Interpreting Rāmrāj
Reflections on the “Rāmāyan,” Bhakti, and Hindu Nationalism

Philip Lutgendorf

Incarnate Rām slew Rāvaṇ and his host in battle
And returned to his city with Sītā.
Rām became raja, Ayodhya his capital,
And their merits are sung by gods and sages.
But humble ones who lovingly recall the name
Triumph effortlessly over the army of delusion
And, lost in love, return to their own bliss,
Free of all worry—by the name’s grace.
—Tulsidāsa, Rāmcharitmānas, 1.25.5-8

A Contested Ideal

The man revered as the father of Indian independence, Mohandas Gandhi, was a devoted reader of the sixteenth-century Hindi epic Rāmcharitmānas (The lake of the acts of Rām”), an influential retelling of the Rāmāyan story, and was fond of quoting from it in his conversations and speeches.1 Though he studied the scriptures of many faiths, Gandhi once observed that he considered the Mānas (as devotees commonly abbreviate its title) to be “the greatest book of all devotional literature” (Gandhi 1968, 47), and even stated that he drew the inspiration for his Non-Cooperation Movement from an episode in which the epic’s heroine, Sītā, though a helpless captive of the tyrannical Rāvaṇ, resists complying with his will (Gopal 1977, viii). A more obvious and pervasive borrowing from the epic, however, was of the term Rāmrāj—“the righteous reign of Rām”—which Gandhi frequently used to articulate his dream of an independent India, often equating it with or preferring it to the term svarāj (self-rule) used by other leaders of the freedom struggle (Bose 1948, 255). For Gandhi (1925, 295), Rāmrāj was “not only the political Home Rule but also dharmarāj . . . which was something higher than ordinary political emancipation . . . .” It was indeed Gandhi’s invocation of such terms as Rāmrāj and dharmarāj and his quotations and homely anecdotes from the Rāmāyan that enabled him
to strike a sympathetic chord in tens of millions of Indians, especially those in rural areas, for nostalgia for Rām’s mythical reign had long persisted, in Norvin Hein’s words (1972, 100), as “one of the few vital indigenous political ideas remaining in the vastly unpolitical mind of the old-time Indian peasant.” Effective as it was, Gandhi’s invocation of this centuries-old paradigm, and of the text through which it was best known, came under criticism from secularists who worried over some of the conservative, even reactionary passages in the poem—most notably, its confidence in the divine rightness of a rigidly stratified social hierarchy. Gandhi’s reply to such critics was that he was concerned with the spirit rather than the letter of the text, and this allowed him to come up with such startlingly unorthodox interpretations as the following, in which the epic’s vision of a divine autocracy is transformed into a populist democracy through an appeal to the moral principle of self-abnegation (1932, 92): “Rāmrāj means rule of the people. A person like Rām would never wish to rule.”

In the fifth decade after independence, Rāmrāj remains a much-used slogan in Indian politics, a signifier of social justice and material abundance that is predictably invoked by candidates in every parliamentary election and that sometimes figures prominently in party platforms. Yet not all who use the term share Gandhi’s positive interpretation of its import. In The Shadow of Ram Rajya over India, an impassioned polemic that appeared in the aftermath of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s period of emergency rule, journalist Prem Nath Bazaz argued that nationalist and Gandhian thought was indeed permeated by the notion of Rāmrāj, but that this notion had proven itself to be inherently reactionary, communalist, and undemocratic, and that its continued invocation could only lead India on a spiraling downward course toward violence, corruption, and ultimate dictatorship. “The bitter truth,” wrote Bazaz (1980, 11), “is that dictatorship and authoritarianism are inherent in what the nationalists extol as ancient Indian culture.” He contrasted the Rāmrāj paradigm with other “liberal and democratic currents” that he saw as historically present in Indian culture, for example, the nirguṇ devotional traditions of Kabir and the sants.

Which, one may ask, is the real Rāmrāj—the Mahatma’s perpetual wellspring of egalitarianism, or the journalist’s stagnant reservoir of oppression? Although the observations of Gandhi and Bazaz are phrased in the language of twentieth-century politics, the debate they reveal is not a new one, for like the broader notion of dharma, Rāmrāj has long been, in Wendy Doniger’s memorable phrase (1978, xiv), “a problem rather than a concept”—a paradigm whose meaning has often been contested by conflicting interest groups. Moreover, debate over the interpretation of Rāmrāj is rooted in a paradox which runs through the Rāmâyana tradition: an apparent dissonance between the letter and spirit of the epic that has allowed for its appropriation by both power wielding elites and disenfranchised lower orders. In the remainder of this essay, I will examine this paradox by considering some variations on the theme of Rāmrāj articulated by a number of texts and given concrete expression through a variety of sociopolitical movements, especially during the past century. Ultimately I will consider the question of whether the concept of Rāmrāj remains, in late-twentieth-century India, a fluid and contestable one.

Reigning Paradox

For the locus classicus of the concept, the modern scholar is likely to turn to the Rām story in its various literary avatars, and is equally apt to privilege the earliest of these—the Sanskrit poem Rāmāyana attributed to Valmiki (c. second-first century B.C.E.). An examination of relevant verses makes clear, however, that the cultural ideal of Rāmrāj owes little to the exegesis of specific literary passages. For although Valmiki’s epic does indeed include, at the end of its core narrative, a description of the condition of the kingdom of Ayodhya during Rām’s lengthy reign, what is immediately striking about this passage is its brevity: less than ten ślokas out of some twenty-four thousand. Another influential Rāmâyana text in Sanskrit, the Adhyātmā Rāmāyana (c. fifteenth century) dispenses with the theme in a mere four couplets, and the medieval Hindi version of which Gandhi was so fond (and which most modern North Indians know best)—the Mānas of Tulsidas—describes Rām’s reign in only thirty-six of its roughly thirteen thousand lines.

The actual descriptions vary little among these three texts that span nearly two millennia and that differ in many other details of their interpretation of the story. All three sketch a formulaic vision of a utopia in which the most basic problems of human life have been transcended: beyond the achievement of social peace and harmony, old age and disease have been conquered, snakes and vermin no longer afflict people, robbery is unknown, and children never die before their
parents or husbands before their wives. The vision of a peaceable kingdom extends even beyond the human realm: all animals are said to live in harmony, trees to flower and bear fruit throughout the year, and clouds to yield rain whenever it is needed. A cool, gentle, and fragrant breeze, it is said, fanned Ayodhya continuously for eleven thousand years.

Perusing these passages, a modern reader may question how it is that Rāmrāj ever came to serve as a “political” ideal at all. The texts offer no practical or legalistic prescription for its establishment—in the sense that, say, the Qur’ān does for the establishment of Islam—because the Rāmāyaṇa (though often characterized by later commentators as a dharmaśāstra or “treatise on dharma”) is not a collection of maxims or laws, but of acts or “characteristic behavior” (charitra). Rāmrāj need not receive much verbal description in Rāmāyaṇ texts because it is assumed that its qualities are self-evident to the audience in the wider context of the story. It is the presence of Rāma on the throne that is its defining feature, and the state of grace under which his people live is but an extension of his own personality and behavior. And since the epic itself constitutes an extended meditation on that personality and behavior, we may understand the whole of the Rāmāyaṇa to be, in a sense, an exposition of the nature of Rāmrāj. Rāma’s devotion to his understanding of dharma throughout the story establishes the parameters or boundaries of human behavior—maryādā, in the archaic sense of this important term (which also connotes dignity and social propriety); boundaries that, if adhered to, facilitate the boundlessly blessed state so tersely sketched by the poets. The vision of Rāmrāj inevitably depends on the understanding of Rāma and his behavior, and here we must recall that the acts of Rāma have been the subject of gradually evolving and at times conflicting interpretation.

Pertinent here is a distinction, which I shall examine further in a moment, between two aspects of Rāma’s character as an exemplar of dharma. We may relate these to the dual nature of dharma itself, which has from an early period been metaphorically compared to a setu, a term connoting both a “boundary”—a wall or dam—and a “connection” or bridge. The former meaning suggests its restraining, regulating character; the latter its expansive possibilities as a causeway to a further or higher realm.

In his analysis of the central themes of Vālmīki’s Sanskrit epic, Sheldon Pollock argues that there exists a fundamental paradox between the explicit and implicit meanings of the story. Explicitly, the poem presents a vast meditation on dharma and on the nature of kingship, in which Pollock sees the reflection of historical processes occurring roughly contemporaneous with its composition—the coalescence of a system of hierarchical social organization and the rise of powerful hereditary monarchies. In its portrayal of an ideal kingdom under an ideal ruling family, the epic attempts to resolve problems of social competition and dynastic succession through an appeal to hierarchical order and submission to senior male authority (Pollock 1986, 16).

But there is another problem that the epic addresses only implicitly: that of the yearning of the individual (particularly within a rigidly hierarchical society) for autonomy and freedom. Insofar as Vālmīki offers any “solution” to this problem, it is Rāma himself: a “spiritualized king” who transcends the limits of his Kṣatriya (warrior) class to incorporate the highest functions of the Brahmīn order, who unites the city and the forest and the life-stages of householder and ascetic, and who reaches out with friendship and compassion to the lowly; a hero who contradicts expectations and oversteps conventional boundaries. According to Pollock, this characterization has profound implications (1986, 72):

If, in his course of action, Rāma explicitly affirms hierarchical subordination, the spiritual commitment that allows for his utopian rule seems explicitly to oppose it... Hierarchical life and the separation of “powers” that underpins it, which the poem elsewhere unambiguously attempts to validate, appears at the highest and critical level to be questioned, and a reformulation is offered in its place.

This reformulation has as its symbol the person of Rāma: the divinized king whose role has expanded to fill both heaven and earth. This implicit understanding of Rāma suggests the inevitability of his association with Vishnu, the “expanding” deity whose self-limitation in incarnate forms is the touchstone of his transcendence; the Kṣatriya guardian of this world who ultimately usurps the status of the absolute Brahmā.

Another and not unrelated aspect of Rāma’s characterization was likewise to prove important in the subsequent evolution of his religious role: his portrayal as a suffering hero, whose strength of character is revealed through adversity. The unjust forest exile to which he willingly
It is often assumed that medieval poets can invoke him (as Tulsidas often does) as "brother to the wretched" (din bandhu). The notion that Rām's trials manifest his true nature is eloquently expressed in a modern Hindi saying: "Only when Rām went to the forest did he become Rām." The full implications of this understanding, and its relevance to my present topic, have been articulated by a renowned Mānas expounder, Rāmkiṅkar Upādhyāy, who has declared that Rāmrāj itself must be reckoned to begin not from the moment of Rām's installation on the throne of Ayodhya, but paradoxically, from the moment when he steps across its borders into exile (Upādhyāy 1983). Here we should recall a fact stressed by contemporary Rāmāyaṇ scholarship: that the epic of Rām, in the conception of its audience, has always been primarily a story and only secondarily a body of written texts. Although individual authors, patrons, and communities have periodically aspired to cast this tale in enduring and authoritative form—the versions of Vālmiki, Kampan, and Tulsidas, for example, have each functioned in this way in certain regions and periods—the multifority of the narrative has always survived such efforts. Recognizing the distinction between story and text—and the primacy of the former over the latter—can help to clarify the seeming contradiction between the spirit and letter of Rāmrāj, for whereas rigid ideological prescriptions exist as specific passages in specific texts (and may be tempered by other passages in other texts or even, indeed, in the same one), the "liberating" potential of the story exists more globally, at the level of what A. K. Ramanujan terms the "meta-Rāmāyaṇ,” which encompasses a rich oral tradition of folk variants (Richman 1991, 33).

Two sets of writings from the medieval period, when the cult of Rām rose to prominence in many parts of India, illustrate the further articulation of the themes I have identified as central to the earliest extant Rāmāyaṇ. In a recent essay on "Rāmāyaṇa and the Political Imaginary in Medieval India," Pollock notes that despite the tremendous influence of Vālmiki's Sanskrit epic as a literary model and the story's presumed popularity as a folk narrative, there is no evidence that it played a significant role in either political discourse or cultic practice during the first millennium B.C. (Pollock 1991a, 4).

Beginning in roughly the twelfth century, however, certain kings in northern and central India began building temples to Rām, and a few went so far as to assert in their inscriptions that they were Rām incarnate—and these assertions often occurred in the context of polemic against Turkic and Afghan invaders from the northwest. Thus the Chalukya king Jayasimha Siddharāj (1094-1143) was identified (in Merutūṅga's c. fourteenth-century Prabhandaḥchintāmaṇi) as an avatar of Rām, and was said to have achieved victory over the "mlechchha chiefs," in token of which he received a congratulatory emissary from King Vibhiṣaṇ of Lanka, Rām's immortal ally (Pollock 1991a, 23-24). Similarly the Sanskrit epic Prthvīrājavijaya, composed sometime between 1178 and 1193 by a court panegyrist of the last Hindu king of Delhi, used an explicit Rāmrāj model to recount the campaigns of its hero against Muhammad Gori—e.g., Brahmagī appears before Vishnu to protest the presence of a mlechchha army on the shores of Pushkar Lake (whose holy waters are polluted by the soldiers' menstruating wives), and Rām, incarnating as Prthvīraj III, takes a vow to slay these "demons in the form of men"; this king is later said to have restored "the riches and joys of Rāmarāja in the very midst of the Kali age" (Pollock 1991a, 26-28). Such examples can be multiplied, and according to Pollock (1991a, 29-32) they roughly parallel, chronologically and geographically, the course of Turko-Afghan expansion over northern and central India during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

In reflecting on why the Rāmāyaṇ became the metaphor-of-choice for embattled kings confronted with an expansionist alien culture, Pollock invokes certain features of Rām's charit that he has highlighted in his earlier writings: the fact that the epic presents a paradigm for both the divinization of a king and the demonization of an enemy (Pollock 1991b, 15-54, 68-84). A ruler who presents himself as upholding dharma partakes in the divinity of Rām, while outsiders who are held to imperil dharma assume the inhuman, perverse qualities of the epic's rākṣasas. From this perspective, the Rāmāyaṇ offered the only epic model suitable to the time, since the Mahābhārata's darker vision of realpolitik presents a more ambiguous, Kali Yuga world in which evil is broadly diffused throughout society and the enemy ultimately proves to be one's kinsman.

The modest number of Sanskrit inscriptions, panegyrics, and ritual compendia cited by Pollock suggest one reading of the theme of Rāmrāj as an essentially conservative principle—a defense of a threatened order as interpreted by certain of its privileged representatives—which accords well with what I have earlier identified (again following Pollock) as a more explicit reading of the story. How widely this interpretation was...
shared by the broader population is open to question. Royal publicists may have eulogized a given monarch as Rām incarnate, but did his subjects subscribe to this identification? If Rāmrāj was a cherished ideal, it was also, realistically speaking, a tall order. Elite appropriation of Rāmāyaṇa themes presupposes the wide popularity of the story, and other elements in the population must have had their own interpretation of Rām and his virtues.

Although it is unfortunately impossible to determine whether late-twelfth-century peasants of the Ajmer region agreed that the "riches and joys" of Rāmrāj had been restored by Prthviraj III, an alternative interpretation of the story is indeed represented by another, and far more substantial, body of texts: the regional language Rāmāyaṇa epics. Although the period that saw the new royal preoccupation with Rām coincided roughly with that of the composition of the earliest of these, both ideologically and geographically these popular epics—which frequently incorporate folktales and local lore not found in the Sanskrit archetype—follow a different trajectory from that traced by Pollock for royal inscriptions and royally-patronized temples. Thus the earliest major Rāmāyaṇa in a local language, the great Tamil Rāmavatāram of Kampan, was composed in the extreme south, sometime between the ninth and twelfth centuries, and betrays no concern for political events occurring late in that period and far to the north. Instead, in both its poetry and theology, it shows the influence of the Ālvār poet-saints of earlier centuries, whose fervent devotion to Vishnu in the form of his human incarnations Rām and (more often) Krishna, emphasized themes of love, compassion, and universal accessibility. Kampan's Rāvana is an arrogant and suitably demonic anti-hero, yet he is simultaneously humanized as a cultivated Dravidian monarch, and is ultimately redeemed, in death, by Rām's grace. This bhakti orientation, which draws on the implicit reading of Rām as a suffering and loving Godman, will permeate later vernacular Rāmāyaṇas, leading to an interpretation of the story that significantly expands beyond the dual paradigm of divine kingship and demonic otherhood so central to Vālmiki.

To venture a broad generalization (which I will develop with a specific example shortly), the devotional Rāmāyaṇa present a pietistic vision in which Rām's divinity entirely overwhelms his worldly kingship, so that his affinity to mundane rulers (especially during the present dark age) is downplayed or ignored. At the same time, the demonic nature of his opponents becomes, in many instances, allegorized as the consuming desire and egoism of worldly people, who can ultimately be purified by the arrows of his grace. Of paramount importance to these texts is the universal accessibility of Rām, especially via his name, which is increasingly seen as a liberating mantra of greater power and efficacy than the Brahmin-mediated formulae of the Vedas. When bhakti-inspired poets, whatever their social background, emphasize Rāmrāj, it is likely to reflect the spiritual yearning of common people and so to be more in accord with what I have identified as an implicit reading of the Sanskrit epic.

The King and the Crow

Having made these general observations, I return to the treatment of Rāmrāj found in one of the most influential of the regional-language epics: the Mānas of Tulsīdās. The composition of this bhakti-saturated poem, which dates itself to 1574, occurred during the height of Mughal hegemony. Yet despite the fact that its author was a classically educated pandit who spent most of his adult life in a pilgrimage center (Kashi or Banaras) that had occasionally suffered the visitations of Muslim iconoclasts, his writings betray little evidence of the cultural collision of the Brahmanical and Islamic worldviews. Indeed, the Mānas shows a striking absence of overtly political allusions, even in contexts in which one might expect some reflection on contemporary events—e.g., the poet's long diatribe (to be discussed below) against the evils of the Kali Yuga.

To suggest the predominant character of Tulsīdās's bhakti-inspired meditation on the theme of Rāmrāj, I will examine two passages from the Mānas in greater detail—passages that I believe are intentionally juxtaposed. Both occur in the seventh and final book, Uttar Kanda, which, in keeping with the long tradition of seven-part Rāmāyaṇa compositions, is essentially an epilogue to the main narrative. The first passage occurs about a quarter way into the final book, following the account of the hero's return to Ayodhya, his reunion with his faithful brothers Bharat and Śatrughna, and his consecration as king.

Vālmiki's account of Rāmrāj begins with a detailed inventory of the Vedic sacrifices performed by King Rām—pānḍarṭika, aśvamedha, vijapeya, and so on—a kind of concealed kingly dharma in the worldview of the Sanskrit epic age, which sets the tone for the catalogue of
meritorious fruits to follow. In contrast, Tulsidās makes only formulaic mention of Vedic *yajñas* ("The Lord performed tens of millions of horse sacrifices" [7.24.1]), but introduces his account of Rāmrāj with a prolonged and touching scene in which Rām bids farewell to the beloved allies of his forest adventures—the lowly monkeys and bears and the impure Niśād tribesmen, bridging the two passages with the verse:

Observing Rām’s behavior (*charitra*), the people of Ayodhya Exclaimed again and again, “Noble is the bounteous one!”

7.20.6

The most influential of twentieth-century *Mānas* commentaries, the twelve-volume *Mānas pīyūś* ("Nectar of the *Mānas*") reckons the account of Rāmrāj to begin with this farewell scene, and emphasizes the gracious compassion Rām displays toward his lowly cohorts as indicative of the tenor of his reign. The commentator points out that to admire virtuous deeds implies making an effort to reproduce them, according to the Sanskrit adage, “As the king is, so are his subjects” (*yathā rāja tathā praja*); hence, he continues, Rāmrāj signifies the imitation (*anukarān*) of Rām (Śarāṇ 1956, 12.169). By juxtaposing the account of Rāmrāj with this scene, Tulsidās indeed appears to have given greater emphasis to social compassion than to ritual duty.

The ensuing account of Rāmrāj, as already noted, briefly sketches a world of perfect order regulated by the precepts of authoritative scripture:

Everyone was devoted to his own duty According to class and stage of life, And ever following the Vedic path Was happy and free from fear, sorrow, disease.

7.20

All men displayed mutual affection And, intent on scriptural precept, Followed their proper duty.

7.21.2

Yet under Rām’s benevolent direction, this impeccable order, far from restricting human beings, produced a freedom hardly mundane at all—a world in which (echoing Vālmīki’s account) even elemental limitations were transcended:

**INTERPRETING RĀMRĀJ**

No one was stricken by untimely death, All had beautiful and healthy bodies.

7.21.5

Forest trees ever blossomed and bore fruit, Elephant and tiger dwelt in harmony. Trees and creepers dripped honey on request, Cows yielded milk at a mere wish, The earth was always filled with crops, The Kṛta age reappeared in the Tretā.

7.23.1,5,6

The moon flooded the earth with nectar, The sun offered just enough heat, You asked the cloud and it released rain— In the realm of Rāmchandra! 7.23

This vision of a utopia in which time itself is reversed—allowing the reappearance, during the second cosmic aeon, of the effortlessly blessed state of humanity during the preceding, Golden Age—resonates with one of the most persistent themes in Hindu discourse: the nostalgia for a lost era when Vedic wisdom was clearly understood, dharma firmly established, and humankind uniformly virtuous. Taken by itself, the description of Rāmrāj might seem a prescription for restoration of the past.

Yet this passage cannot be “taken by itself,” for the *Uttar kānda* is far from over. In the remaining three-fourths of the epilogue, Tulsidās boldly discards Vālmīki’s narrative framework and, instead of recounting the birth stories of major characters and the tale of Sītā’s banishment, weaves a tapestry of didactic tales that emphasize the preeminence of the path of bhakti in approaching Rām. To expound this theme, he introduces a new narrator and a new story-frame: one of the “four dialogues” (*chār saṃvād*) around which he has structured his retelling of the epic (Lutgendorf 1989). Here the inquirer is the solar eagle Gāruḍa, vehicle of Lord Vishnu. Like the goddess Pārvati and the sage Bharadvāj, who serve as questioners in earlier framing dialogues, Gāruḍa becomes troubled by a doubt concerning Rām’s godhood, occasioned by beholding the hero helplessly ensnared by a demonic serpent-weapon during the battle with Rāvan: can this “limited” human
PART III: POLITICAL ACTION

being really be one with the Absolute (7.58)? To answer this question, Lord Shiva sends Garuda to the summit of the mysterious Blue Mountain, where, beneath an immense banyan tree, an immortal crow (kāk) named Bhusunḍi ceaselessly narrates the story of Rām to a devout audience of birds (7.57.7).

One of the epic’s most memorable characters, Kāk Bhusunḍi appears to have been developed by Tulsīdās out of older Rāmāyana-related lore.14 According to the autobiography he recounts to Garuda, he is a spiritual seeker whose adventures span numerous rebirths, until he ultimately learns the story of Rām from the sage Lomaśī, becomes a fervent devotee of the infant Lord of Ayodhya, and secures the boon of immortality. By angering the sage, however, Bhusunḍi also incurs a curse to take on the form of a crow, the harsh-voiced, carrion-eating fowl whom Hindus despise as the “outcaste among birds” (7.112.15). Though the sage later relents and offers to ease the terms of the curse, Bhusunḍi accepts them gladly, presumably because the lowly crow form suits his hard-won devotional humility. Moreover, it gives him the freedom to fly to Ayodhya whenever, in the ceaseless round of the aeons, Lord Rām takes his Tretā Yuga incarnation there, and to witness with his own eyes the childhood pastimes of the Lord (7.75.2).

All of this seemingly carries us far from the core Rāmāyana narrative and its concluding paradigm of an ideal polity. Yet even in the midst of devotional metaphysics, Tulsīdās retains his interest in mundane affairs, and so he makes Bhusunḍi, in recounting his long chain of previous births, linger over one during a preceding Kali Yuga—the fourth age which, by Hindu reckoning, had again come full circle as that in which the poet and his audience lived. As in the “prophetic” verses describing the Kali Yuga common to many of the medieval Purāṇas,15 this passage offers the poet a pretense for a critique of the evils he perceived in his own society. In this dark counterpart to the luminous vision of Rāmrāj described earlier, he portrays an age in which Vedic order has been overturned, resulting in a chaos of heresies and utter social corruption.

Religion is tainted by the Kali Age’s filth,
The holy books become concealed
While hypocrites spin their own fancies
And promulgate numberless sects.

Even as, under Rāmrāj, the willing adherence of Rām’s subjects to dharma produced a state of heaven on earth, so the refusal of the people of the Kali Yuga to adhere to scriptural precept results in the sufferings of an earthly hell:

Racked by disease, men find no pleasure anywhere,
Yet wallow in vain pride and enmity.
Their life span barely a dozen years,
They fancy themselves outliving an aeon!
The Dark Age makes all mankind desperate,
No one respects even sisters or daughters.
Without contentment, discrimination, detachment,
High and low are reduced to beggary.

This jeremiad, which goes on for some seventy lines (roughly twice as long as the account of Rāmrāj), may at first appear to be a strident call for restoration of the past, emphasizing how far society has fallen from its ideal standard. Such an interpretation, however, misses the full implications of this passage, which, significantly, the popular and ubiquitous Gita Press edition of the epic refers to as “the Eulogy of the Kali Yuga” (kali mahimā) (Poddar 1939). The heading is not facetious, for, paradoxically, the long diatribe against the dark age ends not with condemnation, but with praise, and with the promise of a new dispensation of grace, now accessible to all through the power of the divine name:

Listen, Garuda, the Kali age
Is the treasury of sins and vices,
Yet it has one great virtue:
Salvation may be had without effort!

The state attained in the first three ages
By worship, sacrifice, and austerity,
Truly is gained by Kali age people
By the name of the Lord.

The dark age has no compeer
For one possessing faith,
For by singing the pure fame
of Rāma
Liberation comes without exertion!

7.102a,b

To be sure, the Hindi poet’s powerful idealization of tradition is capable of eliciting nostalgia for the past, yet his insistence on carrying his narrative forward into the troubled present shows a recognition that the past is irretrievable; as one Mānas scholar in Banaras remarked to me, interpreting this passage, “In the Kali Yuga, the dharmasetu has been completely destroyed; it can never be rebuilt.” According to this man’s view, Tulsīdās’s prescription for the ills of the age was not a reconstruction of the vanished order but a new, egalitarian expedient—not a Sanskritic Rāmraj of the elite, but a nāmraj (reign of the name), promulgated by a saintly crow and accessible to even the lowliest of human beings (C. N. Singh 1983).

I have discussed the Mānas at some length because of the extraordinary status which it has assumed during the past four centuries, and because its departures from the traditional Rāmāyaṇ narrative are not well known outside India. Although the Hindi poem retains much of the Sanskrit epic’s explicit message of hierarchical subordination within family and society, it uses the ideology of bhakti to foreground and considerably expand on what I have termed the implicit subtext of the older story: its (spiritually) liberating and (socially) liberal dimension. Indeed, the tremendous emphasis given, throughout the poem, to the divine name—which Tulsīdās hails as “greater even than Rām himself” (1.23)—suggests that its author was closer in spiritual sensibility to the sant poets of the nirgūṇ “school” of bhakti than is commonly understood.

The juxtaposition of conservative and liberal messages in a persuasive and accessible vernacular epic represented, in sixteenth century North India, a powerful new articulation of the paradox central to the Rāmāyaṇ tradition. Over subsequent centuries, a rising tide of manuscript and (later) printed editions, commentaries, and treatises documents the growing prestige of the Mānas among ever wider audiences, and its patronage by a range of caste communities and economic classes. The research of Christopher Bayly and others has shown the importance of Hindu revivalism to the development of Indian nationalism and has noted that political ideas in nineteenth century India “were almost unavoidably expressed in terms of religious tradition, because this was the language of social comment” (Bayly 1975, 6). That the Mānas too became—with paradoxes intact—part of the language of social comment is demonstrated by the varied uses of its themes in nineteenth and twentieth century political movements, some examples of which I will now examine. For Rāmrāj has been viewed both as a harmonious but hierarchical order, in which the privileged confidently enjoy their status and the dispossessed keep within their limits, or conversely, as a kingdom of righteousness, in which the possibilities of freedom are made accessible to all.

**Liberation by the Book**

Not the least of the paradoxes associated with the Mānas is the fact that this text—the social teachings of which uphold the hierarchical order encoded in the Sanskrit term varṇaśrama-dharma (the system of classes and stages of life), advocate reverence for Brahmins, and express, at times, sharp censure of any claims to religious authority by those relegated to the rank of Śūdra or lower—should have been enthusiastically received by groups of low social and economic status, and adopted as an inspirational scripture associated with collective programs of “upward mobility.” We can begin with the Rāmānandis who were probably among the earliest promulgators of Tulsīdās’s epic and who eventually championed it as their primary scripture, identifying it as a “fifth Veda” that represented in the language of common people the distillation of the spiritual wisdom preserved in the Sanskrit scriptures of the past. Rāmānandis were considered among the most liberal of Vaiṣṇava ascetics, who took as their slogan a couplet attributed to their founder, Rāmānand: “Do not inquire of anyone concerning his caste or
community; whoever worships the Lord belongs to Him," and who embraced relaxed policies on intercaste commensality and on the initiation of women, low castes, and even Muslims. Such policies appear to have contributed to their success, for by the nineteenth century they had replaced the Daśnāmi (Śaṅkarāchārya) order of sannyasis as the leading ascetic group in northern India and had assumed dominant roles in many pilgrimage centers and trade networks. Peter van der Veer has termed them an “open category” of ascetics, and has attributed their theological malleability and liberal recruitment policies, in part, to their adherence to the Mānas—a syncretic text which lends itself to divergent interpretations (van der Veer 1988, 84–85).

Even though in certain contexts (and following a pattern common to upwardly mobile groups within the Hindu hierarchy) the Rāmānandis in later centuries showed increasing conservatism in matters of caste, this was sometimes little more than a formal acknowledgment of the standards of aristocratic and mercantile patrons or a bid for greater respectability in the eyes of established Brahmin teachers. In fact, Rāmānandis—as well as their favorite text—continued to play prominent roles in movements intended to boost the prestige and power of low-status groups. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries caste “uplift” movements, most commonly associated with claims to Kṣatriya status, were launched by a number of North Indian communities within the framework of what William Pinch has termed “a progressive, assimilative Vaiśnavism belief system” (Pinch 1990, 5).

These communities ranged from relatively high socioeconomic groups like Babhan landholders (who claimed priestly status as Bhūmīhār Brahmins—i.e., “Brahmins of the soil”) and Kāyasthīs (a prosperous scribal and mercantile caste that was nevertheless classed as Śūdra by Brahmin legalists), to low-Śūdra and borderline-Untouchable communities like the Koirīs, Kurmīs, and Gyāls (a.k.a. Goāls, Ahīrs, Yādavs—the most populous jāti of Gangetic North India), each of whom would assert their descent from a Rājpūt lineage of the mythical past. Their religious preceptors were in nearly all cases Rāmānandis, who had supplanted Śaiva Daśnāmi sannyasis and nirguṇ ascetics of the Nānak Śāhī (or Udāsī) tradition in ministering to the religious needs of these groups. The Rāmānandis owed their success, according to Pinch (1990, 118), to their reputation for being ritually strict yet socially “assimilative,” and to their offering “a new and radically different view of society wherein the strict hierarchy of jāti and varṇa, while still relevant, was decidedly softened.” Pinch notes the adoption of the Mānas as a cherished and prestige-enhancing scripture by these groups, and his analysis of the Rāmānandis’ role echoes the paradoxical tension between order and transcendence that I have identified as characteristic of the Hindu epic.

The Rāmānandis were hardly radical egalitarians in a late-twentieth-century secularist sense; their message was couched in what they themselves saw as an “orthodox” idiom, within what Pinch terms “the cultural constraints of Vaiśnavism morality” (1990, 186), and their influence on their patrons showed many features characteristic of what modern anthropologists term “Sanskritization”—thus, according to one British observer, they induced the members of “impure or vile tribes” to give up alcohol and meat eating and become known as bhagats (i.e., bhaktas, Vaiśnava “devotees”) (Pinch 1990, 116). Rāmānandī pamphlet literature, in explaining the debased and oppressed condition of the Hindu lower classes, generally focused on two scapegoats: the Brahmin religious elite and the Muslims; whereas the former could be reformed and co-opted (e.g., as priests managing caste-endowed temples) (Pinch 1990, 219), the latter remained irreducibly other, hence one effect of caste uplift movements in the early twentieth century was to sharpen the rhetoric of communalism (Pinch 1990, 169). Yet without sugarcoating the Rāmānandis’ motives or strategies, Pinch argues that these Vaiśnava ascetics successfully worked for enhanced economic and educational opportunity and self-respect for millions of North Indians whose aspirations were seldom given more than token acknowledgment by the predominantly high-caste leaders of the Indian National Congress.

Rāmānandi leadership came to the fore again during the Avadh peasant revolt of 1920–22, when thousands of tenant farmers on the vast estates of one of the Gangetic plain’s most productive agricultural regions withheld rent and rallied in protest against oppressive landholders. “Law and order” deteriorated to such a degree that the British Governor of the United Provinces speculated that he was witnessing “the beginnings of something like revolution” (Pandey, 1982, 143). Yet the rhetoric of the agitators was not of revolution but of Rāmrāj, and their aim was not the overthrow of the state nor even of the state-supported system of revenue farming. Instead, they sought a return to an older order that had been disturbed by changes in the rural economy and by the depredations of a new class of absentee landlords—merchants
and industrialists who flourished under the protection of British law. The most influential spokesmen for the network of Kísán Sabhās (cultivators’ societies) which formed the organizational basis for the revolt were a pair of Rāmānandi sadhus, Bābā Rāmchandra and Bābā Jānakī Dās, who toured the region as itinerant kathāvādchaks (tellers of religious stories or kathā), peppering their discourses with quotations from the Mānas (Pandey 1982, 168–69). So important was Rāmāyana symbolism to the movement that the establishment of the first Kísán Sabhā, in the village of Rure, was explained by citation of a half-line from the epic which could be interpreted to contain the name of that place. For the first large-scale meeting of the movement in December 1920, the organizers selected Ayodhya, mythical capital of Rāmrāj, and mustered some eighty thousand supporters (Pandey 1982, 171). The slogan used by the organizers to assemble crowds of protesters was Sītā-Rām kī jay! (Victory to Sītā-Rām!), and to worried British officials, this common village salutation now came to represent “a war-cry . . . the cry of discontent” (Pandey 1982, 170–71). They responded with the full weight of the powers of the police and judiciary to suppress the revolt. Ironically, according to Gyan Pandey, though the leaders of the Indian National Congress initially backed the peasants’ demands, they later withdrew their support, arguing that peasants and landlords (some of whom were prominent Congress patrons) should “forget their differences” and unite in a nonviolent struggle against the British, leaving political reform to the “natural leaders” in the Congress. In Pandey’s analysis (1982, 188), this strategy represented “a statement against mass participatory democracy and in favor of the idea of ‘trusteeship’—the landords and princes acting as trustees in the economic sphere, Gandhi and company in the political.” By April 1922, Bābā Rāmchandra was in prison and the revolt he had come to symbolize was effectively crushed.

The movements described thus far aimed at bettering the lives of persons who, albeit scorned by the highest castes, were at least marginally incorporated within the fourfold varṇa order of Hindu society. For those regarded as outside this order—the Untouchables and tribes who are despised even by the lowest agricultural groups—Rāmānandi-style Vaishnavism, with its emphasis on sacred narrative and its endorsement (in theory at least) of varṇa-based hierarchy, would appear to have less to offer. Though a number of Untouchable saints have been claimed by Vaiṣṇava bhakti traditions, the majority of these, like the Chamār (leather worker) Ravidās, appear to have espoused a nirguṇ doctrine, placing their faith in a deity far beyond earthly forms and the power structures that tend to coalesce around these—a deity commonly invoked solely as an abstract and universally accessible name. Thus the Ravidās’s reject caste Hinduism and its pantheon of deities “with attributes” (sagūṇ), preferring to worship their guru and the name through nirguṇ-oriented hymns (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988, 9–23).

Yet the nirguṇ/sagūṇ division risks oversimplifying the picture where the utilization of the Mānas is concerned, for despite its rich iconography and conservative didacticism, this epic gives prominence, as I have noted, to the doctrine of Rāmnām (the name of Rām as the supreme mantra) and frequently uses Advaitin, yogic and nirguṇ terminology. The Rāmānandi order too has long included among its adherents both sagūṇ-oriented rasiks (savorers) who delight in richly decorated (and usually Brahmī-run) temples, and itinerant nirguṇ-oriented tyāgīs (renouncers) and nāgas (naked ones), who practice hātha yoga, and worship Rām, Hanumān, and Shiva in the aniconic forms of rounded stones (van der Veer 1988, 107–29; 130–59). What has historically served to unify such disparate religious orientations has been a shared devotion to Rāmnām as both a symbol and a religious discipline (sādhan), and to the Mānas—understood as imbued with Rāmnām—as an authoritative and power-bestowing scripture.

That Rāmānandi proselytization was not restricted to caste Hindus or even to Śūdras is illustrated by the Untouchable Rāmnāmī Samāj (Society of Devotees of Rāmnām”), founded in the 1890s by Parsurāma, an illiterate leather worker of the Chhattisgarh region of Madhyā Pradesh, who was allegedly cured of leprosy by a Rāmānandī and devoted the remainder of his life to spreading the ascetic’s teachings concerning the glory of Rāmnām (Lamb 1991, 239). Although the practices of the sect centered on the rhythmic chanting of the name (and some adherents went to the extent of having it tattooed over their bodies) and thus differed little from those of other nirguṇ-oriented groups, the Mānas figured prominently in this practice as a symbol of scriptural authority, a copy of the epic being placed in the midst of a circle of chanters and its memorized verses periodically interjected into the chanting. As Rāmdās Lamb observes in his study of the Rāmnāmis, the fact that the epic contains verses insulting to Śūdras and Untouchables, and a much larger number that are flattering to
Brahmins and other “twice-born” (dvija) groups, was initially overlooked by the Râmâyams, possibly because they were illiterate and knew the epic only through selected verses learned from sadhus. Yet during the past century, as a growing number of Chamārs have acquired the ability to read the epic, the Mānas has retained its status among them and the number of verses memorized for liturgical purposes has steadily grown (Lamb 1991, 240–44). Indeed, Râmâyams have developed a distinctive performance genre, the takkar (quarrel), in which sect members well versed in the epic vie with one another in an exchange of quotations relevant to a particular theme, the whole exchange being ingeniously interjected into the context of group devotional chanting (Lamb 1991, 245–51). Although Râmâyams continue to venerate the Mānas, they also exercise freedom in interpreting its contents and even alter verses they find unacceptable (Lamb 1991, 244). None of this is unprecedented in the history of performance and interpretation of this epic—which, Lamb notes (1991, 251), is understood to combine the authority and sonic efficacy of shruti (“aural” revelation, encompassing the four Vedas and their appendages) and the narrative complexity and interpretive malleability of smṛti (the category of “lore” that traditionally includes much of the rest of Sanskrit literature)—but it serves as a reminder that the spirit of the Râmâyana can still appeal even to the most disenfranchised groups. The letter of the Râmâyana is another matter, however, and it is to those who cherish a less flexible interpretation of its social paradigm that I now turn.

Shoring up the Dam

The last two decades of the nineteenth century saw the proliferation of Hindu organizations that espoused political as well as religious aims, and that commonly identified themselves as adherents and protectors of an “immemorial tradition” or sanātana dharma—a term that, partly through the efforts of such groups, came into use throughout northern India to refer to the beliefs and customs of the majority of image-worshipping Hindus.22 The most broad-based Sanātani organization of the early twentieth century was the All-India Hindu Mahasabha (Great Assembly), founded in 1913 as a religious organization to complement the Indian National Congress, but which gradually became politicized in response to the allegedly pro-Muslim policies of the latter organization and eventually grew into an opposition party. In the aftermath of independence and the communal holocaust of partition (for which many Sanātani blamed the congress, which had “betrayed the Hindu nation”), the Mahasabha was joined on the scene by several parties that shared many of its objectives and that have been variously characterized as “communal,” “conservative,” “rightist,” and “reactionary.” Behind their various platforms lies a shared religiopolitical ideal that is often identified with Râmâyana.

The most explicit articulation of Râmâyana as a political goal came from the first of these parties to emerge after the achievement of independence: the Rām Rājya Pariṣad (Râmâyana Party, hereafter, RRP), founded in 1948 by the energetic Swāmī Karpāṭrī (1907–82), a Brahmin-born leader of the Śaṅkarachārya order of dāṇḍī (staff-bearing) ascetics. A tireless religious activist whose name became a household word in Hindi-speaking regions, Karpāṭrī founded the Sanātani newspaper, Sanmārg (The true path) in 1936, promoted the revival of large-scale Vedic sacrifices, and campaigned for the abolition of cow-slaughter, a cause also advocated by his older contemporary, Mahatma Gandhi. Unlike Gandhi, however, Karpāṭrī staunchly opposed the project of “Harijan uplift,” and when a group of Untouchables, emboldened by the principles of the new constitution, dared to enter the Viṣvanāth Temple in Banaras, Karpāṭrī declared its idol of Shiva to be irredeemably polluted and collected funds to erect a new, “private” temple off-limits to Harijans (Tripathi 1978, 225).23

For its first test at the polls in the 1952 parliamentary elections, Karpāṭrī’s party produced a forty-page manifesto “replete with Sanskrit quotations, moral exhortations, metaphysical subtleties, and even arguments for the existence of God…” (Smith 1963, 464). Its evocation of Rām’s reign—the model it wished India to emulate—resembled Tulsīdās’s panegyric: “[E]very citizen of Râmâyana was contented, happy, gifted with learning, and religious-minded… All were truthful. None was close-fisted, none was rude; none lacked prudence; and above all, none was atheist. All followed the path of dharma” (Weiner 1957, 174). To recreate this utopia, the RRP called for a ban on cow slaughter and the sale of alcoholic beverages, advocated the rural system of barter (jajmānī) rather than a cash economy, and sanctioned the replacement of Western medicine with Āyurveda. Society was to function smoothly according to the immemorial varṇāśrama model, but lest it be supposed that this did not offer something for everyone, the
Although the RRP lost ground in later elections and faded from the political scene, the attitudes reflected in its platform would prove more enduring. Also participating in the 1952 elections were the Hindu Mahasabha and the newly formed Bharatiya Jan Sangh—the ancestors, respectively, of the contemporary Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP). The Mahasabha secured four parliamentary seats with a manifesto advocating an “undivided India” (i.e., the annexation of Pakistan), cow protection, and Ayurvedic medicine. On social issues, it adopted a more reformist stance, advocating Harijan uplift and women’s rights, but, as Howard Erdman has noted, such rhetoric can be misleading, since many Mahasabha supporters no more believed in the literal implementation of such ideas than their RRP counterparts did in those of Swami Karpatri (Erdman 1967, 52).

The Jan Sangh was founded in 1951 by Shyam Prasad Mookerjee, a former Mahasabha leader, but drew much of its support from the older Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Service Corps, RSS) which was formed by a group of Maharashtrian Brahmins in 1925 on Vijayadashmi, the day commemorating Rām’s slaying of Rāvaṇa. The RSS rapidly expanded—by 1940 it claimed a nationwide membership of one hundred thousand—and all cadres were supposed to meet daily in local groups for calisthenics, military drills, and Sanskrit prayers; a regimen intended to foster devotion to what was vaguely termed “national religion and culture” (rāṣṭṛya dharma evam sanskṛti). A similar ideology later dominated the policy statements of the Jan Sangh. Its 1951 manifesto contained—in addition to calls for a ban on cow slaughter and for the promotion of Ayurveda—praise of Sanskrit as “the repository of national culture,” and a decade later its platform continued to extol “the age-old scientific principles of social organization”—i.e., the varnāśrama system (Weiner 1957, 176; Baxter 1969, 212–13).

The most successful of the early conservative parties was the Swatantra (Independence) Party, founded in 1959 by C. Rajagopalachari (a.k.a. “Rajaji”—former freedom fighter, chief minister of Madras, and author of popular adaptations of both the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata), who tried to steer a more centrist course and avoided blatantly communal rhetoric. Yet he defined “culture” (sanskṛti) as “essentially the prevailing pattern of joyous restraint accepted by the people,” called for the maintenance of dharma (“an organic growth which it is our duty to respect and which we should not treat as mere Indian superstition”) and bemoaned the undermining of the caste system by “the impact of Western individualism and perverted movements of social reform” (Erdman 1967, 91). Rajaji’s English-language ideology contains an element of euphemism, as Erdman astutely noted: “[I]n his analysis Rajaji uses the term dharma in a rather abstract fashion, but more relevant in popular Hinduism is the more ‘earthy’ notion of varnāśrama dharma. . . . The former usage may be flexible, the latter is not, and in this sense . . . there is an element of ‘disguised conservatism’ which intrudes into Rajaji’s approach” (Erdman 1967, 94).

The concept of varnāśrama-dharma is indeed central to Sanātain’s understanding of their tradition and is often invoked in oral discourse on the Rāmāyaṇa. As a social agenda, the āśrama component—a reference to the ideal of life-stages—has no practical meaning, but the varṇa portion carries potent ideological weight and its connotation of “color” remains a signifier for a wide range of class and caste prejudices. The essentially repressive meaning of varnāśrama becomes clear from the circumstances in which it is commonly invoked; the fact that a Brahmin’s son chooses to enter politics, industry, or, for that matter, sanitary engineering, does not elicit it; but the potential upward mobility of the sweeper, cobbler, or washerman provokes angry cries. In this context, Rajaji’s emphasis on “joyous restraint” acquires a more authoritarian overtone; restraint, joyous or otherwise, is ever urged on the oppressed by their oppressors.

In the face of complex economic and social challenges, rightist leaders consistently invoked a familiar battery of emotional symbols—Rām, the cow, Mother India—urging rich and poor Hindus to “forget their differences” and unite to face an enemy who was always without—Muslims, Pakistanis, Christians, the West. Writing on the early Jan Sangh and Hindu Mahasabha, Myron Weiner observed: “Their emphasis was on cultural questions—Sanskritized Hindi as the national language, a ban on cow slaughter, their opposition to the Hindu Code Bill, and their charge of favoritism toward Muslims by the government—these were the key issues for both parties, not land reform
and other economic questions" (Weiner 1957, 213). The essential elements of one interpretation of Rāmrāj were present in the rhetoric of all the rightist parties, regardless of whether the slogan used was Rām rājya (RRP), dharm rāj (Jan Sangh), Hindā rāśtra (“Hindu nationhood”—used by the Mahasabha), or Bhāratīya maryādā (“Indian national morality”—the slogan of the Swatantra Party): an authoritarian government with a militaristic stance, strict adherence to a “dharmā” defined by the ruling elite, and the denial of religious and cultural pluralism.

Contestable No More?

Since the mid-1980s, public debate over the message of the Rāmāyaṇ and its political implications has been carried to a new level of intensity, in part due to the televised serialization of the epic and to the contemporaneous (and some say, not unrelated) emergence of revived rightist parties that use Rāmāyaṇ themes in a bid for mass support. At the same time, growing disillusionment among the middle classes with the official secularism of the ruling Congress and widespread disgust at its manipulation of communal issues precipitated an upsurge of militant Hindu nationalism that carried these parties to their greatest political successes since independence, and provoked a nationwide debate over the future direction of Indian politics.

Although specific metaphors varied from region to region (e.g., in Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena or “army of Shiva” was the most active rightist party), the symbol with the most dramatic nationwide impact was an image of Lord Rām imprisoned in a padlocked cage, which was transported throughout the country in 1985 by the VHP, an allusion to and the erection of a huge temple in its place, embroiling the nation in a rancorous dispute which eventually toppled a central government.

Unrelenting pressure from rightist groups over the Jannabhūmi issue culminated in the complete destruction of the mosque on 6 December 1992, by a Hindu mob, an event that stunned the nation and was soon followed by riots in cities as distant as Jaipur, Bombay, and Bangalore.

The most horrific consequence of these developments was the great upsurge and geographic proliferation, especially in the wake of the Ayodhya agitations of 1990 and 1992, of “communal violence”—a euphemism that conceals the fact that in nearly all the most brutal episodes the victims were overwhelmingly Muslim: individuals, families, and, in some instances, whole communities, murdered by rampaging mobs of Hindu youths, assisted, in certain documented (but often suppressed) instances, by local or provincial police (Kishwar 1990, 12–13).

That Rāmāyaṇ episodes and, indeed, specific verses from the Mānas, were sometimes invoked by participants in these terrible events is beyond dispute. The fact that the hate-filled ravings of BJP firebrand Uma Bharati (e.g., “Do not display any love. This is the order of Rām!”) represent a grotesque contradiction of the teachings of Tulsīdās is rather beside the point; they were widely circulated on audio cassettes and were persuasive enough to win her a seat in Parliament in the aftermath of the Ayodhya controversy. The new militancy and its related obsession with machismo influenced iconography as well: in some VHP posters the lotus-eyed and softly-rounded Rām of earlier devotional art was replaced by a superhero armored with Bruce Lee musculature, posed in warrior stance with drawn bow, an unchallengeable avenger for an imagined community of politically “impotent” and angry Hindus; in Maharashtra, he was reduced to his weapon alone—cocked with an upward-pointed arrow, like James Bond’s magnum—which served as the Shiv Sena’s symbol in the 1990 by-elections.

Does the meaning of Rāmrāj remain negotiable in the age of mass-mediated politics? Or has the appropriation of the concept by rightist groups, with their rabid publicists and increasing access to sophisticated communications technology, foreclosed on more liberal readings? Ironically, during the same decade when folklorists and historians of religion and literature—mainly outside India—were freeing themselves from a text-based model to recognize the multiform diversity of the Rāmāyaṇ tradition, a number of prominent Indian intellectuals and social critics, confronted with the grim realities described above, were voicing warnings of an opposite process: a narrowing of
interpretation in the direction of a univocal reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Some of these arguments appeared in response to the phenomenally successful television serial *Rāmāyaṇa*, directed by Ramanand Sagar, which aired on India’s state-run television network, Doordarshan, for eighteen months during 1987–88. The serial, although incorporating many *Mānas* verses and permeated with a sentimental devotional mood, represented a major new *Rāmāyaṇa* text, presented in Hindi prose and utilizing the visual conventions of the Bombay cinema. Though avidly consulted by an unprecedented regional audience estimated at one hundred million viewers, Sagar’s *Rāmāyaṇa* was roundly condemned by prominent English-language critics, not solely for its alleged slow pace, melodramatic acting, and visual kitsch, but as a more ominous portent of government imposition, through a persuasive new technology, of a hegemonic “received text” that would obliterate the multiple strands of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition. Thus historian Romila Thapar, writing in *Seminar*, warned of “an attempt to expunge diversities and present a homogenised view of what the *Rāmāyaṇa* was and is” an effort that would necessarily entail “the marginalising and ironing out of other cultural expressions” (Thapar 1988, 72,74). Similarly, sociologist Ashish Nandy charged that the serial “impoverishes[d] all the imagination and fantasy which is associated with the *Rāmāyaṇa*,” and concluded that, after the television version, “There is no scope for new interpretations” (cited in “The Ramayana”: 14–15).

Yet interpretations—new and old—abounded, both during and after the airing of the serial, offering compelling evidence for the continuing role of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in public discourse. Although it may be true, as many complained, that the timing of the serial was politically motivated—part of Rajiv Gandhi’s cynical (and unsuccessful) attempt to “play the Hindu card”—no elite critic seems to have noticed the fact that the television *Rāmāyaṇa* was itself far from being “univocal.” The product of a team that included government bureaucrats, movie moguls, pandits, and devoted reciters of the *Mānas* (the latter category interpenetrating the former three), the television serial, like the written epic of Tulsidās, was a syncretic text that tried to offer something for everyone, incorporating messages of “national integration” and communal harmony, and foregrounding women’s roles in a manner common to folk retellings but rarely encountered in written texts (Lutgendorf 1990). The popular response to the serial, though overwhelmingly favorable, was nuanced as well: the details of weekly installments inspired diverse and often conflicting interpretations as they were discussed and debated in countless homes, shops, and tea stalls.29

The complexities of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s entanglement with contemporary Indian life, as well as the continuing possibility—even under the full assault of the VHP’s dharmic Rām(bo)—of a more liberal reading of the story, are eloquently revealed by Madhu Kishwar’s impassioned essay, “In Defence of Our Dharma,” which appeared in the journal *Manushi* in 1990. A Delhi-based activist prominent in the women’s movement and in work on behalf of the urban and rural poor, Kishwar undoubtedly surprised some readers by disclosing her admiration for Tulsidās’s *Mānas* and recalling the “outrage” she had felt in college, when sophisticated fellow students at Delhi University mocked her for reading this “symbol of backward-looking religiosity fit only for semi-literate grandmothers” (Kishwar 1990, 3). Kishwar asserts that “the BJP-RSS-VHP Combine” has cynically adopted *Rāmāyaṇa* motifs for the purpose of capturing state power through “‘the politics of revenge’” (ibid.), yet she is equally critical of “‘the secularists among the western educated elite,’” whose internalization of colonial standards in education and culture has “produced generations of people alienated from and ignorant of India’s traditions of culture and learning” (ibid., 2-3). Indeed, Kishwar asserts that it is ignorance of the *Rāmāyaṇa*—not allegiance to it—that makes modern youths embrace the rightists’ cause (ibid., 3); like Gandhi, she selectively quotes *Mānas* verses emphasizing brotherhood and nonviolence (ibid., 3, 9, 12),30 and insists on the preeminence of a reading of Rām rooted in bhakti piety (ibid., 7):

We need to redeem Rām as a religious figure, religious in the sense of representing a revered moral, ethical code and as an embodiment of rare spiritual ideals which have inspired generations and generations of people to upright lives in this land. The appropriation of Rām by sectarian politicians to perpetrate communal massacres pours contempt on Rām, who in popular imagination stands as a symbol of love, compassion, self-sacrifice, and steadfastness to duty. The Rām we imbibed as children from our parents bears no resemblance to the BJP-RSS incarnation.

Charging that the VHP is an essentially political rather than religious organization, Kishwar remarks that “their dharma is nationalism, not Hinduism. Their inspiration comes from Hitler, not from Rām”
disjunction to a nationalist “tradition of modernity” with its own powerful truth claims (Heesterman 1985, 9):

Its distinctive feature is . . . the total identification of the mundane with the transcendent order. As the sovereignty ascribed to it makes clear, the modern state cannot be transcended . . . Hence the similarity of the Brahmanical and the modern tradition. However, the difference is equally obvious. There is no more room for a countervailing order. Modernity, then, means the integration of the mundane and the transcendent orders into one explosive reality.

To Kishwar too, the rightist insistence on a monopolization of loyalties—one nation, one language, one religion—suggests a Semitic or Christian worldview (the matrix that gave rise to nationalism), rather than one incorporating the diversity of paths characteristic of most traditional visions of dharma (Kishwar 1990, 10).

The ongoing contest of Rāmāyaṇa interpretation, now waged against the harsh backdrop of late-twentieth century India’s ongoing crises of overcrowding, scarce resources, and corrupt leadership, seems to call for more than a neutral scholarly nod. As a student of the Mānas epic and its commentarial tradition, I can state that Kishwar’s interpretation of that poem, at least, is closer to my understanding of its predominant message. For Tulsidas, the heavenly state of Rāmrāj could be brought to earth in only two ways: by Rām himself or by his name. The vision of transcendence realized in concrete terms was set by the poet in a remote epoch and made dependent on the catalyzing presence of an incarnate avatar; transcendence in mundane time, however, was made immanent and personal, dependent only on an accessible and salvific name. It is surely an irony worthy of the Kali Yuga that this name—which Gandhi is said to have uttered when he fell to a rightist assassin’s bullet—should now be routinely invoked to justify discrimination, hatred and murder.

Notes

All quotations from the Rāmcharitmānas are based on the popular and widely available Gita Press edition (Poddar 1939). Numbers refer to the subsidiary book (kānd), stanza (understood as a series of verses ending with a numbered couplet in dohā or sorathā meter), and individual line within a stanza. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
1. Throughout this essay I use the term Rāmāyaṇa to refer to the broad tradition of oral and literary retellings of the Rām story; the transliterated Sanskrit title Rāmāyaṇa refers only to specific literary works so named (e.g., the Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki, the Adhyātmā Rāmāyaṇa).

2. The more recent work of “subalternist” historians, among others, challenges Hein’s assumption that Indian peasants possessed “vastly unpolitical” minds. See, for example, the works of Pandey (1982) and Pinch (1990).

3. E.g., “Tulsidās had nothing to do with the Rām of history. Judged by historical test, his Rāmāyaṇa would be fit for the scrap heap. As a spiritual experience his book is almost unrivalled, at least for me. . . . It is the spirit ruling through the book that holds me spell-bound” (1925, 111).

4. Both Sanskrit versions note the absence of widows under Rāmāja, presumably because husbands never died before their wives. Conversely, then, one supposes that in each generation women typically died before men—a curious fact of Rāmāja demographics that, like India’s most recent census data, flies in the face of biological expectations. One can only trust that, unlike the situation which prevails today, under Rām’s benevolent rule this prodigy was achieved without recourse to female infanticide, nutritional and medical deprivation, overwork, abuse, and dowry murder.

5. The original makes a pun, playing on the identical spelling of the word “forest” (van or ban) and the stem of the verb “to become, be made” (ban jana); tab Rām ban gayā, tab hi Rām ban gayā.

6. Significantly, this leads Rāmākirti to the further argument that the “first citizen” of Rāmāja is in fact Kevāt, the Untouchable boatman who ferries Rām’s party across the Ganges.

7. For a recent statement of this position, see Richman 1991, especially Richman’s “Introduction” (pp. 3–21) and the contribution by A. K. Ramanujan, “Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas” (pp. 22–49); see also Thiels-Horstmann 1991.

8. A good example occurs in the third book of the Mānas; after slaying the demon Kabandha, Rām lectures him (now freed from a curse and in the form of a gandharva) on the necessity of showing respect to Brahmins: “Though he curses, beats, and berates you, / A Brahmin should be adored—thus sing the holy.” (3.34.1; translation by Linda Hess). A mere fifteen lines later, he praises the devotion of the female untouchable Śābārī by declaring, “I recognize only one relationship: devotion. / Caste and lineage, virtue and status, / wealth power, family, merit, and intellect— / a man possessing these, yet without devotion, / resembles a cloud without water” (3.35.4–6).


10. I do not mean to overlook the possibility that one of the backgrounds against which Kampan wrote was the hegemony of the imperial Cholas, whose occasional military forays into Sri Lanka sometimes inspired inscrip-

11. E.g., after introducing Rāvaṇa and his minions and detailing their sins, Tulsidās has his narrator (Shiva) remark, “O Pārvati, consider all creatures whose conduct is such to be demons” (1.184.3).

12. Interestingly, Tulsidās’s floruit coincided with another significant elite appropriation of the Rāmāyaṇa: the Emperor Akbar’s commissioning of a Persian illuminated translation that rendered the great epic not simply into the official language but also into the iconographic vocabulary of the Indo-Muslim court, an act of patronage that Pollock sees as a royal effort to bridge the cultural strait between Hindu and Islamic elites and perhaps to reduce the “otherness” of the Mughals in the eyes of their Rājput allies (Pollock 1991a, 46). Tulsidās, too, was concerned with bridge-building and cultural conciliation, though of a different sort—between Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva orientations, between nitya and sugna Vaiṣṇava traditions, and between Advaitin intellectual philosophy and bhakti emotionalism.

13. Note that whereas Vālmīki appends his description of Rāmāja (which itself concludes the main narrative) to his sixth book, Yuddhakāṇḍa, thus allowing the seventh to become a true (and stylistically uneven) “epilogue,” Tulsidās (in one of his rare departures from Vālmīki’s narrative sequence) moves the account of Rāmāja into his (more coherent) seventh book, highlighting its juxtaposition with the Kāk Bhūṣūndi narrative I discuss below.

14. Bhūṣūndi’s first appearance (under the name Bhūṣūndi, identified as an immortal being) may have been in one of the stories preserved in the c. eleventh-century Yoga Vāṣiṣṭha, a series of rambling metaphysical meditations framed as a dialogue between Rām and his family guru, Vāṣiṣṭha (see Venkatesananda 1984, 276–87). His prominent treatment in the framing narrative of the Mānas, however, has been explained by the tradition that there existed an esoteric Rāmāyaṇa attributed to him and known to Tulsidās. A voluminous Sanskrit text calling itself Bhūṣūndi Rāmāyaṇa has been published in two volumes by B. P. Singh (1975), who argues that it is an authentic, early medieval text. Other scholars, however, regard it as probably postdating the Tulsidās epic, and as the product of a sectarian author within the rasik or aesthetic-erotic tradition of the Rāmānandī order (see also Singh 1980).

15. E.g., the various treatments of the kali varṣa theme (discourses on “things prescribed during Kali Yuga”) found, for example, in Liṅga 1.40; Vāyu 32, 57–58; and Bhāgavata 12.2 (I am grateful to Frederick Smith for these references).


17. As early as the first decade of the seventeenth century (i.e., within
forty years of the composition of the Mānas) the Rāmānandī Nābhā Dās, residing in Galta, Rajasthan, hailed Tulsīdās as the reincarnation of Vālmīki, and accorded him a place of honor in his hagiographic "garland of devotees," the Bhaktamāl (Rupkala 1909, chhappay 129:756). This citation—significantly, from a distant geographic center—indicates the reverence the Banaras poet must have enjoyed in Rāmānandī circles even during his lifetime.

18. This saying is inscribed over the gateway to the fortress temple of Hanuman Garhi, the principal seat of Rāmānandī nāgā ascetics in Ayodhya (cited in Pinch 1990).

19. The line is rāja samāja vīrājata rure (1.241.3), which occurs in the context of Sītā 's svayamvar (bridegroom choice), at which Rām and Lakṣmān "appear resplendent in the assembly of kings." However, by reading the adjective rure (resplendent, beautiful) as a proper noun, the line can be ingeniously construed to mean "the royal assembly appears in Rure," thus implying that the brothers visited the village. This kind of playfully strained interpretation of Mānas verses is common in oral exegesis (see Lutgendorf 1991, esp. 147–48, 187, 221–31).

20. E.g., such recurring epithets for Rām and Vishnu as arīpa, "without form"; anāma, "nameless"; niraṇjan, "faultless, unblemished"; and the use of the yogic technical term kaivalya for "liberation." In the introduction to the first volume of the Mānas pāyaṅ, Aṃjñānanda Śāraṇ notes that Tulsīdās has sometimes been accused, by sāguṇa Vaiṣṇavas, of being an Advaitin.

21. Tākcar appears to be a modern revival of a once more widespread art of agonistic religious performances, e.g., the eighteenth-century traditions of Lāvani and Kyāl (see Hansen 1992, 65–70).


23. Like many of Karpāṭrī's highly publicized actions, this was sensational but ultimately ineffectual, since the new shrine is rarely visited by worshippers, whereas the "polluted" one continues to thrive as the city's principal temple.

24. The Sanskritized diction of the phrase carries an ideological weight that is lost in English translation. Its implications are conveyed in the writings of RSS 'supreme leader' Golwalkar, e.g.: "The non-Hindu peoples in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture . . . or may stay in this country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen's rights"; M.S. Golwalkar, We or Our Nationhood Defined, 4th ed. (Nagpur: Bharat Prakshan, 1947), pp. 55–56, cited in Baxter 1969, 31. One sometimes encounters the claim that varṇāśramadharma is the
PART III: POLITICAL ACTION


