Yet Devarajan's statement makes clear that the industry standards have been set by the American entertainment industry. The blurbs on *Ramayan 3392 AD* paperbacks loudly proclaim the series' apparent success in equaling heavyweight American narratives: "*Ramayan 3392 AD* is an epic adventure that has been called 'India's answer to *Lord of the Rings*' by *Times of India*, all within an astonishing quest to save humanity from a darker evil than the world has encountered before."

The creators behind *Ramayan 3392 AD*, Deepak Chopra and Shekhar Kapur, express a belief in the preface to the first volume that their reimagining of the *Ramayana* can be universally inspiring:

Ours is not a re-telling of *Ramayan* but a symbolic representation of similar mythical symbols that are meant to be understood in a contextual framework of a *cross-cultural, post-modern, multi-ethnic, global society*. From time to time, new mythologies spark the imagination of a collective consciousness and lay the ground for the telling of a story that has such impact that it influences the behavior, the values and the codes of morality for an entire civilization. We hope that *Ramayan 3392 AD* will ignite a new interest in mythology and nurture the deepest longings and aspirations for

achievement, adventure and the desire to accomplish grand and wondrous things. (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayana 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 4; my emphasis)

Kapur and Chopra imply that the *Ramayana* is greater than any American comic book mythology for it contains truths and values that are universal and timeless. Interestingly, however, there is no mention of its already-evident immense cultural impact on the South Asian and South-east Asian subcontinents. The use of the phrase “new mythologies” is indeed suggestive, for it indicates not only that the creators are familiarizing an American audience with an ancient epic, but also reimagining the epic in a new way that would enable its renewed appreciation for not only a non-Indian audience but also Indians. The series was marketed in both the US and India and the audience includes young Indians in India and the US, as well as Americans unfamiliar with the epic, as is evident from Deepak Chopra’s reference to a “multi-ethnic, global society.”

Though at first blush, it may seem that the series attests to American cultural imperialism insofar as it is dictated by Western paradigms, influences and audience expectations, my chapter argues against such a reading. The company’s impulse towards indigenizing the Western superhero comic is not just an instance of the local being incorporated into the global (Dirlik 34). The series is characterized by tensions between cultural homogenization and indigenization—for example, the attempt to recast Rama as a secular character along the lines of American superheroes is juxtaposed with his status as a Kshatriya warrior. However, the trope of the nation remains paramount in the series.

Barton Scott argues that “these comics’ global mobility is predicated on their ability to demonstrate their links to the nation, just as their hope for the nation is that it might claim greater global cachet” (185). According to him,

Virgin Comics tries to recuperate mythology from its benighted nationalist past and remake it for a liberalized global future. It seeks to unmoor the mythological from the Indian nation...but reinscribes vaunted cosmopolitanism within the cultural imaginary of the nation. (Scott 183-186)

He further argues in the context of Shekhar Kapur’s *Devi* that Virgin comics reinforce the conflation of India with its Hindu majority, but reclaim it from the Hindu Right, asserting instead Hindu mythology’s association with the benevolent (187). I propose instead that *Ramayan 3392 AD* participates in the Hindu Right’s construction of India by creating a gendered imaginary of the nation, reinforcing Brahmanical-Kshatriya supremacy and tying India’s modernity to its “hoary” Hindu past.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section shows how the series is grounded in cultural specificities even though it embraces an internationalized visual style. I show how the post-apocalyptic, futuristic setting of the series is undergirded by the notion of a Hindu nation. I also analyze *Ramayan 3392 AD*’s representation of Rama within the context of his political appropriation by the Hindu Right. I suggest that though Rama is fashioned as a secular figure who shares some characteristics with American superheroes, the comics don’t entirely resist his deification. Rama’s embodiment of Kshatriya masculinity in *Ramayan 3392 AD* overlaps with his representation in authoritative versions of the epic, and reinforces the casteist, imperialist, masculinist construction of the nation. The second section analyzes how Sita is refashioned in the series, and demonstrates how her portrayal betrays anxieties about the empowered, liberated, modern Indian woman. Seeta’s portrayal further

reinforces the gendered habitation of the nation. The third section extends the analysis of the gendered nation within the context of science. I draw on scholarship that demonstrates the importance of science to the self-definition of modern India, showing how Hindu nationalists came up with the conception of a Hindu science to create a uniquely different vision of Hindu modernity. I argue that the indigeneity of *Ramayana 3392 AD*'s sci-fi narrative is informed by the pervasive Hinduization of science, a discourse which has been re-deployed by Hindu nationalists in the last few decades. I further claim that the militarization of the epic in *Ramayan 3392 AD* is reflective of a push towards militarization in contemporary India, and that it is indicative of the Hindu nationalist conception of a powerful, virile neoliberal nation (Oza 113).

### **Rama's Representation, Kshatriya Masculinity and Caste Politics**

In an attempt to reorient the epic for a transnational audience, Liquid/Graphic India comics depart radically from the calendar art-inspired realism of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics. Barton Scott notes that visually, this more "sophisticated" style relies less heavily on what comics scholar Scott McCloud has termed "action-to-action" transitions between panels; instead, in the style of Japanese artists like Osamu Tezuka, Liquid/Graphic India comics extend a single moment across several panels or temporarily suspend the narrative flow to dwell on the discrete details of a setting. Additionally, the flat compositions and bright monochromes of the *ACK* are replaced with realistic modelling of figures, extensive use of perspective, heavy shadow, and a darker color palette (184). *Ramayan 3392 AD* makes interesting use of colors to signify different atmospheres, such as using a red background for the wilderness outside of Armagarh which has been permeated with noxious fumes, or using a blue and green background when the setting changes to Mithila, the land of abundance and vegetation.

The influence of American comics is perhaps most visible in the projection of Rama as a superhero (he is often referred to as a “super warrior” in the comics). Rama’s visual reconfiguration also reinforces the departure from the Amar Chitra Katha comics. The *Amar Chitra Katha* cover of *Ramayana* shows a serene Rama in the act of shooting an arrow. The cover of *Ramayan 3392 AD* was designed by Alex Ross, who is best known for his cover art for Marvel and DC comics. Ross depicts a dynamic Rama who is poised mid-air to take aim at his enemy with a futuristic bow and arrow. In the flaming orange background are many denizens of the mythological universe, all in battle poses. The *Ramayan 3392 AD* cover conveys that Rama is the hero of an action story with a grandiose scale. Close-ups of Rama reveal an angular, chiseled face and a lean, muscular physique that is cast in the mold of American superheroes.

In his essay on *Ramayan 3392 AD*, Caleb Simmons quotes interviews with Abhishek Singh, the illustrator of the first volume, to show that the visual representation of Rama was tailored to make him appeal to a transnational audience. Singh tried to make Rama look more “Indian” by making his physique less vascular, and making his eyes large and oval. But those sketches were discarded, and Singh and his co-workers then set about altering the representation of Rama from an Indian deity into a universal superhero (Simmons 203). This guiding principle is spelled out in the foreword to the second volume, *Ramayan 3392 AD: The Tome of the Wastelands*, which has been written by the editor of Vols. 2 and 3, Ron Marz (comic book writer known for comics such as *Batman/Aliens*, *Green Lantern*, and *Witchblade*). Marz references Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* to discuss Rama’s journey as an archetypal one. In an evident attempt to extend Rama’s appeal to American audiences,

Marz compares Rama to Beowulf, Luke Skywalker, and the heroes of *Green Lantern* and *Witchblade* (Dasgupta and Kang, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 2, 4). Simmons argues that “the editors and executives had no intention of preserving the narrative’s tradition, but viewed the cultural specificities as mere “trappings” that one ought not to worry about” (203).

While the epic is reimagined as a sci-fi comic and Rama modeled on the line of American superheroes, the frequent use of Sanskrit or Hindi terminology (especially in the first volume) is the most obvious indicator that the creators ground the epic within a North Indian culture, thus continuing the geographical and linguistic bias of the TV *Ramayan*. For example, the pilot of sophisticated Armagarhian spaceships is called *sarathi*,<sup>4</sup> the doctor is referred to as *Vaidya*,<sup>5</sup> the atrium is called *mandir*,<sup>6</sup> and Hindi words are used for even commonplace terms like bread, liquor and chance, with footnotes providing their translations. Characters also refer to important concepts in Hindu philosophy such as *dharma*, *karma*<sup>7</sup> and *moksha*<sup>8</sup> in different contexts, though they are mentioned in passing. At one point in the first volume, Lakshman blames Rama for denying him the chance to obtain ‘veergati’, a specifically Kshatriya conception of martyrdom. Caleb Simmons’ interviews with Americans who had read the comic book revealed that the use of “strange” Indian words was one factor behind their inability to

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<sup>4</sup> Translated as ‘charioteer’

<sup>5</sup> Vaidya is a Sanskrit word that is still in use for Ayurvedic doctors.

<sup>6</sup> Translated as ‘temple.’

<sup>7</sup> A Sanskrit term meaning ‘action’ or ‘deed.’ It refers to the spiritual principle that one’s actions have an impact on future happiness/suffering.

<sup>8</sup> Refers to salvation from the endless cycle of birth and death through union with the divine.

relate to the comics, as well as the lack of moral ambiguity and character development (203-204).<sup>9</sup>

This impetus towards cultural specificity translates into the Aryanization of the epic, as is evident in the foreword. In the opening pages of the first two volumes, the sage Vishwamitra, who is the preceptor of Rama and Lakshmana in the Valmiki epic, becomes the reader's guide. In the introduction to the series, he tells us that in a post-apocalyptic era, only two continents exist: Aryavarta and Nark.<sup>10</sup> In Aryavarta, Armagarh is the last bastion of humans and boasts superior technology and lifestyle to its neighboring countries, populated by "various intelligent and anthropomorphic races like the ape-men 'Vanaras,' the bird-men 'Garudas,' bear-men 'Bhalus,' and the bovine people 'Brishavs.'" Vishwamitra tells us that "Armagarh breeds its own protectors, the finest of warriors, the Kshatriyas, matchless in martial supremacy and unparalleled in courage." Nark, on the other hand, is populated with "myriad savage races called Asuras." The ruler of the continent, Ravan, is a monstrous being spawned by the Apocalypse, who is intent on conquering Aryavarta (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 5).

Aryavarta is one of many old names for India, and is a politically charged term. Vasudha Dalmia observes that many Hindus regard Hinduism as a monolinear process going back to the coming of the Aryans and the Word of the Vedas (21). In his influential discussion on the construction of Hindu identity in the nationalist and post-independence era Gyanendra Pandey writes that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century reassertion of

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<sup>9</sup> Simmons notes that the series didn't gain a large following in India either. In his interviews with participants from Indian youth hostels, they cited confusion on why the epic was given a futuristic setting (204).

<sup>10</sup> 'Nark' means 'hell' in Sanskrit.

Hinduism, the Aryans of Aryadhes were the 'original' and most civilized inhabitants of the world who had been in possession of the land for 8000-10,000 years before 'foreigners' invaded the land (3003). 19<sup>th</sup> century Hindu revivalist Swami Dayananand described the Vedic Aryas as "a primordial and elect people to whom the Veda has been revealed by God and whose language—Sanskrit—is said to be the 'Mother of all languages (qtd in Jaffrelot 125). The term Aryavarta is inextricably tied up to the idea that India is a Hindu nation (an idea first propounded by Hindu nationalist ideologues in the 1920s), and to the discourse which has declared Hindus "to be the most ancient and civilized nation in the world, unparalleled in their philosophical and spiritual achievements, accommodating, tolerant, united....even, in a fundamental sense, unconquerable" (Pandey 2997). The creators' use of the term Aryavarta thus reiterates the conception of a hoary, great Hindu civilization which has been crucial to Hindutva discourse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as the contemporary historical juncture.

The map accompanying Vishwamitra's preface depicts Aryavarta and Nark, which are expanded versions of India and Sri Lanka. The map of Aryavarta is loosely reminiscent of older India maps, such as a 5<sup>th</sup> century map in which the nation's north-west frontiers included other parts of Asia. It is worth noting that some material published by one of the Hindu-Right organizations, RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak) contains longing references to the expanded colonial territories of erstwhile kings, which included other parts of South Asia, leading Basu, Datta and Sarkar to observe that "empire building was obviously the high water-mark of Hindu glory" (78). Given the term's imperialist connotations, it is unsurprising that Aryavarta is ruled by an oligarchy, and has "settlements" and "outposts" in neighboring lands which pay taxes to

Armagarh's council led by Chief Councilor Dashrath (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 25). There are many slippages between the futuristic epic of the universe and authoritative versions of the epic. Though Armagarh is technically not a monarchy, the councilors stay in a royal abode called *rajmahal* (the term for palace in Hindi) and Dashrath is called *Maharaja* (the Sanskrit term for king).

*Ramayan 3392 AD* also adopts the hierarchical caste structure of authoritative versions of the epic. At the beginning of volume 1, we are introduced to Rama, Lakshman, Shatrugana and Bharata as they engage in a playful competition of strength, quipping about what it means to be a Kshatriya. What the foreword hints at is made explicit in the first few pages of the comic book—Kshatriya warriors are Armagarh's only hope against the increasingly vicious assault against the *asuras*. The fate of humanity, of the anthropomorphic inhabitants and of the entire universe depends on the protection provided by Kshatriyas.

Interestingly, the comic complicates the narrative of Kshatriya masculinity. Rama's apparent failure to uphold Kshatriya values becomes the rationale for his exile from the kingdom. When the post he is protecting is attacked by *asuras* Viv-shan (Ravana's brother Vibheeshana in the Valmiki version) and Tataka, Rama's team is under-equipped to fight the battle. Knowing that they are about to lose, Rama negotiates with Viv-Shan to give the residents safe passage in return for them surrendering the fort since, in his view, lives are more important than territory. Lakshman is outraged at what he sees as Rama's betrayal: "This is sacrilege. You've gone against the dharma of a Kshatriya warrior. You surrendered even though a Kshatriya is to defend his land with his last breath. You are a coward!" (Chopra and

Kapur, *Ramayana 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 55). The councilors similarly oppose Dashrath's plea for mercy on the grounds that "Rama's act goes against the laws and very belief of Kshatriyan dharma," and he is exiled for 14 years. In different instances, Rama is shown to be a strategic warrior who puts survival over the Kshatriya code of preserving one's honor at all costs.

Rama also deviates from the model of Kshatriya masculinity that we see in authoritative versions of the epic by his resistance to his *dharma*. After leaving Ayodhya, Rama is disillusioned with the political order and becomes a fisherman. Sage Vishwamitra and Lakshmana find him too bitter to join their fight against the *asuras*, and it is only when Vishwamitra shows him a vision of the impending apocalypse—in which Rama's sword is keeping the *asuras*' forces of darkness at bay—that he agrees to join Vishwamitra. Vishwamitra tells Rama that he is a special being whose birth was magical, and that he has the power to master other-worldly dimensions (the 'lokas'). Rama refuses to believe him, proclaiming that he is joining the battle not because he believes in ideals or "prophecies of the apocalypse or chosen ones" but because he is interested in survival (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayana 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 83). He also rebels against being Seeta's protector until the *asuras* enter Mithila and their attempt to abduct her rouses his warrior instincts.

Rama's bitterness at the treatment meted out to him by his family is in sharp contrast to the calm obedience that he displays to Dasarath's orders in the Valmiki epic. Rama in the comic book series may have divine origins, but he is cast as a secular figure who is psychologized (albeit, not to any depth) in an attempt to align his representation with that of American comic book protagonists. In fact, Rama's anti-

establishment instincts have much in common with American superheroes, as does his devotion to a personal rather than legal sense of justice and demi-god status (Reynolds 14-15). Rama's angst, rebelliousness and secular character make his persona very distinct from the Rama of the versions by Valmiki, Tulsidas or Ramanand Sagar.

Nevertheless, the comics' reconfiguration of Rama shares ideological ground with the depiction of Rama in authoritative versions of the epic and, to some extent, the discursive construction of Rama in the Hindutva movement. The portrayal of Rama as a muscular warrior is not without precedent in Indian public culture. Images of a martial Rama pulling his bowstring became popular during the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign in the early 1990s. In her rich and erudite essay, "Deity to Crusader: The Changing Iconography of Ram," Anuradha Kapur traces a marked iconographic shift in popular imagery of Rama. She observes that in the older images, Rama is "compassionate, benign, and graceful; he is ever-serene and ever-forgiving; he is ever-youthful, boyish almost, with a conspicuous lack of masculine power; and yet, he is the lord of the universe" (77). Discussing Rama's visual representation in medieval miniature paintings, she makes the crucial point that even in paintings which depict battle-scenes, "forms of heroism do not get locked with aggressive masculinity and prowess" (91). Rama remains controlled and contained throughout the battle-scenes.

The "almost androgynous, unmuscled, somewhat disengaged body that marked earlier portrayals" is superseded by a masculine Rama who looks like a human crusader—one that needs others behind him, as testified by the slogans of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement (104-105). Whereas earlier portrayals did not need to show Rama to be physically powerful, since "all his adversaries are axiomatically less

powerful than him...this Ram needs martial gear and an adult masculine body to cut down his adversaries and reclaim a home” (104-105). The departure from these established iconographic conventions, Kapur argues, is linked to the formation of Hindu absolutist aggression. According to Arvind Rajagopal, the Janmabhoomi issue transformed Rama into a symbol of a militant campaign claiming to span the country and simultaneously standing in for nation and citizen (“Ram Janmabhoomi, Consumer Identity and Image-Based Politics” 1662). The refashioning of Rama as a muscular warrior in *krodhitbhava*,<sup>11</sup> leading an army to avenge injustice, was a deliberate move by the right-wing organizations to inspire aggressive masculinity and appeal to Hindu manhood. Rama was idealized as the militant Hindu warrior who could militate against emasculation at the hands of foreigners (in this context, Muslims) and inspired his followers to do the same. This image subordinated a variety of other images that had been associated with the god, and was in direct contrast to older iconography which was meant to inspire reverence and contemplation (1663).

Tapan Basu, Pradeep Datta and others note that “Ram has been central to the Rashtriya SwayamSevak Sangh’s (RSS)<sup>12</sup> ‘cultural’ project right from its inception in 1925” (12). During the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (another key organization of the Hindu Right) offered viewers two images of Ram—“Ram the warrior, fighting for his rights in a battle that signifies apocalyptic upheaval, and Ram the king, embodiment of a golden age of Hindu culture, source of stability and reassurance” (Basu, Datta, Sarkar et al. 62). Rama’s gleaming weapons were meant,

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<sup>11</sup> *Krodhitbhava*’ roughly translates as ‘in an angry mood.’

<sup>12</sup> A key organization of the Hindu Right.

implicitly, for the destruction of Muslims. The context of *Ramayan 3392 AD's* representation of Rama is widely different, and he is obviously not a symbol for “revenge” against Muslims or the reclamation of a lost birthright. However, even though the series never uses the word Hindu, it presents Rama as a militaristic hero charged with rescuing a Hindu nation (Aryavarta) from the brink of collapse. He is the key to the restoration of a fractured world, and a source of stability. Furthermore, Rama inhabits an aggressive masculinity and is the chief representative of an authoritarian, caste elite that is composed entirely of Kshatriya males. Rama’s representation in the series needs to be understood within the context of the relationship between caste and Hindutva.

Much work has been done on how cultural nationalism in the colonial era and post-independence era has reinforced hegemonies of caste and patriarchy (Sarkar 1997, Dalmia and von Stietencron 1995. van der Veer 1994). Himani Bannerji argues that the rise of caste and religion-based politics in India since the 1980s has “sharpened the high caste Hindu male as the typological India citizen—in effect, if not in law” (377). Such a collapse goes back to Hindu discourse in the 19th and 20th century. R.S. Gowalkar, who was a major proponent of Hindutva in the early twentieth century, and the second leader of Rashtriya Swayam Sevak, created the category of Hindu as a series of exclusions. While the primary exclusions were for Muslims, Christians and Communists, the Hindu also appears to be male, upper-caste and possibly North Indian in his discourse (Pandey 3001). Scholars have observed that “organized Hindutva emerges right from the beginning as an upper-caste reaction to efforts at self-assertion by downtrodden groups within the Hindu fold” (Basu, Datta, Sarkar et al. 16). Support from high-caste groups has been central to the resurgence of the Hindutva movement

since the 1990s (Sarkar 389; Udayakumar 118-119) and the rising political power of the lower castes in politics in recent years has presented a challenge to BJP (Jaffrelot 481). P.K. Vijayan observes that the growth of Hindu nationalism as an ideology and the fact that “the strong patriarchalism of brahmanical codes of succession remained well in place” in laws that were passed in post-independence India are important factors for understanding the dominant masculine hegemony of brahmanical Hinduism. The ideals of masculinity present in the pre-colonial India—“the ascetic, Brahmanical conception of power, and the warrior, kshatriyac one”—are the hegemonic masculinities that have been repurposed in the contemporary historical moment, specifically in the context of state-sanctioned individual rights (Vijayan 376-377).

The hegemony of the caste elite in *Ramayan 3392 AD* is made explicit at the end of the first volume, when the elite royal commandos of Armagarh find out that the leaders of the oligarchy of Armagarh have been replaced by *asura* impostors. They confer that the only way to save Armagarh (now that King Dashrath is dead and Rama is in exile) is to find someone from Rama’s dynasty, the Suryavanshi clan, since they (Kshatriyas) “have been the leaders and greatest men of Armagarh for ages” (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 155). We learn that the Suryavanshi dynasty’s genetic pool is superior to that of other humans or other creatures because of the selective breeding process of Armagarh’s dynasties (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 161). Thus the assumptions of their “racial supremacy” over other Armagarhian communities that we saw at the beginning of volume 1 (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 11) has its base in caste-based supremacy. The genetic supremacy of Kshatriya males, one that is based in caste-based endogamy, is

reminiscent of the eugenic core of mi-20<sup>th</sup> century fascism, even though there is no hint of ethnic cleansing in the series. It also refers back to the racial theory expounded by Hindu nationalist ideologues in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was “more a racism of domination than a racism of extermination” and translated to “upper-caste racism” (Jaffrelot 140).

The equation between caste and race is extended further in volume 2. While in volume 1, we learn that in Armagarh, Shudras (the lowest order in the *varna* system, who were known as the Untouchables and are now commonly referred to as Dalits) are the working class people of Armagarh, in volume 2, they are transformed into a bestial, predatory race called the “rat-people” led by a ghoulish creature named Shaab. Since the comics slightly change the spellings of characters from the epic, it is safe to assume that Shaab refers to Shabri, the Shudra woman who is blessed by Rama for her devotion to him in the Valmiki version. After Seeta grows vegetation for the monstrous tribe, Shaab immediately bows down in front of Seeta, calling her goddess, and offers that she and her children will be Seeta’s servants all her life (Dasgupta and Kang, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 2, 29). We are told in the guidebook that this “humble race” worships an idol of Seeta. Thus, *Ramayan 3392 AD* effects the Hinduization of lower castes.

While the “rat-people” are dehumanized the most in the series, other races are also represented as bestial and depraved, both visually as well as textually. The setting of volume 2 is the degenerate city of Panchavati, where Rama and his companions are captured, and which attracts “hordes of beggars, thieves, brigands and fugitives—all the scum of Aryavarta” (Dasgupta and Kang, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 2, 82). The spectators

at the arena where Rama and Lakshmana are made to fight as gladiators comprise of “vanaras and nagas, bhalus and asuras and degenerate hybrids of all species alike” (83). From the visual absence of any humans apart from Rama and his companions, it would seem that the “degenerate species” only refers to anthropomorphic beings and the *asuras* (demons).

As we saw in Vishwamitra’s preface, modernity (as symbolized by advanced technology) is the special privilege of the Kshatriya-elite ruled Armagarh. At the beginning of volume 1, Rama and Lakshmana are sent to Janasthan, a settlement of Armagarh. Lakshman rants to Rama that Janasthan is a “backward” outpost that is also behind with its taxes: “Rama, for two decades, they’ve not upgraded the fort’s technology. Plebians! Why can’t they understand that lack of necessity does not mean lack of initiative for progress!” (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD Vol. 1*, 25). He later confesses that he is fearful that Janasthan’s primitive residents will compel him to participate in their “heathen” festivities (29). The residents of Janasthan are dressed in attire traditionally worn by Rajasthani villagers, in stark contrast to the heavily armored non-traditional gear worn by Rama and Lakshman. Moreover, the residents address Rama and Lakshman with the prefix “Lord,” underlining the stratification of Armagarhian society. Though Rama is never explicitly referred to as a Hindu god, the refrain of “Jai Rama” (Hail Rama) penciled four times on the page where he announces war against *asuras* to the Janasthian people (32) and his de-facto status as the ruler of the settlement demonstrates the collapse between the comic books’ representation of Rama and his political symbolism.

While the imperialist undertones of Armagarh are made explicit in the Janasthan episode, other episodes indicate its Kshatriya rulers' history of supremacy over other races. In the third volume of the series, Lakshman is engaged in a contest with the bhalu (bear) King Jambavan (who is an ally of Rama's in the Tulsidas version). Jambavan overpowers the "super warrior" easily but refrains from hurting Lakshman because he owes a debt to the latter's forefathers. He tells Lakshman: "Your forefather, *Maharaj Vagirath*, gave the Syamantak jewel to me as a reward for helping him dig the great canal of Sarayu. Once we were *savages* in the caves of Rishyamuk, but the jewel made my people civilized and prosperous. Today, I pay a small part of that debt by *sparing* you (Dasgupta, Kang and Kotian *Ramayana 3392 AD* Vol. 3, 66; emphasis in original).

Rama's determination to help the *vanaras* who have descended into civil war, also carries connotations of a civilizing mission. Though Rama and Lakshman enlist as mercenaries in Sugreave's army that has been formed to fight Baali, Lakshman tells the readers that "it has become [Rama's] covenant with the *vanaras* to *save* Kishkinda. Save it from its mad monarch" (Dasgupta, Kang and Kotian *Ramayana 3392 AD* Vol. 3, 54; emphasis in original). It is Rama who negotiates with "monster king" Baali, and who has a plan for his downfall. Volume 3 is the last of the series to be published and it is unclear if the comics will be published in the future (when I asked Suresh Seetharaman, CFO of Graphic India, this question during a personal interview, his answer was vague). Given the arc of the story, we can presume that Rama would have succeeded in being the "savior" the *vanaras* needed.

*Ramayan 3392 AD* represents Rama as a Kshatriya warrior with kingly overtones who embarks on a mission to save the inferior race of *vanaras* from self-destruction, and unifying them to build a strong army against the *rakhsasas*. In her analysis of the TV *Ramayan*, Purnima Mankekar claims that through Rama's embodiment of a "masculinist Kshatriya (and therefore upper-caste) dharma," the series participated in a "racist, casteist, masculinist construction of the Hindu/Indian past" (Mankekar 206). She writes:

The continuities between Hindu nationalist assertions of a masculine Aryan/Hindu/Indian identity and the *Ramayan's* depictions of masculinity were most striking in the portrayal of the kshatriya dharma, or the code of conduct of the kshatriyas...the *Ramayan* extolled the virtues of kshatriya manhood in terms of physical strength, martial prowess and a willingness to take up arms for a 'just cause'...*Ramayan's* construction of masculinity was also intrinsically patriarchal in that it was based on militarism and the masculinist 'protection' of women (along with brahmans, lower castes, and all other social groups that are vulnerable and therefore depend on kshatriyas for protection. (206)

Unlike the TV *Ramayan*, *Ramayan 3392 AD* projects a casteist, masculinist notion of the Hindu nation in the future, rather than the past. In reinforcing Brahmanical-Kshatriya supremacy, the series not only upholds the caste biases of authoritative versions, but also reinforces hegemonic models of masculinity which have been central to the discourse of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Hindu nationalism. Its descriptions of how Kshatriya warriors have "civilized" inferior races (castes) serves to underline the imperialist associations of the epic, as well as endow the higher castes with moral supremacy and civilizational responsibility.

### **Sita's Reconfiguration**

As we have seen in chapter 1, Sita has been crucial to the *Ramayana's* appropriation by Hindu nationalist ideologues, and has symbolized a femininity that has

served patriarchal and nationalist ideologies. To analyze how *Ramayan 3392 AD* imagines the nation, we must consider how it refashions Sita. In the series, Sita (spelled here as Seeta) is not Rama's wife, but rather a young woman who has never met Rama before her country Mithila is attacked. Not showing Seeta and Rama as a married couple is a deliberate choice, for the series shows them fall in love in the second volume of the series, in an obvious attempt to appeal to a young, contemporary readership. As the daughter of mother earth, Seeta possesses "maya vidya" or "earth magic." Sage Vishwamitra, one of the Seven Seers who has founded Armagarh and who returns to prevent the world's destruction, appoints Rama as Seeta's "protector," since she is "the key to the salvation of the wretched world" and he knows that Ravana wants to kidnap her for her powers (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 109). The panels in which Seeta is introduced undergo a dramatic shift in tone and palette. While darker colors dominate the comic till then, the change of scene to Mithila is marked by blue and green backgrounds and the presence of vegetation, which has been absent till now. Seeta appears as the embodiment of fecundity, holding an exotic flower and surrounded by birds, plants and worshipping children (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 101).

Seeta in the *Ramayan 3392 AD* comics represents the duality that is inherent in the concept of the female in the Hindu tradition—"on the one hand, she is fertile, benevolent—the bestower; on the other hand, she is aggressive, malevolent—the destroyer" (Wadley 113). Even as Seeta has the ability to grow plants and flowers and heal dying people, she possesses the power of destruction. She brings the forest

crashing down on an *asura*, and at the end of volume 2, she destroys the entire city of Panchvati. According to Wadley,

the female is first of all *Shakti*, Energy/Power, the energizing principle of the universe; she is also *Prakriti*, Nature, the undifferentiated matter of the universe...Uncultured power is dangerous, however: 'women= power+nature= danger' represents one essential vision of femaleness in Hinduism...The benevolent goddesses in the Hindu pantheon are precisely those that transferred control of their sexuality (Power/Nature) to their husbands. (115-116)

*Ramayan 3392 AD* reiterates this belief by showing how Seeta needs male mediators to be able to utilize or harness her powers. At the beginning of volume 2, Lakshmana persuades her to heal Rama, but she confesses that she doesn't have the strength to do so; she saves Rama accidentally, when her tears of frustration fall on him. Subsequently, when Rama asks her to use her magic to prevent them from getting killed by predators, she tells him: "I don't know how to control what I do" (Dasgupta and Kang, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 2, 26). Only when Rama tells her that he believes in her does she miraculously cause vegetation to grow out of junkyards.

The blurb concerning Seeta in the long guidebook at the end of volume 3 reinforces her lack of agency. After mentioning that her connection to earth gives her "Maya Vidya" or Earth Magic, it adds: "However, Seeta's power comes to her instinctually, and in sporadic bursts. She has never trained herself to control the infinite power she yields" (Dasgupta, Kang and Kotian *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 3, 88). Seeta's lack of mastery over her special gifts becomes the impetus for her abduction. As Seeta escapes asuras of Panchvati at the end of volume 2, she runs into Ravana who has taken the form of (the dead) sage Vishwamitra. He insists that she should come with him to get guidance on how to control her powers. He then takes her to the gladiatorial arena in which Rama and Lakshmana are fighting, and convinces her that since her

friends are doomed, she should destroy the city of Panchvati to cleanse it.

Ravana/Vishwamitra's repeated suggestions to Sita to give the city its "salvation" create a hypnotic effect on Seeta (symbolized by the dilation of her pupils), and she causes huge venus flytraps to emerge from the earth and engulf the city. As she wakes up from her daze, regretting what she has done, Vishwamitra reveals himself to be Ravana, proclaiming:

You have served your purpose in this land. The story of Panchvati ends here...I now claim *you*, Seeta, as my own. Together we shall *reshape* the world to our will. We shall become *gods!* And you shall become the *bride of Ravan!* (Dasgupta and Kang *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 2, 120-121; emphases in original)

Sara Austin argues that "because Sita abuses her Shakti status to rescue Rama, defying a cultural script that calls for the man to rescue her, Sita invites violence upon herself. Thus, Sita loses her Shakti status and is rendered powerless by Ravana, and she must wait for her honour to be rescued by Rama before she can prove her virtue by becoming a Sati" (130). However, there is no indication in the text that Sita destroys Panchvati to rescue Rama—in fact, Ravana convinces her that, as a gladiatorial slave, Rama will be killed, even if he wins the battle. Ravana exploits Sita's feelings for Rama by asking her to destroy the city before witnessing the "spectacle of Rama's death" (Dasgupta and Kang *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 2, 110). Austin's claim that Sita's abduction by Ravana is "the moment she shifts from Shakti to Sati" (130) is also problematic—the tension in this series is not between the Shakti/Sati dimensions of femaleness, but between Shakti/Prakriti, as we saw earlier. Ravana's manipulation of Sita's abilities indicates that without male protection (first that of her father Janaka, and then that of Rama), Sita's powers are dangerous. Sita's lack of control underlines the

myth of “the male harnessing dangerous female Power, thus rendering it benevolent” (Wadley 116).

If a defining characteristic of Kshatriya masculinity in the *Ramayana* is Rama’s protection of people who are weaker in the social hierarchy (Mankekar 206), showing Seeta to be in need of constant male protection/guidance despite her enormous powers reaffirms this discourse of masculinity in the text. This is especially the case in Panchvati (the setting of volume 2), where she is constantly the object of male/animal desire. Many panels of volume 2 revolve around her attempted rape by various races, and Rama’s repeated rescue as well as her own resistance.

We observed in chapter 1 that in the colonial period, Sita, as an upper caste woman, became the symbol of the pure, uncorrupted essence of the nation who must be saved by Kshatriya warriors from the polluting hands of the Other (the British and later, Muslims). In the contemporary moment, the figure of the upper caste/class woman has not only become the “ground on which questions of modernity and tradition are framed, she is the embodiment of boundaries between licit and illicit forms of sexuality, as well as the guardian of the nation’s morality” (John and Nair 8). Rupal Oza shows that the figure of the “new Indian woman” has come to occupy a central locus of concern within middle class public debates in the post-liberalization era because the anxiety associated with a globalizing nation-state was displaced onto women’s bodies and practices. In this paradigm, Indian borders could/should be open to economic liberalization but not to “Western” cultural influences. Since women’s subjectivity has historically been framed as a pure repository of culture, it is primarily toward women that

this concern was directed as opposed to men whose encounter with the “West” is not framed in terms of purity” (Oza 24).

*Ramayan 3392 AD*'s representation of Seeta demonstrates a deep anxiety about the sexuality of the liberated, high caste woman. Though Rama is able to fend off some predators, towards the end of volume 2, *asuras* of Panchvati kidnap and sell Seeta as a courtesan and imprison Rama and Lakshmana as gladiatorial slaves. When we were first introduced to Seeta, she wore a sari, much like her counterpart in *ACK* comics, *Sita's Ramayana* and *Sita: Daughter of the Earth*. When she is sold by the *asuras*, Seeta is made to dress in a bikini and harem pants, thus transforming her explicitly into a sexual object. Significantly, Ravana kidnaps her soon after she has been sold as a courtesan: it is only when Seeta's moral and sexual purity has been compromised that Ravana reveals his true self and agenda. In order to appeal to its young, urban, cosmopolitan audience, *Ramayan 3392 AD* creates an agential Seeta who is more powerful than Rama, and who saves his life repeatedly. Her divinity and power is foregrounded—in contrast, Rama's divinity is only hinted at—and she deviates from the stereotype of an ideal, devoted wife. However, in reinforcing the myth of dangerous female power and having Seeta's uncontrolled sexuality be a factor in her abduction, the series betrays its anxieties about the independent, modern Indian woman.

Rama's response to Seeta's abduction underlines the militarization of the epic. When Lakshman suggests that they try and find Seeta, he says: “We shall, but not alone...I will *tear down* the empire of Ravan brick by brick...and for that I will build the *greatest army* this world has ever known” (Dasgupta and Kang *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 2, 125; emphasis in original). These words are accompanied by an image of the *vanara*

army driving tanks, led by Angad (Bali's son), who becomes a main character in volume 3. Rama's words make clear that the mission is not just about rescuing Seeta—it is about taking revenge against Ravana and destroying his empire. Volume 3 all but erases Seeta (she is present in one episode treated in just 3 pages), revolving instead around the war Rama and his *vanara* allies fight against Bali, who has transformed into a “monster king” ever since Ravana's “nanites” corrupted his soul.

In the series, Rama's battles against Bali and Ravana are not simple battles of good vs. evil and morality vs. decadence but a contest of human vs. posthuman, and perhaps most significantly, between a science based in spirituality and untrammelled scientific advancement symptomized by synthetic, artificial life. As we shall see in the next section, this “spiritual” science has roots in colonial-era Hindu nationalist discourse.

### **Vedic Science, Modernity and the Epic**

In his book *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, Gyan Prakash argues that “the emergence and existence of India is inseparable from the authority of science and its functioning as the name for freedom and enlightenment, power and progress” (3). In response to British conceptions of “superstitious” natives who needed enlightenment, Indian Western-educated elite nationalists sought to create an Indian modernity that must be irreducibly different, one that must “reflect India's unique and universal scientific and technological heritage” (7). According to Prakash,

Though rational criticism had been practiced in India long before the British set foot there, the Western-educated intelligentsia felt impelled to reinterpret classical texts and cast them in the language of the Western discourse. This produced a body of indigenous scientific traditions consistent with Western science. Nationalism arose by laying its claim on revived traditions, by appropriating classical texts and traditions of science as the heritage of the nation. To be a nation was to be endowed with science, which had become the touchstone of rationality...As practicing scientists and Hindu religious reformers read ancient texts and interpreted traditions

to identify an original “Hindu science” upon which an Indian universality can stand, this also became the symbol for the modern nation. (6-8)

Prakash observes that under the wave of Hindu revivalism in the twentieth century led by Swami Dayanand, Vedic Hinduism was asserted to be superior to all other religions: “The vision of a pure, scientific Hinduism of the Vedas” was based on the assertion of the absolute authority of the Vedas, which were seen not as religious texts, but transcendent knowledge (92).

Philip Lutgendorf charts a similar narrative of resistance to colonial stereotypes, focusing on the reactions of Indian intelligentsia to “the prevailing British assumption, bolstered by Christian triumphalism and Victorian medical discourse, that all Indians were representative of a mixed and ‘fallen stock,’ whose once-pure Aryanism had been “enervated through sexual profligacy and miscegenation” (338). He notes that early twentieth century Indian scholars gave *Ramayana* a euhemerist interpretation, with some scholars attempting to demonstrate that the “divine weapons” used by Rama and his contemporaries were actually “Aeroplanes, Fire-arms and Electric weapons, gases and smoke” indicative of a technologically advanced civilization (Lutgendorf 340-41). Such attempts to render Sanskrit legacy “scientific” can be traced back to Swami Dayanand’s exegesis of the Vedas, and have become commonplace assumptions in some 20<sup>th</sup> century synopses of the Valmiki epic as well (341).

The influence of this discourse is evident in Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayan*, which “depicted ancient Hindu society as politically and socially equal to the challenge of modernity, indeed to have anticipated and surpassed it” (Rajagopal *Politics after Television* 104). In a sequence that Sagar boasted about as an improvement he made over existing versions of the epic, Guru Vashisht, the preceptor of King Dasarath’s court

lectures his students about magnetic waves, mentioning the *kundalini* (“a magnetic node,” in Sagar’s formulation). Rajagopal suggests that this episode is part of “Sagar’s attempt to modernize ancient education, or at least our understanding of it” (105). Furthermore, Rajagopal observes that “the theme of ‘spiritual science’ and of benevolently controlled powers of destruction recurs frequently,” sanctifying weaponry if it is used for national/racial defense (108).

The *Ramayan 3392 AD* series carries over many of these tropes from the Sagar serial, and testifies to the continued pervasiveness of the collapse between Vedic science and the vision of Indian modernity. To begin with, as we saw earlier, Rama’s homeland Armagarh is the only land that has sunlight which is enabled by a “futuristic marvel” of a reactor called “Shakti Kundali.”<sup>13</sup> Rama’s and his brothers’ weapons, which retain their Sanskrit names, store solar energy and contain telescopic parts (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 176). The militarization of (what is projected as) ancient science is indicative of the martial ethos of the series. Rama’s and his brothers’ weapons serve to reinforce the hypermasculinity of the Kshatriya warriors while also testifying to the modernity of ancient, indigenous science. The “guidebook” at the end of volume 3 describes the weapons in great detail; images of the weapons are accompanied by information on each component (Dasgupta, Kang and Kotian, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 3, 100).

This version of Hindu/Vedic science is central for the creation of the sci-fi fantasy universe of the series, which adds layers to the pre-existing mythology. For example,

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<sup>13</sup> *Shakti*, which is literally translated as “force,” is a loaded term that has religious and spiritual connotations, while *Kundalini* in yogic theory is primal energy located at the base of the spine (“kundali” is a Sanskrit term used in astrology, but the reactor’s name resonates more closely with the concept of “kundalini.”)

the ability of *rakhsasas* to morph into any form in the *Ramayana* is explained in terms of nano-technology which is given a Sanskritized twist. We learn in volume 1 that:

After years of research, the *Brahmin* scientists discovered that *rakshasas* are not born but created...their whole body is laced with *yantra*<sup>14</sup> *tech* in the subcutaneous layer which gives them the power to morph into any other creature of molecular density...the yantra tech is actually *sentient microscopic mechanical organisms* which forms [sic] the being of *Ravan*. In the olden ages it was known as *nano-technology*. (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 184; emphases in original)

“Yantra tech” then seems to be a more advanced form of technology than nano-technology. Similarly, Ravana and the Brahmins have special powers to travel to other-worldly dimensions called ‘lokas’ (‘loka’ means ‘world’ in Sanskrit); the nuclear apocalypse is referred to as ‘Mahavinaash’ (the term’s literal translation is ‘the great annihilation’); the airfield of Armagarh is called ‘vimantal’ (the term for airport in Hindi); spaceships are called ‘vayu yaans’ (literally translated as aircrafts) and an Armagarhian bomb is a ‘visfotak’ (the term for explosives in Hindi).

Rajagopal observes that the TV *Ramayan* showcased the epic universe as proto-modern and “the nation’s past as already scientific and progressive, yet steeped in a devotional, spiritual culture” (103). The *Ramayan 3392 AD* series also succeeds in showing the nation’s past as scientific and progressive, but it simultaneously projects this vision as the nation’s future. The series is reflective of discourses on military strength and Vedic science that have been in currency in the last couple of decades.

In her book, *The Making of Neoliberal India: Nationalism, Gender, and the Paradoxes of Globalization*, Rupal Oza discusses the nuclear tests conducted by the BJP government shortly after coming to power in 1998 in the context of globalization

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<sup>14</sup> Yantra is the Sanskrit word for a mystical symbol.

and the long-standing emphasis of the Hindu Right on military strength. She argues that the nuclear tests were indicative of 'fetishized sovereignty' insofar as "they represent the displacement of control of unstable political-economic conditions in the country onto demonstrations of militarized strength" (105). Oza observes that the BJP's rhetoric on the occasion highlighted the nuclear tests as a sign of national virility that reinforced the well-demonstrated links between militarization, masculinity and nationalism. The statements made by the Hindu right-wing signaled the tests as a response to the emasculation of India from the colonial encounter (which had also been deployed during the Babri Masjid episode), and drew on the gendered habitation of the nation which designate men as the nation's protectors and women as its repositories and boundaries (Oza 113).

The nuclear bomb, in its display of strength and control, was part of the BJP government's quest for international recognition as a postcolonial, modern state (Oza 125). For the middle classes, which had been struggling with economic vulnerability and political instability in the years that followed liberalization, the nuclear tests "served as displays of India's strength and resoluteness that temporarily assuages anxieties of instability while simultaneously tapping into sentiments of India's emergence as a world power" (Oza 128). For Hindu nationalists, the nuclear tests were precisely "the expression of India's strength that would gain the respect of the West" but they simultaneously "adopted anticolonial rhetoric to fiercely demonstrate their independence from the West" (Oza 126).

Moreover, the nuclear tests were incorporated into the discourse of indigenous Hindu science. Meera Nanda observes that "the nuclear tests were celebrated as a

religious event and even the physics behind the bomb was fitted into the discourse of *vigyan* or Hindu science” (71). Hindu nationalists proclaimed that the bomb had been foretold in the Bhagavad Gita and shortly after the explosion, VHP ideologues vowed to build a temple dedicated to *Shakti* on the site of the explosion (Nanda 41). The bombs became “a symbol of India’s advanced science and technology, the roots of which could be traced back to ancient Vedic texts” (Nanda 72). Nanda links this development to the broader phenomenon of Hindu nationalists equating modern science with the Vedas—a conflation that goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as we have seen above.

She notes that “treating modern science as just ‘another name’ for Vedic science and vice versa has become the state’s justification for introducing Hindu precepts and superstitions—Vedic astrology, priest-craft and faith healing, for example, as part of science education in colleges and universities” (Nanda 71). In 2002, the Indian government started funding scientists in premier defense research institutes to develop techniques of biological and chemical warfare based upon the *Arthashastra*, a 2300-year old treatise on statecraft and warfare (Nanda 73). In May 2016, the Indian Institutes of Technologies (IITs), the premier engineering institutes in the country, were asked by the government to teach the Vedas and Sanskrit to the students for a better understanding of science and technology as elaborated in the scriptures (Revanna, “Govt. Asks IITs to Teach Sanskrit to Know Vedic Science Better). The Hinduization of science is, in fact, a major agenda of the current BJP government. Vijnana Bharati, an RSS-affiliated body spearheading a movement for Swadeshi<sup>15</sup> sciences, is providing key inputs to the government in shaping up the policy in sectors of science and

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<sup>15</sup> A term with loaded political valence, that translates literally to ‘indigenous.’

technology, health, education, environment and engineering, among others (Sharma, “Vedas Meet Modernity in Science”). Clearly, Gyan Prakash’s argument that “the expression of modernity of the Indian nation in the science of the ancient Hindus became a pervasive and enduring feature of the national imagination” (92) extends beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century to the contemporary moment.

*Ramayan 3392 AD*’s reimagining of the epic reflects the nexus between the discourse of military strength, Hindu science, modernity, and the neoliberal nation’s aspirational status as a world power. In transforming the epic universe into a futuristic, technologically advanced, militaristic one that is based on an ancient Hindu mytho-spiritual worldview, *Ramayan 3392 AD* participates in the contemporary nationalist construction of India as a virile, technologically advanced power to be reckoned with, whose scientific development has roots in Vedic knowledge. The series provides us with two visions of science—that of a completely synthetic, artificially constructed, mechanistic science (symbolized by Ravana and the *asuras*) which originated during the nuclear holocaust, and in opposition, the science that is founded by the seven seers, which has allowed Aryavarta to become the most “evolved” race in the universe. The Hindu mytho-spiritual worldview is also represented by Seeta, and constitutes a critique of untrammelled scientific advancement.

In volume 1, we are told that the seven nations of the continent engaged in a nuclear arms race, and one nation decided to build the ultimate weapon that could put an end to all future wars. This weapon was Ravan—“a being of seemingly unlimited power” who was created by grafting human flesh with nanotechnology (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD* Vol. 1, 151). The dark energy from the nuclear holocaust (the

Mahavinaash) “ignited the creature with life” (152), and on gaining consciousness, he morphed all the inhabitants of Nark to his own image (152). While Ravan is clearly an automaton, we are told that he primarily wears a humanoid form “perhaps because of his desire for and envy at the perfection of human beings” (Dasgupta, Kang and Kotian, *Ramayana 3392 AD*, Vol. 3, 89). Ravana’s callous cruelty and sadism is directly linked to his artificial nature. For example, soon after we see Ravana being plugged into machines in a Matrix like scenario, he attacks and nearly strangles Mandodri (his wife in the Valmiki epic who is his closest confidant in the series), saying, “I am not alive and I cannot understand what goes on in your mind when you see your life slipping away like a fistful of sand...Hence I satisfy myself by simply watching as other creatures go through the process” (Dasgupta, Kang and Kotian, *Ramayana 3392 AD*, Vol. 3, 89).

Seeta, with her divine abilities to create and restore life, is presented as the antithesis to Ravan, and he seeks to control that power. In Ashok Vana (a slight modification of Ashok Vatika, where Sita is kept in captivity), Ravan pleads with Seeta to give him the secret of maya vidya, the magic of life, saying:

I have *everything*, Seeta, but I have only the *illusion* of life. I am sentient, yet my mind contains nothing but electronic vapor. My heart is a metallic honeycomb which pumps my silicon fluids, but it cannot synthesize emotions. I am a *singular* artificial being. I can scan, calculate and store data, but never feel. (Dasgupta, Kang and Kotian, *Ramayana 3392 AD*, Vol. 3, 58; emphases in original)

Needless to say, Seeta refuses, and waits for Rama and his army to come rescue her since she has been sedated by Ravana and can’t use her own powers to free herself.

The other vision of science that we are presented with is imbued with religious overtones. We are told that Armagarh was founded by the seven seers or the *saptarishi*. The *saptarishi* are regarded in the Vedas as the patriarchs of the Vedic religion and are

extolled at several points in Vedic and Hindu literature. In the reimagined epic universe, the (Brahmin) seven seers are not only mystical saints, but savvy scientists: “Whatever technology and architecture Armagarh boasts today was the brainchild of those seven great men” (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD Vol.1*, 141). As we saw earlier, this technology includes the ‘Shakti Kundali’ reactor which provides sunlight (the symbolism of light provided by the seers is made even more explicit later on). Towards the end of volume 1, we are presented with images of a huge information vault created by the seven seers, which contains their most secret scientific development—the god program or ‘divya drishti’ (a Sanskrit term that literally translates as ‘divine insight’). When one elite royal commando reacts to being duped by the seers for so many years, another reaffirms his faith in their wisdom: “The seven seers created the program for very specific reasons. The world they had survived demanded a degree of authority that no human could supply. They created what they had to, to preserve and perpetuate whatever limited order had survived the Mahavinaash” (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392 AD Vol. 1*, 145).

A little later, this worldview is reinforced when sage Vashisht’s hologram tells the royal commandos that “Codifying God via religion is the cord that binds people together. Human beings need to believe keeps them restrained. In the absence of belief, chaos reigns. We have seen this degeneration already and must guard against it. Hence we created the divya-drishti...the ‘god program.’ The survival of Armagarh, of man himself, hangs in the success and secrecy of the program” (Chopra and Kapur, *Ramayan 3392*

*AD*, Vol. 1, 157). Thus the series validates the authoritarianism of the Brahmanical-Kshatriyan elite, while tying up science with religion.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, it is the Seven Seers who are responsible for spreading 'light' to other races. According to the guidebook, after founding Armagarh and establishing human rule, the Seven Seers diverted their attention towards the other races, who "gained much from the teachings of the Seven Seers." Since the Seven Seers are the scientists of Armagarh, these "teachings" help races develop their own technology. But the religious symbolism is pervasive too. We learn that Nark, the abode of Ravan is the "dark continent" because "the Seven Seers could not reach this hostile land to spread their teachings and gospel. Hence, Nark still remains mostly an uncharted territory" (Dasgupta, Kang and Kotian *Ramayana 3392 AD* Vol. 3, 81).

In explicitly fusing science with Vedic religion, *Ramayana 3392 AD* reflects the discourse on science that is being propounded by the Hindu Right. If science fiction as a genre aims to project a prescriptive futurity, *Ramayana 3392 AD* squarely locates that futurity in the Brahmanical-Vedic conception of Hindu culture. I have demonstrated in this chapter that the nation takes precedence over the local-global nexus. *Ramayana 3392 AD* is invested in creating a notion of India as a modern, virile, powerful nation dominated by a Brahmanical-Kshatriyan male elite, in which empowered women are subject to control and policing. The series participates in the assumptions of the brahmanical-vedic essence of Hinduism which have been central to the Hindutva discourse, and enacts the Hinduization of lower castes.

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<sup>16</sup> The main god of the Armagarhians is Vishnu, one of the primary gods in Hinduism (though his name is not mentioned, his appearance resembles popular images of the god).

CHAPTER 5  
HANUMAN GOES GRAPHIC: IDENTITY AND FORM IN *TRIUMPH OF HANUMAN*  
AND *SIMIAN*

The visual is imbricated in India's experience of modernity in fundamental ways. Sumathi Ramaswamy observes that "a society becomes truly modern when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images of the nation...patriotism or nationalism in India is an intensely ocular ideology and set of visual habits, grounded in the practice of seeing the nation, and being seen in turn adoring the nation," likening these acts of seeing to *darshan* (xv-xxiii). In a similar vein, Appadurai and Breckenridge contend that Indian visual culture is dominated by "'nationalist realism,' that is, an array of images, symbols, scripts and plots in which the nation is figured as central to the project of modernity" (9). Many scholars have discussed the constitutive role of visual practices in bringing the nation into being in the colonial and postcolonial periods (Brosius 2004, Davis 2007, Dwyer 2006, Dwyer and Pinney 2001, Freitag 2001, Pinney 2004, Jain 2007, Ramaswamy 2003).

A central focus of some of these works has been the differentiated experience of modernity in the Indian context. For example, in *Gods in the Bazaar: the Economies of Calendar Art*, Kajri Jain studies the history of mass-manufactured calendar or *bazaar* art to emphasize differences in the contexts of mass culture in modern Europe and modern India. She builds on arguments that the Habermasian characterization of the public sphere as a primarily secular form does not hold in (post)colonial contexts, given that collective public activities such as religious festivals and processions need to be recognized as political arenas. Jain demonstrates how key features of Enlightenment modernity undergo the process of vernacularization in their interface with the Indian market economy (273-313). Preminda S. Jacob argues for a destabilizing of the center-

periphery model in the context of South Asian museum and street art. She suggests that Appadurai's lens of "mediascapes," which refers to the global circulation of images and information in a disjunctive global cultural economy allows us to see how visual and aural resources are inevitably indigenized, and are in "continuous, complex mutation" (54). Sandria B. Frietag asserts that the visual practices of the Indian modern have to be located in a global world of circulating images and ideas, but that does not necessarily mean that the Indian visual is a copy of some metropolitan original; instead, "the local and the particular exert constant pressure, partialising and pluralizing the global and the universal." ("The Realm of the Visual" 366-394).

The graphic novel, as a form associated with modernity (Garcia 24), offers us fertile ground to examine some of the questions raised in the debates outlined above. While the Indian graphic novel shares many features with its counterpart in other English-speaking countries where the graphic novel has emerged as a popular art form, a distinct feature of many Indian graphic novels is their cultural specificity. Corey Creekmur observes that

the most prominent Indian graphic novels...are emphatically "local" or "national" in their content and concerns, frequently taking on notably controversial or culturally specific subjects that may have little interest or familiarity with international audiences...[This] explains why no individual work has enjoyed international "crossover" success. (349)

For instance, Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* and Naseer Ahmed and Saurabh Singh's *Kashmir Pending* highlight the struggle of peoples for an independent homeland against oppressive state regimes, Amruta Patil's *Kari* depicts the angst of a sexual minority in Mumbai's urban landscape, Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* is a scathing critique of the government's repressive measures during the 1975 Emergency, and *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*, by Srividya Natarajan, S. Anand and Gond folk artists

Subash and Durgabai Vyam, deals with casteism in India.<sup>17</sup> A few of these graphic novels also draw on Indian folk/cartooning traditions such as Gond folk art (*Bhimayana*) and political caricature (*Delhi Calm*).

Moreover, artist-created mythological graphic novels such as Tara Books' *Sita's Ramayana* (2011), Amruta Patil's *Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012) and Abishek Singh's *Krishna: A Journey Within* (2012) draw on epic narrative traditions. As we saw in chapter 1, Campfire has also released many titles drawn on Hindu mythology.

This chapter investigates two graphic novel retellings of the *Ramayana* that focus on Hanuman: Campfire's *Tulsidas' Sunderkaand: Triumph of Hanuman*<sup>18</sup> (2012), which has been marketed as a graphic novel adaptation of a section of 16<sup>th</sup> century poet Tulsidas' devotional *Ramcharitmanas*, and Vikram Balagopal's debut graphic novel *Simian*, published in 2014 by Harper Collins, which consists of Part 1 and 2 of the trilogy (the third is forthcoming),<sup>19</sup> in the context of the emergence of the graphic novel in India and the debate on what makes the form distinct from short-form comics. I pay attention to the visual representation of Hanuman in both texts with reference to his iconography in other media, extending the concern with interocularly we have seen throughout this study, to discuss how their particular visual choices reaffirm/contest dominant ideologies of the epic. I also link the discussion of visual representation to the consideration of how both texts engage with the possibilities of the graphic novel form. I assert that *TOH's*

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<sup>17</sup> This is a selective list. See Suhaan Mehta's essay "Wondrous Capers: the Graphic Novel in India" in *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* for a detailed overview of some of these graphic novels.

<sup>18</sup> Henceforth *TOH*

<sup>19</sup> *Simian* won the 2014 Comic Con India award for best graphic novel. *Triumph of Hanuman* has also been aggressively marketed in the UK and USA. *Simian* is available internationally but was not publicized in international markets.

cooptation of iconic representations of the deity is an important factor behind its failure to offer its readers an interpretive reading experience, as is its choice of devotional retelling. In contrast, *Simian*'s iconographic innovation of depicting Hanuman as a baboon is critical to its success in psychologizing Hanuman, thus allowing him to utilize the potential of the graphic novel form. More broadly, I show that Balagopal's departure from earlier visual conventions of representing the monkey god facilitates the interrogative tone of the retelling.

### **The Indian Graphic Novel**

There has been much debate on the genesis, history and usage of the term 'graphic novel.' Charles Hatfield notes the widely-observed belief that the graphic novel "has become comics' passport to recognition as a form of literature (ix). According to Paul Gravett, "[t]he term novel can make people expect the sort of format, serious intent, and hefty weight of traditional literature, as if a graphic novel must be the visual equivalent of 'an extended, fictional work'" (8). Derek Parker Royal asks, "Does this name [graphic novel] provide more gravitas to the medium, or is it merely a critical (and commercial) affectation? Is 'novel' a useful term to apply to long-form comic or does the imposition of terminology from textual fiction delegitimize the unique project of comics as a medium?" (162).

Prominent comics scholars like Hilary Chute and Hatfield propose the use of the broader term 'graphic narrative' instead of 'graphic novel.' Chute argues that since many of the works grouped under this umbrella are not novels at all, but rich works of non-fiction, the term 'graphic novel' is often a misnomer (453). Hatfield contends that the term 'graphic novel' has become an "all-purpose tag for a vague new class of social object" but that "this very plasticity helps explain the currency of the term" (5). The term

has also been viewed with suspicion by authors and practitioners of the form, “who consider it to be a pompous euphemism” (Garcia 22). However, the ubiquity of the term in the comics publishing industry transnationally, and its wide use by practitioners, users, consumers and scholars suggests that the term is unlikely to be dispensed with any time soon.

In his influential book *On the Graphic Novel*, Santiago Garcia intervenes in this debate by exploring “whether there is currently a kind of comics distinct from what was made in the past, which is to say, different from the mass-produced children’s comics governed by commercial criteria, and whether that distinct kind of comic requires a new name in order to be recognized not only as a new form, but as a new spirit” (22). Garcia argues that though the contemporary adult form of comics that is referred to by the term “graphic novel” is “a continuation of the comics for all-ages,” it “presents some characteristics of its own that are distinctive enough that it has been necessary to find a new name to identify it” (3). He suggests that it is useful to see “the graphic novel phenomenon” as a movement that “represents an awareness of authorial freedom... that founds a tradition related to others, but distinct” (184). Pepe Galvez notes that one important shift that characterizes the graphic novel is narrative complexity: “the major progress, the great leap forward made by comics as a form of expression in recent years has not taken place as much in the area of language as in its expressive ambition, in the will to take on deeper and more complex narrative goals” (qtd in Garcia 22).

Though Garcia’s study largely is focused on the history of comics in America, his argument about the emergence of the graphic novel as representative of a distinctive

shift in narrative complexity and authorial freedom from mass-produced children's comics applies to the emergence of the artist-created Indian graphic novel. In their style, content and narrative goals, artist-created Indian graphic novels are very distinct from the mass-produced *Amar Chitra Katha* comics or Indrajal, Diamond and Raj comics, which have been synonymous with Indian children's comics for decades, in much the same way that alternative comics in the US (which spawned the graphic novel) grew in opposition to formula-driven mainstream short-form comics (Hatfield x).

Aruna Rao points out that when Orijit Sen published what is recognized as the first Indian graphic novel, *River of Stories*, in 1994, he had difficulty finding space for long-form comics in bookshops since audiences associated comics with children's literature (43). The scene has changed rapidly since then. A range of Indian graphic novels have been published in the last decade or so, varied in style and genre, and many of them dealing with complex socio-political issues. They have found an increasing readership among urban middle and upper classes. Graphic novels, typically characterized as cool and edgy, have emerged as niche pop culture in the youth market (Chandra). Often the protagonists of these graphic novels are adults in urban spaces, like the creators. Sarnath Bannerjee's *Corridor* (2004) was the first long-form comic marketed as a graphic novel. Jeremy Stoll observes that "the development of the shelf for long-form comics in Indian bookstores was the result of [Bannerjee's] hard work in publicizing, justifying and making room for the comic as a graphic novel in India's bookselling and publishing culture" ("Telling Stories and Building Community"). He argues that "unlike Western comics culture, it was not a corporate, mainstream industry

that established the medium in India, but the incorporation of comics into book culture and creators into the roles of literary authors or filmic auteurs” (*ibid.*).<sup>20</sup>

Along with Graphic India, Campfire Graphic Novels assertively seeks to expand the comics market for India’s youth, the prime audience for comics. Campfire has a younger target audience than Graphic India, with its primary readership consisting of children aged between 11 and 16 (Jhunjunwala). The director of Campfire, Girjia Jhunjunwala told me that they chose the form of the graphic novel since it has gained cultural currency, and is increasingly popular with children. She highlighted the potential of the graphic novel for transmitting important ‘values.’ Campfire’s use of the term “graphic novel” for their comics seems to be a marketing ploy borrowed from the American market, where graphic novels for children and young adults have formed a major and fast-growing sector of the publishing industry.

Campfire’s graphic novels are radically different from artist-created Indian graphic novels in many respects, primarily in their being dictated by commercial criteria. As we saw earlier, the company has a factory-style mode of operation. Artists are at the bottom of the hierarchy in the company and are given detailed instructions on what to draw. In my visit to Campfire’s in-house studio, the interactions between the managerial staff and the artists revealed that artists were given strict deadlines and pushed to complete their work in a given time frame, thus stifling creativity. Furthermore, decisions on which texts to publish are made by the family before being discussed with the author and other staff (Jhunjunwala). Campfire’s assembly line production process has not

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<sup>20</sup> Stoll’s term “auteur-created graphic novels” is an important one for helping us distinguish them from the corporate-produced graphic novels, such as Campfire and Graphic India titles, though I prefer to use the term ‘artist-created’ since not all graphic novel authors have positioned themselves in the role of auteurs.

gone unnoticed. It “has been criticized for its lack of support for India’s comics community, mainly for outsourcing and disrespecting creativity” (Reid, qtd in Stoll, “Telling Stories and Building Community”). However, it is not worthwhile dismissing Campfire comics since for a large number of urban Indian middle class children, graphic novels may be synonymous with Campfire comics, especially since the company has expanded into the educational sector. Campfire’s print runs exceed that of many artist-created graphic novels, and the reasonable prices of the comics make it more accessible to middle class children/parents.

### **Hanuman’s Representation, Masculinity and Postcolonial Anxiety**

Shyam Prakash and Sachin Nagar’s *Tulsidas’ Sunderkaand: Triumph of Hanuman* 69-page *Triumph of Hanuman* and Vikram Balagopal’s 244-page *Simian* are radically different kinds of graphic novels in terms of artistic and production quality, as well as narrative complexity and depth. As we saw above, narrative complexity is a defining characteristic that separates the graphic novel from short-form comics. In that respect, as we shall see, the use of the term ‘graphic novel’ for *Triumph of Hanuman* is a misnomer. While *Simian* creates a complex, secular narrative questioning the motivations of major epic characters for the war, *Triumph of Hanuman* is quite overtly a religious comic, which aims to imbue religiosity among its child readers.

*Ramcharitmanas* has been an enormously influential and popular religious scripture in North India since centuries.<sup>21</sup> Campfire’s choice of this devotional retelling of the *Ramayana* for a graphic novel on Hanuman spotlights the politics of religious and

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<sup>21</sup> It is the text on which the popular tradition of Ramlila is based—a dramatic folk enactment of the *Ramayana*, which is staged annually in Hindi-speaking regions during the ten-day festival of Dussehra, and at the end of which huge Ravana effigies are burned to mark the victory of good over evil.

regional identity, since the company is a family-run, Delhi-based business owned by a North Indian Hindu family. However, the ideological positioning of the publisher is only one factor. With this title in particular, Campfire has sought to tap into the religiosity of Hindu parents to legitimize and draw attention to the fledgling form of the graphic novel, much like the films on boy-gods did for the medium of animation. The company's didactic agenda acquires a religious overtone to suit the anxieties of Hindu middle class parents about their children's "Westernization."

Writing about the mythological *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, Karline McLain observes that Anant Pai (the founder) took care to forestall devotional reactions to the comic book by deciding that "the gods featured on the covers should not gaze directly out at the reader, so that the *darshan*ic ritual exchange of glances between deity and devotee cannot occur" (16). She argues that nevertheless, the visual and textual narrativization of sacred Hindu stories in the *ACK* comics have opened up the space "for their Hindu viewers to view them as sacred, even if they do not ritually worship them" (17). *TOH* actively invokes the readers' religious identification with Hanuman by including a detachable 1.5 foot poster of the deity at the end of the comic. The poster, which is probably intended for the Hindu child to put up in his/her bedroom, invites the child to engage in *darshan*.

The section in *Ramcharitmanas* and the Valmiki epic dealing with Hanuman's trip to Lanka is titled *Sunderkaand* (often called the "Book of Hanuman"). This part of Tulsidas' poem extols Hanuman's virtues and his feats, focusing on his visit to Lanka, which is eventful—he defeats multiple demonesses to reach Lanka, locates Sita, gives her Rama's message, attempts (unsuccessfully) to persuade Ravana to return Sita and

conveys Rama's intent to wage war if Sita is not freed. When Ravana's guards set fire to his tail, he burns much of Lanka on his way out of there as warning to Ravana.

Tulsidas' *Sunderkaand* is often recited during Hindu festivals or auspicious occasions or during times of crises, since Hanuman is considered to be a protector god who removes obstacles. Brockington observes that:

Tulsidas displays a particular fondness for Hanuman, in keeping with his own *dasya*<sup>22</sup> attitude, but Hanuman's significance in the story had been growing, just as Lakshmana has increasingly been marginalized...an important factor is the extent to which in his whole-hearted service to Rama, despite his all too human failings of forgetfulness and lack of application, he provides a model for the ordinary worshipper. (504)

*Triumph of Hanuman* also seeks to represent Hanuman as a model devotee for the child reader. For example, the blurb of the book tells us that "Hanuman is strong and invincible, but he is also a brave and loyal follower of Ram, and is able to overcome all crises through his single-minded devotion." In popular imagination, Hanuman is associated with two characteristics—*shakti* (strength) and *bhakti* (devotion) to Rama, and the Campfire adaptation emphasizes both. Tulsidas's eulogy of Hanuman's feats in *Ramcharitmanas* is carried over to the graphic novel, and different characters in the book (including the *rakshasaas*), utter praises or admiration for the god. The text relies on the (Hindu) child reader's familiarity with the epic and with Hanuman as a god.

The visual representation of Hanuman also relies on the audience's familiarity with the dominant iconography of the deity in calendar art. Campfire's Hanuman is extremely fair-complexioned, with a fully human, hairless and muscular body—features he shares with some older portrayals. Lutgendorf observes that since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, mass-produced calendar art icons of Hanuman have tended to emphasize his

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<sup>22</sup> *Dasya* is translated as 'servant' but in this context, it refers to Hanuman's worshipful attitude to Rama.

human features. This ‘hairless, humanized Hanuman’ or ‘H.H. Hanuman,’ as Lutgendorf playfully dubs him, represents “a significant departure from older iconographic practices that frankly celebrated Hanuman’s monkeyhood” (Lutgendorf, “Evolving a Monkey” 72). In these mid-late twentieth century god-posters, which are also ubiquitous in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Hanuman’s simian features are downplayed: “Apart from a stylised snout with narrow muffle of greyish fur (a subtle langur allusion?) and a floating, almost disembodied tail—his two crucial codings...— his fair, hairless body is unmistakably human” (91). Particularly towards the tail-end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hanuman gained “an exaggerated and carefully-rendered musculature” (93).

Lutgendorf suggests that various factors could be behind the phenomenon of the H.H. Hanuman. The fact that Hanuman is often invoked by Hindutva militants and is seen as Rama’s strongman (as we saw in chapter 2) could be one explanation, especially when juxtaposed with the images of ‘muscular’ Rama that appeared in the 1980s (93). However, he offers two more complex explanations for this iconographic innovation. First, he links it to the “new interest among the upwardly-mobile in the cultivation and display of the male physique...as an emblem of vitality, virility and disciplined leisure” (97). He notes that “the cultivation and public display of the ‘buff’ torso in India since the 1980s appears to be contemporaneous with the rise of both consumerism and of politically-energised middle classes” (98). These observations are valid even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century urban landscape, and may account for the continuing popularity of the H.H. Hanuman god-posters.

The artist Sachin Nagar’s rendition of Hanuman, while sharing some features with the H.H. Hanuman, is quite different from conventional god-posters of the deity to

which Lutgendorf draws our attention. First, Hanuman's ornamentation is reduced significantly, and given a very sleek look, which enables his transition into a dynamic actor in the comic. Second, Hanuman in the comic is extremely fair.<sup>23</sup> Third, Hanuman in the comic is enormous, and his size is foregrounded throughout the text, especially through the huge difference in stature between him and the other *vanaras*, Sita, Rama and Lakshmana. Hanuman's body in the graphic novel is not framed as that of a servant—in fact, it overshadows Rama's in every instance. Even when Hanuman is shown at the service of Rama, Hanuman dominates the page. The visual representation of Hanuman hardly ever signifies his role as devotee, instead drawing our attention to his body as the embodiment of power.<sup>24</sup> In a splash page depiction of Hanuman carrying Rama on his shoulder, Rama is miniscule whereas Hanuman's body—muscular, luminous and tall—conveys grandeur.

Hanuman's gigantic stature is probably influenced by the phenomenon of numerous monumental icons of Hanuman that have been erected in various cities across India in the past couple of decades. In light of Lutgendorf's above-mentioned astute connections between poster imagery and human desire and practice, I would suggest that the role of celebrity culture in India may play a part in the representation of a gigantic Hanuman in the Campfire comic, and more broadly, in the still-continuing trend of constructing enormous Hanuman icons—the latest statue being built has a

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<sup>23</sup> Hanuman's luminous white skin in the comic is reflective of Indians' deep-rooted association of pale skin with beauty as well as the exercise of power, which in turn is linked to the myth of Aryan supremacy, and the belief that Aryans were light-skinned. The opposition between the fair Hanuman and the dark *rakshasas* in the text continues the stereotypes made popular by the TV *Ramayan* and *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, as we had seen earlier, and the *rakshasas* are repeatedly demonized through image and text.

<sup>24</sup> This emphasis is in keeping with Lutgendorf's claim that Hanuman has, in the present age, become a more popular god than Rama (11).

proposed height of 176 feet, and would, if it is completed, surpass the 150-foot Hanuman near New Delhi, which is currently the tallest statue of Hanuman in the country (“India’s Tallest Hanuman Statue to be Ready by May 2015”). There are parallels between celebrity culture’s emphasis on spectacle, hyper-visibility, and its transformation of celebrity bodies into larger-than-life figures (literally and metaphorically), and the depiction of Hanuman in Campfire’s text. For instance, in the comic, Hanuman occasionally breaks out of the frames, and several panels show him towering over other an indiscriminate mass of *rakshasas* to reinforce his supremacy. Moreover, the 1.5 foot poster of Hanuman that comes attached to the book resembles the dimensions of celebrity posters bought by children and teenagers for their bedrooms, rather than the moderate-sized god-posters meant for the *puja sthan* or place of worship in the houses of Hindu families.

There are other, more fundamental, overlaps in the representation of Hanuman in these ostensibly unrelated media. Lutgendorf argues that the phenomenon of the colossal Hanuman icons speaks to Hanuman being perceived by many Hindus as the “preeminent deity-of-choice” in the “present age of discord and moral decay and “may reflect both economic factors (especially the growing prosperity of middle-class patrons) and the triumphalism (and perhaps insecurity) of aggressive Hindu nationalism, which was on the rise during the same time period” (10). When I asked the artist Sachin Nagar why he had made Hanuman humongous, he said that he wanted to represent Hanuman as an extremely powerful and strong god.

*TOH's* representation of Hanuman as a strong god is in fundamental contradiction with one of the distinct features of comics—their “radically fragmented”

form. Charles Hatfield observes that “the fractured surface of the comics page, with its patchwork of different images, shapes and symbols, presents the reader with a surfeit of interpretive options, creating an experience that is always decentered, unstable and unfixable” (xiii-xiv). Indeed, “comic art is composed of several kinds of tension, in which various ways of reading—various interpretive options and potentialities—must be played against each other” (36). *TOH* offers readers no space for negotiating interpretive possibilities—Hanuman’s visual representation and the devotional ethos of the text prevents us from seeing him as anything but a powerful deity.

This lack of tension is also evident within the comic itself. Hanuman’s thoughts throughout the narrative (represented through thought bubbles) serve to reinforce his heroism rather than giving us a glimpse into his subjectivity. For instance, when Ravana orders that his guards set fire to Hanuman’s tale, the next panel shows a smug-looking Hanuman thinking to himself, “This demon is inviting his own doom” (Prakash and Nagar 37). A little later, when Hanuman’s tale is set on fire, he thinks, “I want to see if this city of demons can save itself from the ravages of the fire god” (39). While artists like Gilbert Hernandez use individual close-ups and foreground framing to capture their characters’ intense emotions, and reinforce the reader’s intimacy with the protagonist (Hatfield 72), in *TOH*, these maneuvers (especially the latter) are used to deify Hanuman.

In keeping with the celebratory tone of the narrative, Hanuman’s burning of Lanka is the defining moment of this text, and many panels are devoted to it, since it epitomizes his *Shakti* and symbolizes his triumph over the enemies. The burning of Lanka testifies to “the triumph” of Hanuman, and establishes his divinity even among his

enemies. As he leaves the burning city behind, the people of Lanka exclaim: “He who destroyed the Ashok garden and killed Prince Akshaykumar cannot be an ordinary monkey. He must be a god” (Prakash and Nagar 40). The complete lack of moral ambiguity is another important deviation from the form of the graphic novel. The focus on Hanuman’s destruction of Lanka speaks to the text’s representation of him as a martial god, and to the masculinist ethos of Tulsidas’ version. In chapter 2, we noted that the conception of the multi-faceted monkey-god as a warrior was crucial to his appropriation by the Hindutva movement. *Triumph of Hanuman* speaks to such a conception of the deity. The image of a gigantic Hanuman who possesses untrammelled power is symptomatic not only of aggressive masculinity, but also of the dominant imaginary of a strong nation that is defined by its Hindu culture.

To discuss the visual representation of Hanuman in *Simian*, it would be necessary to go back to Lutgendorf’s second explanation for the H.H. Hanuman phenomenon since that has special bearing on *Simian*. He argues that the development of this iconography is linked to “the monkey problem”—the discomfort and anxiety felt by Indian thinkers and writers of the colonial and postcolonial era about “the nature of a popular deity whom Western scholars had authoritatively classified in the ‘primitive’ categories of ‘zoomorphic’, ‘theriomorphic’ or ‘totemic gods’ (“Evolving a Monkey” 99-100). Missionaries and colonial officials had classified Hanuman as an inferior, primitive deity who represented the decline of the Hindu civilization—a decline that was juxtaposed with the ascent of Western civilization (102). Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indian intelligentsia responded by “rehabilitating Hanuman, and the story in which he appears, as ‘historical, ‘rational, and ‘scientific,’” with some

theories equating *vanaras* as tribals, and others demonstrating him to be a demigod.

Lutgendorf argues that

diverse and persistent efforts to explain away Hanuman's monkey nature reflect a lingering anxiety, especially among middle-class Hindus, over colonial-era discourses that stigmatized their religion as primitive and degenerate...the image of sometimes hairless, humanised Hanuman may be read as a visual response to the same set of concerns: an iconic intervention in the debate over the 'truth' of *Ramayana*...H.H. Hanuman evolves in popular visual culture as the embodiment of a compromise: not a Simian but a semi-man, whose *kapitva*<sup>25</sup> is trimmed to its barest essentials and whose gleaming body—modeling an evolving ideal of consumerist corporeality—is inscribed with the competing texts of myth and history. (108-109)

The prevalence of the H.H prototype in 21<sup>st</sup> century calendar art and statues, and its influence on other medium such as comics and animated films, perhaps suggests that the lingering postcolonial anxiety about the anthropomorphic deity continues.

In contrast, Vikram Balagopal's debut graphic novel *Simian* confronts the "monkey problem" by modeling Hanuman on the gelada baboon. The defamiliarization may not appeal to all readers but is effective in having them approach the character with fresh eyes. When I asked Vikram Balagopal about this choice, he said he "wanted to press the reset button so [readers] could discover, or in many cases rediscover, the character during the course of the story. In my head, Hanuman has always a monkey resembling what I finally drew. So in my research I was thrilled that there is fossilized evidence of the Gelada Baboon having once existed in India."

Balagopal's comment here is revealing insofar as it gestures towards the historical basis of *Ramayana*, which as we have seen above, is a controversial issue tied to the defense of Hinduism. In fact, the artist is aware of the discourse that

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<sup>25</sup> A Sanskrit term meaning 'monkeyhood.'

stigmatized Hinduism as a primitive religion, writing in his foreword that “the story may be ancient, but neither the tale nor the characters are primitive or inferior, as some early orientalist and philologists were wont to say” (iii). While these statements may lead us to wonder if *Simian* follows the lineage of Hindi ‘autobiographies’ of Hanuman which deal with the ‘monkey problem’ (Lutgendorf, “Evolving a Monkey” 106), Balagopal is not concerned to explain or rationalize the monkeyhood of his protagonist. For Balagopal, Hanuman’s monkey nature provides an artistic opportunity to show Hanuman wrestling with his demons. However, the graphic novel does negotiate with this demeaning discourse, even though not overtly.

Portraying Hanuman as a baboon has many ramifications. Most fundamentally, it strips him away of devotional/religious signifiers, and allows readers to see him as a secular figure. In complete contrast to *TOH*, Hanuman is never glorified or deified, and nor is Rama. The stylistic choice of rarely showing Hanuman becoming huge in size is effective in delinking this popular figure from the dominant representation of him as the embodiment of *Shakti*. In fact, when Hanuman meets Sita in the Ashoka garden, he confesses to her that he doesn’t have control over when his size becomes big or small—his body seems to adjust according to the situation (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 2, 30). Hanuman’s inability to control his size is one of the many ways that *Simian* undercuts the prevalent association of Hanuman with masculine power. Though Balagopal’s Hanuman is the least humanized among contemporary visual configurations of the god, he is remarkably human in his self-questioning and reflective nature.

*Simian*'s marketing as a graphic novel testifies to the plasticity of the term, considering that the book is in fact an epic retelling. Nevertheless, it contains some key elements that have been associated with the emergence of alternative comics in the US which spawned the graphic novel—the rejection of mainstream formulas, a commitment to self-examination and a powerful sociopolitical argument (Hatfield 162). The graphic novel is narrated in the first-person by Hanuman, and the author uses this mode of narration to psychologize the protagonist and to thereby allow readers to forge an intimate relationship with him. Visually, this aim is achieved through frequent close-ups of the character. Balagopal's visual style works well for the tone of the narrative. Both parts of the series are sketched in black and white, with grey being a predominant color. Splashes of purple, red and yellow in a few panels highlight certain scenes. Balagopal's training in film is evident in several sequences of wordless panels and in the frequent perspectival shifts. The absence of text on many pages often pushes the reader to make sense of the narrative using only visual cues.

An anti-masculinist, anti-martial orientation is at the heart of the graphic novel, as is evident from its framing narrative. *Simian* starts with an episode from the *Mahabharata* in which Bhima, one of the five Pandava brothers (who are the protagonists of the epic) unexpectedly meets Hanuman, who is his elder half-brother, Hanuman (they are both the sons of the wind-god Vayu). In this episode, Hanuman punctures Bhima's arrogance about his physical strength by pretending to be a weak creature who is too fragile to move himself out of Bhima's path. Bhima (who is the strongest of the Pandava brothers) is unable to lift the monkey's tail, and realizes that this is no ordinary entity. Arshia Sattar notes that "in the traditional *Mahabharata*, the

episode with Hanuman is often thought of as Bhima's Gita, for the monkey explains the nature of time to the Pandava and shows him his gigantic and glorious form..." (Sattar, "Book Review—*Simian*").

In keeping with the move away from demonstrating Hanuman's divinity, *Simian* doesn't show Hanuman change his form for Bhima. As in the *Mahabharata*, the encounter is overtly didactic in the graphic novel, except that the focus is not on philosophical conceptions of time, but on the danger of uncontrolled strength and the consequences of war. Hanuman tells Bhima: "For one with your strength, you must appreciate all the more the damage you can inflict" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 1, 20). Bhima starts telling his elder brother about the injustice the Pandavas have suffered at the hands of Kauravas and his desire to take revenge. That becomes the impetus for Hanuman to warn Bhima that wars have a huge cost: "There will be times, Bhima...when you will have to make a choice. And, very often in war, there are only two—to either die or compromise on your morals" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 1, 35). When Bhima expresses reluctance to hearing the tale, saying that he has heard about Rama's exploits since he was an infant, Hanuman responds wryly: "Valmiki's account, no doubt. That highway thief wasn't there" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 1, 35). Hanuman's dismissal of Valmiki's rendering is an allusion to the fact that Hanuman is *Ramayana's* original narrator. This response can also be read as a meta-textual move in which Balagopal identifies his text as a revisionary version, placing it within the tradition of oppositional retellings. The opening dialogues make clear that Hanuman will complicate Valmiki's version which posits the war as one fought between good and evil. Unlike the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* has a much more ambivalent stance towards war, and

debates the notion of *dharma* endlessly. It shows the human cost of the war, and its traumatic impact on the emotional and mental well-being of the survivors. *Simian's* fracturing of the narrative of war prevalent in authoritative versions of the *Ramayana* seems to be inspired by the other epic's more complex views on morality.

*Simian* utilizes an important feature of the *Mahabharata*—embedded narration or relay narration—to invite the readers' judgment on significant parts of *Ramayana*.

Hanuman starts his retrospective narrative to Bhima with a flashback of an aged, lonely Rama expressing his regrets about fighting the war, and his despair at having lost Sita. The anguished Rama confesses to Hanuman that “I had become and have been my own Ravan ever since I abandoned her. Like him I too kept her a prisoner, away from me” (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 1, 43). Rama narrates to Hanuman his wrongful actions during the Surpanakha episode, and feels guilt for Bali's death—episodes which have, along with the abandonment of Sita, generated much debate within the *Ramayana* tradition since they are ethically problematic (Richman, *Questioning Ramayanas* 6). Hanuman takes over the narratorial charge at the point when Rama and Lakshman meet the *vanaras*. His narrative focuses on Bali's death, in which Sugriva asks Rama to shoot his brother Bali in exchange for the *vanaras* helping Rama and Lakshman locate Sita. In this version, Hanuman is not just a quiet witness of the events but someone who actively tries to stop Bali's murder, and fails. Most of Part 1 of the graphic novel deals with Bali's shooting and its aftermath.

The depiction of the *vanars* as baboons becomes foundational for the text's critique of Rama's shooting, since it underlines the human-animal hierarchy which Rama uses as justification for his going against the warrior ethic to shoot Bali. When

Bali asks Rama what right he had to shoot him from the back as he was engaged in battle with another, especially since Bali had never harmed him, Rama's callous speech reveals that for him, *vanaras* are little more than prey: "You are a monkey! And being a man, it is my right, just as I can hunt a deer and don't have to answer to it. I don't have to answer to you. I am Ram, and whether you were unaware—Vanar—I little care" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 1, 94). The cover page of Part 1 of *Simian* highlights the status of *vanaras* as prey—it shows us a posterior view of Rama holding a sword and carrying on his shoulders a prone baboon whose back has been pierced with an arrow (Bali). Located in the anterior section of the cover is a pool of blood. As Rama walks, he leaves behind footprints covered in blood.

In the text itself, Rama justifies his action by saying that it was Bali's treacherous behavior to his brother that impelled him to take revenge on Sugriva's behalf, but Bali counters him with his own perspective on the feud between the brothers, explaining Sugriva's betrayal. Bali then asks Rama: "Now tell me, Rama, was I wrong to feel betrayed?...I took back all that was mine, and *aam*<sup>26</sup>, I banished him" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 1, 98-99). At the end of Bali's narrative, Rama is left speechless; the subsequent panel depicts him staring wordlessly at Bali. In the next panel, Bali concludes: "And yet, my family has been taken away" (99). Bali's indictment of Rama is the last word on the matter, as the scene shifts to his wife and son mourning him. Balagopal's rendering of the episode not only showcases Bali as a victim, but also places into relief Rama's supremacist attitude, thus undermining the anthropocentric bias of authoritative versions. Bali's victimhood is visually emphasized through frequent

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<sup>26</sup> *Aam* is a Sanskrit word meaning 'yes.'

close-ups of his face and pained, tearful eyes, and of the arrow that has pierced his body.

To see how *Simian's* treatment of the episode is revisionist, it may be productive to discuss the Valmiki epic's version of events. In the Valmiki *Ramayana*, Bali berates Rama for going against *dharma* by killing him deceitfully while he was engaged in battle with another, but it is Rama's counterargument which silences Bali. Rama engages in a lengthy rebuttal. One of his chief defenses relies on his being a Kshatriya and an agent of King Bharata (his brother). He tells Bali that he has no regrets about his action, and that it is customary for Kshatriyas to kill or wound animals during hunts. Shooting is a right of Kshatriyas, and as a mere beast, Bali is not entitled to the treatment accorded to high-born warriors. He also argues that the normal rules of chivalric combat do not apply in this case since Bali is an adulterer, not an honorable enemy. He concludes by telling Bali that kings rule over the animal kingdom, and that he shouldn't reproach them since they have a divine origin, and have assumed human form on earth (Valmiki, *Ramayana* Book Four, 121-127). Robert P. Goldman notes that Rama "attempts to stifle even the possibility of debate on the ethical quality of his actions by invoking the divinity of kings and their immunity from censure" (36).

In the Valmiki epic, Bali immediately realizes his mistake and acknowledges Rama as the epitome of *dharma*, while recognizing himself as a sinner: "Best of men, there is no doubt that what you have said is true. Indeed, a lowly person should not talk back to an exalted one" (Valmiki, "Kishkinda" 129). He reaffirms Rama's divinity and feels honored to be dying at Rama's hands so that his immoral actions can gain absolution at the moment of death (130). Goldman argues that debates in the Valmiki

text such as the one about the killing of Bali, “serve the poet as didactic opportunities to forcefully represent the epic’s social ideology...Rama’s disputed killing of Vali is put to rest, as far as the epic text itself is concerned, by Rama’s culturally syntonic assertions of his royal juridical function and the absolute deference due a king. In the end, in these matters debate is tolerated and even encouraged as it permits the poet and his hero to forcefully assert the governing principles of the brahmanical social order” (38).

Balagopal chooses to avoid any mention of caste in this episode. Nevertheless, his iteration of the debate allows Bali to assert his subject position as a rational, compassionate, albeit flawed *vanara*. Bali’s compelling narrative overshadows Rama’s justifications, while simultaneously having Bali occupy the higher moral ground; for instance, he mentions that he had decided not to kill Sugriva even though Sugriva took Bali’s wife, because they are brothers. Balagopal uses these events to psychologize the *vanaras*. Sugriva feels tremendously guilty after getting his brother assassinated (a word used frequently by the text), and Hanuman is anguished, especially since he was unable to stop Sugriva from making the grievous mistake.

Hanuman is often considered to be Rama’s subaltern—the one who obeys all of Rama’s commands unflinchingly, and exhibits unflinching devotion. In *Simian*, Rama is secularized and Hanuman is not his devotee. Instead, Hanuman’s subalternity emerges in terms of his liminal status as a *vanara*. The graphic novel charts his internal struggle with humans’ presumption of *vanaras* as inferior beings. In the crucial episode where Jambavan explains to Hanuman that he has special powers, and can fly across the ocean to find Sita, Hanuman says: “First I’m scarred<sup>27</sup> and ugly and inferior, and now

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<sup>27</sup> The name ‘Hanuman’ was given to him after he broke his jaw as a child (‘hanu’ means jaw). In *Simian*, he is often referred to by another name, Anjaneya, which refers to him being the son of Anjana.

I'm special. Why can't I be normal?" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 1, 132). When Hanuman finds Sita in part two of the graphic novel, he appears in front of her shrunken in size, leading her to call him "a little monkey," much to his annoyance, but he confesses that he doesn't know how he grew so small (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 2, 30). She laughs at him and refuses to believe that he is Rama's messenger: "Ram has found me...and so he sends a small monkey?...I may seem weak and timid and helpless, but I am not stupid enough to believe you jumped here," to which Hanuman responds by saying: "I am no monkey! I am a vanar" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 2, 29). His assertion that he is more than just a monkey becomes a recurrent theme of the novel, as we shall see later on.

The size difference between Sita and Hanuman becomes symbolic of the power dynamic between them. Like in many other versions, including the Valmiki epic, Hanuman asks Sita to climb his back and fly back with him to Ram, but she refuses. In Valmiki's rendition, she cites concerns about her safety, her modesty and her faith that Rama can defeat Ravana in battle (Valmiki, *Ramayana*, Book Five, 311-315). In *Simian*, Sita's refusal is centered on the point of honor: "No...No, I will not be stolen back and forth. I will be rightfully won by Ram. And Ravan will be punished by him" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 2, 32). Hanuman pleads with her, saying that "The only other way is war!" but she is adamant—"You have my answer, Hanuman" (33). Hanuman sees himself not just as Rama's messenger but as an emissary of peace who is intent on preventing the war. So on realizing that "there is nothing [he] could do to persuade her," he feels helpless: "Frustrated with what I saw as my failure, I grew enraged with myself" (34). He turns his anger towards the Lankans instead and creates havoc in the grounds.

Hanuman's helplessness later turns into a recognition that Sita's easy dismissal of his plan reveals a careless attitude towards the cost of the war to *vanaras*. Ravana seeks to drive home this realization when he meets with Hanuman after the latter has been captured, asking him to think about why Sita didn't want to go:

How could the vanars ally themselves with Rama and his like? For what reason? To die in battle? Rather than return with you last night, she would have Ram come to her on a road paved with vanars and men...They think nothing of you, the great race of vanars, or even the people here. To them, you are simply animals, less than them, convenient to tame with their twisted tongues to do with as they please. It's you who will pay the price. (Vol. 2, 63-65)

After Ravana leaves, Hanuman confesses to being in a mental upheaval, and begins to question why Sita didn't come back with him (67). Multiple panels show Hanuman with a dazed expression, remembering Ravana's statement that "they want this war...on a road paved with dead vanars and men" (67). *Simian* shows Sita to be complicit in the masculinist enterprise of recuperating Rama's male honor, and to also display an anthropocentric attitude that doesn't take into account the value of *vanara* lives.

*Simian's* foregrounding of Hanuman's and the *vanaras'* subaltern status is concomitant with its move away from the demonization of the *rakshasas*. The text casts Ravana, Surpanakha and other Lankans as humans—they are never called *rakshasas* in the text. When I asked Vikram Balagopal about this striking deviation from authoritative versions, he mentioned that he found their depiction in mainstream versions very racist. In fact, *Simian* depicts Lankans as a highly advanced community—Jambavana tells Hanuman that Lanka is "the greatest city built by man" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 1, 134). In part 2, Hanuman is struck with the grandeur of Ravana's palace. We observed in chapter 1 that mainstream retellings used different visual markers to highlight the differences between Sita and Surpanakha, and included multiple textual

references to the latter as a dangerous demoness. In *Simian*, both women are dark-skinned and equally beautiful, and Surpanakha is portrayed as a harmless widow grieving for her husband. Her lunge at Sita is attributed to her mental instability due to having recently been widowed. The episode visually dramatizes the mutilation and the aftermath. One panel depicts Lakshmana holding a machete with one hand and Surpanakha's arm with another, and the subsequent panel zooms in on the machete and the blood dripping from it. The next six panels show a shell-shocked Surpanakha with a bloodied face covering her wound while Rama retrospectively regrets that they didn't even provide her with any assistance (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 1, 48).

Balagopal highlights Rama's casteism in his representation of the episode. An aged Rama confesses to Hanuman that he assumed Surpanakha was a tribal, and that he viewed her as a source of entertainment. He recounts: "Though I told [Surpanakha] I have a wife I felt great affection for, I must confess I couldn't help but tease her a little. And toy with the feelings she had for me...Back then I thought tribals to be no better than children. I didn't think it could cause much harm" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 1, 46-47).<sup>28</sup> As we have seen in Chapter 1, the mutilation of Surpanakha demonstrates that women's "power must be controlled to suit the purpose of patriarchal society" (Erdni 83). *Simian* places into relief how Surpanakha occupies a doubly subaltern position on account of her gender and (assumed) caste, and how a casteist, patriarchal society defaces tribal women literally and psychologically.

Hanuman's meeting with Surpanakha in Lanka becomes a turning point for his realization of Rama's supremacist behavior. Ravana brings his veiled sister with him to

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<sup>28</sup> This is how the events play out in the Valmiki epic.

the cellar where Hanuman has been tied up. He refers to her by her real name, Meenakshi, rather than the name by which she is known, and which has a negative connotation (“Surpanakha” refers to someone with long nails). When Meenakshi takes her veil off, the panels zoom in on her disfigured face. The gruesome image of a mutilated Meenakshi appears in multiple panels during the meeting, driving home her victimhood in a powerful manner. Ravana tells Hanuman that “she came back a wreck...and it did not take long, under frightened and prejudiced stares, to go insane...she does not speak, she does not smile—she stares, like a corpse...And it is for them you fight” (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 2, 64). It is worth noting that in contrast to many other retellings based on Surpanakha, Ravana speaks for his sister, while she is speechless.<sup>29</sup> This narrative choice is probably made in the interest of casting Ravana as a sympathetic and complex figure—a loving brother so filled with hatred against Rama for ruining his sister’s life that he feels bound to his course of action: “Don’t you see, the core within me twists and swells with burning emotions and only revenge can soothe it?” (Balagopal, *Simian*, Vol. 2, 70).

*Simian* traces a connection between Rama’s paternalistic, racist attitudes in the Surpanakha and Bali episodes. When Ravana leaves, Hanuman is left alone in the

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<sup>29</sup> The injustice suffered by Surpanakha has impelled many artists and authors to rewrite the narrative from her point of view. For instance, Samhita Arni, in her recent English retelling *The Missing Queen*, reimagines Surpanakha as a revolutionary for Lanka Liberation Front, which is fighting for its independence from Ayodhya, while Drishana Kalita subversively reimagines Surpanakha as a modern woman who pities Sita for her submissive, wifely obedience, and is attacked by Lakshmana when trying to bond with Sita. Renowned Indian novelist Amit Chaudhury’s short story on Surpanakha’s mutilation highlights Rama’s and Lakshmana’s decision to attack her without any provocation, and their heartless mirth at her disfigurement. Among the varied *Ramayana* variants in modern South Indian literature are some which rupture the hierarchy between humans and demons, “push[ing] us to view rakshasaas through multiple lens (Richman *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India* 29). In one Tamil fable, Surpanakha cuts off Lakshman’s ears (Richman 181-186); a Telugu short story titled “Shurpanakha’s sorrow” shows Rama and Lakshmana as male chauvinists who get away with the crime because of their political clout (Richman 187-193); and another Telugu short story shows Sita and Surpanakha developing a close, empathetic bond (91-98). Many of these retellings are subversive insofar as they give Surpanakha a radical voice to challenge and demean Rama and Lakshmana.

cellar pondering over Rama's actions and omissions, and reconsidering his alliance with Rama. He wonders if Rama chose to "conceal this crime" (against Surpanakha) because he knew the *vanars* wouldn't have joined him if they had known the truth (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 2, 66). Multiple panels in succession give us an elevated view of Hanuman as he lies in the cellar, chained up, and remembers Rama's justification to Bali for killing him—that he was only a monkey, and that he had a right to shoot him like he hunted a deer. Flashbacks of Surpanakha's mutilated face are juxtaposed with silhouettes of Rama and Ravana, as Hanuman grapples with competing narratives. But the emphasis shifts from Rama's morally problematic behavior to Hanuman's own turmoil about his identity. Wrestling with Rama's classification of *vanaras* as mere monkeys, he shouts to himself repeatedly, "I'm not some animal!" (68-69). The image-text dissonance reveals his fractured state of mind—juxtaposed next to a panel which shows a close-up of Hanuman's pensive face, thinking "I'm not an animal," is another wordless panel depicting Hanuman screaming with bared fangs, with his hair in disarray, evoking the bestial side of him (69).

Hanuman's conflict over his liminal identity is explored vividly in the pivotal Lanka burning scene. While in *Triumph of Hanuman*, we see a calm, composed, luminous Hanuman burning Lanka to teach the demons a lesson, here we see him reacting out of anger when his tail is set on fire. His rage is highlighted in a wordless panel which shows him screaming with his fangs bared, thus attributing it to his animal nature (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 2, 93). Paradoxically, his action is motivated by his need to prove that he is not just an animal. Right before setting the city on fire, he shouts, "I'll show you what a 'monkey' is capable of" (93), referencing Ravana's insults earlier on.

Hanuman's display of anger challenges the received version of events, in which his actions were necessary to show the power of Rama's army. Through multiple wordless panels spread over three pages, Balagopal shows the entire city burning as Ravana watches in shock. The human cost of Hanuman's actions is visually represented through silhouettes of people running out of their houses in terror and watching the massive destruction unfold (97).

It is precisely his "monkey nature" which he blames in the aftermath of the incident. When he wakes up on the seashore (having jumped into the ocean after leaving Lanka), he is filled with regret: "Wrath led me to do that senseless, shameful deed...I gave fire and death to innocents...I could have killed the lady I had come to save...*Anger had driven me wild, bringing out the animal within me, the "thing" I try hardest to deny*" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 2, 102; my emphasis). Here it may be worthwhile to go back to "the monkey problem" which Lutgendorf had identified as a key debate in the discourse on Hanuman, which led to Indian intelligentsia coming up with inventive explanations about the *vanars*, and arguing for the historical basis of the *Ramayana*. While Balagopal's decision to cast Hanuman as a baboon overturns such kinds of justifications, Hanuman's angst about his animalistic impulses suggests that the text doesn't entirely escape the lingering anxiety about his monkeyhood.

Hanuman's loss of control over his special powers and his retrospective guilt not only secularizes this figure and makes him more relatable, but also shows how his strength is a mixed blessing. A little later, he says: "I had learnt one of my greatest lessons—no matter how big or how strong you are, always know your limits...and create some to govern yourself" (Balagopal, *Simian* Vol. 2, 103). Hanuman's self-

awareness at this juncture and throughout the narrative demonstrates him to be a much more reflective and conscientious character than Rama, and upends the human-*vanara* hierarchy that is established in authoritative versions.

The second part of *Simian* ends with Bhima asking Hanuman to tell him the rest of the story later. Hanuman is seen looking out into the sky, wondering: “Do I tell him everything?” The final part of the trilogy is likely to zoom in on Rama’s and Lakshmana’s unethical killing of Indrajit, Ravana’s son, and Rama’s repudiation of Sita. It may further explore Hanuman’s conflict about being Rama’s ally, and his own angst about having caused the deaths of many innocent Lankans. Even without the third part of the series, *Simian* succeeds in giving readers an engaging counter narrative which not only challenges the casteist and racist orientation of mainstream *Ramayana* retellings, but also reimagines Hanuman in a way that, to my knowledge, has not been done before—as a figure grappling with the ramifications of his special abilities in a decidedly anti-masculinist way and questioning his liminal identity in the face of derogatory classifications by human beings.

In her discussion of key characteristics of Indian visual culture, Freitag emphasizes the role of the viewer in meaning-making:

In a wide variety of venues and practices, South Asians have been trained to build meanings that explain the workings of their world when cued by visual images...Audiences in South Asia, then, are not passive recipients but active shapers of what they view...This active role is especially important when we think about the exercise of the gaze (a two-way exercise from viewer to object and back). (“The Realm of the Visual” 370-371)

Both *Triumph of Hanuman* and *Simian* rely on their readers’ visual literacy with Hanuman’s images, but while *TOH*’s co-optation of the image of a colossal Hanuman prevents any readerly engagement except religious identification, *Simian*’s success in

psychologizing Hanuman depends on its break from older iconographic conventions—indeed, as I have attempted to show above, the depiction of *vanars* as baboons is central to the revisionist reading that the graphic novel offers us. Whereas *TOH* invokes the *darshanic* gaze in exclusion of the readers' interpretive agency, *Simian* uses the form of the graphic novel to invite the reader's interpretive acts so as to put under scrutiny the anthropocentric and caste biases of authoritative versions. Both texts project their own version of modernity through a modern form—*Triumph of Hanuman* does so by reinforcing an aggressive, resurgent Hindu nationalism through Hanuman's hyper-masculine figure, while *Simian* does so by creating a secular narrative that critiques masculinist values of the epic as well as the prevalent association of Hanuman with militant nationalism.

## CHAPTER 6 EPILOGUE

### **Main Claims**

Since the liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s, Indian society, politics and culture have undergone significant and rapid changes. This study has analyzed post-millennial mythological Indian comics and animations as the product of a nation which is shaped by the forces of rapid globalization as well as resurgent Hindu fundamentalism. An important focus of this project has been to explore how mythological texts negotiate with these forces. We saw that many animation films and TV series refashion Hindu gods as globalized and cosmopolitan but that the attempt at modernization doesn't necessarily translate to the incorporation of progressive values. The boy-gods reinforce the ideology of Hindu majoritarianism even as they uphold the consumerist ideals embodied by the middle class in the contemporary moment, thus testifying to the dominant national imaginary of India as a neoliberal Hindu nation.

This dissertation has explored tensions and fault lines engendered in fashioning notions of Indian identity for a contemporary, young audience in the country and the diaspora through mythological texts in new media and formats. These tensions often conglomerate around the representation of gender. I have demonstrated that ideals of Hindu womanhood in 19<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary Hindu nationalist discourse as well as anxieties about the modern, liberated Indian woman in national public debates inform the portrayal of Sita in different comics. Rama's depiction as a "super warrior" in the *Ramayana 3392 AD* comics testifies not only to the transnational impact of American superhero comics, but also to the valorization of Kshatriya manhood in authoritative retellings of the *Ramayana*, as well as its entrenchment as a model of hegemonic

masculinity in the Hindutva movement and in the Indian socio-political landscape more broadly. Furthermore, I have asserted that the construction of boyhood in mythological animations is inherently masculinist, and that the boy-gods carry out patriarchal agendas, thus reasserting conservative values that have been threatened by changing gender roles and family organization in the context of globalization. Overall, I have argued that many mythological texts perpetuate a Brahmanical, Vedic conception of Hindu culture that has been central to the discourse of Hindu nationalism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which has been repurposed in contemporary Hindutva movements as well.

### **Future Directions**

My dissertation has not studied retellings of the *Mahabharata*, in order to limit the scope of the project. Pamela Lothspeich's book *Epic Nation: Reimagining the Mahabharata in the Age of Empire* discusses how the epic was refashioned in colonial India, and a few articles have recently been published on contemporary fictional retellings of the epic. However, graphic renderings of *Mahabharata* have received little scholarly attention. A longer version of my project would study how 21<sup>st</sup> century English-language *Mahabharata* comics, graphic novels and animations negotiate with discourses of Hindu nationalism, and the conceptions of Indian identity which emerge in the reworkings. Select texts include Campfire's graphic novels *The Kaurava Empire* series (2014-2015) and *Krishna: Defender of Dharma* (2012), Sriram Raghavan's *Mahabharata* comic book series (2014), Grant Morrison's web-series and script book *18 Days* (2013), as well as artist-created graphic novels aimed at older audiences, such as Abhishek Singh's *A Journey Within* (2012), Amruta Patil's *Adiparva: Churning of the Ocean* (2012) and *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* (2016).

The projection of *Mahabharata* as a redeeming, nationalist literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was concurrent with the promotion of Hindi as a national language (Lothspeich 19). Contemporary retellings of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, whether in fictional or graphic form, are predominantly in English, and need to be contextualized within the explosion of Indian English-language publishing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and more broadly, the increasing predominance of English as a national language in a globalized India. The longer version of this project will also investigate in more detail the factors underlying the reinvention of the mythological genre in newer media like comics and animations, and will explore further the generic similarities between Anglo-American and Indian forms.

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